# On the Joys of Administration: Or Race, Failure and the Neoliberal Academy

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In Australian academia — where diversity hiring and affirmative action has not (yet) been institutionalized — the visibility of ‘race’ in the academy has been all but completely erased, transmuted onto the student body as a ‘problem’ of international students. While student diversity is hypervisible in marketing brochures — reflecting a rapidly changing student population — academic culture has been much slower to change. For more than six years since my hire in 2010, I was the only non-white, full-time female academic in my school.[[1]](#footnote-1) I have been told by a colleague that I am a ‘triple threat’ — Asian, female, and queer — as though I have surely sung, danced, and acted my way into a reasonably successful mid-career.

This opening paragraph may read like a complaint, and it both is — in Sara Ahmed’s terms[[2]](#footnote-2) — and isn’t. It is also a meditation on academic performance and ‘productivity’ in mid-career. In the last several years I have taken on more administrative roles in the university — from directing research centres and the school’s postgraduate program to more mundane forms of administration: replying to ever growing mountains of email, editing other people’s work, and filling in endless bureaucratic forms.

I have been reflecting upon the consequences of this ‘retreat’ into administration in terms of the roles available for senior women in the neoliberal university. The thing is, I am *great* at administration: I have an eye for detail and I am organized and efficient with my time. Administration, I find, is soothing — a way of clearing out junk. It provides a semblance of structure and productivity when time for research is scarce. Ann Cvetkovich writes:

Academics too often struggle with long-term projects such as dissertations and books while squeezed on the one hand by an intensely competitive job market and meritocratic promotion and reward system and driven on the other by a commitment to social justice that often leaves us feeling like we’re never doing enough to make a difference.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Hence the joy of administration, an immediate sense of accomplishment *that meets the needs of others*. However, the ‘joy of administration’ — as I call it — also belies a loss of confidence, particularly in my direction as a researcher and educator in mid-career. I don’t want to *lean in*, I want to disappear into emails, into administration, into details. A question I often ask myself is: is administrative work unproductive, or worse: counterproductive to teaching and research? Or is it a necessary part of both? The answer probably lies somewhere in between: if one is buried in administration, it becomes impossible to do much else, but the academy cannot function without the distribution of administrative tasks among academics.

As to who is doing the bulk of this work, in *Counterproductive*,Melissa Gregg writes that much of the history of productivity is gendered: ‘Pioneering productivity studies focused on the repetitive manual labor of young, often migrant workers, many of whom were poor women. Assumptions typical of the era established class, gender, and ethnic biases that continue in management theory and practice today’.[[4]](#footnote-4) As with other organizations and institutions, universities are increasingly obsessed with measuring productivity, marked by a shift from a focus on numerical indicators (citations), to a discourse of ‘engagement and impact’. In the arts and humanities, where I work, these indicators are also complemented by ‘altmetrics’ (alternative metrics, or non-traditional bibliometrics), which are captured by a variety of sources, most notably by the eponymous website *Altmetrics*.[[5]](#footnote-5) *Altmetrics* promises to ‘discover the attention surrounding your research’ and present this in a ‘single visually engaging and informative view of the online activity surrounding your scholarly content’, represented in the form of a rainbow ‘donut’ (this food-based imagery and terminology is the company’s). This donut data does not offer insight into the conditions that enable or hinder productivity in the workplace, including institutional structures of gender and race. Yet within the existing neoliberal framework, it is a form of failure to not be motivated by a drive towards productivity. And as an Asian female academic, failure is not really an option.

Eleanor Ty’s book *AsianFail: Narratives of Disenchantment and the Model Minority*, offers a humorous and critical commentary on the stereotypes linking Asians to productivity and success. She discusses the #AsianFail and #failasian hashtags on Tumblr, Instagram, and Twitter, which feature pictures and anecdotes of Asians who ‘fail’ at doing things Asians are meant to be good at, like maths, playing the violin, and using chopsticks.[[6]](#footnote-6) As an Asian who has ‘failed’ at many (of these) things, most spectacularly at keeping a same-sex marriage alive, I have returned to queer theory, to find solace in how negative affects can also create new forms of sociality and affiliation. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam points out that ‘success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation’.[[7]](#footnote-7) Halberstam suggests looking again at failure, which ‘allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behaviour’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Is being ‘good’ at administration a form of failure in the academy for female researchers, particularly given the gendered history of female productivity? Or, as Gregg[[9]](#footnote-9) questions, is productivity even the right measure for work at all?

As a senior female administrator, a significant part of my role involves emotional labour and the management of ‘emotion work’. As Arlie Russell Hochschild[[10]](#footnote-10) has famously argued, the management of emotional labour falls predominantly to women. In the context of the academy, which has become increasingly corporatized, we are told to work in the service of our ‘clients’ (formerly known as ‘students’). The corporate agenda permeates all levels of teaching, from undergraduate to postgraduate, and the voices that publicly rally against the facelessness of the current system are few. Raewyn Connell has offered an alternative vision of higher education in her book *The Good University*, and in her earlier writings on postgraduate supervision as the long-term negotiation of a human relationship, with all its ups and downs, rather than an activity that follows a prescriptive formula.[[11]](#footnote-11) We do need to keep some of our more difficult feelings in check in this relationship, but this does not mean subscribing to a lifetime of bondage in what Angela McRobbie refers to as ‘the smile economy in the teaching machine’.[[12]](#footnote-12)

McRobbie writes:

The smile economy in the classroom translates into a kind of measured self-management style of pedagogy, one which is constantly alert to the need for good scores in the end of term evaluations, which in turn are based on almost day-to-day performance factors. […] [The] seeming need for wall-to-wall cheerfulness, a happy smile [is] more likely to be expected from women than from their male counterparts for whom an ‘Eeyore’ or melancholic stance in the seminar room could be construed as a mark of erudition. So the requirements of heterosexual femininity were also quietly encoded within the academic version of ‘customer care’.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The containment of less ‘seemly’ emotions — anger, frustration, disgust — is bound up in a culture of self-regulation that is distinctly gendered female within the neoliberal discourse. Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad detail the growing cult(ure) of confidence that permeates all aspects of women’s work and social life. The suggestion is that ‘both the causes and solutions of confidence culture lie in women — individually, as opposed to collectively’ yet is inclusive of every woman regardless of race, class, sexuality, or age.[[14]](#footnote-14) The implication is that environmental and structural factors need not change but women themselves must aspire towards greater confidence and success — not by accepting failure but by ‘thinking positively.’[[15]](#footnote-15)

Don’t get me wrong, I am grateful for the opportunities that my university has afforded me in developing my leadership skills. However, the rhetoric of leadership ‘training’ needs to change. I have been invited to participate in a series of leadership workshops with titles including: the Strategic Leader, Crafting Your Leadership Presence, Master Storytelling, Courageous Conversations, and Strategic Resilience. That the words ‘strategy’ and ‘mastery’ appear in several of these titles is not without significance. The word ‘strategy’ has roots in military theory (from the Greek *stratēgos*, *stratos* ‘army’ + *agein* ‘to lead’).

Against whom am I leading an army as I rise in the ranks of academia? The blurb for the Strategic Resilience workshop states ‘Building your strategic resilience is not just about capably responding to a crisis or rebounding from a setback. It’s about cultivating your ability to respond and adapt to ongoing change.’ Sadly, *ongoing* change is a reality in most higher education institutions, and the expectation of individual cultivation of adaptive responses (including admonishments against overly ‘emotional’ responses) is arguably gendered. As Gill and Akane Kanai note, ‘women must become ever more adept at fielding new affective obligations’[[16]](#footnote-16) as corporate structures continue to shift under our feet.

I am of course reminded of Michel de Certeau’s famed distinction between strategies and tactics involved in the resistance to power. Strategies are a function of place, involving institutions and structures of power.[[17]](#footnote-17) By contrast, ‘a *tactic* is a calculation determined by the absence of a proper locus […] The space of the tactic is the space of the other’.[[18]](#footnote-18) As Ian Buchanan notes:

the essential difference between the two is the way they relate to the variables that everyday life inevitably throws at us all. Strategy works to limit the sheer number of variables affecting us by creating some kind of protected zone, a place in which the environment can be rendered predictable if not properly tame. […] Tactics, by contrast, is the approach one takes to everyday life when one is unable to take measures against its variables.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Strategic resilience, then, seems to imply that one should be selective about the kinds of challenges one will make against the university, to be ‘battle ready’ by smiling, adapting, and being conciliatory towards a higher leadership. Strategic resilience advocates self-monitoring over resistance, personal adaptation over political or structural change.[[20]](#footnote-20) With so few women (of colour) in leadership positions, the imperative to play the game becomes even higher. Perhaps then it is useful to view failure as a call to collective action; a tactic that has its place in the many ways we negotiate academic work and practice resilience.

The term ‘academic feminism’ has been used to describe the ‘historical project of challenging the university by institutionalizing new knowledge formations’.[[21]](#footnote-21) Yet as Robyn Wiegman notes, ‘to conjoin academic to feminism today is almost always a distinct insult, an accusation that draws its blood precisely because politics and academics have come to be so firmly opposed’.[[22]](#footnote-22) Academic feminists such as Judith Butler have been criticized for ‘luxuriating in theoretical pleasure and thereby abandoning practical politics’.[[23]](#footnote-23) Wiegman analyses the failure of academic feminism and notes that the ‘problem’ for academic feminism is that it has institutional power.[[24]](#footnote-24) She continues:

Failure, it seems to me, is the unavoidable consequence of imagining political transformation, especially in the context of the differentials that collate around investments in institutions, social practices, and various kinds of critical agencies and projects.[[25]](#footnote-25)

I, too, embrace the feminist use of the idiom of failure in the context of academia, failure in a more tactical sense. As ‘Women’s Studies’ and ‘Gender Studies’ programs have been decimated across Australian higher education institutions, only to be tentatively re-launched with the resurgent success of academic feminism, the lessons of various forms of institutional ‘failure’ are surely that we must find new ways to be in the academy, new forms of *emoting* (of smiling and meaning it, and being emotional (if we want)). The academy may be a strategic institution but with real feminist struggles that need to be tackled through theory *and* practice.

It is important to consider (and collate) personal stories of success and failure in the neoliberal academy (however we measure these) and the institutional struggles women have faced to arrive (or end up) in these positions, and to make these stories more visible. This is a form of administration, but one that I feel is worthwhile. Sara Ahmed refers to the ‘snap’, which can be sudden, or ‘the gradual sapping of energy when you have to struggle to exist in a world that negates your existence.’[[26]](#footnote-26) While I have certainly considered resigning in feminist protest — like Sara Ahmed and Marina Warner so boldly did[[27]](#footnote-27) — I have more recently begun thinking about alternatives, of how to harness the power of exhausted women, women who fail, who have snapped, who are fragile, who are shattered.

In Australia, where ‘institutional diversity’ barely goes beyond a numbers game — women stacked up against men in graphs and tables and in committee meetings — it is important to remain mindful of the hidden nature of racism, of the lack of attention paid to sexuality, and to call for specific and localized forms of feminist intervention where necessary, without always defaulting to a generalized ‘intersectionalist’ approach that may not be able to cover it all. I am often asked by international students if I am Chinese. They seek a particular, embodied form of connection through a shared ethnicity. I have been reflecting on my role in how to make a difference through my various forms of difference.

Institutionalizing the ‘work’ of diversity may not be the path for Australia, but it is important that we start by looking at the messy, ugly affects that arise from unacknowledged forms of diversity work in the academy. Alison Jaggar writes that ‘emotions play a vital role in developing knowledge’.[[28]](#footnote-28) I would like us to think about this statement broadly, as a way of harnessing sensitive emotions to our collective academic pursuits, and in the service of the often neglected yet important task of administering tactical and localized change. Might we think of failure as a tactic of new knowledge formation, embodying emotional resilience, and providing opportunities for us to imagine new ways of ‘doing’ the university differently outside of the institutionalized mandate to continually succeed and be productive?

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2. Sara Ahmed, ‘Complaint as Diversity Work’, *Feminist Killjoys*, 10 November 2017, https://feministkilljoys.com/2017/11/10/complaint-as-diversity-work/; Sarah Ahmed, ‘Snap!’, *Feminist Killjoys*, 21 May 2017, https://feministkilljoys.com/2017/05/21/snap/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Anne Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, Durham and New York: Duke University Press, 2012, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Melissa Gregg, *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy,* Durham and New York: Duke University Press, 2018, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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8. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gregg, *Counterproductive,* 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
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13. McRobbie, ‘The Smile Economy’, n.p. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad, ‘Confidence culture and the remaking of feminism’, in *New Formations* 91 (2017): 17-34, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
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17. Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, 35-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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23. Wiegman, ‘Feminism, Institutionalism, and the Idiom of Failure’, 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Wiegman, ‘Feminism, Institutionalism, and the Idiom of Failure’, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
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26. Sara Ahmed, ‘Complaint as Diversity Work’. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
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