

# “Perestroika in the Groves of Academe”: Feminism and the Future of the Humanities as a Profession

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I have a Marxist moment, contemplating us all—visiting professor and graduate teaching assistants alike—as workers duped into labouring for the good of the corporation. I wonder if we are all merely participants in hegemony, furthering our own exploitation by romanticizing teaching as a potentially transformative, meaningful expression of feminist activism that deserves our finest effort rather than as “factory work” that serves a corporation. Hegemony in the guise of feminist teaching.

*Lucy Bailey, “When ‘The Research’ is Me”*

**R**EVIEWING HEATHER MURRAY’S *WORKING IN ENGLISH*, Len Findlay comments on “an academic division of labour marked by radical (but too rarely radicalizing) differences in work conditions and financial rewards.” He concludes with a warning that the “unbroken legacy of progressive voices in the Canadian university” esteemed by Murray is “a legacy currently in danger of being de-valued or squandered in a number of jurisdictions across this country” (par. 3).

These academic divisions of labour go to the heart of a number of debates within English studies. Crucial to all of them are who works and who doesn’t. Who gets paid \$4,000 for teaching a half-course. Who is told in September that a class is cancelled, and who has to teach five sections of Business Communication. Who gets fellowship money and who has to

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take on research assistantships. Who is nominated for SSHRC funding and who isn't. Who gets a tenure-track position as a newly-minted PhD and who gets told that she has too much teaching experience and not enough publications. These are questions of material importance to our discipline. Professionalization, hiring, tenure, academic freedom, research integrity, theory, radical pedagogy: all of these are terms that have taken on meanings far beyond themselves through their intimate linkages to this troubled (and troubling) question of the academic division of labour. When we talk about professionalizing graduate students, do we prepare them to work in the sessional pools or as “teaching postdocs” for a few years before they can expect to be hired into tenure-track jobs? When we talk of academic freedom or the freedom to teach theory or not, are we really talking about the fraction of teaching that is performed by tenured professors or the ever-increasing amounts of classroom teaching that have been off-loaded to vulnerable graduate students and poorly paid sessionals?

For it is a travesty of the term to talk about academic freedom for those without any job security. Without job security, there can be no meaningful academic freedom, no research integrity, no freedom to engage theory (or, indeed, no freedom from theory), and certainly no protections for those engaging in any radical pedagogy or advocacy in the classroom. My point here needs to be clarified: whether or not you feel that there is a place for English professors to be engaging in political advocacy in the classroom, the freedom to do so—or not to do so—without fear of reprisal is crucial to the integrity of the discipline. As Michael Bérubé has written movingly, “in the university setting, disciplinary disputes ... are inevitably also disputes about relations of intellectual production. What we teach, and where we teach, affects how we hire, how we hire (intellectually as well as economically, from endowed chairs in cultural studies to adjuncts in introductory courses) profoundly affects what we teach” (35).

What's the connection to feminism, you ask? Well, Lucy Bailey's autobiographical and biographical research—epitomized in the epigraph above—provides us with one very persuasive connection between the theoretical work of feminism and the actual work of “feminist teaching.” Bailey's own “stories,” and the stories of other (and quite often, Othered) contingent women academics that she collects, are the affective reason why feminists must be concerned about the state of the discipline. Women are far more likely to find themselves occupying subordinate positions in the relations of power that mark the academic division of labour. Beyond this immediate concern for feminism with the putative subjects of feminism, though, there is a broader principle involved. By virtue of its own

struggles for academic legitimacy, feminism has a responsibility to those who are still marginalized within the academy at large.

On a more pragmatic if fairly narrow note, feminist scholars and researchers are often themselves to be found working under conditions of under- and mis-employment. Within English studies, courses on Women's Writing, a staple in almost every department in the country, are often farmed out to whoever is willing to teach them, on the basis of the idea that anyone can teach them. If you don't think this is the case, think about how few and far between are those tenure-track positions in Gender and Literature (which seems to be the name by which this aspect of English studies now goes by). And beyond English departments, Women's Studies departments, upon which so much feminist work in the academy depends, are notorious for being so underfunded that they depend on contingent academic labour for much of their staffing. But the time has come to acknowledge that building a network of gender parity on spiderwebs of academic inequity, injustice, and sometimes even downright exploitation is unethical.

Even if you think feminism was the second worst thing that happened to English Studies, surpassed only by the introduction of the words "cultural politics" to the vocabulary of graduate students, consider the pragmatic advantages of housing vociferous critics of the hegemonic within our discipline. Without strong political advocacy for publicly funded and accessible post-secondary education, English departments will soon go the way of the dodo, since they produce little tangible "product." Literary scholars who only want to be left in peace to reread the *Lyrical Ballads* ought to consider what scope they will have to keep doing this under the radical programs of deregulated tuition and vocational training for which right-wing governments and industry partnerships are agitating. This Readers' Forum contemplates the future of feminism, and I can think of no better place to begin this contemplation than within the discipline and the academy itself. At a time when there are vague fears that the political efficacy of feminism is lost on new generations of students and faculty alike, when the trendiness of "post-feminism" is being bandied about as one of the catchwords of the new millennium, when the politics of race or sexuality—or these days, national origin—are seen as taking over some of the ground that feminism (yes, feminism in the singular, in the days before All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave) once claimed, the question really ought to be, what are the relevant political engagements left to feminism?

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Within academia, the ongoing battle on the part of underemployed academics for political recognition, economic justice, and academic legitimacy is one of the most important of these. For what most often goes unmentioned in most critiques of sessional, adjunct, or graduate student labour (and agitation) in universities is that the conditions of this labour are set by senior academics. Those who police the borders of the academy as enforcers of the status quo and the financial bottom line are not draconian outsiders with no understanding of the relationships between job security, academic freedom, research integrity, and pedagogy. On the contrary, they are us: most university administrators, especially at the departmental and decanal levels, are faculty members who seem to be labouring under the impression that they are somehow safeguarding their disciplines by resisting the fair employment practices demanded by graduate students and sessionals. The most horrifying encounters in my years of involvement with graduate student and sessional unions and organizations is the disillusionment, pain, bitterness, and anger that results when colleagues, academic supervisors, mentors—all looked upon as fellow dwellers in the academic grove—turn out to be the people at the forefront of the assault on the most vulnerable of academic workers. My own good fortune has meant that those with whom I've had run-ins have overlooked my politics and looked to my work, but I am realistic enough to appreciate that this good fortune is partly the result of being the protégée of powerful academic mentors. My concern here is with those not as fortunate. Who will speak for them if not the feminists among us?

We have to take collective responsibility for the intolerable situation in which we find our disciplines and departments. Reduce graduate student enrolments. Push for more tenure-track faculty lines. Resist the transformation of full-time positions into piecemeal, course-by-course hires. Don't oppose—in fact, positively support—teaching assistant and sessional organizing. Push for stronger contract language in faculty association and union contracts, both for academic freedom and research integrity and to maintain current or historic levels of tenure-track hiring. Lobby for support from parents, taxpayers, and students. In short, do whatever it takes to make sure that the teaching of the humanities isn't being downloaded onto those least able to resist being overworked, underpaid, and always under threat. If you don't, you will see the eventual evisceration of the humanities. The state of our disciplines and departments depends on what graduate students and sessionals internalize as professional ethics and pass on to their own students and to the broader public when their time comes.

We will best defend our disciplines and departments not by finding further corners to cut in our budgets but by protecting the margins and the marginalized of our discipline. The way to make sure that both Shakespeare and Cixous are still being studied in the twenty-second century is to make sure that the critical links between job security, a living wage, academic freedom, research integrity, and pedagogy are extended to the most vulnerable practitioners of the profession, rather than by jealously guarding ever-diminishing privileges. This isn't the gentlemanly world of the rise of English studies that Murray and Scholes write about; this a profession that has been corporatized beyond belief and its conditions of employment are abysmal. But as Bérubé points out, "a profession that tolerates and perpetuates such conditions is neither professional nor defensible" (89). Feminists among us should see this as a chance to extend the foundational principles of the political engagements of feminism to this immediate crisis, rather than to bemoan the "fact" that feminism has lost its resonance with new generations of students and scholars.

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