

Imposter Syndrome as a Public Feeling
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Introduction

This chapter is about re-thinking 'imposter syndrome'¹ as a public feeling. When I think about doing (early career) feminist work in neoliberal universities there are things that I've run away from, things that I've fought, and definitely things that I've failed at. Another noticeable affect is less of a flight, less of fight, and not exactly a failure, but a kind of paralysis, getting stuck, more like the 'freeze' of some small mammals' response to perceived threat, playing dead instead of fighting or fleeing. I think that *feeling like an imposter*, and an attendant 'freeze' or stuck-ness, is another important aspect of the affective landscape of feminist academic work, especially when this work takes place in neoliberal universities.

I thought about getting stuck a lot while I was doing a PhD, and this led me to Cvetkovich's (2007, 2012) work on ~~'political depression' and~~ public feelings. Cvetkovich's (2007: 465) project set out to explore the role of feelings in public life, including ~~the emotional dynamics of geopolitics, and~~ understanding neoliberalism in 'affective terms' ~~(ibid: 465)~~. Part of this endeavor was de-pathologizing and de-stigmatizing negative affects – including those associated with depression such as inertia, despair, apathy, and indifference – and re-conceptualizing them as resources for political action, and therefore as sites of agency (ibid). Cvetkovich (2012: 202) emphasizes the 'willingness to encounter impasse or lack of

¹ I've used quotation marks – scare quotes – around 'imposter' syndrome in most of this text. I think that conceptualizing the feelings associated with imposterism as a syndrome carries precisely the individualizing and pathologizing connotations that public feelings seeks to trouble and undo. However, I've used this term throughout the chapter, alongside attempts to unsettle and dislodge the implication that feeling like an imposter is an individual – or private – problem.

knowledge', which can accompany emotional expression, since 'depression or being stuck can be an invitation to that which we don't yet know'.

Cvetkovich (2007, 2012) characterized depression as ordinary and mundane; likewise 'imposter syndrome' is nothing if not ordinary, and is seemingly common amongst academics across discipline, career stages, social locations, and – in my experience – is something of a running joke between colleagues and friends. The seeming ubiquity of the feelings associated with 'imposter syndrome' among academics can be seen in higher education blogs and social media, where academics share 'subjective experiences of contemporary academic labouring' (Gill and Donaghue, 2016: 91). Platforms such as *Times Higher Education* feature personal stories, think pieces, and advice on imposter phenomena (~~see e.g.~~ McMillan 2016; Thompson, 2016). These kinds of sharing are important for transforming putatively private experiences into public statements. For Gill and Donaghue (2016: 91), however, 'they remain locked into a profoundly individualistic framework that turns away from systemic or collective politics', and offer individualized 'coping solutions' instead. This is precisely where re-thinking 'imposter syndrome' as a public feeling intervenes. While feelings of imposterism are commonly understood as widespread among academics (McMillan, 2016; Thompson, 2016), it does not follow that these are felt equally, or that the affect carries the same meaning across discipline, career stage, contract type, and intersections of class, gender, 'race' and ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and factors such as caring responsibilities or first generation in Higher Education (HE) status. I want to know what happens if we think of affective regimes of fraudulence, inauthenticity, inadequacy, and the paralyzing fear of 'getting found out', as social, political, and public.

I am at the very beginning stages of a research project investigating imposter syndrome as a public feeling in education. Following Cvetkovich, ~~and~~ feminist sociologies of emotions and queer theories of affect, (~~see~~ Ahmed, 2012; Berlant, 2011; Gould, 2009; Halberstam, 2011; Hochschild, 1983; Sedgwick, 2003), this broader project will 1) situate the affective range of 'imposter syndrome' in social and political context, mapping the emotional landscape of feelings of deficiency, fraudulence, and inauthenticity, in HE according to intersecting forms of social inequality 2) theorize 'imposter syndrome' as something like a 'diagnostic of power'

(Abu-Lughod, 1990) asking what it can tell us about shifts in the structure and governance of HE, including endemic marketization, the rise of entrepreneurialism (Taylor, 2014) and associated workforce casualization, performativity (Ball, 2003), and audit cultures (Burrows, 2012) and 3) re-think 'imposter syndrome' not as an individual ~~deficiency; personal,~~ or private problem of faulty self-esteem to be overcome, but instead as a resource for action and site of agency in contemporary HE (Cvetkovich 2007, 2012).

In this chapter I focus on this third aspect, and take a step towards theorizing imposter syndrome as a resource for action and a site of agency, ~~with a specific focus~~ focusing on feminist epistemologies, and laboring feminist subjectivities, in neoliberal universities. Firstly I briefly contextualize this endeavor in relation to 1) the 'inequality regimes' (Acker, 2006: 443) that character contemporary UK HE, and 2) shifts in the structure and governance of higher education institutions (HEIs), both in conversation with a review of existing studies of imposter phenomena, and theory and research on emotion and academic work. I then shift to thinking about 'imposter syndrome' as a potential source of action and agency, in relation to the ~~felt,~~ feminist ambivalences of being 'within and against' ~~neoliberal universities~~ university institutions, as feminist academics are both ~~inhabit~~ complicit with and ~~contest~~ struggle against the neoliberal university~~ies~~. To explore this further, I present a piece of semi-fictional auto-ethnography ~~ie semi-fiction~~ about feeling like an imposter, which draws on precedents for using personal narratives in analyses of academic labour (Gill, 2010, 2014; Taylor, 2013) alongside those for writing fiction as a mode of inquiry as well as a method of data presentation (Inckle, 2010; Leavy, 2013; Sparkes, 2007; Watson, 2016).

Finally I discuss imposterism as a potential resource for action and site of agency in relation to being a feminist and doing feminist work in neoliberal universities; in relation to feminist epistemologies and the project of making knowledge claims that unsettle the terms and definition of valid, legitimate, truthful knowledge, and of 'good', successful academic labour. This means reading imposter syndrome and feminist ~~epistemology~~ scholarship through each other, ~~thinking about~~ tasking who gets to be a knowing subject, and how we know what we know. The chapter concludes by drawing out the implications of feeling like a (feminist) imposter in neoliberal universities, and how both feelings of fraudulence and inauthenticity,

of 'not belonging' and 'not being good enough', can be re-figured as ~~resources for action and sites of agency~~ agentic resources within and against the neoliberal university. Feeling ambivalently academic *and* feminist in the neoliberal university means creating alternatives to conventional understandings of success and belonging (continuing long-standing feminist projects of critically expanding definitions of 'work', including naming domestic and emotional work/labour as work). Just as doing feminist teaching and research means creating alternatives to conventional ways of knowing, and re-thinking imposter syndrome as a public feeling shows how both of these projects are implicated in each other.

Imposter syndrome in social and political context

'Imposter syndrome' was named in psychological literature in the late 1970s (Clance & Imes, 1978; Clance, 1985), and refers to feelings of not belonging, of out-of-place-ness, and the conviction that one's competence, success, and likeability are fundamentally fraudulent, that it is only a matter of time before this is discovered, ~~a fear of before~~ being *found out*. Feeling like an imposter involves the ~~creeping~~ suspicion that signifiers of professional success (which ~~in academia~~ might include promotion, publication, prizes, award of a permanent contract, award of *any* contract, grant funding, student evaluations, prizes, the 'expert status' of editorial positions, leadership responsibilities) have somehow been awarded *by mistake* or achieved through a *convincing performance*, a kind of deception. 'Imposter syndrome' conveys not only an inability to recognize one's own success and internalize esteem indicators, but a conviction of fraudulence and ~~deception~~ inauthenticity. The sensation of having somehow 'tricked' students, colleagues, employers, interview panels, peer reviewers et al. with a convincing performance, ~~combined~~ combines with the fear of being unmasked, not only as incompetent, but as a fraud as well. So imposter syndrome implies underlying feelings of inadequacy and deficiency, but also conveys a particular felt-as inauthentic or fraudulent relationship to indicators of belonging and achievement.

In popular discourse imposter syndrome is often framed as an individual problem, to be overcome, for instance by keeping a list of achievements to remind oneself of evidenced accomplishments, by listening to senior colleagues describe their own feelings of imposter-

ism (~~see e.g.~~ Thompson, 2016), or by talking about one's own doubts and uncertainties (Collet and Avelis, 2013). The 'CV of failures' serves as an example of this later (Stefan 2010). Haushofer's (2016) failure CV is available online, and includes the 'meta-failure' that 'this darn CV of Failures has received way more attention than my entire body of academic work' (Haushofer, 2016). Examples such as this transform private experiences of 'failure' into public statements, and interrupt smooth narratives of consistent academic 'success'. However, we need to ask who can afford to make such public statements, and how 'failure' carries and sticks differently according to both professional and social status. According to Gill and Donaghue (2016: 91) such ~~moves-public sharing can~~ 'remain locked into a profoundly individualistic framework that turns away from systemic or collective politics to offer instead a set of individualized tools by which to "cope" with the strains of the neoliberal academy'. ~~Yet early psychological research on imposter syndrome focused on its prevalence among high achieving women (Clance and Imes, 1978); I want to suggest suggesting~~ that we cannot understand feelings of imposterism as an individual problem or private issue, isolated from the social contexts in which they are felt.

Some studies of 'imposter syndrome' confirm that, for instance, 'self-assurance about personal competence correlated positively with better teaching evaluations' (Brems et al., 1994: 183), suggesting an important relationship between how workers feel and the efficacy of their labour. However, more recent and more critical work has asked how imposter syndrome is distributed in universities, and whether it is more common among minorities, and those not marked as 'elite'; 'non-traditional' students and staff, including women, queer academics, Black ~~and minority ethnic~~ academics, academics of colour, academics with a disability, first generations, working class academics, and academics with caring responsibilities. Peteet et al. (2014) found that in the USA African American students were more likely to experience imposter syndrome than their White peers. Also in the USA, Collet and Avelis' (2013) quantitative analysis found that self-reported imposter syndrome had more relevance than the commonly given 'explanation' of the perceived 'family friendliness' of doctoral programmes for explaining women graduates' 'downshifting' from tenure track

programmes to non-tenure track teaching positions. ‘Imposter syndrome’ is something more, something other, than a private, ~~individual, emotional~~ problem.

Inequalities in UK higher education (HE), according to major dimensions of socio-economic stratification, are well documented among students (Abrahams and Ingram 2013; Allen et al 2012; Bathmater et al 2016; Ingram and Waller, 2015; Leathwood, 2004; Reay et al 2009, 2010; Waller et al 2017) and academic staff (Addison, 2012; Ahmed 2012; Halsey, 1992; Leathwood and Read 2013). The casualization of academic labour entrenches patterns of ~~staff stratification among staff~~, which impact differently according to intersectional inequalities (Leathwood & Read 2013). ~~with Black minority ethnic and women staff disproportionately negatively affected. Class, gender, and ‘race’ structure access to academic training and inform career trajectories within HEIs (Halsey, 1992: 204).~~

It is clear that higher education is characterized by ‘inequality regimes... that result in and maintain class, gender, and race inequalities’ (Acker, 2006: 443, cited in Gill and Donaghue, 2016: 94). Moreover, research documents the racialised and gendered structure of disciplines, ~~cannons~~, curricula, knowledge production, and universities themselves (Andrews, 2015; Bhambra 2014; Bhambra and Santos, 2017; Stanley and Wise, 1993). Puwar (2004: 1) demonstrates how ~~governmental and institutional spaces of work-place institutional spaces have never been were never~~ ‘neutral’ but rather the ‘arrival of women and racialised minorities in spaces from which they have been historically or conceptually excluded... sheds light on how spaces have been formed through what has been constructed out’. Puwar (2004) goes on to show how the ‘arrival’ of those previously excluded exposes how institutions are marked by masculinity and whiteness, which negates the ‘undisputed’ right of women and racialised minorities to occupy that space.

Concurrently, ‘diversity’ is increasingly mainstreamed in HEI policy and governance. ‘Diversity’ is figured as a desirable characteristic in the neo-liberal, ‘entrepreneurial’ university (Taylor 2013, 2014). ‘Diverse’ subjectivities, embodied personhoods marked by ‘difference’ according to class, gender, race and ethnicity, as well as sexuality and disability, can be made visible in the service of a marketable institutional commitment to inclusivity

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(Taylor, 2013). ~~as~~ 'Diversity' is measured, in initiatives such as Athena Swan, and becomes a metric of institutional differentiation. Here, student and staff identities and personal stories become evidence, promotional material, for the commodified 'happy diversity' of the institution (Ahmed, 2012). While the 'language of diversity' becomes a 'holy mantra' (Puar 2004: 1) ~~diversity practitioners can experience HEIs as resistant to their work, and~~ there is a significant gap between symbolic institutional commitments to 'diversity' and ~~those students and staff who embody 'difference'~~ meaningful change. Ahmed (2012) argues therefore that institutional commitments to 'diversity' can be understood as 'non-performatives', in the sense that such commitments do not bring about the 'diversity' they name; the institutionalization of 'diversity' can paradoxically work to obscure institutional whiteness, racism, and sexism. ~~(Ahmed, 2012)~~. HEIs are complicit in maintaining racialized borders, as with the Prevent agenda in HE, and monitor the visa and immigration status of (some) staff and students. It is in this context that ~~movements of~~ staff and students mobilize to decolonize curricular and canons, and to challenge institutional racism ~~in UK HE~~ (Andrews, 2015; Bhabra and Santos 2017).

In this troubling context, researchers have attended to working class student experiences of ~~'fitting in' and 'standing out'~~ in predominantly middle class UK HEIs. Reay et al. (2010: 121) emphasize 'that the small number of working-class students attaining places at elite universities face... considerable identity work, and the discomforts generated when habitus confronts a starkly unfamiliar field'. In the US, Granfield's (1991) fieldwork with working class students at a prestigious Ivy League school uncovered themes of feeling out of place, and fitting in by attempts at 'faking it'; adopting middle and upper class styles of speech and dress perceived as necessary to success. Abrahams and Ingram (2013) have documented the 'chameleon habitus' as a resource for local working class students negotiating contradictory fields of the university and living at home.

Research that explores the affective aspects of 'non-traditional' students and workers 'fitting in' to universities is particularly relevant ~~here~~, as are accounts of how 'being diverse' in HE 'can be personally painful' (Taylor, 2013: 53). Loveday (2016: 1140), ~~explored the classed and gendered dimensions of shame, arguing~~ argues that shame structures working class

experiences ~~of studying and working in~~ English HEIs ~~as well as~~ ~~and~~ contributing to 'the embodiment of deficiency' among working class students and ~~academics~~ ~~staff~~. ~~Loveday (2016: 1141-2) sets out to 'contextualize the profoundly social nature of shame', and, This builds on bodies of work that explore both 'the subjective experience of class' and 'the naturalization of deficiency' (see Loveday, 2014; Reay, 2005; Skeggs and Loveday, 2012).~~ ~~Loveday~~ demonstrates the appropriateness of the concept of 'affective practice' (Wetherell, 2012; 2014), as a way to shift away from speaking of emotions, which tend to carry individualizing connotations as 'properties of the person' towards recognizing that being affected is 'the result of a social practice' (Loveday, 2016: 1143), building on Skeggs' (1997, 2004) on class and gender as 'structures of feeling', as well as the work of affect scholars such as Sedgwick (2003).

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~~Loveday (2016: 1442) emphasizes how~~ participation in universities is far from a guarantor of legitimacy, and ~~how~~ 'the negative affects circulating in HE institutions have the capacity to attach themselves to particular bodies more easily than others' (Loveday, ~~2011-2016: 1142~~, and see Taylor 2013 on the 'stickiness' of markers of 'diversity', and Ahmed 2009 on 'embodying diversity'), ~~Loveday, and~~ asks – with regard to shame – 'how is it that a problem of society can so easily be turned into a deficiency of the self?' (~~Loveday, 2016: 1143~~). Rethinking 'imposter syndrome' as a public feeling ~~works along the same lines but in a different direction, thinking likewise thinks~~ – through how a supposed 'deficiency of the self' can be refigured as a 'problem of society'. Doing so is aided ~~, and further contextualized~~ by 'relatively scarce' but growing studies of academics as workers, that coalesce around themes of precariousness, ~~and~~ casualization, and ~~audit culture s of audit and self-promotion~~ (Gill and Donaghue 2016: 92).

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Imposter syndrome as a 'diagnostic of power'

There is ~~long~~-established precedent in the (feminist) sociology of emotions for troubling any easy distinction between 'public' worlds of work, and 'private' emotional life (Hochschild, 1983) and for approaching feeling and affect as something like a 'diagnostic of power' (Abu-Lughod, 1990). The second aspect of ~~re-thinking~~ imposter syndrome as a public feeling

follows these precedents and asks what feeling like an imposter can tell us about shifts in the structure and governance of higher education institutions, which are increasingly characterized by endemic marketization, the rise of entrepreneurialism (Taylor, 2014), associated casualization and audit cultures, and how these trends shape feminist academic work and the 'mood' of feminist academia (Pereira, 2012; 2016; 2017b). Three aspects – precariousness, audit cultures, and trends towards self-promotion are particularly relevant for thinking through imposter syndrome as a public feeling.

The growing body of work that explores ~~the~~ 'new laboring subjectivities' (Gill, 2014: 12), the 'psychic life of neoliberalism' (Donaghue et al 2014) does ~~explore~~ encompass feelings of imposterism. ~~For instance,~~ (Sparkes (2007: 525) narrates 'the fear of being found out' in relation to working class insecurities that abound in predominantly middle-class universities. Gill (2010: 1) quotes an academic dealing with a recent journal rejection, 'And you know the worst thing is, they are right: I am useless... I'm a complete fraud, and I should have realized that I was going to be found out if I sent my work to a top journal like that'. Gill (2010: 2) emphasizes that 'feelings of out-of-placeness, fraudulence and fear of exposure in the contemporary academy... [are] ordinary and everyday, yet at the same time remain largely secret and silenced in the public spaces of the academy'. Knight and Clark (2014: 335) analysed how in a 'proliferation of managerialist controls of audit' demonstrate how 'fragile and insecure academic selves' are produced by managerialist controls.

In increasingly entrepreneurial HEIs 'being and becoming', and especially 'arriving' as an academic can feel stretched, and even permanently deferred (Taylor, 2014), as everyday 'work goals' become an 'ever-receding horizon that cannot be reached' (Pereira, 2016: 106), ~~as~~ —Here 'precariousness... is now one of the defining features of academic life', and consequentially, 'neoliberal academia is producing new forms of insecurity... [that] push us to work harder, sell ourselves better, and engage in competition rather than collaboration' (Gill and Donaghue, 2016: 93). Here workers encounter imperatives to enact a particular kind of enterprising academic self, and the promise that if they 'produce more, publish more, conference more, achieve more, in short "perform more"' [then they] will eventually get "there"' (Hey, 2001: 80, cited in Pereira 2016: 105). In such a context, academic work can feel

akin to what ~~Lauren~~ Berlant (2011) describes in *Cruel Optimism* as desiring an object that is an obstacle to one's own flourishing.

At the same time managerialist 'technologies of audit' (Sparkes, 2007: 527) proliferate, including (in the UK); participation in the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)^{2,3}, the National Student Survey, internal teaching evaluations, performance enhancement reviews, citation indices, impact factors and so on. Burrows (2012, ~~cited in Gill and Donaghue, 2016: 93~~) shows how UK academics in the UK can be ~~measured and~~ ranked on over 100 indices ~~and scales, and this leads academics to contributing to feeling~~ 'feel' always monitored and assessed' (Pereira, 2016: 106). Sparkes (2007: 527) argues that technologies of audit have an autobiographical character, in which academics are called to 'account for the self'. Such metrics are made to 'stand in for... the worth, quality, or value of an individual' (Ball, 2003, cited in Pereira 2016: 104), as Sparkes (2007: 530) demonstrates how quickly and easily *my research isn't good enough* slides into *I'm not good enough*.

² The Research Excellence Framework is a joint undertaking of the UK government Department for Employment and Learning and the higher education funding councils of England, Wales, and Scotland. The REF describes itself as 'the new system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions', the first set of results were published in 2014, ranking research 'outputs', 'impacts', and 'environment' on a one to four star ratings system (see REF 2014). The Teaching Excellence Framework, recently introduced by the UK government, 'aims to recognize and reward excellent learning and teaching', and is being implemented in England via the Higher Education Funding Council for England (see TEF 2017).

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This paves the way for the affects of precarity and audit cultures, 'chronic stress, anxiety, exhaustion...' (Gill and Donaghue 2016: 91), to be figured as 'privatized anxieties that are understood to reflect on the value and worth of the individual' (Gill, 2010: 10); 'part of a psychic landscape in which not being successful is misrecognized.... in terms of individual (moral) failure' (Gill, 2010: 12), leading in turn to feelings of guilt, shame, and self-blame, rather than anger at the institutionalized drivers and structural determinants of audit cultures and precarity (Gill, 2014: 22). Audit culture, and the monitoring and measurement therein, has 'been almost perfectly internalized' (Gill, 2010: 7; and see Pereira 2016: 105) by academic workers, who increasingly routinely engage in 'diverse self promotion activities' (Gill, 2014: 15), as part of their workload, including updating multiple profiles and online CVs, tweeting, and blogging, consistent with the 'compulsory individuality' (Cronin, 2000, cited in Gill, 2010: 4) of neoliberalism, whereby individuals are 'required to tell the stories of their own lives'.

Resultantly, the 'hidden injuries of the neoliberal university' (Gill, 2010), which do affect most academic workers, ~~just as they are marked by intersecting injustices, just as they are marked by wider patterns of inequality and injustice that relate to gender, age, class and other social divisions' (Gill and Donaghue, 2016: 91)~~ are nevertheless, individualized. Pereira (2016: 105) has documented 'working harder, sleeping less' as "popular" responses to precarity, audit cultures, and the requirement for entrepreneurial self-promotion, and argues that ~~'approaching these problems through~~ the lens of personal adaptation... reproduces neoliberal modes of governmentality that frame structural problems as matters... that can best be solved by self-regulation ~~and self-improvement'~~ (Pereira, 2016: 106). Likewise, Gill and Donaghue (2016: 92) ~~suggest that one visible response to the problems facing academics is proliferating~~ identify 'technologies of the self' (including wellness initiatives, stress management techniques, resilience training, productivity tips, and time management apps), which 'call forth an enterprising, self managed and 'responsibilised' subject... whilst leaving the power relations and structural contradictions of the neoliberal university untouched'. In these individualized and individualizing responses, the problems of precarity and audit are

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'simultaneously acknowledged... yet silenced and exorcised from formal spaces of the contemporary academy' (Gill and Donaghue, 2016: 91).

The limits of 'individual solutions to a structural problem' (Pereira, 2016: 105) are quite clear, as is the importance of '[resisting] this tendency to individualization ~~of the problem and our responses to it~~' (Pereira, 2016: ~~ibid~~ 106). In this vein Pereira (2016: 107) ~~(ibid)~~ emphasizes ~~'the importance of talking about it... as a site of reproduction, and potentially of disruption'~~. Pereira cautions against underestimating 'the power of academic "small talk"', although easily dismissed and denigrated as both 'self-centered whining... [and] as a potentially risky exposure of one's own weaknesses', ~~since~~ '(Pereira, 2016: 107). Naming these issues, Pereira argues, talking about it... 'can have profoundly transformative effects' (ibid). Gill (2014: 13) similarly calls for 'a critical take that can move us beyond the individualized, toxic, self-blaming discourses that are characteristic of academics in the neoliberal University'.

The relationship between 'talking about it' as a ~~potentially transformative response to~~ tactic to resist the 'hidden injuries' (Gill, 2010) of neoliberal HE governance and the facet of this same governance that 'requires individuals to tell the stories of their own lives' (Gill, 2010: 4) via the proliferation of audits and metrics but also through self-promotional blogs and social media activities, is difficult to untangle. Gill (2014: 24) highlights ambivalent ~~complicity~~ complicity in audit processes and culture; academics are 'critical of yet trapped within the same logic of individual solutions ~~and techniques of the self...~~' (Gill, 2010: 9). The power of 'talking about it', and the ambivalence of being 'within and against' the neoliberal university as a neoliberal institution, are key aspects of understanding 'imposter syndrome' as public feeling, and re-thinking the affective regime of 'imposter syndrome' feeling like an imposter as a resource for action and as a site of agency.

Imposter syndrome as a resource for action and a site of agency

De-pathologizing and de-stigmatizing negative affects is a central aspect of Cvetkovich's (2012: 465) public feelings project. Cvetkovich (~~ibid~~) re-conceptualized aspects of depression, including inertia, despair, apathy, and indifference, as resources for political action, and

therefore as sites of agency. What happens if we think of imposter syndrome, not as an individual problem of faulty self-esteem to be managed or overcome, but instead as a resource for doing feminist teaching and research? I want to suggest that we can think of imposter syndrome like this in relation to a central ambivalence of feeling academic and doing feminist work in the neoliberal university, and that one way in which this ambivalence can be understood is in feminist epistemologies and knowledge claims.

Academic feminist knowledge production encounters the explicit epistemological problem of how to make convincing, valid knowledge claims whilst shifting the definition of 'valid knowledge'. Feminist knowledge production, for instance in social science, is usually critical of dominant epistemological paradigms, at the same time as orientating towards them in some way. This aspect of feminist intellectual labour can be found in methodological text books (see for instance, Ramazanoglu & Holland 2002: 15-16) and the emergence of feminist epistemologies as critical of androcentric 'malestream' biases in the guise of 'objective' social science, indeed of 'objectivity as an excuse for a power relationship' (Stanley and Wise 1993:163), whilst also needing to make a convincing and authoritative case for generating some kind of truth about the gendered realities of the social world.

This tension can be traced through the emergence of the epistemological, ~~methodological~~ stance that women's embodied experiences of the everyday could form the primary basis for sociological knowledge (Smith, 1990: 21-22) and the development of women's standpoint theory (Smith, 1974), feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 1997; Hartstock, 1997; Hekman, 1997; ~~Smith, 1997~~), and Black feminist thought (Hill Collins 1990, and see Bhambra, 2015). Black feminist thought in particular 'addresses on-going epistemological debates concerning the power dynamics that underlie what counts as knowledge' (Hill Collins, 2009: 292), makes it clear that 'feminist knowledge' and 'women's experience' have never been innocent, homogenous, or unmarked by ~~unjust-oppressive~~ (raced, classed) power relations, ~~and fosters a fundamental paradigmatic shift' (Hill Collins 2009: 291) in how we think about these relations, as well as address injustice in a much broader sense.~~

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In the context of sociopolitical structures that position women and racialized minorities as 'unknowing' and 'less credible' (Pereira, 2016: 101), feminist academic work is an activist, political project, a 'critical intervention in the academy', and feminist academics 'seek not just to generate more knowledge but also... to question and transform existing modes, frameworks, and institutions of knowledge production' (Pereira 2012: 283). Pereira (ibid 2012) finds that ~~the critical and transformational~~ these aspects ~~of feminist academic work~~ are often 'bypassed or rejected' by non-feminist academics, and Taylor (2013: 51) shows how ~~feminist 'critical pedagogy'~~ critical pedagogy can be 'read as a failure, ~~mobilised~~ mobilized by the angry, emotional feminist academic, rather than her 'neutral' 'objective' 'rational' un-emotional counterpart'. Feminist scholarship ~~therefore can become~~ be 'marked as not quite "proper" academic knowledge' (Pereira 2016: 101), perceived ~~by non-feminists~~ as incompatible with 'the production of rigorous and credible academic knowledge' (ibid 102), and feminist academics can themselves be dismissed as "imposter[s] in a university dedicated to the neutral, balanced pursuit of disinterested scholarship" (Boxer, 1998: 161, cited in Pereira 2016: 01).

Because of the ambivalent institutional position that feminist academics can occupy, where making feminist knowledge claims requires mediating between epistemological critiques as well as the requirement for some degree of legibility within dominant epistemological paradigms, and to non-feminist colleagues, institutions, and audits 'the paradoxical precondition for dissent is participation' (Hark, 2016: 84). For Hark, 'if critique and regulation are tied up in a fraught but intimate connection, then the point will be to reflect critically upon those circumstances and conditions under which we produce, distribute and consume knowledge' (ibid). This chapter now moves on to explore the affective landscape of being 'within and against' the neoliberal university, as a feminist early career academic, asking how imposter syndrome can be thought of as a resource in this thorny, and often felt-as paralyzing, context. I wrote the following semi-fictionalized auto-ethnography, drawing on my own experience, as one attempt at responding to this question.

Feeling (too) Academic / (not) Academic (enough)...

The story that follows is partial and hesitant, and is ~~This story is~~ an attempt to do, or make, rather than (or as well as) developing a critique and this follows Sparkes (2007: 521) on presenting a 'story that asks for [your] consideration', Inkle (2010) on 'telling takes to speak embodied truth', and Cvetkovich (2012) on academic work as creative practice, and her suggestion that 'writing personal narrative encourages the hunches, intuitions, and feelings that intellectual analysis can restrict' (2012: 80-81). I've tried to focus on difficult and ambivalent feelings, blockages and inertia, but at the level of the mundane, everyday banal emotional turbulence that for me characterizes a significant portion of the affective landscape of doing (early career) feminist academic work. ~~The story that follows is partial and hesitant, and leads into re-thinking imposterism as a resource for (feminist) action and site of (feminist) agency in the neo-liberal academy.~~

I'm returning to my desk, the scene of what feels like my first 'proper' academic job - I've got this desk, a salary, a staff card, an institutional affiliation, ~~for a percentage of FTE, and~~ for the duration of a fractional six-month contract. I've just finished a lecture, about 'collaborative' research methods, followed by a seminar, in which students' discussion kept coming back to the need for 'objective', and 'unbiased' data. I can't help but feel as though I let the students down, the lecture wasn't good enough at framing questions of power in research relationships, or at making feminist arguments about activist research practice as accessible as they could have been. I slump down the corridors, and try not to feel too disheartened, reminding myself of how many students wrote excellent essays on feminist methodology last semester.

My mind wanders through years of essays marked. This is the first time that 'lecturer' is my job title, but I've been lecturing – and working as a seminar tutor – for about six years, mostly on zero hours and very temporary contracts. One memory stands out, from a few years ago, working as a tutor on another research methods course at another university, when students were tasked with writing reflexive essays on their group research projects. One student wrote a detailed, nuanced, and original account of the gendered and racialized power dynamics of

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their group project. The essay was excellent, demonstrating exactly the kind of analytical understanding of the logics of research practice that the module asked for, and developing a sophisticated critique of how 'race' and gender inflected the group's research design. I graded this essay as a 95, which after some back and forth (moderators weren't sure if the essay met the full requirements of the assessment, and wondered if it was 'too personal', and 'not academic enough', and should be graded much lower) was eventually moderated down to 90. This simultaneously feels like nothing to do with me (it was the student who wrote a brilliant essay after all!) and like a victory of sorts.

Stuck in the crush of students pouring out of classrooms, I dig my phone out and start thumbing through work emails; a reminder of an upcoming deadline for a journal manuscript review (I've been putting it off because I *still* feel uncomfortable with and under qualified for the gatekeeping aspects of peer review); weekly notifications of sociology job vacancies (I'll browse through them tonight); weekly notifications of non-academic job vacancies (I'll look briefly at them and feel unqualified later tonight); and a student, one of my first year personal tutees needs to arrange a meeting, she failed an essay and thinks that perhaps university isn't for her after all, she's 'just not cut out for it'. I need to find a way to help her re-frame this 'failure', as a hurdle that can be overcome, rather than an irrevocable judgment of her abilities. I would feel insincere telling her that the university was 'for her', the university clearly isn't 'for' working class mature students with ~~serious-extensive~~ caring responsibilities. I'll probably just end up referring her to a retention programme and helping her with Harvard-style referencing, with 'constructing a logical paragraph and essay structure'; framing the problem *again* in terms of skills she needs to learn, of a deficit on her part.

Another email jumps out, an article I revised and re-submitted about three months ago, to a mainstream sociology journal, has been accepted – after many revisions – finally accepted. I squint at my phone, shoulders tense, head down, forehead frowning. The screen is small, the text is tiny, my eyes tired from late nights and early mornings, brain caffeine addled. Doubt sets in *I must be reading it wrong, this is just wishful thinking*. At first glance the email seems too good to be true. Back at my desk, I turn on my computer and check, the article has indeed been accepted, ~~will be included in the journal~~.

A flush of ~~excitement, achievement, and~~ validation; perhaps it was only a matter of time and persistence, just like everyone always says. And relief, that's one less thing to worry about, I grab a sharpie and cross this item from the ever-long to-do list tacked on the wall. I almost feel like celebrating, except I have to work on that funding bid tonight, its due for internal review by the end of the week. I've never worked on a bid this big before, and I don't want to mess it up. ~~And anyway, should I even be celebrating this? Publication probably shouldn't be a big deal any more; it's not remarkable like during the PhD, it's just another part of the job.~~

Jubilation gives way to mundane concerns, I'll have to update my CV... Surely this will help build the case for my contract to be extended, renewed, perhaps even made permanent... I remember the well-meaning advice from an ex-colleague when I got this position; 'Well, think of your first three months as an extended job interview', maybe I'm not doing too badly in this 12 week long interview... Maybe I am successfully 'managing my academic self in the neoliberal university' (Holmwood, 2015). Maybe I am really REF-ready after all... I'll have to double check this article is REF-able – and if the university even plans to make a sociology submission... Should I tweet about this? How does open access even really work? I force myself to login to Twitter, swallow down the discomfort of self-promotion, ~~and~~ add an entry to my online profile ~~and list of publications, email the univerty's~~ university's open access repository.

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Printing a pile of module evaluation forms for students to fill in, I bump into a colleague and whisper the news about the article's acceptance, and get a hug in return. A sense of achievement – and generous congratulations from colleagues - feel authentic. But there's something else too. Back at my desk, replying to as many emails as I can and shoving a sandwich into my mouth as fast as I can before the next class, the anxious monologue ~~really~~ kicks in.

Oh shit. Now this is going to be published there is a chance that people will actually read it. Well, maybe read the abstract at least. Real sociologists are going to read my work and realize just how inept it really is. How did this article get through peer review? The reviewers must

have been too rushed, or the journal must be so desperate for articles that they've lowered their standards enough to let my article, to let me, slip in. There is no way that it could have been accepted on merit alone. Now the real scrutiny is going to start, and the core of my inadequacy – not really an academic, not really a sociologist - will be exposed.

I try and derail this train of thought. This is classic imposter syndrome, groundless, everyone has these feelings. Remember what your supervisor always said, just fake it 'til you make it. Anyway, time for teaching.

Later that evening, I'm sat on the long rush-hour bus home. The bus is crowded but I have a seat, and a copy of the 'impact strategy' for the bid I'm working on. I lean my head against the damp window and start editing with a blunt pencil. As the bus lurches from stop to stop again I wonder, how did that manuscript ever get accepted? The reviewers' comments ~~recommended~~ ~~required~~ ~~even~~ ~~required~~ that the paper needed to 'demonstrate a more substantive contribution to the discipline'. The reviewers didn't ask that I 'take the feminism out', but 'working up' the sociological relevance did come at some expense to the feminist analysis. I think of all the times I've edited my CV, and how 'feminist ~~sociology~~-~~methodology~~' and 'gender & queer theory' moves up and down the list of research interests depending on the role and institution to which I'm applying.

I close my eyes and imagine my feminist academic heroes, cringing as I do. I bet they never compromised their politics for publications. I try and tell myself that I didn't change the content, just the 'framing', this rings hollow. I wrote that paper in part because I needed a publication. The rationale was to get something in a ~~highly~~ ~~reasonably~~ ranked journal before the end of my contract, in time for the next round of job applications. I'm scared that I'm not employable unless I'm REF-able. Whatever that even means.

Home at last, I dump the impact statement on the kitchen table, and get to work editing. I update my 'list of selected publications' ~~for the bid~~, although there's nothing selective about this list, I'm including everything I've ever remotely published, including a book review and working paper ~~from my undergraduate dissertation~~. I realize the list now just about fills a whole page, even without relying on rather generous line spacing like usual. Maybe this was

the point of working so hard to get that article accepted, so that I could make a longer list. No wonder I'm convinced the paper isn't good enough, no wonder I don't feel like a 'real' academic, if all I was doing was playing the game, following the rules in order to get the article accepted, an instrumental exercise in pursuit of a microscopic increase in the chance of getting funding, getting a job. Absentmindedly copying and pasting my employment history onto the online form, I think about how a lot of funding bodies require that the applicant be on a contract that will last the duration of the proposed research project, and I'm not on a contract like that. No wonder I feel like I don't belong, with only a temporary and partial status.

I don't think that a longer list of publications makes me a better candidate. It might mean that a selection committee pause slightly longer over my application instead of discarding it in the first round, but other than that? I don't think that publication metrics indicate the value of research, or the value of me as a candidate. I don't believe in the stamps of legitimacy, or eligibility indicators, or person specification criteria, that I am pursuing. Nevertheless, I make a note to actually look up the official difference between a 'three star' and a 'four star' publication in the REF, and to actually recalculate my citation index ranking. I don't really know how to assess the value of my own work in a way that doesn't orientate to these criteria. If you're not convinced by, and are critical of, prevailing -the accepted- measures of 'good' work, how do you know if your work is any good? Okay, so focus. If I'm successful at this bid then *maybe* I'll get to do research and publish papers that aren't exercises in performing my own entitlement to the profession?

It's hard to concentrate. Trying to gather lessons learnt from three years of post-doc application forms and interviews. Things are getting better I think. I get more interviews now. I know successful academics that I admire and trust, and they seem to want to work with me. I benefit in innumerable – often invisible ways – from networks of support, friends, family, colleagues, and from the tireless (emotional) labour of (feminist) mentors. From my whiteness. My middle-class South of England accent. I went to an elite university. My face fits. Now I feel guilty, other people have it much worse, what's wrong with me. I'm lucky to

have work, I just need to hang in there, push it just a little bit further, stability and security must be just around the corner.

Time to take a break for some dinner, and a monthly Skype with friends from the PhD. These friendships overlap with a feminist reading group we started during that time. Sorting out the inevitable sound/video glitches that characterize the start of every call, I think about how three out of the seven of us work in universities now. Others work in government, development, and advocacy alongside maintaining academic collaborations. Last time we spoke about feeling a sense of alienation in academia; hardly any of us, including those who work in universities, felt that we belonged there. ~~This evening we~~ reminisce about a feminist conference we organized together, years ago ~~now~~. I remember a comment from ~~an ex-~~colleague ~~, in the lift,~~ shortly after the conference. *Did you enjoy your basket weaving last week?* I hadn't understood what he meant at first, not until I told the others did I realize it was disparaging. Art installations, film, and zine-making had been part of the conference. After the conference the school office emailed our reading group, asking if we wanted to help put up Christmas decorations in the building foyer. We said no and laughed about it, but wondered why we had been approached, were any other reading and research groups asked the same, and what was it about us that gave the impression we were available for arranging tinsel and hanging baubles from the strip-lit ceiling.

Discussion

In writing this chapter I considered presenting the above story without discussion, asking instead 'simply... for your consideration' (Sparkes, 2007: 521). In the writing of it however, there seemed to be a couple of points worth making. Firstly, and to reiterate, I think 'imposter syndrome' appears as much more of a *public* feeling when we think about it in relation to not only how feminist epistemologies (often but not always) seek to challenge conventional ways of knowing, but also how feminist academics (often but not always) seek to avoid or interrupt the reproduction of neoliberal governance in the details of their academic labour, administration, and teaching, and research practice. Both these projects are compromised, by 'our' complicity and implication in neoliberal HEIs, by the need for recognition and

legibility within (some of the) dominant definitions of what 'proper knowledge' and 'proper work' look like, and by misrecognition by colleagues, students, and academic institutions.

I wonder if this complicity and implication is an important aspect of 'imposter syndrome' ~~as a, and might be one starting point for re-thinking feelings of imposterism as resources for action and potential sites of agency resource for~~ playing the game of neoliberal academic labour whilst trying to change the rules. I think this speaks to what Sedgwick has called 'the middle ranges of agency' (2003: 13) between polarized dichotomies of voluntarism and determinism. I've previously tried to show how the imperative to *be taken seriously* in research and teaching work 'is precisely what compels people to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production' (Halberstam, 2011: 6), and that a willingness to not be taken seriously can be a resource for social change in institutions (Breeze, 2015). The Res-Sisters collective of early career feminist sociologists state, 'we are part of the game, but we don't want to play by the rules' (2016a, and see 2016b). Sparkes describes a sense of complicity and ~~being 'tainted by business management speak' of~~ having 'played a game that he did not believe in' (2007: 528). High profile social theorists have examined similar dynamics – and used a similar metaphor – for example in capitalist labour processes (Burawoy, 1979), ~~and in relation to scientific and academic truth claims (Graeber, 2013),~~ arguing that:

'The very activity of playing a game generates consent with respect to its rules... one cannot both play the game and at the same time question the rules' (Burawoy, 1979: 81)

'Once a game is established however, it can assume a dynamics of its own... there is no guarantee that it will continue to reproduce the conditions of its existence... it is possible that playing the game will tend to undermine the rules that define it' (Burawoy, 1979: 86)

Part of the 'game' of neo-liberal academic work is being called to perform (in job applications, interviews, funding bids, lectures, staff meetings, student supervision meeting, conference presentations...) high levels of confidence, competence, and even entitlement that are not necessarily or always *felt* in a singular, straightforward, or unequivocal way. I wonder if academics often perform professional confidence to a degree that is not necessarily

convincing to the self that is doing the performance.

Individualist myths of meritocracy rely on the contention that those in positions of *power, authority, and responsibility* have *earned* it somehow, that their position is an authentic reflection of their individual skills, and hard work. I wonder if this ideological linking of professional status to individual talents is conducive to feminist academic imposter syndrome, since it is well known that hierarchical status differences are very much not simply or exclusively 'earned' but rather distributed according to particular intersections of social inequality and privilege. Alternative mechanisms for distributing positions of responsibility – for instance via community accountability – may offer an opportunity to intervene in 'imposter syndrome'. Collective and community accountability – in the place of managerialist cultures and technologies of audit – would also pose a substantive challenge to contemporary forms of HE governance. The Res-sisters (2016a, 2016b) emphasize collectivity and solidarity as strategies for disrupting neoliberalism in and beyond the university. As Pereira argues feminist projects of 'articulating activism and academic work... [are] extremely difficult... but we must reject conceptualizing that difficulty as an individual challenge, and reframe it as a structural problem requiring – urgently – collective responses' (2016: 101).

As the rationale for this collection makes clear, connecting private-public sentiments is a substantive element of feminist knowledge production, and inhabiting the neoliberal university involves complex feminist feelings of being *in and out* of place. I would emphasize that the ambivalence of simultaneously inhabiting – and seeking legitimacy and recognition within – the neoliberal university whilst trying to resist and rework these forms of educational governance and practice, *and* shift the definitions of 'legitimate' knowledge and 'good' teaching and research, is one (potentially significant) source of feelings of imposterism for feminist academics. If your feminism means that you are critical and skeptical of established measures of the value of academic work and markers of success, and if your feminism means that you do not necessarily or only aim to succeed within established definitions of what an academic career looks like, feeling like an imposter might be no bad thing.

If this is the case, then embracing ‘imposter syndrome’ might offer one avenue for negotiating the ambivalence of being ‘within and against’, of trying to play the game *and* change the rules of the neoliberal university, and serve as a location of collective feminist action in higher education. In this spirit, I began to make a list of what ‘excellent’ feminist research, and ‘excellent’ feminist teaching might look like; criteria for recognizing feminist academic ‘success’. I stopped short however, because I couldn’t quite work out a way to do this without making another measuring stick to beat and berate with, another list of aspirations that feel ~~– and often are –~~ impossible to live up to. I want to suggest instead then, that one alternative (and partial, incomplete, problematic) feminist version of ‘academic success’ might look like failing to meet (some of the) established – and patriarchal, colonial, classed – definitions of academic excellence. Failing (inevitably) to live up to standards that are impossible to meet (Pereira, 2017a), and doing so strategically, collectively, and publically, ~~to live up to performative standards of individual ‘excellence’~~, offers one way of critiquing, and rejecting, institutional conditions of competitive audit cultures and compulsory self-promotion. Public feminist debate on how good, ‘successful’ academic work is not necessarily or entirely defined by metrics of impact factor, citation indices, four star publications, even by the award of funding or a permanent contract, draws attention to the contingency, specificity, and political character of these ‘indicators’. I think these kinds of deliberate failures – especially if collective – might also expose how feeling like a (feminist) imposter is in part generated by being measured according to criteria that your politics and epistemology may well (although not necessarily) critique and negate.

Conclusion

Thinking through ‘imposter syndrome’ as a public feeling shows how a felt-as inauthentic, fraudulent, and inadequate relationship to established measures of ‘success’ and indicators of belonging can be refigured as a critique of these standards, rather than as a deficiency of the self. As this collection set out to explore, feminist academic praxis can hold out the promise of fighting – and perhaps feeling from – the neoliberal university. In this chapter I’ve tried to develop my interest in the spaces in-between fighting and fleeing, and how the

complicity and implication of working in UK HEIs involves reproducing, as well as unsettling, the neoliberal university. Feeling academic *and* feminist in neoliberal universities can be understood not only as a flight or a fight, and not exactly as a failure either; but rather the ambivalence of being complicit can manifest as a sort of freeze – a sensation of paralyzing stuck-ness – a feeling of not knowing how to inhabit academia, or how to do ‘good’ work if you’re critical of established criteria for recognizing ‘excellence’. Drawing again on Cvetkovch (2012: 202), the ‘willingness to encounter... lack of knowledge... [and] being stuck can be an invitation to that which we don’t yet know’ here ‘not knowing’ can be a necessarily precondition to finding out, and to elucidating ~~elucidate~~ the connections and overlaps between (failing to) fitting in and ~~(fighting)~~ the neoliberal university to change neoliberal higher education.

The suggestion of deliberately failing to meet the performative, disciplinary, and impossible standards of the neoliberal university requires a critical consideration of who can afford to ‘fail’ in this way, and how. Perhaps such strategies will prove slightly less risky for feminist academics on permanent contracts, and for those at ‘elite’ institutions. Conversely, feminist academics on precarious and casualized contracts, and those at teaching-focused or post-1992 institutions might (to a limited extent) be able to ‘fly under the radar’ of audits and surveillance. White and middle class feminist academics’ failures are very likely less risky to their own status and career progression, as the work of being a ‘challenging presence’ (Murray 2017 – this volume) is unfairly and disproportionately carried by Black feminists and racialized minorities. Whose – and which – ‘failures’ threaten their job and financial security, and whose can be paradoxically recaptured to evidence reward-able critical reflexivity? These caveats to a naïve call to simply ‘fail better’ (Beckett, 1983), and the critical question of *whose* failures are most commonly and powerfully inscribed as individual inadequacy and deficiency of the self, underscore the importance of *collective* feminist organizing around failure across intersectional solidarities.

Finally then, I want to finish this chapter with a brief reflection on how – of course – I felt like an imposter writing it. Even this exercise in ‘talking about it’, and giving an account of -sharing what feel like quite intimate ~~thoughts and inner monologues~~ feelings, is plagued by the

conviction of inauthenticity and fraudulence. *I've got a job, I've published a book, I've won a prize, no one will ever believe that I feel like such an imposter.* Given such an ad infinitum layering of 'imposter syndrome', responses recommending 'getting over it' start to look very appealing! I think there's more here though, about how being able to admit and talk about feelings of imposterism indicates a **substantial** degree of privilege, and can be mobilized as a performance of modesty, humility and knowing self-depreciation. When I started writing this chapter I was on a six-month, part time contract, by the time it is published I'll be in a five year, research-focused, full time ~~'tenure track' equivalent~~ post. My position in relation to the neoliberal university is changing, ~~has changed~~, and it is time to think more about what to do with this, how to use it.

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