

# Book Review: Feeling Academic in the Neoliberal University: Feminist Flights, Fights and Failures edited by Yvette Taylor and Kinneret Lahad

*Edited by Yvette Taylor and Kinneret Lahad, the collection **Feeling Academic in the Neoliberal University: Feminist Flights, Fights and Failures** offers a vital reassertion of feminist modes of resistance against the increasingly corporate structures of contemporary higher education. This is an incisive, timely and ultimately hopeful volume that provides a platform from which future feminist fights can take flight, writes **Charlotte Mathieson**.*

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

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It is all too easy when reviewing academic books to refer to collections as ‘timely’, ‘pressing’ or ‘wide-reaching’, but these words can be no more sincerely meant than in the case of Yvette Taylor and Kinneret Lahad’s *Feeling Academic in the Neoliberal University: Feminist Flights, Fights and Failures*. In the wake of the widespread strike action across UK universities in recent months, and ensuing discussions about the marketisation of higher education, academic precarity and the relationship between the individual and the institution, Taylor and Lahad’s work is more pertinent and necessary than ever.

Positing feminism as a critical mode to challenge and critique ‘the interlocking structures of domination’ (3) through which the neoliberal university operates, the chapters in *Feeling Academic in the Neoliberal University* offer a vital reassertion of feminist approaches as a mode of resistance against the corporate and commercial structures of contemporary higher education, while also privileging the role of the feminist academic at an individual level as a powerful agent of change. The critical interventions that ensue are incisive and important, and will resonate with scholars across the higher education sector.

Central to this endeavour is a renewed focus on how academia is experienced at the level of the individual by exploring the performative aspects of being a scholar: the material, embodied, affective qualities of what it means to inhabit the neoliberal institution as a feminist academic. The navigation of institutional structures is firstly picked up in chapters assessing the time and space of academia. Barbara Read and Lisa Bradley’s essay on ‘waiting’ in everyday academic life – encompassing everything from the practicalities of waiting for transport to arrive or for a meeting to start, to the less tangible experiences of waiting on a funding decision or an important email – presents pertinent reflections on the temporal dynamics of academia in confluence with social and identity relations, issues that are picked up again in Emily Henderson’s study of ‘conference time’ as it is experienced by scholars. Both chapters offer interesting critiques of what it means to ‘be’ in the academy, and how normative structures such as time (as well as space) are negotiated in diverse, and often difficult, ways by those who don’t embody the expected ideal of ‘an academic’.

What it means to occupy space within the academy, and ‘to experience and *feel* academia’ (1), is taken up further in chapters examining the emotional dimensions of navigating institutional environments. Taylor’s exploration of class and sexuality makes visible the emotional labour involved in working in an academic environment that purports a narrative of inclusivity and diversity, yet in practice is far from it, and conceptualises the emotional ‘stickiness’ that arises from occupying such disjunctures (61), while Daphna Hacker’s chapter seeks to establish a dialogue about the embodied affects of academic labour through a discussion of ‘crying on campus’ as a challenge to the masculine model of an individualised and unemotional academia.





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The emotional labour of academia leads into discussions that consider the complexity of the feelings involved in attempting to live up to institutionalised value systems. Heather Shipley contextualises the key issue through an examination of what it means to be 'a partial academic': someone who has completed PhD study and is developing an early career academic profile while working in non-academic employment. This position affords perspectives on the competitiveness of academia and the standards against which individuals are constantly evaluated and quantified, and Shipley suggests that while academia might claim to promote feminism on some levels, as a system it 'undermines and devalues feminist pursuits, rewarding instead decidedly nonfeminist goals through competition and individual achievement over group endeavours' (18). In a brilliantly incisive critique of one of the core rhetorical devices through which the neoliberal university achieves its competitive ends, Francesca Coin examines the narrative of 'loving what we do' as a means for academic exploitation: as she writes:

the use of love as an emotional resource capable of delivering endurance in a vicious cycle of unremunerated overload seals the diabolical pact between an exploitative labour regime and its prey (315).

As several chapters identify, in navigating this system many academics find themselves caught within a tension between 'playing the game' and finding strategies of resistance therein. The negotiation of this dynamic emerges lucidly in Sarah Burton's chapter on feminist academics' experiences of writing for (and against) the Research Excellence Framework. Burton neatly elucidates one of the key messages of the book as a whole:

feminist fragility in the neoliberal academy stems from the way that the value system of the neoliberal academy and the audit cultures it allows to thrive is driven by a patriarchal conception of legitimate knowledge production (132).

Within this, Burton examines how academic writing is used by feminist academics both as a tool to successfully play the game, but also as a space of resistance.

This theme is also embodied by Lauren Ila Misiaszek's work on academic identity within Chinese academia. Constructing what she terms an 'autoethnography' (88), Misiaszek interweaves an array of textual forms to construct a deliberately disruptive critique of academic writing conventions in order to effectively convey the 'messy' embodiments of the academic environment. However, as these writers and others acknowledge, the extent to which academics have agency within institutional structures and strictures is contoured by privileges of identity and position within the academy. Orla Meadhbh Murray's work on being 'the feminist killjoy' in academia recognises that inhabiting the role of a challenging feminist presence is a risk for precarious early career academics; furthermore, this is not always a role that one might actively choose to inhabit, and 'sometimes existing in a space is enough to be seen as a killjoy regardless of one's political intentions' (164).

Throughout the chapters, the need for feminist spaces of collective resistance against the neoliberal academy emerges strongly, and several chapters identify promising potential for alternative models of research and teaching. Susanne Gannon, Sarah Powell and Clare Power offer a collective exploration of collaborative practice as a counter to the separatist competitive ideology that characterises the neoliberal university, while Cristina Costa's chapter on digital technologies such as blogs and social media offers the potential for alternative spaces through which to construct and examine feminist identities in ways that reconfigure individual agency both away from and in dialogue with the expectations and value systems of the academy. These chapters embody a feeling of hope that runs through the book which, while recognising that feminism in the academy is under threat, works to create a vital space for feminism as a mode for resisting, critiquing and changing the neoliberal discourse of contemporary academia, and provides a platform from which future feminist fights can take flight.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*