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## **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to locate academics within the sights of critical labour studies, and, in particular, the contemporary interest in cultural workers. Despite a growing literature about – and in response to – the transformation of the University there have been few attempts to study academics as workers. This paper argues that there are a number of parallels between academic work and the much more well-documented experiences of work in the cultural and creative industries. The paper examines the increasing experience of precariousness among academics, the intensification and extensification of work, and the new modes of surveillance in the academy and their affective impacts. The aim of the article is to build on the critical lexicon of studies of cultural labour in order to think about academic work as labour and to generate new ways of thinking about power, privilege and exploitation. It argues for the need for a psychosocial perspective that can understand the new labouring subjectivities in academia.

Key words: academia, labour, neoliberalism, precarity, surveillance



## Academics, cultural workers and critical labour studies

*'It's great to have a job that you love, but it shouldn't make you ill' (Web designer, Amsterdam)*

*'I'm working ridiculously hard and have had stress issues because of this. I remember thinking when I started as a research assistant that this was my dream job. And now sometimes it seems more like a nightmare (if only I could sleep)' (Academic, quoted in Leathwood & Read, 2012)*

### Introduction

The aim of this paper is to locate academics within the sights of critical labour studies, and, in particular, the contemporary interest in cultural workers. There is a striking dearth of research on academic labour. Despite academics' much-vaunted interest in reflexivity, there has been a marked reluctance to turn our gaze upon our own working conditions, practices and relations. Indeed, while studies of advertising, web design and the computer games industry have proliferated, there has been a relative silence about academics as workers – particularly in the UK. This is all the more surprising – and disturbing – given the wholesale transformation of Universities over the last three decades – a transformation that has attracted criticism as an 'assault' on the very idea of a University, a marketization and instrumentalization of knowledge, and a new form of 'academic capitalism', yet which has been almost entirely undocumented at the level of University workers' experiences.

In this paper I seek to highlight some of the continuities between the increasingly well-understood conditions of the creative 'precariat' of artists, designers and (new) media workers, and the experiences of academics in the neoliberal University. My purpose in doing so is not simply to add yet one more to the growing list of occupational groups that might be considered 'creatives' or part of the 'precariat', and nor to enact an erasure of differences by suggesting that 'we are all cultural workers now', but rather to push at political questions in two directions. First, to borrow from the critical lexicon of studies of cultural work in order to open up new ways of seeing academic labour as labour and to examine our own conditions of production. And second, to use the example of academics as a way of generating some novel avenues for thinking about power and exploitation- how we theorise it and might resist it.

I want to suggest that in relation to high end, 'above the line' cultural work there has been a turning away from considerations of exploitation, such that it comes to be associated only with a few 'extreme' situations such as unpaid

internships, rather than being seen as a structural feature of work in capitalist society. I will argue that this retreat from the notion of exploitation threatens to leave us without a politicised vocabulary with which to make sense of many features of contemporary labouring – both academic and creative - including exhaustion, chronic stress, shame, anxiety, insecurity, ill health and experiences of intensified surveillance. In this paper I want to suggest that exploitation within the contemporary Academy operates in and through technologies of selfhood that are producing new kinds of labouring subject: individualised, responsabilised, self-managing and monitoring, and increasingly carrying their office or workplace ‘on board’ at all times in a mobile device. What kinds of critical analysis can help us engage with this? What forms of labour politics might constitute an effective response? What is urgently needed, I argue, is a critical take that can move us beyond the individualised, toxic, self-blaming discourses that are characteristic of academics in the neoliberal University.

The paper is divided into three sections. In the first, I review the literature on cultural workers, drawing out its key themes and findings and locating them in wider debates about the transformation of work and the ‘culturalization’ of the economy. In the second I move to consider academic labour as a species of cultural work, beset by many of the same challenges and experiences that characterise work in the cultural and creative industries—for example, DIY biographies, opportunities based significantly on reputation, and the prevalence of network sociality. Academic labour also brings sharply into focus three other issues relating to casualization and precariousness, to the intensification and extensification of work, and to the proliferation of surveillance technologies put in place to audit, calculate and monitor academics' performances. The affective, embodied effects of these will be considered, and in the final section of the paper I will open up questions about whether our existing vocabularies meaningfully speak to the experiences of academics and other cultural workers.

### **Working (in) culture: informality, precariousness and the bulimic career**

Over the last decade a now substantial body of research on fashion, digital games design, film and tv production, theatre and music performance, museums, advertising and web design has produced a relatively consistent picture of ‘creative’ labour – whilst also noting significant differences within and between different fields and occupations (Blair,2001; Ursell, 2000; McRobbie, 2002; Banks, 2007;Deuze, 2007; Cauldwell,2008; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). One of the shared experiences of growing numbers of people working in the cultural and creative field is of precariousness and job insecurity. Increasingly, cultural and media workers are freelancers or work on extremely short term contracts. Processes of deregulation and casualization have speeded this up. In newspaper journalism, for example, it is now the norm to see a tiered workforce, in which a tiny minority of well-remunerated and relatively secure staff writers is supplemented by a large army of freelancers, paid by the word, and competing for jobs, and to whom the newspaper management feels it has no obligations or responsibilities. As Bob Franklin argued as long ago as 1997, what makes this especially poignant is the fact that amongst the ranks of freelancers are many

journalists who would once have occupied stable, salaried positions, but who lost their jobs in the restructuring of the industry, only to be re-hired on vastly less favourable terms.

If the transformation of journalism is one area where this can be seen especially clearly, it is also evident right across the cultural sector. In television, people working in the plethora of independent production companies that have taken centre stage in this globalised, digital, deregulated moment, are habitually working on short-term contracts that are counted in days or weeks rather than months. In the field of web-design, which I have researched extensively, freelancing is the norm. Indeed, in my research, even those who were apparently in employment rather than being self-employed had a wide variety of contradictory contractual statuses, at times regarding themselves as in secure tenure, yet having a 'zero hours' clause which meant that they could be fired with no notice. Others had traded security against shares or options or intellectual property rights. Researching in this field, I learned that the grandiosity of job titles, and in particular the liberal use of the epithet 'executive', told one little about the actual power or security of the individuals involved.

In reality, for large numbers of people in the cultural and creative industries pervasive insecurity and precariousness are the norm, with individuals very often unsure how they will survive beyond the end of the next project, and living in a mode that requires constant attentiveness and vigilance to the possibility of future work. This has been well-documented in recent years (Gill, 2009; 2010; McRobbie, 2002; 2004; 2007; Neff et al, 2005; Taylor & Littleton, 2012) with cultural workers becoming the poster children of 'precarity' (Neilson & Rossiter, 2005; Ross, 2009), iconic exemplars of a group that lives individualised, 'risk biographies' (Beck, 2000), in which all the uncertainties and costs are borne by them rather than by employers or the state (Sennett, 1998; 2006). Linking as it does the notion of a 'proletariat' with an idea of entrenched and unending precariousness, the notion of a precariat (Standing, 2011) has become both a way of speaking about the changed experiences of contemporary capitalism, and a way of forging common cause between otherwise disparate groups of workers eg janitors, cleaners and cultural producers (see Gill & Pratt, 2008;).

Conditions of precarity have become normalised within many fields of cultural work, but have profound effects on the individuals living them. These are manifested in interviews as expressions of anxiety about not finding work, or about becoming sick and thus not being able to work (Batt et al, 1999; Ursell, 2000; Krings, 2007; Randle & Culkin, 2009). Frequently people report not taking holidays both because of lack of money and fear that they might miss out on potential work. The absence of social security benefits to tide people over periods of unemployment, and the lack of sick pay or pension are major sources of anxiety. In most European countries, not being in employment also profoundly impacts on entitlements to maternity benefits, a factor that contributes to the under-representation of women, and particularly mothers, in fields like media, where freelancing or extremely short contracts predominate. As one freelance scriptwriter, quoted by Skillset (2010) put it 'I dream about having sick pay, never mind maternity pay'.

More generally, work insecurity contributes to a situation in which people find it difficult to imagine their future. In the 'DIY biographies' of much media work, the intensity of the work, the competitiveness of the field, and the inherent precariousness of people's working lives contribute to a sense of not being able to look ahead and plan – or indeed even to project into the future (Adkins, 2013; Gill, 2009; Sennett, 1998). As I have discussed elsewhere (Gill, 2010) I was struck by many of my interviewees' inability to answer a 'typical' job interview question about what they hoped to be doing in five years time. The responses – even within the same interview – veered between fantasies of 'making it' – in which the accoutrements of wealth (Caribbean home, swimming pool, etc) were conjured, and set against contrastingly bleak assessments of having given up and started doing something else. This reflected not a lack of imagination on their part but a realisation of the difficulty of creating 'liveable lives' (Butler, 2004) within the cultural field, and the strains of the kinds of (entrepreneurial) subjectivity demanded (Kotamraju, 2002; Neff et al, 2005; Gill, 2013)

One of the effects of pervasive work insecurity amongst cultural workers is the prevalence of second-jobbing or indeed multi-jobbing – frequently in teaching or in the hospitality industries. This is necessitated by insecurity and by low pay, as well as by the deeply entrenched culture of 'working for free' – not only in unpaid internships at the start of one's career (e.g. Perlin, 2011) – which represent the most well-documented example – but right across working lives. The 'privilege' of working in a particular orchestra, theatre or media production is frequently claimed as reward in its own right, and silencing mechanisms include the enculturated idea that it would somehow be in 'bad taste' to ask about money/pay, somehow calling into question one's commitment to the project – whether it be performance, recording, film or new online publishing venture (Ross, 2000). From my experience of interviewing in these passion-driven and creative fields, even those people who were critical of such arrangements did not dare to question them for fear of what this might communicate about their own (lack of) 'vocation'. The class implications of this – in terms of who is able to work for free – are increasingly well-documented (eg Morgan, 2012)

Generally speaking, freelancers in the media and creative fields live by the aphorism that 'you can't say no to a job'. This in turn leads to extremely long hours and to what Andy Pratt (2002) has termed 'bulimic' patterns of working – feast or famine, stop-go, long periods with little or no work followed by intense periods of having to work all the time, in some cases barely stopping to sleep. These characteristic working patterns have also been accompanied by a general marked intensification of work across the cultural and creative field so that patterns that were once associated with 'crunch times' – such as getting a game into production or finishing editing a film – are increasingly normalised (de Peuter & Dyer-Witheford, 2006). All the time is 'crunch time' now.

Melissa Gregg (2011) has argued that work is taking up a central position in the lives of many, threatening to displace our intimate relationships with partners, children and others, as work is extensifying over time and place (see also Jarvis & Pratt, 2006). Gregg contends that technological developments from email to wireless computing and smartphones, are creating a culture in which workers are expected to be 'always on', always available for work – something that

increasing numbers of us can (and do) now do as well from bed or the bus as from offices, with the result that work and its imperatives colonises more and more of the spaces of everyday life. In (creative) business circles this is sometimes called 'the merge' – replacing older notions of 'work-life balance'. Autonomous Marxist theorists have written about this in terms of all of life becoming a 'social factory' (Tronti, 1966 see also Lazzarato, 1996; Hardt & Negri, 2004; Weeks, 2005).

Another of the most enduring and powerful images of creative organisations is that they are 'hip' and informal. From the legendary environments of Google and Apple, through well-known games companies and web design agencies, all the way down to tiny start-ups, creative workplaces are held to be 'funky', 'Bohemian' and playful (Lloyd, 2006; Ross, 2003.) McRobbie (2002) talks about an ethos from 'club to company'; a web designer I interviewed spoke of 'a friends club that got out of hand'; and Richard Florida famously argued that 'creatives' dislike 'rigid caste systems' and prefer flat and informal organisations, without obvious hierarchies. This principle of informality is not just a feature of working environments, but also – crucially – of hiring practices which largely exist outside formal channels and are enacted through contacts and word of mouth. As Margery, a script supervisor put it 'finding and negotiating work is the hardest part. Doing the work is fun. Finding the work is the job' (quoted by Randle & Culkin, 2009:101)

In the absence of formal records–qualifications, experience, references, etc–reputation becomes a key commodity, and networking and maintaining contacts a key activity for nurturing it. This is achieved face-to-face at regular drinks and other social occasions, but also in the affective labour of updating profiles, tweeting, blogging and engaging in diverse self promotion activities (Cote & Pybus, 2011). One characteristic of cultural work labour markets is their 'network sociality' (Wittel, 2001) – thin, shallow relations. In such 'reputation economies' wherever you go, whoever you meet represents a work opportunity. As one of my new media interviewees put it, 'life is a pitch'.

Less well documented and understood are the paradoxical inequalities of the CCI–paradoxical only because they challenge the myth of egalitarianism and diversity that surround cultural work, the notion that 'it doesn't matter if you are black or white, male or female, gay or straight as long as you are creative'. In fact, it would seem, it does matter very much, and all the available evidence points to stark and continuing inequalities relating to race, gender and class (e.g. Thanki & Jefferys, 2007; Holgate & McKay, 2009).

In relation to gender, there is evidence of both vertical and horizontal segregation, and in some domains (lighting departments, sound crews, cinematography, computer games) there are hardly any women at all. Of every 20 Hollywood movies made, only one is directed by a woman (Lauzen, 2012), and men also constitute the vast majority of screenwriters and producers (Conor, 2014). In television, the overall representation of women is better, but inequalities remain. Women earn on average 15% less than their male colleagues, and are much less likely to be in senior positions (despite being better qualified, having more training, and working longer hours[ Skillset, 2010]). Right across



the CCI there are pronounced gender inequalities as well as more complex intersectional patterns of discrimination (for example relating to age and parental status) (Gill, 2013). What's more, the informal working cultures of these fields means that these inequalities are 'unmanageable' (falling outside the purview of legislative instruments and apparatuses designed to ensure equal opportunities and pay)<sup>i</sup>. Perhaps even more worryingly, they are increasingly unspeakable—as a meritocratic myth of 'cool, creative egalitarianism' (Gill, 2002) meets postfeminism and 'gender fatigue' (Kelan, 2009; Gill, 2013; 2014)

### **Working in the neoliberal University**

Even from this brief summary of contemporary research, it is striking to note the number of similarities between the experiences of people working in the cultural field and those working as academics. Yet to date there has been very little research on the experiences of academics, a marked reluctance to examine our own labour processes, organisational governance and conditions of production. Despite the growing interest in reflexivity in recent decades, the experiences of academics have largely escaped critical attention.

This is all the more surprising given the rapid and wholesale transformation of universities in recent years, in the wake of what Ruth Barcan (2013) calls 'massification, marketisation and internationalisation'. A growing body of work examines the 'assault' on the very idea of the University, and the way it is being structurally redefined and reinvented by increasing corporatisation and privatisation (Evans, 2005; Washburn, 2003; Bailey & Freedman, 2011), as well as by neoliberal shifts in funding regimes that devolve more and more of the costs of education to the individual student (reimagined as 'consumer'), now saddled, in the UK, with average debts of more than £50,000 by the time they complete a three-year undergraduate degree (see Lazzarato, 2011; Ross, 2013 on debt). Changes include the importing of corporate management techniques into university life; the reformulation of the very nature of education in instrumental terms connected to business and the economy; the expansion of student numbers without a corresponding increase in staff; the proliferation of new and distinct regimes of audit, surveillance and 'qualculation' (Callon & Law, 2005); the new entanglements between the University and the state's apparatuses of 'immigration control' (Neilson & Mezzadra, 2013); in addition to the degradation of pay and working conditions of academics and the systematic casualisation of employment within the University. Change has been so radical, so speeded up and so precipitate that it is barely possible—even for those within the sector—to keep up with and make sense of what is happening. In the UK, in the last 12 months alone, existing universities are being privatised, new private universities are setting up, and other longstanding institutions are under threat of closure. Inside universities there is a pervasive sense of crisis; outside, a mixture of disinterest and bewilderment.

There have been a number of attempts to make sense of this rapid picture of transformation (e.g. Graham, 2002; Evans, 2005; Washburn, 2003; Martin, 2011; Collini, 2012). Critical work speaks of the 'University in ruins' (Readings, 1996), the 'edu-factory', the 'corporate University' and of 'academic capitalism'. Many have noted the way in which an economic idiom and rationality is coming to

colonise our understandings of human, cultural and intellectual activities which had previously been understood and valued in other terms. It is no longer enough to say that Universities are like businesses; Universities are businesses. As Gigi Roggero (2011) notes, the University seeks its niche, creates its brand, markets itself and relentlessly commodifies the results of intellectual production occurring within it. At its pinnacle it becomes the global university, transcending national borders and catering to an elite international market. The University has emerged as a cipher or barometer of broader transformations within the economy, and thus a privileged space for 'reading' the contours of contemporary capitalism.

This work is important and valuable, yet it is notable that it gives little attention to academics as workers (though see Bousquet, 2008; Krause et al, 2008; Martin 2011; Nelson, 2010; Harney & Moten, 2013). Its focus is primarily on institutional change or even on 'reading capitalism', rather than on the experiences or labouring conditions of those who work in the University. Indeed, as Ruth Barcan notes, most of the very few accounts that exist of academic labour are highly personal narratives. These speak of the– affective and embodied experiences of working as an academic–the pleasures and passionate attachments, but also the injuries–the aching backs, RSI, insomnia–and the valency of profound feelings of anxiety, shame, fraudulence and worry about (not) being good enough or being 'found out' (Sparkes, 2007; Gill, 2010).

Such writing–sometimes explicitly–has the quality of 'breaking the silence' about academics' experiences–experiences that do not seem to have any 'proper channels' of expression, being neither the object of social scientific research, nor the topic of internal university concerns. In my own university we are 'offered' a plethora of training courses in time management and 'prioritising goals', but I have never–in any official forum from management communication to departmental meeting–heard anyone address questions of collective work overload, stress, ill-health or the effects on morale or wellbeing of a proliferation of short-term contracts. These topics are the stuff of corridor conversations and coffee break chats, but remain silenced in the official spaces of academe – even, until recently, in the trade unions – though this is changing and both casualization and workload issues have at last become significant in the UK's University and College Union.

In what follows, I will turn my attention to three key aspects of academics' experience: precariousness, time pressure and surveillance. These overlap with many features of the working lives of cultural workers discussed above, and they also speak directly to some of the most potent 'myths' of academia, bringing to the fore key questions about how we understand power and exploitation in neoliberal work cultures.

### **Precarious lives**

*'I've been living from hand to mouth, on temporary teaching contracts, for ten years now. I've written two books, I get great teaching feedback. But I just can't get a job. I don't know how much longer I can continue like this.'*

In the popular imagination, academics are amongst the most privileged of workers, blessed with 'tenured' positions, long holidays, and leisured conditions. Whilst this image may once have had some truth in the world's most elite institutions up to the late 1960s, 50 years on it is unrecognisable. Moreover, like the myth of egalitarianism in cultural work, it exerts its own toxic, silencing effects. Today precariousness rather than security is one of the defining experiences of academic life—particularly, but not exclusively, for younger or 'career early' staff (a designation that can now extend for one's entire 'career', given the few opportunities for development of secure employment.) Statistical data about the employment of academics shows the wholesale transformation of higher education over the last two decades, with the systematic casualisation of the workforce. In the UK, data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2012) reveals that one third of academic staff in universities is employed on short-term, temporary contracts. But this figure excludes more than 82,000 people who are paid by the hour and therefore not counted in HESA's salary statistics, suggesting that the true extent of casualisation is far greater—and increasing rapidly. Indeed, the number of teaching only staff on temporary contracts went up by one third between 2009/10 and 2011/12. According to the University and College Union, higher education is one of the most casualised sectors of employment in Britain; only the hospitality industry has a greater proportion of temporary workers and 'casuals'.

In the US the picture is similar (Giroux, 2002) and in Australia the proportion of staff on short-term contracts rose from 10% to nearly 50% between 1990 and 2008 (Brown, Goodman and Yasakawa, 2010). Again, the statistics may underestimate the real extent of casualisation. Using a 'headcount' methodology, May et al (2011- cited in Barcan, 2013) argue that in fact 60% of Australian academics are on temporary contracts. As Barcan (2013) comments, 'this is an intellectual and social catastrophe, masking as flexibility'.

Short-term research positions, lectureships or 'teaching fellowships', in which, as a cost-cutting measure for university management, work once rewarded with a permanent position is repackaged for lower pay, stripped of benefits and any sense of obligation or responsibility to the employee, frequently leaving them without income during vacation periods, can nevertheless seem like the aristocracy of labour when compared with hourly paid teaching positions. In these, Ph.D. students and new postdocs are charged with delivering mass undergraduate programs without training or support. The pay in these positions frequently only rewards 'contact hours', meaning that preparation, marking and pastoral care of students are not remunerated. Staff in such positions frequently comment that, in purely financial terms, they would be significantly better off working in a bar or supermarket, but they undertake such roles—just as we see in the CC I—to gain experience, build CVs, and with the hope of obtaining more secure employment within academia.

As in the CCIs, there are predictable patterns relating to gender, race and class. Jill Blackmore argues 'restructuring has led to the re-masculinisation of the centre or core and a flexible, peripheral labour market of increasingly feminised, casualised and deprofessionalised teaching force' (1996:345). In the 27 countries of the European Union, women constitute only 15% of full

professorships, and their under representation is even more stark on grant bodies, editorial boards and other powerful fora. In 2013 the Times Higher produced its first ever 'Global Gender Index' which showed what it described as 'startling levels of sexual inequality among staff' (May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2013). Diane Reay (2004) distinguishes between what she dubs academic capital and academic labour, positing women as the feminine 'lumpenproletariat' of academia, overrepresented in lower grades and temporary positions.

For most people involved in short-term, poorly paid academic positions, the experience is marked by stress, anxiety and an inability to make plans—either personal or occupational—for the future. Academics in this position frequently understand that a period of casualised employment is to be expected, but are often distressed by the duration and number of short term contracts. Frequently, early career academics face agonising dilemmas about how long to 'chance it' in casualised academia. They have invested a huge amount in trying to get in and do not know if or whether to walk away. As one woman put it:

'I feel I owe it to myself to try because I have invested so much in this. But I'm 30 years old and I can't keep existing on a month to month basis. I have to put a time limit on how long I can hold out... And that's really sad.' (quoted by Fazackerley, 2013)

Another told me, on getting a continuing contract at last: 'This is the first time in ten years that I've headed into summer knowing where I'm going to be living at the start of term'.

A sense of personal and social crisis is now endemic and deeply felt amongst many academics, even those for whom 'precarity' does not take the most obvious forms. We have collectively become a mobile, agile, flexible workforce par excellence, prepared to move and relocate cities or countries in order to work, responding with 'hair trigger responsiveness' (Thrift, 2000) to new calls for papers, new funding streams, new potential areas of student demand, and to fit in and reinvent ourselves for every changing fashion on engaging 'research users' and developing 'impact'. But this has exacted a huge cost physically, socially and psychically, producing new forms of injury.

### **Time stress and overload**

*'If I didn't have to sleep it would be all right'*

Anyone who has spent even the briefest time among academics during the last decade cannot help but be struck by a profession stretched to breaking point. Time after time, surveys underline this, highlighting the 'very high stress levels, considerably higher than average' (Court & Kinman, 2008) which are increasing year-on-year, along with disorders of anxiety and depression (Health and Safety Executive) As Mike Crang (2007) has argued the one thing that is perhaps the biggest source of dispute, anxiety and stress in academia is time. Academics want more time to research, don't have enough time to read, spend too much of their time at work, cannot spend enough time with students, can't fit their job into the available time, don't have time for anything outside work – children, friends,

other activities – and then are subjected to the poisonous myth that they are time-rich and leisured!

This is a structural issue about the spiralling overall demands of the job of academic which in the last decade or so have increased dramatically as a consequence of many factors: massive (underfunded) growth in student numbers; growing pressure to get research funding and to publish; the restructuring of admin and secretarial roles so that much of the work previously done by others is now devolved to academics; the transformative impact of ICTs; and the repeated demands to do more with less – have a moodle or webct course in parallel to your teaching, develop a facebook page for your course, tweet about seminars and events, etc. Alongside this is the proliferation of audits and monitoring and surveillance activities in which we are required to be involved – which take up ever more of our time, in the most soul-destroying way.

British academics in older (pre-1992) institutions do not have fixed working hours in our contracts. Employment contracts will typically be worded in ways that highlight a general commitment to teaching, research and administration 'and 'other duties' 'as and when directed by the Head of Department'.

As Crang (2007) notes astutely, what this combines is an openendedness about the tasks we are required to perform plus an indeterminate time period in which to perform them: the job will never be done. This, in fact, is the experience of more and more academics, whose hours routinely exceed the 46/ week, specified by the European Working Time Directive (from which David Cameron's government is trying to get Britain exempted). In fact, as long ago as 2006 the University trade union used official statistics to calculate that academics were working on average nine extra hours per week – or, to put it another way, were working for free for 3 months per year. This kind of free labour – unlike unpaid internships- is almost entirely invisibilised. This is not by chance: I have noted elsewhere (Gill, 2010b) the way that this work is systematically rendered invisible by University accounting procedures through TRAC, which disqualify accounts of working time that add up to more than 37.5 hours per week. No wonder TRAC is regarded with such contempt and weariness by time-pressed academics forced to report on their work (Burrows, 2012 )

Increasingly academics are finding that they are unable to get the work done in a 'normal working week' and are having to work evenings, weekends, and late into the night. Not surprisingly the most common response to the punishing intensification of work is to work harder and longer: getting up early, going to bed late. As one academic, quoted by Crang, said poignantly, 'if I didn't have to sleep it would be alright'. Melissa Gregg (2011) dubs this form of work before and after 'real' work, ' anticipatory labour'. For many academics and others this now centres on email. Email has become emblematic of academics' experience of anxiety, stress and overload. It is always there, and never done. Increasingly people snatch time on the run to send replies bearing the signature 'sent from my iPhone' and the like, but even this constant availability and responsiveness generates more messages requiring attention.

E-mail may, as Mark Fisher (2011) has argued, have 'hacked into libido', accounting for its compulsive quality, but it has also surely hacked into anxiety.

From my discussions with academics about e-mail, what is striking is how suffused they are with anxiety– about missing something important, about finding something upsetting in their inbox, and above all, about simply keeping up with the constant stream of communications. Comparing the number of unread emails in one’s inbox has become a tawdry academic sport, characterised by a mixture of desperation and resignation. We go off to teach and come back to find 50 new emails have arrived. If we are out of the office for a whole day at a conference or a meeting, we have to start an entire new day’s work just to deal with the messages that came in during our absence. One colleague said recently that after a full day sitting on appointment boards, she found 534 new emails in her inbox when she returned to her office at 7PM. She had already been at work for 11 hours.

It is a rare academic who does not feel enslaved and oppressed by email (even as we – of course – receive messages that makes us happy, bring good news, make us laugh) , and this sense has worsened significantly during the four years I have been interested in academic labour. Email causes a heavy burden of stress. As one colleague told me, the volume of emails he receives means he cannot now go on holiday with his family and ‘leave work behind’.

‘I used to be able to go away for two weeks in the summer and just put the out of office reply on and then forget about work. But I can’t do that any more. It’s just not possible. If I did that there would be thousands, literally thousands, waiting for me when I got back.’

This colleague ‘copes’ by spending several hours checking his email twice a day whilst on holiday, and filing his messages – dealing with the most urgent, flagging others for follow-up, deleting some. This is a strategy for dealing with a workload that is individually and socially unsustainable – with psychological and health costs that bear comparison with those experienced by 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial labourers in Britain before the introduction of legislation to limit working hours and protect workers’ health. Yet what is striking is that this is rarely felt or lived as a political issue, as something that might merit a collective political struggle to change, but rather is experienced as an individual problem, about which academics frequently feel guilty and ashamed rather than angry. As I have argued elsewhere (Gill, 2010), academics’ talk about email is characterised by excoriating self blame–with abundant metaphors of addiction, obsession, and failure - when all that is actually going on is that people are trying to manage the unmanageable.

### **Surveillance culture**

*‘the lifeworld of the University is now increasingly enacted through ever more complex data assemblages’ (Burrows, 2012:359)*

Before concluding I want to turn to my third theme - concerning audit culture and surveillance. The surveillance of workers has rightly become an important object of study–and activism–in recent years, in part in recognition of the increasing role played by digital technologies in the monitoring and control of employees. Notorious examples include the crossover of ‘electronic tagging’ technologies from the criminal justice and detention systems into regular

employment situations, to track workers such as refuse collectors care workers and postal delivery personnel as they move through different geographical areas; the electronic surveillance of productivity of call centre personnel; and the uses of hand-held monitoring devices in warehouses and large retail spaces, which both track the speed at which workers 'make grabs' ( e.g. retrieve items from Amazon's warehouse), as well as issuing instructions to work more quickly, stop talking, etc. By contrast, surveillance of 'high end' professional workers such as academics has received less attention than these relentless, intrusive and brutal examples, yet academics may be becoming – albeit in a different way - one of the most surveilled occupational groups in history. As Roger Burrows (2012) has recently argued, any individual academic in the UK can now be ranked and measured on more than 100 different scales and indices which become the 'qualculations' (Callon & Law, 2005) that measure academics' value and monetize them. These metrics measure our grant income, research 'excellence', citation scores, student evaluations, esteem indicators, impact factor, PhD completions, etc etc. In addition to this multiplication of individual measures, there are new nested evaluations that are composites of several of these and become what Burrows calls 'metric assemblages', which then- quite literally – take on a life of their own becoming autonomous actors that do things in the world – generate funding, damage reputations, single out people for redundancies, close down courses.

Like Burrows I am fascinated by this as an example of 'power at a distance', of how our lives become governed by these seemingly autonomous actors. I am also intrigued though by what this does psychosocially to us, how it produces new structures of feeling in the academy, and contributes to our own self-surveillance and monitoring and commodification. Cris Shore argues that 'auditing processes are having a corrosive effect on people's sense of professionalism and autonomy' (2008:292). They produce what Chris Lorenz (2012) dubs 'self-exploitation' and 'inner immigration'. One significant point is simply to note how the intensification and extensification of audit culture (Power, 1994; Strathern, 2000) produces its own kind of precarity – a precarity that as Brett Neilson points out (personal communication, 2012) doesn't just go 'all the way down' into our deepest psyche, but also goes all the way up structurally and institutionally, rendering almost everyone insecure, precarious, at risk. As Ursula Huws (2006) vividly puts it:

'It is not just a question of the tedium and frustration of remembering innumerable passwords and pin numbers, retrieving innumerable reference numbers, keeping records of the time and place and duration and monetary value of every activity, however trivial, to be re-entered repeatedly in ever-so-slightly different formats into those forms. Something much deeper and more damaging is taking place: we are being forced, over and over again, to go through a dual process which I have called begging and bragging. Even the lucky few in permanent jobs can't escape it.'

The various proliferating research assessment exercises are brutal in that regard, and they also, as Guy Redden (2008) has noted, take no account of history – everyone is assumed to start from zero each time the clock begins again. As Shore (2008:286) notes, the proliferation of league tables and 'the policy of

naming and shaming failing institutions has become an annual ritual in humiliation'. This also operates within institutions at the level of departments and individuals. Carole Leathwood & Barbara Read's study of 71 UK academics found that the majority experienced recent changes – and in particular the introduction of the Research Excellence Framework- as 'having a negative impact on their own research and experience in the profession' (2012:9). Even ostensible support could very easily 'tip over into pressure, surveillance and/or threats (e.g. to be put on a teaching-only contract)' (2012:14). Interestingly, many of their respondents felt that they were de facto already on such contracts, given the complete lack of time available for research. Equally pernicious was the widespread fear and shame individuals expressed about feeling that their performance might 'let the side down'.

Other research (Harley, 2001; Morley, 2003; Deem & Lucas, 2007) has highlighted the gendered impacts of cultures of performativity and surveillance, with women significantly more likely to highlight overwork and stress, and conveying 'a strong sense of endless hours of work and desperation' (Leathwood & Read, 2012: 16). Interviewed about the Global Gender Index (2013), Louise Morley, director of the Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research at the University of Sussex, highlights a problem that many women in academia would recognize: 'There is a cultural climate that favours men. Women are not recognized for their talents or abilities and are often forced to do low-level, high-volume administrative work, while many more men assume external-facing roles that have immediate...career gains' (quoted in *The Times Higher* May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2013). The structural inequalities within academia have received barely any attention and urgently need exploration – just like those in the cultural field (but see Meyers, 2012 – and a plethora of critical voices on Twitter and in the blogosphere).

We are exhorted to view ourselves through the optic of these metrics which permeate every sphere of our working lives and dictate the worth of everything we do. "How many papers is a baby worth?" asked two feminist geographers (Klocker & Drozdezewski, 2012). We now have the answer from the HE funding council: each period of maternity leave equates to a reduced output expectation equivalent to one paper across each four year period (HEFCE, 2011) – ie. One!

More broadly, what is fascinating is our complicity in these processes and the shift from a moment early on in these audit regimes in which they were felt as something alien imposed upon academics from the outside, to the situation now in which these qualculations are treated as meaningful and real. The distress they cause is palpable. Whilst I was writing this article I received the following text message from a friend working in a different University: 'Hi Ros I really wish I hadn't come into work today. The atmosphere is terrible. Emails have just been sent to inform people if they are going to be in the REF. Morale is v v low. I saw (head of dept) crying. This is so poisonous and destructive. Hope you're having a better day than me.' What this captures, I think, aside from simply how miserable people feel in academia much of the time, is how enmeshed and entangled we all are – whether we like it or not – in these processes – the head of department called on to deliver the verdict, as much as the people receiving it. This is not just living with the 'h index' (Burrows, 2012) but living in it, through



it, being governed by it. The challenge is how to resist – and to reclaim Universities as spaces of openness, intellectual freedom and collegiality.

### **New labouring subjectivities in the neoliberal Academy**

In this article I have drawn parallels between cultural workers—who have received considerable scholarly attention in recent years—and academics, whose labouring experiences have largely escaped scrutiny. I have highlighted a range of overlapping characteristics of the working lives of these two groups, including the passionate attachment both have to their work, the endemic precariousness of increasing numbers of lives in both fields, extreme time pressure and long hours, and persistent structural inequalities that are obfuscated by a myth of egalitarianism. In relation to academics I have also drawn attention to the intensification of surveillance practices within the University.

Overall I have sought to explore some of the injuries enacted by to neoliberal University, that are largely silenced within its walls and do not have ‘proper channels’ of expression. These injuries do not resemble those of industrial contexts. In the contemporary Western university few people lose limbs in machinery; infection or injury due to chemical gas emissions are rare; and backs are more likely to be damaged from excessive time sitting in front of a computer screen than from heavy lifting. Nevertheless increasing numbers of people in contemporary universities feel themselves to be ‘on the edge’ physically and emotionally, suffering from extreme and chronic stress, and in a semi-permanent state of being close to collapse.

How do we make sense of these affective embodied experiences? How might we theorise the operation of power among relatively privileged groups such as academics and ‘creatives’? What kinds of labour politics are appropriate for intervening in these kinds of work situation?

The notion of exploitation has, it seems to me, largely been abandoned as a way of thinking about creative or professional labour. On the one hand, a classical Marxist understanding of producing surplus value does not seem to relate to academics or many ‘creatives’ – at least not directly (except through intellectual property rights). On the other, several radical thinkers have expressed their frustration at the focus only on the most ‘glamorous’ ‘above the line’ end of the cultural supply chain, at the expense of attention to the millions of workers across the world involved (for example) in the extractive industries upon which mobile communications depend, in the iSlave industries of production for Foxconn and their ilk, or in toxic waste processing (Jack Qui, 2013; Miller & Maxwell, 2013).

Others have turned away from the notion of exploitation, by contrast, because it does not seem to capture the intense, passionate attachments that academics and ‘creatives’ have to their work; it seems one-sided, not doing justice to the pleasures of the work and the opportunities it offers for self-expression, as well as the ethics of ‘doing a good job’ (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010; Taylor & Littleton, 2012). A further problem is the difficulty of how we ‘see’ and recognise

exploitation. As Brett Neilson (2013) points out, exploitation does not announce itself self-evidently. It is easy to recognise in 'extreme' practices of child labour or enslavement, but much less easy to see and – crucially – to name in the seemingly privileged spaces of Universities or 'creative' workplaces.

Yet we need urgently a politicised vocabulary for thinking about the labouring experiences of academics and 'creatives'. To point to the hidden injuries of academic labouring in the Western University is not to disavow the privilege of academic workers, but it is to raise questions about how we might think about both privilege and exploitation- and hold these together. One attempt at doing this has been the notion of 'self-exploitation' (McRobbie, 2011; Lorenz, 2012). This is valuable for capturing the vocational and sacrificial nature of work in these domains (Ross, 2000), and the role played by affect in binding workers to injurious conditions and practices. But the notion can sometimes – lifted out of its proper Foucaultian context – take on a blaming tone, as if 'self-exploitation' means 'something we do to ourselves' – as well as implying that it is somehow easy to slough off ('just say no') (see Gill, forthcoming on the UCU workload campaign). What it points towards, however, is an appreciation of understanding the psychic life of academic and creative labouring – and this is important. To understand academic labouring, it seems to me, we need to develop a psychosocial understanding that can take account of the way in which power is operating through new labouring subjectivities, and new seemingly autonomous technical actors such as performance metrics. To begin this task is to formulate a language for moving beyond the individualising, toxic, self-blaming accounts of academics, to a moment in which we can understand academic labour in its full political, economic, historical and psychosocial contexts, and begin to generate a labour politics equal to the task of intervening in the neoliberal University.

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<sup>i</sup> See Deborah Jones, call for papers, Gender Work and Organization conference 2010