

**X. Stresses and contradictions of trying to 'do feminisms'  
within the (neo)liberal academy**

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### **Observation and Commentary**

**Article Title:** Stresses and Contradictions of trying to 'do feminisms' within the (Neo)liberal Academy

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**Key Words:** ableism, academia, academic, neoliberal academy, education, feminist, learning journey, teaching, university, work

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This essay comes from a place of tension and discomfort in my position as a young feminist and newly employed academic, struggling to negotiate my place within the (neo)liberal (Sothorn, 2007) academy. I'm passionate about the subjects of my work: my writing spans feminist, queer, disability, and critical youth theories, meaning my activist and academic endeavours, my life and work, tend to blur. It is a position that I sometimes think I should feel 'lucky' to be in (Tokumitsu, 2014). Yet, this blurring is proving difficult to negotiate and rife with contradiction. The feeling that I should be grateful of my employment is spurred by entwined feelings of guilt and privilege, relative power and powerlessness (Pillow, 2003). The result of which is a relationship with a 'work/life thing' that is personally unsustainable and contributes to maintaining an exclusive academic arena. I attempt to unpack this here by using feminisms, queer theories and ableism to interrogate my own academic journey.

### **Academic Queer(y)ing, Academic Re-Straightening**

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hooks (1994, 59) "came to theory because [she] was hurting". As a child she found comfort in theorising the world around her. Whilst frustrating and often uncomfortable, school for me was just what I had to do. I found the work easy enough and if I kept my mouth shut and head down, I could get along. At home putting the world to rights ('doing critical theory') was all around me. I came to understand the conversations, arguments and anger that I was allowed at home, but not at school, 'as theory' because I was born into a family where going to university was possible and considered 'a good idea'. So, I went to university and through some particularly important pedagogical relationships, worked out that 'theory' meant trying to make some "sense out of what was happening" (hooks, 1994, p. 61) in the world. It was a revelation that unlike at school, at university critical questioning was not only allowed but praised<sup>1</sup>! I write this now with the conviction that we *all* do theory yet, as I will come onto, only some of us are rendered powerful enough to call it 'theory', speak it and be heard. Gibson-Graham (1999) uses the term queer(y)ing to describe questioning to seek out possibility and change. The disability and queer theory that I found at university was different to the class politics we talked about at home, and a world away from anything I was introduced to at school. This shook up the way I thought about things. I began to understand my own sexuality as queer, and recognise the disablist and homophobic violence in the lives of my family and friends as resulting from ableist and heteronormative systems. The relative privilege I was in receipt of, alongside the struggles I was engaged in, meant I met the criteria which, for this particular department in this particular time and place, meant I was 'good at theory'. By the same standards, at the end of my degree I was deemed 'good enough at theory' to get PhD funding. This led me to further exciting theories and people inside and outside of university who were busy queer(y)ing the world around them. I began to grapple

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with some new words: 'positionality', 'intersectionality' and 'privilege' (Crenshaw, 1989); words I'm still coming to understand.

Since completing my PhD I've got a job teaching around 'in/exclusion' in a university education department. The theories I'm invested in take issues of power and identity seriously (hooks, 1994; Snyder & Broadway, 2004; Sumara & Davis, 1999). I attempt to let these theories, along with critiques of ableism and normalcy inform my pedagogical approach (Baglieri, Bejoian, Broderick, Connor, & Valle, 2011; Campbell, 2009; Davis, 2010; Erevelles, 2005). For Sumara and Davis (1999, p.202), a queer curriculum is "spurred by the desire to create more interesting forms of thinking". This means re-evaluating whose knowledges count, fostering relationships and challenging teacher/student hierarchies. Rather than aim for 'certainty', I attempt to co-create spaces with students where we struggle together in imagining things other than the educational 'now' we inhabit (Facer, 2011; Gibson-Graham, 1999).

Smith (2013, 264) argues that "the current social structure conditions us to exercise what privileges we have". Despite wanting to work against systems of hetero-patriarchy, white supremacy, ableism, adultism, colonialism and capitalism, I am simultaneously expected to play within the rules of the system perpetuating these ideals. There are some brilliant moments in the classroom. Yet, as the end of the semester approaches, anxiety rises as I require students to root shared conversations in individual essays. Higher education thrives on individualism, exclusivity and hierarchy: my job as a teacher is to ensure that I carve 'autonomous learners' who will go on to live 'economically-productive' lives. I take essays and rate them against one-another. After praising students for their exciting ideas in the

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classroom, I criticise them for their refusal to comply with academic convention. Having queer(y)ed together, I proceed to straighten my students back out. Furthermore, the system that allowed me the space to queer(y) is doing the same straightening to me. Competitive, (neo)liberal, consumerist academic contexts mean not only students, but universities/ courses/ staff are rated against one-another. As well as teaching, there is a pressure to keep 'up to date' in the field, apply for research funding and produce 'outputs' (Barcan, 2014; Parker, 2013). I position myself as 'expert' and commodify knowledges that aren't my own. Like my students, I am expected to write in a certain way and publish in particular journals, many of which are closed to most outside academia.

The postmodern shift to challenge binary division is present in many of the theories in which I invest my 'life/work'. Yet, paradoxically, blurring the life/work boundary is also a dangerous expectation of the flexible (neo)liberal worker, which, whilst critiquing, I also epitomise (Brouillette, 2013). Trying to juggle research and teaching, I often write after a day's teaching. Sometimes, in an attempt to pacify my own discomfort, I call this writing activism. Yet, if I ask myself who such 'activism' is benefitting (especially when aiming for academic publication), the answer is uncomfortable. More honestly, I do it because 'that's what academics do' (Barcan, 2014). Yet, this makes a work/life that isn't just personally unsustainable, but maintains academia as a patriarchal and ableist arena. Campbell (2009, 44) highlights ableism to be a "network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body". The self and body that is expected of academics is inherently 'able'. We are expected to 'network', often at inaccessible venues (Peace, 2013; Titchkosky, 2011), and say 'yes' to everything without taking into account the time and

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energy it requires (Price, 2011). For many including disabled people and people with caring responsibilities, the majority of which continue to be women, such a work/life is not possible.

### **Struggles: Older and Wiser?**

I am not trying to claim that there are no aspects of my job which I enjoy (nor that work shouldn't be enjoyable). Writing can be both a pleasure and a pain; I have met many of my closest friends through academic/activist circles; and I thrive off relational moments in the classroom. Yet I follow Tokusmitsu (2014) in stressing that "emotionally satisfying work is still work, and acknowledging it as such doesn't undermine it in any way. Refusing to acknowledge it, on the other hand, opens the door to exploitation and harms all workers". Such a realisation is all the more pertinent when doing 'work' which aims to be transgressive. Neither am I the first to realise these contradictions in the academy. As one reviewer of this paper put it, "the reality of the costs that are inherent in joining the academy [...are] the very dilemma that feminists have been dealing with for decades". Yet, when attempting to discuss these contradictions I'm often returned a knowing look: it gets written off as 'youthful idealism'; the system is something I will learn to 'manage'. Despite the truism that we become older and wiser, feminists know the dangers inherent to a narrative of 'progression' (Burman, 2008). Learning to 'manage' this system for my own individual gain is one of my worries; the longer I am part of it, the more the exclusion within it becomes normal and acceptable. Undoing privilege comes from the dismantling of systems (Smith, 2013), my own individual management does not challenge an exclusive system to which others can't comply. The final point I need to make is that this essay could rightly be accused of hypocrisy and perpetuating the situation I critique. I continue to struggle with this. However, Lorde (2007) tells us the importance of transforming silence into language and action. This special edition offers the possibility of dialogue and therefore collective struggle. I write this paper in the

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hope of reaching out/asking for advice/joining with others about how or indeed whether we can 'do feminisms' within the academy.

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**Notes:**<sup>1</sup> It's important to highlight that whilst these were my school experiences, there are teachers committed to critical thinking, just as there are university lecturers who are not. Furthermore, teachers are too working in stressful systems with less curriculum manoeuvre than those in universities.

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**Biographical Note:** I am a Lecturer in Education and Disability Studies at Sheffield Hallam University. My doctoral studies explored 'youth' and 'disability' as socio-cultural and political constructs. Fieldwork included running arts projects and workshops for young disabled people in the UK, and spending time with young disabled women running the only user-led independent living centre in Iceland. Although focusing on youth and disability, my research is interdisciplinary and intersectional. I am particularly interested in how 'youth' and 'disability' intersect with discourses of gender and sexuality. My latest research interests are how toilets function as socio-cultural spaces within the lives of young people.