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Gender and Precarity across Time: Where Are the Writing Working Women?

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I am writing the first draft of this paper on Victorianist activisms on International Women's Day, March 8, 2023. Yesterday I taught classes at one university on George Bernard Shaw's *Mrs Warren's Profession* (1893/1902), encouraging the students to draw links between late nineteenth-century and twenty-first-century debates on the sex industry, working-class women's precarious working conditions, and the system of university tuition fees that has lead some young people to sell sex to be able to come to classes.[1] Tomorrow I am teaching at another university, where we will discuss women's health and gendered, classed, and racialized health inequalities both in the past and today. This afternoon I am, as a trade union representative, co-organizing union meetings with a fellow feminist trade unionist, to build power for our union's current dispute—the biggest one in the history of UK higher education—which centers on gender, race, and disability pay inequality, pensions, workload, and job insecurity (all feminist issues).[2] Currently employed on four different insecure contracts at three different UK universities, after over ten years working on a range of different fixed-term contracts across institutions, I have carved out these brief hours in the morning to write.

What I mean to say with this personal, self-reflective introduction, is this: in truth, there is no divorce between philosophy and life, as Simone de Beauvoir notes.[3] Our research and teaching as Victorianist or nineteenth-century scholars is embodied and has a direct material ground in our current working conditions and activisms. As this essay will demonstrate, while exploring an initial research trajectory on late-Victorian women's trade unionism, the current state of marketized

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higher education demands that we take collective action both inside and outside of our classrooms; if we do not, precarious and minoritized knowledges and voices will disappear. Politically engaged scholarship is not just theoretical; the nineteenth-century struggles and structures we examine reverberate materially today.

In its attempt to locate a working New Woman, or working writing women, in the Victorian trade union movement, this essay is a reflective work-in-progress, an exploration rather than a finished argument, presented by a precariously employed woman trade unionist in the twenty-first century (employed in one of the most casualized sectors of the economy; only hospitality in the UK has larger rates of job insecurity), struggling to find time to write, examining the works of precariously employed women workers a hundred years earlier. Alice Walker (1983) challenged Virginia Woolf's claim (1929) that one must have a room of one's own and an independent income to write—this paper investigates how true such a claim is for New Women in the context of Victorian trade unionism, while also acknowledging feminist definitions of "work" that include reproductive labor. It suggests possible lines of investigation into trade union periodicals and artifacts to answer questions posed about women workers' literary and cultural production and engagement. It also notes how the kinds of histories we learn about women writers and activism impact our society today, with ongoing gendered labor divisions. In sketching out—it really is sketching—a potential field of research by locating works that are already hard to reach due to gendered, classed, and racialized histories of literary production, I argue that the current marketized and unequal structures of higher education, with its overwork and precarity, compound the difficulties of such a project.

Newnesses of the Late Nineteenth Century: New Women and New Unionism

> Come to the Union sisters old and young, rich and poor, if you love liberty, study to deserve it. Let us set our wits to work, 'tis right against might. Children yet unborn must have to remember, there was woman as well as man in the Union.
>
> P.A.S., a Straw-Bonnet Maker, in *The Pioneer*, May 3, 1834[4]

> The Great Trade Unions . . . as yet, are almost entirely controlled by men. . . . It is more urgently imperative than ever that every woman who works for her living should join a Trade Union, in order that she may have a strong

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> organisation to protect her interests, and that she may help to protect the interests of other women.
>
> Sylvia Pankhurst, in *The Woman's Dreadnought*, March 20, 1915

Through the history of trade unions we can trace gendered, racialized, and class-based structures within society as a whole. While more than half of trade union members in Britain today are women, and the workforce is as diverse as our society, structures of sexist and racist traditions still linger in the movement, contributing to ongoing inequalities.[5] Crucially, the kinds of histories we learn impact how we structure society today: Sarah Boston has noted how "the failure to include women in labor history has had its effect on the development of the trade union movement,"[6] perpetuating gendered divisions and sexist views on gender. The same can be said of conceptions of race, with the racializing of the "British" worker dating back to the late nineteenth century.[7] By tracing equality structures within UK workplaces and trade unions through their literary and social history, we can possibly address current relations between gender, race, and class.

We locate the beginnings of both the modern trade union movement and an internationalist feminist movement in the late nineteenth century, a period of increased feminist, labor, and anticolonial organizing. Britain at this time saw a range of "newnesses": New Journalism, New Hedonism, the New Woman, New Unionism—the latter denoting a boom in trade unionism among previously largely unorganized sectors of workers, especially women and migrants in low-paid, precarious jobs. The cultural figure of the New Woman came to symbolize women's struggle for independence, the figure being defined as having "solved the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman's-sphere, and prescribed the remedy."[8] However, both as literary figures and real-life writers in Britain (such as Sarah Grand and Mona Caird), such New Women were largely middle class and educated. Where are the working women within the sphere of literary and cultural production, and how are they represented within New Unionism? Noting the increased organization in feminist and workers' struggles, we can attempt to locate a working New Woman situated in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century trade union movement.

Women have always been working, and engaged in struggles for better working conditions (organized or not), but before the 1870s, mostly through one-off or short-lived actions and activism, not organized in unions.[9] Before the era of New Unionism, trade unions in Britain were

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mainly "craft unions"—for skilled workers and craftsmen with apprenticeships. On the other hand, "sweated labor"—low-paid, precarious, and dangerous work, often done by women and migrants—remained "one of the most persistent social problems of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."[10] As sweated labor was not unionized, this meant women were not unionized. Before the 1870s there was one exception: the textile industry, which even had women leaders in their unions. Dominant (male) trade unionism instead argued for a "family wage," and many men saw women's organizing as a threat to their own pay and conditions (textile unions were an exception again, as they started organizing in mixed unions, instead of women accepting lower pay and worsened conditions).[11] As a response to their exclusion by dominant unions, women started their own labor leagues and trade unions: we see such organizing in the Women's Protective and Provident League / Women's Trade Union League (1874, changed name and organization 1890), campaigning for women of different unions; and in the National Federation of Women Workers (1906), which organized women across different industries. In between these landmarks, the 1888 Match Girls' Strike made history, linking workers' health and working conditions in the popular imagination, especially through Annie Besant's press coverage.[12]

1874: First National Women Trade Union Organization

The year 1874 was crucial in women's trade unionism in Britain, as the Women's Protective and Provident League was founded by Emma Paterson after seeing women workers unionizing in the United States. The League was not a union congress but a "league" of middle-class organizers supporting semi-/skilled working-class women to set up trade unions. In 1875 Emma Paterson and Edith Simcox from the League became the first women delegates to the Eighth Trade Union Congress, where a motion on supporting women's unions passed; in 1888, Clementina Black proposed an equal-pay motion at the same Congress.[13]

New Unionism (Late 1880s–1890s)

In the late 1880s, alongside women activists setting up trade union leagues and later federations, women working in low-paid, precarious "sweated labor" started to organize. This move was termed "New

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Unionism": mass trade unionism for a wider range of workers, with low membership fees, no requirement of craft or apprenticeship skills, and often more radical politics and actions (strikes especially became an important tool). The most famous examples of New Unionism are the 1888 Match Girls' Strike and the 1889 London Dock Strike; indeed, the Match Girls' Strike at the Bryant and May match factory, organized and reported by Clementina Black and Annie Besant, became "the match that lit the explosion of 'New Unionism.'"[14]

As a result of mass organizing, the Women's Protective and Provident League in the 1890s became the Women's Trade Union League, changing its financial base and policies in favor of New Unionist tactics and structures. The new League started sending organizers to support strikes and had around sixty affiliated unions, operating as a women's Trade Union Congress. The League thus became a mouthpiece for working women, both organizing in unions and campaigning for legislation on working hours, sanitation, and other health and safety issues. Throughout the 1890s the League went from 2,000 to 70,000 members.[15] Another organization of note is the Women's Trade Union Association (1889–94), a London East End federation of unions, which later became the Women's Industrial Council (1894–1917) investigating women's working conditions.

National Federation of Women Workers (1906–1920)

The National Federation of Women Workers, founded in 1906 by Mary Macarthur (previously of the Women's Trade Union League), was a powerful general trade union for women. It had a great impact: "during its short existence from 1906 to 1920, when it merged with the General Workers union, [it] organized more women, fought more strikes and did more to establish women trade unionists than any other organization."[16] Indeed, Federation membership went from 2,000 to 20,000 members during the period 1906–14, while the number of women in all trade unions more than doubled.[17]

New Unionism thus signified a boom in trade unionism among new sectors of workers, while the New Woman figure symbolized women's struggle for independence in the period. However, as scholars have noted, the intersection between New Woman and working-class writing is difficult to locate. In a context where dominant trade unionism remained hostile to women workers organizing, and where women were used as low-paid, precarious "sweated labor," we need to look

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beyond dominant publishing structures and scholarly norms to locate the writing working New Women.

Where Are the Working New Women Writers?

> There is perhaps no class of whom the wealthy or the educated know so little as of working women. Everybody in these days knows something of the slums, something of the crofter's cottage and the Irish cabin; but the industrious, independent woman who spends her days working at a skilled trade in a factory crosses our path but seldom, and few of us know anything of her thoughts, her aims, and her struggles.
>
> Clementina Black, "A Working Woman's Speech" (1889)

While the "new socialism" and the New Woman of the period have been examined by scholars such as Sally Ledger and Sheila Rowbotham, and the role of British women in trade union history by scholars such as Sheila Lewenhak, Sarah Boston, and Barbara Drake, the specific literary history of women in trade unions at this time remains neglected. This period of growing trade unionism saw nonfiction works published by journalists, writers, and labor activists including Annie Besant, Eleanor Marx, Annie Kenney, and Clementina Black, alongside fiction by socialist novelists Margaret Harkness and Olive Schreiner highlighting the lives of working-class women. Kenney and Black noted the growing role of women within trade unions at the time, while Schreiner in *Woman and Labour* (1911) stressed labor as key to gaining female independence. Clementina Black, the middle-class union organizer, combined her union work and labor writing with fiction writing, such as the trade union novel *An Agitator* (1894), which was based on her experiences in unions. While Oscar Wilde in 1889 noted that "Socialism . . . has her poets and her painters, her art-lecturers and her cunning designers, her powerful orators and her clever writers," Black observed that "novels can be important vehicles for presenting social realism." She also stressed, correspondingly, that "factual accounts may yield a telling corrective to the partial views embedded in fictive narratives"—her own reports on sweated labor and women's work provided such correctives.[18]

However, these are middle-class writers, labor activists, and organizers. One needs time and space to write, as Woolf famously wrote. Working-class women would mostly not have had the opportunity to write novels, or possibly short stories or short poems, nor would they generally reach traditional publishing houses where (white, male, middle-class) connections mattered.[19] As feminist periodical scholars have

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noted, and as seen in the Piston, Pen & Press project, marginalized women writers tended to find potential outlets in ephemeral and local newspapers and periodicals as these were more accessible routes.[20] Given that women workers organized in trade unions, it seems a good trajectory then to study the publications of women's trade union organizations of the time, to locate potential short fiction, poetry, and nonfiction by working-class women.

Women Writing in Trade Union Publications

For a fuller account of literary women in trade unions, we can look beyond canonical work for shorter fiction, nonfiction, and poetry in trade union publications, binding together sociological and literary histories. The main publications to examine would be *Women's Union Journal*, *Women's* [*Woman's*] *Trade Union Review*, the *Women's Industrial News*, and the *Woman Worker*. The *Women's Union Journal* (1876/7–90), published by Women's Protective and Provident League, was a monthly journal that included articles on remarkable women, poetry, fiction, and practical issues. However, the paper would have been too expensive to buy for working-class women, and the "middle-classness" of the league "seeps through the pages" of the journal.[21] *Women's* [*Woman's*] *Trade Union Review* (1891–1919) was the quarterly report of the Women's Trade Union League, distributed by Trade Union Congress, and *Women's Industrial News* (1895–1919) was produced by the Women's Industrial Council. The *Woman Worker* (1908–20), edited by trade union organizer and campaigner Mary Macarthur, was published by the National Federation of Women Workers.[22]

Out of these publications, *The Woman Worker* (first a monthly and then weekly periodical) is of most interest. The journal's aim and purpose is stated in a 1907 editorial: "To teach the need for unity, to help improve working conditions, to present a monthly picture of the many activities of women Trade Unionists, to discuss all questions affecting the interests and welfare of women."[23] Already the first few issues of the journal contain a variety of genres of writing: allegories, nonfiction, poetry, and short pieces on practical issues such as home improvement. A section called "The Poet's Corner" publishes short poems, and there is a piece called "The Parable of the Bundle of Sticks" by Macarthur. Given that dreams, utopias, and allegories are key modes in New Woman and feminist writing of the time, examining such a

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"Parable" would possibly contribute to the canon of New Woman literature.

Where Are We At? Working Conditions in Contemporary Higher Education

So, where are we at? Have I found time and space in the last five years (the time that this project has been on my mind) to properly work through the above sources, and if so, what have I found? The short answer is no—because of the conditions of academic labor. I am finishing the draft of this paper in between trade union meetings and marking essays at two different universities, struggling to concentrate as university workers in the UK are currently at a key point in negotiations with our employers.[24] I am revising the paper for resubmission in between work and union meetings, teaching, job applications, and strike preparation. Juggling the emotional labor of being a woman in academia, trade union duties, and teaching commitments,[25] I have struggled to finish this paper.[26]

A 2016 report finds that 83 percent of academic staff in the UK reported that the pace of work has increased over the past three years, with more than a quarter of respondents stating that their workload is unmanageable all or most of the time, and two-thirds of staff stating that their workload is unmanageable at least half of the time.[27] Rosalind Gill's 2010 detailing of the "hidden injuries of neo-liberal academia" shares a conversation between two female colleagues, which mirrors the experiences of many of us:

> "How are you?"
>
> "I am totally stressed at the moment, to be honest. Work is piling up and I'm just drowning. . . . I mean, I had 115 e-mails yesterday and they all needed answering. I'm doing 16 hour days just trying to keep on top of it. I feel like I'm always late with everything, and my 'to do' list grows faster than I can cross things off it. . . . I'm sleeping really badly and it all just feels completely out of control. . . . It just gets worse."[28]

Faced with increasing workloads and monitoring of productivity, overwork, and a kind of speeding up of academic life, many staff in the contemporary university are in a constant state of exhaustion; many fall ill, sometimes with chronic conditions.[29] In addition to overwork, a larger number are under pressure related to precarious employment; the precariously employed (US: "adjunct"; UK: "casualised") worker is

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now commonplace or in many places the norm in universities. As figures from the University and College Union (UCU; the main UK academic staff trade union) show, around half of academic staff in UK universities are employed on insecure contracts; 70 percent of researchers are on fixed-term contracts, the majority of fixed-term teaching staff are hourly paid, and adding to these there are tens of thousands "atypical academics" often not counted in staff records.[30] A 2015 survey of staff on insecure contracts carried out by UCU reveals significant numbers struggling to get by: 17 percent of respondents say that they struggle to pay for food, 34 percent that they struggle to pay rent or mortgage repayments, and 36 percent that they struggle to pay household bills like fuel, electricity, water, and repairs. One respondent states, "I especially dread the summer and Easter periods as I have no idea how I will pay the rent."[31] Precarity is no longer a "rite of passage" in academic careers in the UK, Europe, and beyond, but a normalized and never-ending, prolonged, condition of employment.[32] Job insecurity is also gendered and racialized; women are more likely than men to be on insecure fixed-term contracts, and people of color more likely than white people to be so.[33] This widespread casualization, and its gendered and racialized aspect, is one of the reasons for the current university industrial dispute in the UK (mentioned at the start of this paper).

Why am I sharing employment statistics from twenty-first-century academia in a paper supposedly trying to locate working-class women writers of the nineteenth century? How do current gendered and racialized structures in universities link to Victorian and nineteenth-century literatures and cultures—the period I predominantly teach and research? While I am definitely not comparing the situation of precariously employed workers in current universities to those in hyper-exploitative sweatshops in nineteenth-century Britain—that would be ridiculous—I am thinking: structures of work are still gendered and racialized, and these structures still impact the ways in which we work and what kind of work we produce, including our writing. So we might ask: What can we learn from past struggles to inform current ones?

Conclusion: Precarious Working Lives, Precarious Knowledges

Women in contemporary universities are exhausted. If we are multiply marginalized (e.g. if we are women of color, LGBTQI+, disabled, working class, with caring responsibilities), we are even more exhausted. How, then, do we juggle caring responsibilities, insecure and low-paid jobs,

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and our commitment to change the world into a better place? Not only academic working lives, but also academic knowledges are precarious. In 2022 the United Nations warned that job insecurity in UK universities threatens knowledge production, confirming what many of us already knew: "the growth of casualisation in the sector is weakening the 'fundamental pillars of excellence in teaching and research.'"[34] When one is scared not to have one's contract renewed, or to lose hours, one might think twice about speaking out against workplace injustice or engaging in "troublesome" research such as feminist, decolonial, or antiracist work. Furthermore, precarious working conditions are inseparable from overwork, and most of us do our "patchwork" research (if at all) in between jobs, union work, and other responsibilities.[35] Many of us simply leave. Struggling to find time in between jobs to write this paper, it is clear to me that the kind of research that many colleagues are trying to do is precarious not only due to its "troublesome" character but also because we do not have the space and time (or pay) to write.[36] While our positions as insecurely employed workers might help us perceive missing voices in the past, our precarious while privileged (I am still writing, of course) positions hinder us finding such voices.

How, then, do we use our positions of privilege in knowledge-producing institutions (even when such privilege is precarious) to transform theory into practice? Gendered and racialized structures in workplaces and in trade unions in the UK is not a thing of the past, and I would argue that examining the intersectional gender politics of late nineteenth-century labor structures (with women and migrants underpaid and precariously employed, and also underrepresented in union leadership) can help inform our understanding of current conditions. Such enacted, politically engaged scholarship requires us to reach out, across contract divides, across sectors, and work together in solidarity. In other words: Talk to your students and colleagues! Join a union! Support precarious workers! Given that many of us are exhausted, centering a feminist ethics of care is necessary.[37] Hopefully we can learn from late nineteenth-century comrades and sisters, in their fight for decent working conditions and lives, while also safeguarding our own health and knowledges.

Notes

1. Sanders and Hardy, "Students."
2. UCU, "Biggest"; UCU, "University."

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3. de Beauvoir, “Existentialism,” 217.
4. Quoted in Lewenhak, *Women.*
5. Wånggren, “Feminist?”
6. Boston, *Women*, 9.
7. Virdee, “The Second Sight.”
8. Grand, “The New Aspect,” 142.
9. As Nicole Busby notes, “After all, the first strike for equal pay was organised by 1,500 women card-setters in Yorkshire in 1832” (Busby, “Women’s”).
10. Blackburn, “No Necessary Connection,” 269.
11. This summary is based on Boston’s *Women Workers and the Trade Unions* (2015), the most up-to-date historical account of women in the British trade union movement, as well as on archival research and classic texts such as Drake’s *Women in Trade Unions*, Lewenhak’s *Women and Trade Unions*, and Soldon’s *Women in British Trade Unions, 1874–1976.*
12. Boston, *Women*, 48–51.
13. Boston, *Women*, 30–33; Trade Union Congress, “Clementina Black.”
14. Boston, *Women*, 47; Raw, *Striking a Light.*
15. Boston *Women*, 55.
16. Boston, *Women*, 60.
17. Boston, *Women*, 68.
18. Wilde quoted in Livesey, *Socialism*; Black quoted in Oakley, “Fact.” Black was honorary secretary of WPPL, moved the first successful equal pay resolution (for WPPL) at a TUC congress, organized in the Match Girls’ Strike, supported the newly formed Union of Women Match Workers 1889, and founded the Women’s Trade Union Association (later the Women’s Industrial Council). As most of Black’s trade union positions were honorary, writing was her main source of income. In addition to fiction, she published crucial work such as *Sweated Industry and the Minimum Wage* (1907), *Makers of Our Clothes: a case for Trade Boards* (1909), and *Married Women’s Work* (1915) (Trade Union Congress, “Clementina Black”).
19. Ethel Carnie Holdsworth is often noted as an exception.
20. Lutes, “Beyond”; see www.pistonpenandpress.org.
21. Boston, *Women*, 31.
22. Further sources might include *The Link* and *Pall Mall Gazette* (1888), which contains Besant articles on the Match Girls’ Strike, and the Women’s Trade Union League annual reports (1891–1917/21).
23. Macarthur, “Editorial.”
24. Weale, “Staff.”

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25. Murray, Crowley, and Wånggren, “Feminist Work”; Wånggren, “Feminist?”
26. I am checking the edits in between contracts, while also applying for jobs (two of the four contracts mentioned when drafting the paper have ended). I note these conditions not to focus on my individual situation (it is not individual; it is one situation among many making up a structure) but to make apparent the usually invisibilized material conditions of academic writing.
27. UCU, *UCU Workload.*
28. Gill, “Breaking the Silence,” 228.
29. Brown and Carasso, *Everything*; Gill, “Breaking the Silence”; UCU, *Counting.*
30. UCU, *Precarious*; UCU, *Counting.*
31. UCU, *Making Ends Meet.* See also Lopes and Dewan, “Precarious.”
32. Bonello Rutter Giappone and Wånggren, *Working Conditions.*
33. UCU, “Job Insecurities.”
34. Trinder, “International Report.”
35. Günel, Warma, and Watanabe, “A Manifesto.”
36. Blell, Liue, and Verma, “‘A one-sided view.’”
37. Wånggren, “Feminist Trade Unionism.”

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