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Perverse Pleasures – Identity Work and the paradoxes of greedy institutions

By Valerie Heyⁱ

Abstract ⁱⁱ

Women's studies struggle for a location in the academy has always involved feelings of deep ambiguity. The outsider/insider relation is a peculiarly vexed one in times when the demands on professional identity appear to erase the more political claims on our identity such as being a feminist.

This paper considers aspects of these complex navigations across the personal, private, public and professional aspects of identity through the concept of pleasure. It explores the discrepancy as well as the interrelations between the moral climate of higher education and the more elusive, secret or at least unspoken nature of our persistent (over?) commitment to intellectual labour. I draw on key concepts such as 'seduction' and 'repression' (Bauman, 2001), in order to tease out the complicities secured by the rewards and the displacements won by our repression. What positions and identities do we stake out in the hyper-competitive world of higher education and is the feminist project sustainable in these crisis times?

Key words: Academy, feminism & pleasure

Introduction : Texts and Contexts

There is a considerable literature on audit and managerialism and minimal literature on pleasure and even less theorising what pleasure academics might still manage to squeeze in 'wannabe' universities. This paper is inspired by Jocey Quinn's pioneering work 'Taking pleasure in the university' (Quinn, 2003) where she examines how universities have been marketed as sites for the pleasure-seeking hedonist'. Her own empirical work offers an alternative vocabulary of pleasure defined by some of her subjects through 2 different registers – of an appreciation of the university's 'homeliness' and their subsequent delight at 'fitting in', and intellectual pleasures – an excitement of 'thinking about things' or 'just learning stuff'. These are discourses notably absent from government policy documents (as Quinn, 2003 notes) and it has to be said from feminist work. They offer stimulus to further musings about the complexities and fragmentary nature of pleasure.

In this initial exploration I consider first intellectual pleasure; then briefly allude to some related aspects of the pleasures of creating an academic identity - dress, finding a voice and writing and teaching before moving onto alternative (banal or unexpected or tutored) pleasures; and end by alluding to the complex redemptive pleasures of female friendship in academic feminism.

I am interested in questions of commitments and desire because I am struck by an enigma in my own practice and one that is shared by other women I know. I am perplexed by the clash between the 'corridor talk' 'shop talk' critique of the impact of audit and managerialism and our manic productivity. As Sue Webbⁱⁱⁱ remarked recently, our commitments have been powerfully reworked so that we have become instrumental in our own exploitation. What is going on below the level of the obvious regulation and what surplus value is being extracted from our own (punitive) pleasure in what we do?

The Difficulties of Desiring Otherwise

One of the many hard lessons of feminist enquiry has been the recognition that current desires to 'be otherwise' are conceded to the lures of the present (Rowbotham, 1985). Moreover, our *collective* capacity to think about feminist-inspired futures has been seriously diminished in the context of 'identity politics, postmodern critiques of enlightenment projects (Nicholson, 1990) and the consolidation of centrist and conservative political alliances in the US and UK. Jane Gallop notes;

'We don't seem very able to theorize about how we speak as feminists *wanting social change*, from within our positions in the academy'
(Gallop, 1992: 4)

Lynne Segal comments the 'austere pleasures or torments of abstract thought' are one thing and the 'heated exchanges of collective confrontation and strategic coalition building' another (Segal: 2000). Part of my motive here is to confront aspects of 'our' investments in academic work and identity (including my own) to begin teasing out these obscure pleasures and torments. My aim is to connect arguments about the conditions of production of academic labouring to its material base. For this identity to qualify as successful requires an internalised commitment to 'wanting'. Hyper-productivity and visibility (output & impact being key words) required by external modes of regulation direct this desiring economy into ever more infantile and regressive modes – we want more – more, more, more - to be 'world class' to be 'simply the best'.

My modest intent here is to take up what Lynne Segal implies, the search for a more subtle appreciation of what is at stake in developing a feminist capacity to conceptualise the future. We need stronger understandings for why we desire what we do – a politics of educational subjectivity (Walkerdine, 1987). This is not framed by notions of piety though it does have a moral context and content but, using the words of Joan Scott, Segal comments that feminism has 'only contradictions on offer' (Scott, 1996).

I suppose my recent interest in these questions of our presence is in examining the nature of our contradictory morality as outsiders within. This is partly because of my growing unease with writing about social justice whilst increasingly living the dissonance between what I/we say and what I/we (alas) do.

The particular paradox I want to open out is that of our contradictory investments in aspects of some present academic identity projects that are clearly not unequivocally pleasurable and desirable but they do seem to produce their own dividends. My initial premise is that there is more to our punitive work rate than can be explained as compliance with the escalating demands of higher education restructuring (Marginson, 1997; Morley, 2002). We seem to be *over-complying*, or at the least over-zealous. I think that there might be a complex rehabilitation going on –at least psychically –a sort of psychological adjustment. My frames of reference here are the fields of feminism, sociology and women's studies as well as education – this gaze maps my own affiliations, professional, personal and political.

Theorising Academic Identity Work

My take on questions of identity power relations is taken from Foucault's notion of capillary formations and power networks but is augmented by some attention to what Bauman (2001) calls the seductions and repressions of consumer

capitalism. A focus on the symbolic economy of desire enables us to understand how the installation of discursive arrangements and social practices are successfully secured because of their capacity to mobilise appealing identifications (Hall, 1996). We need to pay more analytic attention to those moments of fixing without falling back on the notion of deterministic structures.

One way to consider this is taking up Bauman's notion that power now circulates largely as the capacity to stimulate desire (Bauman, 2001). His metaphor for contemporary subjects is that of the swarm –

‘Whomever may wish to keep the swarms on target should tend to the flowers in the meadow, not to the trajectory of a single bee...the management of humans is being replaced by the management of things...(quoting Goux), “to create value, all that is necessary is, by whatever means possible, to create a sufficient intensity of desire’
(Bauman, 2001:127-130)

My claim here is not that there ever was an altruistic golden age – altruism is after all another desire, but that the shaping of our desires has disarticulated positions from collegiality to hyper-individualism. This is not to suggest that the ‘old boys’ clubs were preferable either. Leonard (2000) argues that different formations of higher education – successively liberal, emancipatory or technical/rational commodity marketised – are nevertheless masculinist in some form or another. What *has* changed is the dominant configuration of masculinity.

But whilst academics, like all professional communities, have modes of inclusion and exclusion, prestige and honour systems are not new. What is different I think is the *intensification* in enticements and seductions spun in the spaces of the academy. These inducements work us over and come to form an indispensable resource of any identity work project.

The fact that feminist academics have so easily ‘rolled over’ and bought this package indicates a number of processes not least the pliant nature of our own socialisation that predisposes us to replicate its individualistic orientation. Our training in intellectual labour, most crucially its assessment in competitive examinations, validates the thesis – these ideas as ‘ours’ - emanating from single and singular minds. I have written before about ‘citation wars’ (Hey, 2001). We know what academic culture desires and to some extent we desire it too. Even our language is instructive – we learn the texts of our discipline, we do disciplined enquiry, we must be rigorous, and we offer our work as submissions – these discursive terms offer insight into the deeply ascetic, self-denying (yet) egoistical paths we follow as participants in what I take as a very peculiar practice. There is something vaguely medieval here, which of course there is, given the origin of the English university in monastic vocational devotion. I return to this theme of sacrifice later.

So my provocative question is ‘Why is the contemporary feminist intellectual identity that of a self-flagellating ascetic?’ She/we are not unlike earlier complex identity projects such as female martyr saints such as the medieval figures of Catherine of Siena and Margaret of Cortona (Meiners, 1999).

Yet, my problematic does not deny the exploitations and pressures of academic work. It does nevertheless consider our own roles in buying into the particular economy of new times performativity and the rationales we offer about our commitments and performances.

Given these ambiguous circumstances then we need a subtle sort of attention to get at the feminist stakes in academic labour: here the utility of the vocabulary of the psycho-social, of pleasure and the emotions as a way to tease out commitments. Perhaps also this register could offer one possible way to explore our 'absent presence' and hence situate the riddle of some paradoxical consequences of our commitments. I think this level of analysis is extremely useful for generating (indispensable) concepts that link the ways in which the private and the public are intimately related - notions of 'identity work' which is stitched back to material relations can assist us here (Hey, 1997). What follows is a first attempt to do that.

Guilty Pleasure (1) Heady Labour - Theory for its own sake

A while back at a women's studies conference Jacqueline Rose (I think?) gave a paper about the guilty pleasures of 'difficult theory'. What I recall apart from the elegance of the paper was the frisson of recognition as if somehow 'coming out an intellectual' or a theoretician was in contradiction or at least in some tension with being a feminist/activist. Yet, because feminism has a historical legacy of an ethical discourse of social justice theory – theory as an elite practice – it is still likely to be seen as a minority, excluding and thus not quite decent activity, least of all in England. In this precise vein, another (male?) discussion about the pleasure of intellectual practice captured something of the illicit aspects of doing 'non-useful' work. The author is discussing Barthes famous account of 'jouissance':

I don't know about you, but sometimes even I can achieve something like this kind of pleasure. In my case it works by reading some theory first. In the right circumstances (e.g. not having too much work to do, not having to think of summarising it all in a lecture), theory can have a pleasantly "heady" effect on me – I can see new possibilities. I can follow complex arguments; I can delight in the (usually French) pursuit of implications into quite new areas. Gaining some sort of shock of recognition while watching a Bond (the page is about filmic pleasure) and catching myself at, say, constituting the text from a reading formation, or enjoying an inter-textual moment, or glimpsing those serried ranks of paradigmatic meanings, or pursuing a floating signifier, can deliver a kind of intellectual pleasure. *It is impossible to enjoy intellectual pleasure in England without feeling guilty immediately afterwards however, if this is orgasmic, it is also masturbatory?(sic)*
(<http://www.arasite.org/jbpleas.htm>) italics added

Many colleagues concurred and spoke of the 'privilege' of having space for thinking and for exploring ideas – that was what they really loved about their job. And this is also true of those few feminists who have written about this. Liz Stanley notes her 'passion' in knowledge and indicates that her own questions are about who are the 'gatekeepers and the role of contested knowledge. Under the rubric – Other versions of My Life –we find:

Working class by birth, a lesbian by luck, and a Northerner by choice (for all its denizens know, Manchester is the centre of the known universe)...
What these, and various versions of 'me' as well, have in common is a litany of what the novelist Colette called – and extolled as – the earthly pleasures'. For me, the mind is a very earthly thing too, very much part of my bodily and grounded pleasures' (<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/~homepages/lizstanley/>)

This motif of the pleasurable is carried through; later she speaks about how she ‘read omnivorously’ and how she was involved in the ‘heady ferment of gay and women’s politics and sociological ideas’. The bodily metaphors convey the gustatory and gastronomic delights of feeding and being fed, and ‘heady’ is a perfect metaphor for the intoxicating thrills of politics/thinking or politicised thinking that drives so much of feminist scholarship and research. It is also encouraging (and thus pleasurable) to read this energetic celebration of critical sociological work largely because this unique voice does not take itself too seriously. It is quite hard to pull off the trick of ‘doing’ commitment as well as ‘doing’ reflexivity about pretentiousness. Her picture of herself dressed as a very convincing rabbit is paradigmatic of this double-position in this sense.

Following the theme of desire in head work, a recent paper by Sandra Acker and Michelle Webber (2003) on pleasure and danger in academic life noted the passionate endearments through which some respondents constructed their academic work and identity, ‘I love to teach; really love to teach’ (p3) – but they also commented that how or where people are ‘positioned’ is crucial in determining their level of satisfaction. So what this specific (partial) account indicates is the delight in creativity, in making new links, in comprehending – in getting to grips with difficulty as well as in simply celebrating being there as a politics of presence.

Perverse Pleasure (1): Girls Are Us? Competitive Relations Between Women

I have argued that conditions of the contemporary academy put the ethical practice of feminism in extreme contradiction with the contrasting ethical practice and moral regulation of audit and accountability. Feminist academics live between these spaces.

Given that any form of regulation is irksome (has constraints as well as opportunities), we could speculate that given the disposition of power/desire in the academy (definitely not on the side of the angels!) adherence to the well-intentioned, edicts of feminism (collective practice and collaboration) produces increasing levels of deviance that might then be recuperated as the pleasures (no doubt ambivalent) of being a ‘bad feminist’ but a ‘very good girl’. By this I mean the pleasure of compliance with (masculine formal) authority.

The Errancy by Jorie Graham (1997) tackles this tension of feminist certainties and compliance:

Utopia: remember the sensation of *direction* we loved,
How it tunnelled forwardly for us,
And us so feudal in its wake -
specking of diamond-dust as I think of it now,
that being carried forward by the notion of human
perfectibility-like a pasture imposed
on the rising vibrancy of endless diamond-dust
And how we would comply, someday.
How we were *built* to fit and comply-
As handwriting fits the form of its passion

Are there instances when we have run from the unappeasable demands of the matriarch –feminist BIG SISTER back to the patriarchal BIG BROTHER – because at least the men are in charge and we can get some rewards individually? I know this is

too crude but I am struggling to think through the ways that the forces of these practices drive through into the mundane realities of feminist-feminist relations.

In the context of an intensely competitive ethos, are we conceding too much to the professional 'dividend'? If we think of how academic feminists are positioned (variously overworked, over casual, marginal as well as mainstreamed and 'successful'), we might appreciate how the moral climate of individualism that incites (and rewards) the worst sorts of bad behaviour is shearing away at our own forms of fragile or incipient collectivism.

For my purposes, what I found intriguing and disturbing lately about the psychic economy of academic feminism in its least reflexive moments, is how continuous it is with the divisiveness that poisons girls' friendships and sets the limits of female solidarity relations:

Girls have to make sense of themselves against other girls but they have to do so 'not in conditions of their own choosing'. We can I think locate some of the features of girls' relations here. We have seen that girls 'longings' for certain girls; for a sense of belonging to certain groups and argued that these affinities resonate as another politics of 'desire' played out in the in/ex/clusions of personal forms of feminine intimacies (cf. Steedman 1986:33) There is however, more to it than that. Not only were 'places' desired, they were loathed, not only wanted they were repudiated. Moreover, given that the 'places' were embodied by 'other' girls and all they represented - looks, clothes, manners, forms of sexual self display or 'cleverness' - we should not be too surprised to discover that the various economies of girls' friendships carried both intense sources of personal affiliation as well as forms of social antagonism. (Hey 1997: 136)

My argument here was about the social divisions of class and 'race' and their 'distinctive' manifestations in 'the aesthetics of taste' – here expressed in evaluative judgments about sexuality, consumption and 'intelligence'. Girls compared and contrasted and did their identity work invariably as evaluations of the self and the 'other'.

At their worst, feminist conferences can resemble the schoolyard girl popularity contest i.e. who's in? Who's out? Who's cool? Who's off the pace? Who's last year's news? That is all so terribly 20th century!

The performative hierarchical orderings of conference going is palpable – you feel on display or alternatively invisible – neither I think is a comfortable position but being positioned as a 'face' is definitely better than 'faceless'. These risks to identity can weigh on the nerves and are felt as physical symptoms – I never feel more agitated or excited or disappointed than at conferences. I seem to live them at a ridiculous level of anticipation a bit like a Cinderella waiting to go to that ball – these are pleasurable anticipations but they are also troubling and perverse.

Sometimes 'backstage' at conferences reminds me of fieldwork in the 'girls' locker room'. 'Bitching' can reach new heights of professional polish and we do indulge with relish! We can be that 5** psycho-witch from hell dissecting another woman's paper/personality in the steamy stew of post-presentation deconstruction. What this indicates is that if we are honest about the murky world of our own professional jealousies and resentments, we can be and *enjoy being* competitive! This is hardly news, but I think the price we pay whether we dish or receive the dirt is a lot

higher personally and professionally than when we find ourselves in the struggles with misogyny.

The collisions between friendship, feminism, professional competition, self-interest and social justice rationales are currently unvoiced, which indicates the degree of unspeakable difficulty here. We need at least to acknowledge these strains.

Perverse Pleasures (2) Difficult Desires – Status & Dressing to Impress?

I have alluded to our ambiguous pleasure in competition and status. As women (and thus not dominant in universities) we have noted the ‘uncomfortable’ pleasures of recognition as well as unease around the distance created by the status given to those with ‘titles’ such as Dr or Professor.

I think for me ‘getting a chair’ was embarrassingly embodied – it took me a month to stop smiling!. There was the enormous buzz of ‘making it’ and a powerful feeling of self-worth from the respect I (imagined, fantasised?) I received. And all this despite the role of the RAE ‘market’ in making spaces available for certain types of female academic. Yet, this could not completely override ‘feeling’ a success as pleasure. How do you celebrate something so individualistic in a feminist space? A bit tricky from my point of view. What is the protocol? Who holds the rules?

One thing I did do was go and buy some new clothes, which was decidedly pleasurable. I then consulted the literature to see if there was any work on ‘dressing like a professor’! Interestingly the same emphasis on difficulty was there in the one text I found, ‘Through the Wardrobe: Women’s Relationship with their Clothes’ (Guy et al, 2001) – this did not disappoint - lots of trauma and anxieties about how ‘to embody authority’ –some references to ‘floaty clothes’ and ‘the fun of dressing to impress’ –of refusing to ‘mouse dress’ but only one truly irreverent insistent comment - something more daring - ‘of going blonde’ :

I couldn’t be a professor without doing something outrageous, so I rang my hairdresser...it was the first phone call I made, I finally feel...I’m established enough professionally that I can do what I’ve always wanted ...it’s almost a statement of defiance, like you know, I’m going to be blonde and they have to take it seriously’ (Joyce in Guy et al, 2001 p114).

This account reveals both the power of the regulatory force of the masculine norm as well as the calculated exercise of female power to ameliorate it. Again it is understood how the binary marks of femininity and masculinity are mapped onto the body/mind distinction. But it also shows what happens to pleasure when you analyse it!

Work on identity and clothes, style and self-presentation have barely touched the surface. There is a great deal to be said about self, identity, disguise, display and the enigma of female forms of authority as embodied and encloded. These relations are classed and racialised of course. But I will leave this agenda for another time. Suffice to say I think feminists have lots more to say about pleasure in clothes and presentations of self.

Innocent and Banal Pleasures ? (1): Resistant Collaborators

In contrast to the confessional tortured tone of the previous section I turn briefly in this excavation of academic culture to look at some ‘old’ times practices of sisterhood.

Colleagues still speak about the pleasure of resisting the individualistic ethos of higher education by persisting in collaborative work, even though this was often only fleeting and against the warp of institutional arrangements. Encouragements at trans - or inter-disciplinarity can provide space for more capacious forms of dialogue and there is some burgeoning work here.

At more local levels of collaboration, a colleague remarked on the simple pleasure of receiving thanks from students for being supportive, which was treasured. Hard won collegiality is perhaps all the sweeter. More light-heartedly still, a friend responded to my enquiries about what at work gave her pleasure: 'Opening an email and discovering you don't have to do anything' The same friend mentioned 'going to the library and finding a book you want'! And she also added the times of pleasure when people who she had mentored, supervised and otherwise supported recognised her contribution in thanks. This meant a sharing and thus an extension of personal individual delight. In a sense in the rush of the hot housing of higher education, it could be that these 'banal' pleasures of the everyday, are valuable precisely because they are often effaced by the pressures to produce. We no longer actually feel at times the need (nor do we make the time) to express conventional human courtesies that mitigate the pressures of work.

Academics Anonymous or Pleasurable Futures?

Yet, as we garner (or not) the vulgar 'goodies': of grants, the publication of prestigious papers, the tonic invite to keynote leading conferences, we also know that the pleasure of winning is very short lived, almost a redundancy since success is for ever postponed in the race for the next prize.

These are the circumstances rather like alcoholism. We need to have the next hit! Is there an addictive subculture developing that is the equivalent? I once heard at a gender and education conference a woman declare that she was a 'recovering academic'. I know what she means. It is an obsessive activity.

Current conditions for our production are then extremely competitive. Our bread and butter practices are grant bidding, reviewing and refereeing. As we jostle for places on an ever-escalating elevator to climb higher we have to do more. Measures of where we are to be found set against any one performance indicator become endlessly applied (Hey, 2001, Shain & Ozga 1998). We are required to practice this gaze on our own and others' performativity/productivity. This is both seductive (if you are higher than someone else) but regressive (if not). We shift around in different league tables. We advance three paces if we get a grant, go back ten if we fail to produce articles for 5* journals, make progress again if our citation index goes up and so on....

Should we form 'academics anonymous' for people (like us?) who suffer the same addictive compulsive personalities, being dependent on something that is not necessarily good for us? But perhaps this peculiar mix of compulsion and stigma – massive commitment and yet insignificant immediate social relevance^{iv}, marks out why those of us so positioned talk this kind of fanatical discourse of the fatally hooked minority. Could it be that academic feminism, having turned inwards with such spectacular success, is intent on administering its own guilt-induced self-mutilation as the price we have paid for buying into the pursuit of individual careers. Like sado-masochists, we have to exist in proximity to the administration of the punishment as the condition of extracting individual desires.

What can we say and do as feminist academics to handle the collision of a collective project with the need for earning our own incomes? How do we do as well

as build what Nancy Fraser called for as an alignment of the ‘politics of distribution’ and the ‘politics of recognition’ (Fraser 2000). Can we understand the markers that structure the unconscious as well as the very conscious motivated positional jostling of our own practices?

What about interrogating our epistemic communities – those smaller more localised entities that form around political and theoretically informed agendas? These groupings often have something of the identity of large mobile households created across the boundaries of friendship and professional interest. Like most households they can be amicable and warm as well as dysfunctional and punitive scapegoat clubs. Can we get some more pleasures in there, can we make it more pleasurable for newcomers?

Can we identify other ‘innocent’ pleasures or are these all eaten up by the desiring machine of professional identity projects fuelled by ambition and personal and positional gains? Do we still feel ‘heady’ pleasures or has it become ‘just a job’? Is feminist academic work accountable to professional ethics or has it just become accountable to managers? Does the old-fashioned idea of ‘making a difference’ survive the conditions of academic work?

There are some hopeful signs of new political - intellectual themes that are prospective and connect more to the progressive liberal humanist tradition that briefly flourished in the early 60’s –70’s (Leonard, 2000). There is some evidence of a growing civic desire to envision ‘things otherwise’ that encompasses a wider political plane than any one strand of social justice action.

It might be too premature (possibly another kind of infantilism) to announce a shift in the ‘structure of feeling’ but there are some positive trends of the revival of left-leaning dissent stoked locally by disappointment with New Labour; an interest in utopianism (BSA 2003) and the global movement struggling to challenge the logic of ‘compulsory capitalism’. Most notable of all was the building of a critical anti-war alliance that showed that it was possible to unite very discrepant constituencies on a common platform of principled opposition to US imperialism.

What this suggests is the possibility of refreshing our selves by making new sorts of network connections to reinvigorate our ability to ‘speak as feminists *wanting* social change’, if we are honest about what we ‘get out’ of the current settlement, even so far as recognising the perversity of our pleasures, we might be in a better position to stop martyring ourselves – as punishment for these inadmissible ‘guilty pleasures’ (in intellectual work; in competitive endeavours, in status, in winning, etc) and put our skills and capacities to ‘better’ public and civic use – it could also be redemptive, even as we know it will be another contradictory struggle.

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¹ Several friends and colleagues helped my deliberations here. They warmed up my imagination, reminding me of my own perverse pleasures in academia. I have to admit therefore to a certain opportunity sampling at the level of empirical data and literature. This is work in progress partly stimulated by curiosity about becoming an academic and recently a professor and the sorts of de-and reconstructions it has required. At points, it draws on ad hoc 'conversation' with other feminists in higher education about their pleasures in their work but the final shape is best seen as indicative work mapping some questions that I will take forward in more detailed and systematic ways at a later stage.

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³ A comment made at a paper at the Discourse, Power & resistance Conference University of Plymouth April 6th-8th 2003

⁴ I do not mean this literally more that social studies and the critical social disciplines seem redundant in most social formations but they matter massively to their practitioners and in an ideal world would possibly contribute to democratic renewal

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