



Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

[Book Review] Feeling Academic in the Neoliberal University: Feminist Flights, Fights, and Failures edited by Yvette Taylor and Kinneret Lahad (2018)
Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 368pp

Journal Item

How to cite:

Paterson, Laura L (2019). [Book Review] Feeling Academic in the Neoliberal University: Feminist Flights, Fights, and Failures edited by Yvette Taylor and Kinneret Lahad (2018) Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 368pp. *Gender and Language*, 13(3) pp. 1–6.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2019 Equinox Publishing

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1558/genl.39038>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

***Feeling Academic in the Neoliberal University:
Feminist Flights, Fights, and Failures***
edited by Yvette Taylor and Kinneret Lahad (2018)
Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 368pp.

Reviewed by Laura L. Paterson

This edited collection of perspectives on the neoliberal university will be of interest to scholars across disciplines, especially feminist scholars who will probably see their own experiences reflected in the book's pages. The collection has 16 chapters, each of which (to differing extents) questions what it means to feel academic and feel feminist and how these two emotions/perspectives/identities fit within a neoliberal environment. Most chapters use a form of (auto)ethnography, but the topics covered are wide ranging, and are written by authors from countries including Australia, Canada, China, Israel, Italy and the UK. This range is one of the collection's biggest strengths. The editors, Yvette Taylor and Kinneret Lahad, introduce the neoliberalisation of higher education, noting the potential impacts of market-driven initiatives on job security, especially within the arts and social sciences. Importantly, they do not restrict their discussion to the UK and acknowledge challenges to academic freedoms around the globe, which they associate with increasing governmental 'interference' (page 2) in higher education. Taylor and Lahad also note the intersectionality of feminism pertaining to privilege, noting that (in this case) academic seniority is a key privilege of note. To address this directly, many of their authors are early career researchers and/or on precarious contracts.

Heather Shipley's chapter, titled 'Failure to launch?', focuses on understandings of success and failure in academia and how they can influence interaction between academics and with one's own research. Shipley drives home the fact that women are paid less than men and hold fewer

Affiliation

The Open University, UK.
email: laura.paterson@open.ac.uk

senior positions of power. This is worth reiterating, but Shipley implies that more fully funded/staffed women's studies and gender departments would directly address this. Thus, she does not consider inequality across disciplines. Shipley's chapter is also one of two (the second is Read and Bradley's) which contrasts feminism with competition. A more in-depth discussion of this apparent contrast was needed to avoid the implicature that feminists who embrace competition are somehow 'bad feminists'. There is scope to reject competition within academia on feminist grounds, but even so, resources (particularly economic resources) are finite. Arguably, the problem is not competition itself, but rather who gets to decide the rules of the game (i.e. who controls access to such resources) and the ideologies that underpin their positions.

Emily Henderson's 'Feminist conference time' begins with a reflective exercise encouraging readers to think about their own experiences of conferences, focusing particularly on how academics multitask. She notes that 'academics bring the university with them to [a] conference, even if they deliberately try to do otherwise' (page 39). Henderson considers the proposition that neoliberal academia works on a compressed time frame, a notion that will be easily recognised by readers who have experienced what Henderson refers to as having to 'speed up to keep up' (page 40). This chapter is one of the high points in the collection. However, as with many chapters, it would have been interesting to see more of Henderson's primary data, which comprised interviews with conference delegates.

In contrast to Henderson's chapter, Yvette Taylor's 'Navigating the emotional landscapes of academia' is less directly applicable to one's own experiences. Taylor discusses the 'emotional stickiness' of working in academia, but full understanding of this concept and the chapter as a whole depends on the reader having prior knowledge of Taylor's other works. This may be less of a problem within sociology, where Taylor is well established, but it does make the chapter less accessible to an interdisciplinary audience. Taking issues of accessibility even further, although not necessarily in a negative sense, Lauren Misiaszek's 'China with "foreign talent" characteristics' is an outlier in this collection, insofar as it does not take the form of an academic chapter. Instead, Misiaszek uses what she calls autoethnography to disrupt the practice of autoethnography. The chapter includes notes, meditations and some analysis, and can be read non-linearly. The chapter, which considers Misiaszek's experiences as a foreign academic in China, is an interesting exercise which pushes at the boundaries of what is academic. But returning to the neoliberal context of the whole collection, she notes that this chapter will not 'count' as an academic output in her current context.

Sarah Burton's chapter, 'Writing yourself in?', considers how sociologist, feminist, women academics orient themselves to the REF. Using an ethnographic approach which involved data collected over the space of a year, Burton works with data from three participants. She frames her work as looking at race, class and gender, with one participant's contributions relating to the dual roles of academic and mother. Burton's chapter considers how the participants use writing to demonstrate 'fidelity to mainstream sociological legitimacy' while simultaneously 'satisfying their feminist political aims' (page 118). Burton claims to want to let her participants' stories speak for themselves, but the chapter contains only one extract written in a participant's own words. The rest is mediated through Burton's version of events, and this is somewhat unfortunate. It would have been beneficial to include more examples of primary data. For example, in the following chapter – 'Feelings of change' by C. Laura Lovin – the author works with interviews conducted by other people, but provides a link to the unabridged dataset so that readers can take a look for themselves. There are four abridged interviews – effectively biographies of four women working outside academia – presented with some summary. The women talk about how their PhD programmes only partially equipped them for non-academic positions and, in one case, a participant expresses their internalised shame resulting from leaving the academy. This chapter is followed by the excellently titled 'Feel the fear and killjoy anyway' in which Orla Murray uses interviews and online questionnaires with early career researchers in 'precarious positions' to explore being a 'feminist killjoy in academia' (page 163). Murray notes that some women have the choice about when to be killjoys while others do not. This could be because their reputation precedes them and/or because their presence disrupts academic norms. Murray positions the latter in terms of race, but it can also be extended to disability, class, religion, etc. One criticism of this chapter is that it centres on the researcher rather than her participants; one could read this as disrupting the academic paradigm to foreground feminist voices, but on the other hand the researcher is privileged here and has somewhat backgrounded the voices of the participants.

In one of the most engaging chapters in the collection Maddie Breeze considers 'Imposter syndrome as public feeling'. Breeze notes the importance of showcasing subjective (lived) accounts of imposter syndrome but rejects its individualisation, defining it as something beyond a 'private problem' (page 196). Breeze includes a partially fictional autoethnographic account that, on first reading, drew scepticism, but the account will be familiar to many. She uses her account to acknowledge the contradiction in feminists challenging the definition of knowledge but having to work, to an

extent, within existing paradigms of knowledge. That is, you have to speak someone's language to make a point even if you refute the underlying syntactic conventions. Breeze ultimately posits a global approach to imposter syndrome that pulls individuals together in collective action. She suggests that one way to challenge existing norms is to systematically and collectively fail at certain 'impossible standards' of current higher education (page 212). This is a strong idea, but Breeze does not discuss it in enough detail to ensure action. However, she does acknowledge that her ideas should be critically evaluated in light of 'who can afford to fail' (page 212).

In another chapter using 'experimental autoethnographies' (page 222), Read and Bradley focus on 'Gender, time and "waiting" in academic life'. Their method involved taking photographs and using them to reflect on the time they spent waiting during a one-week period. However, there are no photographs reproduced in the chapter, which is a shame. Nevertheless, Read and Bradley should be credited for their discussion of what autoethnography is and how it is defined. Their explanation of their methodology will be useful to readers who are unfamiliar with this approach and the chapter thus might have been better placed earlier in the collection. Further evaluation of autoethnography comes from Pat Thompson's 'A long goodbye to the "good girl"', in which she situates herself at the end of her career looking back. The chapter considers Thompson's move from the desire to conform towards an identity/understanding that rejects this position as, in part, a facet of neoliberalism. One take-home point from this chapter is Thompson's emphasis on the strong positives of working collaboratively with other women who share (some of) the same views, pressures and expectations as she did.

As an example of women collaborating, Gannon et al.'s 'On the thresholds of legitimacy' uses collective biographies as a direct challenge to the individualised practices associated with neoliberalism. There are three stories presented in this chapter and their analysis includes some consideration of language, although this is characterised as literary rather than linguistic analysis. The points made are insightful but there could have been more acknowledgement that the stories were fictionalisations or retellings of events. Thus, word choice was probably not as natural or neutral as is implied; Gannon et al. knew why they were putting these stories to paper and this could easily have influenced their content and structure. The chapter also includes a poem and thus does not conform to the expectations of an academic text. The poem represents a noteworthy deviation, but the extent to which it is a direct challenge to neoliberalism is questionable.

Daphna Hacker considers the strong gendering of 'Crying on campus' and the use of crying within a gender-essentialist paradigm. She categorises

academia as a masculine space and notes that all scholars (independent of sex or gender) are expected to act accordingly. By focusing on four 'brief' (page 282) times that she has cried in a professional setting, she notes that such occurrences can be motivated by 'the clash between the academic habitus and the fact that the university is, also, an economic and bureaucratic employer' (page 289). However, she also checks her privilege and acknowledges (similar to Breeze's those 'who cannot afford to fail') that others may be less able to cry due to external constraints. She notes 'how privileged my tears are compared to the tears of those who find themselves in much less secure or powerful positions within the academic field ... those who have more distressing reasons to cry, generated by the university itself, those who cannot afford to cry on fear of retaliation, and those who gain no relief from' crying (page 285).

Concluding several chapters which run together very well, Francesca Coin's 'When love becomes self-abuse' focuses on the precarity of academic jobs and how this can clash with academics' love for their jobs. Coin reports on the results of the *Ricercarsi* survey in Italy which provides information on academic labour and the living conditions of academic researchers. In particular Coin notes how one's socioeconomic background can greatly influence the possibility of pursuing an academic career, due to low paid, precarious work. There is also a focus on the additional unpaid tasks (including things as fundamental as teaching) which come to be expected but are not necessarily financially rewarded. And perhaps unsurprisingly, Coin notes that women are 'over-represented in the performance of unpaid labour' (page 312) in Italian academic institutions.

Nick Rumens's 'Teaching gender in a postfeminist management classroom' focuses on the relationship between neoliberalism and post-feminism, and he considers how his students 'acknowledge gender but disarticulate its salience as a site of inequality within organisations' (page 322). Rumens includes some anecdotal examples which could usefully be incorporated into language and gender teaching materials and he makes the point that using experiences from other countries and cultures can act both to foreground inequality and reinforce post-feminist ideas, as UK students position themselves as 'lucky' to be somewhere that gender is not an issue. Indeed, Rumens's students, both male and female, do not see gender as an issue even though some may have been discriminated against based on gender. Rather, the students hold their experiences within a neoliberal framework and do not want their actions to jeopardise their careers. Thus, Rumens's chapter encourages readers to reflect on their own experiences of teaching gender and consider how to address the constraints placed on students by wider neoliberal forces.

The final chapter, and another thought-provoking contribution, is Christina Costa's 'Digital scholars'. This chapter is not (explicitly) linked to feminism, which perhaps accounts for its positioning in the collection, but it is a solid chapter nonetheless. Costa considers the relationship between formal validation through traditional academic means (such as peer-reviewed publications) and newer forms of informal validation found in online interaction with and dissemination of academics' outputs (whatever form they take). Costa draws heavily on Honneth's (2007) theory of recognition – which is significant for feminist research as informal recognition can be affirming, but does nothing to challenge inequality in formal recognition. However, the discussion of Honneth's work needed more space. Overall, the chapter sits well within the changing landscape of UK academia insofar as it can be read in relation to increasing calls for public engagement and impact.

Most of the chapters point to an understanding that academia is (intersectionally) gendered. Indeed, this is the coherent underpinning to the collection. To address this directly, and not merely to pay lip service to intersectional feminism, the editors have showcased a range of academics at different career stages across several different countries and in different situations. As always, however, there is room for more voices. In particular, the editors could have made room for some interdisciplinary chapters, to see how the neoliberal academy can be analysed using a multitude of methods and from different perspectives. Nevertheless, this book is a good starting point for academic readers interested in how neoliberal ideas have shaped their sector, their institutions and the opportunities that may or may not be available to them.

Reference

Honneth, A. 2007. *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.