

Academic Labor

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Of Careers and *Curricula Vitae*: Losing Track of Academic Professionalism

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In a time of tough competition for academic jobs, job seekers have lost track of what it means to professionalize one's self. In first-person narratives featured in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, job seekers define "professionalism" as candid self-scrutiny, self-discipline, and emotional composure. These narratives suggest that the academic dimensions of professionalism have given way to self-interrogation techniques. Job seekers see their professional efforts as less a matter of advancing a program of research and teaching and more a matter of recalibrating their selves in order to "stay on track." Read through the lens of neoliberalism, these narratives show how job seekers rationalize these habits as necessary to their career success.

Raymond Williams' dictionary of keywords (1983) tells us that the word "career" was used in the sixth century to mean racecourse, gallop, or any rapid, uninterrupted, or unrestrained activity. As Williams notes, there are shadows of the term's earlier connotations in phrases such as "the rat race," but in its more generous sense, the term suggests a safeguard against the itinerancy of piecemeal *work*, or what we refer to today as "flexible *labor*" (p. 53). Williams notes that the word "is still used in the abstract spectacular sense of politicians and entertainers, but more generally it is applied, with some conscious and unconscious class distinction, to *work* or a *job* which contains implicit promise of progress" (pp. 52-53).

For academic careers, the veracity of that promise is the subject of some dispute. In a now famous article, "Graduate School in the Humanities: Just Don't Go," Benton (2009) takes aim at the idea of academy-as-meritocracy and the impression held by prospective graduate students that intelligence and hard work will not go unrecognized. To dispel that idea, he argues that the labor conditions of the academy are such that those "who get tenure-track positions might as well be considered the winners of a lottery" (para. 17). To explain why so many continue to believe the academy to be a meritocracy in the face of evidence to the contrary, Benton points to students' stubborn faith in their own unique and singular talents, an even more stubborn adherence by professors to academic tradition, and to an exceptionalism—a belief that the academy is singular and unique in its social structure—that Benton argues permeates academic culture.¹

¹ For a critique of the anti-professional attitude to which Benton subscribes, see Stanley Fish's (1989) response to popular characterizations of literary studies as vacuous careerism.

In *The Last Professors*, Frank Donoghue also remarks on the culture of the academic job search that “assigns the responsibility of being valued to the job seekers themselves,” which, he adds, is “a cruel injustice given the way that the hiring system actually works” (p. 37). Where Benton credits an air of exceptionalism, Donoghue attributes this impulse to job seekers and their advisors’ faith in market logics that they believe will, like a free-market economy, “sort out” the value of each job candidate (p. 36).

A third analysis of academic professionalization by Eng-Beng Lim, Lisa Duggan, and José Esteban Muñoz (2010) takes Donoghue’s argument a step further to attribute the “professional performances of faculty” to “a larger neoliberal cultural politic permeating the United States” (pp. 130, 128). Duggan offers several examples from her home institution of professors who publicly aligned themselves with, for instance, collective labor actions such as graduate student unionization movements while privately supporting decisions that led to anti-union measures, faculty pay inequities, and a weakened faculty governance (p. 131). Duggan attributes these decisions less to outright hypocrisy than to an economy of professional incentives that encourages individuals to pursue “one’s own best interests” (ibid.). “Progressive and left faculty,” writes Duggan, “often lose track of the difference between the commitments that shape their scholarship and teaching, and that shape their scholarly reputations, and the decisions they make to forward their careers within their institutions” (p. 130).

Whether crediting academic exceptionalism, market logics, or neoliberalism, these analyses all suggest that amid shrinking job pools and scarcity of institutional resources, we have, as Duggan puts it, “lost track” of ourselves. Duggan’s choice of words evokes both the earlier meanings of *career* and the metaphors “tenure track” and *curriculum vitae* or “life course.” Keeping the track metaphor in mind, this essay takes up the question of what it means to say that we have “lost track” of ourselves within what Muñoz has characterized as this “provisional” neoliberal moment (Eng-Beng, Duggan, & Muñoz, 2010, p. 132). Does it mean, as Benton suggests, that the academy now operates by a lottery system that renders its ranking systems meaningless? Does it mean, as Duggan suggests, that academics have forfeited more equitable and just political motivations in order to navigate the new labor conditions of the academy? While productive in many ways, these arguments risk casting individual academics as either delusional or coldly calculating.

In what follows, I analyze several job search narratives from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in which job seekers are neither delusional about their job prospects nor calculating at the expense of their peers. Nevertheless, these narratives do display the neoliberal affect to which Duggan points. While these narratives make mention of conventional job search techniques, such as networking, their primary focus is on maintaining physical and emotional discipline. To be clear, neoliberalism manifests in these narratives not as allegiance to free-market economic policies but as the exercising of what Wendy Brown has termed a political rationality that “normatively constructs and interpellates individuals as entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life” (2003, para. 15). It is this latter sense of neoliberalism that I attribute to academic job seekers who exhibit a faith, not in an academic meritocracy or in a free-market economy, but in themselves to act as “rational, calculating creatures whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for ‘self-care’” (para. 15). “Moral autonomy” refers in this case not to the beliefs we might typically associate with neoliberalism, such as the idea that dedicated consumerism should relieve one of the

burden of paying taxes, but to a belief that self-discipline alone equals academic professionalism. Benton attributes this belief as a sense of entitlement that students carry with them into graduate school. But such an analysis misses the extent to which job seekers interrogate themselves and strive to meet standards, no matter how demanding. There is less a sense of entitlement at play here than a constricting of the professional circuit to such a degree that the academic dimensions of professionalism have given way to endless self-scrutiny of faults as modest as pride and bitterness. The result is that job seekers are not advancing a program of research and teaching so much as continuously recalibrating their selves in order to “stay on track.”

To show a neoliberal affect in the following narratives, I highlight places where job seekers define “professionalism” as candid self-scrutiny, self-discipline, and emotional composure. Academic professionalization has always been an exercise in social posturing, particularly where it meets with class ambition.² These narratives suggest, however, that the academic job search has become largely an exercise in self-management while the process of matriculation into the profession has dropped from sight. It is in this sense—the sense that the academic job search has become less about pursuing a particular kind of work and more about a narrow program of self-management—that we could say we have lost track of our selves.

Brown theorizes neoliberalism as a political rationality that manifests as the ability to calculate costs and benefits and that relieves us of evaluating our choices according to an ethical code. As Brown puts it, “mistakes in judgment” become under neoliberalism mere miscalculations of cost rather than a departure from a particular ethical program (para. 15). A common “miscalculation” by politicians is the extramarital affair that now guarantees the end of a political career—not usually because of the behavior itself but more often because of the public’s perception of it as an instance of poor judgment. For academic careers, even where the details are less salacious, the principle is the same. Indeed, part of what is so unsettling about many stories of the academic job search is that job seekers’ “missteps” are so modest. Even so, candidates place great emphasis on the importance of managing themselves—not in terms of their teaching and research programs, the details of which are generalized and secondary, but in terms of their ability to stay disciplined, make sacrifices, and keep emotionally composed.

Getting Into the Race

The following is an analysis of several first-person accounts of job searches featured in the career advice column in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Their humor, narrative inconsistencies, and frenetic emotions may ring familiar. The places where they read as awkward performances of professionalism are opportunities to see how job seekers rationalize their performance of self. The columnists—all of whom are women—display self-doubt that may register as gendered. My reading of these narratives through the lens of neoliberalism does not rule out the influence of gender norms. I do, however, suggest that these narratives are governed by a rationality that offers job seekers limited strategies for navigating their employment options beyond that of continuous self-scrutiny. No doubt that scrutiny has a gendered dimension, but I read it first as evidence of a shift from a professional program once focused on the

² For more on this see Burton J. Bledstein (1978).

expectations of academic institutions to one now attentive to an individual's ability to remain disciplined and emotionally tempered.

The first account is by Mairead Eastin Moloney who while still a graduate student, wrote four articles for the *Chronicle*, three under the pseudonym Margaret Tennant, that detailed her self-management strategies during a two-year job search. Much of the force of Moloney's account comes from her disclosures about the state of her personal affairs—her marriage, diet, housekeeping, and personal finances, all of which fall into disrepair while she pours energy into pursuing a tenure-track position. Where the sorry state of her personal affairs might elsewhere read as an inability to care for herself, here it reads as an exceptional ability to weigh the costs and benefits of her personal life against those of her career pursuits. Her narrative thus registers as the exercising of neoliberal rationality in that Moloney presents her choices not as ethical decisions, but as calculations of risk. That is, she does not present herself as advocating for self-promotion over support of her colleagues or as entitled to an academic job. Rather, she rationalizes her behavior as self-management strategies, the mastery of which alone speaks to her professionalism.

Throughout her story, Moloney showcases her ability to measure costs and benefits and adjust her behavior accordingly. In her first article (Tennant, 2008, October), Moloney tells with self-deprecating wit the story of attending a job fair. She portrays herself as overwhelmed by the search process and struggling to acquire a competitive attitude. As she puts it, "my inner job seeker and I are rusty" (para. 25). She recounts a situation in which she has an opportunity to speak highly of a colleague to an interviewer, which she does before her self-interest takes hold. "I realized," she writes, "that the tightness in my throat was actually my inner, wiser, job-seeking self, attempting to strangle me before I could cough up any more platitudes about my competitor" (para. 16). The point of her story is not that competitiveness is a desirable trait but that she can and must suspend collegiality where it is a liability. In other words, Moloney's is not an ethical stance in favor of competitiveness so much as a simple cost-benefit analysis, the execution of which speaks to her self-discipline.

As her story progresses, it becomes evident that Moloney sees her capacity for self-discipline as one of her greatest assets. When her narrative proves short on details of her career-specific skills, self-discipline begins to seem her only asset. By her second article (Tennant, 2009, February), Moloney's reluctant entry into the job market has given way to unceasing self-scrutiny. This time, her wit serves to normalize the frenetic self-accounting in which she engages. She details a daily routine now dominated by the job search that includes obsessive keeping of Post-it Notes and checking of job banks, "research all-nighters and application-writing benders," and a lapse in housekeeping and healthy diet (para. 4). Her account becomes less about pursuit of a specific kind of work and more a presentation of her self-management skills that alone speak to her commitment to an academic career. In the following passage, for instance, profession-specific details about teaching and research are secondary to her primary point that her career ultimately hinges on her possession of the will and discipline to accomplish a considerable amount of work:

I may be teaching an upper-level sociology class to 60 students, conducting four to 10 interviews a week for my dissertation, using my meager statistical skills to analyze data

from a national survey, submitting a paper for publication, and applying for a final-year fellowship, but in my spare time I'm just going to continually track job announcements online, whip out applications for postdoc and tenure-track positions, and incessantly stalk my e-mail and mailbox to see if anyone has gotten back to me with a life-changing offer. (para. 2)

With professionalization reduced to self-disciplining techniques, Moloney's evaluation of her job search turns on the question of whether she is doing enough. To make that determination, she compares herself to a colleague whom she describes as "a young white man fearlessly and unabashedly nurtured by older white men" (para. 15). This colleague, who "cranks out publications," is widely considered in her department to be the standard against which others should measure their own efforts (para. 15). "[His] achievements," she explains, "were held up to the rest of us as an example of what our paltry careers could be, if only we weren't so darned lazy" (para. 15). Moloney also notes her colleague's social advantages: "We can't all have stay-at-home wives, family trust funds, and nimble brains that work with deadly efficiency at 8 a.m." (para. 16). But what begins as a critique of social inequities concludes with Moloney renewing her commitment to get organized. Moloney calculates that her only option for closing the gap between her privileged colleague and herself is increased self-discipline:

I have to fill out one more job application. I have to look at one more job posting. I have to try to picture myself living and working in cities I wouldn't have ever thought of as home. I have to stop resembling a stained flannel couch cover and start resembling a successful, job-getting grad student. I just have to. (para. 18)

Here again Moloney evaluates herself, not by anything we might recognize as an academic standard, but by her ability to rally in the face of exhaustion. In arriving at this conclusion, Moloney demonstrates the limits of neoliberalism, which offers her no means of addressing inequities. Here, neoliberalism is less an economic ideology that encourages individuals to act without regard for others, and more an inadequate rationality that provides little in the way of what Kenneth Burke called "equipment for living" (1941, p. 296).

In her third article, a retrospective of her year-long search, Moloney makes clear that she is aware of the economic conditions that make risky the pursuit of an academic career (June 2009). However, as before, her reflection on structural conditions is less a critique of those conditions than it is further demonstration of her ability to calculate risk in her own interest. In this article, her self-accounting takes a back seat to statistical and anecdotal information on the job market. As she watches job postings evaporate, she reflects on the toll in the form of debt and depression that graduate school takes on people's lives. As with the story about her colleague, what at first promises to be an analysis of the academic job market is instead a re-calculation of the costs of her career pursuits that leaves her wondering if the debt she has acquired is worth the risk. The article ends with her securing a two-year postdoc, a turn that she attributes to good fortune: "By a bizarre combination of luck, tenacity, more luck, and an incredible amount of help from my mentors, I have landed a job" (para. 19). The significance the postdoc seems to hold for Moloney is as a sign that she is still "in the race." As before, she adjusts her calculations accordingly and once again decides the risk is worth it.

Throughout her narrative, Moloney offers an account of her self-management skills, which she sees as a measure of her professional value. As a career advice column, her articles provide a model for other job seekers in how to assess whether they, too, are doing all they can. The criteria she establishes for that assessment has less to do with specific academic practices, such as attending conferences, than with cultivating self-discipline and emotional composure. This is evidenced in her final article, written after a second year on the job market (2010, April). In her final reflections, she discusses the need to recognize and correct her professional missteps. Her greatest regret, she writes, is that she succumbed to pride and went onto to the job market too soon (para. 13). Her argument suggests that she sees her emotions not as collateral of a long slog through graduate school followed by a challenging job search, but as yet another measure of her professionalism. She turns this self-assessment into a lesson for her readers by encouraging graduate students to weather the tight job market by swallowing their pride and staying in school for as long as possible. Her advice is in line with the thinking that has guided her own job search: More important than the work itself is one's ability to calculate costs and benefits to one's self and possession of an inexhaustible well of self-discipline. These skills, her narrative suggests, are what distinguish the academic professional.

Running in Place

Other columnists echo Moloney's call for discipline and emotional control. One of the striking things about these accounts is how they develop degrees of self-discipline that extend well past the carefully proofread cover letter. In the context of an actual job search, no activity or emotion is too small to scrutinize or recalibrate. For Alex Lamoreaux (November 2008), a PhD in English entering her third year on the market, even writing a column for the *Chronicle* is a liability. As she tells us, she "is in pretty good shape, all in all, aside from the fact that I am procrastinating right now by writing this" (para. 3). Like Moloney, Lamoreaux assures her readers that she is working hard with the caveat that there is always more she could do. "I have attended loads of conferences . . . written quite a bit journalistically," and have "some academic publications under my belt, too (if not as many as I had hoped)" (para. 3). She also discloses that what she finds most exhausting about the job search is the unceasing self-interrogation, which she characterizes as a necessary part of the process (para. 4).

Even criticisms of academic labor conditions have become tangled in the rationalities of neoliberalism. A third columnist, for instance, sets out to debunk the association between hard work and employability, but in trying to dispel the myth of the academic meritocracy ends up reinforcing a perception of professionalism as a matter of self-discipline. On being offered a tenure-track position in her department after serving three years as a lecturer, Sally Racket (March 2011) writes that "it seemed incredibly callous to yelp, dance, or run through the halls" (para. 1). In an echo of Benton, Racket attributes her job, not to hard work but to the fact that she was "one of the lucky ones" (para. 1). Like Benton, Racket dismisses academic meritocracy as a myth and empathizes with those who have been "living through rejections the last two job seasons and then working hard to do more and then even more" (para. 17). She details her own and others' productivity in order to query the belief that career success correlates with hard work. However, in defending her fellow job seekers as hard workers, her critique reinforces the idea that it is one's stamina that matters most. She characterizes, for instance, the job search as "finding out that you have to run a sprint after you've just run a marathon" (para. 11). Rather

than question that standard, she cues us to see the ill of current labor practices not as the loss of talent, skills, or fresh intellectual perspectives, but as the waste of hard work itself.

A forth columnist takes the opposite stance to that of Racket's and advises readers to rise above bitterness and not allow frustration with the job market to become a critique of the academy. Charlotte Vane's (April 2010) account of her job search illustrates how emotional temperance—in this case the ability to be graceful in the face of disappointment—is not just something one must manage as part of the search process, but is itself a measure of one's professionalism. After a year on the market in which only one of a dozen of her colleagues was offered a job, Vane wrote an article encouraging readers not to succumb to bitterness. "[E]very time we resist *schadenfreude*" she writes, "we are improving the world" (para. 6) Here Vane makes an ethical argument. She also argues, though, that bitterness is an immature emotion unfit for newly minted graduates. As she explains, bitterness—like pride—is a personal weakness that the mature will learn to control: "Bitterness may be motivational for adolescents," she writes, "but it's utterly unsustainable for adults" (ibid.). Her reasoning here matches that of Moloney, Lamoureux, and Racket, each of whom identifies additional ways to extend conventional career advice into programs of self-discipline and self-scrutiny. In each case, these regiments eclipse conventional modes of academic professional development and bind job seekers to a cycle of continuous searching for personal faults that they can remedy.

Conclusion

Thorstein Veblen's critique of university culture (1918) is a reminder that the academic career path has always been fraught with anxieties over how to comport one's self. Academics have long complained about the superficialities of academic professionalism and its weak ties to our intellectual mission.³ At issue here is not that academic careers demand professionalization; as Stanley Fish argued (1989), our professional practices give meaning to our academic work. It may be, however, that with tenure-track jobs growing increasingly scarce, job seekers simply cannot see any relationship between their professionalization and the academic career path. With the career path obscured, job seekers have turned instead to taking inventory of their emotional faults. If this is the case and the narratives above are not the usual job search anxieties, the concern is that professionalism related to the job search has shifted from a practice of promoting one's record of teaching and research to a kind of endless self-interrogation.

When I say that we have lost track of our professional selves, I do not mean that a once noble system of apprenticeship has been vitiated by neoliberal economic policies. Rather, my aim has been to suggest that job seekers have come to think of self-discipline itself as a sufficient form of professionalism in much the same way that some believe financial independence to be a sufficient economic plan. Neoliberalism may not be the cause of this shift, but it does lend itself as a rationality.

³ See, for instance, criticisms of "prolific publishing," which some decry as careerist in the basest sense. In the mid-1990s, former editors of the *Southern Communication Journal*, Keith V. Erickson, Cathy A. Fleuriet, and Lawrence A. Hosman (1993) sounded the alarm over a "research ethic" emerging among communication scholars that valued "quantity rather than quality publishing" (p. 329). They attributed that proliferation to a compulsion among some academics to see their name in print.

Any job search is fraught with emotional anxieties, but there is a difference between processing those feelings and finding them professional faults. Likewise, time management is an important skill for job seekers to have, but there is a difference between managing one's time and disciplining one's self to do more and more. Just as neoliberal rationalities can manifest in small gestures of self-interrogation, so too can our interventions be small. One such place to intervene is in the conversations that we have with students and colleagues who are in the job market and may not see that they are caught up in rationalizations that do not help them to advance along any career track. If the above narratives can help us to recognize those rationalities, then they will have proven useful after all.

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