

2020

# Bearing the Brunt of Structural Inequality: Ontological Labor in the Academy

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## Recommended Citation

Kim, Ruthanne Crapo, Ann J. Cahill, and Melissa Jacquart. 2020. "Bearing the Brunt of Structural Inequality: Ontological Labor in the Academy." *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 6 (1). Article 3.

## **Bearing the Brunt of Structural Inequality: Ontological Labor in the Academy<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

Empirical data show that members of underrepresented and historically marginalized groups in academia undertake many forms of undervalued or unnoticed labor. While the data help to identify that this labor exists, they do not provide a thick description of what the experience is like, nor do they offer a framework for understanding the different kinds of invisible labor that are being undertaken. We identify and analyze a distinct, undervalued, and invisible labor that the data have left unnamed and unmeasured: *ontological labor*, the work required to manage one's identity and body if either or both do not fit into academic structures, norms, and demands. We argue that ontological labor efforts should be understood as a form of labor. We then provide a characterization of ontological labor, detailing the labor as navigating one's obligations to give and managing entitlements to take. We also highlight the ontological labor that takes place through instances of resistance, such as through complaint or refusals.

**Keywords:** labor, ontological labor, invisible labor, academic inequality, entitlement to take, obligation to give, underrepresented faculty, academic labor

### **1. Introduction**

In recent years, strong empirical evidence has accumulated showing that the distribution and valuation of labor required of academics in institutes of higher

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<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to extend our deepest thanks to Allauren Forbes, Nabeel Hamid, and Stephanie Wesson for their work in organizing the 2018 MAP-Penn Conference on Inclusive Methodology and Pedagogy in Philosophy. We are indebted to their scholarly midwifery in developing this excellent conference, as this paper emerged from conversations that took place during this event. We would also like to thank our anonymous reviewers for their insightful feedback on earlier drafts.

education is profoundly influenced by identity markers such as race and gender (Guarino and Borden 2017; Park 1996; Park 2014; Park and Park-Ozee, forthcoming). For example, members of historically marginalized groups<sup>2</sup> are disproportionately called on to do “diversity work,” or as Bird, Litt, and Wang put it, “institutional housekeeping” (2004, 195). Moreover, the explicit work of organizing committee meetings and writing reports on such topics is accompanied by affective labor of various sorts; at the very least, engaging in diversity work requires being moved to anger or at least dissatisfaction by the current state of injustice. Shelley Park argues that such affective states are frequently perceived as contrary to the role of the dispassionate, objective philosopher (Park 2014, 39), resulting in a classic double bind in the Marilyn Frye (1983) tradition, and we suspect that such tensions are not limited to the discipline of philosophy. When it comes to distribution and valuation of labor related to teaching, female-identified instructors not only teach *more* than men (Park and Park-Ozee, forthcoming); they teach *differently* than men, being much more likely to engage in student-centered methods (Eagan et al. 2014, 199). Female-identified instructors also expend more emotional energy balancing the requirements to be simultaneously authoritative and friendly than male-identified instructors (Tunguz 2016; El-Alayli, Hansen-Brown, and Ceynar 2018); these demands for emotional labor are surely related to the clearly discriminatory effects of instructor evaluations (Mitchell and Martin 2018; Merritt 2008). El-Alayli, Hansen-Brown, and Ceynar find that “students with high academic entitlement have a higher expectation of female professors granting their special favor requests” (2018, 144). Female-identified instructors spend much more time advising students (Park and Park-Ozee, forthcoming), and faculty whose identities align with marginalized racial groups spend significant amounts of time guiding students with similar identities through a frequently hostile intellectual environment (Matthew 2016).

The findings of this substantial body of empirical research are clear and unsurprising: as a site of labor, the academy instantiates and perpetuates inequalities based on sex, ability, gender, race, and other salient factors.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, many of the empirical studies referenced above focus on the invisible (that is, undervalued or unnoticed) labor undertaken by instructors who identify as members of historically marginalized groups. While some of this variety of labor is becoming more institutionally recognized, it is still not valued and recognized to the

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this essay we use interchangeably the terms “historically marginalized,” “minority,” and “underrepresented” to indicate both the multiple frames currently in use and to highlight the inherent limitations of one term to effectively delineate this problematically lumped group.

<sup>3</sup> The claims we make may extend beyond academia. However, in this paper we confine our discussion to this context.

same degree as other work, such as “gold standard” single-authored, peer-reviewed scholarship.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, though the empirical data are needed and are an important step in *identifying* that there exists a disproportionate burden of un- or under-recognized work that falls on certain (underrepresented) members of the communities, and help make the labor more visible, the empirical data do not provide a thick description of what the experience is like, nor do they offer a map or framework for *understanding* the different kinds of invisible labor that are being undertaken. At times, the empirical data conflate many varieties of invisible labor and fail to appreciate that they involve different interpersonal dynamics and different ethical and political challenges. What is needed to further discussions around disproportionate and invisible labor are better, more complex, more nuanced, conceptual frameworks and distinctions.

The larger context of changing structures of employment in higher education, and how they intersect with and perpetuate systemic inequality, is crucial here as well. As tenure-track positions disappear, colleges hire more women and minorities than they did previously, but into temporary or part-time positions, the lowest and widest tier on the academic rung (Flaherty 2016). According to the American Association of University Professors (2017), based on numbers from 1975–2015, these positions account for 70 percent of all faculty posts and their growth occurred during times of economic prosperity, not downturn. These instructors, lecturers, and faculty are most likely to be found in community colleges and in lower level college courses; the majority of these faculty do not have outside professional employment (Curtis 2014). At a time when America hails the transformative power of education to include marginalized people, its own narrow power structure mimics the subordination of these groups as they gain access to mostly contingent positions with flattened and grossly deflated wages. This compensation excludes pay for research, course design, voluntary advising, mentoring, departmental support, institutional assessment, institutional service, letters of recommendation, or outside student support. These pay gaps and narrowly demarcated labor contracts are especially disproportionate in comparison to their mostly nonminority, tenured counterparts, for whom at least some of these expectations are built into the tenure review (Finkelstein, Conley, and Schuster 2016). Given that so many faculty who identify with historically marginalized groups work at community colleges,

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<sup>4</sup>In particular, our claims about research norms in this paper take our shared discipline, philosophy, as a focal point. Of course, there are other disciplines where single-authored work is virtually unheard of (such as some sciences). Other disciplines, particularly the sciences, require faculty to earn grant awards as monetary contributions to the university; such requirements may be analogous to our discipline’s privileging of single-authored scholarship.

marginalized students continue to interact with mostly marginalized faculty who possess little economic or sociopolitical power to secure their own livelihood, let alone the overall academic progress of students. These students are caught within the crosshairs of American poverty with highly dedicated, skilled, but vastly underpaid, unsecured, sometimes multi-campus or multi-institution faculty guiding them.

As a set of coauthors who instantiate different positions on the hierarchy of academic instructors (one of us is a professor at a community college, one is a full professor at a four-year, private liberal arts university, and one is a postdoctoral fellow at a large public research university) and different racialized embodiments (two of us identify as white, one as a person of color), we have been struck by the ways in which different demands on us for such invisible labor have framed our experiences within academia. More importantly, we sense that the empirical data tell only a small part of the story of the lived experiences that such invisible labor—and the demands for it, and the various ways in which it is undervalued, and indeed its various forms—produces.

Our goal in this paper is to identify and analyze a distinct, undervalued, and invisible labor that the existing empirical data have left unnamed and unmeasured: *ontological labor*, by which we mean the work required to manage one's identity and body if either or both do not fit into academic structures, norms, and demands. This labor is ongoing, ineluctable, and persistent, and given the ways in which various forms of invisible labor are disproportionately allocated to minority members of academia, it frequently accompanies and is intensified by that invisible labor.

In what follows we first briefly survey some existing frameworks of invisible labor, to show that ontological labor is among the forms of labor that such frameworks omit. We also provide a rationale for why ontological labor efforts should be understood as a form of labor. We then turn to an extensive description and analysis of ontological labor, grounded in the framework of social reproduction theory, but also use philosophical frameworks, such as feminist theory and critical race theory, that have addressed structural inequality. To provide a thicker characterization of ontological labor, we detail the labor as navigating one's obligations to give and managing one's entitlements to take. We also highlight the ontological labor that takes place through instances of resistance, such as through complaint or refusals.

We aim to build upon the substantial empirical data that exist regarding inequalities of labor within the academy in order to provide a thicker description of how those inequalities are lived by diverse bodies. Our overarching claim is that though there are many forms of invisible labor that are disproportionately required, expected, and enacted by members of the academy who identify with historically

marginalized and excluded groups, ontological labor almost always accompanies and undergirds those other forms, and is even more susceptible to a lack of recognition and assignment of value. In addition to providing a characterization of ontological labor, we seek to reveal hidden structures enforcing ontological labor that, in remaining hidden, perpetuate systemic inequalities in academia by allowing (and often requiring) the labor of devalued members to both make possible and sustain the more visibly productive labor of its more highly valued members.

## 2. Existing Frameworks

The empirical data on invisible labor in academia referenced above have not, of course, been produced without some helpful conceptual frameworks. Park and Park-Ozee (forthcoming), for instance, describe some forms of invisible labor as “reproductive,” arguing that their disproportionate distribution particularly along gendered lines (and, we suspect, along racial lines) mirrors other social structures regarding work. In this context, reproductive work (associated with femininity) or “institutional housekeeping” (Bird, Litt, and Wang 2004), is contrasted with “productive work” (associated with masculinity). Reproductive work or institutional housekeeping refers to the necessarily repetitive, always-ongoing work that does not result in an identifiable achievement but rather keeps the institution and its various components functioning. Just as cleaning one’s house doesn’t result in a clean house now and forever more, serving on certain kinds of committees, advising students, or teaching introductory classes are ongoing tasks that need to be undertaken over and over again. Productive work, by contrast—which, in the academy, is almost entirely understood as producing distinct and, in the discipline of philosophy in particular, single-authored scholarly works—is structured by a certain kind of finality. Once a book or paper is written and published, it stays written: the work is completed, and an additional CV line is accumulated.

The distinction between reproductive and productive work is helpful in categorizing various forms of invisible labor and highlighting their association with existing gender norms. However, we are arguing that the distinction is not sufficiently comprehensive and omits some crucial forms of invisible labor. Three omissions seem particularly salient to us:

- *Scholarly midwifery*, by which we mean labor done in service of helping others produce knowledge and insight (this labor can take the form of informal or formal reviewing of manuscripts, initiating and organizing conferences, maintaining professional networks, etc.);
- *Diversity and liberatory labor*, by which we refer not only to the officially sanctioned diversity work that institutions of higher education disproportionately distributed to faculty and staff who identify with

historically marginalized groups (often with the aim to build and cultivate better communities) but also to the more private, individualized labor involved in supporting other members of historically marginalized groups (both students and colleagues) as they navigate institutional hostility and indifference—the aim of such latter efforts may be to undermine the institution or refuse to do “diversity work” if it keeps structural inequality intact; and

- *Ontological labor*, by which we refer to the mundane, daily, constant effort and expertise required to bodily inhabit institutions and spaces ineluctably shaped by structural inequality.

Of these three, the category of scholarly midwifery has been entirely neglected, and while we do not address it in this discussion, we hope to take it up in future work. Diversity labor has been described in some detail<sup>5</sup> but often in the absence of its connection to liberatory labor, to which, we suggest, it is intricately related; again, we hope future research will address that relation in more depth.

Ontological labor, the focus of this current discussion, is described (although not using that term) in Sara Ahmed’s (2012, 2017) analysis of diversity work in academia. Ahmed has developed the kind of phenomenological description of the lived experience of invisible labor that we are seeking to extend in this paper. She identifies two modalities of that work; the first entails the work one does when attempting to transform an institution by opening it up to those who have historically been excluded from it (Ahmed 2017). The diversity worker, then, works to open up institutions to these groups by suggesting how structures and systems can or should be modified. As Ahmed notes, the diversity worker has their job because diversity and equality are not practiced daily (2017, 95). The second modality consists of the work one does when one does not inhabit the norms of an institution—that is, the work of being in question, when one is a body that is passing (in a variety of senses) through academic spaces and assumed not to belong. As Ahmed acknowledges in her analysis, this work is undervalued in the institutional reward mechanisms, and for those who undertake such labor it can feel like one is banging their head against a brick wall (135).

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Fehr (2011) examines epistemic benefits of diversity and diverse practitioners for knowledge production in the academy (with a focus on STEM fields). Fehr also identifies roadblocks for effective use of epistemic diversity within the academy, which include challenges in ideas gaining uptake, isolation, and forces that inhibit development of dissenting views. We suspect that Fehr’s work on diversity is another locus of ontological labor.

This is precisely the labor that we are labeling as *ontological*, in an effort to highlight the ways in which structurally unjust institutions require marginalized members to manage their embodied beings in specific, and exhausting, ways. Along with the invisible or undervalued labor identified in the empirical data (for example, to conduct diversity work), there exists a second kind of inescapable labor undertaken by the individual to navigate their embodiment when undertaking these first labors. Such labor, we hold, requires a closer look and a more detailed analysis.

### 3. Ontological Labor in Academia

Perhaps the first question to be addressed is why, exactly, the kinds of practices and behavior that we are seeking to highlight should be properly termed labor at all. While social reproduction theorists (Vogel 2013; Bhattacharya 2017) identify clearly the Marxist implications of social labor power for production and reproduction processes, and the exploitation of the latter to increase capitalist wealth among a few, less discussion surrounds the labor of managing the perception of one's embodied being and others people's perception of our being within the landscape of academic work. We contend that this is a critical area of analysis and that the ongoing management, adaptation, and reorientation of one's embodied bodily presence constitutes other social reproductive labors that reveal the reliance of productive labor on reproductive processes. We apply this lens of ontological labor to academia, drawing heavily on experiences within our own discipline (philosophy) and the nascent effects of the increasing turn toward neoliberalism in higher education. Social reproduction theory (SRT) aids our analysis in that it includes "various kinds of socially necessary work—mental, physical, and emotional—aimed at providing the historically and socially, as well as biologically, defined care to maintain existing life and to reproduce the next generation" (Laslett and Brenner 1989, 383).

Vogel (2017) observes that SRT powerfully reveals that labor power is the principal commodity in a capitalist society. In its social form, however, we only encounter that commodity as exchange (not use) value. The fact that labor power appears as a commodity that lacks the origins common to other commodities has caused some thinkers to expand the purview of SRT to include "the processes necessary for the reproduction of the workforce, both biologically and as compliant wage workers" (Fine and Saad-Filho 2016, 61–62). SRT, then, focuses our attention on noneconomic factors that influence how we reproduce and transform society over time. Compliance, we contend, is a necessary condition of this social reproduction, a bodily reorientation toward a specificity of desire, demands, and regimens—coercion beyond typical labor. Connecting this to the academy, Zheng (2018) suggests that the shift in the ratio of tenure-track (TT) to non-tenure-track (NTT) faculty in the US, from 70% TT/30% NTT in 1969 to 30% TT/70% NTT in 2011



(Kezar and Maxey 2013), clarifies the precarity of academic labor and the gendered and racialized processes that inform a structure wherein women and people of color fill the majority ranks of NTT positions. Within the discipline of philosophy, the precarity is stark, as only half of PhDs find permanent employment, one-third of whom fill temporary positions (Jennings et al. 2017).

Academics compete in this precarious system, reinforced by myths of “individual merit” and “work as its own reward” (Zheng 2018, 238–242). Both myths distract from the collective and social factors whereby we socially value certain labor over others. These myths reinforce gender exploitation by questioning why one ought to be paid well for work one “cares” about, or (particularly but not only in the case of philosophy) the notion that one’s work upholds truth, justice, and the examined life. Under these logics, contingent faculty comply with low wages, at-will employment, and menial benefits as a costly means to care for their students and the important work of the discipline itself. To do otherwise is to “fail” at being included as an academic, a person who has work worth doing for its own sake. Under the myth of meritocracy, their compliance furthers the mythical chance that they may be selected into the shrinking TT line, where work is made easier by the vast pool of NTT faculty who perform the bulk of teaching and service work. As the larger system obscures the social factors that inform the market commodity of academic labor, a precarious worker falls prey to the logic that they can be exceptional, that they can overcome the odds and be celebrated as individuals, and not as folks who challenged the system that excluded them wrongly. They become skilled in appearing to comply with the system.

The compliant worker may be a variant of what Foucault (1979, 136) called the “docile body,” a product of the “constraints, prohibitions or obligations” placed on bodies within regimes of power. As Foucault describes, the body becomes docile through a variety of mechanisms, modalities, and priorities, which, we contend, have become characteristic of the neoliberal university; a focus on efficiency of movement, the supervision of bodies rather than results, and “a codification that partitions as closely as possible time, space, movement” (137). While feminist and decolonial philosophers (Alcoff 1999; Gordon 1995) have noted the ways people are socially, economically, and professionally coerced to adopt somatic ideals of maleness and whiteness in philosophy (one could also include heterosexuality and able-bodiedness), few have called this behavior “labor” in the Marxist sense or identified it as a compliance needed to obtain wage-labor and professional advancement.

Frantz Fanon’s (2008) work on blackness explores the ineluctable system used to reproduce a binary racial oppression, where one’s being (whiteness) is predicated upon the nonbeing (blackness) of another. As Fanon writes, “For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. . . . I am

not a potentiality of something; I am fully what I am. I do not have to look for the universal” (90, 114). Fanon’s words are meant to rebut Sartre’s (1976) analysis in *Black Orpheus* that black consciousness is the next move after the thesis of white supremacy. The historically marginalized person (in this case racialized) must comply by remaining a nonbeing in order to sustain the project of being taken up by majority workers. As such, the racial binary plays a functional role in reproductive labor, utilizing the structure of internal colonialism to maintain racist compliance and complicity.

Mario Barrera (1979) extends a Marxist analysis of race and sex in order to reveal these complex moves. Barrera suggests that two major intraclass divisions (with associated subdivisions) segment capitalist political economies. Classes are segmented based on (1) the *structure of the work*, with a primary labor market characterized by jobs that offer “security, stability, good pay and working conditions, the possibility of advancement, and a stable set of procedures in the administration of work rules” (209). The secondary job market offers the reverse conditions, and these jobs are often labeled “dead-end.” Classes are also segmented based on (2) *ascriptive class divisions* wherein “a portion of a class . . . is set off from the rest of the class by some readily identifiable and relatively stable characteristic of the persons assigned to that segment, such as race, ethnicity, or sex, where the relationship of the members to the means and process of production is affected by that demarcation” (212). Given the ever-waiting secondary labor market that snatches those who fail, many workers are compliant and complicit with these ascriptive demarcations. Internal colonialism manifests itself in historic labor movements, Barrera notes, when Anglo workers observed their employers’ ability to use this dual labor system to undercut wage standards, reduce organized labor, and divide workers via a second tier composed of the most vulnerable, politically powerless, and readily removable employees (213). Minority workers digest the mythos of leaving the secondary labor market to join the first, agreeing to segment from those they left behind and to leave intact the reproduction of the system itself. Meanwhile, the ascriptive demarcations silently structure both job markets, with greater levels of violence and oppression in the secondary market incentivizing the maintenance of a dual system.

It is in this sense that we appeal to the ontological: the project of being requires, in Western metaphysics, the nonbeing of others. This labor is at the level of existence, not affect, choice, or preference. To fight for the inclusion of nondominant workers and to acknowledge their work is to acknowledge a system that permits them to work in order to erase them. No matter how hard the worker tries, they remain outside the bounds of being and its visible expression as a somatic ideal. To be a worker, even a compliant one, one must first exist.

The capacity to embody the somatic ideal is, we suggest, an exchangeable commodity on the free market where coaches, professional development organizations, and campus centers train academics to write, speak, present, teach, and meet in ways that reinforce the dominant metaphysical order (Puwar 2004; Thomas and Jackson 2019). It is a bodily or phenomenological labor to discipline and inhabit one's body so others see it as complying; one must learn to manage time, take space appropriately, and move acceptably. This labor, skill, coercion of compliance, or docility is what we explore as ontological labor, a term that highlights the effort and expertise required for instructors, particularly those from historically marginalized groups, to simply *exist* in academia. Informed by Puwar (2004) and Ahmed (2006), we note the phenomenological legacy of the bodies that have occupied, shaped, and continue to orient the somatic norm of the philosophical body and its relation to space. We suggest, extending Kate Manne's (2018) theorization of misogyny, that somatic norms inform the capacities and possibilities from which one is entitled to receive or to which one ought to give within the academy. We expand our analysis beyond the overt correlation of gender, adding an intersectional lens intended to complicate binary processes of production and reproduction and the ways we generate research, teaching, and service.

We define ontological labor as the energy, creativity, and skills required to work within a body already socially inscribed<sup>6</sup> and manage the reception of one's embodied social identity, not only for oneself, but for others who must reproduce and produce within and for the institution. Within any given philosophy department, particular bodies have inhabited offices, classrooms, and committee chairs, shaping and orienting new academic bodies toward the historically established somatic norms; those outside this norm may be labeled "historically marginalized," "underrepresented," or "minority scholars." By examining the status of being somatically ideal—and the elision of embodied qualities that fail to meet this standard—we aim to highlight the labor individuals must undergo and how they may be both visible and invisible as socially reproductive and productive workers. From a generally Foucauldian perspective, of course, all faculty, regardless of identity markers, undergo a disciplinary process that shapes them as recognizable teachers, scholars, and colleagues; it is not the case that faculty from majority groups are free to embody whatever norms they please. However, we are arguing that for minority scholars, oppressive environments generate specific and onerous tasks in service to social reproduction associated with a person's bodily identity, and that these tasks differ both qualitatively and quantitatively from those required of majority groups.

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<sup>6</sup> Social inscription may also include the effects of trauma and the environment that influence epigenetic factors (van der Kolk 2000).

Providing a characterization of ontological labor begins with acknowledgement that being a member of a historically marginalized group comes with the burdens of managing the oppressive norms and behaviors expressed both individually and institutionally. Our point here is a deceptively simple one, with wide-ranging and at times debilitating ramifications: the act of being a member of a historically marginalized group within the academy comes with demands for labor that are utterly foreign to the experiences of members of historically dominant groups. Specifically, one's ontological status can have a substantially transformative effect on the particular work that academics are called upon, or expected, to do.

Manne's (2018) analysis of sexism and misogyny offers insights that we use to broaden beyond the confines of gender. For Manne, a key characteristic of misogyny (which Manne's analysis names as the law enforcement branch of patriarchy, distinguishing it from sexism's justificatory role) is that it clarifies tacitly assigned roles and obligations of (1) entitlement—who is permitted to take—and (2) obligation—who is obligated to give. What we find compelling in Manne's critique is that her distinction helps feminists locate an abstraction, in this case sexism, when an enforcement arm is present that ensures compliance. While Manne remains focused on gender, we suggest Manne's model is relevant when considering other forms of abstract contempt, such as racism, ableism, heterosexism, and nationalism.

Manne's articulation of misogyny, particularly when extended and applied to other forms of structural inequality, can help us understand how the academy has constructed the kind of giving that is associated with certain social groups. Manne argues that female-identified persons are seen as human givers rather than human beings—humans, for sure, but humans whose moral value is dependent upon their giving certain moral goods to their ostensible superiors. A similar dynamic is at work with regard to other coerced conditions of compulsory deference that the academy has ignored or disavowed, often based on somatic superiority and inferiority, such as race, ability, religion, and sexuality. The invisibility of enforced obligations and entitlements makes straight the path of becoming like a majority faculty member in the academy. What is overlooked is the lack of choice one has to engage in the labor of complying with personal and institutional somatic norms that identify people as givers or nurturers, doing labor that SRT theorists recognize as reproductive work.

The management of the meaning and weight of difference is, we argue, a form of labor, and an inescapable one at that, at least for the many members of historically disadvantaged groups whose identity markers are visible or otherwise perceptible. These faculty cannot conceal the signs of their identity: the head covering, hair texture, skin pigment, accent and inflection, odor or design of clothes, missing limb, or scarred skin. With a tacit culture of whiteness, ableism, and nonminority religious practices ordering the university, institutionally, a minority worker must manage the reinforced presumptions of guest-worker status,

presumed incompetence, and outsider-isolation. To do otherwise risks revealing that they lack this shared cultural understanding, further alienating the person (Armstrong and Wildman 2012, 240).

In what follows, we deploy Manne's analysis of misogyny to aid in characterizing other forms of systemic inequality as having similar enforcement, policing, and litigious expectations, all compliance measures that illuminate the complicated intersectional series of entitlements and obligations simultaneously produced within departments. Thinking alongside Manne, we argue that the different expectations held for differently positioned faculty members (and, in some cases, the imposition of identical expectations upon differently positioned faculty members) is an ontological matter that reveals both the unequal status afforded to instructors who identify as members of historically marginalized groups and the disproportionate labor demands that such unequal status imposes upon those instructors.

#### **4. Being Obligated to Give**

As we begin our discussion of what members of marginalized groups are perceived as being obligated to give, it is crucial to recognize that not all labor associated with marginalized identities is alienating or unfulfilling. Often, staff and faculty identified as "diverse" serve in a variety of capacities that deploy knowledge and skills deeply informed by their identity; in particular, many faculty find work that enhances the success of similarly positioned students to be meaningful and full of value. Yet despite their own valuing of such labor, institutional recognition is often difficult to come by. When such faculty seek to have that value affirmed in their formal evaluation, they discover that there is little space to tally this work, except within the underwhelming category of "service to the institution" that researchers have noted tends to pale in comparison to, say, scholarly publications (Matthew 2016). Although faculty may receive praise and gratitude from individual students whom they have assisted, such individual recognition cannot replace institutional appreciation. In the absence of such appreciation, work that is valued by the faculty member can, especially in untenable quantities, become tainted by a sense of institutional entitlement. Expectations that minority faculty will give in a nearly limitless fashion to students (in the form of careful, caring attention, particularly to students with similar social markers) as compared to their majority colleagues are examples of the disciplinary forces that impose disproportionate kinds and amounts of labor on minority faculty. These assumptions can drive minority faculty to enact these social norms, punish them for their failure to adhere to these expectations, and exact an enormous toll of time and psychic energy.

While these workers may feel depleted, colleagues enlist them with stunning urgency to serve on hiring committees, speak to this tweet, or publish a response in

order to ensure equitable representation.<sup>7</sup> Too often, faculty from historically marginalized groups, rather than serving as, say, consultants to initiatives undertaken by a broad set of constituents across the university, are positioned as having primary responsibility for diversifying the institution, program, and/or discipline. Regardless of the degree to which minority faculty take up this work, they are uniquely positioned to be aware of the daily realities of working at that institution, knowledge that, in the context of a hostile environment, may cause them to advise other potential instructors to refrain from applying for or accepting job opportunities at the university. Yet, even acting as noncompliant workers, they become important gatekeepers as gate informers, saddled with the responsibility of warning others of the institution, while trapped within it. A hostile environment, then, increases the labor expected of the minority faculty in multiple ways: it establishes the urgency of the work needing to be done; constructs the minority faculty as particularly (and naturally) responsible for initiating and implementing the work; and decreases the possibility that they will be able to share the load of the work in the near future.

Underlying the committee work and initiatives that all instructors are expected to join is the distinctly ontological work of culturally educating majority groups to respect the labor of minority faculty overall (that is, across the areas of teaching, service, and scholarship), and finding ways (both explicit and implicit) to unsettle the assumption that their inclusion signals a politically correct hire, and that therefore the social category they represent has more value than their actual labor. The fear of being an entitled token will incentivize many to diminish (as much as possible) the perceived differences that render them conspicuous, easing for dominant groups the social discomfort of their difference.

Yet such attempts at diminishing difference are, at best, fraught. As operationalized within the black/white binary, the hypervisibility of racialized markers results in systematic surveillance, as black bodies under white gazes (Yancy 2008). This vigilance to report activity that destabilizes present racial regimes curbs modes of speech, clothing, and any behavior that does not align with the present racial culture of the institution. At one author's institution, peers informed an advisor of color that her nails were "ghetto," indicating her personal grooming aligned with a nonprofessional aesthetic mode. Black feminists have long analyzed the hypervigilance against afros, box braids, weaves, and other aesthetic choices affiliated with certain racialized bodies (Jerkins 2018). Chemically treating hair, reshaping or coloring the body, and bearing the cost, discomfort, and amount of time these aesthetic choices involve remains a private responsibility. Calling into

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<sup>7</sup> See Talia Mae Bettcher's (2018) confession of dual exhaustion and duty to respond to Kathleen Stock's article.

question the professional legitimacy of certain bodies illustrates a tacit enforcement meant to impose a physical mirroring of a tacit institutional culture, a set of somatic norms created by historically dominant groups and institutions. In enforcing (again, often implicitly or informally) such somatic norms, individuals and institutions can claim that they do not discriminate based on skin pigment; they are merely ensuring compliance with institutional policy or culture. Yet such compliance relies on the noticeability of brown and black faculty, produced against and through the backdrop of their persistent and historical exclusion (with the exception of historically black colleges and universities), and can produce a profound experience of un-belonging for faculty of color, as if they are simply visiting and not part of academia.

Moreover, workers are generally expected to manage feelings of racial isolation, trauma, and intractable social and political change privately. Minority workers admit they avoid discussions of daily biases with white colleagues due to the deafening silence that often follows (Onwuachi-Willig 2012). Some institutions offer collegial peer support with other faculty of color, but most assume faculty can cope with support from personal intimates and paid therapists. Racial identity also complicates what faculty of color are obligated to give to their students. Minority collegiate instructors are often disproportionately expected to identify with students (increasing office-hour usage) who seek them as mentors, despite rarely having such mentoring themselves (Easton 2012; Bowen 2012). When students come to process their own experience of racial oppression with their instructors of color, they may assume the person will cheerily offer affective labor, while aptly managing their own triggered experiences. The support bolsters the functioning of the university itself without necessarily interrogating its practices and culture.

We offer the following racial anecdote as a thicker description of the emotional complexities and multiple stereotypes racialized people experience. This is a first-hand experience of one of the coauthors, included here with the permission of the person at the center of the narrative:

I had been supporting a contingent faculty member of color to secure a tenure-track position, and he had an upcoming Skype interview, a format that many candidates dread and which “outs” visible racial markers. I encouraged the faculty member to utilize the private conference spaces in our library complete with available laptops so he could avoid the questions that might arise if folks overheard him in our shared office suite. With a week’s advance warning, he asked if the laptop was compatible with the interview technology and received assurances it would all work. Thirty minutes prior to the interview, he realized the technology was not working and returned to the library technical desk to request support. Having been afforded the respect of a faculty member previously and dressed in a suit

and tie for his interview, he asked the library worker politely (also a person of color) to send for help. In the interim, another student perceiving the cliffhanger moment offered him his personal laptop in order to proceed with the interview, but the worker objected, citing policy restrictions. Now, flummoxed that a solution was at hand but being stymied by the unyielding worker, the faculty member asked—in a loud, clear, insistent, but not unprofessional manner—for an exception, given the time constraints and the prior assurances that all would work. Ceasing to give reasons for her stance, the worker then threatened to call campus safety. The faculty member grew increasingly anxious and frustrated as the interview time approached, and yet was also acutely aware, because of his racialized identity, of the mandate to manage his feelings of anger, shame, and resentment in a way that would be viewed as nonthreatening (although, as it turns out, there seemed to be no “safe” level of anger that he could express).

The obligation to manage his feelings, in the context of his justifiable suspicions that his affect was judged as threatening due to his race and gender profile, typifies the specific kind of ontological compliance that we are seeking to highlight in this discussion. Instructors from historically marginalized groups are inevitably confronted with oppressive assumptions, tangled cultural identities, and clashing feelings of insecurity; more to the point, their reactions to such confrontations are, they know all too well, judged on those very same oppressive assumptions. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, such instructors are overrepresented in the ranks of the contingent faculty and thus are often managing such perceptions from a place of increased professional precarity. Contingent faculty are frequently not only required to do more but subject to higher stakes than tenured faculty should they not meet (sometimes unspoken) expectations.

Minority academics may also be obligated to give with regard to their service to their discipline, particularly to areas of minority scholarship including indigenous, queer, critical race theory, and disability/crip course creation, research, and writing. For example, trans theorists, working in an emerging and young field of scholarship, represent a small pool of professionals called on to speak to the breadth of trans issues, theories, papers, and book reviews. However, the added ontological labor doesn't consist just of being one of a small number of theorists within a field but rather in the managing of the social and political obstacles their embodied identities encounter. While being in a small field or department certainly increases the workload of any faculty member within this group, the salient factor for trans theorists is the additional historical and social oppression that shrinks the pool of applicants qualified to share in the work and the sociopolitical work their disciplines are forced to confront. There are only a few folks who can speak to minority-issue



topics, and these folks are under additional social and political strain because others perceive an essence to their identities that carries moral obligation, answering for who they are and, perhaps, what they research. Indigenous scholars face different yet existentially similar threats regarding their community's historical right to live. However, much of this obligation, argues Sandy Grande (2015), is simply a commodification of their knowledge in order to sell what they know and uphold an institutional system that will continue to other, rather than liberate, their communities. We return to Grande's point in our conclusion.

Minority faculty must manage expectations, norms, and demands that are absent from the experiences of majority faculty. Moreover, regardless of whether such management takes the form of compliance or opposition, it constitutes ontological labor that is a form of giving, insofar as it provides for the dominant group either continuing education about systemic oppression (in the case of opposition) or the pleasing sense that inclusivity will be a shallow affair that does not require significant cultural transformation (in the case of compliance).

### **5. Managing the Entitlement to Take**

On the flipside, entitlements for racial majority faculty are also enforced. Entitled faculty enforce affective equanimity as they expect generous, cheerful work from their junior minority colleagues. Such entitlement may be on the faculty's own behalf, for example, assuming that a junior colleague will take up the entitled faculty member's idea for a program, initiative, paper, or grant application and do all the logistical legwork necessary to bring it to fruition. Often ignored is the fact that junior faculty, according to the data cited earlier, are the largest pool of racial minorities. Or, it may be on the behalf of others, assuring a student, for example, that "we" can get that article scanned for you, fit you into the conference, or mentor you, knowing that the task will simply be handed off to another.<sup>8</sup> Often this reproductive work is given to administrative support staff, graduate assistants, or untenured faculty, safeguarding time and energy for tenured faculty to complete productive labor.

Majority faculty are also entitled to choose diversity training as an option, and their freedom to not engage in this work is accepted on multiple campuses. Anti-racist training in pedagogy and method continues to be optional, and it largely falls on those already under the weight of racialized identities to ensure this work occurs. White fragility, an increasingly recognized phenomenon, protects and

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<sup>8</sup>Carla Fehr (2011, 145) offers a similar but more robust account of this phenomenon as a "diversity free rider," one who makes use of existing diversity without increasing the diversity of any formal community or the total representation of diverse voices.

insulates majority faculty from the stress and discomfort of assessing how their institutions, courses, and methods continue to center a majority white sociocultural norm (DiAngelo 2018).

While majority faculty frequently enjoy the permission to receive that accompanies their privileged status, nonmajority faculty often fear the punishment of the same group if they attempt to join their ranks. Thus, many instructors from historically marginalized groups persist in performing ontological labor privately and compliantly because they fear being seen as takers, a role that their social identity, frequently represented by their distance from the somatic ideal, would render problematic. Racialized or immigrant groups are often stereotyped as taking up positions of prestige due to affirmative action, receiving benefits without legal status, and thus taking funds away from deserving majority, tax paying citizens, and so forth.

Additionally, nonmajority faculty occupy an ambivalent status as both takers and givers, blurring the lines, as made clear by indigenous and (dis)abled faculty accounts of ontological labor required to exist in these in-between spaces. Indigenous faculty may experience a dangerous stereotype of “being takers” with slurs like “Indian giver” still attached to settler confusion about economic systems that rely on reciprocity rather than the social contract of private property.<sup>9</sup> As recipients of federally subsidized programs created in the wake of genocide, forced child removal and sterilization, and questionably enforced legal treaties that grant their nations sovereignty, indigenous faculty teach the academic analysis of this trauma while undergoing its ongoing effects within diverse and subsisting nations. Moosa-Mitha (2015) describes the double task of demonstrating output in a system where one must evidence early aptitude to publish atomistic research predicated principally on studying the world as an object of analysis, while simultaneously also answering an ethical call to one’s community, often collective and animistic in its outlook: “Our elder cleaning fish, our sister living on the edge in East Vancouver, our brother hunting elk for the feast, our little ones in foster care . . . ‘Are you helping us?’” (55). While many faculty have relationships with people who are undergoing personal stress and systemic oppression, indigenous faculty are unique in their small numbers (only 1 percent of faculty in Canada); and, like other marginalized groups, researchers identify indigenous faculty as crucial in securing indigenous students’ retention and completion of academic awards within institutions (Gallop and Bastien 2016).

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<sup>9</sup> Kimmerer (2013) outlines an alternative notion of reciprocity and a gift economy that stands in contrast to private property and market economies. She outlines an ethic beyond “take what you need,” and instead suggests, “take only that which is given” (184).

Disabled/crip scholars remain marginalized as recipients of accommodations, frequently facing entrenched suspicions about both their need for accommodations and the reasonableness of necessary accommodations. Eli Clare (2009, 125) explains the reality of perpetual childhood many disabled adults face—never or under employed, living with parents or caregivers, undertaking sheltered employment in workshops with repetitive work, and even experiencing forced sterilization. To have a job in the academy is such a milestone that the job itself may be considered as “generously” given, further fulfilling the stereotype that the scholar is a one-sided recipient of care.

To be a disabled scholar means one must give disclosure of a recognized disability in order to receive accommodation, but this exchange is itself precarious. Daily, a disabled person must decide what to call attention to and what to keep under wraps; this decision-making requires astute social and political skill. Much of the dilemma is that the disclosure, the providing of which requires high skills of lived experience, is met with low disability literacy, meaning few know what to do or how to engage the disclosures given (Kershbaum and Price 2014). Students and professionals report the ways disability interacts with race, gender, sexuality and contend the paramount need for specific disability literacy (Pryal 2014a). Linda Kornasky (2009) and Brian Clarke (2014) urge professors with disabilities to reveal their status so students can identify them as mentors and reduce a culture of ableism; the mandate is framed as a moral one. Ruth C. White (2011) reports that early in her career, she chose not to disclose her bipolar status because as an immigrant, queer, black scholar she was to be “strong,” while withstanding stereotypes of mental instability. As Katie Rose Guest Pryal (2014b) reflects on how Professor Lisa McElroy spent three days answering emails and phone calls from students and other people once she disclosed her anxiety disorder on *Slate*, she argues that this “bonus work” spans an ambivalent range of meaning, which administrators fail to structurally recognize. She laments, “We want to help, yet too often we end up paying the price” (2014b). To illustrate the point, we offer another thick description (again, experienced by a person known to one of the coauthors, and reproduced here with that person’s permission).

An assistant professor of philosophy battled a serial medical disability where a port had to be inserted into their body. The faculty member went to great lengths to hide the medical apparatus, nervous that it would affect the students’ perception of their fitness to be a scholar (a whole person without punctures or fluids). When the member took a medical leave of absence, they realized the only medical accommodation the university covered for tenured faculty was pregnancy. Upon returning, they had to make up quickly

for the time away and demonstrate research productivity as if they had no ongoing medical issues.

If workers choose to pursue accommodations, they are onerously won (Tremain 2013; Burke 2017) and peculiarly isolate the person(s) from the typical academic membership and cooperative functions. Needing an interpreter often assigns faculty to certain positions in the room; requiring notes that are shared in digital format results in a time lag of access for the visually impaired; distance between locations of meetings or classroom setups creates a time and energy tax for those with mobility impairments; appropriate time away from work to tend to mental health can create gaps in one's CV that can be taken as evidence of nonproductivity. Often securing accommodations only serves to marginalize those members and render their position in the academy ever more dubious and precarious, rather than being taken as evidence of heightened commitment and ability.

## **6. Strategies of Resistance and Refusal**

Thus far we have discussed ontological labor undertaken through managing obligations to give and the entitlements to take. It is also worth noting that ontological labor also takes place through instances of resistance. This is another form of the labor that must necessarily be done to interrupt the reproduction of a society that utilizes workers' private management and fails to acknowledge the status of nonbeing or spatial normalizing taken on by others. Important strategies to oppose worker compliance that perpetuates somatic dominance of one group over others include the sociopolitical acts of complaining and refusal.

Norlock (2018) draws attention to philosophical aspects that influence the prohibition to complain, noting Aristotle and Kant's portrayal of the act as "self-indulgent. . . . effeminate and weak" (117, 121), to contemporary portrayals of it as "pointless" and "infantile" (127).<sup>10</sup> The bias against complaint reinforces a somatic norm of male "hardness" and a problematic aversion to seek embodied comfort, especially if it appears complaining will not change one's circumstances. Such logic underscores an individualistic culture where we learn to manage our own

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<sup>10</sup> Although Kathryn Norlock (2018) focuses her analysis of complaint on precisely those examples that are not intended to result in positive social change, and thus does not overlap explicitly with our concerns, we suspect that the very gendering of mundane quotidian complaint that is, as Norlock details, part of the basis for the traditional philosophical rejection of it (complaining is feminine, and so should be avoided) helps to associate this institutional form of resistance with a wayward, annoying femininity that renders it more easily dismissed.

vulnerabilities in isolation; in contrast to such cultural assumptions, Norlock delineates the way complaint helps identify where a response may be needed, and social culture has little imagination as to what could change. Additionally, complaint helps distribute affective duties and reduce isolation for those suffering. She writes, “Most pressing for me are those occasions when one’s complaint is a plea for validation that one’s pains are not insignificant, and one’s complaint further seeks company to attenuate isolation in suffering, because denial of recognition frustrates basic goods of self-knowledge and autonomy” (129). Part of our argument in this paper is that marginalized people expend labor to be recognized *as* workers, and their exclusion reproduces a social hierarchy of ranked and associated activities that must be taken up (or denied) in order for them to be valued workers and/or to include marginal others into the fold. Complaint combats this erasure and generates further work for the complainant. To complain, writes Ahmed (2019), is to engage in extraordinary amount of institutional labor: “I can hear the strain, the physical effort, the wear and tear; I can hear how hard some are willing to push, because they are not willing to give up or to give in. . . . *You have to record what you do not want to reproduce.*” As SRT theorists observe, production is intricately connected, positively or not, to processes of reproduction, and the way we educate, socialize, and reproduce laborers is itself reproducible. The path of complaint means that the worker will become more, not less, involved in the policies and procedures of the institution, thus spending even more time and energy in its hallways and meeting spaces. While adding to their own individual labor, the worker does so with the aspiration of reducing systematically the ontological load of academics they are socially responsible for reproducing.

Yet it is crucial to note that the labor of complaint is not only not recognized as labor but is frequently constructed by institutional authorities and structures as inappropriate, problematic, insulting, and, crucially, untowardly demanding. That is, complaints about structural inequality, particularly those that emanate from nonnormatively embodied community members—precisely because of the norms surrounding the giving and taking of social goods that Manne (2018) articulates and we expanded on earlier in this paper—are most likely to appear not as labor that the complainer is performing on the part of the institution, for which they should be valued and compensated, but as an affront, an abrupt demand for the wrong kind of labor from the wrong kinds of bodies. And so, as Ahmed (2019) has so elegantly described, the complainer, rather than the injustice about which they are complaining, becomes the problem.

Another strategy, suggested by critical Indigenous studies scholar Grande (2015), is to refuse the language of inclusion used blithely by neoliberal academics who deploy “democratic education” to assimilate marginalized faculty, particularly indigenous people, into Eurocentric norms and ideals. Grande theorizes the

shortcomings of both a politics of reconciliation and recognition, focusing on refusal as framework to “help imagine alter-*Native* modes of participation” that reveal, reconstruct, and restructure colonial dominance (4, 6). She offers a necessary critique of social relations and modes of production that make knowledge itself a commodity without the indigenous context of respecting elders and those whose deep experiences and wise living earn them the status of speakers, as opposed to inexperienced listeners.

Complaint and refusal are, of course, only two strategies of resistance among many. Our larger point is that strategies of resistance that are so often mischaracterized as inchoate opposition, or disloyal criticism, or inappropriate demands for the wrong kinds of institutional labor, are themselves part of the labor that marginalized members of academic communities are required to undertake. Reframing such acts of resistance is a crucial step in the process of rendering higher education more just and equitable.

## **7. Conclusion**

In this paper, we have sought to deepen existing conversations regarding invisible labor in the academy, and how it intersects with various forms of structural inequality, by identifying, describing, and analyzing ontological labor as a distinct and undertheorized genre of such undervalued labor. Our discussion characterizes ontological labor as the mundane, daily, constant effort and expertise required to bodily inhabit institutions and spaces that are ineluctably shaped by structural inequality. For members of the academic community whose embodied identities are nonnormative in a variety of ways (along axes of gender, race, ability, and class, for example), this ontological labor includes managing others’ perceptions that one is obligated, by virtue of one’s nonnormative positionality, to give to normative others whose identity includes the entitlement to take. Such labor takes time and mental energy to navigate. It also demands that a person decide in what way they will engage the prevailing system; as we have noted, strategies like complaint and refusal require time, skill, and deliberative processes that are often beyond the scope of outlined duties. Additionally, all these choices have social and political implications for one’s overall fitness to remain a worker at the university. This work and these choices come to a person largely because of how others perceive the person’s inhabited being.

We have not undertaken the task of identifying specific ways in which ontological labor ought to be formally recognized and rewarded, opting to focus on the prior step of providing an analysis that will allow the labor to be perceivable by those members of the academy who, by virtue of their more privileged positions, lack the emotional topography and bodily capacities to hear and decipher what is often institutional background noise. Becoming better attuned to the quality,

intensity, and scope of ontological labor occurring in our departments and institutions is a crucial element of rendering those institutions more just and more inclusive.

More questions remain, of course. Although we have provided within this discussion examples of forms of ontological labor undertaken by underrepresented groups (female-identified persons, members of racially marginalized groups, trans scholars, disabled persons), we have not explored or identified how ontological labor may take radically different forms across those groups or at their intersections. Our goal has been to demonstrate that all members of academia whose embodied beings are somatically atypical are necessarily compelled to undertake a taxing form of labor that is spared those who embody more normative forms, but surely the differences among particular modalities of ontological labor are also important and require further study.

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