

# Gender and Precarity: A Response to Simon During

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**I**N 'PREARIOUSNESS, LITERATURE AND THE HUMANITIES TODAY', SIMON DURING CLAIMS 'the humanities need to adapt to and accept their relation both to social and metaphysical precariousness'. As the social and economic landscape moves from social capitalism to neoliberalism, and academia from 'ivory tower' to 'Enterprise University', a re-emergence of debates on precariousness, immaterial labour and the role of the humanities is timely, and yet, what concerns me about During's article is the accommodation he affords to neoliberalism with little regard for the ways in which precariousness and precarity in the academy is gendered. As many feminist scholars have noted, 'women have always done immaterial and affective labour, often with little recognition in both fields' (Fantone 12), and so it isn't surprising that this discussion around precariousness is only raised, as Laura Fantone reminds us, precisely 'at the moment when the western, male worker began feeling the negative effects of the new, post-industrial, flexible job market' (7).

During's paper is no exception. His article might have been a personal response to the fear of falling into the academic 'bourgeois precariat' or an altruistic gesture towards those facing such an existence, but his thesis is a resigned advocacy of an internalised neoliberal precarity rather than a statement of academic solidarity, critical engagement, or even recognition of those in the

academy whose knowledge-work, as is the case for much feminist and queer studies research, is a form of political practice that resists neoliberalising forces.

During describes the precariat as a 'relatively small social sector'; perhaps, but not within higher education. Today, it is not only women's presence in the academy, but the positions women occupy that expose the continued gender inequality in Australian higher education. Precarity is an endemic feature of the contemporary higher education landscape and one which disproportionately affects female academics. In Australia, around half of all academic staff are employed on an hourly rate basis, with 75% of new university jobs since 2005 being insecure, casual and contractual appointments. Moreover, though there are considerable complexities to the picture, recent data on academic employment suggests that academic women across all disciplines (even the fields dominated by women) are more likely to occupy fixed-term positions than continuing roles, and are more likely to end up in insecure career pathways (May *et al.*; Broadbent *et al.*; Hartley and Dobeles; Morrison and Dever; Gill; 'Higher Education Statistics').

The pervasiveness in higher education of gendered precarity, and of gender inequality more broadly, is a product of ongoing post-industrial neoliberal economic reform. The lack of cohesive and collective criticism against neoliberal managerialist practices is complicated by the individualisation of academic work. Tanya Fitzgerald observes that

Recruitment, contracts, workload and the allocation of resources have been formalised through induction and performance management processes in which academic labour is appointed and assessed differentially according to hierarchical position (associate lecturer to professor). These processes legitimate the university as an incentivising institution that can prescribe how work should be done and develop the rules (policies and procedures) that are designed to induce compliant behaviours if individuals are to access rewards such as promotion. (211-212)

Neoliberalism appears resistant to nuanced criticism precisely because it has individualised and internalised the norms of capitalist logic and self-interest (Skeggs), making it difficult to articulate these new forms of inequality. As Rosalind Gill notes, in many ways the academic exemplifies the neoliberal subject as one willing to be 'flexible' and adaptive. Our subjectivities have changed to fit in with the logic of capital and 'we become the living embodiment of capital' (Skeggs 2). In the process of neoliberalising our own academic labour, we reinforce the debilitating effect of what Lauren Berlant describes as 'cruel optimism' in our dedication to and investment in scholarly pursuits in such precarious times. As a consequence we become unable to challenge or alter

hegemonic discourses but merely to endure them. We must remain cognisant that precariousness is not just an unintended consequence of a neoliberal agenda; it is a discursive and operant practice, an intentional product of neoliberalism, and one which is markedly gendered. While universities can no longer be described exclusively as antiquated bastions of patriarchal hegemony, old patriarchal masculinity is instead being replaced by a remodelled entrepreneurial masculinity, which has resulted in what Margaret Thornton describes as a remasculinisation of the university.

The humanities needn't become an accomplice to neoliberal new managerialist practices and I would here invoke Sara Ahmed's notion of being 'willful'<sup>1</sup> to resist During's proposal that the humanities must 'adapt to and accept' this move toward neoliberal precariousness. Instead, I adopt Janet Newman's theorisations of 'spaces of power' as a counter response to During's essay, and use it to describe the ways in which feminist academics find and create spaces for activism and resistance within the neoliberal university. These spaces foster feminist (and queer) politics and perspectives that enable academic women actively to resist hegemonic structures and discourses. In 'Spaces of Power: Feminism, Neoliberalism and Gendered Labor', Newman re-evaluates recent literature on feminism and global capitalism to expose neoliberalism's appropriation of feminist identity politics, such that 'processes of "mainstreaming" have served to both acknowledge and depoliticise feminist claims' (202). In the university organisation, neoliberalism can be understood to have perverted feminist ideals such as equal employment opportunity and workplace diversity in the pursuit of profit, and these redefined concepts are then implemented and actualised by new managerialism. Newman states that 'blaming feminism for its own undoing too easily slides into the continued demonization of feminism and its achievements by the conservative right, fed by the popular press' (Newman 203). Because of the way in which neoliberalism individualises the social, feminism as a collective ideology is made culpable for its own depoliticisation, the widening of its forms and political objectives.

Given the precarious status of academic women and the prominence of such debates in feminism today, I am interested in exploring further the relationship between feminism and neoliberalism in ways that seek to challenge dominant narratives of erasure and appropriation and reintroduce 'questions of contradiction and ambivalence' (Newman 200). By extension, During's complicity reminds me that feminism is needed most precisely when it is understood as having been superseded, and that it is invariably women, and particularly women of colour, who will experience the most disadvantage and

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<sup>1</sup> See Sara Ahmed's *Willful Subjects* (2014) for the ways in which willfulness might be reclaimed as a feminist, queer and anti-racist term that challenges the will of the oppressor or institution that seeks control and compliance.

inequality in this process of 'reflexive modernisation'. So what and where are these 'spaces of power', both material and spatial, that enable us to resist and redress neoliberal hegemony?

My research on academic women, feminism and leadership in the neoliberal university endeavours to open up a space for a politics and historicity of the present that will enable an exploration of the entanglement of feminism in the dominant systems, operations, and cultures of the neoliberal university organisation, and a rethinking of how this complicates the ongoing paucity of women in academic leadership positions. My project is framed around the experiences of academic women, and has involved interviews with female scholars from a range of academic disciplines and a variety of Australian public universities, including urban and rural, research-led and teaching-driven institutions, women in executive management, women in the professoriate, senior lecturers and early career academics, and most notably female academics in precarious contractual and sessional appointments. Through this project, I hope to provide a more nuanced picture of academic women's working life, feminist politics and practice, and leadership in the contemporary Australian academy.

Here I interweave the words of two of my sessional and contractually employed interviewees working in the humanities, with a brief analysis of the ways in which these women are creating feminist 'spaces of power' through their research and teaching practice and their interactions with colleagues and management. In our conversations together, they sought to reflect on their precarious status in the academy and their feminist identifications and commitments. When asked to reflect on their future as an academic one participant confides that: 'I could be here forever, as a casual. There's just not much of an option for secure employment, and then you think; you give all this time and energy, and for what?' She notes that the majority of sessional academics in her department are women:

A lot of them are caregivers: mums. They are there because it's flexible and they are of course incredibly intelligent and talented but they get abused, in a way. Our skills are abused because of the labour market and gender constructions within that, and you know, there will always be someone to replace you in that labour market situation: another woman to come and do all the sessional work.

Despite her ambivalence towards her status as a female sessional academic in her university she nevertheless feels her workplace to be 'a safe space to be "out" as a feminist and meet other feminists, to do feminist work'. In contrast the other interviewee found academia to have a 'brutal culture' where you have to 'play

the right game' in order to get ahead. Notwithstanding that both these women have experienced gender-based workplace discrimination by male academics they both attribute their accomplishments as academics in part to working in a community with other feminists: 'there's a power in owning that space, in recognising you are legitimate, a confidence in your own legitimacy'. However:

It's not like it's this feminist utopia that exists in this lovely fluffy vacuum. But I think what happens when there's feminist leadership is that there is a greater recognition of differences.

In this instance, feminist leadership comes to mean, all educators who operate from a feminist perspective, one which informs their practice as researchers and teachers. Both cited the importance of mentorship and supporting younger female academics as well as the need to give voice to young women they teach in the classroom by facilitating discussions that enable female students' voices to be heard, because 'even in classes dominated by women it tends to be the male voices that are the loudest, even though they are the minority, and it's important to make them aware of that'. Spaces of power and agency coalesce with spaces that foster collectivity amongst women.

Political responses activated by precariousness can, as During suggests, create spaces where uncertainty is permitted and encouraged and it is possible to make a link, as Neal Curtis proposes, between the chaos and anxiety produced by neoliberal precarity and the ability of the humanities to 'maintain spaces [in] which noise and anxiety might be explored' (75). I appreciate that risk can push us into action and towards states of innovation, but unregulated and unconstrained precarity is unsustainable. Raewyn Connell describes global patriarchal neoliberalism as 'a baroque monster of power without glory, violence without the capacity to create. All it can do is intensify its spirals of competition, mining both nature and social institutions with startling ruthlessness' (266-27). This illustrates the intensity in which individual competitiveness comes at the expense of social justice. While Connell's definition encapsulates the unrelenting dominance of neoliberal ideology and its ability to subsume feminist politics for capital gain, she does not accept this outcome, and I concur with Newman that to accept the dominant neoliberal narrative is to perpetuate the presumed erasure of feminism by neoliberalism. This has created a false consciousness around present day feminism, one that has pronounced it out-dated (Newman). Connell's critique may also be understood as a warning; a cautionary tale to feminists of the limits of these 'spaces of power' within neoliberalised structures. However, as Skeggs notes:

There are always temporal lags and also emergent and residual forms that escape the dynamic of capital. Capital's dynamic is uneven and ruptured and

thus cannot control or capture everything: gender, race and class relations establish the limits to the take-up of its logic. (15)

It is possible to trace multiple projects of neoliberalisation, but it does not preclude the potentiality of feminist identities and practices from ‘working in and against’ (Newman 208), outside and within neoliberal structures and organisations. Rather than an ‘accommodation’ to an all-pervasive neoliberalism, part of the task of the humanities is to preserve and continue to create such spaces where the critical intellectual work of the humanities can continue to be done.

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