

# Precarity is a Feminist Issue: Gender and Contingent Labor in the Academy

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*Feminist philosophers have challenged a wide range of gender injustices in professional philosophy. However, the problem of precarity, that is, the increasing numbers of contingent faculty who cannot find permanent employment, has received scarcely any attention. What explains this oversight? In this article, I argue, first, that academics are held in the grips of an ideology that diverts attention away from the structural conditions of precarity, and second, that the gendered dimensions of such an ideology have been overlooked. To do so, I identify two myths: the myth of meritocracy and the myth of work as its own reward. I demonstrate that these myths—and the two-tier system itself—manifest an unmistakably gendered logic, such that gender and precarity are mutually reinforcing and co-constitutive. I conclude that feminist philosophers have particular reason to organize against the casualization of academic work.*

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Feminist philosophers have contributed enormously to improving the practices of professional philosophy. Over decades, they have raised awareness of many gender injustices: hostile climate and sexual harassment; stereotyping, bias, and underrepresentation; male-dominated conferences; the androcentric canon, and so on. Yet one glaring injustice that has scarcely been mentioned in the annals of academic philosophy<sup>1</sup> is the problem of contingent faculty who cannot find permanent employment. Increasing numbers of philosophy PhDs, unable to secure permanent jobs, confront the prospects of either leaving the discipline or struggling to cobble together a career out of temporary or part-time positions. Arguably, the precarity of academic employment is the most pervasive and urgent problem confronting the discipline<sup>2</sup>—and the rest of the academy—today. Why, then, has it received so little attention?

In answer, I argue, first, that philosophers (and other scholars) are held in the grips of an academic ethos that obscures the *structural* conditions of precarity, and second, that the *gendered* dimensions of such an ideology have been overlooked. I begin in section I by motivating the need for a feminist ideological analysis of

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contingent academic labor. In section II, I identify two myths, commonly if not consciously held among academics, that I call the “myth of meritocracy” and the “myth of work as its own reward.” I argue that they distract us with individual-level strategies away from collective resistance, making us complicit in the problem of precarity. In sections III and IV, I demonstrate that these myths, and the two-tier system itself, manifest a highly gendered logic, such that gender and precarity are mutually reinforcing and co-constitutive. I conclude that feminist philosophers have particular reason to organize against the casualization of academic work. In other words, fighting academic precarity is a feminist issue.

### I. PRECARIETY AND CASUALIZATION: A STRUCTURAL PROBLEM

I begin with some terminology and assumptions. For simplicity’s sake, I focus on the US model as the starkest case,<sup>3</sup> designating as “tenure-track” (TT) all faculty who are (or expect to be) employed on a permanent basis to perform research, teaching, and service. However, non-TT (NTT) faculty form a highly heterogeneous group.<sup>4</sup> In this article, I am concerned with NTT faculty who aspire to but are unable to find TT or otherwise more secure employment, whom I refer to as “contingent.”<sup>5</sup> Contingent faculty are often *precarious* in multiple senses. First, their employment depends on factors outside their control and is subject to frequent and unpredictable changes, of which they are sometimes notified only days in advance (Baldwin and Chronister 2001; Hart 2011; Waltman et al. 2012). Second, they are vulnerable in the workplace because they can be dismissed—or their contracts simply not renewed—for any reason, without recourse to an appeals process (Harper et al. 2001; Paul 2004; Hart 2011). Third, the low pay and lack of benefits characteristic of many non-TT positions can subject them to the threat of poverty, homelessness, and illness (Brown, Goodman, and Yasukawa 2010; House Committee 2014). Finally, contingent faculty often hover on the brink of leaving the profession altogether (Gill 2014; Barcan 2017). Meanwhile, their TT colleagues typically enjoy (or can expect to enjoy) unparalleled job security in the form of tenure, considerably higher salaries, and a full package of healthcare and retirement benefits. The major substantive assumption I take for granted is that this state of affairs is morally unacceptable, and that improving the working conditions of contingent faculty is of urgent moral concern;<sup>6</sup> I thus refer to it as “the problem of precarity” (or “precarity”).

There have always been individuals vulnerable to precarious employment, but the problem of precarity has reached epic proportions only in recent decades. I use “academic casualization” (or simply “casualization”) to refer to the systemic transformation of TT to NTT lines over the past half-century. Many are now familiar with the striking statistic that the TT-NTT ratio in the US has been almost completely inverted: from 78%-22% in 1969 to 30%-70% in 2011 (Kezar and Maxey 2013). However, these trends are widespread across Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Europe (Robinson 2006). For these reasons, precarity is best understood as a *structural* problem.

Traditional wisdom holds that casualization is caused by the ascendance of global neoliberalism and the subsequent corporatization of the university. I understand “neoliberalism” to be, on the one hand, a set of economic policies (for example, the privatization of public services, deregulation of markets and labor, austerity measures) reviving certain tenets of classical laissez-faire liberalism, and on the other, a cultural and moral ethos of so-called “personal responsibility” in which society is conceptualized as an assortment of individuals who (ought to) gain the rewards and bear the costs of only their own and not others’ actions. This erosion of a notion of the public good, which higher education once served as mainstay and centerpiece, is responsible for numerous trends gathered under the umbrella of the “corporatization” of the university, including but not limited to the casualization of work. Other changes include the overgrowth of assessments and ranking exercises, ballooning salaries for high-level administrators recruited from the corporate world, and increasing reliance on private donations in the absence of public funding. Much research on academic casualization thus draws explicit connections to wider neoliberal trends in corporations, bureaucracies, healthcare, arts and media, and especially low-wage menial and service work (Parker and Jary 1995; Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Bousquet 2008; Tuchman 2009; Gill 2014; Cardozo 2017). Indeed, tenure itself—once understood as necessary for protecting the integrity of academic research conceived of as a public good—has been largely rebranded as a private benefit awarded to meritorious individuals (Robinson 2010, 537).

Against this background, it is clear that the attraction of contingent faculty lies in the fact that they are—as they have long felt and perceived—*cheap*, *flexible*, and *disposable* (Bousquet 2008; Brown, Goodman, and Yasukawa 2010). Although tenured faculty are needed to bolster the institution’s prestige and hence competitiveness, they are by contrast *expensive* and *obstructionist*. They cannot easily be dismissed,<sup>7</sup> and they may resist corporatization (Bousquet 2008, 74–75). To be sure, academic employers may not be consciously<sup>8</sup> thinking in these terms. But there is a *functional* difference between TT and NTT faculty that explains why contingent labor is so appealing in a neoliberal climate. To achieve their aims (especially against recalcitrant faculty), higher-level administration needs only bide its time, gradually replacing TT with more vulnerable NTT faculty.

This means that casualization is not only a problem for the precarious individuals themselves, but for all of us. Indeed, the most pressing issues facing tenured faculty—funding cuts, departmental closures, the undermining of faculty governance, and threats to academic freedom—are all enabled by the growing use of contingent faculty. At the same time, growing pressures faced by tenured faculty, for example, to secure competitive research grants and to perform well in ranking exercises,<sup>9</sup> absorb time and energy that could be spent addressing these issues. To be sure, resisting neoliberal logics is a challenge that goes far beyond academia. However, I propose a feminist ideological analysis of precarity in the academy for the following reasons. First, I want to highlight contributory factors *internal* to our own disciplinary ethos, practice, and discourse, lest we succumb to fatalism and what Iris Marion Young calls “reification,” the belief that global neoliberalism or market trends are natural forces

that cannot be controlled, and against which nothing can be done (compare Young 2011, 154; Bérubé and Ruth 2015, 58). Second, I want to consider the *ideological* aspects of precarity: why has precarity been neglected by many who are otherwise highly attuned to injustice? Why is it so difficult to organize concerted action against casualization? Third, I want to expose the *gendered* dimensions of precarity, which become apparent once we explore these questions.

## II. IDEOLOGY AND COMPLICITY: TWO MYTHS

My strategy is to identify and analyze two myths that permeate academic lifeworlds, through a quasi-phenomenological argument that exposes ideology by critically describing institutional and individual practices, discourses, and ways of being. I use *ideology* to refer to suites of cognitive, affective, and behavioral tendencies enacted by individuals that both derive from and *function to preserve* prevailing social structures (compare Haslanger 2007). These attitudes need not be explicitly held, nor held by all individuals, but they are recognizable in the way they organize individual and collective action—or lack thereof. My claim, then, is that the ideological function of these myths is to prevent scrutiny into the problem of precarity, whose injustice we would otherwise expect to incite action of the sort that has formed around other feminist issues. By obscuring the need for structural reform in holding up individual-level concerns and strategies, they render us complicit in maintaining academic casualization.

### THE MYTH OF MERITOCRACY

The “myth of meritocracy” is the idea that outcomes on the academic job market are determined solely or primarily due to individuals’ varying levels of innate scholarly ability. Many challenges to it have already been raised.<sup>10</sup> My aim here, however, is not to assess the truth or falsity of the myth. It is instead to explicate how the myth of meritocracy operates at the level of ideology to distract from and enable academic casualization.

If pressed explicitly, most people probably would not endorse the myth of meritocracy as true,<sup>11</sup> or at least not without some unease. The job market is widely acknowledged to be a “crapshoot,” and candidates are exhorted against taking rejections personally. Yet even when we explicitly recognize that there are far more candidates worthy of TT jobs than there are jobs—a problem calling for structural reform—the majority of the profession does not *act* on this recognition. Instead, we act *as if the myth were true*. Search committees spend hours sifting through applications, debating the fine points of a candidate’s interviews, personality, and history, in an effort to “look behind” appearances for an “accurate” assessment of a candidate’s “real” merit;<sup>12</sup> the more socially conscious committees adopt bias-blocking mechanisms that might obstruct such access. Candidates, likewise, expend tremendous effort

attempting to demonstrate their merit, from securing letter-writers who will vouch for it to crafting the perfect cover letter to showcase it. Moreover, we also *feel* as if the myth were true. Job-market outcomes are viscerally experienced by winners as proof of their merit, by losers as a signal either that they don't "have what it takes" or that their merit has gone unrecognized. And search committees, after all their time, effort, and investment, can hardly afford to feel they have not successfully discerned the most meritorious.

More generally, merit-based bonuses and benefits commonly granted to TT faculty also cultivate the implicit notion that better working conditions are to be gained through individual talent and effort—rather than, say, collective bargaining (Aronowitz 1997, 205; Heijstra, Steinhorsdóttir, and Einarsdóttir 2017, 771). As TT lines grow scarcer, sustaining the myth of meritocracy requires that standards for hiring and tenuring are ratcheted continually upward, such that fewer and fewer people really *do* seem capable of achieving what is now expected from junior faculty (Schell 1998, xii). In short, academics' profound preoccupation with merit—who has it, how to evaluate it, what constitutes genuine merit—diverts the community's energy away from the *structural* lack of jobs toward what is deemed lacking in *individuals*. The former calls for organized resistance, especially by those in stable and powerful positions: faculty unionization, strikes, open letters, no-confidence votes. But what we see far more often is professionalization workshops and mock interviews aimed at candidates.

My point is not that we shouldn't try to prepare candidates for the market. We must; "meritocracy" is an inexorable reality, for all of us. But it is only a *partial* view of reality (compare Haslanger 2007), and that is the point: meritocratic discourse prevents us from seeing the whole. It disguises the fact that disciplinary assessments of merit—which *we* ourselves produce—play a direct role in academic casualization. Such assessments are ubiquitous in seminar rooms, after talks, at conferences, and around the water cooler (compare Jennifer Saul's discussion of "reputation-building" [Saul 2012])—particularly so in philosophy, which scores higher than most disciplines in how strongly its members believe that native talent is necessary for success (Leslie et al. 2015). These assessments of merit are codified into institutional rankings. Institutional rank, for academics, is as consequential as gender or race:<sup>13</sup> it is impossible not to be aware of others' affiliations (exchanged in the same breath as names), not to know at least roughly where one's own institution ranks, and not to have interactions whose terms are dictated by the gap or parity between one's own institutional rank and the other's. Yet institutional rankings—which rely heavily on peer evaluation or reputation surveys by academics themselves (in fact, the U.S. News and World Report's social-science and humanities rankings are conducted entirely through such surveys)—betray our own buy-in into the myth of meritocracy. In fact, methodology of the Philosophical Gourmet Report, the most widely used departmental rankings in philosophy, invites evaluators to openly assess lists of *individual* faculty: an exercise intelligible only through accepting the myth of meritocracy (and ignoring the differential impact of institutional resources, disciplinary fads, and various forms of social capital).

Although such rankings have been rightly criticized for the way they encode bias (Saul 2012), what is missed is the way that rankings, *no matter how accurate or unbiased*, contribute to casualization. Research suggests that a major factor in casualization is market-fueled competition for higher rankings (Cross and Goldenberg 2011). One conspicuous example is New York University, which relegated 70% of its undergraduate teaching to adjuncts in order to buy its star faculty (Kirp 2003). In the UK, the use of contingent labor is actually highest at the more prestigious—and wealthiest—Russell Group universities (University and College Union 2016). Faculty often decry administrative undertakings aimed at improving rank, but their assessments of merit are what make institutional rankings possible in the first place.

#### THE MYTH OF WORK AS ITS OWN REWARD

The second ideology I want to examine, which I call the “myth of work as its own reward,” is the idea that academic work is inherently different from other kinds of paid labor because it is intrinsically gratifying. This idea is closely—but inversely—related to what Miya Tokumitsu has christened the “do what you love” (DWYL) mentality: the exhortation to turn an activity that one loves—baking, blogging, or Boethius—into a paid profession (Tokumitsu 2015). By defining work as something that ought to be pursued only if it simultaneously contributes to moral self-actualization, Tokumitsu argues, DWYL erases the vast majority of workers who have no choice but to perform tedious, unpleasant, unlovable work; it also encourages large numbers of hopefuls—artists, writers, designers, and of course academics—to work for little to no pay in pursuit of a dwindling number of secure jobs. The myth of work as its own reward, by contrast, is more likely to be held by those lucky enough to have secured stable employment. Rather than invisibilizing *unlovable* work, the myth takes unlovable work as the highly visible foil against which *lovable* work ceases more and more to be recognized as work. “I can’t believe I get paid to do this!” is its slogan, spoken from the safe perch of the ivory tower.

Like the myth of meritocracy, the myth of work as its own reward serves to deflect effort away from collective restructuring of the system. First, it promotes the idea that academic workers have *nothing to complain about*. Indeed, one of Tamar Heijstra and her colleagues’ interview participants insisted that “the intangible traits of the profession were so valuable to him that he felt he was actually being overpaid, despite his modest salary of €1700 a month” (Heijstra et al. 2017, 208).<sup>14</sup> In reality, academics—particularly women—experience considerable stress on the job, due to income insecurity as well as higher workloads imposed by neoliberal measures, such as increased class sizes, ranking exercises, and pressure to secure external funding (Robinson 2006). But the myth of work as its own reward transmutes structural issues of working conditions into matters of personal decision. Faculty overburdened with teaching and service, for instance, often move their research into their private time, leading them to “experience it as their own choice and in their own personal interest” rather than as a labor issue (Heijstra, Steinhorsdóttir, and Einarsdóttir 2017, 774). Some view

poorly rewarded service and teaching work positively, as valuable work experience (Heijstra et al. 2017, 210). This enables institutions to convene panels on “work–life balance” exhorting *individuals* to change their own practices, while leaving overarching systems of incentives, evaluations, and pressures in place—to hire a domestic worker, for instance, rather than unionizing to negotiate for smaller class sizes or free childcare.

Additionally, the myth encourages the idea that academics have *nothing in common* with other workers.<sup>15</sup> Here its effects are most obvious in juxtaposition against the academic labor movement, that is, graduate student and NTT faculty unions. In a revealing letter forwarded to the entire membership of the Modern Language Association, a titled Yale professor gave the following rationale against recognizing their graduate student union (GESO):

GESO has always been a wing of Locals 34 and 35 of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union, who draw their membership from the dining workers in the colleges and other support. Yale is not prepared to negotiate academic policy, such as the structure of the teaching program or class size, with the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union (quoted in Bérubé 1996, 79).

Such an argument not only dismisses the far more prominent bread-and-butter issues of salary and benefits, but does so by imagining academia as a rarefied realm of teachers and students incomprehensible to ordinary workers—a realm suffused, perhaps, with the love of learning rather than the need to make a living. But being able to work out of love, and viewing the demand for compensation as “bad taste”<sup>16</sup> or evidencing insufficient devotion to the craft—as is also common in the creative arts—is a luxury available to the leisure rather than the working class (Gill 2014). The myth of work as its own reward obfuscates the unpleasant fact that academic work, no matter how gratifying, is embedded within a larger economy. In other words: though research and teaching might be activities one would independently pursue outside the office or classroom, it makes an enormous difference to the meaning of such activity when it constitutes paid labor, not least because of its economic consequences for other academic and nonacademic workers. Academic work, no matter how lovable, is still work, and deserves to be treated as such.

Finally, the myth of work as its own reward exacerbates casualization by generating pressure to remain in academia. Because academic work (especially in philosophy) self-consciously aims at such ideals as truth, knowledge, and justice—a prime source of its intrinsic rewards—it is particularly easy for academics to self-identify intensely with their work. This makes it difficult to perceive leaving academia as anything other than failure (lack of ability to perform the loved work), or betrayal (lack of commitment to academic ideals). Thus the myth of work as its own reward contributes to contingent faculty staying in academia despite atrocious job prospects; emotional devotion to academic work prevents them from exiting the academic labor market in large enough numbers to drive up salaries (Cardozo 2017, 415–16). Such an observation must not amount to victim-blaming. In a recent study on contingent

writing-center faculty, Dawn Fels and her colleagues rightly resist the way in which “contingent faculty are often blamed for their own ‘willingness’ to take a low-paying job” (Fels et al. 2016, 14) while far greater structural factors are ignored, just as (to anticipate the next section) women’s overrepresentation in low-income caring professions is often explained in terms of the compensatory “psychic income” they are assumed to receive from the joy of helping others, rather than, say, gender discrimination (Folbre 1995). But Fels and her colleagues also call on contingent faculty to affirm their own worth, writing that “the fact that these participants are self-sacrificing [by overworking on behalf of their students] over their own needs as a professional—before their own self-interests—brings to light the degree to which we as professionals are complicit in our own exploitation” (Fels et al. 2016, 14; compare Gill 2014 on “self-exploitation”). Indeed, this is the lesson of both myths: by getting caught up in ideologies that focus on individual-level strategies at the expense of collective action, we ourselves are rendered complicit in the problem of precarity.

### III. PRECARIETY IS GENDERED: THE FEMINIZATION OF ACADEMIC LABOR

Thus far, I have argued that the myth of meritocracy and the myth of work as its own reward function ideologically to forestall collective efforts at transforming structural conditions. This, I suggest, is one reason for the neglect of precarity. Another is that feminist philosophers—who often serve as the discipline’s vanguard against injustice—have failed to recognize the gendered dimensions of precarity, which I explicate in this section.

The gendered dimensions of contingent labor can be understood under the rubric of the *feminization of labor*. The “feminization” of labor comprises at least two distinct senses: the first refers to increased numbers of women entering a workforce, and the second refers to a structural transformation whereby working conditions once specific to traditionally feminine work are generalized to all workers (Standing 1999; Cobble 2007). First, the demographics. Higher education remains predominantly male, but notwithstanding the overall numbers, women and faculty of color are overrepresented in NTT and underrepresented in TT positions. In the US, although there was a 64.6% increase in the total headcount of women and underrepresented minorities in faculty positions from 1993–2013, the increase was seven to ten times greater in NTT than in TT jobs (Finkelstein, Conley, and Schuster 2016). In the EU, women are 1.48 times more likely to hold precarious<sup>17</sup> contracts than men, though the gender gap varies significantly and is reversed in some countries (European Commission 2016, 105). In Australia, a majority (54–57%) of casual<sup>18</sup> academic staff are women; 47% of women (compared to 42% of men) hold fixed-term contracts (Strachan et al. 2016).

Second, with regard to working conditions: growing casualization means that increasing numbers of faculty, *both* male and female, are now subject to the precarious, low-prestige piece-work conditions long endured by women and workers of color (Standing 1999; Thornton 2013). Indeed, Karen Cardozo has argued that contingent



academic labor is best conceptualized as a form of “carework” (Cardozo 2017),<sup>19</sup> that is, work tending to the daily and generational reproduction of human beings. Because of its origins in the family sphere, carework is either wholly excluded from or devalued on the market; this is evident in the cooking, cleaning, and dependent care performed by domestic workers, as well as in professions such as nursing and education, all of which have long been relegated to women—especially poor women of color. Moreover, carework demands substantial emotional and motivational resources from the caregiver, including intrinsic concern for the well-being of the persons being cared for. This is all readily apparent in just the sort of service teaching that has been largely cleared off the tenure track. Cardozo writes:

[Academic casualization] reconstructs teaching as “poorly paid housework in the marketplace,” where some tend to the (college) kids and maintain the (departmental or campus) home, while others engage in more “productive” [research] work that circulates on the market. Viewing teaching and service as care work thus clarifies the invidious gendered and racialized logic by which the complex work of “professing” has been unbundled into a two-tiered system of academic labor that also devalues caring activities within the tenure system. (Cardozo 2017, 5)

Cardozo’s carework analysis, along with the concept of the feminization of labor, equips us to see the gendered dimensions of the myths I identified earlier.

I begin with the myth of work as its own reward. We can trace this to the gendered division between paid and unpaid labor that arose in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century US, alongside industrialization and what Barbara Welter calls the “cult of true womanhood” (Welter 1966), according to which women’s natural and proper place was in the domestic sphere. A “true woman” was distinguished by her strict moral virtues and selfless devotion to the bodily and spiritual health of her husband and children—that is, carework. As Welter puts it: “She was to work only for pure affection, without thought of money or ambition” (Welter 1966, 160). The cult of true womanhood played an important role in the feminization of primary education. Schools had been staffed by men since colonial times, but by the end of the nineteenth century, 80% of public schoolteachers were women (Preston 1993, 531). Education advocates such as Catherine Beecher and Horace Mann effected this demographic sea change by bending the cult of true womanhood to their own purposes: they argued that women were superior teachers due to their nurturing instincts and self-sacrificing, unambitious natures (535, 538). (Note, however, that this type of public-school teaching did not require that women be viewed as worthy as men *intellectually*, but only morally and characterologically. Scholarly teaching, performed in universities and aimed at developing future researchers, remained the province of men.) Importantly, there was an economic aspect in addition to the ideological: much of the opposition to expanding public schools was based on cost, which could be reduced by hiring women for much lower wages than what was given to their male counterparts (538). If women were drawn to teaching as their “natural vocation,” it followed that they didn’t need much pay.

Returning to the present era, the feminization of academic labor has meant that the myth of work as its own reward expanded what was traditionally conceived of as women's work. In a strange twist of circumstance, the idea that work should be performed out of love and not for pay has been appropriated by academics who—faced with the grimness of what “work” looks like under the regime of neoliberal capitalism—would rather retreat to an ivory tower, one which indeed bears some eerie resemblance to a domestic refuge shielded from the vagaries of the marketplace.<sup>20</sup> Here, as I argued previously, it serves to insulate from the hard truth that academia, too, is not immune from but deeply implicated in wider economic trends that threaten workers. And for the less fortunate toiling away in hopes of making it into the ivory tower, the myth of work as its own reward serves as both carrot (the dream of TT employment) and stick (the moralized failure of leaving academia), ensuring a steady supply of overworked and underpaid labor.

Similarly for the myth of meritocracy. Women—especially those further disadvantaged by race, class, disability, and so on—have long been assumed to lack the ability, talent, motivation, or commitment required to be scholars. As far back as Aristotle, women were deemed so lacking in intelligence as to be unfit for education, let alone research (though from Plato onwards it has also been argued otherwise). Renaissance Europe witnessed the genesis of a *querelle de femme* over the equality of the sexes in which treatises, some on the question of whether women should be allowed into universities, were proliferated by men and women on both sides. Contemporary work on implicit stereotypes about gender differences in intelligence, as well as the forthright expression of such stereotypes (of which some exceptionally notorious instances in recent memory involve a former president of Harvard University, a Polish European Parliamentarian, and a Google employee), demonstrate that the *querelle* remains alive and well, in and outside academia (Leslie et al. 2015; Bian, Leslie, and Cimpian 2017).

Along with being stereotyped as intellectually inferior, women are also stereotyped as lacking commitment to a scholarly career because of their role in childbearing. Indeed, contingent female faculty are often assumed not to desire full-time employment, despite evidence to the contrary<sup>21</sup> (Schell 1998; Harper et al. 2001). Again, the feminization of academic labor has enlarged the scope of such stereotypes to include *all* contingent faculty, who are now also victims of the myth of meritocracy. As many contingent faculty have testified, they are routinely and insultingly viewed as inferior (or not even) researchers, despite in many cases having gone through equally rigorous training at the same (often prestigious) PhD programs as their tenure-track peers, and receiving far less institutional support for research (Abel 1977; Waltman et al. 2012; Haviland, Alleman, and Cliburn 2017). They are also viewed as lacking institutional commitment, again despite the fact that this is often untrue or results largely from their institutions' not guaranteeing stable employment or decent working conditions (Abel 1977; Umbach 2007; Ott and Cisneros 2015).

## IV. A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF PRECARIETY

A feminist analysis, then, reveals a tight relationship between gender and precarity. The very logic of the two-tier system is borrowed from the nineteenth-century division between women's unpaid and unrecognized "reproductive" work and men's paid "productive work," itself built from dichotomies of private vs. public, household vs. marketplace, leisure vs. labor (Boydston 1990). Fitting together arguments from the previous sections, I show here that gendered myths about merit and work, on the one hand, and academic casualization, on the other, are mutually reinforcing.

As I argued earlier, the two-tier system goes unchallenged as far as it does largely because of the myth of meritocracy. If we imagined, for instance, that all academics were equal in scholarly ability, the system would be exposed as massively unfair. But even granting genuine differences in scholarly ability, it is utterly implausible that they are large enough to warrant the chasm of difference in job security (and other working conditions) between TT and NTT positions. If outcomes were purely meritocratic, studies have shown, PhDs from the top ten departments would have to be two to six times more productive in research than those from departments ranked from twentieth to thirtieth, and an hour of a TT faculty's teaching would have to be 40% more valuable than a NTT faculty's teaching (Robinson 2012; Clauset, Arbesman, and Larremore 2015). Yet the myth of meritocracy draws TT faculty's attention away from the morally reprehensible conditions to which their contingent colleagues are subject at extremely close range, and the ways in which their fates are ultimately intertwined in the neoliberal university. It can also encourage NTT faculty to stay in the game longer than they otherwise would, hoping against hope (while trying not to rock the boat) that they will succeed if they simply work hard enough (compare Berry 2005, 18); paradoxically, women and underrepresented minorities may be especially attached to meritocratic principles to motivate and validate themselves (Śliwa and Johansson 2014).

Conversely, it is in no small part due to the casualization of academic labor that (gendered, racialized, and so on) stereotypes about merit and ability are perpetuated. In this two-tier system, only a tiny handful can "win" what the vast majority must lose. Hence the most vulnerable, that is, those *already* subject to the material and psychic burdens of a sexist, racist, exploitative, homo-/transphobic, and ableist society, are naturally the first to get shunted off the tenure track. It is crucial to remember that women and faculty of color entered the academy just as the tide of casualization began (Finkelstein, Conley, and Schuster 2016). Under these conditions we need not even debate whether differential merit explains the underrepresentation of women, nonwhite, working-class, LGBT, and disabled academics in TT positions. The *structural* configuration of the two-tier system in conjunction with wider social inequalities (for example, that some bear unequal child-rearing responsibilities or need to take on second jobs), would be sufficient to undermine their chances of success (compare Haslanger 2015). But what this means is that real patterns in the world—the actual dearth of women, academics of color, and so on in TT positions—reinforce stereotypes about their purported lack of scholarly ability (compare

Haslanger 2007). In other words, the current system of contingent labor is by its very nature structured so as to sweep the already disadvantaged off the tenure track, all while the myth paints the appearance of picking out the deserving talented from the undeserving untalented.

Similarly, the myth of work as its own reward prevents academics from organizing around their working conditions in the way that other workers do, and it keeps contingent faculty willing to work despite their precarious situations, thereby enabling casualization. At the same time, it is the two-tier system itself—the shifting of service teaching onto the backs of NTT faculty—that makes it possible for TT faculty to carry their lighter teaching loads, take leaves, and avoid the more tedious aspects of their research in such a way that their work *can* be as intrinsically rewarding as it genuinely is (Bryson 1999; Reay 2004).

The two myths fit perfectly hand in hand.<sup>22</sup> On the one hand, TT faculty are made to feel that they especially deserve to be in lovable employment on account of their talent (whereas the untalented do not), and NTT faculty that they simply need to do more to deserve a TT position. On the other hand, just as women were thought to be naturally suited to carework because they lacked the capacity or desire to venture outside the domestic sphere, so too contingent faculty are thought to deserve their NTT positions because they lack scholarly ability or because they should be content to work out of love. Both myths work in tandem—alongside other neoliberal pressures<sup>23</sup>—to carry out their ideological function of maintaining the status quo, that is, casualization.

#### V. DEMYSTIFYING AND DISMANTLING: ORGANIZING FROM THE MARGINS

In this article I have argued that academics are complicit in the problem of precarity when we buy into gendered myths about ability, merit, and work that distract us with individual-level strategies away from collective resistance. I have argued, furthermore, that gender ideology and the casualization of labor are mutually reinforcing and co-constitutive. It follows that addressing one requires addressing the other.

To disrupt this cycle of myth and contingency, then, we can and should work to undermine bias, discrimination, and stereotypes about gender, race, disability, class, and so on, as has already been done by diverse constituencies throughout the discipline. At the same time, it is crucial that we also work to dismantle the *system* that continually recycles people through it in stereotype-sustaining ways. We should be wary of what Nancy Fraser calls “affirmative strategies” (Fraser 1997), which seek merely to elevate the position of underrecognized groups within existing hierarchical structures, in favor of “transformative strategies” that seek to radically transform those very structures themselves. In short, we need to pursue *structural* solutions.

Precisely what these structural solutions look like will vary widely according to local contexts, since the diversity of the educational landscape is unlikely to admit of any single all-purpose answer.<sup>24</sup> Fortunately, there already exists a range of different models for addressing precarity, tailored to options that might be available for various

institutions: tenured teaching positions, regularization (that is, conversion from NTT to TT) pathways for all faculty, a single salary scale across NTT and TT tracks, shared faculty across regionally clustered institutions, payment for work outside the classroom and for committee service, transparent and nonarbitrary workload allocation, and reprofessionalizing teaching positions by eliminating ad hoc hiring (Kezar 2012; Bérubé and Ruth 2015; Kezar and Maxey 2015). The Delphi Project hosts a wealth of ready-to-use resources,<sup>25</sup> including survey instruments, self-assessment tools, case studies, example practices, change maps detailing specific reforms, and discussion guides for initiating dialogues across various stakeholders. And of course, the most direct way of challenging neoliberalism remains the labor movement, which unites academic and nonacademic workers, including student workers,<sup>26</sup> in reviving demands for a public good (which, as mentioned in the introduction, the university has traditionally provided). The academic labor movement has been by far the most vocal critic of academic casualization thus far; along with organizations of contingent faculty such as the New Faculty Majority, it regularly launches campaigns, publishes reports and organizing guides, and promotes other forms of collective resistance (Berry 2005; Robinson 2006; Robinson 2012; University and College Union 2016).

In concluding, I would like to briefly suggest one feminist principle that we should look to as a guide for all such efforts: *organizing from the margins*, that is, prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable and multiply disadvantaged (compare hooks 1984). The arguments for doing so are both moral and pragmatic. In addition to the greater urgency of protecting the most vulnerable, failure to think intersectionally can re-trench other forms of oppression. To take a relevant example: a study of faculty unions in Canada found, surprisingly, that higher levels of unionization did *not* correlate with lower levels of NTT labor, because the relatively privileged TT faculty leading the unions bargained primarily to protect themselves from loss, rather than to promote the interests of their more vulnerable contingent colleagues. By maintaining the functional gap between TT and NTT faculty, they thus preserved the incentives for universities to increase NTT labor (Dobbie and Robinson 2008). More generally, the weakness of the contemporary labor movement has been attributed in part to its failure to take on issues affecting workers other than prototypical blue-collar white men, for example, issues of racialized police violence and mass incarceration, or of gender wage gaps and sexual harassment (Clawson 2003; Cobble 2007; Black Labor Collective 2015).

Precairety within the academy, then, must be resisted through collective solidarity *across* varying levels of privilege and vulnerability. Casualization is both a product of and the thing that makes the corporatization of the university possible; challenges facing TT and NTT faculty are two sides of the same neoliberal coin. Within institutions, then, TT faculty in stable positions of power must work to improve the conditions of their NTT colleagues. Those in more prestigious institutions should disengage from competitive hierarchies that enable the current global onslaught on higher education as a whole. Academics in general should treat increasing precarity as part of a common plight shared by other contingent workers under neoliberalism. Finally, among the contingent workforce, we should pay special attention to those

disadvantaged by gender, race, class, disability, sexuality, and so on. By keeping their interests front and center, and refusing solutions that fail to work for them, we undo the gendered (racialized, and so forth) logics at the heart of the system—in other words, we resist the devaluation of abilities and labor that makes it all possible. Only then can we truly solve the problem of precarity and refashion a more just academy.

## NOTES

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1. A notable exception is Nagel (2014), but the focus is on how casualization erodes the possibility of professional ethical responsibility. It is worth noting, however, that considerable scholarship exists in other disciplines, such as sociology, women's and gender studies, and English, rhetoric, and composition (one of the hardest-hit by casualization).

2. Carolyn Jennings and her colleagues found that fewer than half of philosophy PhDs find permanent employment, and about one-third are in temporary positions (Jennings et al. 2017).

3. However, I draw on evidence from a variety of contexts, focusing on the UK, Australia, and Europe. On the UK and Australian models, core academic staff are “permanent” or have “ongoing” contracts comprising research, teaching, and administration that are similar to TT positions but lack some of its insurance against dismissal, for example, for lack of productivity. Others, comparable to NTT faculty, are usually designated as “casual” or “atypical” staff on fixed-term contracts for shorter periods of time (a term, nine months, or several years) or hourly-paid contracts. The type and nature of appointments vary widely across Europe, but there are still relevantly comparable differences between permanent positions and part-time or temporary positions.

4. Most importantly, there are differences in the nature of their employment (full-time or part-time, renewable or nonrenewable, whether health insurance and benefits are provided) and in their motivations for undertaking non-TT work (for example, “moonlighters” receiving their primary income in other professional fields, or faculty who want to teach but not perform research/service).

5. The desire of NTT faculty for more secure working conditions is widespread and well-documented (Baldwin and Chronister 2001; Harper et al. 2001; Brown, Goodman, and Yasukawa 2010; Waltman et al. 2012), though research on their career aspirations is rarer. David Leslie and Judith Gappa report that 15–17% of part-time community college faculty in the US hold multiple college-level teaching jobs, but this does not account for other types of institutions with higher percentages of PhD-holding faculty (Leslie and Gappa 2002). Glenda Strachan and her colleagues found in a nationwide Australian study that 57.2% of

women and 48.4% of men in casual positions are “frustrated academics,” that is, those who desire a permanent position but do not expect to obtain one (Strachan et al. 2016).

6. I do not have the space to defend this assumption here, but my arguments are compatible with a variety of normative frameworks (for example, egalitarian, Rawlsian, Marxist, consequentialist, deontological), any one of which might be presupposed to explain the unjust nature of such working conditions.

7. This contrast is less pronounced in the cases of the UK and Australia, where permanent academics may be dismissed more easily than under the tenure system. However, contingent faculty remain appealing because they are willing to work for less money, as well as for shorter and more unpredictable periods of time, which facilitates corporatization, and they are easier to manage insofar as they are less likely to voice objections for fear of nonrenewal (Brown, Goodman, and Yasukawa 2010).

8. It is a vexed question whether and, if so, how consciously institutions are replacing TT with NTT faculty. Certainly, high-level university administrators, often brought in from the corporate world, are deliberately seeking to massively restructure universities (Bousquet 2008; Tuchman 2009). But other accounts explain casualization as the largely accidental cumulative effects of well-intentioned short-term solutions to miscalculated enrollment and funding cuts (Franklin, Laurence, and Denham 1988; Bérubé and Ruth 2015). Since ideology can permeate both conscious and nonconscious processes, both spurring and inhibiting action, it is likely to exert some influence in all these cases.

9. This is especially true in the UK and Australia, where the lack of tenure means that one’s failure to perform on these fronts runs the risk of dismissal, even at the highest ranks.

10. For example, it has been shown that nonmeritocratic gender, prestige, and other on) biases persist even after controlling for merit-based criteria (Clauset, Arbesman, and Larremore 2015), that academic success requires more (for example, self-promotion or social networks) than pure scholarly performance (Bagilhole and Goode 2001), and that the very notion of an objective, gender (racial, and so on)-neutral conception of merit is itself suspect (Acker, Wagner, and Mayuzumi 2008; Jenkins 2013). Others have challenged the idea that individual performance is determined by differences in fixed levels of native talent, rather than differences in environment and social expectations (Dweck 2006; Leslie et al. 2015).

11. Though perhaps many would. A revealing survey at the University of Michigan, for instance, found that 43% of TT faculty—whose personal success would be validated by the myth—believed that their substantially higher pay (up to twice as high) was justified, compared to 3% of NTT faculty. While 30% of TT faculty believed it was unfair, a full 64% of NTT faculty did (Robinson 2012, 7). These patterns are highly characteristic of other cognitive phenomena documented by social psychologists, such as the fundamental attribution error and just world hypothesis, that function to maintain social hierarchies.

12. Compare Margaret Thornton’s discussion of assessing candidates’ true “potential,” a feat of which some people are apparently much more capable than others (Thornton 2013, 129–30).

13. See Wendy Espeland and Michael Sauder’s work for an analysis of the ways in which consumer-oriented rankings *create* rather than merely report hierarchies, such that even those schools that deplore the unreliability and arbitrariness of rankings must



constantly operate in accordance with what will raise or lower their rank (Espeland and Sauder 2016).

14. Compare the discussion of “psychic income” on p. 8 at the end of section II.

15. This idea is also enshrined in a 1980 US Supreme Court ruling (*NLRB v. Yes-Hiva University* 1978) that full-time professors are “managerial employees” excluded from collective bargaining rights. Note that professors’ autonomy over their work, which was deemed characteristic of managerial status, is also one of the prime sources of academic work’s intrinsic rewards. In both cases it is taken to be a reason that a worker is in less need of protection or income.

16. Diane Reay, in her account of the tension between her working-class background versus academic habitus, recalls being chided for publishing *too many* papers on the grounds that it was “rather crude and vulgar” (Reay 2004, 35).

17. Faculty with no contracts, fixed-term contracts of one year or less, or contracts associated with student status were designated “precarious” (European Commission 2016, 103).

18. Academic staff designated as “casual,” addressed separately from those on permanent and fixed-term contracts, were those employed based on hours of work per week, typically semester by semester (Strachan et al. 2016, 10, 18).

19. Others have conceptualized it as “academic housework” (Reay 2004; Heijstra, Steinthorsdóttir, and Einarsdóttir 2017; Heijstra et al. 2017), which is similarly gendered.

20. Another faculty letter analyzed by Michael Bérubé concedes that unionization might be appropriate at less prestigious schools with higher teaching loads, but not at Yale. Bérubé reads this as a refusal to admit that Yale graduate teaching assistants “are not the blessed of the earth [as described by anti-unionists, despite the fact that they earned less than Yale’s own estimate of the New Haven cost of living], any more than are the graduate teaching assistants at the University of Kansas. And *that* means that Yale faculty are no longer so uniformly powerful as to grant their Ph.D. students exemption from the great depression in the academic job market” (Bérubé 1996, 86).

21. Family responsibilities are by no means the most common reason women hold NTT positions. Indeed, half of NTT women faculty have no dependents at all, and having dependents does not predict TT vs. NTT status, though it increases the likelihood of holding a TT position for *men* (Harper et al. 2001; Perna 2005). Women are also more likely than men to cite inability to find full-time academic employment as their reason for part-time work (Leslie and Gappa 2002).

22. Tamar Heijstra, Finnborg Steinthorsdóttir, and Thorgerdur Einarsdóttir quote a senior male professor who states: “You have to want it enough [a permanent position]” (Heijstra, Steinthorsdóttir, and Einarsdóttir 2017, 770). Heijstra and her colleagues report that some faculty fear that objecting to academic housework will be viewed as lacking devotion to the job (Heijstra et al. 2017). Another way to lack merit, then, is to possess insufficient love for academia.

23. See, for example, note 9.

24. Indeed, the institution of tenure itself has problems, and may ultimately need overhaul. But the core idea behind fighting casualization is that the job security and



benefits currently provided by tenure should be granted to *all* workers. I am grateful to Sally Haslanger for pushing me to clarify this point.

25. Available at: <http://www.thechangingfaculty.org/resources.html> and <http://www.thechangingfaculty.org/examplepractices.html>. See also the Vancouver Community College Faculty Association Program for Change, which outlines a twenty-year incremental action plan for overhauling the two-tier system: <http://vccca.ca/program-for-change/> (all accessed December 14, 2017).

26. Increasing numbers of students—through work-study programs, scholarships with strings attached, or out of economic need due to rising tuition—are becoming low-wage workers. Marc Bousquet reports that 80% of US undergraduates are also workers, and that they provide as much as half of the low-wage dining, janitorial, and administrative work on a typical university campus (Bousquet 2008, 149–50).

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