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# First Generation Feminist? Auto-Ethnographic Reflections on Politicisation and Finding a Home within Feminism

Vikki Turbine

Independent Researcher, Glasgow, UK; hello@vikturbine.com

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**Abstract:** In spite of the apparent rise in feminism, who gets to know about feminism is still fraught and impartial. How then, do we come to find ‘a home’ in and for feminism when it has been absent from our formative politicisation? How comfortable is that home for working-class academics? In this paper, I reflect on my feminist genealogy—from growing up as a working-class girl in a small Scottish town in an area of deprivation to becoming a first generation feminist academic in a Russell Group University in the UK. This paper builds on the wealth of research exploring the trajectories of working-class women within academia by engaging genealogy research to explore how one develops as a *feminist* within academia—which can also be a strange place for first generation academics. As an undergraduate coming of age in the ‘post-feminist’ 1990s, access to the language and politics of feminism was beyond my grasp. I came to feminism relatively late in my life and academic career—it was in my doctoral research that I really became engaged academically and as a named political identity. I employ auto-ethnography in this paper and reflect on how our intimate others are always implicated in our own stories. This allows me to highlight how inherited experiences, memories, and embodiments are key. Intergenerational learning can make us implicitly feminist before we learn the formal language of feminism. The stories I choose to tell and ‘memories’ I invoke here are re-crafted and recalled in response to what frustrates me now. That young women are still telling the same stories that I tell here.

**Keywords:** working class; higher education; auto-ethnography; politicisation; inheritance; feminism; pedagogy

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## 1. Telling Tales?

In this special issue, the concern is with feminist genealogies; how we come to be feminist and come to claim our politics and action as such. In this article, I reflect on my own journey to feminism from a point of depoliticisation and educational experiences devoid of any substantive feminist content or context. I came of age at a time in which I could be classed both as a ‘Thatcher’s baby’ and as a post-feminist ‘Blair’s teen’. I was engulfed in an ever-increasing neoliberal mode of governance that aided the ladette culture and mythologies of ‘girl power’ and empowerment that suggested feminism was outmoded (McRobbie 2007; Allen 2014; Scharff 2016). I navigated an anti-feminist, post-feminist evolving neoliberal context. I reflect on how my gendered and classed experiences continue to be important to hear and tell because we have not overcome the intersections of gender and class that impacted me. And we still have too far to travel in terms of addressing the racialised politics of working classness and the prioritisation of whiteness.

My paper is adding to a well-traversed terrain of research on working-class girls and women’s entry into and through academia (Lawler 1999; Reay 2000; Walkerdine 2003). It adds to this by my reflecting on my own genealogy of feminist becoming as a working-class girl growing up in a number of

small Scottish towns during the advance of neoliberal careless state-craft and post-feminist ideologies. As I write this, Brexit 'chaos' continues. I write this as I exit the academic community. My hopes for what getting into academia could do and my aspirations of 'making' it were only partially realised. Becoming a feminist gave me a home and a voice. It enabled me to write this. To focus my anger. To analyse my experiences and encourage others to do the same.

Yet, being a feminist academic is often perceived as being insecure. Feminist research still occupies the margins of academia, and I am unconvinced of any successful feminist intervention in the management of the sector. I am hopeful this might come. Therefore, I am adding to this discussion the ways in which feminism can both offer a home and be a site of ambiguous non-belonging. For those of us already ambiguously placed—via class and gender in the academic sphere—feminism may address some problems, but engender others. We need to confront who has access to feminist political education at the times when it matters. Even inside academia, we do not 'leave' our class behind—it is not our past, it is our lived experience through the relational and emotional ties we have. We do not become 'equally feminist'. My experience of finding a home within feminism is that it is as classed as getting in and through academia.

As [Breeze and Taylor \(2018\)](#) highlight, the work of telling feminist stories from a variety of lived experiences is never 'over'. The fact that we need to continually do and redo this work and retell these stories anew is the exhausting labour of feminist activism and embodiment—even in privileged spaces such as academia. Because of this privilege of having been in academia, I can have a voice and access to tell some stories. Yet, it is important to emphasise that the stories I can tell are stories. They are informed by my experience, but this is recounted via memory and recalling. As the rich research in memory studies shows—particularly the influential work of [Hirsch \(2008\)](#) on post memory (the way in which experience of trauma is inherited, not experienced, and then 'remembered')—this is only ever a partial picture told for particular ends.

I tell parts of my story of feminist becoming not only because they are important in and of themselves but also because the younger women I have had the privilege to teach and supervise continue to tell me their experiences which are echoes and reverberations of my own. This re-telling is done to show the undoneness of the feminist project—both via the intransigence of the patriarchy and neoliberalism and due to failure to collectively support one another in the face of that. Both processes create partial inclusions within feminism—even if you now call it your home.

## 2. Genealogy and Method: The Value of Auto-Ethnography

In this article, I draw on [Meadmore et al.'s \(2000, p. 463\)](#) reflection on the role of genealogical methods in educational research. I use their reading of Foucault in understanding genealogy—as a method—as an '[inquiry] into processes, procedures and techniques through which truth, knowledge, and belief are produced' and through which 'the legitimacy of the present can be undercut by the foreignness of the past, offering the present up for reexamination and further inquiry' (p. 464). I use auto-ethnography to uncover my own past, which has been written out in the process of entering academia and becoming a feminist academic. As [Pillow \(2003, p. 147\)](#) states 'a feminist genealogy as methodology [ . . . ] can be used to reinterpret power, truth, ontology and subjectivity'. Moreover, as [Fine \(2018\)](#) argues, the female body is inherently positioned as 'leaky' and undisciplined. Fine explores the racialised disciplining of women of colour by white women. While my experience as a white cis woman is not comparable in terms of intersectional marginalisation, this insight into how women police each other is also felt in classed interactions amongst feminists in academia. Indeed, I have wanted to write this paper in multiple occasions before and have always been 'warned' by senior women—identifying as feminist allies—that this would be 'too risky' to my career and standing. In fact, the more I spoke out, on class and gendered discrimination, the more I was silenced. As [Ahmed \(2017\)](#) has so eloquently shown, when you 'name a problem, you become a problem'. Overlay this with classist assumptions about knowledge, behaviour, and ways of occupying academia 'legitimately' and the result is uncontainable frustration and the realisation of how much damage being 'grateful' for

your partial inclusion can do—to your own health and to the opportunities for those like you in the future. Thus, naming feminism as a home also requires highlighting the marginalisation that can occur within and amongst self-identified feminists.

In this genealogy of my feminism, I tell some stories using auto-ethnographic ‘vignettes’. I am clear that the stories I tell are snippets that have been purposely chosen for this particular project. I am concerned with recalling the moments that—now retrospectively as an adult (Harris and Valentine 2017)—I see as formative in a feminist becoming. These vignettes are partial and fuzzy. The research conducted in order to recall and repackage in a retelling what I now recognise as an adult as critical moments involved the use of photography and talking with my mum—using a photo-elicitation technique (Pickering and Keightley 2007; Gloyn et al. 2018). It also involved creative writing—I had to make fiction out of the partial facts—that are recollections—in order to render them communicable (Leavy 2012; Williamson and Wright 2018). I am not asking for you to see this as an objective ‘truth’ (Inckle 2010)—should such a thing exist. I am asking you to listen and understand how my coming to terms with how I became a feminist in turn informs my continued fraught engagement with feminism as a political and personal project of education and mobility.

Pitard (2016, p. 1) describes auto-ethnographic vignettes as contextual explorations of experience that offer a way in which to ‘reveal layers of awareness that might remain experienced but concealed’. We know from research on feminist becoming that how we learn to become a feminist is diverse and, in many cases, experiential and accidental—although the recent ‘popularity’ of feminism and use of social media platforms may give ‘gateway’ access to feminism for more women than before (Gill 2016). In addition, we often learn our politics—of whatever stripe—through inter-generational dialogue. In my case, this dialogue was held with women who did not embrace a feminist identity as well as those who did. Moreover, becoming a feminist is not a linear process. It is not ahistoric or fixed. We are not tied to our generation or mapped onto a ‘wave’ of feminist activism (Mackay 2015). We are relational, and we are intersectional (Stone 2005). I might have come of age in a post-feminist era, and I may not have known my feminism in those terms for a long time, but I have been on a journey of lifelong learning as a feminist. Thus, the vignettes below are chosen to illustrate that non-linearity and those inheritances—particularly those unsaid and intangible.

The decision to use an auto-ethnographic method was made following Ellis et al.’s (2011, p. 274) description of why scholars come to this method. I was also ‘seeking a positive response to critiques of canonical ideas about what research is and how research should be done . . . to concentrate on ways of producing, meaningful, accessible and evocative research grounded in personal experience [ . . . ] that would sensitise readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence.’ In this paper, employing auto-ethnography enables me to tell ‘stories’ that might have otherwise been left unwritten—out of the professionalised biographies of ourselves as academics. There are so many silences and processes of silencing aspects of our life to maintain the image of a successful academic. As Denshire (2014, p. 831) puts it, auto-ethnography is a ‘transgressive’ form of writing—it is the telling of experiences that are often hidden or obscured. It is often uncomfortable because it ‘remakes power relations.’

While not the focus of this paper, it is worth noting that while auto-ethnography is now an established methodology in many disciplines, in my home discipline of political science, it is a relative new-comer. Indeed, the masculinist and conservative foundations of the discipline are strongly entrenched. While we are decades on from understanding the key role of researcher subjectivity and positionality as in feminist stand-point theory, auto-ethnography can still be disparagingly dismissed as ‘mesearch’ or ‘navel gazing’ that contributes nothing to ‘real research’. This is why the method and the content matters here—it is me saying it is valid and important for me to tell my story of feminism becoming; because this does not begin and end with only me. As outlined above, young women continue to tell me similar stories when given the chance to be heard. The feminist project is far from done—and it is actively becoming undone in the current Brexit political climate.

Furthermore, it is key to note that overcoming a traumatic or critical event often pushes researchers to engage in auto-ethnography. As the conditions of a neoliberalising academia change and the ways to 'self-manage' increase (Gill and Donaghue 2016; Loveday 2018), it is perhaps unsurprising that an increasing number of feminist and critical scholars are using auto-ethnography and other creative methodologies (Kara 2015) as a means of communicating and analysing their experiences—experiences that are hidden, silenced, or denied. Combining these approaches with a genealogical methodology, we may be able to more clearly see the relational, the contextual, as well as the individual experience—how not only inheritance, fragments, and memories shape how we become feminist, but also the structures in which we are contained.

### 3. Auto-Ethnographic Research: Revealing the Traumas that Lead to Feminist Politicisation

My inherited and experienced traumas came to a 'snap' (Ahmed 2017) during a period of debilitating chronic illness—the stress of which was exacerbated by the constant and increasing demands of an 'uncaring' academia (Gill 2009; Rogers 2017; Loveday 2018). I realised that I no longer wanted to play this game. Moreover, I wanted to ensure that my reasons for leaving—the structural and organisational—were shown, and that this could not be reduced to some individualised failing. I also wanted to undo any narratives about 'working-class girl done good'—a 'first generation, first class'. While I have worked hard to be where I am, I have no desire to play the politics of exception, elitism, or of gratitude. The academic world is exclusionary; those of us who are here may well have worked hard to get in, but many more who work as hard, or harder, will never get in (see also Littler 2013 on the myth of meritocracy).

I needed a way to write about my frustrations that were becoming increasingly boundless, bleeding into all parts of my work: My outreach work with young women studying politics at high school, my teaching, and my engagement with creative writing. Ultimately, my decision to leave academia can be interpreted as a feminist statement of 'snap'—'not as a moment of one woman experiencing something as too much but as a series of accumulated gestures that connect women over time and space' (Ahmed 2017, pp. 200–1).

There are obvious ethical dilemmas in using and writing an auto-ethnography (Letherby 2002; Ellis 2007; Denshire 2014). For the researcher—we are not atomised individuals—our narratives always imply others—directly or implicitly. We have to be mindful of issues of consent that cannot often be secured, as in other forms of social science research—there may be deceased, estranged, or too young people involved. This is even more pertinent when the reasons why people come to auto-ethnography is as a way of writing through a traumatic experience—either personally and/or in doing research on 'sensitive' work. The emotional and embodied fall out of actual or vicarious trauma has to be written to be worked through (Enosh and Buchbinder 2005).

As women, we live through trauma—we grow up as girls and experience various types of violence. This violence can be structural, symbolic, and actual. It is physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, and economic. It is perpetrated by the state, and it is perpetrated by our most intimate others. We survive it—sometimes. We never forget it. Why should we? We should 'refuse to get used to it' (Ahmed 2017, p. 206). This gendered violence keeps happening; we have to get over these types of violence every day. They accumulate. They make us. They break us. We remake ourselves again and again.

I am going to tell you the story I want to, in the way I want to.

I want you to know some things about me. I want you to know that I am not ashamed to have come to feminism—as recognised by academia—later in life. I will not be 'ashamed' for not knowing that I could have/should have studied feminism in my youth (see also Loveday 2015). I will not apologise for still being angry and hurt and damaged by what has been done to me and to the working-class girls and women around me. I will not apologise for surviving and I will not apologise for refusing to be grateful.

I am lucky. I know my privilege. I am using my privilege to repeat this—feminism can be a home, a refuge from violence, a space to hold anger, to let it out, to name the wrongs, to galvanise women into action. However, it can also be used to perpetrate marginalisation and exclusion—even if unintentional. Feminists when embroiled in academic structures and politics can gaslight too. We need to be honest about that.

Class still matters. It always has. You cannot deny it. I will not deny it any more.

I am not alone in this frustration. It is not new. And that is the point. (see for example the edited collection by [Taylor and Lahad 2018](#)). [Gill's \(2009\)](#) key rendering of the 'hidden injuries' of academia plainly showed this, and my experience since then is that these brutalising techniques have only increased—news coverage of mental health crises and suicide show the grim reality of the culture and pressures of overwork. As we live through accelerated and aggressive academic times, being a feminist academic in anti-feminist and increasingly depoliticised academia is tough.

This can be the case even when we are people in academia that enjoy some obvious privileges—in my case, whiteness, a permanent post, and an invisible illness. We may enjoy a partial passing. Structurally, I have enjoyed privilege in academia too—being in a 'top' university; securing funding, a permanent job, and a pension; having access to maternity leave and to sick pay. Perhaps resigning will be interpreted as 'throwing all of this away'—as a grotesque act of privilege in and of itself. In a context and atmosphere of all-pervasive precariousness, it may make no sense that a woman claiming a working-class identity and politics would walk away from security and mobility. However, I hold zero romantic notions about the political value of claiming working classness and have little interest in playing games of proving authenticity. Rather, I want to challenge why claiming a working-class identity is always seen as inauthentic—that you cannot be working class and in academia. If you are a woman, then this is doubly dubious—you just cannot be both.

This is of course nonsense. It is disingenuous to claim that once an academic, you have 'moved class'. What might have moved is your income bracket, your security, your tastes even. That is not the same thing. Class is what we are born into and live as. We are recognised implicitly as other. We are both not enough and too much—borrowing from Sara Ahmed again ([Ahmed 2017](#), p. 201). We are too garish, too loud, too rebellious, too uncouth, too common. Too plain. Too fussy. Too ungrateful. We do not look, talk, act, or walk the same. We 'have such gaps in our knowledge' when we do not recognise the places or books or parts of history being discussed. We do not know when to speak up and when to be quiet. We are thrust into a game that we were never told the rules of and those who know, change them all of the time. We are never meant to win. We are tolerated. We are allowed to be there to tick diversity boxes. To be held up as examples of a working meritocracy. To do the drudge. We are meant to be taught; we are not the ones doing the teaching. If we choose to drink the cool aid of neoliberal academia and life, we might even get individual success. If we are willing to compete, to trample over others, we can be rewarded. Yet, this is always conditional. Strings firmly attached.

Extending [Manne's \(2018\)](#) work theorising on how misogyny is not about blanket hatred for all women—only those who transgress the dictated lines of femininity and subservience—not all working-class women in academia experience misogyny in the same way. Just as there is no 'one' classed experience, there are many trajectories. However, if we refuse to be compliant and grateful, we are marginalised and denigrated. We are gaslit. We are constantly reminded that we are hanging on by one fingernail. We are refused respect and value, but with a smile. We are made to feel guilty about our progress and our privilege. We should not be here. We know it. We have lived it our whole lives. Our mothers lived it, and so did our grandmothers. We have inherited the fury, the futility, and the fight. We know what it is like to be pushed down, disciplined, and punished. We know that we are viewed as bodies there to be used. We are the modes and means of reproduction. We were never meant to be the ends.

#### 4. Learning to Be a Feminist: Instinctive and Unsaid. Always Political

In this section of the paper, I present a selection of vignettes. These are autobiographical. These are partly fictionalised. These are inherited, experienced, and imagined (Pickering and Keightley 2012). Hirsch and Smith (2002) called for making the study of memory—and post memory—inherited traumas feminist; for taking a gendered analysis of the ‘psychological and political structures of forgetting or repression that have disempowered or enabled women to veil their own painful past lives’. While dealing with how large collective memory projects have impacted me at the personal level, I have found engaging with the work around post memory useful in thinking through my own inheritances of an ‘instinctive, but unsaid’ feminism. One that is always linked to wider state forms of benevolence or violence—via being a working-class girl reliant, in key areas and at key times, on welfare and state funding.

The fact that this is the first time I have written about this demonstrates how deeply engrained feelings of shame and gratitude and luck are as a ‘first generation’ academic and feminist (Loveday 2015). The luxury of a higher education and ability to own your political participation and identity was completely out of reach for my foremothers and for many women in many places still. Yet, in academia, the suspicion of how ‘deserving’ of my place I was, why I have been ‘lucky’, serves to continually erase both the collective struggle and the individual work that put me there. It erases why I wanted to be an academic in the first place; why it was inevitable that I would become a feminist in academia. It also obscures why I might also be disappointed at times with how feminism still operates as a classed project within a classist institution.

The inclusion of the following vignettes without a context is my attempt to reveal my critical points of politicisation; to demonstrate what it is like to instinctively feel and live gendered injustice and violence—both from the state and in intimate settings—but to have no way to voice that injustice, neither in name nor in space. Of course, gendered violence is not only experienced by working-class women—this paper is not about pathologising or making unfounded correlations. The point is that the likelihood of being blamed and made responsible for your circumstances is higher for those ‘misrecognised’ as disreputable and unworthy of respect (Skeggs 2001).

Thus, in this paper, I follow Page’s (2017) case for ‘vulnerable writing’ as a feminist act. Writing vulnerably in this paper has been one way for me to resist the disciplining of disciplines and audit cultures. It has given me a way to reconnect not only with my ‘research’, but with my feminism and how it came to be. It reveals my genealogy in embodiment, precarities, marginalisation, and privileges. My feminism is ever changing as my life and politics evolve. These non-linear and progressive political selves need to be voiced and analysed. There are valuable forms of knowledge that come from being a first generation academic and feminist that are not better, or worse, but are important. Writing about how we might have first entered academia and arrived at feminism as a way to ‘transcend’, ‘escape’, or ‘edit out’ our negative experiences reveals both constraints and opportunities. It is time for a reclaiming of class analysis that is intersectional and mindful of the classed experiences of feminism (Walkerdine 2017).

##### 1: 1979. Thatcher’s children

*‘You girls, getting pregnant to get a flat, expecting everyone to bail you out.*

*You’ve made your bed, now lie in it’.*

*I’m 21 years old with a 3-week-old baby. I’m living with a relative. My partner—the father of my baby—is taking our photograph. He has given our daughter a giant teddy. With an extravagant red satin ribbon in a bow around its neck. His name will be on the birth certificate, along with his occupation. And yet, he has already left us.*

*I will be moving soon, to my own flat. They say I ‘am lucky’. I’ve been given a house and a furniture grant that will buy a couch, a bit of carpet, a calor gas heater, a bed. I’ve been given a second hand cot. I will have no telephone, no central heating. There will be no one to stop the strange man banging on*

*the door in the middle of the night. I am 21. I have the keys to the door. I won't be going back to work. My job no longer exists.*

*I am that 3-week-old baby, so I cannot really be telling you this. But, I do want you to know that you will give me books, love, television, pop music, the fire in my belly. I will not know how to talk about the wrongs that have been done to you, to us, for such a long time. I won't even want to hear about them for such a long time. But what is unsaid can be the most important of lessons.*

## 2: 1984. Don't tell me to smile

*'Stand in the middle, so you don't spoil the picture.*

*Smile! There, such a lovely wee doll'.*

*I see a lady who is my brother's gran, but not mine. We don't speak about her. She looks at me as if she knows things about me that I don't know myself. What have I done that is so bad?*

*'She has a tendency to daydream'.*

*I'm not always daydreaming, I'm mostly thinking. I'm mostly wondering if everything will be ok today, tonight. If there will be more arguments, more crying. If the neighbours will be shouting at us to keep the noise down.*

*Sometimes I am daydreaming. Read my stories and you will see those are works of fiction. You don't like when I write about what we've really been up to. You just say, I need to be 'more imaginative'. 'Neater'. 'Take more care'.*

*But I'm only 5 years old. And I'm worried. About everything.*

## 3: 1990. Only good for one thing?

*"Do you like this song'?*

*'Yeah', she replied and bit into a sweet from her 20p mix. Her first 'big' school disco. The summer before starting high school. She had begged her mum to let her go. Scrabbled the coppers from the backs of the kitchen drawer, the piggy bank that never had much in it. Enough to get in and get that mix. She had picked a cola bottle. It was too chewy, she couldn't talk. She was scared she would choke. The Family Circle paper sweetie bag growing damp as she clasped it tighter. She didn't really want to offer them one.*

*He was older. She was flattered. She had been taught to value male attention. Everyone said he was good looking. Her friends were looking at her. His friends were all around the two of them, she felt a group of them behind her, she couldn't see their faces. Instead, she felt them. Standing too close. Then, loudly, so everyone could hear above the music, one says to the back of her head, so close she can feel the heat in the breath, smell the tang of fizzy juice,*

*"Yeah, she'll totally be a wee ride when she's older"*

*Then, just laughing.*

## 4: 1997. Things can only get better

*She wanted to study Politics because she needed to understand why things were not changing. For her mum, for her.*

*A boy sat behind her and kicked the back of her chair during every lesson for two years. The teacher ignored it at first. Then told her to move and ignore it; to 'just get on with your work and stop messing about'.*

*She does well, she begins to think about university. She is told 'not to be complacent. This is probably just luck'.*

*She clutches an unconditional offer for a university place to study Politics. No one in her family has ever even been near a university. She asks for some advice, hoping her interest and dedication will*

*spark some encouragement. He tells her she won't be able to do it. His son had studied politics at university and found it very difficult. She should perhaps think about what she really wants to do.*

*She leaves school early.*

*She tries to talk to the men who are sometimes in her house—the ones who sit around the table, being fed, smoking and talking about the world. She tries to intervene. One of the biggest elections the UK has seen is approaching—1997. 'Things can only get better'. They laugh and say 'daft wee lassies don't sit at the table'.*

*She goes to University. That first term she comes home, changed, but not. The boy who kicked her chair for two years sees her. 'So I'm paying my taxes, for daft wee bitches like you to swan about. Who do you think you are—the next Maggie Thatcher?'*

*As he walks away, he spits on the ground.*

## 5. Learning to Be a Feminist: Academic and Angry

All of those stories are based on my experiences. They are my retelling of recalled formative experiences of politicisation and of instinctive knowing of feminism. Of knowing that girls and women were unfairly and badly treated—at every stage and at any moment. There is, however, no mention of feminism; no coming to feminist knowledge; no light bulb moment. However, what they show is how growing up as 'other'—by class, gender, age, parentage—is with you from the beginning and is indelible (Gagnon 2018). You know instinctively that you are not viewed or treated with the same respect or value as others. As Reay (2017) found, we are still educating people according to classist attitudes. I had a desire to study politics. I thought it was a way of possible change. I thought about university as a route of mobility. Yet, this was not based on any clear understanding of how this could happen, or what this would be like. Indeed, I literally had no one to talk to about my aspirations or desires. When I tried to, I was told that I could not do it.

I have found it useful to reflect on the work by Allen (2014), showing how girls growing up in the late 1990s were framed as ideal 'aspirational subjects.' As girls were socialised into people-pleasing and self-regulation of particular feminine behaviours, educational attainment became a marker of respectability and being 'good'. Of trying to 'transcend'. And, yet, for working-class girls, this attainment was also policed by those who continued to view the working class-girl as abject and other. Engaging with feminism at this time was also fraught. As McRobbie (2007), Walkerdine (2003), and Ringrose (2007) all show in their work on post-feminism, those of us growing up as teenagers and young women in the late 1990s were sold the myth that we had it all. As Scharff (2016) argues, in a process of 'repudiation', feminism was aligned with second wave women's liberation in popular discourse. This was demonised and denigrated as, after having achieved the gains of formal equality of opportunity, being an outdated form of 'man-hating'. Women and girls were positioned as 'empowered' and only had to be emboldened to take those opportunities. Yet, as I have found throughout my career, girls and women who are politically engaged are misrecognised, ignored, or aggressively attacked. Their voice is heard only as asking for too much.

## 6. Becoming the DIY Feminist Teacher: 'Rip It Up and Start Again'

*It's 2016, she lives, breathes, does politics. It is now her privilege and her job. Her mum is proud, but tells her it all seems too much. 'You can't have it all'. She is with another cohort of politics students. She is running a workshop about being a social scientist, they are all female.*

*They all tell her—her—stories.*

I did succeed in my aims of mobility. I obtained a first-class degree in Politics. Then later, I received funding for a PhD. Later still, I managed to secure a permanent full-time lectureship in Politics in a Russell Group University. The stuff of dreams; of myth and legend. I was lucky because I was able to take 'opportunities.' I had some material support—a grant, loans—and emotional support from friends

from other class backgrounds. More fundamentally, I loved learning. It was a gift to me. It made all the most difficult times bearable. However, this made me very *grateful*, for a very long time.

Nonetheless, towards the end of my time in academia—once I was ‘secure’ enough in terms of permanency of position—I began to rethink some of this gratitude. What was I to be grateful for? Why were only some of us deemed to be there by luck and chance, not hard work? As I became able to claim feminist politics as my research area and pedagogical intention (Olive 2018), I began to understand how I had been shamed into ‘staying in a box’; feeling again, that I could not ask for anything more. Even when it was obvious that a feminist intervention in Politics teaching and life was necessary, I had to ‘earn’ the right by continually proving my deservingness and gratitude to feel like I was able to legitimately work and teach something ‘marginal’ and ‘risky.’ Without an initial ‘pedigree’ of feminist education or activism from my undergraduate days, I was often told I was simply working from ‘experience’ or ‘anger’; that this is not legitimate. That learning in academia—as an academic—is something that is used to undermine some of us.

Why is this relevant now? Beyond my experience? Do we not live in an age of ‘digital feminism’, ‘celebrity feminism’, ‘popular feminism’? Feminism as a fashion accessory—emblazoned across tee-shirts. Yet as Gill (2016) cautions, we should be wary of thinking this is a sign of post-postfeminism—a moment where we can straightforwardly reclaim feminist fights and identities. As these new formations of feminism—in modalities and claims—reconnect with older feminist campaigns, we face a virulent anti-feminist backlash. We are in a moment of anti-feminist backlash that is state sanctioned and led. A global government made up of toxic masculinity reigns over a right-wing pendulum swing underpinned by a racist and homophobic misogyny, that fuels and propels gender-based violence. This exists alongside the ever-present threats of commodification and co-optation—feminism and capitalism in their valuing of freedom and choice are intertwined.

I am telling my genealogy—writing this as I leave academia—because I want to show how my individual stories—forged through my inheritances and classed social and political context—continue to be connected to those coming after me. The reason I say this is because the stories I have told above are the same stories I continued to hear from female students as a feminist teacher. That is what concerns me now. That is why I am using my relative privilege to write this paper. It is also why I decided to reintroduce a feminist politics course into the curriculum about four years ago. Not only a feminist course, but a course with different modes of participation, learning, writing and assessment. I asked students to engage in their own feminist praxis—to write their own feminist journeys; to represent their feminist demands in collages and manifesto. To visit a zine archive (at the Glasgow Women’s Library) in order to see how varied and engaging feminist politics can be. In the feedback from that first cohort, students told me this was the first time they had been offered the chance to engage ‘seriously’ with feminism. To learn a diverse and non-pejorative narrative. Not of ‘man hating’, but of equality and politics. For them, it had been the first time that they could make a connection with their instinctive and lived feminism with knowledge creation and production; the first time that their lives—and the gendered injustices and violence—could be a serious and legitimate form and content of knowledge. That their study of Politics could also be political and personal.

Enabling students to engage their own lives in learning about feminism has shown that this is just how persistent gender-based violence is. From work-based discrimination, sexual harassment and assault, domestic workloads, silencing and lack of opportunity—all of those old and new battlegrounds were there. What was heartening, however, was the desire from students to have more of this knowledge at their disposal; to be ‘able to argue my case’ against discrimination. To have their lived experiences of discrimination based on misogyny believed and taken seriously.

My critique of the classed project of feminism in academia is not an argument against feminism in academia—it is a call to reclaim it. To reconnect feminism to those who need it. To provide the tools to fight against what they instinctively experience everyday as gender-based injustices. When it matters. When we are young. And as we age.

## 7. Conclusions: A Home with/in Feminism?

By way of conclusion, I want to return to the question of whether working-class girls can be at home with feminism in academia. My short answer is yes. But we must continue to refuse to ‘get over’ the discriminations we face (Ahmed 2017). We can experience feminism as a place of home—of refuge, sanctuary, security—but it can also be one of potential discomfort and insecurity in contemporary academia and society. The corrosiveness of competition and stress and audit cultures has served to break many collective bonds. We have the tools of feminism to address this. We have anger, refusal, activism, DIY. We can ‘weave that tapestry’ of diverse, intersecting, intergenerational—and divergent—paths to, through, and within, feminism (Lewis and Marine 2015). We must ensure that we work against the shoring up privileges we may have; in certain voices becoming privileged. We need to acknowledge that our education—formal or informal, state led and intimately informed—is still lacking in basic respect for women’s experiences and the way in which their lives are contained within everyday experiences of violence.

And this is where class comes in. Whilst we are regarded as other by our classness—dress, demeanour, accent, knowledge, politics—we also continue to be not ‘recognisably’ working class (enough) for academia. I do not own that history of standing on picket lines or have an activist heritage from a second wave mother or rent striking grandmother. Those of us who are girls from small towns might not be from urban widening participation target areas. A girl who has been the daughter of a single mother, and then not, and back again, is both far removed from the state sanctioned mess of austerity policy, but intimately linked to it—forged by it.

Feminism within academia can be a way to voice these nuances, but it can also police them too.

In writing this paper, I am not doing something ‘new’. Yet, it feels like a radical act. I am unwriting my ‘success’ as codified by a classed academia. I am making clear that my feminism is still from the gut, even if I now know how to render that recognisable. I am showing my privilege, but unmasking the precarities that co-exist. I have told you parts of my story. I am not asking you to believe it, but I am asking you to listen. I am asking you to stop telling girls and women everything they are not. I am claiming a feminism coming from growing up as a working-class girl and then learning to be an academic and a feminist; from trying to find the ways to have my experience recognised and valued, in order to be able to do the same for others.

I will always continue on my journey of lifelong learning to be more feminist. I think we all should.

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