Hyperemployed or Feminized Labor?

Hi all, I am participating in a conversation through the iDC listserv organized by Trebor Scholz at the New School. If you are interested in digital labor (or the future of labor in general) and the New School's upcoming conference (November 2014), which promises to be excellent and will bring together scholars, researchers, labor organizers, activists, and artists (and more!), please consider subscribing: http://collectivate.net/idc/

Here is my latest post to the list, which is a response to Ian Bogost's piece in The Atlantic, "Hyperemployment, or the Exhausting Work of the Technology User."

I am assuming that, regardless of how you are employed, the notion of hyperemployment struck a nerve with you. Bogost's point that most jobs contain a multitude of invisible forms of labor is well understood; perhaps it is even becoming a form of muscle memory for many of us. E-mail is one of the most obvious instantiations of the often-unacknowledged demand that workers be continually "available" and ready for work, and as such it is a powerful social, subjectifying agent. A friend recently told me that, despite being hired and submitting paperwork for the position, he lost a well-paying, temporary teaching assignment because he was a day late in responding to the director's e-mail request for supplemental materials. When you live paycheck to paycheck, it's cold comfort to suggest, "Well, hey, you probably didn't want to work for that madman anyway." In many ways, the overattachment to digital devices that Bogost charts can be seen as learned behavior emerging from a poorly controlled Milgram experiment in which we are both the ones shocked by the persistent buzzing of our devices ("opportunity" calling) and the ones doing the shocking, giving in to invisible structures of authority that mark the evolving, ever increasingly digitally mediated labor landscape. In addition to that implicit demand for attention and the assumption of "epic" levels of connectivity to digital and mobile technologies, there is also, as Bogost suggests, an accompanying "administration" of one's life that takes the form of an endless to-do list. As he writes,

> the ballet school's schedule updates (always received too late, but, "didn't you get the email?"); the Scout troop announcements; the daily deals website notices; the PR distribution list you somehow got on after attending that conference; the insurance notification, informing you that your new coverage cards are available for self-service printing (you went paperless, yes?); and the email password reset notice that finally trickles in 12 hours later, since you forgot your insurance website password...

It is undeniable that as life and work blur into each other, levels of exhaustion mount. The persistent "doing of things" or the "getting of things done" comes to stand in for other activities. Microsoft even recently declared November 7 to be "Get It Done Day," as though to suggest that even holidays are workdays (and they are quite literally for part-time workers this Thanksgiving at Walmart and Best-Buy). As Microsoft rather grossly suggests in its new Office 365 campaign, there is no physical escape from work, and "whether you are in an office park or a national park, you can still participate in meetings."

And, as we e-mail in the morning, text in the afternoon, and hop on Twitter to criticize after dinner, a substrate of meta-data-labor goes to work in ways that we can barely conceptualize, let alone make claims about its surplus value. Bogost writes, "For those of us lucky enough to be employed, we're really hyperemployed," and he is well aware that such hyperemployment is rarely acknowledged, begets little to no wage, and may even be a form of labor common to both the formally employed and the under- and unemployed. If you need a stark reminder of how exhausting unemployment is, try playing "Iain Duncan Smith's Realistic Unemployment Simulator": http://toys.usvsth3m.com/iain-duncan-smiths-realistic-unemployment-simulator/.

What I am curious about, however, is the use of the term "hyperemployment." As Trebor suggested, the term is contradictory for workers who are refused the designation of "employee." Trebor mentioned crowd-sourced labor, but the fight simply to be recognized as an employee has been a long and well-documented struggle for workers who were excised from the National Labor Relations Act, namely agricultural and domestic workers. While there is agency in simply offering the term "employment" to certain activities (waged or unwaged), I am wondering if what Bogost is drawing attention to has less to do with "employment" than with the uneven redistribution and privatization of the labor of social reproduction, an antagonism that feminist theorists have been writing about for more than thirty years. Bogost writes, "hyperemployment offers a subtly different way to characterize all the tiny effort we contribute to Facebook and Instagram and the like. It's not just that we've been duped into contributing free value to technology companies (although that's also true), but that we've tacitly agreed to work unpaid jobs for all these companies." This tacit agreement, however, extends beyond social media and e-mail and is really a form of housework and maintenance for our daily lives. In that regard, I wonder if calling the cozy arrangement between digital technologies, data economies, and invisible labor "employment" runs the danger of side-stepping the deeper (gendered and racialized) antagonisms inherent in the distinction between what is considered labor and what is considered "care."

While I am very supportive of drawing lines of solidarities between waged workers, the underemployed, and the unemployed (and I think Bogost's article can help us with that project by drawing attention to unspoken common platforms and practices across these groups), I'm also curious if we can approach the very notion of digital labor with a different vocabulary— one that might reject the implicit tendencies toward individual competition and entrepreneurial success. I mean, are you just employed or are you "hyperemployed"? Either way, there is a culture of "what's your excuse?" sadism ready to answer you and a large market of "management systems" and life-coach support systems geared at helping individuals live and thrive in the "hyperness" of the market. As Mimi Thi Nguyen has suggested in her piece "Against Efficiency Machines," "'Solidarity' may seem an old-fashioned concept, but it is one we need if we are to refuse to concede to what neoliberalism would make of us (entrepreneurial, exceptional, exploitable)." To that end, I am curious about language that can shift focus from the individually employed individual and perhaps even help us reconsider what a "share the work" program might look like today. I am curious about language that looks not to flatten the condition of employment but rather can ask questions like "why am I so overworked, when others are going hungry?" While we can draw attention to the ways in which our lives are coming to exhaust us, I am wondering what solidarities can be drawn among bodies, selves, and data (and other nonhuman actors)—solidarities that might really take care of all of us.