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Yvette Taylor • Kinneret Lahad
Editors

Feeling Academic in the Neoliberal University

Feminist Flights, Fights and Failures

palgrave
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When Love Becomes Self-Abuse: Gendered Perspectives on Unpaid Labor in Academia

Francesca Coin

Debunking Love

During the 1970s, feminist scholar Silvia Federici argued that one of the main challenges in the *Wages for Housework* campaign lay in the fact that women's domestic labor was presented as an act of love, a natural attribute of the female personality that required no monetary compensation. Federici's critique of the Fordist mode of production grew out of the *International Wages for Housework Campaign* launched in 1971 by activists and scholars such as Selma James, Brigitte Galtier, and Mariarosa Dalla Costa, who maintained that the social construction of gender forced women to contribute an immense amount of unpaid labor to industrial production. In their analysis, the Fordist assembly line found its origin in the domestic sphere, where the hidden reproductive labor of millions of women created the emotional and physical conditions that enabled individuals to sell their labor in the factory. In those years, reproductive labor was not considered as work but rather as a

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predisposition, "an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of our female character" (Federici 1975: 2). In recent years, scholars have often turned to the *Wages for Housework* campaign to describe the contradictions of "immaterial" and "cognitive labor" that characterizes post-Fordism (Gorz 2003; Gill and Pratt 2008; Castells 2009). Marked by innovation in technology, digitalization, and communication, the post-Fordist economy has emphasized the importance of those relational and affective skills that have historically been identified with feminine labor (Hesmondhalgh 2007). The post-Fordist economy has also used love to conceal the pressure to facilitate endurance in a context marked by increasing casualization of labor and protracted competition. Love and passion have become necessary resources to support individuals in self-promotional practices while concealing a labor regime in growing proportions unprotected and unremunerated. The coexistence of love and casualization has been particularly relevant in academic labor, where scholars have been encouraged to rely on passion to brand themselves and succeed within a context of competition driven by mission-driven commitment and limited social security. In this context, love and passion provided "both (1) the actual reason motivating actions and professional choices and (2) a rhetorical genre, a motif or 'motive' that social actors deploy to build consistent and socially acceptable narratives about their jobs" (Busso and Rivetti 2014: 16).

This chapter reflects on the role of love in academic labor. It examines love as being both an emotional resource capable of transforming labor into "an absolute end in itself, a calling" (Weber 1930: 25), which is perfectly compatible with an insecure labor regime, and at the same time as a trap that encapsulates individuals in a labor market that is increasingly characterized by intensified work rhythms, requests for unlimited availability and labor control. Drawing on data collected in the course of an online survey called *Ricercarsi*[1] that was administered to 1864 academics and with 20 in-depth interviews, this chapter tells the stories of precarious academics in Italy: researchers, postdocs, and adjunct professors who often work long hours in hopes of nebulous rewards such as co-authoring papers, receiving recommendation letters or vague promises of future employment. Despite the mainstream discourse tending to present academic labor as the privilege of young scientists "doing what they love",

these interviews often portray academia as a *de facto* exploitative labor market where adjunct professors and precarious academics barely make a living, often dwelling in overcrowded homes and on occasion turning to deviant behavior to make ends meet. Locked in a system of promises about their future, young academics often endure financial hardship and long periods of isolation in the hope of financial stability and social recognition. The question is whether the benefits outnumber the costs: whether such devotion can lead to personal fulfillment or rather entrap them in an abusive relationship chronicled by costly sacrifices and uncertain prospects.

Feeling Academic in Italy: A Case Study

This chapter focuses on the relationship between love and academic labor in Italy, a country that in some ways has become a paradigmatic example of the transition to neoliberal education. Over the past ten years, the joint impact of the neoliberal reform of higher education and the economic crisis has resulted into a radical transformation of Italian academia. Until 2005, precarious scholars comprised nearly one third of the academic body. By the end of 2013, they represented more than 50%. In 2013, Italy's universities had lost more than 9000 permanent scholars compared to 2008, including 5000 full professors and 2500 associate professors (European Commission 2015: 9). The combined effect of retirement, budget cuts, casualization, and lack of career opportunities resulted in an unprecedented downsizing of the university system, attested by a massive expulsion of aspiring academics. In those years, new legislation such as Law 1/2009 and Law 240/2010 introduced major changes to the recruitment process, leading to an increase in temporary personnel that largely precluded access to tenure track positions. The slowdown of career advancement opportunities and the negative outlook for young scholars turned into widespread international mobility that drove nearly 20,000 temporary researchers, postdocs, *assegnisti*, and para-subordinate researchers to leave the country between 2010 and 2012. Between 2008 and 2013, the overall number of permanent professors and researchers decreased by 14.8%. At the same time, the number of precarious

researchers increased by 61%. By the end of 2014, only 48.3% of academic staff were permanent (Toscano et al. 2015). In perspective, such sharp downsizing had a negative effect on universities' ability to perform their activities in terms of teaching and research. In part, such activities were externalized to fixed-contract researchers and research collaborators, for the most part *assegnisti di ricerca*[2] and 8035 collaborators on research projects who are external university staff (Toscano et al. 2015).

In 2013/2014, *Ricercarsi* represented the first attempt to evaluate the impact of casualization in Italian academia. The goal of the survey was to investigate the perception of academic labor at a time in history characterized by massive expulsion from the academic system. Saskia Sassen's notion of expulsion (Sassen 2014) is particularly fitting in this context as it underscores a systemic transformation induced by a rapid restructuring of the welfare state that has forced personal expectations to adjust to a dramatic exclusion from the public system. To show the dimensions of such a process, it is suffice to say that the percentage of precarious researchers recruited to Italian academia with a permanent tenure track position between 2004 and 2013 amounted to 6.7%—the remaining 93.3% have all been expelled from the system. Funded by the Flc-Cgil, the largest union in the research sector in Italy, in 2013–2014 *Ricercarsi* investigated the ambivalent relationship that contingent academics have with their labor at a time of rapid transformation.

The research was divided into three parts. The first part was intended to shed light on the numbers involved in academic labor in Italy. One of the complicated aspects of short-term work is that even the data are precarious, as Mario Toscano has pointed out. Ephemeral in nature, precarious jobs tend to be temporary and informal, leading the data to be vague and uncertain. In this sense, the first and necessary step in analyzing contingent labor in Italian academia was to shed light on the role that fixed-contract researchers, research collaborators, *assegnisti*, and para-subordinate researchers play in the university system. Drawing on records provided by the Ministry of Education and concerning the years 2003–2013, the research shed light on the numbers of precarity in Italian academia, unveiling the rapid downsizing of the Italian academic system and its negative impact on teaching and research activities. Revealing that 93.3% of young researchers had been expelled from the system and that 60% of

doctorate students were planning to leave the country in the next few years, the research revealed the growing instability of the Italian academic system (Toscano et al. 2015).

The second goal of our research was to investigate the working and living conditions of these researchers. In this sense, the second part of our research was an online survey that remained available between October 2013 and April 2014 for a total of seven months, amounting to 1864 respondents. The use of an online survey method allowed us to reach a population that is by definition dispersed and fragmented, including those individuals that had in the meantime been able to find a stable job in a different sector or moved abroad. In the first instance, the online survey was distributed in all communities that were in any way involved with academic and short-term labor (social media, blogs, mailing lists, and extant associations). In this phase we asked communities to solicit responses using a snowball sampling method to better suit an online survey (Toepoel 2016). In the following stages, we solicited responses from specific communities until our desired sample size and sample composition were achieved. The final sample included 1826 respondents. It comprised respondents from all disciplinary fields: the humanities (25%), the social sciences (24.1%), the natural sciences (29.7%), and the applied sciences (21.2%). The largest part of precarious researchers comprised *assegnisti* (51%), postdoctoral researchers whose contract can be renewed annually for a maximum of four years and whose labor conditions are characterized by low wages and weak social protection. In terms of age distribution, 60% of respondents were between 30 and 40 years old with an average age of 35 years. In terms of gender, respondents were 57% female and 43% male, hence reflecting the gendered distribution of academic labor in Italian academia.

The questionnaire comprised eight sections. First of all, it attempted to reconstruct the short-term labor journey of each respondent, mapping the fragmented contracts that composed their path towards employability. Their social background, economic situation, area of study, family demographics and household responsibility, working conditions, the consideration of their labor, and finally their idea of the future were the variables selected to help us understand what enables or inhibits success in an academic environment. The goal of the questionnaire was specifi-

cally to investigate the material conditions of academic labor and these researchers' emotional perceptions. How do academics reconcile the explicit or implicit demands of academic efficiency with the demands of being a mother or a father, a wife or a husband, a single man or a single woman? How do they respond to labor insecurity? Ultimately, what do the lives of these scholars tell us about the future of academic labor in Italy? These are the questions we have tried to answer in the third and final part of our research, which involved the administration of 20 in-depth interviews to a sample of 20 precarious researchers from different campuses situated in the north, central, and south of the country. Given the vulnerable conditions of these scholars, we decided to ensure respondent confidentiality and to protect the identities of the individuals who participated in this research. In this sense we erased from our report those traits that would make them identifiable—limiting ourselves to indicate their gender, position, and their geographic location in Italy.

Academic Labor as a Labor of Love

While it will not be possible to detail the entire research in this context, my goal is to look at the emotions and material conditions that define academic labor. It is worth beginning with the emotional landscapes that the respondents associate with their jobs. In our survey we asked respondents to describe how they felt about their work. More precisely, we posed an open-ended question asking respondents to indicate the three words that best represent their experience of academia. The word cloud revealed a very ambivalent perception that alternates positive adjectives such as stimulating, fulfilling, satisfying, and engaging with critical adjectives such as frustrating, undervalued, or burdensome. Generally, the first word chosen by respondents had a positive connotation, whereas words with a negative connotation were indicated as a second or third choice, shedding light on a fragmented perception that tends to favor an encouraging imaginary of academic labor by focusing predominantly on its strengths and qualities. As we shall see, this is an underlying aspect of our research, which often reveals an attempt to reframe academic labor as an enriching experience despite the discontent that characterizes it. Joining

sociologists and social scientists who have insisted on the social and cultural life of emotions, Sara Ahmed (Ahmed 2004) suggests looking on emotions as cultural constructions that are not produced by the object itself but rather involve a process of interpretation whereby the narratives describing each object are constantly confronted by each individual's experience. Drawing on Descartes' observation that "objects do not excite diverse passions because they are diverse, but because of the diverse ways in which they may harm or help us" (Descartes et al. 1985: 349; quoted in Ahmed 2004: 5), this suggests that the emotions associated with academic labor could be considered as social constructions that can be constantly redefined by individual experience. Given the rapidity of the neoliberal reform of education, it is possible that the positive connotations that emerge in the word cloud reflect an imaginary of economic nostalgia, a world of full employment where academic labor is still constructed as a symbol of prestige. In a way, academic labor is entrenched in the cultural history of modern society that brings us back to figures of speech rooted in ancient tropes and cultural vocabularies that linger in our collective imagination, as Steven Shapin has shown us (Shapin 2012). Drawing on Sara Ahmed's work, we can posit that such cultural construction nurtures the imaginary of academic labor. The questions are: How are such narratives reconciled with the embodied experience of contingent labor? How do precarious researchers adjust to a shift in the horizon of operability introduced by austerity and the neoliberal reform? Can love endure such neoliberal restructuring or should we expect such emotional landscapes to be deconstructed and demystified as occurred during the 1970s?

Academic Labor as an Embodied Experience

In general, our sample was comprised to a great majority by *assegnisti* (51% of female respondents), coupled with Ph.D. students (12.4% of female respondents), freelance researchers (22.3% of female respondents), fixed-term researchers, and researchers who had found a stable position. Generally speaking, women were the majority in the most precarious positions: short-term collaborations and para-subordinate

contracts largely featured female researchers (22% women and 14% male), while women were underrepresented in more stable positions—both fixed-term and permanent researchers were predominantly male (respectively 9.1% female and 15.4% male; 4.4% female and 7.9% male), unveiling the resilience of gender inequality in academic achievement: as we shall see, promotion and initial placement reveal the resilience of male advantage in academic attainment.

Even though a small percentage (4.4%) of respondents had gained a permanent position by the time of our survey, all respondents had undergone a long journey of labor uncertainty: the average number of contracts had by each researcher over the previous five years was 6.2, meaning that on average, each person signed more than one contract per year, both inside and outside the academic system. The former perception of academia being an exclusive job market chronicled by a binary process of inclusion or exclusion is interrupted by a situation whereby temporary occupations within and beyond academia overlap, integrate one another, and often coexist. In this sense, 39% of respondents admit having had both inside and outside appointments within their academic activity: 10.4% of respondents admit having had between 13 and 30 different appointments, indicating a creative assemblage of occupations ultimately intended to make ends meet. Unsurprisingly, over 43% of respondents confess to not having the possibility to focus on their research. More precisely, 45% of para-subordinate scholars, 41.5% of *assegnisti*, and 48.5% of fixed-term scholars confess to not being able to give continuity to their research due to their professional instability, indicating that professional insecurity has a negative impact on research quality and personal life. In general, 52.5% of respondents live with their partner and 19.1% live alone, while 11% have flatmates and 17.4% live with their family of origin. In this sense, most of the respondents share their lives with a partner even though 71% of them have no children. The precarious academic is generally reluctant when it comes to having children. For women in particular motherhood is often *not an option*, given the subaltern nature of their professional condition. As the interviews will make clear, there is often no formal recognition of maternity leave. This means that the overrepresentation of women in subaltern positions often goes hand in hand with the inability to make any other long-term plans,

revealing a condition of professional insecurity that extends to their private lives. Even though the rhetoric of gender equality has been used to legitimize labor flexibility, the transition towards a flexible labor regime in academia has come with long hours, low pay, lack of job security, and lack of access to basic benefits, conditions that appear to have limited women's independence rather than securing it.

In general, most temporary scholars have a net income of between 10,000 and 20,000 euro. It is easier for men to land at the high-end of the income distribution, whereas women are largely located in the lowest part of income distribution: 71% of women earn 10,000 euro per year. Those who cannot earn sufficient income through academic labor are forced to look for employment outside academia (40%) or seek support from the family of origin (22%). Others seek their partner's support (19%) or cut their own expenses (12.5%).

> My family's support allows me to continue this job, although it is not sufficient because my job only recognizes my work economically for the hours I spend on frontal lectures… However we do the same work of a full professor, meaning that we supervise students and their thesis. I myself supervise several M.A, candidates and if you consider the office hours, the time required for exams and student orientation… if only they gave us a voucher for each thesis we supervise…. (Adjunct, female)

The social capital of the family of origin is significant in predicting the ability to remain inside the academic system. In an attempt to verify the variables that influence permanence in the academic market, Giancola and Toscano (2017) relied on a multiple correspondence analysis (Mca), a data analysis technique used to detect and represent underlying structures in a data set. They concluded that the economic conditions of the family of origin have a significant effect in making it possible for precarious researchers to work in the academic system. In other words, an affluent family can compensate for the economic vulnerability produced by labor impermanence. This also means that precarious scholars from a low socioeconomic background may be the first ones to quit academic labor. As we shall see, the social capital of the family plays a big role in the ability to access an academic position.

In this sense, academic labor resembles an apprenticeship. Apprentices often do not receive a salary for their labor but rather gain the skills and expertise necessary to secure for themselves an occupation in the future. The sustainability of academic labor often requires that the family of origin make an investment in their children's future by being economically supportive of their apprenticeship. The problem is that casual academic labor is not an apprenticeship. State disinvestment in education makes it difficult for individuals to succeed in academia despite family support. In this sense, academic labor sometimes resembles a risky bet that filters employment opportunities according to socioeconomic status. It is unsurprising that the daily experience of academic labor reveals a constant negotiation whereby the benefits of prestige are constantly offset by the personal sacrifices required to endure an under-remunerated labor regime. One respondent admits having experienced "a long period of disillusionment" where she was often tempted by the benefits of leaving academia.

> I am undergoing a period of disillusionment because I long for stability in my life.. on the contrary, if you want to find any stability you need to move abroad and if you have affective relationships that is not possible… as a result any plans I make will be ideally outside academia; I am fine with any work sector at this point and have given all I had to the academic system. (*Assegnista*, female)

In a similar fashion, another respondent confesses wondering how long she would be able to endure the sacrifices required to continue her work.

> It's been a difficult time because I had to understand my priorities, whether waiting for an opportunity was worth it or not and how much I was willing to sacrifice to continue doing this work […] waiting so long for this opportunity has led me to believe that it was either all or nothing, you reach a point that you don't want to find yourself in such a position that you have to reinvent yourself again. (Doctoral student, female)

The burden of academic labor seems particularly troublesome when it comes to women, as their longing for independence often appears to be

in conflict with the sacrifices demanded by their academic lives. In this sense, precarious women struggle to reconcile their longing for stability with a condition of vulnerability that often interferes with their own self-esteem and economic independence, leading to a protracted experience of frustration and disillusion.

It's Not Love, It's Unpaid Labor

The complexity of this situation increases if we think that the lack of economic stability is complemented by the permanent burden of unwaged labor. Sixty percent of respondents declare having done unpaid labor "sometimes" or "often" throughout their academic career. The percentage refers, once again, to women. We asked both male and female respondents to list the different tasks they perform in relation to their role. Predominantly, unpaid labor is used to cover up the reduction of permanent staff introduced by austerity and budget cuts.

Specifically:

- Permanent researchers undertake services for student orientation and supervise students' theses that are formally assigned to them as well as to other associate or full professors (16%), on top of undertaking specific administrative tasks (12.6%).
- *Assegnisti* supervise student theses that are formally assigned to others (23.8%), provide services for student orientation (20%), and perform administrative tasks (10%).
- Ph.D. students offer services for student orientation (29.6% of cases).
- Para-subordinate researchers perform tasks for student orientation (26.3%) and supervise students' theses that are formally assigned to them (23.8) as well as others (22.4%).

On top of these tasks, more than 38% of doctorate students take on teaching assignments that are not formally recognized, just as do 25% of subordinate researchers.

It must be noticed that these tasks are not part of the contractual agreement and as such they are not formally recognized or remunerated.

Teaching is not included among the duties of permanent researchers, in Italy, just as it is not required of *assegnisti*, Ph.D. students, or para-subordinate researchers. In a sense, unpaid labor is the symbol of an underfunded system that uses temporary scholars as shock absorbers for institutional strains. Multiple tasks are outsourced to precarious researchers even though they often do not receive any formal compensation for them, either in terms of monetary compensation or in terms of social recognition.

In the questionnaire, we asked respondents to indicate the frequency of labor outside the standard schedule (on weekends, in the evenings, or late at night) and the types of tasks it involved, whether they were included in the different contractual agreement of each category (as are, for instance, research, publications, or panel presentations) or not included (or at least not explicitly included) in such agreements. Taking into account this set of data, we used principal component analysis (Pca) to create two different indexes. One index measures productivity in activities directed towards one's own career—in other words, it measures labor done in addition to the regular schedule in order to publish more or attend more conferences, for instance. The other index measures labor carried out for others—those activities performed in addition to the regular schedule that are unrelated to one's own research. Results show that it is largely the most vulnerable categories of precarious researchers who work for others, more specifically para-subordinate researchers and *assegnisti*, whereas fixed or permanent researchers use nights and weekends to continue their own research. In this sense, the most vulnerable categories of temporary researchers compensate for institutional strains. As mentioned above, the sharp downsizing of the Italian academic system had a negative impact on the universities' ability to perform their activities in terms of teaching and research. Oftentimes, these activities are externalized on contingent personnel with vulnerable labor contracts.

Women are overrepresented in the performance of unpaid labor. The amount of unremunerated labor performed by women over men is an issue that has not received much attention in academic literature. Recently, Cassandra M. Guarino and Victor M. H. Borden (2017) have investigated the gender gap in academia with respect to faculty service loads. Drawing on 2014 data from a large national survey of faculty at

more than 140 institutions, they find evidence that, on average, women faculty perform significantly more unpaid labor than men, controlling for rank, race/ethnicity, and field or department. In general, their research takes into account the unpaid work that permanent faculty undertake in internal and external service (Pyle and Ward 2003), meaning unpaid labor for one's department, school, or university in activities unrelated to one's own research. The authors include activities "related to faculty governance, faculty, recruitment, evaluation and promotion, student admissions and scholarships, program supervision, development and marketing, internal awards, etc." (Guarino and Borden 2017: 2) without being recognized or compensated for their service. Their results leave little doubt as to the existence of a gender imbalance in such activities. "Both in the number of activities and in the amount of time spent on such activities […] women report doing more, on average. […] Thus, one might generalize that women faculty are shouldering a disproportionately large part of the burden of 'taking care of the academic family', so to speak" (Guarino and Borden 2017: 19). While their research looks at the distribution of unpaid labor along gender lines among permanent faculty members, our focus on temporary faculty leads to a similar conclusion. In this case, internal service in activities related to student orientation and supervision, teaching, and research relies on the unpaid effort of precarious scholars, primarily women. Karen M. Cardozo (Cardozo 2016) interpreted the development of a precarious and predominantly female body of adjunct instructors through the prism of feminist and intersectional studies of care work. She concluded that the overrepresentation of women in undervalued tasks in academia could be interpreted as the embodiment of long-standing patterns of devaluing socially reproductive work. In fact, the devaluation of care is reflected in the production of a predominantly female body of temporary "care laborers" who undertake internal service despite the lack of monetary compensation.

As one young researcher admitted:

I have given a lot of free labor and I must say that the conditions that I have found [name of university] are much worse that the conditions I have found elsewhere, in other words where temporary researchers are paid, whereas what happened to me and my colleagues here is that we are con-

stantly asked to work for free without any continuity of income, so I call it care-work… supervising students, organizing conferences and even doing administrative work… I do everything for free and quite often my labor is unrecognized even socially, it's free and anonymous, often professors use the lever of passion, they talk about love for culture and critical thinking [to solicit your work] and that is done in my experience primarily by progressive academics […] and the result is an ambiguous relationship. When we work among peers aware of our labor conditions, I always have a positive experience. But when you work with a professor or someone whose superior in rank, that is a lot more complex because it comes with the demand for absolute availability and there is also a certain surprise when you try to establish some boundaries. Somehow you feel morally obliged to do all they ask of you, including organizing seminars. Professors normally do nothing until you deliver them everything they need and so it is as if they didn't know there is labor involved—it's as if it happened by magic. This is rather degrading and it produces tensions. (*Assegnista*, female)

It must be observed the involvement of contingent faculty in administrative tasks or student orientation has an impact on the advancement of temporary faculty within the tenure system, as it reduces the time for activities that are directly necessary for advancement in their own career. It must also be considered how such labor is often not simply imposed upon precarious researchers but is often also accepted. In a rather interesting reinterpretation of Marx's *Fragment on the Machines* (Marx 1973), performing superfluous labor becomes necessary in order to demonstrate one's being indispensable for the job. In this sense, unpaid labor appears to be performed by the precarious scholar in a desperate attempt to overcome a situation of insecurity.

"Do you work for free?
Yes.
Do you do other activities inside academia?
No.
What do you think about it?
It's just for me to work in this way and academic labor is very demanding, I must also devote time to supervising students. Of course, I would like for my labor to be taken into account.
Do you think free labor is a widespread phenomenon?

Yes, academia lives on unpaid labor. Besides the fact that associate and full professors cannot take care of everything, there are a number of people who, probably through passion and probably because they hope in a better future, probably because the idea of professorship gives them an image of power or intellectual prestige, there are individuals who pursue these dreams and the hope for recognition, but the truth is that academia lives on the unpaid labor of its temporary staff… the idea of future recognition could even never come… so in the meantime it's important to recognize their labor financially". (Adjunct, female)

"Do you work for free?

Yes, because when one contract terminates and the other one has not yet begun there may be periods of discontinuity. So if I am supervising a student's work I cannot just disappear.. Therefore there are times of discontinuity when our presence in academia resembles the presence of ghosts". (Adjunct, female)

Neoliberal academia uses unpaid labor as a protection against the consequences of austerity, while precarious researchers rely on unpaid labor to show their dedication to the institution. In this context, love is at once the emotion that ensnares one within an unremunerated labor system and the emotional resource that permits one to endure it. In an interesting resemblance with domestic labor, the apparent innocence of love conceals "the most pervasive manipulation, the most subtle and mystified violence that capitalism has ever perpetrated against any section of the working class", as Silvia Federici wrote (Federici 1975: 2). At the same time, the use of love as an emotional resource capable of delivering endurance in a vicious cycle of unremunerated overload seals the diabolical pact between an exploitative labor regime and its prey. The neoliberal narrative sells the magic spell of academic prestige as a symbolic currency for unpaid labor, while the temporary worker feeds on such a spell to endure a vicious cycle of precarity and unremunerated work. In this sense, individuals seem to develop something like Nietzsche's bad conscience, "the deep sickness to which man was obliged to succumb under the pressure of that most fundamental of all changes,? when he found himself definitively locked in the spell of society and peace"

(Nietzsche et al. 2016: 73). At times, precarious scholars hang on to the narrative of love in an attempt to conceal the contradictions that entangle them into an unremunerated labor regime, hence letting the formal agreement between one scholar and one institution collapse into a system of personal favors where duties become gifts and labor security translates into reciprocal promises of protection and obedience. Although our data show that precarity is a heterogeneous experience that cannot be narrowed down to one single narrative, the aftertaste of acceptance overarching the description of academic labor as a labor of love suggests an attempt to remain locked in the spell of academic prestige despite its many detriments. In this sense, today's academia is a perfect example of Hochschild's commercialization of feelings (Hochschild 2012). Love is bought and sold to ensnare, and conversely to be ensnared, in an academic system that fluctuates between an image of prestige and a regime of labor insecurity in hope that self-sacrifice will somehow be rewarded and deliver stability and future employment.

Until Cuts Tear Us Apart

It is not surprising that exit from academia often occurs not so much by choice but rather by expulsion. Among those respondents who no longer work in academia, exit is largely the effect of a unilateral decision to terminate their appointment. Respectively 55% of female and 53% of male respondents were expelled from the academic system, while 20% of women and 17.3% of men decided to quit. Women decided to quit primarily due to their precarious conditions (18.3%), while men (20.4%) decided to quit primarily due to the grim prospects for a possible career. In this sense, women leave academia mostly for reasons related to the insecurity of their position, whereas men leave primarily for reasons related to the unsatisfactory opportunities for academic advancement. The notion of gender is hardly ever *raised* as an issue in our respondents' interviews. Both women and men seem to perceive the idea of an academic career as being a rather remote possibility. Our data also show that the recruitment of women in the early stages of an academic career has been growing to reach 40% of the total number of researchers, suggesting

the existence of a narrowing gap in the early steps of an academic career in terms of gender distribution. The rationale behind exit from academia reveals, however, a difference in expectations whereby male scholars often leave academia when their expectation of a career is betrayed, whereas women decide to quit after protracted precarity. Although gender has not been framed as an issue in the interviews that we administered, scholars seem to envision their future in academia according to expectations that differ along the gender line. In this sense, it is unsurprising that women make a decision to quit in larger percentages than men. It must also be noticed, however, that frequently exit from academia corresponds to a collapse in the vision of the future and in each person's place in such a vision. If indeed half of those respondents who no longer work in academia have been able to find a new place for themselves in the labor market in jobs that require a high level of specialization (this is the case for respectively 52% of male and 40% of female respondents), at the same time 33% of male and 35% of female respondents have remained unemployed. In line with our analysis, the highest percentages of unemployment are concentrated among individuals whose family of origin has limited social capital—individuals whose parents are either unemployed or employed in unskilled jobs, hence confirming that the social capital of the family plays a big role in social mobility. The more unsteady the professional arrangements, the riskier the investment for the future. Conversely, the riskier the investment, the greater is also the need to maintain a positive outlook on the future even at the cost of overlooking its contradictions. In this sense, regardless of the possibilities offered by the system, what is evident is the need not to take too seriously the violent threat of expulsion in an attitude of self-deception that seems sometimes instrumental in believing that such adverse conditions will someday dissolve with a little bit more discipline and self-sacrifice.

Breaking the Spell

In 2009, Maria Maisto wrote an opinion-expressing editorial entitled "An adjunct's moment of truth". Recalling Jane O'Reilly's *The housewife's moment of truth* (O'Reilly 1971), Maisto described the spark of

recognition: the little and large moments in which the lowest points of humiliation become the sources of courage that produce social transformation. Such was the experience of Maria Maisto, an adjunct scholar who taught English composition, had three kids under the age of 12 and a spouse "who has to look for a new job in the worst economy in decades". "If you've been reading the news", she wrote, "you know that contingent faculty members are among the most vulnerable workers in higher education, and each story I read about them losing their jobs to budget cuts or possible political retaliation sends a chill up my spine" (Maisto 2009). Despite this, she became the President of the New Faculty Majority, an organization funded in 2007 and dedicated "to improving the quality of higher education by advancing professional equity and securing academic freedom for all adjunct and contingent faculty" (New Faculty Majority 2009).

"Adjuncts of any gender are the housewives and handmaidens of academia", Maisto argued. She then made a list of those elements of humiliation that became the very source of her courage:

> When I discovered that buying into the university's insurance plan for my family might cost more than my monthly pay check or when an administrator on my campus actually acknowledged—publicly—that Walmart treats its part-time employees better than colleges and universities treat adjuncts and that we constitute a highly educated working poor. When 17 adjunct colleagues and I wrote a letter to the editor of our local newspaper drawing attention to contingent faculty working conditions, only one tenured professor from our department would join the two officers from our campus AAUP chapter I had invited to sign it. When I realized that my children are likely to have college instructors who are either overworked, distracted tenure-stream professors or under-supported, freeway-flying contingents—in either case, effectively being prevented by colleges and universities from being given the highest quality education possible. (Maisto 2009)

In a sense, what Maisto defines as the adjunct's moment of truth is what was often missing in our research. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's work, we could say that an adjunct's moment of truth describes the moment in which the dominant narratives that construct the representation of the object of our emotions are re-signified by the contrasting evidence of our embodied experiences. From this point of view, the narratives that

describe academic labor as a labor of love are contradicted by the experience of humiliation endured by the precarious scholar. In our case study, such idealized narratives of academic labor were reluctant to fade. In some instances, temporary academics seemed to hang onto a mystified narrative of their labor in the hope that love and sacrifice will somehow be rewarded. In a rather religious manner, self-sacrifice was considered as the price you have to pay to be graced by the academic system. In a way, such an attitude makes sense if we consider the rapid change undergone by the Italian academic system after the economic crisis. In some ways, such emotional resilience could indicate an attempt to come to terms with the shock produced by austerity. Still, now that short-term work has become systemic and expulsion has become a chronic condition, now that intellectual passion has become the main accomplice of economic insecurity and austerity, it is probably time to open up an honest discussion about the relationship between gender and unpaid labor in academia for the purpose of overhauling a system that is broken.

Notes

1. The research included Emanuele Toscano, Francesca Coin, Orazio Giancola, Francesco Vitucci, Barbara Gruning. The research report in Italian can be accessed here: Toscano, E. Coin, F., Giancola, O. et al., http://www.roars.it/online/ricercarsi-indagine-sui-percorsi-di-vita-elavoro-nel-precariato-universitario/. (2015). [online] Available at: URL http://www.roars.it/online/ricercarsi-indagine-sui-percorsi-di-vita-elavoro-nel-precariato-universitario/ [Accessed 22 Apr. 2017].
2. I use the word *assegnisti di ricerca* or simply *assegnisti* to indicate postdoctoral researchers whose contract can be renewed annually for a maximum of four years and whose labor conditions are characterized by low wages and weak social protection.

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