

# Where are the Women?: Rhetoric of Gendered Labor in University Communities

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inclusion, access, gendered labor, university community, university discourse

I recently attended a panel of feminist scholars at the Conference of College Composition and Communication entitled “Rhetorical Inquiry to Change Realities: Why Feminist Methods Matter” (Belanger et al.). The question that framed the presentations was “where are the women?” There was considerable discussion from the panel and among audience members about women’s inclusion and equal participation in disciplines, university governance, and university communities, with a particular emphasis on underrepresented fields such as engineering. The discussion emphasized that women, individually and collectively, deserve *access* and *inclusion* to institutional governance and knowledge production in all areas of universities because women are demonstrably valuable members of institutions and systems.

Certainly, inclusion and access are important feminist issues. Inclusion and access have been used as by feminists as keywords, “‘particular formations of meaning’ that provide ‘ways not only of discussing but at another level of seeing many of our central experiences’” (Williams, qtd. in McRuer 6). As keywords used by feminist scholars and activists, access and inclusion can help secure recognition within legal systems and religious organizations, from employers and professional organizations, and within public space and public cultures. However, given the range of women who work at universities, and the close relations and dependencies among differently, and often unequally, situated women, the particular question raised at the panel “where are the women,” with its call for access to academic employment and inclusion in university governance, seems too narrowly focused on women who do intellectual labor, i.e. faculty. At many universities, keywords of access and inclusion are not used to address the range of labor that women do at universities, nor does it address complex relations between differently situated women. While access and inclusion can be strategic keywords, when used only to talk about faculty these keywords insufficiently address the wide range of experiences of women who work in universities, particularly immigrant women of color.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, I argue that keywords of access and inclusion need to be situated specifically within the gendered material and structural labor contexts of contemporary universities. To make this argument, I investigate how gendered labor at universities is wound up in citizenship, race, ability, and other social categories. For analysis of differently situated women, and differently recognized women, who work in contemporary universities, arguments for access and inclusion must be

expanded through attention to what Jennifer Nash calls “understudied intersections” (51) between “intimate entanglements between labor, gender, race, citizenship in the current global moment” (57). This essay expands the keywords *inclusion* and *access* by drawing attention to and analyzing the labor of differently situated women in universities. The labor that connects differently situated women—in my example, intersections of gender, race, citizenship, and labor—must be accounted for in order to constitute feminist arguments for inclusion and access effectively. To do this work, I lay out how intellectual labor in a university depends upon on the physical and reproductive labor of women and people of color, even as this gendered and racialized labor is not discursively visible in the conversations about access and inclusion that I opened with.<sup>2</sup> To make this point, I provide an example from the university where I work, George Washington University (GW), located in Washington, DC.

## THICK RELATIONS AND THIN DISCOURSE

My argument for linking discourse about access and inclusion to analysis of labor emerges from a very basic, grounded observation about life and work at George Washington University. At GW, located in downtown Washington, DC, women are professors, students, staff, and administrators. Women are also contracted janitors and subcontracted janitors. Women make and serve food, answer phones, order books, and care for children. Women do gendered, reproductive labor, labor that is associated with women’s reproductive and domestic roles. This labor “reproduce[s] healthy, active human life, on a daily and a generational basis” (Kabeer 28). Faculty, student, and administrators *depend* upon reproductive labor: faculty could not work and live at the university without services such as food preparation, window installation, trash disposal, or bathroom cleaning and maintenance. Intellectual employment is enabled by gendered reproductive labor directly: this is a *thick, direct* economic relationship that sustains the work and life of the *entire* community. However, these thick dependencies are often *thinly* recognized in the feminist discourse that I’ve described.

At GW, gendered labor is predominantly carried out by women (and men) of color. Workers are drawn from the metropolitan area’s long-standing African American communities as well as from more recent migrants to the metropolitan area, usually Latino, African, and Asian women. Women who serve food and clean bathrooms may have unequal access to institutions such as education. If they are not citizens, they have limited access to state support systems and legal systems. They may also come from communities that historically have been exploited and disenfranchised. Thus, thick dependencies, arenas of life where human dependence on others is unrecognized and unavoidable part of everyday life, are constituted by “mutually constructing nature of systems of oppression,” (Collins 153) unequal ideologies, practices, and histories of racism, access to citizenship and literacy which are conjoined to gendered, reproductive labor.

My point is that thick economic dependencies—economic relationships that sustain the work and life of a entire university community—are (unequally) constituted through “understudied intersections” between labor, gender, race, citizenship in the current local context (Nash). In this context, race, gender, citizenship, and other systems of oppression are central to understanding

gendered labor structures and relationships in universities as well as in cities and regions such as Washington, DC.

As Kevin Mahoney and I have argued elsewhere, in universities, women who clean bathrooms and cook in cafeterias are structurally *inside* the university community insofar as their labor reproduces the conditions of education and scholarship for the university community. Simultaneously, women are discursively *outside* insofar as they are not imagined as part of the university community itself (*Democracies to Come*). The decontextualized use of keywords such as inclusion and access that I described earlier does not address women's reproductive labor that sustains, indeed makes possible, intellectual labor.<sup>3</sup> Recognition and analysis of the local relations and structures of gendered labor by women is pointedly absent in such feminist discourse.

At the same time, that thick analysis of gendered labor is absent in some areas of feminist discourse, women's reproductive contributions are not recognized in university discourse. In universities, as in cities such as Washington, DC, reproductive labor that sustains a community is not part of the discursive imagination of people in positions of influence and power in *local* places. University communities are constituted and imagined "on the projection of individual existence into the weft of a collective narrative, on the *recognition* of a common name and on traditions lived" (Wald 52) that weave them into the narrative of belonging. The discourses through which universities are imagined and projected—inherited stories, disciplinary language, classroom conversations, pedagogical documents, news stories, and conference presentations—are thick discourses of recognition and belonging that connect us to those who are similarly situated through our labor. Such discourse does not recognize forms of gendered and racialized reproductive labor that enable a local academic community to live healthy and productive lives. For example, when the university represents itself on its website, it presents photos of students studying and interacting with faculty, graduation celebrations, and other images of interactions between students and faculty. As I will go on to discuss, in the current moment of global capital (or, to put it differently, neoliberal political economy) these discourses do not recognize workers such as immigrant women and women of color in public culture and public life.

## GLOBAL RELATIONSHIPS AND DEPENDENCIES

The GW example enables me to point to a university community that depends upon gendered service labor of women of color. I have argued that gendered labor is thinly visible *locally*. In the daily lives of faculty, students, and administrators who work on campus, gendered reproductive labor is not part of the discourse of belonging to community. Nor is there in dominant discourse any sustained recognition of the dependencies between intellectual and reproductive labor or analysis of the historical formations of formal and informal labor in relation to gender and race. In addition to sustaining local community, gendered labor sustains GW's global identification and reach.

In addition to being a local place where students learn, janitors clean, immigrant laborers install windows, staff manage offices, and faculty teach, GW has a global identification and reach. Because of its centrality to the global economy and global governance, Washington, DC has a

relatively economically stable global location. In this context, it is a hub for a gendered and racialized economy, income-generating activities that are low-paid, often occur outside of state regulation, and are not included in official economic calculations or discourse (Sassen). In the current global economy, cities that are central to the operations of formal economy rely upon women of color and immigrant women (these categories obviously overlap), to supply low-wage labor that is associated with women's domestic roles. As Saskia Sassen argues, informal, service sector work has a particular gendered structure; it is "buil[t] on the backs of women" (179). Immigrant women and women from longstanding minority communities do the labor that is essential for the operation of the global economy and local places in the global economy (180). However, while migrant women supply labor that makes intellectual labor possible, they are not seen as members of university communities. The vocabularies of contemporary globalization do not include low-paid service sector gendered labor.

The university is part of global exchanges that bring students, faculty, and other intellectual workers to Washington, DC from all over the world and that send students and faculty abroad. Research done at GW on economies and social groups is used to make funding decisions by powerful agencies and institutions such as the World Bank and the United Nations as well as non-governmental organizations. Scientific knowledge shapes policy and resource decisions by the US government. Global exchanges of knowledge in a range of fields are directed through university centers and institutes across disciplines and fields. We can call GW a "global university"; a "command point" and center of the global knowledge economy; a key location for production, innovation, and dissemination of ideas, policies, data, and knowledge (Massey, "Geographies," 12-13).

In fact, GW's identification and influence as a global university could not exist without local labor such as food service and trash disposal. As a local place with a global identification, GW depends upon upkeep of campuses and buildings, garbage removal, and clean bathrooms. This reproductive labor and these reproductive laborers make their global identifications and influence possible: faculty, students, and administrators could not travel, study, or cross borders without reproductive labor. To rephrase my earlier point, thick global economic dependencies that sustain the *global* reach and influence of the university are (unequally) constituted through understudied *local* intersections between labor, gender, race, citizenship. In this context, race, gender, citizenship, and other systems of oppression are *central* to understanding how global universities are at the center of the global knowledge economy.<sup>4</sup>

## SHIFTING LOCAL AFFILIATIONS

How can we draw attention to thick, local relations and interdependencies that make the city and the university's global reach and influence possible? In the context of thick gendered and racialized labor relations, how do we create literate practices, reading and writing practices that are used to interpret and evaluate knowledge (Schell and Rawson), that bring to the surface macro-political relations and dependencies? How can we create *obligation*, or what Iris Marion Young calls *political responsibility*, among both local communities and global places? How do we analyze race, class, gender, ability, citizenship, the local relations upon which the university depends as well as the

global relations that sustain universities and cities? How do we shift identification from hegemonic representation of universities to thick, differentiated affinities that link people within a particular place?

It is relatively easy to find examples that mark the absence of women's reproductive labor in local discourse and global discourse: in academic discussions; in administrative communications; in less formal conversations about who matters, whose work is valued, and who is invited to participate in decisions. Universities are often sites in which the economic and political interests of a dominant class are consolidated through practices that shape identities, behaviors, and feelings. Yet universities also include spaces and activities that exceed this hegemonic function (*Democracies to Come*). To expand inclusion and access to understudied intersections between labor, gender, race, and citizenship, it is important to look for discourse and activities where recognition of gendered reproductive labor is active and present (Kabeer, Sudarshan, and Milward). While there are multiple examples of invisibility, there are also examples of cross-cohort recognition and solidarity. Universities put different kinds of workers in contact with each other in locations where relationships develop between people who come into contact with each other through everyday interactions (more on these informal interactions in the next paragraph). Academic institutions, as Chandra Mohanty points out, are "contradictory place[s] where knowledges are colonized but also contested" (*Feminism* 170).

For at least the past fifteen years, a small cohort of workers, students, and faculty at GW have been involved with organizing that builds solidarity across employment categories. This work is informed by relationships built through daily interactions on campus. Food workers and students talk to each other in food courts, and these interactions open up into discussions about daily conditions of work. Faculty and facilities workers interact in office spaces. Over the years, these informal interactions have created conversation and friendship that extend beyond employment categories to solidarity and support.

As one example, in 2010 students in an organization at GW called the Progressive Student Union (PSU) became friendly through informal interactions with food workers. Conversations about working conditions with the workers inspired students and workers to organize breakfasts for janitors, cafeteria workers, faculty, students, and maintenance workers. Many of the GW workers are employed by Sodexo, a company contracted by GW to provide all on-campus food. The backdrop of the breakfasts are working conditions in the student union, the Marvin Center. Some workers are unionized, some are not, and there is a long history of workers being laid off by Sodexo as the company and GW restructure dining services. In the context of poor labor practices, there has also been a long-standing alliance and on-going communication between the PSU and service workers that has been used to activate support for workers.<sup>5</sup> In 2010, the breakfasts were the current form of that alliance. They took place once a week in the student union and were organized as a potluck. According to Paul Seltzer, the idea behind the breakfasts is "to build solidarity through talking." Although these potlucks were not sustained over a long period of time, they are example of students and workers transforming segregated labor categories of student and worker that permeate dominant university culture. Because these relationships are in place, students, faculty, and workers create solidarity around labor disputes. PSU students and faculty have supported a successful unionizing

effort by food service workers on GW's Mt. Vernon campus. This effort involved showing up to public rallies and providing other forms of public, symbolic support for food workers. All of these actions were built through informal, everyday conversations with each other in dining halls where food workers, students, faculty, and staff chat about life and work. In the everyday life of the university, a range of people who work, live, and break bread with each other are part of public life and public culture. As I will go on to argue, these informal, convivial encounters can create alliances of workers, students, faculty, and staff.

The PSU breakfasts are an example of local affiliation and identification, recognition that talking and organizing across discursive, institutional, social, and labor borders is important for solidarity building and worker protection. The breakfasts sustain communication so that workers and students can respond quickly to management tactics. Yet political purchase in the potlucks extends beyond smart union tactics that sustained relationships in order to provide a quick response to immediate labor crises. The potlucks are a discursive and structural space that is not adjudicated by the university. The potlucks are not sponsored by student life employees nor are they officially sanctioned "meetings" either by the union or with management. The potlucks are *outside* the official structures outside lines of authority, and outside GW's identification as a global institution. They are also *inside* the local space of the university (literally, the Marvin Center), and they bring together people whose (different) work and lives are interdependent.

In other words, the institution is the official structure and discourse of the GW community; yet, there are relations and interdependencies that are both within GW and outside official university structure, culture, and discourse. These are interdependencies, identifications, and personal connections that exceed official institutional sanction and recognition. The potlucks imagined community as grounded in recognition of multiple forms of labor and recognition of differently situated subjects who work in universities. The breakfasts are an example of an event and relationship that exceed official structures and official discourses and community that is imagined through its global reach and influence. It is a local strategy that emerges from experiences and realities of a particular group of workers and that responds to the particular discursive and cultural context in which they are located.<sup>6</sup> It involves both concern with working conditions and a concurrent concern with issues of gender-specific constraints that shape working conditions. In other words, as we look to shift and expand the keywords *access* and *inclusion*, as we work to address entanglements between labor, gender, race, and citizenship in the current global moment, and as we act to shift discourse where reproductive labor is absent, we can build from informal, convivial encounters that can create alliances of workers, students, faculty, and staff.

Many of the students who organized the breakfasts study in departments and take classes whose curriculum emphasize what Mohanty calls "counterhegemonic pedagogies" (204), classroom practices, interactions, relationships, discourse and research that seek to shift common sense ideologies of gender, race, and difference through analysis of lived experience and local structures in relation to historical analysis and analysis of larger relations of capitalist political economy (204). PSU students are familiar with interdisciplinary scholarship that argues for responsibility from membership of local and national community for globalized labor. Iris Marion Young argues for

responsibility from membership in local and national community to responsibility for globalized labor. In Young's argument, labor connects people to each other even though these connections might not be visible. She argues for political responsibility that would be derived from acknowledgement of how different forms of labor sustain life across local and global places. Her notion of political responsibility makes thick local and global relations visible: "political responsibilities derive . . . not from the contingent fact of membership in common political institutions . . . [They] derive from the social and economic structures in which they act and mutually affect one another" (Young, "Responsibility" 376). Young's work suggests that community can be imagined and constituted by a collective narrative that recognizes intellectual and manual labor that sustain each other.<sup>7</sup> In other words, within GW, there are experiences, pedagogies, curriculum, and relationships that are not shaped by dominant university narrative. Students and workers have drawn upon multiple forms of knowledge to shape relationships that emerge from social and economic structures. Their activities and their knowledge demonstrate "the possibility of counterhegemonic discourse and oppositional analytic spaces within the institution" (Mohanty 198).

As I have discussed, universities are complex, differentiated relations and interdependencies among local and global (gendered, racialized) workers. In this framework, the PSU and service workers, many of whom are women, suggest space for critical conversation and convivial collaboration across employment categories, citizenship, class, and gender and racial identifications. The potlucks are an opportunity to call into question labor structures and discursive practices that are fraught with labor, race, gender, and citizenship. They can provide "bottom up" literacies for recognizing those who are overlooked, invisible, or simply forgotten in the constitution of community, in this case because reproductive labor is invisible in an academic community (Kabeer, Sudarshan, and Milward 45). Building from on-the-ground examples from student, faculty, and worker collaboration, the keywords *access* and *inclusion* can be recast by looking at spaces where knowledges are contested. Instead of "where are the women," we might ask "who is working?," "what work are women doing?," "what are the conditions of their work?," and "what is the relationship between the labor that women are doing and social categories that shape their experience?" These questions have been used locally to build solidarity and support. At the very least, past and current alliances of students and workers demonstrate that the thin use of inclusion and access in scholarly settings and in dominant discourse that I have described and the invisibility of reproductive laborers is not inevitable. Thin discourse and gendered and racialized employment structures can be addressed, identifications with different places and people within the local and across the global can be created, vocabularies can be expanded, and identifications and structures can be intervened in. The move now is to explore understudied global intersections between labor, gender, race, and citizenship and to build solidarities that address globalized inequalities, expanding our inquiry to "how does this labor support university's global influence and identification?"

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A critique of feminism and feminist scholarship not engaging in analysis of gender in relation to race, class, and other social categories emerged in the late 1980's from women of color feminism and postcolonial feminism. It has continued recently in the work of intersectional feminists who explore the linkages between gender and other social categories such as race, class, and ability. For earlier work, see Gloria Anzaldúa, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Chandra Mohanty, and Kimberlee Crenshaw as representative examples. For more recent scholarship, see Jennifer Nash.

<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, I have addressed subcontracted work of male immigrants in universities and the vulnerability their work status creates. See "Nascent Collectivities: Transnational Abandonment, I: <http://www.womeninandbeyond.org/?p=692>. While this essay focuses on reproductive labor done by women, an extended analysis could look more closely at labor done by men of color, particularly immigrant men of color. I would also point readers to Saskia Sassen's *Cities in a World Economy* that argues that the current structure and practice of globalization largely relies upon migration of female workers who can fill low-wage jobs (178-179).

<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, as Jennifer Nash has recently argued, women of color's experiences are not subjects of the current moment, not considered part of public culture and public life. In this context, vocabulary about women defaults to white, middle class women's experiences.

<sup>4</sup> Feminist scholars have argued for about thirty years that gender, race, sexuality, and other social categories are central to understanding how capitalist economy works. In these arguments, capitalist economies work through social relations and inequalities, using these divisions to organize labor and structure the extraction of surplus value. Thus, social inequalities are central to analysis of capitalist political economy. See the work of Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Mohanty, Cynthia Enloe, Maria Mies, M. Jacqui Alexander, Grace Hong, and many others for elaborations of this argument.

<sup>5</sup> In 2004, I wrote about another moment in the PSU/service worker solidarity where students camped out in the Marvin Center in support of workers. The university called the DC police, and students were arrested for trespassing although all charges against them were later dropped. See "Strategies of Containment" *The Minnesota Review* 61-62 (Spring 2004): 233-237.

<sup>6</sup> My analysis of the potlucks is not intended to suggest an organizing strategy that could have a universal application. Rather, my work suggests that organizing will have a "strong local dimension" and is best framed in relation to local contexts that takes into account the relationship between this local place and its global identification and reach (Kabeer, Sudarshan, and Milward 41).

<sup>7</sup> In addition, students are familiar with organizing strategies that are based on knowledge of local context and analysis of larger global context that the local is shaped through (Kabeer; Sassen), with intersectional analysis that investigates how social categories of gender, race, and class are intimately tied to each other (Collins; Crenshaw; Nash), and with research that shows how bodies that are read through social scripts of gender, class, race, and other social categories are associated with underpaid and undervalued labor (Mcruer; Mohanty; Spivak).



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