

*Lauren Berlant*

*for Phyllis Jones and Bill Readings,  
in memoriam*

## *Feminism and the Institutions of Intimacy\**

I want to open up some questions here, about the contradictory expectations and obligations politically engaged faculty face in the contemporary American academy. In contrast to the constant shaming rhetoric issuing from the public sphere, which claims to expose the scandalously easy and self-indulgent lives of professors, I want to assert that mass stress from institutional saturation afflicts faculty across diverse institutional settings. One source of this stress is the current downsizing by universities, which obligates faculty members to meet ever greater demands for pedagogical, administrative, financial, and intellectual productivity. Another source is quite different: what I will call the intimacy expectation that accompanies much politically engaged work in the academy, both among colleagues and in pedagogical contexts. I want to talk about what it means that there is so little public discussion, among faculty and among faculty and students, about what the limits are to the charismatic mentorship model of pedagogical practice, which focuses on what one individual can do for another one, even when this model is reimagined in the name of collective intellectual and political ambition: This model tends to decredentialize students and make faculty seem falsely magical. Finally, I want to talk about the complex relations between these different scenes of labor, stress, and value. Recognizing that some of these problems emerge from the relative freedoms university teachers have to shape their professional lives, I do not want it to seem that this essay is merely a professional/queer/feminist complaint about the pressures of managing privilege. Although complaining is a valuable way of publicizing and making a larger landscape for understanding the confusing contradictions and important ephemera of everyday life. I would like to tell the following story, to underscore why I think

\*This chapter was originally commissioned as an essay to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of women's studies at Cornell. I especially thank Anna-Marie Smith and E. Ann Kaplan for their thoughtful engagement with its contents.

thinking about pedagogy, intimacy, and institutional exploitation is so important, especially for faculty whose professional work in universities is central to sustaining their political practice and optimism.

I went to Oberlin between 1975 and 1979. It was a time when many feminist teachers were just starting there, teachers who were not trained as feminists in graduate school but who were, nonetheless, busy reinventing pedagogy and disciplinary knowledge for themselves and their students, of which I was lucky to be one. The English department had a few wonderful and smart women, and one in particular became very important to me, not least because she was the first feminist teacher I had in college, and also because, along with being smart, she was one of those Oberlin 1970s feminists who made academic "safe space" seem possible. She looked at you warmly and sincerely when she talked to you, holding on to your arm as she did it, to make you feel included in the insider talk and utopian scene we were developing. I did not work closely with her academically (because she could not afford irony at that moment of personal and intellectual risk taking, whereas I needed it to survive), but I did learn immensely from her about pedagogy. It was from her that I learned that the classroom was not ideally a place for professors to dramatize the excellence of their own minds, but a space in which hard thinking could be generated collectively. She had many ideas about how such collectivity or alliance might be forged, and to this day I still work in the tradition and with the techniques I learned with her. Without abjecting her own knowledge, she respected where her students entered history.

During my time at Oberlin I taught courses in the Experimental College, a credit-generating, student-run institution, all of which concerned women and popular culture in the United States. My teacher and I worked together on the course's initial shape, and talked it through often over the years. When I was a senior, I and my course co-teacher invited her over to eat some probably very bad food, and we talked about our lives, our futures, and the things that sustained our optimism. On this subject, she described to us her increasing sadness and desperation, saying something like: Now I feel inadequate at every moment; I want to be attentive to kids like you, a good teacher in my classes, present for my colleagues, my husband, my children, my community, my activism. She said, I want to write theory, and not only can I barely finish a sentence, but I have trouble thinking a clear thought. I remember saying to her, Why don't you think of perfection as a kind of long term

project, and in the meantime just do the best you can? She said, That would be accepting failure, wouldn't it? Sometime late in the next year, she called me in Ithaca, where I was in graduate school. She asked how I was, and I told her, at great length: I was struggling terribly, partly because I felt stupid all the time, as usual, and partly because at that time there was very little feminism for graduate students in the English department, and I felt constantly inadequate and exposed as unserious for my lack of disinterestedness. We talked about this for awhile, and then she reported that she had stopped teaching and in fact had had a nervous breakdown. She said she couldn't face the classroom any longer. Shortly thereafter, she killed herself.

There are many reasons someone would do something like this. Certainly, I don't know the whole story. But to those of us in the academic community whom she had taught and taught with and talked to, it seemed clear that she had suffered terribly from the notion that a good feminist fails if she cannot attend constantly to the nurturing/facilitating project in every domain of her commitment. It seemed clear to us that the conditions of ever-expanding volunteer obligation that politically engaged academics inhabit, which tend to induce precarious lives, are structural in ways about which we have not yet produced satisfactory eloquence. It is to begin redressing these lacks that this chapter is also dedicated.

### Whose Fantasy Is This?

The opening shots of the film *Go Fish* (dir. Rose Troche, 1994) take place in a women's studies class whose subject is lesbian history. Kia, the teacher, is asking the class to name some famous lesbians. The students offer a wide range of choices: serious ones and frivolous ones and ones that attack self-righteous heterosexuals, from Sappho and Angela Davis to Peppermint Patty, Mary Lou Retton, Agnes Morehead, and Marilyn Quayle. Someone asks the teacher why they are making the list. Kia, who is the film's key to all wisdom, tells her students that the lives of lesbians have been hidden lives, and that "the meaning and power of history" lies not just in excavating these suppressed knowledges, but in taking on the responsibility to know history differently, and thus to make history, to change its course.

The scene then cuts to someone's apartment. A young white woman named Max is writing in her journal about a lesbian life she has not yet had. To imagine her life she constructs a love plot. In her journal, on the soundtrack, and on the screen she tells the story of the imaginary day an unnamed

