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*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

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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

"you" and she were supposed to meet and fall in love, only a fat man interposed his body in the space where contact was supposed to have happened and love was supposed to begin. The tragedy of the loss Max experiences by not having a love plot with "you" to sustain her leads her to a defensive and joyous crescendo of self-naming, where she says the phrase "My Name is Max," over and over, in the absence of the other's voice speaking her name in the magical affirmation of love.

The camera then cuts to two anxious women waking up in bed. These are older women, women of color, sleeping in very white sheets. We discover that the women's studies teacher, Kia, is also Max's roommate, and we hear that she has overslept her class after a long night of sex with her lover Evie. Kia is an African-American, lesbian feminist from the 1970s and Evie is younger, Chicana, and a nurse. Max finds Kia's "lesson plan" for her and as the teacher rushes out of the house to her waiting class, Max stops her and says, "You're going to meet me at the café at five to read my paper, right?" At five Kia and Max meet to discuss her paper. But mainly they talk about their sexual lives, and play a game of naming who in the café is sexually attractive and who is not, and the student teases the teacher for using archaic 1970s-style terms for vagina like "honey pot." The teacher gets a little mad, but says "You know I can't stay mad at you for long." Max closes the conference by asking Kia to "facilitate," not her intellectual life, but her desire to be in a couple "by helping me meet babes." It is a long office hour but we never actually see them discuss what Max wrote in her paper. As the film goes on the teacher is seen constantly engaging in erotic discourse, gossip, and sexual play with her own girlfriend and her student friends. She also finds a girlfriend for Max, a girl named Ely. The teacher has fabulous taste. The girls walk off into the sunset.

Go Fish is a really sweet movie, but I could not help thinking as I watched it: Whose fantasy is this? Then I thought about Mary Louise Pratt's assertion, in her essay "Linguistic Utopias," that when it comes to theorizing pedagogy there is almost always no voice of the student. Pratt argues that even when politically engaged teaching is examined, there is only the voice of the teacher, the perspective of the teacher that dominates discussions about power and knowledge in the classroom (Pratt, 51–52). I have long been haunted by this assertion, and it has changed and helped to make more explicit and self-threatening the kinds of discussions about power and knowledge styles I have with my own students.

But while I was watching *Go Fish*, I must admit a bit of resentment crept into the space of sentimentality, nostalgia, and principle that usually sustains me through my fear of failing to be a worthy feminist teacher. This

feeling registered contrary impulses: First, I was thinking, this movie is a student's fantasy, a teacher never would have written this film. For Max and her friends the academic queer/feminist project holds a promise of a teacher who is infinitely patient, available, and confident of her knowledge, an intellectual and sexual role model who uses her long office hours therapeutically to help students develop subjectivity and self-esteem—to solve personal problems, find love, and get laid, for example. In short, there is no voice of the teacher here, no different life history, no struggle or anxiety, no question of boundaries or recognition of difference, no unshared aspiration, no aversion at the heart of what might also truly be a scene of pedagogical and political intimacy. There is no professorial relation to materialist politics either, no evidence of a commitment to thinking about the nonsubjective domains of social transformation feminist/queer work has also been known to address. If there had been, the film would have no doubt registered it as the queer/feminist project's failure to be there *for the students*.

On the other hand, because I am a feminist from the much maligned and yet still utopianized 1970s I remember how exciting it was to enter as a student this scene of politics, fantasy, and intimacy. Then, the alliances feminism promised to make seemed destined to produce collaboration and cohabitation across different identities and different kinds of privilege and struggle. Central to this promise was a new and exciting complexity among teachers and students, which merged inventing new knowledge with making unprecedented political and erotic demands on each other and on the practical world. It involved thinking that a new literacy about power would make relations of domination both less painful and less entrenched. It cast the academy as a miniature world where hierarchies of authority and entitlement might be refunctioned and even put to the productive use of subalterns in and outside of school. It proposed that new relations between knowledge, authority, and desire would not only affirm but create new general possibilities for identity and society. Central to this social transformation would be a revolution in the scene of teaching, turning it into a public, collective, and politically accountable practice.

This was the aspiration to include academia in the project of making an American feminist public sphere: I would like to tell a story about some things that have happened to this cluster of desires and practices, that is, to provide a preliminary anatomy of intimacy that will characterize some of the complex and incoherent demands that have come to saturate our professional time and labor, if we are women, or feminists, or queers, or teachers committed to counterhegemonic teaching and research in the contemporary American academy.

The word "our" here deserves some special preliminary attention. Not only all knowledge but all teaching is local, and any anecdotal evidence I might have will always derive both from particular institutional cultures and more random encounters with circulating anecdotes, including things I have read in journals and books. All of these bits of knowledge no doubt operate according to specific norms about what constitutes the kinds of virtuoso competence feminist and other politically engaged teachers are supposed to have. I have attended and taught at private or semiprivate institutions: Oberlin, Cornell, the University of Chicago. It is said that at private universities the students frequently see themselves, through their parents, as buying a kind of intimate access to professors that they would not get at state-run institutions. I have not had this experience of imperious student demand—quite the opposite. For queer/feminist teachers generally I suspect a much more insecure desire by students for professorial cultivation/therapy/solidarity overwrites the elite expectation of faculty attention. The relation between these two scenes of pedagogy—the elite and the sentimental—will be explored in the next section. In any case, I will take as given that across different scenes of politically engaged academic life, especially those organized around corporealized and sexualized kinds of identity movements—African-American, Hispanic, gay and lesbian, or women's studies—the phrase "virtuoso competence" ought to, but does not, seem like an oxymoron; that students and feminist teachers labor under vastly unrealistic, stress-creating, and nonetheless important, utopian expectations about what it is possible to generate in a university, especially in the face of the bureaucratic violence of work and the vulnerabilities of having ideas; that it is important to create some contexts for understanding the ever-proliferating obligations and desires feminist and queer academics face.

I am more broadly interested in what happens when people see their relations to an institution as vital to their self-understanding, their selfhood, their identities, and their hold on narratives of history and possibilities of the future. This condition of institutional identification has become especially acute where politically engaged knowledge projects in the academy are concerned, since between the right-wing turn of American public culture and the increasing instability and narrowing of hiring opportunities in universities even the activist space for radical work seems to have become more "academic." For many the classroom and writing are now the *only* places for political work and for experiencing collective engagement in thinking about futures and bringing about change. But these and other pressures tend to lead to overdependence on the

institution, an overidentification with its individualist standards of professional value, and, in the women's studies context, unrealistic expectations about what kinds of safety, support, sustenance, and affection expectations and people in institutions can provide. Anyone who has observed the Jane Gallop sexual harassment case,¹ for example, has witnessed a terrible mess of courage, code-crossing, and confusion about the relation between institution and affective intention where women's studies practice is concerned. The ambiguity of professionally mediated intellectual closeness, especially in the tutelary context of feminist/lesbian/queer identifications, was further exacerbated by the centrality of psychoanalytic theory and the erotics of transference to Gallop's particular pedagogical practice. Yet the rapid shifts among scenes of teaching theory, feminist feeling, hetero- and homoerotic discourse and practice, feminist public culture, and actual corporeal sex acts in this story reveal, if nothing else, that the pedagogical complexities of identification, mediation, responsibility, and privilege are importantly different from the conventional love talk of couples and the therapeutic talk of psychoanalysis. They operate according to different rules, and have different conventional ways of disavowing what protects and motivates those with authority. On the other hand, they reproduce intimate knowledge as dependent on a scene of intersubjectivity, frequently blocking out or minimizing the ways the material conditions of knowledge production affect what counts as trustworthy explanation, argument, and evidence. And if teaching is like psychoanalysis in the ways transference opens up unsettling scenes of knowing, it is most like love when it shares love's debilitating fetish of implicitness, an ideal of transparent intersubjectivity that turns the complexities of contract into seeming necessities of life. This brief triangulation of intimacy forms tells us that when the concept of pedagogy is *dominated* by the tableau of charismatic teacher/desiring student, it relies on euphemizing or denying altogether the routinized aspects of its institutional situation. The false figure of intersubjectivity woven into the ethics of proper academic subject formation always threatens to depoliticize queer/feminist work. But subject formation is only apparently personal.

The eroticization of the discourse of pedagogy in feminist and queer contexts constantly elicits complex scenes of hetero-feminist erotophobia (i.e., teaching between women should nurture feeling but should *not* involve desire) and queer sex literalism (same-sex pedagogy always involves specifically sexual and sexually specific desire). But this mania for the intersubjective has also diverted the development of more widening and still pertinent discussions of the material conditions of feminist praxis in the

academy, in ways I think damaging both to teachers and to students. This is the concern of section three. It will be my task throughout this essay to think about what it has meant that academic feminism has made public spheres around a desire to change knowledge, make subjects, and institutionalize feeling. I will organize my discussion around two paradigms: in the first, the individual student/teacher encounter as the modal scene of academic practice; second, its antithesis, the ever-expanding complex of activities that saturates the time of workers in the knowledge factory at all levels of the bureaucracy.

The Sentimental Mission of Feminist Teaching

One of the striking things about academic life is the way its institutional spaces and relations of professional labor support the production of intimate publics. That is, they become public contexts of collective life on which people come to rely for sustaining their identities, their opinions, and their relations to power, as well as their fantasies, rages, and desires. Usually without realizing it, workers invest in these scenes anxieties and needs for mirroring one normally associates with the institutions of privacy and domestic intimacy (Negt and Kluge, 32–38). But because most intimate publics are generated in institutions that seem merely instrumental to people's survival, they tend not to experience their own institution-based intensity as something emanating from *themselves*, their needs and desires.

Since there is nothing natural or inevitable about this expectation that work, even professional work, will provide anything but material self-sustenance, we can assume that there is something peculiar (although not unique) about the way academia generates expectations for some of the people who labor in it that they will gain sustainable identities through it; we can also assume that there is something peculiar about the way the institution generates amnesias about what it cannot do. In this section I would like to describe some aspects of these expectations and amnesias. As throughout this chapter, I will shuttle between explanations that are not women's studies-specific and those that are.

In 1967 Christopher Jencks and David Riesman published *The Academic Revolution*, which tells an ambivalent story of the modern American university. They begin by referring to a myth about the experience of being a university student, a conceit that still saturates the sentimental educational rhetoric about the identity-forming, citizen-building, or ethical function of education currently coming from both the right and liberals in the American public sphere. "Among the many myths that afflict contemporary

thinking about American colleges, none is more persistent than the one that maintains that in the good old days, when colleges were small, faculty and students had intimate personal contacts on a day-to-day basis" (Jencks and Riesman, 35). They suggest that the romantic pedagogical tradition, the tradition of the *Émile*, became institutionalized mainly as an ideal of Enlightenment pedagogy. In this scenario, tutors and teachers not only impart true knowledge to their students, but in so doing make a world possible for them, a world where their sensibility and ambition might merge in a lifelong sentimental education. We might say that no one any longer believes this ideologue. Yet, as many have argued, the possibility that one will experience the charismatic authority of the virtuoso teacher still frames and organizes the hopes and aspirations of many students, especially those who see in school the possibility of finding and securing a true self (Johnson et al., 1982).

Of course, this particular expectation is traditionally that of members of an educated elite, where questions of what constitutes survival, and survival's relation to the good life, expose the class determinations of personhood. Only when practical survival is a given can the subject stop drowning in the contingencies of the present tense: Only once a future seems assured can the pedagogic gaze be turned toward developing the soul's capacity to possess its authentic and fulfilled identity. We can see the power of the elite mytheme in novels like Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), where it is not knowledge but the teacher's aura itself that becomes a wedge into new possible worlds and affects for her female students. Or in the film *Dead Poets Society* (dir. Peter Weir, 1989), where male students struggling to become authentic in the face of narrow patriarchal notions of personal value overidentify with the pithy passionate pseudo-philosophy of their English teacher.

What the parents in the film want is for their sons to affirm the patriarchal value of the fathers and the older brothers who have also excelled at the Helton school and gone on to become worthy professionals. But this unironic and uncynical film has a powerful desire to revitalize the empty forms of "tradition, honor, discipline, excellence," the fathers offer through the school: "Seize the day, boys," the teacher, Jack Keating, opines, "make your lives extraordinary." By this he means that they should cultivate the excesses of their language, sensibility, inferiority, and instinct. They should aspire to be Walt Whitman, without the homosexuality. Then afterwards, if they want, they can still go on to join the normative professions.

Played out here intergenerationally is a contradiction within capitalist subjectivity already well-described by Jurgen Habermas and Herbert

