

Broken Jars: Academic Labour and Care in COVID Times

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Brenna Clark Gray, [The University Cannot Love You: Gendered Labour, Burnout and the Covid-19 Pivot to Digital](#), in **Feminist Critical Digital Pedagogy: An Open Book** (G. Veletsianos & S. Koseoglu eds., 2022).

I have found teaching and researching through the pandemic difficult. That is a radical understatement. The pressure to normalize—to work normally, in particular—through what has been happening has come from many sides. So has support, care, compassion and understanding. As a scholar of equality, it seemed obvious both that the pandemic would have differential effects which would exacerbate existing inequalities, and that this would be a useful place for me to concentrate. But concentrating was the problem, and as time wore on it became clear that it might not serve as a solution.

The article that I'm recommending, *The University Cannot Love You: Gendered Labour, Burnout and the Covid-19 Pivot to Digital*, is one that centres the world of the university and the people that work in that space, asking about what was happening in these spaces. It centres not the idea of equality but the idea of care. It is not legal scholarship. But I think that it offers two things that some legal scholars of equality might deeply value right now. The first is a way to think about the situation we are in. The second is a way that we might reframe or rethink some of the perennial problems of equality law, the public/private divide, the work/life divide, the ways that we divide and differentially burden people.

The University Cannot Love You: Gendered Labour, Burnout and the Covid-19 Pivot to Digital by Brenna Clarke Grey, is a part of *Feminist Critical Digital Pedagogy: An Open Book* (the [publication method and values of this book](#) are also worth checking out). Grey is a tenured professor who works as coordinator of education technologies at a university in Western Canada.

In this short piece, Grey “examines gendered participation in the academic labour force, care work, and the pressures on women academics at work and at home”. Noting “increasing chatter about academic burnout”, she works to explore the ways care was described and experienced inside the university, and how that has played out against the rest of our lives in which care has also been under extreme stress.

Grey is particularly interested in “Resisting Neoliberal Manifestations of ‘Care’ in the University space”, noting the endless virtual yoga sessions being offered. Understandings of care—and offerings of care—are deeply politicized in this piece, which draws on BIPOC scholars and artists including [Dionne Brand](#), [Christina Sharpe](#), [Roxana Ng](#) and [Billy-Ray Belcourt](#) to make these arguments. Grey notes that taking the position that we should refuse to provide care where we are unsupported or unrecognized in its provision usually visits the consequences of that lack of care on people with fewer resources. They will be asked either to go without care—or to provide that care, with even less support.

“I am tired” writes Grey, at one point. “We are not, of course, the brains in jars that the university imagines or wishes us to be”, she reminds. And, speaking straight to your secret heart maybe, she says, “It feels, for me, like a rejection of myself and my choices to imagine caring for my son is exclusively burdensome, but our institutional structures tell this story about our experiences for us.”

It's a short piece. But reading these things in print offered me more than critical insights into the way

that my work was being structured, and how I was reacting to new and old pressures. Grey said things I could barely acknowledge, and so her article was like a small gift. A colleague sent it to me and I sent to others, a way of acknowledging things that we were struggling to see or say, but that were affecting ourselves, our lives and our work in complicated ways when we had such limited time and space to share the experience.

It bothers me, my inability to get through this moment without thinking incessantly about myself, how that parallels neoliberal notions of self-care as individual responsibility. *The University Cannot Love You* helped me out of that conundrum. Still, I know reflection does not always provide insight, let alone relief, from trouble. What I hope this article could do, for legal scholars, is help them (1) feel less alone, (2) think about the care that sustains them, where it comes from, and how to acknowledge it, (3) think about the system within which we work and the way that it structures our work and relations, (4) (re-)engage with work which critically assesses the notion of care and finally, perhaps most importantly, (5) take our thinking about these things beyond the academy as we consider our research agendas in the post-COVID or Long COVID era.

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