Feminist Repetitions in Higher Education

Interrupting Career Categories

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Palgrave Studies in Gender and Education

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Maddie Breeze • Yvette Taylor

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Interrupting Career Categories
A few anecdotes from the feminist starting out in academia:

It’s my senior year of college at a small U.S. liberal arts school and I’m working as a research assistant for a professor in the English department. Let’s call her Dr. Jane Doe. She is new to the university, and though it’s the first time I’ve worked with her I know her by reputation: strict, exacting, with high expectations. She is one of the youngest professors in the department, a woman of colour, and a wheelchair user.

We’re having a meeting in her top-floor office when another English professor comes in for a chat: Dr. John Smith. He’s the spitting image of the mad professor: an elderly white gentleman always wearing stained, creased tweed with wiry white hair like a mop hit by lightning. His office is a dank den of old books littered with student essays and paper plates of free food he’d taken from campus events (he once offered me a roasted pepper from a plate on the floor. I declined). He’s what people think of when they picture an academic.

Dr. Smith pops his head into Dr. Doe’s office and asks us what we’re working on. I explain that ‘Jane has asked me to develop an annotated bibliography on Afrofuturism within contemporary U.S. fiction.’ When Dr. Smith leaves, Dr. Doe turns to me with a hard look. ‘Katie, please do not call me Jane. My name is Dr. Doe. I worked extremely hard for my PhD and earned that title.’ My face reddens and I apologise profusely.
Later, though, I don’t understand. On this small, ‘community values’
campus, I call all of my professors (including John) by their first names. Why does this professor insist on the use of her title?

* * *

Fast forward three years and two graduations. I’m in the first year of my PhD, now living in Scotland and cultivating a career as a performance poet alongside my academic work. It’s my first time teaching a university course: a first-year Creative Writing seminar. Marking assignments, I spend an hour on each piece, providing detailed, tailored feedback. Many of the students have shared what seem to be deeply personal accounts of trauma, oppression, and mental health challenges through their poetry and fiction. I want to honour the trust they’ve placed in me by sharing their stories, so I take care to be sensitive in my feedback. Once I’ve finished, I realise I’ve spent four times my allocated paid time on marking. On the next assignment, I struggle: do I expend the same effort and fulfil my pastoral responsibility to these students, or do I mark less carefully and thus respect the value of my time and labour?

* * *

I meet one of my PhD supervisors for a meeting while she’s in the process of returning from maternity leave. She brings along her energetic, bouncing baby boy. She keeps apologising for his gurgles interrupting our conversation, seemingly worried she’s being unprofessional. I couldn’t care less—he’s adorable. I keep biting my tongue from asking to hold him, worried I’ll seem unprofessional.

* * *

I am invited (by the authors of this text) to deliver a poetry performance lecture at the biennial meeting of the UK & Ireland Feminist and Women’s Studies Association. I’m deeply honoured and simultaneously feel the worst imposter syndrome I’ve ever felt. I’m a feminist, yes—but am I a _proper_ feminist? I know Judith Butler wrote an important book in the ‘90s and that bell hooks is a badass but I couldn’t cite them off the top of my head—isn’t that a prerequisite? I non-ironically watched Love Island last summer, for goodness sake! Why did they choose me?
On the evening of the talk, I stand before the room of eminent scholars and sweat, madly wondering if it was a bad call to shave my legs and wear lipstick (they’ll find out I’m not a proper feminist!). (It goes fine).

* * *

At my other PhD supervisor’s retirement party, the department chair politely asks what I’m currently working on. Gripping my plastic cup of prosecco, I say that I’m preparing for my viva and working part-time at a not-for-profit supporting local artists. The reality: I haven’t looked at my thesis since I submitted it and I’m working four days a week selling art in a mall (mostly working the cash register, restocking, and mopping), plus multiple other part-time precarious jobs trying to make ends meet. I have £10 in my bank account, the department is two months late paying me for teaching work, and I’m exhausted.

* * *

On the train to my university on the morning of my viva, I blast Cyndi Lauper through my headphones and carefully apply makeup. I’m mindful of a recent article claiming that men tend to be uncomfortable when women apply makeup in public settings, feeling it rude. I place the binder containing my printed PhD on the table in front of me next to my makeup bag and coffee cup. I feel it inoculates me somehow: I’m painting my face for a purpose, to excel in the performance of being A Serious Academic. Humming along to “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun,” I blush my cheeks and mentally revise the taxonomy I devised of performative authenticities within contemporary U.K. performance poetry.

I pass my viva with six months of corrections. On the train home, I cry non-stop, mascara running, unable to perceive this as anything other than a failure.

* * *

A few months after my viva, I attend a dermatologist’s appointment. The doctor, a kindly middle-aged man, addresses me as Miss Ailes, without a hint of condescension (it’s what was on his forms, after all). Drunk on my new power and summoning the courage the #immodestwomen campaign stirred in me, I correct him—‘Um, actually it’s Dr. Ailes’—and
immediately feel like an utter numpty. It’s not the heady rush of empowerment I expected at proudly claiming my title: Gloria Steinem has not materialised to applaud me, nor Beyonce to belt my praises. I’m in the dermatologist’s office because I’d kept an infected earring in too long and developed an ugly, scarred lump. Not exactly my greatest display of intelligence. But the doctor is lovely and gracious, asking curiously about my research, and he uses my title for the rest of the (painful, humiliating) appointment.

* * *

Clearly, being a feminist (or at least attempting to be one) within academia is not always a simple endeavour. Alas, feminists are not all professorial Rosie the Riveters brandishing thumb-drives of our illustrious CVs, hair swept back under glamorous velvet graduation caps, vanquishing the systemic inequalities of the academy! More realistically, and as this text carefully documents, being a feminist within academia means embarking on a winding journey full of setbacks, interruptions, and the need for reconsideration of how to practice one’s values within a flawed system.

This journey can feel never-ending: we navigate a field in which the goalposts are constantly blurry and shifting. When do we ‘arrive’ in academia—as newly minted Dr.’s, Early Career Academics, Senior Lecturers? When should we claim our titles, assert our legitimacy: and in what authority is that legitimacy rooted? And how, as feminists, can we simultaneously occupy positions of academic power and status while actively resisting the problematic facets of these systems and working to dismantle them?

As this text consistently demonstrates, often the same actions have both liberating and oppressive potentials. Decisions to respect one’s own value and health (i.e. only marking during paid time) can grate against feminist actions (practicing care with students; building mentor-mentee relationships). Sharing one’s personal accounts of setbacks, failures, and discrimination as a feminist within academia can be a deeply empowering practice making others feel less isolated; yet it is also important to question whose stories are demanded and valued and who is less able to openly confess to struggling.

At times throughout my academic journey I have been a bad feminist, an empowered feminist, a conflicted feminist: but, most importantly, I have been a learning feminist open to new ideas and more compassionate relationships. I now have a clearer understanding of why Dr. Doe, as an
early career female academic, a woman of colour in a majority white state, and a wheelchair user working on the top floor of an old building, so firmly insisted on the use of her title. To occupy academia while not fitting the stereotype of ‘the academic’ means a daily struggle for legitimacy and respect in which these status signifiers are deeply meaningful. Now too I better appreciate how the precarity of academic labour, particularly in traditionally feminised roles such as the provision of pastoral care, is intimately connected to wider issues of gender-based inequality. And yes, I now know that wearing makeup does not disqualify me from being a feminist, no more than having hairy armpits last summer made me a good one.

* * *

Last week, filling out the ‘title’ section of an order form, I furtively, deliciously select “Dr.” from the drop-down list. It still feels like identity theft, a secretive deception. When my parcel arrives addressed to my distinguished alter ego, I giggle: then, proudly, I open it.

Katie Ailes
We write this acknowledgement as an interruption. Interruptions are a central methodological device in the book, as we work to interrupt and reconsider feminist conventions in taking up academic space across the career course, including by interrupting ourselves. We have, in truth, interrupted ourselves, and each other, over an extended period of time in writing this book. Sometimes these interruptions have become repetitions and frustrations: we arrive in each other’s inbox, amidst the bursting emails, promising and reminding, and apologising for redrafts not-yet-completed, work deferred and returned to. We knock on each other’s office door and promise to stick to the deadline next time. We strike, we go on the picket lines. We forget what the book is about, we add it to our CVs, we talk about it as if it’s published already, and we remind each other that it’s not. In this, we think about the deadlines we hold ourselves to and acknowledge that there will always be repetition and interruption in our feminist efforts. In this book we consider the ways that feminism is done and re-done in higher education, necessarily and insistently repeated.

Some acknowledgements are smoothly integrated into feminist academic work; the flow of thanks does not necessary interrupt working days. Saying ‘thank you’ can be a learned impulse, an automatic reaction; in emails, ‘many thanks’ and in person, ‘thanks for taking the time to meet’. Feminists might also encounter the expectation that we should be grateful for having achieved academic entrance, thankful just to be here, for being allowed in. We are so grateful for the corporate well-being and mentoring programmes teaching us how to be more efficient, more flexible, and to just DO MORE, all the while maintaining a positive mental attitude.

Acknowledgements
We can trace academic relationships, and inequalities across the career course, in official thank yous: differences in (un)expected thanks, those thanks that do and do not interrupt the flow, and consider who is thanked for their work in the departmental meeting, in promotion rounds, in professional societies and on #academictwitter. Thanks can re-inscribe the status of the thanker, I gratefully acknowledge the Society for Elite Research Funding, without which I would not have been able to take two years away from teaching to write this book. In which direction along the career course, vertically, horizontally, do thanks flow? Reading into who is not named, acknowledged, and thanked hints at a different stories, including beyond performing #academickindness. Saying thank you can have the effect of acknowledging the source of ideas, work, connections, resources that otherwise would not be spoken in official academic discourse, interrupting and diverting the flow of recognition. Thanks can gloss over the conditions of academic labour. Thanks to my wife for typing. Thanks can surprise us, in the unexpected acknowledgement in the PhD thesis, the generous note in the post from an admired colleague, an email that says our article or book was useful. Thanks can initiate an affecting pause, feelings of gratitude and recognition, a pleasant surprise. Being left off the thank you list can cause embarrassment, guilt and anger.

Hopefully we have thanked the people in our lives before, during, and after the completion of this book and we thank them again: thank you. Thanks can acknowledge the labours and cares often invisibilised across the career course, and they work as affective gestures, even humanizing the distant neutral academic made familiar by revealing partners, parents, children, and pets, situating thankers in relation to normative family forms, and the support they offer. Thanks (again) to my wife for typing. We turn to acknowledgement pages often before delving into a book, and we may understand the personalization as also a politicization, including, for example, of queer cares and queer families. These acknowledgements may in fact legitimize us as authentic subjects, demonstrating and living a ‘feminist life’, including by citation, association, membership and so on. You may hear our ambivalence and commitment to thankful acknowledgement. We are thankful for feminism and to the feminists who repeat and hold a feminist presence in the academy, for many reasons, even as we feel our feminist complicities in distributing thanks.

Thanking those who are not usually thanked can muddle the successes that herald academic careers, and disrupt the myth of individual, meritocratic achievement. But sometimes academic acknowledgements re-tread
a path pointing to success; the writer acknowledges the teacher, the supervisor, the mentor, who encouraged and advocated and showed the way. Following in their footsteps and saying thank you can persuade the reader, and the educational institution, of the effectiveness of following on, taking advice; the system works. Exceptional successes, or lucky escapes in winning despite the odds, can also reproduce career course logics and we want to interrupt this and consider how our objective educational successes—for we are both academics—may well be partly produced through failure. Here we think of discouraging teachers, difficult colleagues and the sideling of feminisms from the curriculum and in the career course.

It is important to acknowledge that we finished this book as the Covid-19 global pandemic took hold, and as the deadly social and political life of the pandemic is causing severe and sustained disruption. Like other academics, we have felt rapid and unprecedented changes to our usual work, with university buildings shutting down, redundancies threatened, and teaching, research and administration moving online. Amidst this, we have asked ourselves how might the book still matter beyond a task to be ticked off our to-do lists? In what ways will the everyday feminist repetitions and interruptions analysed here be shaped by the devastating interruption of everyday social life, just as the UK’s political response to the virus repeats lines of continuity in the austerity-driven dismantling of public health and welfare? We leave these as open questions, as we stretch ourselves again, wondering how to do feminism when we are not sure what universities will look like, or do, in the months and years ahead. In between stretching with and against institutional, familial, care and social pressures, we acknowledge and very much thank each other.
Praise for *Feminist Repetitions in Higher Education*

“Why must feminism still repeat itself? What must feminism still intervene in? How can we stretch our colleagues, disciplines, universities and ourselves in our feminist interruptions? How do feminists negotiate the ambivalences of working in the non-feminist university? This vital book responds by creatively attending to unequal educational journeys along intersecting paths of privilege and precarity-across academic ‘career courses’.”

—Professor Mary Lou Rasmussen, *The Australian National University, Australia*
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