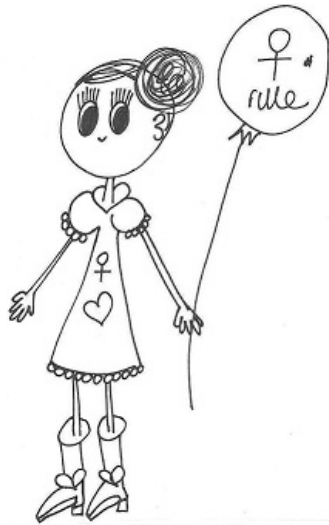


We're not afraid of the 'f' word: Storying our voices and experiences of Women and Gender Studies in Australian universities

Introduction



I could tell her house from the others as soon as I turned down the street—a modest bluestone cottage in an inner city suburb in Melbourne, complete with a rambling front garden of roses, lavender, alyssum and daisies. I had not had time to think about meeting her but now that the moment was approaching, I felt extremely nervous. As far as women’s liberation went, she was the ‘real deal’ and the opportunity to interview her felt like a once in a life time occasion. The iron gate squeaked as I opened it, and not wanting to make any more noise than necessary, I hesitantly pressed the door bell. Moments later, a delicately framed woman with white hair came to the door. “Hi ... Merle? I’m Liz”, I said and reached forward to introduce myself. She took my hand and gently kissed my cheek. “Welcome to my home”, Merle said and gestured for me to come inside. We walked down a narrow corridor to the end of the house, the walls lined with black and white family photos, and more recent colour snaps of her children and grandchildren. Nodding for me to sit down, Merle placed herself on a wooden chair opposite. “Before we begin”, she spoke quietly and with authority. “I am curious to know how and why it is that you come to be here with me in my dining room?” Some of us might know Merle Thornton as Sigrid Thornton’s mother (a well-known Australian actor); as the feisty feminist who famously chained herself to the bar at the Regatta hotel in Brisbane in 1965 for women’s right to drink and inhabit the same public social spaces as men (Thornton, 2007); or perhaps, as the political activist who fiercely and successfully fought to overturn the commonwealth

marriage ban on women working in the public service in 1966 (Thornton, 1999). Few of us are aware that Merle Thornton began the first Women's Studies course in Australia at The University of Queensland in 1972.

It was this groundbreaking chapter in her life, and indeed Women and Gender Studies in Australia that had brought me face to face with Merle. "Well, I've been teaching in Women and Gender Studies since 1997", I explained, "We're writing a position paper about the history and strengths of our discipline but we've realised that we don't actually know how and why women's studies began at UQ. All we know is that it was the first course of its kind in Australia and that you were the woman who made it happen". I paused. "You see, we find ourselves struggling against the neo-liberal surge to 'de-profile' (Baird, 2010, p. 112) difficult disciplines such as ours and we now have to justify why we should continue to exist as an area of undergraduate study". Merle nodded knowingly. "Yes, sustaining women's studies was never going to be easy—a lot of the regressive politics of today are a reaction against the success of the women's movement—there are still those who would wish to see us disappear" she murmured. "That's why I'm not afraid to say the 'f' word - both of them in fact!"ⁱ



The title of this paper “underscores the status of feminism as unspeakable” (Weber, 2010, p. 125) within contemporary culture and draws inspiration from the well-known 1962 play and later Hollywood film “Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf?” by Edward Albee. “Who’s afraid?” attempts to portray and analyse the damaging effects of traditional and stereotypical gender roles, particularly for women (Anon, 2011), and the name itself references feminist author and writer Virginia Woolf. In what is considered one of her openly feminist works

the *Three Guineas*, Woolf (1938, p. 63) develops in detail the arguments around the social, political and cultural institutions which combine to keep women dependent on and unable to access the power of men (Bowlby, 1997, p. 19). With particular reference to education, she commented on the academic procession of men she saw marching figuratively past her window. Woolf's feminist writings in the *Three Guineas* directly challenged the kind of education that patriarchy provided, questioned the values upon which such education was based and lamented the exclusion of women. If she were alive today, Woolf might well ask the same question—have academic women joined the parade of men or are we performing a pageant of our own making (c.f., Murphy & McNett, 2000, p. 319)? Indeed, it is the *performance* of feminism in the academy which takes centre stage in this paper, and more specifically, the performance of *feminist politics* within/against/through/over/around/under/across *feminist pedagogies*.

I use the word *performance* deliberately here—this paper is written as “serious play” (Weber, 2010, p. 136), as a performative act of the Butlerian kind (after Butler, 1997, 1999; Weiss, 1999) or perhaps even an example of “body-shaped” (Weber, 2010, p. 131) knowledge and pedagogy at work which brings autoethnographic research and writing methods together with narrative inquiry. In keeping with the centrality of performance to autoethnography, the paper is built around a series of scenes, which aim to provide us with a glimpse into the way that feminists in Women and Gender Studies in Australia today experience the academy.ⁱⁱ This approach is deliberately provocative and intends to challenge the “dinosaurian beliefs that ‘creative’ and ‘analytic’ are contradictory and incompatible modes” (Richardson, in Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 962). A scene is set, a story told, intricate connections are woven, experience and theory are evoked and then ruthlessly let go (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 765). All of the balls that have been juggled fly into the air and both performer and audience stand waiting with baited breath to see how they might fall. Each time they are thrown they

soar higher, rolling, shifting and teasing, never showing quite the same line as before. In this paper, I am going to turn around and around ideas about feminist pedagogy and feminist politics in the academy in a similar way to take us to the kind of “social somewhere” (2012, p. 9) that Barone and Eisner speak of, to look at the same material in familiar and unusual ways—here a fiction, there a fanciful retelling of facts, somewhere else a free hand drawingⁱⁱⁱ and everywhere conversations of the friendly kind. Scene 1 of the story begins in a meeting room in a University, where at that particular moment, the rationale to continue or end Women and Gender Studies is the main topic of discussion. Scene 2 presents a feminist response to the assumption that Women and Gender Studies is no longer needed, wanted and therefore no longer justified as an area of undergraduate study in universities in the form of a ‘feminesto’. In Scene 3, I am joined by a friend called ‘Ms Feminist Pedagogy’ to explore the teaching and learning imperatives which ground us as feminists in the academy. Scene 4 brings together our individual Women and Gender Studies stories in a shared conversation over coffee where we talk about what being feminist in the academy means to us, what it looks and feels like to be a feminist academic, and the kinds of feminist pedagogical performances that are central to our work in Women and Gender Studies. The paper closes by returning to the beginning – to my interview with Merle Thornton – to consider what the future might hold for those of us who are not afraid say the ‘F’ word in higher education.

Scene 1: Do Australian universities still need feminism?



I enter the Faculty teaching and learning meeting room wearing my favourite frock. It's a spotty number which shows more knee than my 40+ years would like, carefully matched with black rather than blue stockings, sensible ballet flats, and a short sleeve cardigan. Complete with my hair captured in a neat bun and a

subtle spray of perfume, I feel professional—indeed intellectual—and ready to match it with the big boys. As I open the door, I quickly take stock of who else has arrived and immediately notice that once again I am the only female academic in the room. Sighing inwardly, I search for a spare seat. The Professor and chair of the committee sits at the head, a beige bowler hat placed dutifully on the table in front of him and a tweed jacket casually guarding his blindside from the back of his seat. His pasty white hands and long fingernails tap impatiently as he waits for me to take my place. “Excuse me...” His colleague on the right scowls as I squeeze past him— “Oh, I’m terribly sorry...” —and another further to the extreme, has no intention of making space for me to get through. The Professor sighs and looks at me in exasperation, “When you are ready Liz, we can get started”. I fumble and practically fall into my chair, the burn in my cheeks setting ablaze my earlier sense of sophistication. “We are gathered here today,” the Professor’s voice takes on a missionary zeal, “to discuss those programs which we will need to...how shall we say...‘do away with’ in the interests of budget and bums on seats!” He smiles broadly and winks at me, at the same time giving license to the other men around the table to snigger. I choose to ignore the sexual undertones of the word bum in association with his bung eyelid, and try to concentrate on the meeting’s agenda. “Well Liz, given that your program is at the top of our hit list, I think maybe we’ll start with you. Care to explain why there are not so many bottoms baring themselves in the lectures of your women and gender studies courses? Is it political correctness gone wild or simply a posse of bra burning has-beens protecting a program that no longer has any need to exist? I mean after all, we’ve already ‘feminised’ the curriculum haven’t we? ” There is a silence. I look around the table to see if maybe I had misheard the Professor’s loud neoliberal assertion of “the pastness of feminism” (Weber, 2010, p. 125). The smug faces sneering at me tell me my hearing is fine. “Professor, I think we should begin with a distinction between ‘feminisation’ and ‘feminist’...” “Actually Liz, we don’t have time

for fancy philosophical discussion, what we would all prefer is your account of the numbers and why they are so low.”

The Professor has me trapped. It is true that the number of students enrolling in courses such as women and gender studies at our university have decreased to conservative numbers over the past ten years, but I want to tell the committee that this can be explained as having direct correlation with a return to 1950s old school politics in Australian society more broadly, particularly in regards to the status and role of women (c.f., Wallach Scott, 2008). The feminist backlash that began in the mid 80s/early 90s, did not miss Australian shores, in fact, it arrived with the force of a tsunami. How can we forget the Australian leader of the opposition Tony Abbott’s reminder in 2010 that, “it would be folly to expect that women will ever dominate or even approach equal representation in a large number of areas simply because their aptitudes, abilities and interests are different for physiological reasons” (Caitlinate, 2010)? And what about the way in which the current Australian *female* prime minister Julia Gillard was ridiculed last year for speaking out against sexism and misogyny in her own parliament and Australian society as a whole?

Just like Julia, the feminist goddess inside me begins to seethe like Pele and urges me to rip off my dress in front of the men in this meeting, proudly reveal my “I’ll be a postfeminist in postpatriarchy” t-shirt and stand tall on my soapbox. I want to scream, Australian universities still need Women’s and Gender Studies. If women really were equal, why is it that as recently as last week, the Australian government released “gender indicators” (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013) which draw attention to the fact that not only do women get paid less (ABS, 2013, “Work”); we still undertake the vast majority of care work in our society. Women make up less than 9% of the directorships and no more than 2% of the CEOs in our companies boardrooms (Dux & Simic, 2008, pp. 205-206 for

earlier statistics; ABS, 2013) and the university scene is not much better. Only one third of teaching and research staff at my university are women and less than 20% hold Professorial or Executive positions (Equity Office, 2011, p. 10). If women really were free, why is it that one in three Australian women will report being the victim of physical violence in their lifetime, four times more women than men will assaulted by their partner (ABS, 2013, “Victims of violence commentary”)? How can explain the premature sexualisation of children and girls in the media and the ways this places them in increased danger of becoming victims of prostitution, violence, and unwanted forms of pornography (Women’s Forum Australia, 2010)? And where do we begin a conversation about the toxic rise of “e-bile” (Jane, 2012), the sexualised threats of violence and misogynist recreational nasties that arrive as email in our inboxes and circulate freely through the entire internet? If women really do “have it all”, why is that most women are plagued in some degree by body image problems and low-self esteem with more than 75% of Australian disliking what they see in the mirror (Dux & Simic, 2008, p. 207)? Given this disheartening picture of the overall status of women in Australia, the relevancy of Women and Gender Studies in higher education, and the crucial role that our discipline has to play in educating new generations of women about what gender equality really means cannot be underestimated. But I stop myself from climbing onto my soapbox before it’s too late - as a discipline which is committed to the critique of patriarchy, power and privilege, women and gender studies has always played a risky game in the academy in daring to “bite the hand that feeds it” (c.f., similar arguments for feminism and public sociology, 2007, p. 274; Wallach Scott, 2008, p. 6).

Scene 2: A feminesto about higher education about where we are and why we still dare to say the ‘f’ word

Later that night, I fall into bed absolutely exhausted and desperate for a dreamless sleep where the Professor and his band of merry men fall into an invisible hell of their own making. But much to my horror, I am besieged by the worst kind of nightmare possible where I am forced to live through the meeting, again, and again, and again. The meeting is just about to start for a fourth time and I cannot bear it. In my dream I roughly push myself away from the table and jump onto my chair. In my hand I am holding a “feminesto” and as I begin to read, I am joined by others who are proud to stand beside me. I, Liz Mackinlay, from the School of Education at The University of Queensland; together with my sisters do solemnly offer you a personal, political and pedagogical statement about who we are as feminists in higher education institutions in Australia today, what we do that makes us feminists and why we still dare to say the “F” word. This statement may be read as addressed (c.f., Hastrup, 1995, p. xi for a similar anthropological statement) to our feminist sisters and brothers, but it may also be read as a statement from us as feminists to every academic in every University department, school and faculty everywhere.

We are feminist academics and academic feminists. The two go together and we like the fact that being a feminist makes us difficult to define.

We have been thinking about feminist issues for a long time, since birth as it seems. We have always held a deep-seated psychic discomfort with regard to the feminine roles expected of us as daughters, mothers, wives and workers.

We position all our scholarly work as feminist and use feminist theory in our research. At the heart of our work sits the social construction of gender and the regimes of power that intersect with gender, race, class and sexuality. We are not afraid to ask the woman or gender question or asking others to do the same.

We belong, or would wish to belong to, departments of women and gender studies. We feel comfortable in these places because they expect rather than exclude our feminism. We teach feminist theory in class and we enact a feminist pedagogy through active learning, dialogic relations, listening and respect, through story telling and personal experience. We attend to these in relation to theory and analysis and we encourage personal as political *and* critical thinking.

Most of us don't mind that women's studies has been renamed gender studies – it's time for men to be part of gender analysis and reform, to do some work on masculinity and their own issues of power and fear, and to stop thinking about women as the problem and the focus. We don't mind being called gender studies because what they don't know is that what we actually teach is feminist studies.

We are aware that many feminist courses are currently being “mainstreamed”. Either the rationale is that it is passé and only of historical interest, or that it is now accepted and everybody wants to incorporate it into their courses. Neither is correct.

Our academic feminism is linked inherently to our feminist activism. We are feminist agents who operate in multiple ways. We sit on boards of domestic violence organisations, support women’s libraries and museums, give financial sponsorship to young women overseas, and provide media commentary on feminist issues. We present feminist research at conferences, sit on various Union and university committees for the status of women, support younger women’s activism, and raise our children the feminist way. We mentor our younger academic sisters and rely on the guidance of and continue to pay our respects to our feminist elders.

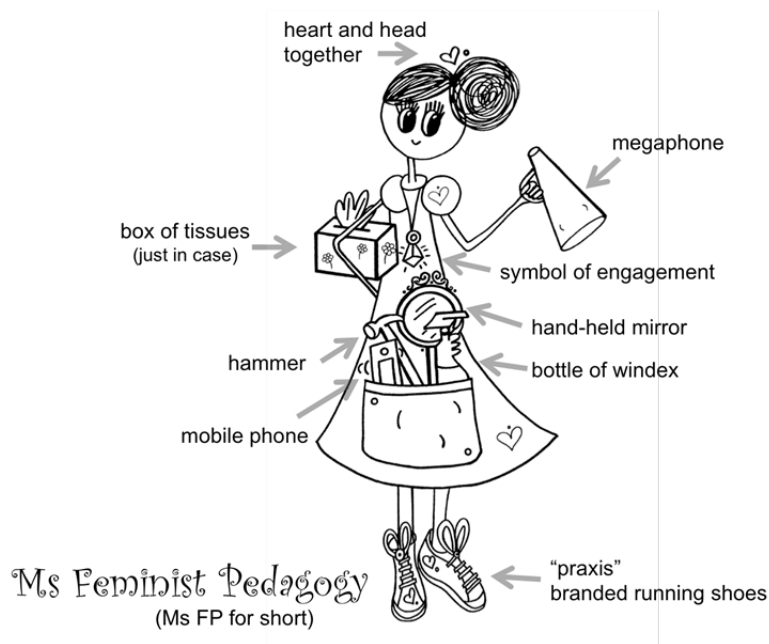
We would like the current environment in universities to change whereby it is acceptable to be a feminist and to have epistemic authority without having to justify ourselves. We know that women’s studies in the contemporary academy is viewed suspiciously and that if you took notice of myths circulating in the media, “feminism would be pronounced dead on a regular basis” (Redfern & Aune, 2010, p. 1). The disregard from those in power at universities tells us that many are still afraid of feminism, thinking it still has teeth that can bite them. We are prepared for this and we know we will not win without a fight, taking heed of Faludi’s warning that “fear and loathing of feminism is a sort of viral condition in our culture” (1992, p. 13).

We cannot know what the future of feminism holds. The times get better for pushing forward and sometimes they succeed in pushing back. Feminist are used to playing “lost and found” in the struggle for women’s rights and we know that to keep what we have needs a lot of care and attention.

We don’t have all the answers and we ask the same questions that de Beauvoir did almost 60 years ago about the destiny that “awaits our younger sisters, and in which direction we should point them” (2010, p. 16). Amidst such uncertainty we are determined to remain optimistic and we feel the murmurings of a feminist revival beneath our wings. The future of feminism is what feminists decide to make of it.

Scene 3: A friend arrives

Our “feminesto” draws attention to experiences and identities we have and hold as feminist academics in higher education in Australia. Reading it through we realise that there is an important discussion yet to have about not only who we are as feminist academics, but how we enact our identities and what our experiences look, sound and feel like in pedagogical terms. To assist with this aspect of the paper, let me introduce you to a friend ours—Ms Feminist Pedagogy.



In this picture, Ms Feminist Pedagogy (Ms FP for short) is on her way to her WOMS101 class and as you can see, she has chosen her clothes and kit very carefully. On her feet she wears a pair of “praxis” branded running shoes to show how bringing together theory and action have always been central to the liberatory goals of feminism (hooks in Weber, 2010, p. 124; Sandell, 1991, p. 179; Shrewsbury, 1997, p. 166). Her sneakers enable her to “walk the talk and talk the walk” (Crabtree & Sapp, 2003, p. 131) of feminism in her classroom by grounding her in the academy and the everyday (Bell, 1993, p. 112; Crawley, Lewis & Mayberry, 2008, p. 7) thereby keeping feminist “content and vision alive, evolving, and changing” (Bell, 1993, p. 112). Ms FP knows that her shoes are perhaps the most important part of her outfit – being feminist has always been dangerous inside and outside the academy, and she is keenly aware that in today’s ‘post-feminist’ world, she is going to have to run fast and smart to keep one step ahead.

Around her neck, she wears a symbol of engagement—not the marrying kind—but one to show that she is forever and always committed to the struggle for gender justice and overcoming oppression in all its guises (Wallace, 1999, p. 167); to enacting an active and politicised pedagogy in accord with feminist principles that seek to give space to all voices and social identity locations (Weber, 2010, p. 125); to building critical consciousness and community, with traditional organizations, and with movements for social change (Shrewsbury, 1997, p. 166); to empowering women’s ways of knowing, being and doing; and, to always placing women and gender standpoints at the centre of her teaching and scholarship (Luke & Gore, 1992).

You’ll notice that she has a hammer in her pocket. Why? To smash patriarchy of course—and break the illusions and silences of traditional pedagogy (Anderson, 1995, p. 713) which continue to privilege, as hooks describes, imperialist, white, supremacist, capitalist patriarchal systems of knowledge (2013, p. 4). The hammer will come in handy to assist her to build a feminist home in pedagogical places and thereby ensure that teaching and learning continues to come hand in hand with the creation of scholarly works. The doors in MsFPs house are open-minded and the bottle of windex she carries will ensure that critical thinking and questioning keep the windows in her head sharp and clear. She understands how important it is that feminist academics contribute to the preservation and growth of feminism in curricula, in the intellectual atmosphere of academia, and more over, in the hearts and minds of students (Baiada & Moulton, 2006, p. 288). Ms FP feels strongly that every home needs a community to give it soul and she recognises that relationships and collaboration are the cornerstones of empowerment in a feminist classroom. Her mobile phone ensures she is connected and in dialogue with self and others, and she has a megaphone to ensure that you’ll be able to hear hers and multiple voices loud and clear at all times. Alongside privileging the link between experience/emotion and the personal/political, community happens through the

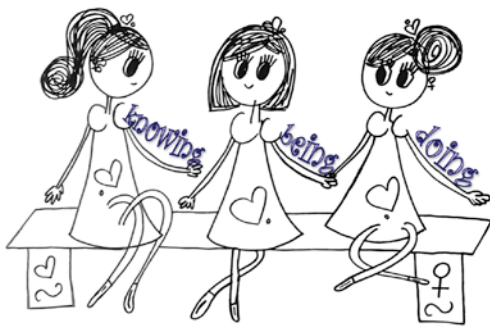
creation of a democratic learning space where power is reconfigured and used to enrich rather than oppress (Wallace, 1997, p. 189).

Power, authority and voice are complicated and everywhere in a feminist classroom. She knows from experience that many women have difficulty asserting power in fear of perpetuating the very domination they want to eradicate (hooks, 1994, p. 77). Heeding Ellsworth (1992), she is not so naive to think that she gives and/or shares power and voice equally with her students. To muddle things further, Ms FP also knows that feminism *needs* power and so she seeks to destabilise authority from within the subject positions she holds. For her, this means taking care, practicing compassion, and adopting an ethical and moral responsibility for the transference/countertransference of power. She uses her hammer to build a new form of “mastery”—or should we say “mis/mystery”. Her head is haloed by her heart, never are the two very far away from one another because Ms FP refuses to separate the “emotional from the rational” (Crawberry p. 6) and holds tightly to the belief that affects are active dimensions of ourselves which provide “the revolutionary core of feminism” (Rich in Fisher, 1993, p. 76).

Paying attention to emotion does not mean adopting sentimentality (although, she carries a box of tissues knowing that sometimes tears do and must fall); it means making visible and privileging the thinking, moving and feeling body as an epistemological site. Embracing such embodied teaching and learning moves us “onto seeing experiences in different lights” while maintaining difference, positionality and a “sense of ourselves as subjects” (Wallace, 1997, pp. 166-167). To do *all* of this *every* time she stands up to teach is a massive task. Sometimes Ms FP thinks she fails miserably and at others she feels optimistic that her classroom is a place where a feminist vision of the world is practiced (Wallace, 1997, p. 169). For this reason, the mirror she carries with her is an absolute

necessity for such moments of reflexivity (Crawley, Lewis & Mayberry, 2008, p. 2). Standing in front of the looking glass she can step inside and outside and back again to ask what's feminist about the spaces she occupies as a teacher and learner in the academy? What is she teaching and learning about feminism; for whom, how and why does she know? (c.f., Crawley, Lewis & Mayberry, 2008, p. 2).

Scene 4: Teaching and learning like a feminist



As it so happens, these questions were the main topic of discussion amongst my feminist academic friends last Saturday afternoon when we met at the Three Monkey's cafe. It was the mid-semester break and for the last few years Ann, Melanie, Karen and I have had made a habit of meeting as

regularly as we can during university down time. With combined backgrounds in history, politics and English literature, we hold academic positions in Humanities departments across a number of Australian universities and we each have teaching and research roles within the field of Women's and/or Gender Studies. A recent article in the pull out magazine from the Brisbane based Courier Mail on Saturday has got us talking.

Melanie: Did you see that interview with Merle in Q weekend? 81 years old—still “foxy” and firing feminist shots! I remember she told me once that she thought she had been “thinking about women's issues forever—since birth, as it seemed”.

Ann: Mmm, I feel the same you know. I feel the consciousness has always been with me.

Melanie: I guess I've always been a feminist too. As a little girl I would've been feminist without calling myself that. I wanted an exciting adventurous life and it was pretty boring being an

ordinary girl. I read a lot of political theory as a teenager, my family were pretty left wing and had a lot of political arguments, I did an arts degree and was in a women's rights collective at uni.

Ann: I loved it. I loved reading it. But I wasn't an active feminist. I've always had a complicated relationship to feminism. I didn't participate in campus politics ... in fact, I felt quite alienated from it.

Karen: For me it began when I was a teenager, back in the mists of time really! The 70s were exciting and a bit scary—books like *The female eunuch* (Greer, 1971) were all over the media. The things that were being said made sense to me, and now, feminism is what I do—it's what I am.

Liz: I was quite conservative and came to it quite late - I was raised in a small town of 5000 people and married at 21. I only became aware of an alternative in gender politics when I went to uni. I remember the lecture when the women lecturers suggested that it wasn't something or other, it was patriarchy to blame. I thought, 'Oh my god! That is so radical – she is *so* right!' I think it's really important to be passionate about your politics.

Melanie: You've got to say what you stand for.

Liz: You do, that's right, and it makes you human as well, to show that you are conscious of your subject position and others *because* of your experience and knowledge.

Melanie: I kind of feel like a motorbike as a feminist academic.

Liz, Ann,

Karen: What!!!

Melanie: Well you represent something; a motorbike is a great machine of the 20th century, just like the women's movement. I live the metaphor – a bit of noise, a bit of style, a bit of danger. That's all women and gender studies should be.

Ann: I see myself as a medium – I really enjoy translation, making use of the material to speak without me overlaying too much of my own interpretation. I like to give people a sense of feminism’s intellectual history.

Liz: I’m thinking about trees in relation to what we do as feminist academics and how trees are really grounding – just like history. Feminism is a grounding structure for how I live and how I see things. Trees grow, they change, and they get tired in winter and become invigorated in spring.

Melanie: What’s wrong Ann? The look on your face just then – it reminded me of one of Liz’s fatigued old trees. Are you OK?

Ann: It’s just that there is a lot of antipathy towards feminism. I mean, I don’t think it’s my job to convert them to feminism, or to punish them for not being feminist. I try to be collaborative, not punitive.

Karen: Mostly what I do is enable feminist issues to be talked about – looking rigorously, deeply, widely, humorously sometimes, at feminist questions.

Liz: I try to say it’s about seeing feminism as a set of parallel ideas – you know with just as much value as any other set they encounter at uni like modernism, postmodernism or Marxism. It’s just feminism, you know – so what? Don’t get upset, deal with it.

Melanie: Your family will still be there when you get home, for better or for worse.

Ann: I don’t know about you, but I am *the* ‘feminist’ person at the university. I get trotted out to do the feminism lecture in other people’s courses all of the time. On the up side, I do find its a good way to introduce students to my own work. I like to smuggle a lot of feminist content in whenever I can - last semester I managed to bring Kinsey and the sexual revolution into my “History of the World in the Twentieth Century” course!

Melanie: You have to be who you are and do what you can live with. You can't pretend to be something else.

Ann: The question I keep wondering and worrying about is, is it about teaching feminist content? Or is it about the actual way you teach?

Karen: A feminist course has to have feminist, gender, and sexuality issues as primarily what's being spoken about.

Ann: I know that I unapologetically use feminist material, feminist thinkers; I like to think of creative ways of doing that - of bringing up feminism and feminist angles in unexpected ways.

Liz: I've tried to do that by experimenting with the social and physical space of teaching – you know, upsetting and rearranging the lines of chairs looking at one person at the front.

Melanie: Spatiality is really important. Facing one another as teachers and learners is central to that in terms of 'sitting' in particular locations and learning to see and speak to one another.

Ann: I let students know feminism is a space that encourages and embraces difference - that there are many different points of view within feminism, that pluralism is fantastic, and that we all have different perspectives and positionings.

Karen: I guess the aim is, after all, to get a range of feminist points of view discussed and debated among students.

Ann: They are also encouraged to take a firm stance within that if they want, but not at the expense of anyone else.

Melanie: It's their space and they have to use it – it has to be serious, supportive, and generous all at the same time.

Liz: And because of that, it's about the dynamics of who's talking and where they're positioning and how they're referring to each other. It's about making an ethical *and* reflective space.

Ann: I'm constantly aware with teaching stuff on feminism, gender, sexuality, that it's not enough to just you want to be inclusive. You have to be vigilant, because the students can easily feel silenced or alienated by some of the topics we're discussing. It's an incredible duty of care to students that sometimes doesn't exist in other teaching contexts.

Karen: I think I try to take on a kind of motherly or grandmotherly role to some of them. By teaching feminist content I try to give support, be on their side. I don't think my role is to grow up feminists; I think they work out how to grow up themselves.

Melanie: No way, I'm not going to be the mother – they always think the female is going to be the mother and the sponge, the dishcloth and 'clean up' when it gets messy or difficult.

Liz: It's a risky space too then isn't it? Because it's quite challenging and there's highly emotional debate sometimes and some people might not feel comfortable with that.

Melanie: But knowledge is always dangerous – good knowledge is. What we do has to empower them. They must learn their subject position and how that mediates knowledge, the kinds of things they can do and I can do. We're in a relentlessly anti-intellectual culture and we have to hang onto the fact that ideas matters - serious thought matters. It might hurt but it's good and they – us – we're all a part of it.

Ann: There are still disciplinary things they have to learn – students have to write essays so that they learn to construct arguments, for example.

Karen: I think it's important for students to think that it's alright for them to do theory if they want to. There's nothing wrong with it. Making feminist theory and feminist critiques available is one of the things we might do as feminist academics. One thing I always say to my students is that the arguments and discussions about feminism among feminists are far more interesting than the ones with anti-feminists!

Melanie: Yes, it's really important that they learn how to articulate ideas theoretically and meld that with experience too. They need to know it's OK to do observations, to think about their own lives and bring that to class.

Ann: Where I like to be innovative is how they find material – how they go and find out. Letting them know that everyday world evidence is actually a feminist intervention.

Melanie: Absolutely yes - it's got to be knowledge for the real world that they've got to deal with to make the real world better.

Ann: They know then that feminism is actually a methodology – it's a critique of disciplines, here is an example of it and you're doing it, you're bringing it in. They start to see feminism as the kind of punks of history which is great!

Melanie: It makes them realise that this stuff matters, it's not intellectual wank. It's knowledge for the unreal world too – the world that's yet to come.

Liz: Textual essays, reflective essays, life writing all make space for that kind of reflexivity.

Ann: I'd like to think that being open and having lots of conversations is feminist in some way too.

Liz: Yes, multiple conversations make a feminist classroom – lots of ideas, everyone coming in prepared, listening, actively engaging, and informing your life outside of it.

Karen: The feminist method would be trying to find ways for gender questions to be part of that. You're playing it by ear really. I've got no idea how well I 'do' feminist teaching and learning. I try.

Ann: There's a sense that feminism is something that you *do*, isn't there?

Liz: Absolutely, I love workshop-based, student-led classes full of interactivity. More often than not they're up the front more than me. I'm wandering around up and down the sides to try to shift the focus and involve different groups. It's quite mobile – I sort of feel like it's a hypothetical where they take ownership of the questions - I'm facilitating and *not* being the expert.

Melanie: It's has to be active learning, interactive learning.

Karen: But actually, now you mention it, the embodiment element is really important (she pauses) I don't think university structures are very friendly to women's bodies. All of the gains we've made, they still don't make it a feminist universe.

Ann: I don't feel validated by my institution, in terms of the feminist work that I do. In fact, I think some of them think, 'Gosh, Ann, she's nice. She does her job well but she's still a crazy feminist'.

Liz: There's something fundamentally patronising about education in universities and indeed the discipline of education. I started researching feminist pedagogy to try and upset their paradigm.

Ann: Often my success is attributed to my personality and spoken about in feminised infantile terms, rather than because I'm a scholar and I do a lot of work in this area. It's always some sort of hyper-feminine category that you're boxed into.

Melanie: I think it's important for them to see a woman who's serious about ideas and doing a competent job, getting stuck into something. I think that's good modelling, the intellectual woman.

Ann: I've had strong feminist mentors in the academy and I like to create opportunities for my students working on feminist topics. (She pauses and sighs loudly) But you can't just be a gender studies person; you have to do something else as well. It's terrible that we have to be so strategic.

Karen: Yes, what's going on in higher education at the moment with recent cutbacks and more and more streamlining – it preoccupies us a lot. In this kind of context, it makes it a bit harder to think through what the feminist issues might be.

Melanie: We're still pretty privileged in the academy though. We're still lucky because we don't have to do the performance of conventional femininity like you would in the corporate sector – yeah, I don't have to iron shirts if I don't want to!

Liz: You're right. We do have power and privilege in the academy and we speak from a privileged position as by and large white-middle class-educated women. We've got to get better at using and moving within that. I've noticed that people find it easy to slip back into talking about the feminist struggle and the battles and the fights and thinking that these things have to shape what it is. I'm so sick of it. We can't keep being so negative.

Ann: We have to keep trying to keep that space open for feminist enquiry in the university. I think it has to be a conscious move – you can't ever just take it for granted.

Melanie: I actually think that it is amazing that we're ticking along – all of these incredibly bright, highly educated compassionate women doing this stuff. You know, there's hope. You've got to live in hope, haven't you?

Closing

It's early in the morning and I haven't slept well. All night I have been throwing around words, turning over pages, writing and rewriting carefully constructed sentences only to erase them and start all over again. I realise now that the manner in which I have presented the interview material with Merle and my feminist academic friends in this paper, my own experiences in the academy, and the theory I might think relevant in this storied entanglement of feminist politics and feminist pedagogy, has one fatal drawback – “I should never”, as Virginia Woolf was keenly aware, “be able to come to a conclusion ... to hand you after an hour's discourse a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on your mantelpiece for ever” (Woolf, 1929/2001, p. 6). Woolf also remarked that “when a subject is highly controversial – and any question about sex [or indeed

feminism we might add] – is that one cannot hope to tell the truth ... fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact ... It is for you to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping. If not, you will of course throw the whole of it into the waste paper basket and forget all about it” (Woolf, 1929/2001, p. 7). These words are drawn from Woolf’s well-known text *A room of one’s own*, where she proclaimed that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write” (Woolf, 1929/2001, p. 6). I smile wryly; Virginia’s 84-year-old desire is our contemporary yearning too. It’s a yearning of the bell hooks kind where we find ourselves reaching to rejuvenate and reclaim feminism in higher education but “it’s difficult to reach with all our resources, actual and confessional, so we are just there, collectively grasping, feeling the limitations of knowledge, longing together, yearning for a way to reach [it]. Even this yearning is a way to know” (hooks, 1994, p. 92). The yearning holds a disquiet and a conviction that we are on our way to “somewhere” – and to get there we must do more to close the distance between neoliberal rationality inside and outside educational institutions which professes feminism is a dirty word, and the freedom from gender oppression for a more socially just, loving and ethical world which is at the heart of our being, doing and knowing in feminist praxis. To sit in that space of yearning is unsettling – some of us have grown tired and fallen by the wayside, others are frustrated with sisterhood, society and themselves, some have simply lost their voice in the struggle to be heard. But to return to Melanie’s sentiments of hope, I believe there are *more* of us willing to hold on tight to the question of how the personal-is-political becomes pedagogical, to find a way to be in that “somewhere”. “The academy is not paradise”, hooks reminds us, “But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility” (hooks, 1994, p. 207) for teaching and learning like a feminist and making space for others in higher education to continue to do the same - to “swear [loud and proud] by feminism” (Caro & Fox, 2008).

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ⁱ The meeting with Merle Thornton featured in the introduction to this paper, is drawn from a real life interview I conducted with her in October 2011.

ⁱⁱ The material included brings together the experiences shared with me during a series of interviews conducted with feminist academics working in a number of different Australian universities during 2011-2012. The project received ethical clearance from the University of Queensland and all of the women whose words and voices appear in this appear have given their informed consent.

ⁱⁱⁱ The drawings featured in this paper are my own and are intended to offer another way of thinking, reflecting on, and understanding the place of feminism in higher education.