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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Against Hope Labour in the Public Humanities

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Abstract

This article argues that the number of tenure-line academic positions has been shrinking for decades, and that non-tenure track workers are being asked to do more un- and under-compensated publishing, editing, and peer review labour this labour. This is all having a detrimental impact on larger, public humanities based projects. Often, non-tenure track faculty are paid for their hard earned expertise in a currency of hope, or in the implicit promise of future opportunities. Large public humanities programs, should resist the temptation to use hope labour and gig workers.

Keywords: Adjunct Labour; hope labour public humanities

As tenure-line positions decrease at most public universities in North America, the work of journal reviewing, editorship and administration is increasingly being done by non-tenured employees. As Julia Richardson et al. note, "it appears that careers in higher education are diverging into two streams: an increasingly smaller stream of academics with continuing positions focused on teaching, research, and/or administrative leadership; and a larger group of temporary teaching-only sessional academics."[1] According to Judith M. Gappa and David W. Leslie in their classic study *The Invisible Faculty*, full-time and tenured faculty and precarious faculty are becoming "bifurcated into high- and low-status 'castes'" where precarious faculty "now carry a significant part of the responsibility for teaching, especially at the lower division level of undergraduate education."[2] As the higher status community of tenured academics is shrinking across North America, we are seeing cracks in the publishing system where many reviewers are being overworked, and some journals and university presses are having serious issues finding volunteer peer reviewers due to reviewer fatigue. At the same time, many non-tenure line academics are publishing their research in public humanities venues and acting as reviewers without direct compensation for their time and expertise.

As Frank Donoghue argues in *The Last Professors*, most of the advice graduate student and adjunct faculty receive is in the form of "take-charge, self-help" approaches that tell academics that job market failure is the result of a lack of preparation, professionalization

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[1] Richardson et al. 2019, 624.
[2] Gappa and Leslie 1993, 14.

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or publication, and thus “that success or failure [on the job market] is largely up to you, the job search itself becomes an intense personal drama about individual distinction and merit.”[3] Many sessional are told that the best way to gain a full-time job by doing the work of a full-time research employee by publishing, presenting at academic conferences and providing service to the profession without any compensation or renumeration. In fact, asking for compensation in humanities academic spaces can be seen as uncouth or a sign that one cares more about the money than the work itself.

Non-tenured academics who engage in public humanities work as writers, reviewers, editors and publishers are engaging in hope labour, a form of uncompensated or under-compensated labour carried out in the present, in the hope that the exposure, experience or goodwill generated by the task will lead to future employment opportunities.[4] Often, academics engage in hope labour because they want to gain new opportunities, because of the uncertainty of the academic job market, and/or as a way of showing care for their discipline.[5] As feminist theorist Mary Zournazi argues, “Hope can be what sustains life in the face of despair” and it can encourage “the drive or energy that embeds us in the world – in the ecology of life, ethics, and politics.”[6] Hope is wonderful, but it does not pay the bills and it may encourage precarious labourers in the humanities to maintain unhealthy economic relationships with the university in hopes of future employment. While we tend to speak of the hiring crisis in the humanities, Donoghue points out that the trend of using precarious labour to cover teaching work began in the 1960s and 1970s, forging an academic culture based on brutal competition and a scarcity of job stability.[7] Sessional labour is not a bug of our academic labour system but a feature, and while “no university administrators talk about it candidly, casual teaching labour proved cheaper and more practical than the old practice of staffing all courses with professors.”[8] The days of a robust job market, where it made sense to do causal academic labour in hopes of landing an academic position, have been over longer than I have been alive and there is no indication that institutions of higher learning will return to hiring tenure-line faculty to cover most, if not all, university courses.

In this market, encouraging hope labour does little more than teach those who are being exploited by the academic labour market to see themselves as gig workers. Hope can become an anchor, a tool that holds us down and keeps us in poorly paid jobs while yearning to secure an elusive tenure-track position. Public humanities projects must either strategically reject hope labour as an employment model for economic and ethical reasons or it must strive to make the exploitation inherent in hope labour visible and open to criticism.

It did not have to be this way. As Herb Childress argues in *The Adjunct Underclass*, we have largely discarded the idea that college faculty deserve to make a living wage within a system that increasingly sees them as irrelevant and easily replicable.[9] There are many terms for this kind of temporary academic labour, but what they have in common is the idea that academics should be “working course-by-course or year-by-year, with no guarantee of permanence, often for embarrassingly small stipends, and often for no benefits.”[10] Now, some academics want to have a more casual relationship with the academy, and they may have other income streams that allow them to take on teaching as a hobby. Moreover, many of the academics who take on positions as adjuncts faculty, visiting scholars, postdoctoral fellows, professor of the practice or artist in residence know that these positions are unlikely to directly lead to full-time, permanent or tenure-line employment. Yet, many of us are told to see taking on these temporary appointments as putting in one"s dues in a world where "college teaching has become primarily a pickup job, like driving for Uber."[11] Moreover, many precarious employees stay in precarious positions, year after year, in hopes that they will find a full-time position. Since the hiring process for academic jobs can take from six months to a year to complete, many precarious employees wait through multiple year-long job cycles in precarious positions out of a fear that a "gap" on their CV will be read as a red flag by a hiring committee.

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[3] Donoghue 2008, 37.
[4] Kuehn and Corrigan 10.
[5] Mackenzie and McKinlay 2021.
[6] Zournazi 2023, 14–5.
[7] Donoghue 2008, 25.
[8] Donoghue 2008, 25.
[9] Childress 2019, ix–x.
[10] Childress 5.

Between 1955 and 1970, when universities in Canada and America were growing rapidly, there was robust government funding and most academic positions were stable, long-term employment situations. This corresponded to a strong job market, where those with doctoral degrees who wanted to teach were likely to find stable academic positions. Many of us have had the experience of speaking with a professor of a certain age who would beguile us with stories of getting job offers right out of their doctoral programs, sometimes without even doing a campus interview, on the strength of a supervisor's recommendation. For example, Ronald G. Ehrenberg talks about receiving his PhD in 1970 and going on a golden job market where he has his "choice of positions at a dozen major research universities."[12] In our present market, however, with persistent government underfunding, tenure-track positions are "close to unattainable for many new Ph.D. precipitants."[13] In fact, Edna Chun and Joe Feagin argue in *Who Killed Higher Education* that "nearly three-quarters of instructional positions in U.S. institutions are now *off the tenure track*". While one would assume that these job trends would slow down academic publishing, the fact is that new journals are springing up all the time in the humanities, at least in part because scholars feel pressure to publish to gain or maintain one of the few remaining tenure-line positions.

As a point of full disclosure, I should note that I have a permanent academic position that is non-tenure track. My position is 80 per cent teaching and 20 per cent service. What this means in practice is that I am not paid for my writing and scholarship, the editorial work I do for academic journals or any public humanities projects I engage in on my own time. In writing this essay, then, I am engaging in the very hope labour I am criticizing. Academics do not get paid directly for their writing outputs, for very good reasons. Nevertheless, in the traditional 40 per cent research, 40 per cent teaching and 20 per cent service tenure-track position, academics are paid for their research labour. None of my salary is allocated to for my research labour, and yet I publish, peer review and edit more than most of my tenure and tenure track colleagues. I do so because I know my hopes of securing one of the few remaining tenure-track positions depends on maintaining or building my scholarly profile. This means that I need to write academic books, publish peer-reviewed journal articles and write public facing work such as editorials and opinion pieces. While my employer is clear that I do not have to do this work to maintain my academic position, they are also aware that it is in my best interest to continue to do this academic labour, even if it is uncompensated. If I decline to do this work, I will become completely dependent on my employer in a system where it is very difficult to move between institutions mid-career unless one is a research superstar. Publication and citations are currency in the academic job market, and if I had to apply for a new job in ten years (say because of provincial or state budget cuts to the humanities), I would not be competitive on the market with only years of excellent teaching and service on my CV, even if those years represent my doing the job I am paid to do well. Write for the job you want, not the job you have, seems to be the ethos of most higher education workers in an era of disappearing tenure lines.

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[11] Childress 5.

[12] Ehrenberg 2004, 16.

[13] Chun and Feagin 2021.

Our system of academic publishing is held up by a cruel hope: maybe, if we write one more article or network at one more conference, we will win the academic lottery, find a tenure-line position and be able to mentor new graduate students who will, in turn, become precarious workers for the academy. Here I want to be clear that I am not making a "woe is me" argument. I have a solid job, a pension and benefits. Nor am I suggesting that people with doctoral degrees are unable to see the economic realities of the situation when they enter into temporary employment situations or engage in hope labour. My concern is that there are academics without a stable job, health benefits or a pension who are actively engaged in publishing new scholarship, editing academic journals, providing peer reviews of emerging work and writing public facing articles in public humanities venues, all in hopes of landing a stable job, and that it seems taboo to talk about it. Their labour is un- or under compensated, and yet if they want any hope of finding future, stable employment, they are forced to do this volunteer work as a way of demonstrating their potential.

We must ask how aware university administrators, deans and tenured faculty are of the fact that thousands of un- and under paid academics are supporting academic publishing in the humanities and social sciences, and that many public humanities projects depend on hope labour to sustain themselves? Hope labour, in other words, becomes a tool that "mask[s] and maintains[s] capitalism's asymmetrical power relations."[14] Do those with power in the university system care who teaches the introduction to freshman composition, serves as their external reviewer or provides a helpful citation to their recent scholarly monograph, or do they simply care that these things happen at the lowest possible cost? Are they even considering the real, human, costs of maintaining this asymmetrical and unsustainable academic publishing system within the public humanities? Imagine what would happen to the precious citation metrics of academics if those who were not paid to do this work simply stopped writing, reviewing and editing, gave up hope and walked away from the academy?

The difficulty with critiquing hope labour is that those engaged in will say it is an enjoyable and rewarding labour that does not "'feel like' work."[15] In this way, it matters that public humanities work is often personally fulfilling for sessional, adjunct and non-tenure-track academics in a way that grading, going to committee meetings or commuting between campuses is not. If anything, working on a large, public facing, digital humanities project provides an opportunity to feel welcomed and values for precarious employees, a kind of psychological wage that hides their disposability. While there is pleasure in being paid in opportunity and prestige, "free labour has ultimately undercut professional wages and job availability, introducing new opportunities for exploiting workers' compensation needs even as corporations continue to report record profits."[16] By engaging in hope labour, we are telling a system that it does not have to value us, since we are more than happy to work for little to no wages as long as the task is pleasurable. A job cannot love you back or provide your life with meaning, it can, however, pay you a living wage that allows you to live with dignity.

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[14] Kuehn and Corrigan 10.

[15] Kuehn and Corrigan 11.

[16] Kuehn and Corrigan 12.

Many of the most exciting public humanities projects are funded by national funding bodies such as the SSHRC and NIH. For tenure-line academics, this system is wonderful. It does not raise their total compensation, but it allows them to work with eager and hopeful undergraduate, graduate and postdoctoral students on a project that we believe will help make the world a better place, and it looks good on your CV when it comes time for promotion. But we should ask ourselves if relying on these short-term funding models is encouraging our students to engage in academic temp and hustle work? When we measure the impact of our work, are we factoring in the sometimes-toxic role that hope can play in trapping our students into an academic system that will exploit them with low wages and temporary jobs? There is a reason why the genre of quit lit matters. In quit lit, authors discuss their reasons for leaving the academy, and, as Laura McKenzie argues, these stories of "disillusionment" are "especially common among precarious academics" and "recent PhDs who have worked in short-term, part time positions for years or even decades."[17]

So, what is to be done? Building stronger faculty unions will help, as will lobbying provincial and state governments to restore university funding to the levels we saw in the 1970s. We also have to talk more with the general public and explain to them why educating students is not like driving an Uber, so that they understand why creating more stable faculty employment is a public good.

These, however, are long-term solutions that may not help people who are right now in grad school, doing postdoctoral work or working in precarious academic positions. We have a duty to our colleagues to be more honest about what is happening. As editors of scholarly journals and project leads on public humanities projects, we should offer some money to any precarious academic who does peer reviewing. The amount does not have to be huge, but it should be fair. A good model to look at might be the Canadian Artists Representation and their minimum recommended fee schedule (https://www.carfac.ca/tools/fees/). Creating an adjunct fee schedule, even if most journals and public humanities projects cannot afford to pay it, will at least help to quantify just how much hope labour is costing precarious academics and could lead to an academic culture where paying adjuncts for their expertise is factored into grant applications. If we cannot pay people for their labour fairly, perhaps it is time to say that we will not perpetuate the system of hope labour by publishing, or asking precarious faculty members to review public humanities projects, without compensation of some kind.

Some will say that being honest and paying people for their labour is hardly a radical solution to a systemic problem. I agree, but we need to start somewhere. We live in an age of mendacity, where people lie without shame or remorse. Public humanities projects cannot engage in mendacity. We must temper the hopes of precarious employees and graduate students by being honest about the real market value of the hard and soft skills they are gaining. What I am advocating for is an ethics of compassion and honesty in the public humanities, where we stop asking for or expecting free labour from precarious employees who are being paid mostly in exposure. I want project leaders in the public humanities to use their influence to encourage building academic cultures that are kinder, more just and more honest.

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[17] McKenzie 2021, n. pag.

Dr. Jamie Paris is an Instructor II in the Department of English, Theatre, Film, and Media at the University of Manitoba, and an assistant editor for *Early Theatre*. His scholarship on early modern literature focuses on premodern critical race studies, with a specific interest in whiteness studies has been published with *The Sundial*, *Early Theatre*, the *Journal for Early Modern Culture*, *Renaissance and Reformation*, as well as forthcoming chapters in *None a Stranger There: England and/in Europe on the Early Modern Stage* (University of Alabama Press) and *An Alternative History of Shakespearian Acting* (Arden). Paris has a manuscript in progress, entitled *Clothed Villainy*, with the Strode Series at the University of Alabama Press. This manuscript is interested in the performative nature of whiteness and the role of racial cross-dressing in early modern drama. He has written editorials on educational issues The Manitoban, The Conversation, Inside Higher Education, and University Affairs.

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