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Janelle Adsit, Sue Doe, Marisa Allison, Paula Maggio, Maria Maisto

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# Affective Activism: Answering Institutional Productions of Precarity in the Corporate University

Janelle Adsit, Sue Doe, Marisa Allison, Paula Maggio, and Maria Maisto

*Given the context in which precarity is unevenly distributed in today's corporate university, it is important for women's studies to consider its role in bringing about higher education policy reform. Reporting on the findings of a national survey of chairs and directors of women's studies departments, this article suggests strategies for performing "affective activism" within the university through research and action, guided by feminist theory—including collaborative organic theater, institutional discourse analysis, and the drafting of position statements. Drawing from a range of experiential and discursive primary-source materials, the essay suggests strategies and examples for how institutional norms can be made available for interrogation and transformation. In this work, emotion can provide a lens by which to see the institutional situation of women's studies and its intervention in the new status quo of the corporate university.*

**Keywords:** adjunct faculty / contingency / discourse / gender equity / managerialism / precarity / tenure / women faculty

In the increasingly bottom-line-driven university, *precarity* is unevenly distributed among disciplines and programs. Consider the recent history of departmental closures in higher education in which programs in liberal arts, humanities, and identity politics suffer funding cuts and closures, while science and technology programs are spared. In 2009 the women's studies program was closed at the University of Guelph; in 2010 the University at Albany suspended five departments in the humanities: the departments of French, Italian, classics, Russian, and theater art; in 2013 the University of Windsor closed its Centre

for Studies in Social Justice; in 2014 the University of South Carolina Upstate closed its Center for Women's and Gender Studies. Such programs become considered a financial drain on the institution and opposed to the "money-making" disciplines, which are externally funded by grants and contracts. Closed departments are seen as inessential to the university because they are not monetarily profitable in the so-called marketplace of ideas that constitutes higher education. Holding to the capitalist meritocratic ideology of "that which performs best will be rewarded most," these closure decisions become framed with the discourse of consistency and fairness; of the University of South Carolina Upstate decision, Chancellor Tom Moore explained to a local newspaper: "Not only is this decision not punitive or a response to external pressure, it is *part of an effort to be consistent and systematic* across academic affairs in how we administer and support various programs" (qtd. in Shain 2014; emphasis added). Such statements paint over the structural inequalities in academe with a language of equality, consistency, and fairness. Capitalist ideologies, which are perilously applied to knowledge production and teaching, become naturalized in the rhetorical gestures of the institution.

As precarity is unevenly distributed among disciplines and departments, so also is the condition of precarity unevenly distributed among academic laborers—that is, faculty and staff. Today, nontenure-track instructors represent more than 70 percent of all faculty, and there is a "continuing (and striking) concentration of women in [this] temporary, nontenured underclass" (Sharff and Lessinger 2008, 3), with women composing between 51–61 percent of adjunct faculty nationwide. Women are overrepresented among contingent faculty: they are 10–15 percent more likely to be in contingent positions, and earning 27 percent less than their male counterparts while there (Gappa, Austin, and Trice 2007). And Sivagami Subbaraman (2002) reports that the reproduction of these contingent positions "has been highest in those very disciplines that feminism has helped transform and engender: English, women's studies, gay and lesbian studies, ethnic studies, etc." (264). These temporary workers are not likely to be granted full-time tenured positions, as "conversion" from contingent status to the tenure track is rare.

To call for change is to make visible one's unhappiness, a gesture that risks further marginalization; a call for change, after all, implies that current systems are no longer acceptable—a notion that challenges or even threatens the very people who enjoy high levels of power and control. The "feminist killjoy" or the "unhappy queer" (monikers that Sara Ahmed uses to demonstrate the tendency to silence and dismiss through typecasting), like the "whining adjunct" (as recently invoked in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* letter to the editor), is further marginalized because of her unhappiness with the structures that marginalize her.<sup>1</sup> She becomes figured as irrational and violent, as possessing an overly emotive positionality.

In contrast, the “happy adjunct” maintains a cheerful countenance in an oppressive system, which may, on the one hand, allow others to proceed in denial of complicity and culpability. The happy adjunct’s professional survival may rest on her sustained performance of this role, which involves a suppression of discomfort and dissatisfaction. When she expresses rather than suppresses such discomfort and dissatisfaction, the activist adjunct may embody the antithesis of the administrator’s ideal academic laborer—even as hegemonic stereotyping of, and prejudice toward, these roles can work to silence the activist. The happy adjunct can reinforce those in positions of power and authority, or, on the other hand, she can be well-positioned to challenge that power by virtue of herself holding a position of privilege. As a colleague noted to us recently in conversation, the happy adjunct may be a misunderstood resource for activist work, since this person may feel less vulnerable and hence more bold if politicized and deployed for action.

The emotional performance of the adjunct reflects in many ways what has been said of the emotional expectations of the activist-feminist. “However she speaks,” Ahmed (2012, 62) writes, “the one who speaks as a feminist is usually heard as causing the argument.” She continues: “[she] is heard as an obstacle to the conversational space before she even says anything. She poses a problem because she keeps exposing a problem” (63). Her words are read as being “already heard” (as in “we’ve heard this all before” or “here she goes again”) and, at the same time, disruptive. Her persistence is disruptive, so her persistence is dismissed. She is a figure who is associated with disruption and her message is difficult—often too difficult for those in positions of power to entertain, much less engage with enough to be prompted to act in response. The unhappy adjunct and adjunct organizer are likewise seen as problems. She, rather than the underlying context of precarity that has positioned her, becomes the source of shame. How do we counter these stultifying realities so that activist projects can move forward?

We discuss below our own positionality in light of the academic precariat and locate disciplinary precarity in women’s studies programs, including how precarity is represented by chairs and directors of these programs. We also discuss how disciplinary organizations’ position statements and institutional discourses reinstate precarity, and we situate this discussion within what we consider to be the under-theorized role of affect and emotion in discussions of precarity. Finally, we talk about an experiment involving an explicit confrontation between affect and emotion and precarious academic employment—an “organic (participatory) theatre” production, which offered an arts approach to activism that is consistent with feminist research and theory.

While only one of the coauthors of this article (Sue Doe) has enjoyed that rarest of opportunities in moving from a contingent status to a tenured position, all of us have experienced, firsthand, precarious employment in higher education. Sue taught off the tenure track for twenty-five years prior to her

conversion to the tenure track, and she has made the rhetorics of academic labor her research focus—a fact that makes it unlikely she will ever relocate or renegotiate the terms of her employment. Another coauthor, Maria Maisto, has been teaching on contingent appointments off and on since 1993; she left her PhD program ABD in 2000 due, in part, to institutional policies that did not stop the clock for family leave. Her experiences as an adjunct in Ohio from 2005 onward led her to co-found and lead the New Faculty Majority (NFM) and its affiliated Foundation. She realizes that her national prominence in the academic labor movement makes job security complicated, since it can cut off access to other opportunities. Her experience leading a national nonprofit organization dependent on public and foundation support has also given her insight into an economic precarity that is arguably similar to that experienced by department chairs and academic administrators, who find themselves confronting dilemmas created by apparent conflicts between their activist orientation and the structural demands and limitations of their institutional roles. Coauthor Janelle Adsit, as a new PhD, recently completed her first national job search but has taught as an adjunct, as a graduate teaching assistant (GTA), and in a nontenurable academic-support position. She has come early to understand the emotional labor involved in workplace-justice efforts, even as she has consistently recommitted herself to this project. Coauthor Marisa Allison, as a doctoral candidate in sociology with a graduate certificate in women's and gender studies, is approaching the tenure-line job market, but recognizes that the ten years' worth of teaching experience she has in higher education will likely work against her in attempting to land a tenure-track position. Her research and activist work for her contingent colleagues could also make the job market a difficult place to navigate. Coauthor Paula Maggio's career history has been marked by the versatility and mobility that is demanded off the tenure track: after a longtime career in the communications field, she earned her master's degree eight years ago and began teaching as an adjunct in three disciplines: English, journalism, and women's studies. She then held a series of full-time temporary positions at a public university near her home, the second of which was within a women's studies program—a position that came to end when Paula fought the university's denial of her unemployment insurance claim. While her decision to fight the university was guided by feminist theory and praxis, Paula's case, which ended in the university's favor in the Court of Common Pleas, pitted her against the women's studies' program interim director, who backed the university's argument against her unemployment eligibility. Since then, Paula has been unable to obtain any classes within the women's studies program where she taught for five years and that once employed her full-time.

Our experiences with contingency and activism in higher education cause us to question the ways in which women's studies may be positioned to address the inequities that condition academic labor. At the same time, we recognize that the discipline's vulnerability may hinder efforts to bring about change. It

is often the case that the most vulnerable departments and workers are those who become responsible for equality work, for changing the conditions that affect them. As evidenced in the list of department closures above, social justice centers, women's studies departments, and other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences that take consciousness-raising as an explicit commitment are disproportionately affected by institutional cuts. It is as Ahmed describes in *On Being Included* (2012, 4): "if . . . equality work is less valued by organizations, then to become responsible for this work can mean to inhabit institutional spaces that are also less valued." Equality work—working upon the institution you work within—is vulnerable.

It is not coincidental that four out of five of us teach in English studies and composition, which have historically been central sites of both academic labor problems and the contingent faculty movement largely due to their problematic reliance upon nontenure-track faculty for the teaching of writing and their focus on the role of language in social justice efforts, writ large. Here, however, we ground our work in the context of women's studies, which we believe to be an important site for transformative action in addressing the structural inequalities in higher education.

As the discipline of women's studies continues to critically consider its position in the academy we must reevaluate what we are responsible for and how that responsibility has been allocated. What is women's studies' proximity to the problems of contingency in the academy? Where does the responsibility for the crisis of contingency in higher education lie?<sup>2</sup>

During the fall 2014 semester, chairs and directors of women's and gender studies departments across the country took part in an NFM Foundation–sponsored Women and Contingency Project designed to answer these questions. The study invited chairs and directors to express their own perceptions of contingency, and to examine the degree to which they, as administrators, have a felt sense—and actualized evidence—of agency to effect change.<sup>3</sup> In what follows, we examine their responses for what they reveal about labor activism work within higher education. We argue that emotion can and often does provide a lens by which to see the institutional situation of women's studies with relation to academic hiring practices, particularly in terms of its potential as a resource for interventions into the corporate university. We follow this discussion with suggestions for how affective work can be done to interrogate and remake university policy statements and collaboratively express community experiences within the university. How can we work with the affective realities that work upon us, in a situation characterized by precarity?

### **Precarity and Women's Studies**

In describing the current academic milieu we rely upon the term *precarity*. We use it in part because of its mobility: it is a term that has invited interdisciplinary

thinking: precarity, as a concept, has found a place in scholarship in philosophy, international studies, anthropology, rhetoric, communication, literary studies, women's studies, and some of the social sciences, among other disciplines. Following Stephanie A. Shields's (2012) essay "Waking Up to Privilege," we conceptualize precarity as being another organizing feature of social relationships that is intersectional and that, with other social identities, becomes mutually reinforcing and naturalizing (30); that is, one's job title, and the level of contingency it represents (as a symbol for a particular contract and a particular status within institutional structures), is another factor that is constitutive of one's positionality. Contingency intersects with other complex power relationships related to gender, class, race, ethnicity, and so on and creates forms of precarity that should be examined. A task for women's studies is to continue studying and acting on the complex relationships among forms of contingency that are constellated in terms of gender, class, race, and other identity categories.

Precarity has been variously defined, but has come to signify the "multiple forms of nightmarish dispossession and injury that our age entails" (Muehlebach 2013, 298) with the growth of neoliberalism.<sup>4</sup> While "[p]recarity applies to a specific subjectivity, the lived experience of ambient insecurity" (Horning 2012), it is also a widespread condition, and its increasing prevalence in higher education is an indicator of the ways in which the corporate university reflects larger economic and policy trends.<sup>5</sup>

We are not of the belief that these interrelated precarities (those of students, staff, and faculty) are part of a zero-sum game, as they are typically explained through a corporate model. For example, we are often told that increasing the wages of faculty and staff would increase tuition, but we know that tuition has been increasing for years as wages have declined or remained stagnant. Therefore, we see the academic labor-activist work we do as a part of other interrelated precarities: fighting for a living wage for *all* workers, making college more affordable and accessible for all, eliminating student loan debt, demanding equal work for equal pay, and so on.

Women's studies' own disciplinary contingency is conditioned by these general trends and at the same time is unique, as it is one of the few disciplines to be so variously institutionalized: in the form of the autonomous academic department, the multiuse center, the academic-support extension, or as an interdisciplinary unit that is spread across other disciplines. And the diversity among programs multiplies when one considers institutional contingencies, such as student-body demographics and student experiences, organizational relationships to local publics, donor relations, governmental mandates, previously established mission statements, industry trends, local legacies of hiring practices, outsourcing services once performed by full-time staff with benefits (for example, food service, housekeeping, maintenance, IT, and so on, resulting in an academic community that is a series of outsourced "services"), and many other factors, which are to varying degrees generalized trends and unique local

circumstances. This range of institutional circumstances coincides with a sense of disciplinary instability, expressed by some members of the discipline. More than a quarter (26.2 percent) of the chairs and directors of the 104 women's studies programs who responded to the Women and Contingency Project survey stated that their department was unstable, and another 23 percent were unsure of its stability within their university.<sup>6</sup>

Women's studies' unstable relationship to traditional academic situations and practices has sometimes been a source of unfavorable labor conditions, but it has also been a profound resource for theory production and research within the discipline. An history of institutional liminality and transgression of disciplinary boundaries has shaped feminist theory. Women's studies theorists resist aspects of traditional disciplining, refusing to hole up in a closed discourse that excludes nonspecialist readers and prevents cross-disciplinary exchange. Women's studies has seen its location in the university as a unique position from which to think about relationships, and as a way out of some of the inadequacies of traditional academic culture. As Kathleen Blee (2002, 177) writes, "[t]he benefits of operating outside the boundaries of conventional disciplinary frameworks, most of which historically have been antagonistic—or, at least, blind—to gender analysis, are clear." The situation of women's studies allows for the adoption of an inside/outside activist stance. But as Blee goes on to note, "there are also problems that stem from the complicated relationship of Women's Studies to the academic disciplines" (178)—problems such as an uncertain future and vulnerability to administrative decisions.

Because it instigates change at a local level the mission of women's studies necessarily comes with a level of precarity. It cannot be readily folded into the "business as usual" university that does indeed operate as a business. The discipline therefore operates in a situation wherein the "idealism of Women's Studies can quickly be replaced by the profits of Golf Course Studies," as Diane Elam (2002, 219) wryly puts it.<sup>7</sup> Exposing this precarity, and mobilizing to do something about it, is the continued work of women's studies.

The corporate university's undervaluing of certain forms of knowledge production and disciplinary interests, the persistent labor exploitation, and the concurrent marginalization of and prejudice toward minoritized groups and nontenure-track faculty should, we argue, be among women's studies' most pressing concerns. These three interlocking features of corporatization coincide, as they result from a mainstream managerialism that now largely governs academic decision-making. If we want to address the role that women's studies plays in the activism of contingent faculty we have to start by asking how precarious departments in the corporate university can (and should) advocate for the precariat within this situation. Women's studies can change the corporate academy from the inside. However, we are continually reminded of Audre Lorde's (2007) admonition that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. In an institutional reality wherein certain forms of labor and certain laborers are



undermined and undervalued, feminists in positions of power may be called on to, in her words, “stand alone, unpopular, and sometimes reviled” in their spaces of power in order to create and realize our “common cause . . . in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish” (112).

What this world looks like in practice remains an open question. While a situation may be improved by autonomous, secure department status and security of employment for faculty, these policies also risk affirming forms of elitism. Alternative models have been proposed, and the discussion of these should remain open. While the protection of tenure can enable those who have historically been blocked from higher education to be able to speak as scholars and influence/serve students from similar backgrounds, the hierarchical tenure system is also rightly contested. Similarly, additional state support and the goal of free higher education, as additional proposed solutions to the problem of corporate education, are not without risks to academic freedom as well. Another solution, also imperfect, would be to limit admission to PhD programs so that we do not have a flooded labor market. Clearly, these questions about how best to combat the damaging effects of corporatized higher education are far from being resolved.

It should not go unnoticed that the growth of contingent faculty occurred at the same time as those who have been historically blocked from higher education (women, minorities, and the poor) became the majority of students on college and university campuses and as women became the majority of doctoral degree earners (Schell 1998). What on the one hand could be seen as feelings of entitlement among PhDs for tenure-line jobs, is on the other viewed as a test of the myth of meritocracy of education by those who have been historically denied entrance. Importantly, tenure is not just about job security, but primarily and initially about academic freedom. The historical structures that have blocked women, minorities, and people in low socioeconomic conditions from higher education have also blocked the scholarship of women, minorities, and people in low socioeconomic conditions (as contingent faculty) from being protected by academic freedom. If those who have been historically denied these positions are able to get through and secure tenured faculty jobs, they risk perpetuating the myth of meritocracy of higher education, ultimately leading others to believe it is personally achievable for anyone when in actuality it is not. At the same time, there is a belief that one can change higher education from within if one can get to that position of security from which to speak. Yet, our survey data shows little evidence that this is the case for women’s and gender studies chairs and directors, who are largely coming from secure, tenured positions and perceive themselves to be unable to make substantial systemic changes.

Our purpose here is not to resolve these questions; rather, we seek strategies for raising the visibility of these issues and the ways in which they are tied up in affective circulations. By bringing these issues to light in all their complexity, we suggest ways of addressing them through collaborative processes of interrogation.

And in this consciousness-raising we are all in the uncomfortable position of critically examining our own investments. For instance, Marisa finds that her positionality as a first-generation, poor white college graduate from the Deep South no doubt led her to be invested in believing the meritocratic myth of higher education for much of her life. Her background also led her to understand how others in similar positions would also feel entitled to the “elite position” (defined as succeeding to those who do not come from positions of academic/class privilege). Similarly, Janelle has internalized meritocratic myths of success and achievement and is cognizant of her position of privilege as a white woman from a middle-class background who has been partnered with someone with a stable income and the flexibility to relocate. It is essential that we continue this practice of questioning why any of us (feminist academics) believe we should be in an entitled position within an elitist institution.

### Responding to Contingency in Women’s Studies

There is widespread agreement that the academic working environment is in need of reform. In the survey data collected, women’s studies chairs and directors expressed criticism of the progressiveness of their institutions, with 31 percent disagreeing that the working climate for women at their institution was positive, 31 percent disagreeing that their university had progressive family policies, and 85 percent disagreeing that minority women were well-represented at their institution. To rectify these shortcomings and counter the trend toward corporatization and the resultant marginalization, we, following Judith Gardiner (2002), argue that women’s studies today should work “to theorize, imagine, narrate, and to the best of our ability, actively demonstrate noncoercive collectivity, to show the limits of consumer freedom, and to envision models of feminist equality” (199) that necessitate changes to current hiring and wage-assigning practices. With Gardiner and Robyn Wiegman we prioritize knowledge production as dovetailing with activism. As Wiegman (2012, 20) writes, *knowing* can be a “means to do justice,” and critique can be a means of revealing and undoing structural inequality. Attempts to recognize institutionalized structural inequality through research within disciplines such as women’s studies must also be aligned with activist work that actively directs institutional change. We read feminist methodology as supplying not only techniques for describing and analyzing social relationships, but also providing a repertoire for affective activism.

Women’s studies has long had the disciplinary task of reeducating the academy about social issues and creating better conditions for the university’s most marginalized subjects (and here we invoke more than one meaning of *subjects*—both the subject positions that individuals are *disciplined* to occupy, and disciplinary subjects or topic areas of research and thought). The project of reeducation inextricably ties scholarly work in women’s studies to political

activism within and outside of the academy. Academic labor activism is deeply tied to other activist commitments in women's studies: secure employment cannot be separated from issues like academic freedom, better working conditions, and representation for minoritized groups. Forms of subordination and oppression are connected.

In responding to the institutional situation of the corporate academy in women's studies, we, with Sherene Razack (1998) and Ann Russo (2008), argue for a "politics of accountability" to recognize how we are implicated in the subordination of minoritized groups. We extend Razack's and Russo's conceptualizations of a politics of accountability to attend to the stratification of academic labor in an era of increased contingency. Cultivating accountability means, in Russo's words, "encouraging faculty and students in women's studies to recognize our structural relationship to one another and our involvement in maintaining . . . systemic hierarchies" (137). A politics of accountability in academic labor activism is vigilant against biases that limit and marginalize nontenure-track faculty and maintain a "two-tier system": for example, assumptions that nontenure-line faculty are less serious, less intellectual, or less committed. A politics of accountability interrogates the biases built into the language we use to talk about disciplinarity: the tendency to privilege metaphors of disciplinary "belonging," for instance, ignore material realities that necessitate transience and cross-disciplinarity and increasingly make long-term "membership" to one disciplinary community the privilege of a select few, as more and more faculty members are forced to teach outside their "home" disciplines or to leave the academy altogether.

Following Russo, we seek to prompt greater consideration of how hierarchies are systemically sustained within the academy. She reflects "on how demands for more resources in women's studies programs impact the labor of other women and men in the university (e.g., the resulting increased labor of the clerical, operations, and other staff at the university whose voices, labor, and compensation are not always figured into the equation)," and "how discussions about the status of women in the university often do not include the women and men doing this labor" (136). Implied in Russo's statements is a need for greater collaboration and dialogue among multiple communities and participants in pursuit of a sea change in academic labor practices.

The marginalization of members of the academic community is built into common practices and discourses that circulate within the university. It is the nature of institutionalization to naturalize, making conventions and assumptions become less visible in their normativity. As Ahmed writes (2012, 21), "[w]hen things become institutional, they recede. To institutionalize x is for x to become routine or ordinary such that x becomes part of the background for those who are part of an institution." Our purpose as activists is to bring the background to the foreground, in this sense. The goal should be that the structural inequalities of the university—and the ways that these structures are

produced and maintained—come under constant scrutiny by all members of the institution. It becomes important to disrupt these norms. Too often, chairs and directors are constrained by their contexts, unable to do what they might want to do on behalf of others, as the survey data described in this article suggests. Chairs and directors see the necessity of disruption as they respond, by condition of their authority, to that which is truly urgent. Disruptive activist processes, such as those we suggest in what follows, can present chairs/directors with a moment of opportunity, a moment of innovative response to the complex emerging and urgent needs on the ground. A logical response is an honest one that acknowledges the messiness of academic activism and completely exposes the angst involved in trying to find ethical solutions to these problems. This mode of responding is a constantly reflective praxis.<sup>8</sup> The mistake that we as activists sometimes make is projecting the sense that it is “simply” a question of instituting social justice or some other principle—forgetting that in practice it is never as easy as it seems. Therefore, the only honest response is to reject the defensive practice of offering glib, canned excuses and instead openly acknowledge the complex, fraught nature of our work. That is what is disruptive. The activism of critique must be complemented by the activism of example.

The aim is, as Ahmed (2012, 25) argues, to make critical and complex thought about inequality automatic and ubiquitous in academic discourse and decision-making. We argue that an examination of the affective economies of the institution can reveal why this goal is to be hard-won.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, affect can be an important counter-force, prompting action and change. As we elaborate below, both operations—the examination of emotion, and the mobilization of emotion as a counter-force—are key to affective activism.

### **Accounting for Emotion and Disrupting Emotional Hegemony**

To examine what hinders this vision of transformative academic activism we look to circulations of affect. Disparate affective economies, which are “social and material, as well as psychic” (Ahmed 2010, 46) and produced by the uneven distribution of precarity and the displacement of responsibility for it, regularly go unnoticed in the academy. Those who *do* notice express a fatalistic sense of being able to do anything to effect change. In the case of the chairs and directors surveyed in the NFM Foundation study, 64 percent had taken an opportunity to advocate for contingent faculty either in their departments or at their universities. Those who did not report participation in such advocacy work shifted that responsibility upward, stating that “only the dean makes those decisions” and “given our budget situation, I really have no control over working conditions.” Two things are clear from this research: that chairs and directors of women’s studies overwhelmingly recognize the problem of contingency. Most also feel that they have little power to make real change, so they place the blame for academic labor conditions further up the

bureaucratic chain.<sup>10</sup> These responses reflect a sense of futility or lack of power to effect change, given the tenuous location of departments and programs within the marginalized disciplines in the arts and humanities, as well as in some sciences. The corporate university tends to valorize those disciplines that produce external funding. And yet, there is a cost to this funded research, which, like university football, never actually pays the bills. It is the arts and humanities that “keep the lights on,” as many have argued, including Gary Rhoades, Robert Watson, and Chris Newfield.<sup>11</sup>

Recognizing these often-fatalistic feelings that accompany the recognition of oppressive working conditions is a step toward enacting change. We prioritize the acknowledgment of such affective operations. As Ruth Leys (2011, 436) asserts, “we ignore . . . affective intensities and resonances at our peril” because affect is always working on us materially, psychically, and institutionally. To ignore emotion and affect, she explains, not only leads us to “underestimate the political harm that the deliberate manipulation of our affective lives can do” (*ibid.*), but may also prevent action. Knowing the ways in which emotions work can help us, as activists, to do our work more effectively and encourage those in positions of power to want to do more.

Accounting for affect and becoming accountable for it (that is, recognizing affective productions and becoming responsible for intervening in them) are important to the work of the activist. To be clear, the pursuit of these forms of accountability is not a matter of identifying and possessing the “right feeling.” Discourses of the right feeling—associated with decorum, status, and normative affective positions—privatize and naturalize emotions, ignoring the ways that they are culturally constructed and therefore contingent. Lauren Berlant (2008) is right to worry that such an ethics grounded in a privileged or “true feeling” will preclude “the ethical imperative toward social transformation,” replacing action with “a passive world of private thoughts, leanings, and gestures projected out as an intimate public of private individuals inhabiting their own affective changes” (41). Countering this privatizing tendency, a praxis that de-interiorizes emotion makes affect available as a site for change. To recognize that affect is, as Lisa Langstraat (2002, 306) says, always “imbricated in power relations” is to make emotion operative for activism. The fear of humiliation, for example, is another unacknowledged feeling: particularly the looming prospect that we could be exposed as hypocritical for advocating for just employment practices when guilty of violating some ourselves, for advocating for social justice in one sphere and inadvertently supporting unjust practices in another. Confronting this threat of humiliation—that which makes us feel most uncomfortable—is a disruption that is a necessary piece of reflective praxis. Humiliation, and the fear of it, is perhaps the emotion most susceptible to being privatized and turned inward. As all emotions are relational and thus imbricated in power relations, humiliation foregrounds issues of status inequality.<sup>12</sup> There is a famous expression in the adjunct movement: that no adjunct is more than ten seconds

away from total humiliation. Bringing these conditions to light is essential to advocating academic labor reform, which extends to all aspects of experience in the academy.

Interrogations of prejudice, as another example, also require this de-privatizing approach to emotion. Prejudice is itself an affective position, embedded with feelings of contempt, anger, resentment, or disgust. Prejudice in turn produces emotional effects; thus, to eradicate prejudice is to change emotional relations. The “unhappy” emotions produced by prejudice and exploitation, such as physical pain, make us acutely aware of our conditions; they therefore may be necessary to any intervention in those conditions.<sup>13</sup> We should not draw a false equation between “unhappy” and “morally suspect” (Ahmed 2010, 70); however, unhappy emotions can nevertheless signal the need for change.

Ahmed goes so far as to define “consciousness raising” as “raising consciousness of unhappiness” (*ibid.*). When activists act out their unhappiness they cause a disturbance—the sense of neutrality is disrupted. This disruption challenges the “emotional hegemony” (Jaggar 1992, 130; Langstraat 2002, 300) that serves to maintain the status quo in naturalized power relations. Following Alison Jaggar, Langstraat defines emotional hegemony as “the processes through which dominant groups struggle to regulate the epistemic potential of emotions, thereby determining which emotional states are valued and which are mistrusted in specific contexts. Emotional hegemony is effective only insofar as it wins our consent by naturalizing that which is saturated with power relations” (*ibid.*). As Langstraat notes, emotional hegemony functions to win a kind of happy consent, a contentment with the way things are. It thus becomes imperative for equality laborers to find strategies for disrupting these naturalized affective economies. The “vexing” capacities of emotions can be cultivated through activist work. For Langstraat, cultural constructions of emotionality can undergo interventions to bring about political change (310).<sup>14</sup> In the final sections of this article we suggest strategies by which such vexing work can take place. Before embarking on this discussion, however, we pause briefly to address the repeated objections to emotional appeals and the recurring disregard for emotional realities.

### Countering Skepticism toward Emotion

Equity and conflict-resolution discourses regularly advise practitioners to deal with the ideology, not the emotion. But these recommendations, while perhaps useful as a conversational style with certain audiences, can serve to privatize, pathologize, or neutralize emotions that are crucial features of any inequitable and vexed system—emotions that are full of the potential to stir things up.<sup>15</sup> As feminists, we seek to be vigilant in countering the tendency to hide or dismiss emotion, in refusing the myths that construct emotion as a hindrance to real change. At the same time, we should resist a corresponding tendency, which Ahmed warns against throughout her books, to fetishize emotion and

divorce it from the contingent circumstances of its circulation. An emotion can problematically become itself a site of investment, causing subjects to cling to a particular affective identity—for example, a righteous sense of fear that is born from the recurring “besiegement narrative” that Alison Piepmeier identifies in her contribution to the collection *Rethinking Women’s and Gender Studies* (2011). A besiegement narrative is often not far from discourses regarding activism, of which academic activists should be aware. The temptation to figure the adjunct as, to use the words of this article’s reviewer, “always, already, ahistorically, and/or only wronged” is simplistic and inadequate to the needs of academic labor reform. Instead of reducing the affective situation of the academic laborer, we must gain resources for attending to the complexity of emotional circulations and emotional identities, which are multidimensional and ambivalent. Subsequently, these mixed feelings and ambivalences are useful, if not necessary, for sustaining collectivism and material change.

Frustration and anger, for example, can themselves become powerful rhetorical moves, translated in discourse or the body’s expressiveness. Hence, while affect continues to be constructed as at odds with legitimate persuasion and action, we counter such common constructions, arguing that emotions may themselves be a primary means of effective persuasion and collective action because they are always-already shaping our allegiances and ways of being.

Ann Cvetkovich (2012) argues that “feelings” like the “political depression” now dominating the public landscape can be a resource for political action and should be de-pathologized so that they become “a possible resource for political action rather than its antithesis.” She does not discount political depression’s association with “inertia and despair,” and says that “this is not to convert political depression into a positive experience,” but to suggest that “these feelings, moods, and sensibilities become sites of publicity and community formation” (2).

Emotions propel activism, triggering and catalyzing advocacy’s pursuit of, and claim to, policy and culture change. As an emergent, evolving, and impassioned component of advocacy, therefore, activism is the fast-and-hot protest arm of advocacy’s slow-and-cool project. Because we make a case here for the essential role of the affective to persuasion, we align our efforts with more of an activist approach than an advocacy one, as much of our ensuing discussion will show. Because it saturates communication and social relations, emotion becomes an important resource for social justice work. Accounting for emotion and changing the emotional economies that reinforce and result from inequity is key to academic labor activism.

### **Making Use of Emotion in Activism through Organic Theater**

We should not leave emotion out. Here, we show, by using examples from a local setting, how emotion can become part of the action because activists intervene



at the level of discourse and consciousness-raising of the experiences of the precariat. While affect is to some extent beyond our control or decision, as Ahmed (2004), Cory Holding (2007), and Denise Riley (2005) have articulated, we can also make rhetorical use of emotional resources, knowing that expressions of anger and despair have material effects and can work to bring people together in collectivized action.

The activist's role necessitates not just the presentation of a message, but also the creation of conditions for making the message heard. She redeploys the message, as she must. But first, since effective activism, as Dorothy Hodgson and Ethel Brooks (2007, 25) posit, "depends on the ability to bridge differences of lives and locations to build community, alliances, and collaborations," the adjunct activist/organizer must call attention to both complicity and collective despair. She then reappropriates "the power to express, criticize, shape, connect, and affect" (15).

We have found through our activist work that feminist methodologies can enable this work at all levels/ranks of academic employment. We have employed feminist theory to assert alternative ways of knowing and of wanting to know, to seek untold stories. Following Shalomit Reinharz and Lynn Davidman's (1992, 12) feminist methodology, we argue that activists should hold themselves constrained to no single set of approaches to accomplish this work, but assert instead the necessity of utilizing a range of methods. However, certain methodologies of activism, which arise from feminist thought, are particularly useful in the context of academic equity work.

Sue has found *organic theater*, a practice informed by feminist theory, to be a powerful form of activism within the academy. As defined and developed by James Walsh and the Romero Theatre Troupe of Denver, organic theater builds on the work of Augusto Boal and Bertolt Brecht and is a form of collectivization in which stakeholders and members of a community come together to collaboratively, and sometimes improvisationally, script a short dramatic play that portrays an evocative and discussion-provoking event or issue.<sup>16</sup> This theater is a useful tool for activist work in that it allows lived experiences to be rendered visible through the form of dramatic productions and reenactments. For instance, Sue has helped to perform a scene, drawn from life, in which an adjunct instructor is asked by a student to meet privately to discuss extenuating circumstances contributing to a low grade, a request that the adjunct instructor is forced to refuse because she has no office space for such meetings and no time to stay after class, since she has to commute between several campuses where she holds multiple teaching contracts. Depicting this scene for a seated audience—"showing" it on a stage rather than only "telling" about it—is persuasive in exposing the problems that result from the reliance upon undercompensated contingent instructors. Such approaches, due to their embodiment onstage, also resist the reduction of social justice issues to mere "cognitive problems" (Clough and Fine 2007, 265).



Because each scene is embodied in this way, organic theater's persuasion is affectively charged; however, as a rhetorical strategy it resists the manipulations of pathos by staking out space for discussion following each performance. Each scene is left open to multiple interpretations, asking audience members and actors alike to consider the manifold forces that shape the presented situation. Additionally, various members of a community are invited and welcomed to depict their experience and perspective as actor-participants, regardless of alignment or affiliation, thus expanding the range of stakeholder voices and complicating too-easy characterizations of the motives of this type of staged performance.

This approach of organic theater is informed by feminist methodologies that elevate the "situation at hand" and lived experience of marginalization as an otherwise "hidden process" and value of the "already-given situation" (Fonow and Cook 1991, 11). Drawing from feminist theory, organic theater takes the small, local case as an appropriate unit of focus. Such methodological choices counter academic contexts where faculty are largely educated to develop a general distrust of the "n" of one, the individual story or personally experienced scene. Organic theater allows for the case study, the testimony, the personal story all to be made public as dramatically rendered genres of understanding and forms of meaning-making. At the same time, because performances often involve several actors and a range of stakeholders, the individual story becomes a space for collaborative reconstruction and counter-narratives. Organic theater is a way of recognizing how precarious employment emerges, evolves, and is experienced, while also calling for change at both the local and national levels. It offers a pedagogy of disruption to business as usual, accelerating change even in contexts of informed and committed activism; it reminds participants and audience members of the imperfect progress of change efforts and of those who suffer while they wait.

In our work as activists we have come to recognize how employment trauma utterly dismantles the narratives of academic success and achievement that are often central to the self-image of persons educated at the graduate level. Such affronts to personal and professional agency may prompt shame, which can only be reworked if the story is allowed to be told, the emotions articulated, the effects registered. This kind of restorative witnessing relies upon Wendy Hesford's (1999) notion of *layered testimony*, through which identities are inscribed and alternative versions of history talk back to the dominant culture and one another. Testimony allows others to witness alternative ways of knowing and being, and confronts the prejudice and conformity insinuated by dominant expectations for autobiographical testimony. There is, therefore, an important role to be played by the re-storying of trauma in the calculus of recovery and healing from trauma in the workplace, and not just for the adjunct. Equally as much, there is a role for the stories of those who are more fully enfranchised within the academic setting. And as a feature of the feminist methodology at

work here, storying provides the opportunity for both testifier and witness to challenge dominant assumptions. From this viewpoint, emotions, including those of disappointment, loss, hurt, grief, and anger, are validated in their own right. Even conscience and shame can be given their due because presenting a story can move out of a state in which “one’s body seems to burn up with the negation that is perceived” (Ahmed 2010, 103); at the same time, it becomes possible for these emotions to be integrated and transformed after they are first told.

By way of example, an onstage exploration can be undertaken across tiers or levels of employment rank and privilege, thus deepening the conversation by explaining the employment context from multiple perspectives. Those who might imagine only being demoralized by processes that call out injustices they are complicit in are consciously invited in and given opportunity to offer their perspectives. This approach goes some distance toward answering to fears of public shaming, which would be a nonmotivator. Instead, an invitational rhetoric opens the door to multiple versions of the same event, thus aligning this approach to feminist methodologies that permit forgiveness and enact reintegration. Emotional dimensions of marginalized employment are hence not only motivating factors that can lead to change, but legitimate landmarks in and of themselves that warrant representation. As both subject and outcome of a feminist research agenda they also pronounce a hallmark of feminist research to which we have referred: that the doing of research and the making of change can (and perhaps must) go hand in hand.

Sue’s work in organic theater has uncovered these possibilities, as it has also exposed several risks of making use of emotion in activism. One of the purposes of doing organic theater work is to draw on Bertolt Brecht’s (1957, 91) notion of “the alienation effect” in which the performance is not offered to make people feel good or even sympathetic, but rather to make them uncomfortable in the laying bare of issues, the unveiling of injustice and prejudice.<sup>17</sup> The act of challenging the status quo through this medium thus serves a rhetorical purpose: change comes at a price to those who must reconsider their positions of privilege. However, as tenured colleagues have pointed out, when you are on the receiving end of that kind of discomfort it can seem that you are being called out and humiliated, which would likely cause audiences to become distanced and disengaged from what is being presented. At the same time, the nontenured adjunct may feel an inflicted shame for having not measured up and disappointed one’s self, institution, discipline, and family. Cognizant of the ways that shaming has been a tool of patriarchy, heterosexism, and misogyny, we prioritize the need for practices that remain mindful of the ways that shaming can foreclose, rather than open up possibilities to move toward greater equality.<sup>18</sup> In order to avoid the experience of shame that inflicts violence on another, adjunct activist work should seek a restorative approach, as defined by Ahmed (2010, 107): “Shame may be restorative *only when the shamed other can ‘show’*

*that its failure to measure up to a social ideal is temporary*" (emphasis in original). There must be an opportunity for change, a way of altering what is deemed "shameful"—whether it be the correction of a hidden bias or the acknowledgment of hidden labor. This practice of reflection that moves toward change is key to a practice of accountability that examines one's imbrication in oppressive systems. As Russo (2008) argues in her discussion of the politics of accountability, "[e]xploring, naming, and claiming one's privilege is an important part of the process of anti-oppression work" (146), yet identifying one's privilege is not enough: we must actively seek ways of dismantling existing power structures and enabling realignments.

With adjunct activism through theater, at least as Sue has conducted it locally, the goal is to bring together as many layers of university employment as possible. It is with this idea that we have used the research presented here, on chairs and directors of women's studies departments, to push disciplinary associations like the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) to provide a platform for women's and gender studies (WGS) administrators to share experiences in their advocacy efforts and encourage one another to move toward stronger activism. (One such platform was during the 2014 annual NWSA conference, in the session "Feminist Perspectives on Contingency in Academia Part Three: Advocacy and Activism in the Contingent Labor Movement.") When asked via survey what resources disciplinary associations could provide, these administrators indicated that they wanted trainings and materials. When asked what effective support from NWSA would look like, here is how some of the chairs and directors responded:

"Models of strategies that have worked elsewhere."

"Best-practices advice. What has worked elsewhere?"

"Wow! Any advice, especially from those who have agitated for reform. Perhaps alerts to legislation that could help us create an argument or approach. Also, suggestions for other things we could do to be supportive, particularly when we cannot in the financial ways. I would welcome any/all advice and help!"

From these sentiments we can see that department chairs within women's studies express the wish that disciplinary associations would gather and share best practices and exemplary initiatives implemented in other departments to address the problems of contingency. As we move to consider strategies to support the heads of these programs we should also see the value in creating forums for discussion and reflection, accompanied by discipline-centered accountability structures, which could help institutions find their way toward alleviating inequality.

### Intervening in Institutional Discourse: Exposing Affective Economies

In addition to using storying, testimony, and the presentational devices of organic theater, we have found interventions at the level of institutional discourse to be useful to academic activist work. A close examination of written university policies can yield productive discussions in much the same way that organic theater does. These discussions of written university-policy documents may take place in department or committee meetings, or in open forums like classroom discussions, town hall-type events, campus newspapers, or designated free-speech zones where discourses may be posted or written on community boards or with sidewalk chalk.

Analysis of institutional discourses reveals how the affective economies of the university are regulated through human-resource policy. Policies and legislation are ways of managing emotion because they shape interpretations of feeling as being either legitimate and normative or marginalized. Judith Butler (2010, 41) holds that “how we interpret what we feel actually can and does alter the feeling itself”; emotion is discursive because it is at least partially constructed by interpretation. Bearing this in mind, we can reread the genre of the “compensation philosophy statement” by using a new lens—one that emphasizes the emotional realities that coincide with institutional realities.

Official university discourses regularly frame the issue of compensation in terms of *sustainability*, without identifying who is being sustained (that is, the institution, the worker, the student, or otherwise) and how evaluations of sustainability are determined. Sustainability becomes a term like *diversity* that plays out an ideal at the level of language without regard for material realities. In *On Being Included* Ahmed (2012, 5) reads institutional discourse as, citing J. L. Austin, *performative* rather than *constative*: saying “we are diverse” is not a true or false statement about the inclusion or representation of lived identities of members; claims to diversity are instead a performance of nominal values that need not be descriptive of actual circumstances. Sustainability, as a construct, functions similarly. Official claims to employ sustainable hiring and compensation practices operate to perform nominal values unaccompanied by explicit definition or measurable accountability. What counts as sustainable practice is a rhetorical problem. The neoliberal catchphrases of “fiscal responsibility” and “market competitiveness” come to belong to the discourse of sustainability in universities’ compensation-philosophy statements. These official documents construct university administrators as prudent, judicious managers of limited funds while remaining silent on the larger budgetary contexts in which pay distributions are decided. As Jagna Wojcicka Sharff and Johanna Lessinger (2008, 3) note, citing National Center for Education Statistics, the increasing reliance upon untenured labor coincides with four other key shifts, which are rarely acknowledged in institutional explanations of pay:

- 1.) The direct capital corporate investment in university research.
- 2.) A dramatic rise in tuition fees, increasing at more than twice the rate of inflation.
- 3.) Continuing bitter complaints from colleges and universities about “fiscal agony” despite enrollments that are at an all-time high . . . and tuition revenues that have doubled over the past decade.
- 4.) A rapid rise in the administrative costs of US universities (19 percent), as compared to their instructional costs (5 percent) during the 1980s.<sup>19</sup>

These factors, which govern a university’s cash flow, may not be transparent to the laborers who belong to the institution, and they are elided and deemed irrelevant to explanations of faculty compensation that are distributed to faculty members. The budgetary situation of a university is instead glossed in generic, loaded terms of *sustainability* and *equity*. We should be wary of the institutional appeal of such terms, which can serve to conceal lived realities. Taking back, or re-appropriating, these shape-shifting terms in academic activism work becomes a strategy that must be managed carefully so as not to allow activist work to become co-opted or emptied of transformative meaning.

Compensation-philosophy statements purport to “reward employees for the skill, responsibility and effort required for their positions as well as individual performance” while also promoting “internal equity” and “consistency in pay practices across the university.”<sup>20</sup> These recurring claims to a meritocratic ideal of reward-based pay that is also fair and consistent at once obfuscate the extreme disparity in pay rates between university administrators and nontenure-track faculty, even as they also naturalize pay scales as being grounded in individual “performance” rather than in structural factors, such as the visibility, power, and expendability of the position.<sup>21</sup> The implication of this prevailing ideology is that poor compensation is a result of individual inadequacy rather than structural inequities. This goes hand in hand with an “increasingly negative view of teachers as chaotic, disordered bodies in need of professional [outcomes-based] discipline” (Strickland 2011, 64). These institutional discourses manage emotion in the sense that they justify conditions that regularly produce anxiety, fear, resentment, anger, and despair; in turn, these discourses serve to privatize emotions, since emotions are not afforded a place in an institutional context that paints itself as doing what is right, sustainable, and fair. As poor compensation is indicated to be the result of individual inadequacy on the part of the employee, so also are negative emotions attributed to the individual rather than the conditions that set these emotions into circulation.

We should continue to seek strategies to intervene in official, managerial languages of “equity” that disguise and defend actual inequities. One such strategy is to bring explicit recognition of institutionalized structural inequalities into official discourse through position statements, such as those issued by NWSA, the American Association of University Professors, and other academic

organizations and research centers. Doe and Mike Palmquist (2013) argue that work on the local level supported and shaped by interventions at the level of discourse “might ultimately lead to a renewed and potentially more vigorous employment system in which tenure—in a variety of forms—is more widely enjoyed than is currently the case” (23). In their analysis, position statements that counter official discourses “have served an important role within local contexts” (27). Such position statements may ultimately prompt individual universities and colleges to enter the recognition of inequities into institutional self-presentations, causing administrators to take public stances against university reliance upon contingent labor; they can also foster critical awareness of the implications and ramifications of policy decisions. At the same time, these position statements can legitimize contingent faculty members’ expressions of the unhappy effects of contingency and under-compensation. Position statements can foreground emotions, shared by contingent faculty members, which have become hidden behind institutional declarations of fairness and equity in compensation policies.

The affective productions of official discourse are multifaceted—at once marginalizing emotions that highlight woeful conditions, and reinforcing affective attachments that keep professionals in exploitive labor conditions. As, among others, Ahmed (2010) and Berlant (2008) have theorized, “emotion can attach us to the very conditions of our subordination” (Ahmed, 12). We take seriously Subbaraman’s (2002) warning to complicate and critically consider the implications of claims that we, as teachers, “labor not for wages but for love” (261), a notion that affirms “popular conceptions [such] as ‘women’s choice,’ and serve as both a rationale and a justification for structural inequities” (260). Clearly, however, “love,” or what Eileen Schell (1998) calls a “psychic income,” plays a role in some women’s decisions to remain in low-waged academic jobs. However problematic, faculty are motivated affectively by their concern for their students, by beliefs in the transformative potential of education in addressing the historical marginalization of minoritized groups, by the nonmonetary rewards that are thought to be intrinsic to academic life, including prestige and community, and by hope for a model of a noncorporatized university that values the independent, free life of the mind for the sake of the public good. The “system has flourished,” Subbaraman notes, “because we feminists have bought into the ideological fantasy that we work for pleasure and for love. Given the white, middle-class antecedents of the second wave of the feminist movement that put many white feminists into the academy, this particular state of affairs does not seem ironic at all” (260).<sup>22</sup> University discourse makes use of these ideologies, reinforcing in various ways the idea that faculty life is intrinsically self-fulfilling and should therefore be an all-consuming lifestyle of knowledge production and service to the university. The work of the faculty member becomes divorced from wages, which reinforces the ideologies that discipline the “good professor” to be a tireless and altruistic laborer for the good of the university, which is

regularly constructed to be representative of the good of all. These ideologies are mobilized to continue the exploitation of the academy's precariat.

The idiom of affect theory can prompt academic labor activists to ask questions that may be essential to any possibility for change: What affective bargains do contingent faculty make to maintain their careers in academe? What emotional habitus maintains the status quo? How do institutional discourses reflect and shape this emotional habitus? How can we confront the status quo at the level of institutional discourse and through forums of communication that can be prompted through position-statement drafting and the performance of organic theater?

### Conclusion

We have suggested the use of strategies like organic theater, position statements, and analyses of local institutional discourses. Speaking out directly against the evocation of the language of equity within public institutions that gloss over institutional inequities like precarity is part of the work of women's studies. Research can take a dual approach, working both from the inside out and the outside in, in which local efforts are captured and shared as potential approaches for agency on other campuses, and national efforts are joined and assisted in order to participate in the broader effects.

We should remember that precarity has become a generalized condition in the academy, which should be answered with a widespread response. The adjunct activist agenda has the best interests of all academic faculty and staff in mind. While we know that contingency is not evenly distributed in academe, it is nonetheless true that contingency affects us all. The idea that tenure means security is rapidly being exposed as an unreliable myth. Contingency is an issue that involves members of higher education at large, and women's studies plays an important role in paving the way to a new institutional reality that will no longer rely upon an "underclass" of poorly compensated and undervalued professionals.

**Janelle Adsit** is an assistant professor of English at Humboldt State University in Arcata, California, specializing in writing practices. She has previously taught at Siena College, the University at Albany/SUNY, and the San Francisco Art Institute. She recently completed a postdoctoral fellowship in English at Simon Fraser University. She can be reached at [janelle.adsit@humboldt.edu](mailto:janelle.adsit@humboldt.edu).

**Sue Doe** is an associate professor of English at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, where she teaches courses in composition, autoethnographic theory and method, reading and writing connections, research methods, and GTA preparation for writing instruction. She does research in three areas: academic labor, writing across the curriculum, and student-veteran transition in the post-9/11 era. Coauthor of the faculty development book *Concepts and Choices: Meeting the Challenges*



in Higher Education (2008), she has published articles in *College English* and *Writing Program Administration*, as well as in several book-length collections. Her coauthored collection on student-veterans in the composition classroom, *Generation Vet: Composition, Veterans, and the Post-9/11 University*, was published in 2014. She can be reached at [sue.doe@colostate.edu](mailto:sue.doe@colostate.edu).

**Marisa Allison** is the director of research at the NFM Foundation, a research and advocacy organization for contingent faculty, where she currently directs the Women and Contingency Project. She is a doctoral candidate in public and applied sociology at George Mason University, and has been an adjunct instructor for ten years at numerous institutions in Virginia, Mississippi, and Alabama. Her doctoral research investigates the ways that transformations in political economy have affected institutions of higher education and women's work within them. She can be reached at [marisa.allison@newfacultymajority.info](mailto:marisa.allison@newfacultymajority.info).

**Paula Maggio** recently served as the communications director for the NFM Foundation. She is a former adjunct faculty member in the women's studies programs at the University of Akron and Kent State University. She can be reached at [akronpm@sbcglobal.net](mailto:akronpm@sbcglobal.net).

**Maria Maisto** is an adjunct faculty member in English in northeast Ohio. She co-founded and now leads New Faculty Majority and the NFM Foundation, affiliated nonprofit associations that work to improve the quality of higher education by transforming the working conditions of the majority of the faculty, who work on temporary, precarious appointments. She has written and spoken on the subject of academic contingent employment in the media as well as for academic venues. She can be reached at [maria.maisto@newfacultymajority.info](mailto:maria.maisto@newfacultymajority.info).

## Notes

1. See Catherine Stukel (2014).
2. These questions are beginning to be acknowledged and addressed from within women's studies: for example, the National Women's Studies Association's 2014 conference featured three roundtables on contingency and women's studies. During one of these sessions, members of the NFM Foundation reported findings from a survey of women's studies programs.
3. The NFM Foundation's Women and Contingency Project seeks to understand the experience of precarity as an experience of women, as well as the long-standing, generalized feminization of certain roles, such as that of the teacher, within the academy. Because women's centers and women's studies programs have historically undertaken activism work within the academy, researchers from the foundation reached out to these chairs and directors to better understand how and if they advocate for contingent faculty within both their departments and their institutions as a whole. The researchers contacted 586 chairs and directors at institutions throughout the United States,



receiving 114 responses—a rate of 20 percent, which is acceptable for web-based surveys of this magnitude.

4. In *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2010), Judith Butler articulates how precarity is a basic condition of all life, since all life is dependent on and exposed to the other. Butler reads this generalized condition of precarity as a resource for ethics that can reduce what she calls “precariousness.” Butler distinguishes *precariousness* from *precarity* in that the former term “is not simply an existential condition of individuals, but rather a social condition from which certain clear political demands and principles emerge” (2010, xxv, 3). For our purposes here, we use precarity and precariousness interchangeably to denote academic working conditions that prevent security and stability, positioning these conditions in a larger context of “dispossession and injury” affecting people in all parts of the globe.

5. *Precariat* is a term popularized by Guy Standing in his 2014 book of that title and in previous work, to signify an emerging class that experiences conditions that demand to be recognized and addressed. While we do not adopt Standing’s arguments, we use *precariat* and *precarity* to highlight subjectivities and experiences that are created by contingency.

6. Thus, about half of the respondents indicated that their departments were “stable.” While it is difficult to infer much about a collective meaning of *stability* based on this survey given its limitations, understandings of stability imply a top-down, bureaucratic approach to faculty governance (that is, stability assumed to be given and taken from above). One limitation of this research is the possible assumption that if chairs and directors largely felt that adjunct faculty working conditions were poor (which they did), that their department and positions within their institution were stable (which they mostly are), and that they had opportunities to advocate for these faculty members (which they note that they have had), then they would feel higher levels of autonomy to enact change. Unfortunately, this is not what we found. Over 60 percent of chairs and directors disagreed with the statement, “I have the autonomy to better the working conditions of part-time faculty in my department.” The buck does not stop on their desk, but on the desk of the administrators higher up.

7. As a response to this situation Diane Elam (2002) suggests that, in this context, women’s studies has no choice but to find ways of shoring up its financial autonomy, of reducing disciplinary precarity, so that the imperatives of women’s studies can continue. She writes that “Women’s Studies can continue to be a resistant force within the university . . . but Women’s Studies will not be heard if its voice is only a tiny squeak from the margins . . . Women’s Studies cannot negotiate from a position of strength without a solid financial commitment on the part of the university” (223).

8. See Maria Maisto (2012).

9. We follow Ahmed in not drawing a sharp distinction between the terms *affect* and *emotion* in our discussion here; see her *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004, 40). While some theorists, such as Brian Massumi (2002), define affect, in contrast to emotion, “as a nonsignifying, nonconscious ‘intensity’ disconnected from the subjective, signifying, functional-meaning axis to which the more familiar categories of emotion belong” (qtd. in Leys 2011, 437), we do not find a hard line between *nonsignifying* and *signifying* circulations.

10. It should be noted that although they are not the majority, fewer than twenty respondents expressed continued commitment to advocacy for contingent faculty in

their institution. Determining what causes this difference in action would be a logical next research step.

11. See Sue Doe (2010), which references the work of Gary Rhoades, Robert Watson, and Chris Newfield.

12. See Ahmed (2004).

13. See Doe, Maisto, and Adsit (2015).

14. In claiming a space for the “unhappy position” in activist work, we do not mean to affirm a model of the heroic, masculinist, unhappy revolutionary “whose suffering is a gift to the world” (Ahmed 2010, 169). Nonetheless, there may be, Ahmed suggests, a necessity for unhappiness in activist efforts, since happiness signals an acceptance of the status quo. Unhappiness stirs things up. Unhappy emotions are, in this sense, active; they are “creative responses” (217) to conditions and ripe with potential to instigate change.

15. Acts of protest become maligned in terms of emotional abnormality and excess that “gets in the way.” “Psychologically reductive accounts that pathologized protest and protesters,” Deborah Gould (2010, 19) notes, “did not die out in the nineteenth century but rather continue to circulate widely today.” She explains that those “with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo frequently describe social justice activists as driven by emotion (which they pit against reason) and protest activities as irrational and childish, rather than a legitimate mode” of advocacy (*ibid.*).

16. See Tina Griego (2011) and Josiah Hesse (2012).

17. The discomfort described above serves a rhetorical function, transcending simple identification with characters in the play in favor of defamiliarizing the familiar and revealing the ideologies and injustices hidden in everyday events—a phenomenon that dramatist and theorist Bertolt Brecht (1957, 91, 95) termed the “alienation effect.”

18. The authors wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for their help in elaborating the concepts under discussion here.

19. What could be added to Sharff and Lessinger’s (2008) list is the divestiture of colleges and universities from public retirement funds and contributions to Social Security. Today, more often than not, the faculty employee is an individual intellectual entrepreneur who is expected to take care of her own 401k or 403b. This expectation is untenable for the 75 percent of faculty who teach off the tenure track, many of whom have no access to benefits packages at all, the rest of whom barely make enough to put food on the table, much less to invest in a private retirement savings plan. As a result, many if not most are likely never to retire due to the low amount of investment they can make. Of course, tenure-track faculty and most other university employees participate in this divestiture from Social Security also, albeit at lower stakes.

20. This section quotes from the University of San Francisco’s compensation philosophy as a typical statement of university pay policy.

21. Even the deployment of alternative forms of compensation exacerbates the problem of inequity. When free tickets to fine art exhibits or membership to an on-campus gym become an alternative form of compensation, differences become recognizable because the likelihood of use varies by employment status. The adjunct faculty member who is carrying a full load is less likely to invest in the arts or in wellness activities when the goal is just to survive, which suggests that some faculty members exist in a kind of “opportunity desert,” even as they may be presented with opportunities for self-care that they simply cannot afford to take.

22. Subbaraman (2002) cites Patricia Hill Collins, Bonnie Thornton Dill, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, bell hooks, and Deborah L. King and for their observations that “work as a liberatory principle was true only for white, middle-class U.S. feminists, for whom work was a way to escape the structures of home. For all other women, work has always been integral to their economic survival and, in fact, has little to do with pleasure or love” (260).

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