Academic Labor and the Global Pandemic: Revisiting Life-Work Balance under COVID-19

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In an essay that appeared in the Fall 2019 issue of the Butler Center's *Working Paper Series*, I'd suggested that conversations around "work-life balance" needed urgent reframing.² My central arguments were that any neat distinction between work and life did not do justice to the particularity of what academics do. Furthermore, I proposed that there was an ethical imperative upon university administrations and communities, in their conceptualization of the struggle for a healthy work-life balance, to consider the well-being of non-normative academics – single women and mothers, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and international scholars, queer and trans professors.

With the global pandemic, most of us have been compelled to recalibrate, or maybe even altogether lose grip over, our carefully culled life-work balance. Perhaps, more than ever before, at least in our lifetimes, the boundaries between life and work have become unremittingly blurred. To be sure, university faculty are all too familiar with what it means to take work home. And yet, the COVID-19 lockdown, and the sudden pivot to remote teaching-learning, has meant that all our work has relocated to the site of the 'domestic' (with all its expansive connotations). In the last few months, we have watched ourselves, and witnessed friends and colleagues frantically hustle kitchen tables, hallways, bedrooms, living room couches, and garages into itinerant work-zones.

Even more jarringly, our pleasure-inducing, routine-establishing life-chores have become tainted by a morbid, anxiety-inducing tonality: shopping for groceries has turned into a nerve-racking, fate-tempting expedition; the erstwhile end-of-day joy of spending time with one's child(ren) feels substantially less blissful now that the entire day is constituted by Olympiad-level acrobatics, as we manage their needs with our own professional commitments. All the components of our life that we'd outsourced to others – child-care workers, school teachers, domestic workers – have returned to us as work we weren't quite ready for. And, all the non-domestic pleasures of our lives – coffee shops work-sessions, drinks at a bar with friends, browsing in bookshops, movie theatre outings, gym workouts, impromptu chats with neighbors have, in one fell sweep, ceased to be on offer as rehabilitative rituals that punctuated our work-life. In fact, the pandemic has had a tragically individualizing effect on our lives; as our social

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² See https://www.purdue.edu/butler/working-paper-series/2019/fall.html.

circles have shrunk, our reliance on the insularity of normative family structures and/or primary romantic-marital partners has become, if it were possible, even more entrenched.

To be Productive or Not to be Productive

With the tizzy of adjusting to the new normal came, once again, a flurry of articles proposing life-hacks for "how to avoid a burnout in the middle of a pandemic" (Fairbank 2020). In keeping with a neoliberal ethic of individualizing self-care, such articles have always perpetuated the rhetoric and logic of resiliency, a logic grounded in the belief that each one of us is singularly responsible for our survival and success, never mind the truth of just how asymmetrical or inequitable these processes are. It's important to note that implicit in these resiliency recommendations, particularly in this moment, is an insidious normalization of relentless productivity, and a demand that no matter how exceptional our personal circumstances, or even global conditions may be, we must not allow a slip-up in our work rhythms. The memes reminding us of all that Shakespeare and Newton accomplished during pandemics, and social media posts championing experiments with new culinary or artistic skills seem intent on looking at the silver lining of the pandemic, celebrating it as an opportunity to recover the untapped parts of our lives.

The unspoken goal of these life-hacks, however, is to re-infuse tenacity into our destabilized work(er)-selves; the baking, yoga classes and poetry workshops are meant to distract and revive us to keep 'going' to work, albeit from home. Aisha Ahmad's important piece, suggesting that we ignore all "Coronavirus-inspired productivity pressure" draws attention to just how cruel, "profoundly daft" and "delusional" it is to insist on normal patterns of scholarly productivity at a time when the world as we know it has come to a grinding halt and is in the process of being irrecoverably altered (2020).

In many ways, the necessity of, and over-reliance on, the language of self-optimization, that alternately coaxes and berates us to "prove our metal" or "shine against all odds," is rooted in the innate precarity of life under neoliberalism. As Laurie Penny so astutely observes, the "doctrine of workism" or the "cult of productivity" are symptoms of fear and hypervigilance, produced by an economic system which blames individuals – their laziness, their incapacity to be industrious or entrepreneurial enough – for being out of jobs during global catastrophes (2020). We are encouraged to "internalize the collective failures of the ruling class as personal failings that could be fixed by working smarter, or harder, or both" (Penny 2020). A focus on the self, and its deficiencies, also has the assuaging effect of letting us imagine we have more agency than we actually do.

It's hard to come to terms with the fact that as academics, we too have been recruited to do the bidding of what Naomi Klein calls "disaster capitalism" (2007). It's unsettling to recognize the ways in which our overwhelming sense of dispensability, induced by an increasingly privatized university life and alienating academic labor market, have turned us into workers for whom the "treadmill feels normal" (Penny 2020). COVID-19 has really brought this reality home (quite literally) – all we want is to be able to secure our place back on the treadmill. And yet, the crisis of conscience and the interruptions in the materiality of our daily routines – of life and work – that have accompanied the pandemic make an 'innocent' return to the old work-life balance untenable. This is because the framing of the current crisis not only demands that we squeeze out

the last dregs of our most ingenious, entrepreneurial selves, but also that we do so even as our working conditions, and the terrain on which they operate, are dramatically reconfigured.

The Reconfiguration of Academic Labor

My goal here isn't to exceptionalize the COVID-19 related challenges that academics face, or to suggest that academic vulnerability/anxieties somehow supersede the enormous emotional-physical suffering, and material precarity that the pandemic has imposed upon millions of people (faculty included). In assessing the ways in which the work-lives of faculty have shifted under a virus-regulated dispensation, I do not wish to cast our experience as extraordinary; indeed, in many respects, university faculty share much in common with the challenges faced by countless others in different professions. In fact, the process of recovery from this economic and health crisis will require that we use our shared experiences, and the overlaps in our struggles, to collectively formulate a future in which everyone is more secure. However, such a path to recovery will also require that we stay alert to the particularity of the new pressures, or, in some cases, the new contours of old pressures that each profession confronts. This section is dedicated simply to honoring some specific ways in which academic work stands transformed; to exploring the (new) dilemmas that the present moment enacts upon our profession.

Crucially, the pandemic has heightened job insecurity, especially for non-tenured faculty. As Penny (2020) puts it: "If we've been furloughed or lost our jobs, we're scrambling to make up the shortfall. If we're still employed, we're worried about the long term, and if we're relatively secure, we're wrestling with survivor's guilt." Sadly, this sense of precarity is not new for university teachers. 4 For a while now, academics have operated under threats of budget-cuts and a shrinking job market. Most of us have intimate knowledge of how the university's austerity measures have refurbished the nature of academic labor. I discuss some of these in my previous essay on life-work balance (Anwer 2019). However, a sustained slow-moving process, a threedecade-long, systematic chipping-away at the sanctity of and security in the academic profession, has (potentially) been given a new, accelerated lease of life as a result of the pandemic. Many university professors worry that the involuntary and inescapable adoption of online teaching necessitated by the pandemic could well mark the end of our struggle against the expansion of online education as a substitute for in-person learning.⁵ In a moment where traditional face-toface teaching is hard to execute, it may seem difficult (not impossible, but difficult) to argue against the repurposing of public funds and university budgets towards online teaching. As Anna Kornbluh in "Academe's Coronavirus Shock Doctrine" argues, the pandemic will furnish the

³ As clarification: This is not to argue that the actual loss of employment compares to the anxiety of losing one's job, or the guilt at having retained it. I cite Penny as a way to elucidate the exacerbation of precarity that faculty face.

⁴ For more on the decline of job openings, particularly in the humanities, read Kevin Carey's piece "The Bleak Job Landscape of Adjunctopia for Ph.Ds.," which was published just before the nation-wide lockdown.

⁵ For a quick account on the research that has found online education inadequate in offering quality education, particularly to students from racially and economically disenfranchised backgrounds, read Paul Fain's "Takedown of Online Education." https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2019/01/16/online-learning-fails-deliver-finds-report-aimed-discouraging (2019). To be sure, there is significant research that also recommends ways to counteract their shortcomings in online teaching.

pretext to push through measures that universities have been looking to do for a while now (2020).

Remarkably, though, this ostensible opportunity to expand (exclusively) online education, has been accompanied by the unequivocal realization that virtual interactions cannot replace inperson learning. Many students and faculty, who had never contended with this choice, have had to investigate the preferentiality of one over the other, and resoundingly, both have come out on the side that favors in-person learning. Importantly, then, the very moment that marks the universalization of online-teaching also offers a resurgence of a discourse that recommits — ideologically and pragmatically — to an investment in the irreplaceability of campus-life and face-to-face classrooms interactions. Thus the pressure on faculty to incorporate at least some form of in-person engagement in our fall courses.

At the same time, the recognition that something unique transpires when we're all physically present together in a classroom has led to an added pressure on faculty. We're now expected to recreate the distinctiveness of the in-person experience in virtual pedagogical modules. The rush of articles offering valuable tools to make online teaching "first-rate" (Hersh 2020), to implement strategies that make it more personal, collaborative, dynamic – everything that the traditional classroom represents – attests to this pressure. However, the more we adapt our most cherished pedagogical rituals and tools to online formats (a format most of us did not choose in pursuing this profession), the more we contribute to the success of online teaching, the more we might be paving the way for a system that treats us as defunct. This explains, then, another trend in articles about higher-education that caution against over-investing in the transfer to virtual learning. They remind us why we should be doing a "bad job" (Barrett-Fox 2020) of transferring courses online, as a way to ensure that these emergency-contingent, "temporary exertions" don't become "permanent expectations" (Kornbluh 2020).

Either way, this is a terrible political-ethical-professional dilemma to find oneself in. On the one hand, all attempts at non-compliance or any failure (concerted or unwitting) to optimize our skills in the current moment can be used as grounds to "pull up" individuals or even entire departments. On the other hand, all sincerity exerted in excelling at this transition might mean there is no turning back the clock. But, the absurd-tragedy of this Sophie's choice rests in something even more basic: it lies in that university faculty actually want to teach, and teach well. Despite grueling course loads; the tedium of grading; the "publish or perish" imperative; the emotional-psychological toll that high-intensity engagement with students (inside and outside the classroom) takes on us; or the steady escalation in our administrative responsibilities, we continue to remain dedicated teachers. This is what explains why as a collective, notwithstanding our strong misgivings about a blanket transition to distance learning, we have spent the last four months attending countless webinars and online courses, reading many articles and books, on how to be better teachers during a global pandemic; on mastering new technologies; practicing our recorded voices to create online lectures; re-planning all our courses for virtual/hybrid delivery in the fall; joining new committees and attending interminable hours of meetings to deliberate on what will best serve our students. Significantly, all this during our unpaid summer

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⁶ Here, much gratitude is owed to centers of instructional excellence, scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) experts, and faculty with online-teaching experience, who have worked overtime to put together invaluable resources to share with others.

months, which we usually use to move forward on our research projects (without which there is no hope for regularization or promotions).⁷

Even more, this, while grieving⁸ the loss of what we most love about teaching; what, today, we know to be integral to, and the irrefutable essence of a successful classroom; what Peter Boumgarden and Abram Van Engen in their beautifully elegiac piece "In Praise of Classrooms" call "the communal aspect of attentiveness crafted by coming together in a shared space" (2020). It is perhaps only now, as we confront the loss of an ideal that we chased each time we entered our classrooms, that we are able to articulate so vividly what we have always felt in our bones: that.

When we teach, we thrive on response—nodding heads, raised hands, levity and laughter (even the polite sort of chuckle offered for our poorest jokes). We could not have taught what we taught in the way we did without a basic sense of trust. The space made possible the bonds of learning that support and extend beyond the content of any course.

This is just one of hundred other challenges/conundrums that faculty currently face. The present juncture, demands that we undertake a massive overhaul of what we do, of what we know to do, and what we love doing. The uncertainties of a post-pandemic university-system weigh heavy on our hopes of a return to normalcy.¹⁰ What remains to be seen is how faculty across the country come together to imagine, demand, and actualize the future of their work.

The Differentiated Labors of Minoritized Academics or How Life-Work Balance is Always-Already Skewed for Some

In my previous essay on the issue of faculty life-work balance, I had argued that we must protect our notion of "life" from being hijacked by a "normative understanding of how non-work hours are spent or ought to be spent." I asked that academic communities and administrations center the experiences of non-normative academics, that we develop an "intersectional conceptualization of the lives that faculty lead," and begin to pay attention to the inconsistencies in the "structures of care" afforded to people, because some of us struggle much harder to "find community and a sense of belonging" (Anwer 2019:54).

COVID-19, and the spate of socio-political developments that have accompanied it – especially the public lynching of George Floyd (among the countless other cases of anti-black police

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⁷ Within days of the nation-wide pivot to online teaching, a support group for university teachers called "Pandemic Pedagogy" emerged on Facebook. Today, it has over 30,000 members. The frequency of posts and comments exchanged, the resiliency of the advice offered and solace extended on this group are a testament to the generosity with which university teachers are approaching this moment.

⁸ For the idea of "grief" as a response to COVID-19, read an interview (2020) with David Kessler, the renowned co-author (along with Elisabeth Kubler-Ross) of *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss* (2005). https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-isgrief.

⁹ I am grateful to Kristina Bross for drawing my attention to this article.

¹⁰ For more on the innumerable possibilities that await us, read "How will the Pandemic Change Higher Education" (2020) in which faculty and administrators offer vastly variegated visions of what the future of the university might look like.

brutality and vigilante violence) – have painfully aggravated the disparity between who gets and who doesn't get to feel secure about making it to the other side of the pandemic. In a terribly tenuous world, even the slightest shifts in our already fragile ecosystems make all the difference. Needless to say, having to negotiate a racist medical infrastructure during a pandemic that disproportionately affects and kills blacks (because of the long history of health and environmental inequities they've suffered); witnessing a police personnel fatally suffocate a human being, no less during a global health-crisis that ironically effects our respiratory system; being tear-gassed and tasered at peaceful protests by combat-ready, hyper-militarized police forces – these would be enough to dismantle just about anyone's sense of security. It is hard to fathom the enormity of the trauma that the black community, and our black colleagues, have endured in these past few months. And yet, fathom we must, because without a conscious and conscientious grappling with their trauma, with its long legacy and this legacy's manifestations within the academy, we cannot engage in a meaningful conversation about anything, really, let alone an ethical or sincere discussion about faculty work-life balance.

In 2016, Patricia Matthew wrote a piece about the "invisible labor" done by professors of color; labor that is all too often bypassed by institutions in their evaluation of "faculty work." Matthew gives a detailed account of the "extra burden on minority faculty," particularly women of color, who undertake service engagements in far greater proportion to similar work done by their white male counterparts. When it comes to doing the work of building diverse and inclusive university communities, the responsibility falls heavily on the shoulders of faculty of color. We can be sure that black faculty, and faculty of color more generally, will face (and are already facing) an intensification of the demands on their time, their intellectual-emotional resources. They will find themselves in a bind – to add to their already mammoth workloads or forgo serving on committees, letting them be steered by predominantly white faculty and administrators, as they try to 'fix' the problem of racist campuses. This quandary – to participate in the toxicity of being tokenized or risk being left out altogether – predates COVID-19, of course. Either scenario only adds to the challenges of finding a work-life equilibrium for BIPOC faculty.

Come fall, universities must prepare to support their black faculty who will have to incur, even more than usual, the ethical burden of supporting students of color; these students will, no doubt, arrive onto our campuses and into virtual classrooms with new anxieties produced by the pandemic and their encounters with racist state apparatuses. Furthermore, our academic institutions must be ready to protect their black and brown faculty against a 'whitelash' (white backlash) that will be directed against them in retaliation against the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. We know that historically, all assertions of black dignity and black rights have been met by bullying, intimidation and threats of violence (if not actual violence); universities have no excuse to be ill-equipped to combat incidents of hate-speech and hate-crime against their faculty of color. Equally, universities must undertake real, non-tokenistic and broadspectrum measures to ensure institutional action around issues of inclusion. It is not enough to simply hire faculty of color in response to the demand for institutional racial equity. University leaderships must enact concrete plans to not just diversify the academy but also build them as spaces where anti-racist and decolonial work can thrive, and faculty of color feel secure and sure of their success. Among these measures must include a massive re-assessment of the efficacy and ethicality of using teaching evaluations to assess faculty performance. We know that these

months of political-social crisis will exacerbate the experiential inequities that faculty of color, especially women, already face within academia.

As a foreign-born faculty member, I have to confess that achieving even a modicum of a worklife balance has been cruelly impossible for me, and no doubt, others like me who have been unable to travel because of the pandemic. It's hard to explain what time at 'home,' in one's country of origin, means for one's psychological and physical wellbeing. It's what re-orients and grounds us; reminds us to not succumb to the myopia, the insularity of our work, but to connect it to the global, transnational networks to which we invariably belong. It is difficult to capture the profoundly therapeutic power of savoring the foods we grew up eating; to picnic with one's girlfriends in the shade of 600-year old monuments, under a scorching 100-degree sun; to catchup on all the latest films my best friend and I carefully catalogue during our months apart, for us to watch when we are finally together. Each time I embrace my parents, my partner, my best friend, I am not only trying to make up for the months of missing their corporeal presence, I'm also asking for their forgiveness for having left, for having risked the improvisation of a worklife balance that takes shape thousands of miles away from them (they would, of course, never concede that this is something that needed forgiveness). COVID-19 has brutally disrupted the rituals that allow international faculty to sustain their life-bonds – the very things that make us the best version of our academic selves. I have had to forge new and exhausting ways to compensate for not being able to see my loved ones in India this summer: my screen-time includes not just the 8-10 hours/day I spend doing work on my laptop but also the hours of video-chatting I've had to instate into my daily schedule. I wouldn't have it any other way, no matter the effect this has on my eyes, or my sleep pattern. For over a month, I've worried about my mother who did contract COVID-19 and, as I write this, is on her 35th day of fever. I worry endlessly for my 65-year old father who risks his life each time he has to walk our little dog, Chinchin (who, I ungrudgingly suspect, he loves almost as much as me).

What has compounded these personal challenges are the government's attacks on our work-futures. Once again, we are not new to the political scapegoating of immigrants in times of economic crisis. The stoppage of new work, immigrant, and dependent visas, the embargo on international students to continue their remote learning while residing in the country, continue to instill in us a sense of our dispensability; after all, many of us began our journeys in the US as international students. The state's expression of indifference towards their wellbeing, then, feels like an attack on our own past and future in this country. Those of us who are here already may be safe, for now. But, it's hard not to panic in anticipation of a time when this too might change, as it already is for many scholars impacted by work-visa-bans and the impossibility of securing consulate appointments because of the pandemic.

An important and final note on the gendered dimension of our differentially distributed capacities/opportunities to develop a life-work balance. In late April, a research conducted on academic journal submission data suggested that women's research productivity had declined under COVID-19; editors reported never having seen such a skewed distribution in the gender-ratios of the authors who were submitting papers. It is not as though men are not overwhelmed by COVID-19; but "women already juggle more domestic and affective, or emotional, labor with their actual work prior to the pandemic", writes Colleen Flaherty (2020). "The coronavirus has simply exacerbated these inequities by stripping away what supports women had in place to walk

this tightrope." Already, we live in a society that doesn't value women's labor as "work." Quite expectedly, people's care needs have escalated during the pandemic; we know that it is women's social reproductive labor that is going to fulfill this increase in demand for care-giving. Even as we fight the long-term battle for a more gender-equitable distribution of life-responsibilities, it is up to us to demand that universities do not punish women, by impeding their career advancement, for the added work on their plates.

A higher-education system, which is truly invested in helping its faculty achieve a healthy work-life balance, must not treat these, and other, differently marginalized faculty groups as being in competition with one another for the university's financial, legal, mentoring resources. Instead, it must seek to put in place an institutional structure that empowers and secures its faculty both individually, and collectively.

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