

CONNECT WITH YOUR AUDIENCE! THE RELATIONAL LABOR OF CONNECTION

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CONNECT WITH YOUR AUDIENCE! THE RELATIONAL LABOR OF CONNECTION

The theme of Console-ing Passions this year is cultivating community, a topic about which I have had much to say in the context of fan practices. In my work on fans of soap operas (e.g. Baym, 2000) and independent Scandinavian music (e.g. Baym, 2007), I showed how audiences appropriate the affordances of the internet in order to build communities based on shared practices and meanings. In this paper, I want to look at building ties from another vantage point by considering the kind of work that relating to these often, but not always, mediated communities and individuals entails. I mean this short talk to be provocative rather than exhaustive, a peek into a potential trajectory into media work for feminist media studies.

Increasingly, part of the job of artists such as the musicians I will talk about here is to foster and sustain ongoing interaction. MTV's survey of music listeners between the ages of 15-29 found that "artists are expected to be constantly accessible, especially on social media, offering unique and intimate moments to their fans" (Hillhouse, 2013). Digital music pioneer Dave Kusek (2014) describes social media as the "cornerstone" of a music career. According to her social media manager, Lauren Wirtzer Seawood, even Beyoncé "is aware of and approves every piece of content that goes everywhere all the time" (Collins, 2014) In fostering these relationships, whether through social media or other means, artists must balance their own sometimes competing economic and social needs with their audiences' needs to connect with them and with one another.

Connecting with audiences may be expected, but it is rarely directly compensated. Instead it is seen as an investment toward building and maintaining an audience that will sustain a career. In this regard, this connecting exemplifies contemporary demands to engage in unpaid social labor to have any hope at professional success. Neff (2012), describes the "venture labor" of New York's Silicon Alley workers, who (among other unpaid obligations) needed to attend

countless late-night parties (featuring entertainment like scantily clad women dancing in cages) to earn a place in the scene and hence, continuing marketability. Social media now figure centrally as sites through which people can do this networking, acquiring and displaying the markers of status that make them attractive hires or entrepreneurs worthy of investment (Marwick, 2013). Nowhere do you see the demands of performing identities for and fostering relationships with potential audiences more clearly than with musicians, whose product – the music – is ever easier to get for free.

Having to foster audience relationships is one way that media labor exemplifies contemporary work. Gill and Pratt (2008: 2) list the buzzwords often used to describe the current state of economic affairs: “post-Fordism, post-industrialization, network society, liquid modernity, information society, ‘new economy,’ ‘new capitalism,’ and risk society.” Optimistically, culture workers are seen as models for a future of fulfilled creative laborers and cities (e.g. Florida, 2002). Less optimistically, they are seen as exemplifying insecurity, informality, discontinuous employment, bearing of individual risk, and “poster boys and girls of the new ‘precariat’ – a neologism that brings together the meanings of precariousness and proletariat to signify both an experience of exploitation and a (potential) new political subjectivity” (Gill & Pratt, 2008: 2-3). Cultural work is temporary and intermittent, work/play boundaries are collapsed, the pay is poor, and people must be mobile. The mindset of the cultural worker is “a blend of bohemianism and entrepreneurialism; informal work environments and distinctive forms of sociality; and profound experiences of insecurity and anxiety about finding work, earning enough money and ‘keeping up’ in rapidly changing fields (Gill & Pratt, 2008: 14). In music we see clearly what labor sociologist Lisa Adkins (2001: 669) describes as the post-1970s “cultural feminization of economic life.” Not only are working conditions such as precariousness and flexibility historically common to women now common even to Western men, the work itself is feminized and disrupts gender binaries. It is ever-more immaterial, service-oriented, and tied to

the management of one's own and others' emotions through communication and managing one's bodily appearance (Adkins & Lury, 1999; Veijola & Jokinen, 2008).

RELATIONAL LABOR

For the last several years I have been working on a project about how musicians understand their relationships and interactions with their audiences (see Baym, 2012, 2013a, 2013b). I have interviewed nearly 40 musicians, most whom had audiences before MySpace (circa 2002) and could therefore reflect on being a musician before as well as after social media. I also spent years following artists on social media, attended music industry conferences, and closely followed press coverage of the music industry, with a particular eye toward exemplars of audience engagement and advice that musicians are given.

What I've found, in short, is that musicians are engaging in a sort of labor that the many terms used to modify contemporary labor – immaterial, affective, emotional, venture, cultural, creative – speak to but do not quite capture. In addition to all of these things, musicians are involved in *relational labor*, by which I mean regular, ongoing communication with audiences over time to build social relationships that foster paid work. “Relational” is meant to emphasize effort that goes beyond managing others' feelings in single encounters, as is usually the case in emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), to creating and maintaining ongoing connections.

Relationships built through relational labor can entail all the complex rewards and costs of personal relationships independent of any money that comes from them. At the same time, the connections built through relational labor are always tied to earning money, differentiating it from affective labor, as the term is used in most Marxist traditions.

Emotional labor scholars usually positions emotional displays designed to manage customer feelings as alienating. “It is the pinch between a real but disapproved feeling on one hand and an idealized one, on the other, that enables us to become aware of emotional labor,” writes Hochschild (2013: xiv). Instead of contrasting emotion done for work with real feeling, *relational labor* asks instead how the complementary dialectics of personal relationships and professional labor play out in the ever-changing flux and flow of everyday interaction. The boundary between social and economic relationships has always been far blurrier than theoretical distinctions might suggest (e.g. Badhwar, 2008). As in most fields, musicians’ social and economic relationships have always been intertwined. However, the shift to media that enable continuous interaction, higher expectations of engagement, and greater importance of such connections in shaping economic fortunes calls for new skills and expertise in fostering connections and managing boundaries.

When pundits tell musicians that to be economically viable, they must “connect” with their fans in order to “monetize” them, their rhetoric of connection obscures the labor of relating. “Connect” serves as a gloss for unspecified mechanisms through which the presence of interaction might be tied to income-earning potential and it obscures the hard work that “connecting” entails. This echoes the erasure of female-gendered skills from discussions of work life in other contexts and discourses of labor (e.g. Adkins & Jokinen, 2008; Bolton, 2009; Fortunati, 2007; Jarrett, 2014; Weeks, 2007). To see this erasure, one need only look at the “secret” tips Kusek offers musicians as he warns them to balance self-promotion with displaying their humanity. These include *listening* to others, being *conversational*, and being *genuine*. That he frames these (excellent but hardly obscure) feminine communication strategies as “secret” in contrast to the (presumably totally obvious) masculine strategy of self promotion speaks to

the struggles those who promote connection face in accounting for the kinds of communication practices that “connecting” with audiences really requires.

To ground this discussion, I’d like to offer three brief examples of musicians who span a spectrum of how artists think about relational labor. Toward one end is someone who views a career in music as a means to build relationships with people who begin as his audience, the other views relationships with his audience as a means to a career in music. Steve Lawson is a solo bass player who creates “ambient music for people who hate ambient music.” He prefers playing house concerts in the domestic spaces of his audience’s homes to clubs and other typical music venues. His income comes from a combination of these live performances, pay-what-you-want sales of his recordings on Bandcamp, teaching, and other odd music jobs. He is an ardent Twitter user, having posted over 130,000 tweets since he started. He also writes a blog and maintains a website and an active Facebook page. “I’m making friends with people who listen to my music,” he told me, “and then I become a part of their life and they become a part of mine. And I am truly enriched by that. And the music becomes the soundtrack to that relationship.”

Toward the other end of the spectrum is someone like Lloyd Cole, a singer-songwriter who released his first album *Rattlesnakes* in 1984, enjoyed considerable success in the 1980s, and has continued to earn a living through selling recordings and touring in the years since, although that has become much harder. For years, he “didn’t embrace the idea of trying to find an audience through any other method than putting music out there.” For him, music is about making “beautiful things and add[ing] beauty to people’s lives,” a process he believes depends in part on the artists maintaining mystique that connection can undermine. In contrast to Lawson, for whom relationships with his audience are the point, for Cole, those relationships have real pleasures and benefits, but are laborious. He spoke often of discomfort when describing communication with his fans, yet saw his ability to put his son through college and

support his family as dependent on that communication. He has a forum on his website where a small group of highly engaged and supportive long-term loyal fans hang out and many more lurk. “At times I feel like I’ve got a second family with these people,” he told me, “which is not really what I set out to have.” “What did you set out to have?” I asked. “An audience.” While some musicians with whom I spoke found time spent at the merchandise table meeting fans after a show as one of their favorite parts of being a musician, Cole described it as necessary but uncomfortable. “Every now and again I get cornered by a drunk fan,” he explained, “and what can I do? Just I’m standing there and I’m just sort of nodding my head going, ‘Okay. This is how I make a living.’”

Lawson and Cole represent two far – though not end – points on a spectrum of attitudes toward the balance of social and economic dynamics of interactions with fans. Somewhere in the middle is Zoë Keating, a solo cellist with more than a million Twitter followers (far more people than listen to her music). Keating described meeting fans after a show whom she knew from Twitter. “They came to the concert just based on our social media connection, and they felt secure enough in our relationship that we could go hang out.” She felt secure as well, since “luckily my online self is not idealized so it’s not that hard to live up to.” She is an avid Twitter user and she strives to present herself honestly there, as this allows her to both humanize herself and explain to her followers that she supports her family on her music revenue. Her self-humanizing is often based on expressing her identities as mother and wife. “I might tell you that I just made applesauce muffins or what I had for breakfast or that I’m now about to go nurse the baby,” she said. The strategy works. “I get these e-mails a lot,” she said, “people have been listeners for a while and then it wasn’t until they got to know me on Twitter that they bought my album.” For Keating, then, the social is an easy extension of her everyday practice, but is also strategically tied to making music a financially-feasible career choice. It has also proven to be much more. When, after our interview, her non-smoking young husband was diagnosed with advanced lung cancer and she slowed down her music career to care for him,

her audience donated directly to his medical care, making it possible for her to focus on him and their son instead of working.

I choose these examples to make a few points. First, although they represent different perspectives, all three of these people see building and maintaining ongoing relationships with their audiences as integral to their economic viability. They also share the sense that, for better or worse, social media pushes these relationships to become ever more like friendship and family (see Baym, 2012). Each hints at the range of complicated interpersonal skills and demands that such engagement entails.

HOSTING THE AUDIENCE

The cultural feminization of economic life means that much contemporary work activity is now about producing pleasant, comfortable, or exciting feelings in others (Hardt, 1999; Adkins & Jokinen, 2008). In creative industries like music, the goal is to create something with the right style and aesthetics to please an audience and hence create economic value (Adkins, 2005; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2008). As the MTV study I cited earlier showed, it's no longer enough to create affectively-engaging music, musicians are now expected to host lively and engaging discussion forums, whether on their own sites or through commercial platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Veijola and Jokinen (2008: 176-177) describe "hostessing" as the paradigmatic mode of performance in new work, since it requires "management of social situations, affects, and corporeal needs between friends, acquaintances, as well as strangers." Hostessing "reproduces and requires performances of femininity: social, emotional, as well as domestic skills required to make the encounters amiable and emotionally satisfying." One musician with

whom I spoke, Jill Sobule, explicitly understood herself as a hostess, describing her role on her Facebook page as akin to that of the Madame of an Eighteenth Century Salon: “It's just for a community of people to talk to each other, like-minded people. So [I'm] the Madame of my house.”

In addition to creating affective responses through the immaterial labor of making music, as expectations have shifted toward more audience engagement, producing economically valuable feelings increasingly requires offering a continuous identity and interactive presence both in person and through social media. These identities must also have the right style and aesthetics, whatever those may be, as must each message they send. This demand to perform an aesthetically pleasing self holds for both men and women (Adkins & Lury, 1999). Indeed, hard as I looked for male/female differences in attitudes toward or expectations of relational labor, I have yet to see them.

The musicologist Christopher Small (1998) insisted that music's meaning lies in the ideal relationships its performance explores, affirms, and celebrates. If he is right, and to some extent he surely is, the relationships musicians create with their audiences are of the utmost importance. The stylistic and aesthetic standards of their their extra-musical communication and presence has to be in line with their music's, even though they are realized through other modes of communication and entirely different skill sets. The relational ideal of the new economy is a delicate balance of the professional and the personal. For someone such as Lawson, who views music's function as creating friendship, or Keating, who considers her “inside voice” and her “outside voice” the same, living up to this economy's relational ideals is

not alienating, even when it is challenging. For Cole, those ideals are inherently alienating.

Creating hospitable conditions requires a willingness and ability to present and sell your self as something of value, all the while appearing to be socializing rather than brazenly self-promoting. This responsibility for being pleasing, reaching out, connecting with others, and providing a space for audience members to connect with one another, falls on the musicians. As Keating explained, if she can't convey to her audience that she is a real person who needs income to produce music, she can't expect audiences to pay for her work. As Cole said "this is how I make a living."

CONCLUSION

As plenary speakers, we were asked to consider future trajectories for feminist media studies. I hope this brief sketch is enough to stimulate your thinking about the hard work of "connecting with your audience" and the value of theorizing such work, both for understanding media industries and for understanding contemporary labor conditions across industries. New media ramp up demands for ongoing relationship building and maintenance in ways that may bear greater resemblance to friends and family than to customers and clients. The concept of "relational labor," abuts "emotional labor," "affective labor," "immaterial labor," "venture labor," and "creative labor" but offers something new by emphasizing the ongoing communicative practices and skills of building and maintaining interpersonal and group relationships that is now so central to maintaining many careers. What musicians must do to connect with their audiences is indicative of labor shifts that have already begun and points to a future in which even those not oriented toward producing creative works feel compelled to connect with customers and clients through means both social and sustained. Cultivating audiences that function as affectively-engaging communities is the future of work.

The closest parallel to the relational labor I've discussed here is found in the literature on care workers, such as those who look after the elderly (e.g. Aronson & Neysmith, 1996; Lopez, 2006; Piercy, 2000). These jobs raise enormous challenges around maintaining boundaries between personal and professional, paid and unpaid labor, and pleasure and exploitation. However, as I do here, rather than focusing on feelings of alienation, care work scholars also address the potential for emotional honesty (Lopez, 2006). We do not have to understand relationships in labor as inherently either genuine or alienating, empowering or oppressive. They are all of these and more, often at the same time.

Feminist media scholars are particularly well suited to examine these issues. As Fortunati (2007) forcefully argues, feminist scholars were the original champions of research into the immaterial labor of producing communication, information, entertainment, affect, care and love. Given that much of the social demands of new work are managed through new media, media scholars have analytic frameworks and traditions we can bring to bear on making sense of work in the new economy that others do not. Excellent groundwork has been laid by scholars I have cited and others such as Banks, Gill & Taylor (2013), Deuze (2007) and Gregg (2011). There is so much more we can do.

Relational labor may be dismissed as "as embodied, natural, immaterial: in effect, women's work" (Bolton, 2009: 75), but that should not blind us to its productivity, its difficulty, or the need to understand it as both labor and personal. As media scholars, we can help to make sense of how contemporary contexts and industries combine with media affordances to shape expectations of relational labor and its performance. We can begin to unpack the interpersonal and cultural tensions at play in relational labor, the perspectives that workers use to frame those tensions, and the skills they deploy as they negotiate them in each localized interaction.

We can critically interrogate who profits financially as relational labor becomes more important (hint: social media platforms).

In closing, I was asked to consider how we can build and sustain community as feminist media scholars. I offer relational labor as a useful lens. Much of what I've said about musicians is true of academics. Our work involves near-daily relational labor as we foster ongoing, convivial social discussions and friendships amongst ourselves at conferences and on our campuses and also through email and social media platforms. Creating and maintaining these relationships simultaneously nourishes (and irritates) our souls and supports (or can decimate) our careers. We should understand what we are doing here as part of the relational labor of building academic community, see that it requires skills, strategies and practices quite different from those of our scholarship itself, and recognize the difficult work and balancing acts those practices entail. Just don't expect to get paid for it. At least not directly.

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