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Hitting Pause on Productivity: Finding Mindful Labor in Quarantine

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On March 11, 2020, the University of Wisconsin-Madison suspended in-person classes beginning March 23 through April 10 in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. I was in my Economies of Literacy class when the email popped up on my screen. As the discussion wrapped up and the news spread throughout the class, we ended with uncertain plans for the future: we'll figure out what our class looks like in the coming weeks; for now, enjoy your spring break.

Enjoy your spring break. I can do that. My partner and I were headed to visit my dad in Chicago for a few days and take engagement pictures. It would be nice to spend time in my childhood home, check in on my dad, get some work done on my midterms, and take some sappy pictures with skyscraper backdrops. It would be nice to step just slightly away for just a brief moment from the many roles I play as an aspiring academic and primarily enjoy being a daughter, a friend, a partner (with just a little bit of student, as always). A few days into break, though, the university extended the suspension of in-person classes through the end of the semester, and instructors across campus were thrust into bringing their courses online. My spring break was no longer a break as I processed information from my professors as a student, my supervisors as a grad student employee, my undergraduate students as their instructor, and the university at large. I did my best to stay on track with my original plans for break and accommodate the changing demands of my position as a graduate instructor, a TA at the Writing Center, a student in my courses, a novice researcher, and a colleague in my program.

This was what everyone was doing, though. And somehow I felt strangely confident in my ability to weather this unprecedented storm. I wasn't pleased about any of the new demands on my time, but I calmly put my head down and continued working despite my original plan to enjoy my spring break by taking a break. Plans change. And,

in my focus on communicating changes in my course calendar to my students, implementing changes to my strategy for my midterms, and integrating lifestyle changes to my daily routine, I missed the fact that most of those changes were not self-determined.

And then I began reading for next week's classes. For the Economies of Literacy course, excerpts from researcher Melissa Gregg's monographs *Work's Intimacy* and *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy* were on the syllabus for the coming week. And reading these excerpts from Gregg while working from home during and coming off a spring break that wasn't a break made these texts even more intensely relatable and appropriate than I think they would've been otherwise. I couldn't help but recognize how my "efficiency training" immediately kicked in when faced with unprecedented change. Unexpectedly, after reading these excerpts, I was worried and agitated by my instinct to press on unaffectedly, to remain productive and not question the blurring lines between work and home. I just . . . kept working. Why wasn't I feeling anything other than the impetus to continue working?

When things began to shut down, like many, I looked at it as an opportunity. Quarantine meant more efficiency, right? Finally, I will have more time to do this and do that, to catch up and get ahead. But I soon realized that time isn't extended in quarantine—I don't get more of it. Despite not having to travel to and from appointments and responsibilities, I didn't find more time to accomplish all of the things on my to-do list. That didn't stop me from adding more items to that list, though.

And then, all of a sudden, about two weeks later, I seemingly couldn't just keep going. This is odd for me. All of my intersecting identities—student, educator, writer, woman, person of color—are persistent. I do not stop; I persist. But instead of confident, I suddenly felt hopeless . . . I stared listlessly at my computer screen and then at my to-do list and back again at my computer, unsure of how or where to begin. I closed my laptop and opened a book. I read the words, but I didn't understand them. I tried changing positions: a new seat at the dining-room-table-turned-communal-workspace, a respite on the couch, the uncomfortable desk chair in the other room. I returned to my place at the dining room table and opened my laptop once again. I stared at my inbox. What now? Would I be stuck here forever?

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I imagine similar questions have crossed other people's minds during

quarantine: What now? In fact, in an overwhelming fit of despair, I asked it out loud to my partner: Will it be like this forever? It doesn't hit everyone at the same time, and it might not have hit you, dear reader, yet, but quarantine can bring up some pretty existential questions. Answers in quarantine can be pretty illuminating.

Before the pandemic, I treated every day as a challenge. How much could I possibly squeeze in? How many things could I schedule between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m.? Down to the minute, I would jam task after task into my daily planner. I would power walk through the hallways of the English Department, up and down the streets of campus. I would arrive at meetings, classes, appointments out of breath but ready to work. And then I would happily cross each item off my list, feeling more motivated to forge ahead as each item was checked off, strategizing and prioritizing my way to accomplishing everything on it. There was no greater sense of accomplishment than coming home at the end of the day with everything complete. There was also no greater sense of anxiety than coming home with more things to do and obsessively strategizing to find a way to do them and still be present at home. In my efforts to fit everything into a typical workday, I chased after the "work/life balance ruse" that Melissa Gregg elucidates in *Work's Intimacy*; however, instead of achieving true balance, I was swept up in "work's enticing and seductive dimensions" (5-6). As a result, I unknowingly yet acutely struggled with what she terms "presence bleed," or the "consciousness of the always-present potential for engaging with work [that] is a new form of affective labor that must be constantly regulated" (3). Except, I didn't know how to regulate it. I still battle against a constant consciousness that I could be accomplishing more and against the instinct to strategize how to work more. I feel an almost insatiable need to produce in order to feel whole, in order to avoid feeling anxious.

I deeply identify with the senses of pleasure and accomplishment that professional work produces in today's era as aided by rapid and extensive technological advances that Melissa Gregg writes about in *Work's Intimacy*. The "psychological appeal" of work for me was exacerbated by the turn to technological platforms in response to workplace and state-wide shutdowns in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. That is, as a high school composition teacher and now as a graduate student, I've been trained in the "disciplinary techniques" of "self-monitoring and individual goal-setting," but the autonomy of such positions "come at a price: to constantly prove responsibility" (13). So

when quarantine began, I was still out of breath. I wasn't power walking through hallways or up and down the streets of campus anymore. Instead, I was zooming through meetings, weaving in assignments, and sending out emails. My planner was filled to the brim, and I continued to find ways to fit as much as I could into my day. No pandemic would stop me; in fact, I would transcend it. Quarantine wouldn't change anything but where I'm working. I would continue being the concurrent student, educator, colleague, writer, partner I had always been—reliable, impressive, efficient, persistent, and breathless.

As a result of the rapid shift to online instruction and learning, I acutely felt the "presence bleed" (*Counterproductive* 12) that has resulted from the technologically-aided turn from an information economy to an attention economy. As neoliberal ideologies influence education at every level, promoting individual responsibility, market-based competition, and quantifiable success, teachers and students—of which I am both—find themselves in incredibly precarious positions, especially in the face of COVID-19. In order to keep my job, I must respond well to the pandemic-amplified "productivity imperative" or suffer the "cumulative effect of cost-cutting measures that urge employees to 'do more with less' and 'work smarter, not harder'" (3). As such, I must quickly develop new effective habits and lean on technology to continue producing—to continue teaching, writing, discussing, participating, replying, attending, etc. My fight-or-flight response to the heightened precarity instigated by higher education's reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic was to fall back on what Gregg calls my "efficiency training," which "encourages workers to see themselves as capable of separating from the pack and with the right motivation, destined for a prosperous future, even in times of economic distress" (75). And as Gregg illuminates, the potential issues posed by separating from the pack—and predominantly exercising our capacities for intimacy/connection "in the pursuit of competitive professional profit," as a result—may eventually lead to being "unable to appreciate the benefits of intimacy for unprofitable purposes" (*Work's Intimacy* 6). I can attest that it has proven extremely difficult to achieve work/life balance in the face of the imperative to be available for faculty and students, to make it work beyond "normal" business hours (what are those nowadays, anyways?), to unquestioningly make sacrifices in order not to move up, but simply maintain my status, because 1) there are no longer clear boundaries between work and life, and 2) I believed

my efficiency training would continue to serve me well, despite the unprecedented circumstances. Without clear boundaries, professional productivity has come to mean progress and living my personal life has come to mean a pause in that productivity. As a result, productivity for professional progress has begun to take precedence over what seems like pausing for personal connection. I was indeed becoming "unable to appreciate the benefits of intimacy for unprofitable purposes" (6).

Gregg writes that "presence bleed captures both the changing behavioral dimensions and professional expectations in communication and information-heavy jobs" (*Work's Intimacy* 2). As a millennial in 2020, as a woman of color, and as a scholar-educator, I'm not sure I've known any other behavioral dimensions or professional expectations. I've come up in an age of precarity that makes it possible to take advantage of worker-citizen-consumer-learners like me. And so, originally as a high school teacher and now as a graduate student, I have consistently found myself wondering why that is, torn between two cultural economic voices:

- the quiet, calm voice that advocates for being understanding, for being a team player that does her part, and
- the outraged voice that says I shouldn't have to take on this much and tolerate the invasion of work into so much of my life.

I've realized the first voice as efficiency trained (*Counterproductive* 75); it responds to the productivity imperative (3) and performs executive athleticism (54). That is, this first voice "accepts personal responsibility for productivity" (73). This is how middle-class neoliberalism raised me, shapes me: it's up to me to do my part in order to keep being productive and therefore keep progressing; teamwork and productivity are how I make myself marketable.

The second voice, on the other hand, is trying to practice mindful labor (*Work's Intimacy* 16) by recognizing the hegemonic status of time management on my professional and personal life (*Counterproductive* 55). The second voice is working against the influences of an "age of maximum flexibility" and against giving in to the "feelings of instability, threat, and fear" that advances in technology have played on over the last few decades (18). It seeks to honor the power of collectivity in establishing career competence, in being good worker-citizen-consumer-learners. As time wears on, both before but especially during quarantine, I am becoming more aware of the "immaterial"

(or invisible) labor (*Work's Intimacy* 13) involved in the responsibilities that come along with the coexisting positions I hold as a graduate student, an educator, a researcher, a partner, a woman, a colleague, a writer, a daughter, a sister, a friend.

Despite recognizing being torn between these two voices, the first one consistently won out. I didn't realize it until now, but I had formed an unhealthy obsession with accomplishment. I struggled to stop accomplishing—I mean, who wants to stop accomplishing things? I liked being breathless because it meant I was getting things done. However, I believe this second voice represents "an emerging practice of mindful labor [that] can introduce ethics to the pursuit of productivity" (*Counterproductive* 16) that is beginning to take hold in me, especially as a result of the sweeping lifestyle changes COVID-19 has introduced. With more and more time in quarantine, I'm coming to realize the truth in Gregg's assertion that "time management is inwardly focused; its project is personal enhancement rather than care for others" (75). I don't want this to be my sole focus anymore; instead, I want to practice radical care for myself and for others by practicing mindful labor—labor that honors the idea that "solidarity and power are formed through the collective imposition of work limits" (*Work's Intimacy* 4).

Thus, a few weeks in, I realized that quarantine was not the opportunity I thought it was. As the number of cases and deaths grew and the stay-at-home orders increased and the social distancing measures strengthened, I tried to simply press on with my daily routine like the good efficiency-trained scholar-educator I had always been. As I was bombarded with news of the United States' fumbling efforts to flatten the curve, desperate attempts to protect the economy, and disparities in protection and care exacerbating long-held inequities in our country, I tried to focus on what was in my locus of control—my to-do list. And that's when quarantine meant overworking myself, meant beating myself up for even thinking about taking a break, meant overscheduling and overextending myself more than ever before. I disregarded the idea that perhaps I needed to grieve the destruction the pandemic was wreaking on the world and the loss of self-determination quarantine imposed on my daily routine. I disregarded the idea that my body and my mind needed time to adjust to quarantine. I just needed to keep working and focus on the tasks in front of me. However, participating in the eight daily reflection prompts as a CCCC Documentarian highlighted for me how little I was moving throughout the day. The reflections highlighted

how long I stayed in the same place, accomplishing all the things but seemingly getting nowhere, making no progress. It's a puzzling catch-22: powering through a to-do list without moving; staying in place while trying to push forward. Mentally, it's exhausting. And emotionally, it's confusing: why wasn't I feeling the same senses of pleasure and accomplishment for the work I was completing? Instead, I would come to the end-of-day reflections and feel defeated, exhausted, and disappointed for not having reached all of my (impossible) goals. I felt as if I wasn't using my time wisely, as if, all of a sudden, I couldn't be efficient.

Quarantine was a different opportunity entirely because, normally, opportunities are something I try to make the most of, even when they're unexpected. But what I'm learning from quarantine is how not to make the most of something, how not to make it work for me, how to stop strategizing, how to sit with un-accomplishment. I am learning how to question productivity as progress and prioritize reflection as pause. I'm learning how to be more aware of immaterial/invisible labor and practice more mindful labor that encompasses an ethics of (self-) care. To do this, I am trying to channel my motivation to be productive toward "unprofitable" ends, like setting up family video calls and reaching out to friends just to catch up. As the popular rhetoric goes, quarantine and social distancing isn't for me but for others. If I don't come out of quarantine having accomplished all of my professional goals, that's okay because quarantine isn't for more work or for profiting off of seemingly "more" time (what a joke!). Quarantine is for preserving life. It's to hopefully return to life as we once knew it or an even better one in which we prioritize and cherish connections for personal (rather than solely professional) purposes. I hope to come away from this with less of an inward focus on my own improvement and achievement and more of an outward focus on practicing radical care through building and maintaining positive relationships with myself and others.

Now, it's hard not to reframe these "lessons" as a new way of taking advantage, of making quarantine work for me. However, instead of accomplishing a new way to live my life that doesn't revolve around accomplishing or failing, I'm coming to terms with it instead. And I don't think coming to terms is the same as making the most of a situation. It's accepting it. It's turning away from a sole focus on progress and finding comfort in pausing, both by myself and with others. I may be catching my breath, but not necessarily by choice, and I'm reminded of all the people who can't catch their breath right now,

who couldn't. Practicing mindful labor is one way to begin fighting for those most affected by COVID-19 because it undermines the neoliberal project of individual responsibility, competition, and measurable success. Instead, mindful labor can help us collectively come to understand and elevate the meaning and purpose (instead of just the profits) behind the work we do as well as the work we don't.

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We won't be stuck here forever. But if we're fortunate enough to take a moment (or even to be forced to take a moment) to breathe, we should, because there are so many others who cannot. Pressing on unemotionally is dangerous and risky. Efficiency training and executive athleticism are only good up until a point; mindful labor, on the other hand, can clarify a sustainable path forward.

And through such a practice, I hope to know how to stop along the way, how to be more accommodating of detours, instead of finding myself hopeless and unable to move forward. If I take anything from quarantine, I hope it is to respond to events of the world with grace and compassion for myself and for others; I hope I learn how to be intentional about catching my breath and to be grateful for the chance to do so.

As a student, an educator, a writer, and especially as a woman of color, it's hard for me to sit with un-accomplishment, to be unproductive, because of a fear of letting my communities down. When you're tired, it's much easier to keep pushing forward when it's for people and causes you care about. And therefore, it sometimes feels all up to me to continue forging a path with and for others like me. If I don't do it, who will? I'm learning that it's those same communities who help me get unstuck and regain my confidence. When I unexpectedly rolled to a stop, it was other students, educators, writers, and women (of color) who told me it would be okay, who encouraged me to catch my breath, who reminded me that there's no such thing as oppression and inequity that can be overcome with just hard work, who showed me that it's not all up to me. Only in solidarity can we resist the influences of precarity, especially during this time.

WORKS CITED

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