

Complicit: On Being a WGSS Program Director in the Neoliberal University

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Women's, gender, and sexuality studies is a project that has championed rebellious questioning of the status quo, resulting in work that has inspired collective action against oppressive social conditions and ideologies. It is also an intellectual endeavor that supports a generative multidiscipline, one that treats intersectional experience and ideas as the springboard for new knowledge. Similar to the liberal arts, WGSS understands education as a public good and sees each student/scholar as uniquely poised to contribute to changing the field and the world. Given these founding core principles and values, WGSS is well suited to lead the charge on exposing and challenging the exploitation of contingent faculty in higher education. It is especially necessary that WGSS does so because, as Tamura A. Lomax delineates in a stunning new essay, "Black Women's Lives Don't Matter in Academia Either, or Why I Quit Academic Spaces that Don't Value Black Women's Lives and Labor," women comprise the majority of contingent faculty in the contemporary academy, with women of color alarmingly overrepresented.¹ As Lomax asserts, the academic industrial complex thrives on racial and gender inequalities.

In Gwendolyn Beetham's essay, "Love in a Time of Contingency: A Letter to Women's and Gender Studies,"² she bravely raises the issue of WGSS's lack of leadership in contesting the adjunctification of the university. She writes,

[W]omen's and gender studies as a discipline shouldn't be joining the fight [to critique the exploitation of contingent faculty], we should be *leading* it. Instead, aside from a few outspoken critics, the current context is one in which senior scholars—as happened at a conference recently—describe women's and gender studies grads as being in a 'good place.' (n.pag.)

Beetham's observations signal that there is something deeply wrong in WGSS. To describe the current employment prospects in WGSS as positive is delusional. However, even if these senior scholars at the conference Beetham attended spoke openly about their shock over contingent faculty's appalling working conditions—as opposed to "celebrating" the plethora of one-year visiting assistantships—such comments would not adequately capture the intricacy of the complicity structuring the current situation. The corporate arrangement of higher education today forcefully directs WGSS faculty and midlevel administrators' work in deep and powerful ways, and a better understanding of this might help all of us move forward.

Lomax contributes to this effort by characterizing the academic industrial complex, in which WGSS is housed, as an enterprise that does not care about learning, justice, or equality; instead, it cares about "fiscal solvency, corporate profit, new construction, outsourcing, and growing its customer base . . ." In the contemporary corporate university, complicity, silence, and

even delusional thinking are now part of the job. As long as one remains employed in the university, one is complicit/deformed by default. There are no alternative college or university formats to the neoliberal corporate structure, so the moment a social justice WGSS scholar/teacher accepts a tenured or tenure-track and/or administrative position, complicity with the corporate university system begins—and deepens with each year. This point is powerfully expressed in Lisa McGurk’s essay, “Bottom Line: The Effect of Corporatization on Women’s Studies,”³ where McGurk quotes a WGSS director who speaks to the daily contradictions she faces, “[W]e have to fill out . . . unending paperwork and worry about whether or not what we are doing fits with the university’s approval, even as we are supposed to be critiquing ‘the ivory tower.’ This gets problematic [because] it stifles confrontation and discourse” (n.pag.). Anyone who directs a program or chairs a department in the contemporary university encounters the endless parade of forms, rules, and measurement procedures that comprise their days. That the WGSS program I direct manages to offer some cutting-edge courses, bring in provocative and engaged speakers, and support (to the extent possible) research is nothing short of a miracle.

The WGSS program I direct also relies almost completely on exploited adjunct labor—twenty-eight sections in the spring 2015 semester were taught by part-time faculty for a meager wage. Complicity is embedded in my job. This structurally induced complicity often renders administrators and faculty like me, who are located in vulnerable fields like WGSS, silent in the normalized practice of adjunct exploitation in their university and college workplaces. As a colleague of mine says,

The notion of our complicity in an oppressive and unjust system is deep. It’s important to crack this idea open and ask: ‘How can women’s and gender studies scholars (maybe all faculty focused on social justice) do the work they need to do to add to knowledge through teaching and research? How do they do this without compromising their values? How can they do this without contributing to a flawed and unjust system?’ Probably they can’t. The complicity comes with the deal.⁴

There are additional complications to consider when exploring WGSS and complicity. Within the academy, WGSS still has a respectability problem. Because of its roots in social justice movements and historically marginalized communities, some faculty and administrators still dismiss the field as “frivolous” self-help programs for women—this is the case despite the transformative power of critical race, gender, and queer theories on many disciplines in the academy, and in the culture at large. Academic feminists sometimes react to the lingering second-class status of the field by distancing themselves from “activist” or material issues—especially themes related to “identity”—or they create brilliant theoretical work written in a specialized idiom that safely removes them and their writing from real world issues in the university and beyond.

More basic is the fact that many academic feminists are simply trying to keep their poorly funded programs afloat and/or keep their jobs in an increasingly corporate atmosphere. At my state university, WGSS is marginally funded—despite enormous student interest—and seen as a “lost cause” by many faculty and administrators. Having one’s program or department “discontinued” is not an unfamiliar scenario in my state university system. There are some WGSS programs and departments in the country with adequate resources to develop rich cultures of teaching, research, and activist/community engagement, but by and large, the majority of programs and departments throughout the country are inadequately staffed and funded. In this era of education as super-vocational training, being treated as a field that is neither “practical” nor

rigorous further marginalizes WGSS. In North Carolina, a key requirement in gaining approval from the university Board of Governors for moving my program from a minor to a four-year undergraduate degree requires extensive labor market analyses that will quantitatively prove that WGSS will lead to high-paying full-time employment—preferably in North Carolina. With the gender wage gap at eighty-two cents on the dollar—and lower when race, transgender, and national identities are factored into the calculus—it’s nearly impossible to meet this requirement. In a January 2014 radio appearance, North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory said, “If you want to take gender studies, that’s fine, go to a private school and take it . . . But I don’t want to subsidize that if that’s not going to get someone a job.” McCrory’s sentiment saturates those in positions of authority and power in the state university system where I work.

But the question remains: although the corporate university’s complicity is inevitably my complicity, what work needs to happen so people like me can build fragile alliances with contingent faculty? I agree that feminist administrators and faculty need to be more open about their complicity, and that university feminists could take action on behalf of their contingent colleagues. My point, though, is that this demand for action could include a more nuanced acknowledgement of WGSS’s marginalized history and its current vulnerable position in the neoliberal university. It bears repeating that at many universities throughout this country WGSS is the embodiment of precarity, under constant threat of being cut and often barely limping along. Folding an understanding of this into the movement for WGSS contingent justice might serve as a way to enlist WGSS full-time colleagues in the struggle against contingency/adjunctification—by connecting it to the longstanding marginalization of WGSS. After all, what unites us is that we all desire an alternative to the corporate neoliberal structure.

However, articles published on the Remaking the University blog in summer 2014 by scholar activist Jennifer Ruth (associate professor of English and co-author of *The Humanities, Higher Education, and Academic Freedom*) offer a different approach to this issue. In “Why Are We Complicit in Creating a Disposable Workforce?,” Ruth points out how “middle managers” (directors, chairs, and deans)—as well as non-administrative tenured and tenure track faculty—are the key players in feeding the adjunctification machine. Ruth argues that when program directors and department chairs agree to non-tenuretrack appointments over tenure-track ones, and/or use part-time lecturers to teach the bulk of a program’s courses, these administrators are complicit.⁶ In the same way, when tenure-track and tenured faculty apply for course release or sabbatical—to finish a book or referred journal articles for tenure, promotion, or to get a job—these individuals are climbing the academic ladder by stepping on the backs of their adjunct colleagues.⁶

As Ruth explains in a companion essay, “What Can We Do Now That Adjunct Sections Are Written Into Universities’ Fiscal Survival Strategy?,” almost every university and college in the country “has adjunct usage [] baked” into its budget.” According to Ruth, the only way to resist this shameful practice is for individual chairs and directors to refuse to hire adjuncts for the forthcoming semester.

On the surface, this action sounds bold. On closer inspection, it might prove difficult to implement and, in my particular context, it could lead to the destruction of an already precarious program that relies on contingent faculty for its very existence. It’s not only unlikely that I could convince every single chair and director in my College or university to follow this strategy—particularly chairs and directors in the business and engineering schools—but deciding not to hire adjuncts would mean that some adjuncts who rely on these appointments would be

harmful. Contingent faculty Linh Hua explains that, from her perspective, complicity happens “not at the hiring table but at the moment of continuing employment. At the hiring table, [the department chair or program director is] actually a life force . . . [The chair or director] has jobs/sections that I want. The more sections, the better. That they are not well-paid positions does not enter the picture (yet). The instability of the positions is the source of grievance for me. Thus, the response to not hire adjuncts and hold out for TT [tenure-track positions] is actually harmful, rewarding only one in a sea of many.”

In addition to hurting adjuncts, I would be cancelling courses students need for the WGSS minor, an action that would hamper their progress and my effort to create a major. Equally important, and directly related to my overall point about WGSS, cutting adjuncts to protest adjunct exploitation at my state university would bring my program to a screeching halt, which is exactly the outcome many in the state university system desire. In June 2015, the University of North Carolina Board of Governors voted to consolidate or discontinue fifty-six degree programs; WGSS and Africana Studies at NC State were cut.

As a director of WGSS at an institution that is part of an inadequately funded state university system, eliminating adjunct lines as a form of protest would be risky for adjuncts, and my program. Why? Because my state university can’t function without exploiting adjuncts given the middling support from the legislature. As one sympathetic reader said in his otherwise supportive response to Ruth’s passionate article, many (albeit not all) mid-level administrators need an extensive coalition of support to effectively resist “policy trends that have handcuffed our administrators and humiliated our faculty.” WGSS administrators in particular desperately need an expansive coalition because our programs and departments are often the first disciplines to be put on the chopping block.

At the same time, tenure-track and tenured academics who work in marginalized fields such as women’s and gender studies are being asked to explain their ethical and moral failure. The assumption is that feminists should know better. I think we do know better, probably more than many of our colleagues in other fields, but we also fear for our programs, departments, and jobs. WGSS directors expounding on their privilege and guilt is not going to overthrow this blatantly despicable system, and refusing to hire adjuncts will just make us more vulnerable.

Minority police officers engaged in the deeply racist “War on Drugs” may seem to have nothing in common with minority/marginalized tenure-track and tenured faculty working in the neoliberal university. Crucial differences of history, systemic racial violence, gender, and class would seem to prevent any link between the two professional groups, but I believe a structurally-induced experience of complicity emerges as a connection. The “quiet complicity” of minority police officers echoes the collusion of tenured and tenure-track faculty who condone the corporate university through their silence. As Michelle Alexander points out in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, it’s not surprising that many minority police officers engage in racial profiling: “A war has been declared against poor communities of color, and the police are expected to wage it. Do we expect minority officers, whose livelihood depends on the very departments charged with waging the war, to play the role of peacenik?” (237)⁷. Minority and marginalized individuals try to maintain their livelihoods at the expense of broad social justice. However, what is astonishing are the few brave minority officers who speak out about police brutality. And despite Alexander’s gratitude toward these brave resisters, she asks her readers to carefully consider if it’s reasonable to expect individual minority workers to jeopardize their immediate livelihoods in order to protest a structurally

entrenched system of discrimination that they did not create. Tamura Lomax speaks directly to such academic complicity when she says, “[T]here are many who want to break up with their academic institutions but cannot. The capitalist academic machine knows that most cannot support themselves or their families if they do” (n.pag.).

I don’t have any easy answers, but refusing to hire adjuncts, which is dramatic and might garner media attention (at least in some higher education publications), won’t stem the system of exploitation from starting up again. In a parallel yet different example, it’s worth noting that sweatshop organizers urge U.S. consumers not to boycott products manufactured in sweatshops overseas as a sign of protest; instead, they ask for consumers to put pressure on companies to institute workplace unionization, workplace safety, and better pay. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, in his effort to launch a Poor People’s Campaign, “Riots are easier just because they need no organization.” Refusing to hire adjuncts, while not technically inducing a “riot,” would create intense temporary chaos and drama—but I fear it would not change the deeply entrenched racialized and gendered corporate structure of higher education.

In addition to repeatedly exposing what Lomax astutely calls the “silencing tactics” of the corporate university, she challenges the well-known demand for an increase in tenure-track lines, arguing that this demand does not address the structural poison that is harming higher education. “And it does not matter if academic institutions all of a sudden engage in a mass hiring of one hundred new black bodies, women or otherwise, if those bodies represent and maintain the status quo, or if their radical resistance is met by macro or micro aggressions and other silencing tactics” (n.pag.). So what might help challenge the mentality that fuels the ruthless gutting of higher education and the exploitation of contingent and non-contingent faculty? Many have stated the following actions in an effort to reestablish the idea of education as a public good, rather than a vocational assembly line for regional, state, national, and global markets: support contingent faculty unionization; pressure state legislatures to fund higher education; demand a cut in presidential, administrative, and athletic coaches’ salaries; and reach out to parents so that they can insist that their children be taught by teachers paid a living wage.

WGSS could be working together with our contingent colleagues in such organizations as the New Faculty Majority to create more accessible research and education about the effects of the corporate university on students, faculty, staff, communities, and the country. The National Women’s Studies Association might be able to forge alliances with organizations such as the Modern Language Association, the American Federation of Teachers, and the American Association of University Professors, as these groups have been reaching out to those who create and reinforce this system in the first place: state governors, state legislatures, university presidents, and those who sit on university and college boards of trustees. These powerful societal individuals and governing bodies are the key target audience, as are students and parents who are still unaware of the workplace conditions under which many teachers labor at colleges and universities in this country.

I am aware that the fear of losing whatever institutional power I have is influencing my thinking and writing on these issues. But I am also someone from a socially modest background who is the first woman in my family to graduate from college and earn a Ph.D.—and as female and queer, my position in the university is an uneasy one. I am a beneficiary of both white privilege and what Michelle Alexander calls “cosmetic diversity,”⁸ which refers to the common practice of hiring people of color, LGBTs, and women as evidence of an organization’s commitment to diversity while, at the same time, vigorously maintaining traditional structures of

social control and exclusion. Women, queers, people of color and individuals with disabilities, as well as those from the lower middle and working-class, are still outsiders in academe. When our marked bodies are located in relatively “new” and typically underfunded disciplines/fields such as women’s, gender, and sexuality studies, ethnic studies, and African American studies, we are further marked. The inevitable complicity of “marked” and marginalized tenure-track and tenured faculty and mid-level administrators in underfunded disciplines and programs is a challenge, but it doesn’t have to be a showstopper.

So, while my complicity is real, it’s not the same as the complicity of the mostly white conservative men who run the legislature in the state where I work and live. I participate in the mistreatment of contingent faculty, but we need a more multifaceted understanding of complicity in this critical conversation.

Notes

¹ Tamura A. Lomax’s essay can be found at: <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2015/05/black-womens-lives-dont-matter-in-academia-either-or-why-i-quit-academic-spaces-that-dont-value-black-womens-life/>

² Gwendolyn Beetham, “Love in a Time of Contingency: A Letter to Women’s and Gender Studies,” *The Feminist Wire*. (July 24, 2014) <http://www.thefeminist-wire.com/2014/07/womens-and-gender-studies/>

³ McGurk’s essay is based on research on the corporatization of higher education and a short survey with WGSS chairs and directors (full disclaimer: I was one of the respondents for McGurk’s survey, which was distributed to a women’s studies listserv).

⁴ Snyder-Duch, Jennifer. "Re: Complicit." Message to the author. 30 Sep. 2015. E-mail.

⁵ The two articles by Ruth that I discuss in this paper were published in Michael Meranze and Christopher Newfield’s blog, *Remaking the University*. Ruth’s “Why are We Complicit in Creating a Disposable Workforce” is available at “Why <http://utotherescue.blogspot.com/2014/07/why-are-faculty-complicit-in-creating.html> Her essay, “What Can We Do Now That Adjunct Sections are Written Into Universities Fiscal Survival Strategy” is found at <http://utotherescue.blogspot.com/2014/07/what-can-we-do-now-that-adjunct.html>

⁶ Tamura Lomax’s discussion of academic collusion with corporate methods and cultures is a model of clarity and complexity. She writes about “black male and female complicity within this structure” and reminds those of us who hold some modicum of institutional power that “the work of those in positions of power in academia [is] to actively and collectively decrease the gap between the precariat and everyone else. This kind of collective activism has yet to happen.” Later in her piece, she evokes the familiar image of the pampered, narcissistic tenured professor whose only concern is his or her “career”: “If this discussion on poverty among academicians makes you uncomfortable it should. If you find it unbelievable, you’ve been under a rock or perhaps safely tucked away on a remote access resort writing and researching on the institution’s dime for the past several years.” Lomax also makes clear that the corporate university has carefully acquired a small cadre of what she calls “superblackademics” that it showcases when claims of discrimination hit—but tokenism is just another version of maintaining the status quo. But there is more: she also writes about faculty of diverse racial, gender, and class backgrounds who went out of their way to help her and other black female graduate students and

contingent faculty: “In my short career, I have personally experienced black and white faculty, female and male, who would have parted the Red Sea for me and other black women if they could have. These faculty work tirelessly to deconstruct the academic ranking system in real ways in their thinking and doing.” Her essay should be mandatory reading for all in academia, from undergraduate students to university presidents.

⁷ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 237.

⁸ Ibid, 237.



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