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“It’s Like Writing Yourself into a Codependent Relationship with Someone Who Doesn’t Even Want You!” Emotional Labor, Intimacy, and the Academic Job Market in Rhetoric and Composition

Drawing on forty-eight interviews with individuals who participated on the academic job market in rhetoric and composition between 2010 and 2015, this essay shows how conceptualizing the academic job search as an intimate endeavor can offer insights for understanding the rhetorical production of affective binds within institutional contexts.

Humanity and its soul are produced in the very processes of economic production.

—Michael Hardt, “Affective Labor”

Over the last decade, a series of shifts in the economic and technological realms has had critical implications for academic workplaces. Such shifts include the rise and fall of the for-profit college and the 2008 financial crisis and Great Recession. The corporatization and neoliberalization of higher

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education has also led to changes in the cost structures of academic institutions, such as reductions in federal support of public institutions, decreasing faculty salaries, growing salaries for chief executive officers, increasing numbers of contingent faculty, and decreasing numbers of academic staff at public research universities and community colleges (Barnshaw and Dunietz; Desrochers and Kirschstein). While staff and contingent faculty are in particularly vulnerable positions during periods of institutional restructuring, tenure-track faculty have been subject to layoffs as well (Flaherty; Hammer; Huckabee; Jaschik; Mytelka; Woodhouse). During the period coinciding with the 2008 financial crisis, the Modern Language Association reported a 39.75 percent decrease in academic positions advertised on their *Job Information List*, going from 1826 positions in 2007–2008 to 1100 positions in 2009–2010.

It is within these material and economic conditions that hundreds of job candidates work to secure work. What's more, these economic conditions have occurred alongside technological shifts that have impacted the ways in which we communicate. For instance, the growth of crowdsourced and user-generated content, the monetization of virality, and the entry of *clickbait* into the vernacular suggest a stylistic and affective shift in Internet-distributed content. These economic and technological changes, together, have corresponded with a shift in the rhetoric of the academic job market toward a rhetoric of emotional crisis. Headlines like "Update: The Job Market for Academics Is Still Terrifying," "Job Market PTSD," "When the Job Market Seems Hopeless," "Academic Job Hunts From Hell: Inappropriate, Hostile, and Awkward Moments," and "Why Your Cousin with a Ph.D. Is a Basket Case" pepper social media (Weissmann; Kate; Vick and Furlong; Perlmutter; Schuman). The *Academic Jobs Wiki*, often described as a site to avoid altogether if you are to maintain your composure on the job market, has its own "Universities to *Fear*" and "Universities to *Love*" pages, where candidates are able to share, on either end of the emotional spectrum, their most loathsome or most delightful experiences on the academic job search. Indeed, informal conversations surrounding the academic job search are inundated with the language of feeling. The experience is, for many, a time of excitement, hope, fear, and dread, oftentimes all at once.

This essay considers the affective experience and emotional labor of candidates on the academic job market. In invoking the term *emotional labor*, I draw on the work of Arlie Hochschild, who defines emotional labor

as “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value” (7). At the same time, I draw on Michael Hardt’s conception of *affective labor*, which he describes as immaterial and corporeal labor, with intangible products, whether “a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion—even a sense of connectedness or community” (96). Certainly job applicants, whether they do so consciously or not, hope to produce such affective connections, even community, with search committee members and faculty from hiring departments. To do so, applicants labor to research institutions and faculty, compose cover letters, interview with search committees, prepare and present research and teaching talks, and engage in less formal conversations as they meet and dine with faculty. Using Hochschild and Hardt, together, enables me to account for the sorts of emotions and affects that exist at both ends of the production cycle, including the emotional labor needed to produce particular affects, which then serve to elicit particular affective outcomes. An attention to affective and emotional productions and experiences in terms of labor can help shed light on the rhetorical process by which affective intensities and emotional binds are institutionally inculcated through communicative action in the context of the job search.

To explore this process, I draw from a study consisting of forty-eight interviews with individuals who participated in the academic job market in rhetoric and composition between 2010 and 2015. During these interviews, I analyzed the ways in which “emotions work as a form of capital” on the academic job market, “produced only as an effect of its circulation” (Ahmed 120). In other words, affect exists not within signs, bodies, objects, or places, but across these registers, “in the midst of *in-between-ness*” (Gregg and Seigworth 1). I was most interested in engaging the spaces between individuals and institutions by, for instance, asking such questions as, How do candidates manage the emotional demands of “showing interest,” “demonstrating passion,” and showing that they will be a “good colleague,” “good departmental citizen,” and “good fit” on the job search? How do candidates maintain their performances in the face of anxieties, for example, regarding the precarity of gainful employment or financial stability in a context where salaries and negotiations tend not to be openly discussed, and where some consider such conversations tacky or inappropriate? What happens when the rhetorical meanings of one’s body—as a woman, as a

person of color, as queer, or as disabled—change as that body is physically mobilized to new locales?

Understanding the academic job search as an intimate endeavor can offer insights for conceptualizing the rhetorical production of affective binds within institutional contexts, and can thus reframe how we think about the search in critical ways. In addition, analyzing the ways in which candidates are hailed to perform particular normative intimacies during the academic job search can make clearer how emotions are politicized within the broader context of academia and how that politicization is wrapped up with larger rhetorical exigencies. Here, I respond to Marc Bousquet's call to look beyond the prevailing market rhetorics of supply and demand by instead considering the job search as an embodied and rhetorical endeavor that is intimately and institutionally situated. This work is relevant to composition scholars because institutional hiring practices set an important tenor for work that affects how employees, including writing teachers and scholars, understand the organization and their role within it. Such conditions can affect not just candidates' well-being but also their teaching, research, and service down the road.

Analyzing the ways in which candidates are hailed to perform particular normative intimacies during the academic job search can make clearer how emotions are politicized within the broader context of academia and how that politicization is wrapped up with larger rhetorical exigencies.

Description of Study

In the spring of 2015, I conducted a series of forty-eight interviews with individuals who had participated on the academic job market in rhetoric and composition since 2010. I spoke with a diverse group of people affiliated in some way with rhetoric and composition. All participants held—or were working toward—a terminal degree in rhetoric and composition or a related field and had applied to academic jobs with a rhetoric and composition focus, including non-tenure-track, writing program administration, and writing center positions. Interviewees were asked a set of twenty-five open-ended questions (see Appendix). A majority of interviews lasted for about 90 minutes, with a couple as short as 30 minutes, and a couple lasting up to 180 minutes, broken up over two days. Interviews took place on Skype, Google Hangouts, in person, or over the phone, depending on participants'

preference. I understand these interviews as valuable data for accessing how job candidates remembered the academic job market, whether at a particular moment in the market or, sometimes, years afterward. While these memories cannot be taken as “objective” accounts of what took place during the market, they can be taken as reliable accounts of what emotions were impressed upon participants as well as what events, interactions, and concerns they attach to these emotions.

The pool of participants was a diverse group and included those in both tenure-track and contingent positions, whose primary professional responsibilities included research, teaching, and administration. Some participants were graduate students, while others were early career post-doctoral fellows, adjuncts, or assistant professors. Still others held tenured associate or full professor positions. Some candidates were going on the market for the first time in 2014–2015, while others had been on the market two or more times. Participants were also based at a variety of institutions including research-intensive universities, four-year state schools, land grant institutions, and small liberal arts colleges located in twenty-two states across the United States and Canada. Participants worked in diverse areas of rhetoric and composition, including composition studies, history of rhetoric, writing program administration, technical communication, cultural rhetorics, computers and writing, and writing centers. While some participants reported applying to community colleges, none said that they were working at a community college at the time that we talked. Some participants reported being in between jobs and unsure of what the fall semester would hold for them, but none had left academia completely at the time of our conversations. Along with this wide range of professional experiences, participants also self-identified via diverse subject positions, including any number of the following (not an exhaustive list): African American, Asian, indigenous, Latina/o, mixed race, Native American, white, heterosexual, bisexual, gay, queer, single, married, parent, Christian, Catholic, Buddhist, not religiously affiliated, disabled, first-generation college student, first-generation immigrant, veteran.

Given that I spoke with such a diverse group of people with wide-ranging experiences and perspectives, it is not surprising that participants perceived the job search in varied, sometimes contradictory ways. For instance, I learned that some enthusiastically enjoyed the experience of campus interviews and finally getting to meet scholars in the field, while

others pointed to these visits and the activities they would engage in on them as among the most challenging parts of the job search process. While some felt that going back on the market a subsequent time was significantly easier than entering the market as a graduate student, there was at least one person who said that going on the market a subsequent time was significantly more emotionally difficult. At the same time, however, there were also a number of recurring themes that emerged across interviews, some of which are described in the sections that follow.

Laboring to Labor: Feeling the Academic Job Market in Rhetoric and Composition

In composition studies, several scholars have outlined the ways in which emotion and work intersect in the discipline (Albrecht-Crane; Jacobs and Micciche; Jung; Lindquist; McLeod; Micciche, “Emotion”; Micciche, “More”; Robillard, “We Won’t”; Robillard, “*Young*”; Schell; Worsham; Yoon). In particular, this essay responds to Laura Micciche’s call for “the place of emotion in materialist analyses of work.” Micciche urges, “If we are to posit good work practices, [. . .] we need to address the ways in which our profession produces emotional dispositions for its workers” (“More” 435, 452). Also central for conceptualizing my study is Lynn Worsham’s argument that a pedagogy—or, the schooling—of emotion aims to “inculcate patterns of feeling that support the legitimacy of dominant interests, patterns that are especially appropriate to gender, race, and class locations [. . .] organiz[ing] their affective relations to that location, to their own condition of subordination, and to others in that hierarchical structure” (223). In the context of the current study, we might interrogate, then, how the discourse of the market “inculcate[s] patterns of feeling that support the legitimacy of dominant interests” (Worsham 233). How are these patterns of feeling more, or less, in line with the affective norms of particular genders, races, and class locations than others? What does it mean to take a serious look at the many moments of shared anxiety and fear in academia—including the academic job search?

The stakes of these institutionalized “patterns of feeling” can be usefully understood through Lauren Berlant’s concept of cruel optimism, which she offers as a way of understanding how postindustrial subjects remain persistently attached to unachievable fantasies of “the good life.” Specifically, cruel optimism, she says, is “a cluster of promises we want

someone or something to make to us and make possible for us” (23). That cluster of promises might include, for example, a tenure-track position at a small liberal arts college, a particular kind of relationship with one’s students, a certain amount of financial stability, perhaps a bit of time to pursue one’s hobbies, the possibility of tenure and job security, perhaps happiness, excitement, or hope of doing one of the many things one has put off while pursuing graduate school and while working to procure the position: reading novels, having children, buying a home. These affective attachments are typically shaped by multiple discursive contexts and are accumulated and pieced together over time, for example, through experiences in graduate school, or images or stories of intellectual life, or in undergoing the academic job search.

Moreover, profound attachments to such clusters of promises often require the management of anxiety and other kinds of physical, social, and emotional exertion, exhaustion, and stress, which can very well affect one’s ability to perform in working to attain “the good life.” Berlant says, “A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. [. . . These relations] become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially” (1). As such, the concept of cruel optimism can shed light on the ways in which normative ways of desiring on the job search are not only historically and institutionally informed but also function as motivation that enables candidates to persist in a system wherein employment is not always available for all, where tenure does not always promise job security, and where working hard does not always result in a living wage. We might even think about the ways in which the dominant narratives of—and ways of feeling on—the academic job market align with other postwar narratives of optimism and upward mobility. And through their persistence, candidates labor to “support dominant interests,” at times continuing to work in various contingent positions in the service of the institution. But why do candidates continue to be magnetized to these clusters of promises despite widespread knowledge of the current politico-economic situation?

Composition studies scholars have also researched the academic job market for some time, focusing in particular on job advertisements to examine the supply of PhDs in relation to the demand of positions available (Stygall; Rude and Cargile Cook), the political economic exigencies and

diversification of expertise as it relates to the growth in composition positions (Mendenhall), how technological changes have affected professional expectations for composition and technical communication scholars (Sun and Hourigan; Lauer), and strategies for using the job search process as a way to challenge misconceptions about composition studies and to improve the conditions and status of composition at small colleges (Delli Carpini). These studies have been useful for providing evidence of the ways in which the job market and labor conditions for those in rhetoric and composition and technical communication are in several ways distinct from those of other disciplines in the humanities.

More recently, Bousquet argued for revising the larger labor structure and market mentalities of the academic job search, showing how “[t]he literalization of ‘the market’ has the effect of legitimating the passive, observational role of the informant; now the profession is a victim of forces beyond its control” (194). Caroline Dadas provided a glimpse of the embodied experiences of job candidates in an effort toward greater equitability and minimizing exclusionary practices. For instance, she discusses the ways in which academic job candidates must perform and persist amid many decisions that are, for them, both uncontrollable and unknowable. She reports that candidates “worry about where they might be hired,” indicating anxiety over the lack of control over place of residence (68).

Perhaps the essays that most clearly narrate, from the first-person perspective, the vulnerabilities of candidates and emotional experience of the academic job market are Kristen Kennedy’s “The Fourth Generation” and Clyde Moneyhun’s “All Dressed Up and OTM: One ABD’s View of the Profession.” In “All Dressed Up,” Moneyhun describes some of the internal questions and anxieties that he, as an ABD at the time, faced:

I want a job. And how, do I want a job. But what is this profession I’m about to be certified to enter, if I’m lucky? What will I be expected (no: required) to do or to be allowed if I’m allowed in? In what other social/political/economic systems will I be implicated through the simple act—god willing—of finding work? My nights are ruined by my heart’s oscillation between fear of not finding a job and fear of finding one. (406–7)

Many of Moneyhun’s observations remain relevant in the current context. Later in the essay, he describes the logic behind what some have called “survivor’s guilt,” or the feelings of ambivalence that some feel upon attaining a

tenure-track position: “But someone’s finding a good job is predicated upon the existence of the lousy jobs that other fellow graduates have to settle for: \$23,500 for four sections of comp a semester on a three-year terminal contract” (409). Yet, the job market and tenor surrounding it has shifted significantly since Moneyhun wrote “All Dressed Up” in 1994, and, as at least two of my interview participants have noted, while job candidates tend to receive substantial amounts of technical advice for navigating the job market, many do not receive support for preparing for the affective and emotional experience of the national job search in academia.

“It’s Kind of Like Falling in Love”: Performing Intimacy on the Academic Job Search

*It is kind of like falling in love—like, they want to be in love.
I’m finding that there’s so much commenting about my
character and about my grace and about just analyzing that
rhetoric—there’s an erotics there. There’s definitely eros at
work. Not in any kind of illegal sense but in the Deweyan
sense, I guess.*

—Unnamed interview participant

In your gaze I become a new person, as you do in my mind.
—Elizabeth Povinelli, *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and
Carnality*

The quote inscribed in the title of this essay—“It’s like writing yourself into a codependent relationship with someone who doesn’t even want you!”—came from an interview participant while we were talking about the academic job search through the metaphor of dating. This quote illustrates the act of writing as a corporeal activity. Elspeth Probyn explains, “We work ideas through our bodies, we write through our bodies, hoping to get into the bodies of our readers” (76). For instance, candidates write themselves into their letters, hoping that the marks on the screen will stir the bodies of their reader—such that the reader will metaphorically move the letter to the “request for more materials” pile. To take a more granular look at the writer’s composing process, the embodied, physical, and cognitive act of writing a cover letter tailored to a specific institution might include researching that institution, department, or city where it is located; considering how this relocation might affect existing relationships; taking in institutional mis-

sions and values and considering how these values line up with one's own; getting to know faculty through their departmental profile or professional website and thinking about them as potential colleagues, considering their work in relation to one's own; viewing and co-constructing images that represent possible futures; finding the language to locate oneself within particular programs, departments, universities, or towns; and inscribing these new relational circuits into a two- to three-page single-spaced cover letter. These corporeal acts are performances of intimacy that bring into being affective attachments that may not have been there otherwise, whether to or through a location, position, institution, department, scholar, group of colleagues, or the idea itself of connecting intimately and intellectually with someone or something. The view of writing as corporeal can help us understand writing and other performed genres of the academic job search as ways in which particular attachments are brought into being, and particular affective binds are rendered palpable.

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When I describe the embodied practices that make up the academic job search as “performances of intimacy,” I draw on Judith Butler’s articulation of performativity, which she used to explain how we come to be gendered through embodied enactment and behavior. While originally used to articulate a theory of gender, performativity can help us understand how the act of writing—as well as other performed genres of the academic job search, such as researching institutions, delivering a job talk, or participating in the sorts of conversations that are expected on campus visits—functions as a way that we and what we feel come into being. These sorts of performative acts, in which we take part on the job market as in other contexts, are a way in which we understand ourselves, and they are a way in which emotional binds are rendered palpable. Of course, not all inscriptions of “fit” unilaterally enact the same desires, intensities, or emotional binds. Writing desire is contingent on a complex matrix of subjectivity, experience, and histories, including preexisting emotional attachments. Thus, acts of writing emotional binds take place within and among a complex set of motivating factors, agents, histories, and subjectivities. As a result, “Affects are not so much forms of signification, or units of knowledge, as they are

expressions of ideas or problems performed as a kind of involuntary and powerful learning and participation” (Stewart 40).

Through embodied performance, intimacy becomes instantiated across body, context, culture, and institution. James V. Cordova and Rogina L. Scott define intimacy as “a process that develops from the reinforcement of interpersonally vulnerable behavior,” or what they refer to as “intimate events” (85). For instance, self-disclosure, which takes place in many parts of the job search, is an example of vulnerable behavior that may or may not be reinforced, validated, or reciprocated by hiring institutions. Candidates may also render themselves vulnerable when they present intellectual work that is open to critique. What’s more, Cordova and Scott say, “nonintimate behaviors are punished during an intimate event” (78). The punishment of nonintimate behaviors can be seen in the rejection of impersonal templates and boilerplate material. In other words, job applicants are placed in positions where they are required to be vulnerable to institutions—or institutional agents—to succeed. When Cordova and Scott discuss the ways in which “intimate partners are the necessary products of accumulating intimate events” (79), I think of the end of the search, when an offer has been extended and accepted, and employment has been secured. Conceptualizing intimacy in these terms renders visible—via “events that can be observed and experienced”—the behavioral factors necessary for the constitution of an intimate partnership (81).

To return to the example of composing a tailored cover letter as a performance of intimacy that is oftentimes desired, if not expected, by institutional agents (read: search committee members), then, institutional agents should be aware that what they are also expecting of candidates is an embodied and emotional performance of vulnerability. As candidates envision possible futures, they open themselves up to desire and vulnerability, despite the fact that there is a good chance those futures will never be realized. Search committee members are implicitly asking people they have never met to show how much their institution is desired, asking them to be vulnerable. Yet, several interviewees talked about the pains of receiving boilerplate rejection letters or, more often, no response at all. One might say it is the equivalent of dumping someone without ever telling them, or offering a pained cliché, “It’s not you, it’s me.” The job search process, particularly in the early stages, dehumanizes applicants as a way of managing

the paperwork as well as committee members' intellectual labor of sifting through applications in a time when they are already reportedly overworked. At the same time, many institutions will not dare allow candidates—many of whom apply to sixty to eighty positions, and sometimes more than a hundred, while teaching, writing dissertations or doing other kinds of research, engaging in committee work or administering programs—to treat institutional departments like numbers.

One interviewee offered a detailed critique of the widely accepted practice of tailoring letters, which, I think, is worth quoting at length:

I think it's unfair to ask candidates to be super personalized when, literally, someone's going to be looking at this letter for 30 seconds. I also think it's unfair because you never know from the outside looking in on a website what that institution values. Websites are always horribly out of date for all kinds of good reasons. [. . .] As a hiring committee member, I'm asking that person to hit a target that they can't see. That's just patently unfair. It takes a good year, once you get into a position, to understand that institution and to get into its rhythms and figure out what's being valued. To ask a candidate to hit the right notes of what's being valued is a rigged game [. . .] Especially, considering 95 percent of the people who are applying are going to [get] some kind of standard e-mail saying, 'Thank you, but no thank you.' If you want to be ethical and treat people with respect, well, and you want letters, start crafting some tailored e-mailed rejections. Give some substantive feedback. If that's what you desire as a committee member, then [. . .] put up the other end. I say that with all due respect.

Indeed, some search committees *do* do this. When I asked participants about a time when a search committee member attended to the candidate's emotional experience particularly well, one participant talked about having received personalized, handwritten rejection notes. Another described feeling excited when an institutional administrator actively engaged them on their scholarship, an act of reciprocity. One person described how, after an interview, a search committee member followed up by saying, "I really felt like the interview was about, 'What can you do for us,' and we didn't say what we could do for you. I'm really concerned about that. What are your needs? What do you need from us?" The interviewee explained, "I thought that that was really nice that she recognized what was happening and that she tried to do something about it." Another participant explained how the rejection from one school can feel "nicer than the acceptance letter from other places." Each of these statements show how participants feel well at-

tended to when institutional agents take action to validate and reciprocate the kinds of emotional labor they performed.

That said, it is to be noted that performances of intimacy are highly contingent on culture, race, gender, class, (dis)ability, and embodiment; not everyone has equal access to the “right” performances of intimacy. As K. Hyoejin Yoon has illustrated, racialized and gendered bodies are hailed to perform particular kinds of affective labor by the dominant culture, and read in ways that are varied and beyond their control. For instance, whereas some cultures perform closeness by being open and outward facing with their emotions, others may see such behaviors as inappropriate. At least two interviewees spoke explicitly about the “WASPy”—or Anglo-Saxon/Anglo-American/Euro-American nature of the academic job search and academic culture more generally, while others spoke to this issue in more implicit ways. For instance, “I think that it’s still a very WASPy culture. I think you don’t want to show naked conflict, but at the same time you can’t really show that you’re a doormat. And of course those things are really, really, really gender-based, but how you handle that narrow ledge is particularly important.” Worsham historicizes this affective norm, explaining,

For much of the twentieth century, anger (or its prohibition) has been the target of workplace training and the effort to inculcate a proper emotional style for work[. . .] Forms of pedagogic violence, developed through and authorized by industrial psychology, have so successfully disqualified the legitimacy of worker anger that by the 1960s it was said that anger had been eliminated from the workplace and no longer posed a problem to productivity. Attention then shifted to the cultivation of empathy, friendliness, and consideration (through T-groups or sensitivity training) as an appropriate emotional style for the workplace. (225)

Many of these rules for maintaining “professional” affect are in effect on the academic job search. In similar ways, exhibiting anger is generally prohibited, while empathy, friendliness, and consideration are affects that are cultivated by candidates, at times consciously, in an effort to be seen as a strong candidate.

Another interviewee spoke to how certain conventions of the campus visit privilege the performance of an able-bodied norm:

I have arthritis in my knees and I have to tell people, “Slow down. Can we take the elevator?” And nobody ever thinks to ask if I’m okay with walking

all around campus on a campus interview when actually that's really hard on my arthritis, and by the time I get back I'm pretty much shot. And I don't feel comfortable in saying—because it's not really a disability, it's just a situation that I have to deal with.

As this quote illustrates, particular bodies are privileged on the market, as they are able to more “appropriately” perform and maneuver in ways that others are not. The necessity to walk up, down, and in between buildings on what can be large university campuses, sometimes several times over what can be two or three tightly scheduled, consecutive, twelve-hour days of meetings, interviews, and presentations, is more constraining for some than others, even though one's ability to perform in such a context is not necessarily an indicator of one's ability to succeed as a tenure-track faculty member. This quote is also interesting for the ways in which what the speaker really desires is a level of reciprocity—“nobody ever thinks to ask.” One can read the speaker's discomfort in requesting accommodations as an effort to curtail further vulnerability.

These examples of cultural and embodied difference make clear that particular bodies are unevenly able to perform the kinds of affective labor that are necessary to procure a position in academia. As Cordova and Scott put it, “all developing intimate relationships unavoidably experience both the reinforcement of interpersonal vulnerability and punishment of interpersonal vulnerability. Essentially, this constitutes a process of discrimination training. Partners over time engage more frequently in those expressions of vulnerability that are safe in the relationship than in those that are not” (78). What Cordova and Scott leave open is whether intimate partnerships take place between a person and an institution, in a context of uneven power. Still, their statement has clear and significant implications for the hiring, retention, and representation of those who have been systemically marginalized on ac-

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count of race, gender, sex, class, and/or (dis)ability. In an institutional and disciplinary context where people of color, in particular, continue to be severely underrepresented, I argue that we need to do a better job attending to the varied and pervasive ways in which our hiring practices enact varied forms of discrimination. Importantly, Dadas also contended, “we need to educate [the administrative] office that ‘fair’ does not mean ‘the same for all.’ Only in challenging these institutional constraints can we work toward a more flexible process that allows all candidates to perform at their best” (85). We need to more rigorously interrogate not just our practices but also our metrics for assessing what we view as a desirable candidate, and how those metrics line up with the skills and qualifications needed to be successful in the position advertised.

Time, Timing, and Normative Intimacies

Across the interviews I conducted, time and timing played a significant role in participants’ articulations of emotional labor. Eleven interviewees with whom I spoke explicitly referred to the academic job search as an “emotional roller coaster,” a term used to make sense of the thrilling, wide fluctuations in affective intensity over a short period of time. These intensities have been described by participants using words like *excitement*, *joy*, *happiness*, and *celebration*, alongside *stress*, *frustration*, *anger*, *rage*, *agony*, *trauma*, *dread*, *horror*, “never-ending anxiety,” “extreme depression,” and “overwhelming fear.” Many academic searches last for somewhere between three to nine months, though there is an increasingly wide variation in this time frame. This number changes if we include candidate and committee preparation, as some candidates start on their materials several months before the time advertisements typically start rolling out in September.

Still, the time span during which candidates and committees actively interact in an academic job search is in some ways too short, and in other ways too long. Nine months is, in the context of the job market and its temporal waves of activity, too short to develop a presumably lifelong—if not six-year-long—intimate partnership. As one participant explained, in many social situations, people are able to take their time getting to know one another, if they so desire. On the job market, the entire process happens via a stack of papers, a half-hour interview, and two to four full days of interaction—days that can last for as long as 13.5 hours. Put in the context of Cordova and Scott’s argument that “our culture begins to refer to such

a developing intimate partnership as an ‘intimate relationship’ only after a sufficient history of intimate events has accumulated,” it is clear that the duration does not seem to line up with the pressure exerted on both job candidate and search committees in the context of a job search (79). Given this temporal context, performances of intimacy can feel stilted and unnatural. One participant explained:

People like to say, “I’m not on the search committee so you can tell me anything,” which is not true. It’s not how it works. This kind of need for intimacy and disclosure, I think, is uncomfortable. We’re strangers to each other still, largely. That kind of gets forgotten because this is a process where, like dating, there’s a sense of a lifetime together that’s at stake. It speeds up the intimacy.

Nine months is also too long to ride an “emotional roller coaster” (keeping in mind that actual rollercoasters are typically only a few minutes long—for good reason). It is, in many ways, a highly compressed and intensified time period, with bursts of activity and long periods of waiting in between. Furthermore, nine months is too long for many to sustain and manage the kinds of performed affects that candidates feel compelled to perform for a chance at succeeding on the market. As one participant put it,

With the job market, you have to be on, and being on isn’t just a physical consideration. It’s beyond face-to-face. You have to be on in terms of how you present your document. You have to be on in terms of how you present yourself online. So when I say “being on,” it’s like a 360. We’re not just talking about this face-to-face identity, but being on, being alert, being on the ball all the time from the way you present your document, the way you project yourself online, the way you talk to people, the way people are going to conceive you.

This condition of the academic job search is in many ways specific to the current economic and technological context, where it is rather typical for candidates in rhetoric and composition to participate in various professional development opportunities, maintain a professional website, and remain active on several social media sites. As Dadas notes, “Committees will search for information about candidates online; will interact informally with graduate students on Facebook in the years leading up to their candidacy; will interview them using software programs such as Skype; will expect them to manage the social challenges of phone interviews” (87). To “be on”—on the job search, at work, and online—while also *on edge* about the uncontrollable, unknowable future for nine months, is an utterly ex-

hausting, tenuous situation in which subjects often feel they must sustain performances as poised, emotionally composed “professionals.”

I also consider it noteworthy that, in my conversations, time on the academic job search was at times discussed using metaphors of normative intimacies, and fifteen participants explicitly used the language of courtship, dating, love, and intimacy to articulate their embodied experiences in terms of their temporal context. For example, the metaphor of dating was used to talk through some of the earlier experiences of preliminary interviews and campus visits, when the candidate and representatives of the institution are getting to know one another and trying to make a good impression:

It's kind of like a first date[. . .] If you order the salad, you're a girly-girl who doesn't eat. If you get the steak, did you have to order the most expensive thing on the menu? [. . .] So, at breakfast, I would always say be sure you get fruit or yogurt or something. You're thinking about all of these things and also trying to be conscientious of budgets. So, you don't want to seem like this person who is going to order lobster and wine at dinner and be completely unrealistic.

This excerpt makes visible the kinds of anxieties that candidates often feel on the market, in the earlier periods of candidate-institution interaction, when there is a desire to make a good first impression. Given this high-stakes context of a tenure-track position, and given the horror stories that get circulated about how someone was ultimately denied a job because of one comment they made, or because of one thing they posted on social media, job candidates are reasonably concerned about making the “right” impression at all times.

Other participants used the language of courtship to describe experiences of institutions “wooing” a candidate. One candidate even spoke about campus visits from the position of the beloved, where they found themselves on long walks on the beach, getting wined and dined at upscale restaurants, and being subject to intimate disclosures about others’ personal lives. Another participant described this feeling, saying, “You know, someone asks you out and you kind of just go out of pity. ‘Oh, well, they seem kind of nice. Maybe it’ll be fine. Who knows?’ And then you go and you’re like, ‘Oh God, it’s worse than I thought.’ And then they call you a bunch of times and you’re like, ‘Oh my God, what do I do?’ That was kind of how it felt with that particular school.” This excerpt points to how job candidates

at times feel an emotional obligation to institutions, acknowledging that institutional agents have placed themselves in positions of vulnerability as well; for instance, when resources are used to bring candidates to campus. Candidates are, at times, concerned about managing the institution's potential disappointment.

The metaphor of dating was also used to talk through candidates' experiences of inactivity: "I think there are little seasons of where you get [. . .] a handful [of calls] over a week and then you don't hear anything for a little while. I mean, it's kinda like dating, right? And you're just like, 'Well, did they like me? Are they deciding?'" The speaker asks, "Did

they like me?" seeking emotional validation for being vulnerable. Nine interview participants cited these periods of inactivity—the waiting—as the most challenging part of the academic job market, in part because of its contextual and temporal location. As one person said, "There was a lot of anticipation, and excitement, and hope, but far, far outweighed by the agony of waiting and the stress of second-guessing yourself, not feeling good enough, constantly worrying that you had made a wrong move, all of those things." The waiting, the periods of silence and inactivity, can turn into a lot of time for reflecting about one's vulnerability and self-doubt. As another person explained, "being in that extended space of uncertainty with so much riding on it—and not just in that moment, but so much that you've been building toward—and not having any control whatsoever or anything that you can do in that moment is really stressful. And a feeling of powerlessness." This feeling of powerlessness is illustrated by another participant, who said,

There's the potential that you're just going to sit on your butt and wait for some boy to call you for nine months, you know? And that you shouldn't feel like you need him but you're going to, and that it's okay to feel that. I was under the impression that I was going to be so fucking busy this whole year, and I have not been that busy at all. And then I feel bad because I'm not that busy. Well, what's wrong with me?

Time is important for understanding affective labor on the job market, and how periods of silence, especially when candidates are not promptly

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updated, can lead to a lot of time for self-doubt. Many participants wished for some form of update, with some saying that they would prefer a boilerplate email to none at all.

If we continue with this metaphor of dating, it is no surprise, then, that later into the search process, some candidates described those experiences in comparison to falling in love: “I sort of fell in love on a couple of campus visits, which was really nice. Yeah, not with a person, with a campus. [Addressing partner:] ‘Sorry sweetie.’ So I came home feeling like I had been wooed and that they had won.” Conceptualizing the campus visit in terms of intimacy means keeping in mind that these events typically occur after cover letters are validated with a request for more materials, and after the initial conversation of the preliminary interview is validated with an invitation to the campus. On the other hand, the metaphor of dating was used at least once to make sense of the kinds of emotional labor involved in coping with rejection or other painful moments: “I found that, unfortunately, you can’t talk about it with other people that are going through the same process. It’s too hard. [. . .] To use the dating metaphor, if you’re going through a breakup and you need support, you don’t go to a person who’s also going through a breakup. There’s nothing to lean on when you’re both trying to find something to lean on.” What’s significant about this quote is how the speaker articulates how the emotional experience and affective work performed by individuals on the job search are not only contingent on interactions with search committees but also with applicants’ interactions with others, whether their job cohort, colleagues, or others in their support network—family, non-academic friends, pets, or someone else.

If we understand the academic job search as an intimate endeavor, it is also not surprising that candidates can experience rejection in ways that are as painful as a bad breakup. At times, interviewees shared their experiences of rejection—not just of a position but of vulnerable behaviors more generally—in powerful ways, where, even if they weren’t using the language of dating, one could easily imagine parallel emotions being felt in a more explicitly intimate context—the desperation felt when the beloved stops calling, or the devastation of being dumped: “It felt very, ‘Stop calling. We’ll tell you when we tell you and you just need to chill the fuck out.’ And I was like, ‘Okay, sorry.’ You know? Maybe I was a little over-eager.” To use Cordova and Scott’s language, candidates feel pain when their vulnerable

behavior is “punished,” when they reach out and the beloved is curt, when they feel they over-invested themselves emotionally.

To be clear, my point here is not that the job market is like dating and should be thought of as such, but rather that the performances that people engage in to succeed on the academic job market produce emotional attachments that can be more apparently visible in other relational situations. Several of the excerpts presented here are some of the more explicit comparisons to dating made by interviewees, and they show how candidates on the academic job search are doing the emotional work of managing insecurities, staying confident and upbeat when they may not feel confident and upbeat, managing expectations, exercising patience, and coping with rejection. One might even compare it to the emotional work needed to manage several emerging and unrequited relationships, all of which candidates are expected to take seriously, in the span of an academic year.

At the same time, there is a risk that comes with discussing the academic job market using a dating metaphor. For instance, as with any analytic, there are ways in which the metaphor of “dating” is limited in its ability to shed light on the emotional experiences of the market. One participant makes a compelling point, explaining, “If our emotions are situated, corporeal, etc., those feelings [of dating and of participation in the academic labor market] aren’t the same and aren’t contextualized or produced in the same ways.” And even though the comparison to dating has the potential to help us to rethink emotions, intimacy, and vulnerability on the market in useful ways, the concept of dating often brings with it cultural, emotional, and gendered baggage. While the reality of dating is a particular kind of normativized intimacy that is complex, varied, and multifaceted, the emotions associated with dating are enmeshed with values that are particular to a given culture. For instance, particular emotionalized behaviors can be denigrated as desperate, clingy, or even overly emotional, and subjects can be easily and quickly dismissed with a flippant “get over it.” In this way, current cultural conceptions about dating are such that the metaphor of

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dating may risk undermining candidates' emotional experience on the job market, making it more difficult for some to see how the structure and common practices of the market are dehumanizing.

Still, viewing interpersonal interactions on the academic job market as an intimate endeavor can help us see where institutional structures, economic and technological conditions, and cultural practices are intertwined with candidates' embodied experiences and see not only the kinds of emotional labor and coping that are part and parcel of the academic hiring process but also the ways in which job candidates themselves are read in and through their bodies. In part, I hope that what has become clearer through this essay is how disciplinary and institutional practices create conditions such that candidates must engage in what is essentially uncompensated labor—uncompensated not in the financial sense, but in the affective.

Concluding Thoughts

It's a difficult, draining process no matter what, but if people are transparent, honest, and compassionate, it makes the whole process a little bit easier.

—Unnamed interview participant

Job candidates are able to find—on the Internet, in books, in graduate programs, even from non-academic family members—an endless array of, and sometimes contradictory, advice for a successful job search; however, a vast majority of this advice consists of technical know-how, rather than approaches for managing emotional labor. In addition, job candidates are oftentimes in vulnerable institutional positions, where, as one participant explains, “[e]xposing the emotional circumstances of the job market is something that I don’t really have a space to do because the people I’m talking to about the job market are largely my professional references. The conversation remains strictly about the professional considerations of the job market.” Another interviewee adds:

Quite frankly, I think we don’t know how to deal with emotions as a field. I think what we do is we sublimate it, and we focus on the technical how-to, but we don’t ever open up and acknowledge and talk about the underlying emotions. So when it comes to job preparation and things that I wish I would

have known, I think we need to take a multipronged approach. It's not just a technical how-to. That's one aspect.

Furthermore, it is much more rare to encounter recommendations for institutional units, whether graduate programs, search committees, or professional organizations. This imbalance sends a problematic message about who can and should change for a positive—or “successful”—experience on the academic job market. Instead, we should be thinking about ways in which institutional stakeholders might rethink their approaches with issues of affect in mind.

My motivation for doing this work came in part as I learned, again and again, of the experiences of brilliant, highly capable, kind people—the kinds of people our discipline *needs*—between graduate school and the early years of the highly coveted tenure track—that have led to high stress and trauma, feelings of alienation, displacement, anxiety, and depression. There is a problem with the system when these sorts of experiences are widely felt, yet normalized and accepted as part of the process. There is a problem when, instead of critiquing our institutional practices, the quick fix seems to be to provide hoards of advice, directives, and tips for candidates to navigate—indeed, to *survive*—the job search, and the problems of the job market are dismissed as the result of larger political and economic issues. Even though global politics and economies certainly limit possibilities, we are not excused from being complicit in partaking in what are arguably oppressive hiring practices.

Finally, there are numerous directions for future research in this area. For example, it is crucial to have a frank and open discussion about how race, gender, class, disability, and other forms of embodied subjectivity affect candidates' emotional experience of the job market. It would be important to learn more specifically what sorts of affect are valued on the academic job market, and how institutional factors like departmental setting might affect the ways in which affect is evaluated. It may be interesting to learn about the kinds of affective labor performed by search committee members. My hope is that this discussion of participants' experiences will serve to open up conversations about feeling in relation to our hiring practices—conversations that should be taken into account in discussions of restructuring institutional search practices, graduate student professional development, and candidate search processes in ways that are more humane

for all involved. Certainly, interviewees described many positive experiences they associated with the academic job search. At the same time, the academic job market is fraught with practices that are inhumane, inequitable, emotionally draining, and psychologically taxing, in ways that tend not to be accounted for. Rather than viewing the activities of the job search as expendable, neutral, or innocuous, what would it mean to understand them as meaningful? As one participant asked, “Where is reflexivity when it comes to the job search process?”

Appendix: Interview Questions

1. Please describe your identity. You might include your race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, class, nationality, (dis)ability, veteran status, or any other category you consider important to your identity.
2. What year/s did you go on the academic job market?
3. What emotions do you associate with the academic job market (either based on your own experience or in general)?
4. What was your activity like during the year you went on the job market? In other words, when were you preparing materials, interviewing, doing campus visits, and what other relevant events in your personal life were taking place? If you went on the market more than one year, you might focus on the last time.
5. Describe your job search preparation. Did your dissertation committee members, graduate program, or someone else offer workshops, advice, or other kinds of guidance?
6. What kinds of jobs did you target at the beginning of the search?
7. What do you remember about how you felt when you were preparing your job materials, i.e., job letter, CV, teaching philosophy or portfolio, etc.? (If relevant, feel free to focus on one specific year or to speak generally.)
8. If applicable, what do you remember about how you felt when you were interviewing? Did it vary depending on the committee? Depending on the medium (phone, Skype, in person)? How?
9. If applicable, what do you remember about how you felt while you were on campus visits?
10. How did you perform what you felt would make you a strong candidate for a position? For example, how did you perform so that hiring committee members and potential future colleagues would understand that you would be a good colleague and departmental citizen, a strong researcher, a good teacher?

11. Did your feelings change or shift throughout the process? If so, what prompted these changes?
12. Was there a time when you felt unprepared for some aspect of the job market? If so, describe.
13. Were there ever times when you felt uncomfortable on the job market? When and why? Will you describe one (or more) example/s in depth?
14. Did you ever feel like your race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, class, nationality, (dis)ability, veteran status, or other identity category affected your experience on the job market? If so, how?
15. Did you end up getting a job offer? If you remember, approximately when in the academic year did you get your job offer(s)?
16. What were (are) the most important factors that informed (or will inform) your decision in taking a job?
17. If applicable, what is your current job, and what are your feelings toward that job?
18. What is your most positive memory of the academic job search (so far)?
19. Were there other parts of the job search you found enjoyable?
20. What parts of the job search were the most challenging?
21. How did you cope with the emotional demands of the job search, and how did you develop those coping strategies?
22. What is an example of a time you felt that a search committee attended to your emotional experience particularly well?
23. As someone who's been on the academic job market, is there anything you wish you would have known in advance?
24. Do you have any other advice for someone who plans to go on the academic job market?
25. In what ways do you think the academic job search could be improved?

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