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Work's Intimacy

Michelle Rodino-Colocino

Gregg, M. (2011). *Work's Intimacy*. Malden, MA: Polity Press. xii + 205 pages.

At home on a living room couch, chair, desk, dining table, “stability ball,” the front porch, a hammock, and while running; alone and with family: These are the places and contexts in which this book review was completed, and they overlap with workplaces and contexts Melissa Gregg studies in her new book, *Work's Intimacy*. It should be noted that this book review—like the many emails, reports, news stories, and class materials produced by Gregg’s interviewees laboring in the “ICE” sectors of information, communication, and education—was made possible by a laptop owned by my employer (a university), an Internet connection entirely subsidized by my household income, and was written “off the clock” (during summer months that constitute the unrecorded and uncompensated portion of the year for faculty contracted on nine-month salaries). And, like the “knowledge workers” Gregg interviewed, I loved this labor. Melissa Gregg calls these dynamics “work’s intimacy,” and in the preface, calls on academics to “be among the first to see their lives and loves as potentially open to change” (p. xii). I suggest keeping this challenge in mind while reading Gregg’s book.

Engagingly written, *Work's Intimacy* promises to become a classic at the intersections of media, gender, labor, technology, and cultural studies. Highly respected for her research on “affect studies” and work, Melissa Gregg thoughtfully examines relationships among affect, work, overwork, and new mobile media by analyzing a range of texts gleaned from advertisements for mobile media, “lifestyle journalism,” management tracts, and most fascinatingly, through her interviews with white-collar professionals in Brisbane, Australia during the boom-and-bust years of 2007–2009. Using mixed methods that yield rich data, Gregg argues that “new media technology encourages and exacerbates a much older tendency among salaried professionals to put work at the heart of daily concerns, often at the expense of all other sources

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of intimacy and fulfillment" (p. xi). Thanks to the convergence of new media with older management ideology and work practices among white-collar professionals, work has become a site, a force, a projection, and an enemy of intimacy.

Work's Intimacy covers extensive ground and makes bold yet resonant observations. After painting a picture of the "Smart State" branding initiative in the boom and bust years in suburban Brisbane, Gregg tells readers what it was like for the creative workers pressed into making this vision a reality. Part I examines the "aestheticization of mobile lifestyles" by exploring how promotional copy that glamorizes the always-connected, always-on lifestyle contrasts with the everyday experiences of workers. Anxious at the thought of being perceived as unprofessional, harried by long hours that an understaffed workplace demands, and enabled by laptops and wireless Internet connectivity to work around the clock, workers exhibit neurotic symptoms once observed only at the executive level (underscoring the old in the new, Gregg shares William Whyte's observations regarding "The Neuroses of Organization Man," pp. 8–9). Lower-ranked and precarious professionals now feel intimately attached to their work and work-mediating technologies. As "Jenny," a project officer and part-time library worker puts it, "I feel that if I don't answer an email someone thinks I'm purposely ignoring them.... It's a concern and it's also just how I see myself as a professional" (p. 15). But in the case of "manic email monitoring" (p. 18), obsessive-compulsive behavior feels to employees like a coping strategy. For Jenny, Gregg astutely observes, email as an asynchronous communication platform has been "transformed into its opposite" by becoming a "means to demonstrate co-presence with colleagues and enhance the pace and immediacy of busy office schedules" (p. 15). Worse, "chronic connectivity" (p. xi) is as exploitative financially as it is emotionally, especially for young and student workers. Gregg's interviewees do not "count" email monitoring as "work" although it extends work temporally and spatially.

Part II of the book further explores work's intimacy by examining how teamwork and friendship are exploited in features as mundane as the CC (email's carbon copy feature) and via "hot" social media like Facebook and Twitter. Attendant to the contradictory effects of intimate workers' coping mechanisms, Gregg shows how electronic social networks provide means to cope with the isolating, hyper-competitive structure of office work but subsequently entail function creep that coerces longer, more intense workdays without increased pay and security. One counterproductive effect of teamwork is that employees begin to feel as if "only I can do it," as "Claire," a part-time telco worker puts it (p. 77). This sentiment, Gregg argues, "gets to the heart of teamwork's interpellative power, just as it signals the inadequate staffing levels that teamwork rhetoric helps to excuse" (p. 77). Additionally, Gregg finds that workers do not directly challenge "management pressures to pilfer friendship networks for business benefit" (p. 105).

This acquiescence troubles Gregg. After accounting for structural economic, technological, and cultural changes in the workplace (as Parts I and II do) Gregg argues in Part III that, "employees themselves appeared increasingly willing to engage in work beyond office hours—often to the detriment of other intimate

relationships" (pp. 121–122). Feeling anxious and overworked, employees have embraced "partial presence." As a coping mechanism, "partial presence" allows employees to work near loved ones. "Tanya" describes working at home on her laptop around family members as "feel[ing] nice and superficially it looks like everybody's a bit more involved together, but probably the reality is not" (p. 126). Gregg further develops the feminist analysis of the gendered division of labor she began in the second chapter, where she argued working mothers with childcare duties are highly sensitive to the number of hours available for productivity and are endlessly innovative in finding ways to get the job done. "Working women's desire to be productive," argues Gregg via Angela McRobbie, "certainly marks them as the ideal employee for contemporary capitalism" (p. 55). But the trap of partial presence is that working via laptop at home among loved ones provides "a beneficial escape from a mundane domestic experience" (p. 144). Work becomes adulterous. This observation extends Arlie Hochschild's formulation that paid work is an escape from domestic drudgery; for intimate workers, "paid work" often goes unpaid and provides an emotional but not physical escape from loved ones.

The places, contexts, and practices that allow work's intimacy evidence class privilege and desperation in the "binge" and "purge" economy Gregg describes. They also raise important political questions. Chief among them is: how would a "labor politics of love" operate? Gregg tantalizingly raises but does not flesh out this project. Also, do salary workers on billable hours think differently about what "counts" as work? Finally, how can academics provide the language, courage, and love needed to change the system and ourselves?