

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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## Coda: Quiet Commitment

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<1>The pleasurable labor (another suggestively reproductive, familial *double entendre*) involved in putting together this special issue as a junior scholar has suggested a modern-day transformation of a nineteenth-century relationship between identity and work. Whereas in Victorian Britain, womanhood was married to familial labor, the material conditions of the University today mean that the work of a generation of underemployed scholars is often ambivalently motivated by desire. Victorian separate spheres ideology naturalized household work as essential to middle-class white women's gender, thus erasing that work *as work*. Instead, enthusiastic embrace of domestic labor became confirmation of normative femininity. Achieving a "correct" kind of womanhood, in the period with which this issue deals, thus meant reproducing within the white heteropatriarchal family, not only children but also the conditions by which a middle-class male workforce could sustain labor within the growing and intertwined systems of capitalism and imperialism. Women bore and raised future workers; they also ensured that professional men were fed, clothed, rested, and sexed, such that husbands could go to work, day after day—this, we know. As we also know, such normative gender roles were not only complicated but often also reversed among the working-class.<sup>(1)</sup> Moreover, these ideas of gender were built at the expense of people of color, enslaved and indentured people, people from what we now call the Global South, and sex workers of all genders.<sup>(2)</sup>

<2>A generation of graduate students, lecturers, adjuncts, and otherwise precarious scholars lives in a historical moment when—recapitulating, aslant, a historically feminized relationship to labor—we sometimes experience our academic work as an identity, one that is variously justificatory and affirming.<sup>(3)</sup> Today, as many continue dedicatedly to study, write about, and teach literature within an ever-narrowing field of stable professional opportunities, it can sometimes feel like this kind of work is a labor of love, or who we *are*, more than the job we *have*—and may

even *not* have. We are operating in a profession that has recently and increasingly turned attention to the university setting as a workplace that should be free of harassment and abuse of power. The notion that teaching and research are vocational has been crucially critiqued: rather than a passion project, academic work is a job—that is, a wage relation in which rules about ethical conduct in relation to power do apply and in which labor should be fairly compensated. During the time of this editorial project, for example, the University of California (where both editors work) saw the largest strike in higher education in US history. Although I want to speak here of love of scholarly work, I do so with the caveat that within a precarious labor market, love always runs the risk of being weaponized.

<3>Within the shared scarcity of job security in the humanities, ambivalence is not evenly distributed across identities. The strained conditions of this labor are felt most acutely by already marginalized people like workers of color, workers with disabilities, and trans workers; transfeminine people are at even higher professional risk, often, than transmasculine people. These conditions sometimes make academic work feel like tilting over a cliff’s-edge. But slanting across this cliff’s edge sensation of voluntary leaning into a deadend, over the course of this editorial project, I have also felt desire for and fulfillment by closely reading new arguments about, and close-readings of, nineteenth-century literature and gender. Feelings of passionate and reinvigorated commitment to the study of gender in the nineteenth century are not incidentally related to scholars’ queer and trans identities: rather, our scholarship often theorizes and historicizes the conditions of our own lives. Jordy Rosenberg’s essay on the life-saving experience of reading Judith Butler evidences the fact that I am not alone in feeling like scholarship has allowed me to live—in my case, my research about why lesbianism has been historically understood as “not real.”

<4>To write and edit as junior scholars is to write aslant: in an uncertain and ambivalent relationship to the profession. In a historical moment when it is increasingly dangerous to be trans, nonbinary, or visibly queer in the classroom, a generation of untenured scholars is fretting, alongside everything else, about whether coming out, affirming pronoun usage, or gender-nonconforming teaching attire may hurt their chances of continuing the work that we love.<sup>(4)</sup> The inversion of this situation is, as ever, the strength—and joy!—we derive from our scholarship and service as trans and queer people. If our gender presentations render us disproportionately vulnerable, professionally, we also sustain and reproduce our *own* livable lives through this work. Moreover, now more than ever we need historicizations and legible, accessible critiques of transphobia and hetero-patriarchal state violence: high risk, high reward, as the kids say.

<5>In contrast to the “quiet quitting” that has come to describe my generation’s relation to work in other professions, my experience collecting and editing this special issue has produced something I’m calling “quiet commitment.” As junior scholars, we keep up our work under a banner that often no longer reads “publish or perish,” but rather “publish *and* perish”—as well as an imperative that need not even be spoken aloud to “keep quiet” when labor conditions are bad.<sup>(5)</sup> Sometimes, such commitment requires an affective relationship to our work beyond the exchange of labor power for wages, and even beyond “professional interest.” For some marginalized people, academia is a space where we can thrive—in my case, by writing about gender and sexuality with relative safety, joy, and irreverence, as well as fully living my butchness (which Microsoft Word now tells me is not a real word).

<6>It is fitting—and tempting to say, only natural—that many junior queer and trans scholars are cutting our teeth in the still-emerging field of trans studies. Editing “Writing Aslant” has been an invaluable opportunity to read—to *really read*—the brilliant scholarship of my peers, as I helped along written and argumentative clarity. (This kind of meticulous and slow reading, I’ve discovered, is more rare and precious a year out from graduate school with a lecturer’s teaching load on top of the demands of research and the job market.) More, I’ve encountered unfamiliar texts and ideas; established friendships and future colleagues; and learned how to edit academic prose—and in so doing, sharpened my own writing skills, which immediately transferred into my writing classrooms. What I hope most is to make fair return on this incredible gift.

## Notes

(1) See Stoneman.<sup>(^)</sup>

(2) Among the most crucial of white British female services to nation, finance, and patriarchy, was the production of racialized gender norms against which to measure the sexualities and relationalities of peoples colonized by the British. See Spivak and Free.<sup>(^)</sup>

(3) Calls for “adjunct pools” on Humanities job lists appear regularly now to collect a workforce of ready part-time laborers, should the need for them arise.<sup>(^)</sup>

(4) I have written on this historical-material condition more creatively in “Trans Origin Story of the Jackelope.”<sup>(^)</sup>

(5) See Ahmed.<sup>(^)</sup>

## Works Cited

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