

Organizing Precarious Labor in Film and Media Studies: A Manifesto

by BRUCE BRASELL, JOSEPH CLARK, BETH CORZO-DUCHARDT,
REBECCA M. GORDON, JAMIE ANN ROGERS, SHARON SHAHAF,
and members of the Precarious Labor Organization

Contingent laborers cannot afford to perform the unpaid labor demanded of academics for work such as this.

In 2019, an informal group of academic laborers were involved in performing the free labor of developing the new Precarious Labor Organization (PLO) for the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS)—labor that also goes largely unrecognized in terms of promotion and retention for contingent faculty. That August, the editor of *JCMS* approached the group with the offer to produce a manifesto of sorts explaining the purpose and mission of the PLO. The offer was a welcome one. It represented an opportunity to announce the mission of the new organization and a chance to further the conversation about how to transform the field of film and media studies to acknowledge and include precarious faculty. But as the task of organizing the PLO and negotiating with the SCMS board of directors for its implementation took on more time, the semesters and quarters began, and the challenge of writing such a manifesto became clear.

Precarious faculty often teach up to five courses (or the equivalent) per semester, including multiple new class preps, as departments routinely rely on contingent labor to fill gaps. Queer and racialized contingent faculty take on the added work (emotional and otherwise) of mentoring marginalized students and confronting institutional racism and homophobia, all while “diversifying” white-dominated institutions. Underemployed academics continue to spend countless hours on cover letters, diversity statements, teaching statements, writing samples (all of different lengths!), portfolios of evidence of teaching effectiveness, teaching and diversity plans for various institutions, and sample syllabi for common core, lower division, upper division, and graduate courses. Despite the desire to produce a manifesto, it was soon clear: *precarious faculty do not have the time to perform (more) uncompensated labor*. See the email thread that follows.

On August 21, 2019, Caetlin Benson-Allott wrote:

Dear Bruce, Becky, Beth, Sharon, Jamie, Joseph, and other members of the Precarious Labor Organization,

I’m writing as the editor of *JCMS* to offer the PLO space in the next issue going to press to publish an essay on the organization’s identity, mission, and goals—sort of a “who we are, what we stand for, what we want” statement.

To appear in issue 59.4 (the next issue to go to press), the essay would need to be around 2,000 words, including notes. For that issue, I would need to receive the essay by November 1, 2019.

If you have other ideas about how *JCMS* can support the PLO, please let me know. . . .

Best wishes,
Caetlin

On August 21, 2019, Jamie Rogers wrote:

Hi all,

I love this idea. It would be a great space to hash out the mission of the PLO, as Caetlin describes, and perhaps incorporate some of the Best Practices ideas that came out of the Women's Caucus last year (if any of you don't have a copy of that and want one, let me know and I'll get it to you). I am definitely down to commit to co-writing this with any or all of you!

Bruce and I talked a year (or more?) ago about pitching an In Focus on precarious labor. Life got in the way of getting it rolling, but perhaps it is something worth revisiting down the line as well.

All the best,
Jamie

On August 21, 2019, Beth Corzo-Duchardt wrote:

I also love this—especially the open-access idea—and I'm here for whatever level of involvement you want me to take on. I won't be able to begin working on it until Sept. 8 or so, however. So please get started without me.

On August 21, 2019, Sharon Shahaf wrote:

I love and appreciate this idea!

. . .

I think a major issue, either way, that I'd like the journal to consider is that taking on big collaborative work is extremely hard to do when one isn't collecting a TT [tenure-track] university paycheck. I edited a special issue for *Critical Studies in Television* last year, and—as I was otherwise academically unemployed—the endless hours of work that went into it became hard to justify or tolerate.

Would the journal consider any mechanism that would allow our members to do this (whether a short essay or an IF section) without putting more free labor into the organization?

Warm regards,
Sharon

On August 21, 2019, Joseph Clark wrote:

Add me to the list of those who thinks this is a great idea! I'm happy to help in the drafting of the essay.

But Sharon raises a good point about labor. The entire system of academic publishing and conference-going is premised on a tenure system that is broken. In theory, academics contribute to journals, academic organizations, conferences, etc., because they are being compensated for it by their institutions. Now that the majority of scholars are not in TT positions, we are expected to contribute in the same ways without any compensation at all. I think it would be great if our essay (manifesto? statement of principles?) somehow addressed the inherent irony that even this well-meaning offer (presented by the editors in the spirit of allyship) is in itself an invitation to participate in our own labor exploitation.

Joe

On August 21, 2019, Jamie Rogers wrote:

Yes, so true! This brings up so many thoughts . . . the affective quality of such self-exploitation—its reliance on our desire to be a part of an intellectual community (that nevertheless rejects us), the assumption that we do it for the love of it all (ugh), the way it keeps a carrot dangling in front of those of us foolish enough to hang on to hope, and how all of this revolves around the desperate attempt of those who are already “in” to hang on to a system that, as you say Joe, is broken.

Best,
Jamie

On August 27, 2019, Jamie Rogers wrote:

Dear Caetlin,

Thank you for reaching out with this idea. We appreciate the offer and all that it means, in terms of *JCMS*'s support. We've been discussing it, and we are on board to produce an essay along these lines. We are looking forward to working with you on this!

. . .

All the best,
Jamie, Bruce, Beth, Becky, Sharon, and Joe

On August 27, 2019, Caetlin Benson-Allott wrote:

Dear Jamie et al.

Fantastic—I am so glad that the PLO likes the idea. Please let me know if you have any questions between now and November 1. . . .

Best Wishes,
Caetlin

On November 5, 2019, Jamie Ann Rogers wrote:

Hi All,

I hope this finds you well and I can't believe that all of September and October came and went already. I just received an email from Caetlin Benson-Allott about the *JCMS* statement . . . which we had said we'd get to them by Nov. 1. Oops. She wants to know if we can turn around something by the end of this week. Can we pull something off by then?

Yours-drowning-in-overwhelming-work-that-we-don't-get-paid-for,
Jamie

On November 5, 2019, Beth Corzo-Duchardt wrote:

Hi all,

I support whatever decision you make, but I can't dedicate the time to contribute to this. I'm sorry that I completely forgot about this deadline. IMHO, this potential positive outcome is not worth the labor, but for folks who are still going for academic cred, a *JCMS* credit on the CV and name recognition might be useful . . .

Xo
Beth

On November 5, 2019, Joseph Clark wrote:

Unfortunately I am slammed this week and won't be able to offer any work on this until Sunday. If others want to take a stab at drafting something, I would be happy to read and help edit something on Sunday.

As I remember our intention was to get feedback on a draft from the wider PLO list. That won't be possible at this late stage. Given that, it might be better to postpone the manifesto for now.

Joe

On November 5, 2019, Sharon Shahaf wrote:

Sadly I too have to opt out. I am currently not pursuing an academic job and I have heavy writing duties involving my alternative career goals. I'm sad because I wanted to help but the hours to put in this effort are just not there.

If you want my help in a supporting role, to help brainstorm or some such, I'm open to this.

Warm regards,
Sharon

On November 5, 2019, Bruce Brassell wrote:

Would Caetlin go with a graphic design à la Barbara Kruger that is a political statement instead of a traditional manifesto? Like a page with a nice title and byline like it is an article but the blank page where the body of the article would go except for a few small tiny words in the middle of the page that say something like "Contingent laborers cannot afford to perform the unpaid labor demand of academics for work such as this?"

Bruce

Precarious Labor Organization
Mission Statement

- The Precarious Labor Organization (PLO) provides community and advocacy for the Society's members who are in positions without job security or a clear route to promotion and advancement.
- The PLO is committed to attending to differing experiences that precarious/contingent labor conditions produce, depending on one's access to or lack of access to other forms of privilege.
- In recognizing that precarious labor conditions are damaging to the mission of higher education in general, and that the harm it produces is not limited to the precariously employed themselves, the PLO holds that the work of improving labor conditions in higher education is the responsibility of all. Therefore, PLO membership is open to all SCMS members and affiliates, regardless of employment status.

Join us at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/SCMSPLO/>. SCMS members and nonmembers welcome.