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Emma Bell and Amanda Sinclair

*Organization* 2014 21: 268

DOI: 10.1177/1350508413493084

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# Reclaiming eroticism in the academy

Organization  
2014, Vol. 21(2) 268–280  
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DOI: 10.1177/1350508413493084  
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**Emma Bell**  
Keele University, UK

**Amanda Sinclair**  
University of Melbourne, Australia

## Abstract

In this article we address the question ‘what are we to do with ourselves?’ by arguing for the reclamation of the erotic in higher education. By defining the erotic in a way which encompasses the pursuit of pleasure and love, we seek to re-differentiate the collapsed categories of sex and eros. Universities have always been environments where a love of learning and pleasure in pedagogy is possible. Yet a range of cultural and societal factors have rendered academic life on the one hand disembodied, and on the other, commodified and sexualized, especially for women. Our suggestion is that these effects strip out the opportunities to love and enjoy academic life. We therefore pursue the possibility of reclaiming eroticism and the erotic in ways which refuse commodified sexualized norms. Drawing on the work of feminist theorists, we make three proposals for reclaiming eros in the academy: by exploring the relationship between bodies and knowledge; recognizing love in learning and wisdom; and cultivating the pleasure and nurturance that arise in collegial and pedagogic relations. Our view is that exploring broader notions of eros and eroticism in the university will invite a more meaningful understanding of academic work as embodied practice, involving pleasure and love.

## Keywords

Academic work, embodiment, eroticism, gender, sexuality, university

It is over 20 years since researchers began to explore the role of gendered bodily performances and sexualities in organizational life. Early observers like Hochschild (1983), Hearn et al. (1989) and Pringle (1989) showed workplaces to be territories where relationships of sexual domination and submission are normalized. They also demonstrated that these

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## Corresponding author:

Emma Bell, Keele Management School, Keele University, Staffordshire ST5 5BG, UK.  
Email: e.bell@keele.ac.uk

dynamics applied in male workplaces where men at the top hold power via demonstrations of masculine performance and heterosexual conquest (Cockburn, 1991; Collinson, 1992; Collinson and Collinson, 1989). Particularly, although not exclusively for women, organizational life was characterized by an implicit requirement to enact eroticized subjectivities (Brewis and Grey, 1994).

Despite this pioneering work, and with some exceptions, academics have generally been reticent to explore sexualities and eroticism in their own organizational domain. We are of the view that our credibility as analysts of these issues in other contexts relies on being able to recognize and challenge them in organizations in which we are embedded. In this article we therefore seek to redress this neglect. Our interest is two-fold. First, we seek to challenge the traditional binary that sees academia as a life of the mind based on suppression of bodies, and to map the consequences of this bodily exclusion, especially on academic women. Second, we suggest that focusing on the role of eroticism in the contemporary university may be crucial to rediscovering a more meaningful understanding of academic work as embodied practice.

Our starting point is in resuscitating a more nuanced understanding of eros. The word eroticism derives from eros, meaning *love*; which includes imaginative love, the prospect of love and a love of wisdom as well as sexual passion. While eroticism might be a feeling between people, a sense of anticipation, implied attraction or pleasure, it is related first and foremost to love, rather than sex or calculations of sexual appeal. We argue that the idea of eros as sensuality, connection and love has been lost within the dominance of a capitalized market discourse that defines eroticism as sex, and erotic as sexy.

Feminist and critical writers and artists have a long history of retrieving notions of the erotic from narrow meanings (Jaggard and Bordo, 1989). For example, O'Neill shows how the erotic may be encountered in music and art, reminding oneself of one's capacity for pleasure and sensuousness (O'Neill, 1989). Poet Audre Lorde argued and enacted in her work and life, that eroticism was a source of knowledge and empowerment, with the capacity to energize women and inspire others (1989). For Lorde, the erotic is manifest when 'sharing deeply any pursuit with another person'; or experiencing a 'fearless' and embodied capacity for joy; or the deep feeling that may be present when writing or exploring an idea, as much as (or perhaps more than in many) sexual relations. For us also, the erotic includes embodied feelings of pleasure, delight and sensuousness. Examples from academic life are the charge from interacting with an engaged class; the thrill of moments of insight in listening to others or writing; the intimacy of collaborative relationships or deeply nurturing supervision.

In the fields of organization and management studies, the proposal to put the erotic back into analyses of institutions and relationships emerged from these branches of feminist and critical thinking as a response to de-humanized bureaucratization. Yet as Brewis and Grey (1994) warn, re-eroticization can easily mask itself as emancipatory while being used to advance a phallogocentric, sexually manipulative agenda. The desire, perhaps especially among women, to have their erotic lives recognized, gets translated into another means of reducing women to their sexual value. Brewis and Grey's analysis is also useful in differentiating eroticism from sex. They argue that in re-eroticization there is a 'focusing [of] attention away from genital activity... [expanding] not only the possible range of erotic acts but also the intensity and length of erotic play' (1994: 72). They further point to the importance of *jouissance*, understood by French theorists such as Baudrillard (1990) and Cixous (2008) as a state of blissful freedom and pleasure that arises when sexual activity is no longer centred on the genitals. Eroticism is not sexuality according to this view – far from it. Instead it emphasizes 'potential, playfulness, unpredictability and danger', and involves a rejection of conventions

and 'sexual fixity' (1994: 73). Bataille also takes pains to distinguish eroticism from sexuality: 'an immediate aspect of inner experience as contrasted with animal sexuality' (1962: 29). He identifies three forms of eroticism: physical, emotional and religious or sacred where the latter involves connecting with 'a full and limitless being' (1962: 21). He further suggests eroticism reflects a yearning for lost continuity and connection to the truth of love.

However, popular commentators often refer to eroticism interchangeably with, or as a form of, sexuality (Hakim, 2010a, 2011). Perhaps this is not surprising. As 'erotic' gets twinned to 'capital' in discourse, a process of commodification and instrumentalization inevitably unfolds. Discourses of sexuality and gendered sexualization thus become ubiquitous. Alternative meanings and experiences of eros in relationships are subsumed by the cannibalizing canon of sexualization. As we will argue in this article, this manoeuvre of using perceived sexiness as a marker for the erotic has profound consequences for women. Women are far more likely than men to have their value linked to their *perceived* sexual attractiveness and availability, judged by those around them (Lewis and Simpson, 2010). Successful identities get tied up with performing recognized scripts of sexuality. Eroticism becomes knowable and comprehensible only via a gender regime in which women are already objects and potentially abject. These scripts leave little room for women to experiment with their own sense of eros, of a capacity for love or fondness, for pleasure or playfulness in their organizational life. Even among feminist writers and those who acknowledge the role of sexuality, it becomes a game of resisting or quarantining one's designation as a sexual being. Hence, as Ashcraft (2000) notes, feminist theories of organizational sexuality show little concern with pleasure and resistance.

Accordingly, our desire in this article is to try and reclaim notions of eroticism that place a broader value on pleasure and love. We follow Bauman (1998) in noting that in postmodernity eroticism has become 'free-floating', able to be 'wedded semiotically to virtually unlimited numbers of signifieds' (1998: 26). In the emancipation of eroticism from 'its reproductive and amorous constraints', desire and eros become treated as of value in themselves, sometimes creating not delight but anxiety (Bauman, 1998: 27). Yet our hope is that by opening up notions of eroticism, we are able to explore in new ways the complexities and contradictions of academic life, not only exposing the gendering and repressive processes in academia, but also a different way of thinking about what it means to be an academic.

We come to this as two scholars with interests in these organizational issues, and as people whose gendered bodies have had an impact on our own ways of working in academic organizations. Emma has analysed the role of the sexed body in organizational ethnography (Bell, 1999), the embodied, gendered identity practices of women managers (Kenny and Bell, 2011) and the body pedagogics of critical management studies academics (Bell and King, 2010). Amanda has explored the impacts of sex, sexualities and bodies on MBA and leadership education (Sinclair, 1995b, 2005b, 2009), organizational and leadership life (Sinclair, 1995a, 2005a, 2011). Through our work we have sought to explore the presentation of the performing self 'through the medium of the socially interpreted body' (Turner, 2008: 41).

Consequently, for us, being an academic is not just a matter of having a body and taking it into the research field, or the university classroom. Instead it is about creating and experiencing our bodies, our careers, our lives, through embodied participation with others. As critical feminist organizational researchers, we are particularly interested in the institutional denial of the erotic, alongside popular portrayals of universities as sexual environments. In this article we explore the impacts of these tensions that particularly, and often adversely, affect the credibility and authority of women. We begin by contextualizing our arguments relative to recent controversy surrounding sex and the erotic in the contemporary Western university.

## Locating sex and the erotic in the university

Hakim has recently argued that in addition to economic, human and social forms of personal capital, of increasing importance in society is erotic capital (Hakim, 2010a, 2011). She identifies ‘six (or seven)’ elements of erotic capital: beauty; sexual attractiveness; social grace and charm, including flirtatiousness; liveness including energy and humour; social presentation or style; sexuality including ‘sexual competence’ and ‘erotic imagination’ (2010a: 3). Suggesting that erotic capital has been dismissed in many cultures precisely because it is mainly held by women, she further maintains that women generally ‘have more erotic capital than men in most societies because they work harder at personal presentation and the performance of gender and sexuality’ (2010a: 6). Finally, Hakim observes that erotic capital is growing in importance in individualized, sexualized modern societies and suggests this presents an opportunity for women.

Our interest in Hakim’s work relates not to the idea of erotic capital, which has been widely critiqued for conflating notions of erotic and sexual and offering a highly simplified view of the dynamics of capitalization.<sup>1</sup> Instead we focus here on the controversy her work has generated, and what this reveals about cultural attitudes towards the place of sex and attractiveness in the university. Hakim herself has been a vocal contributor to this debate, maintaining that the concept of erotic capital applies to academics as well as other professionals.

In the past, most academics were just ‘names’—invisible, ageless names attached to theories, concepts and ideas. Today, university websites routinely display separate pages for every member of staff, almost invariably with a photograph attached. Suddenly, appearance and style matter, hugely, and we cannot remain ‘faceless’ as in the past. (Hakim, 2010b)

Hakim’s articles unleashed an incensed response from academics; some were insulted that her work could be called research, others appalled at the move back to treating women as sex objects and their bodies as an exploitable site of eroticism. A few accused her of a personal lack of erotic capital which, they argued, should disqualify her from commentating on this subject. They also asserted that academics should remain above contemporary obsessions with image, youth and beauty which undermine traditional academic values of intellectual scholarship, as the following blog quote illustrates:

The ‘dress for success’ idea here ignores the main reason why academics have for so long looked dowdy: it’s signalling. It’s a signal which says ‘I’m too busy/deep thinking/intellectual/whatever to worry about little things like a tie or matching socks or a clean shirt’. Or it’s a signal which says ‘I am too original or important to need to conform, or care what others think of me’. It’s why Einstein never got a haircut. It’s why the best mathematician in my old lab held his trainers together with electrical tape.<sup>2</sup>

Such characterizations uphold the Cartesian dichotomy that privileges the intellectual mind over the emotional, sexualized body. Academics are portrayed as exemplars of a commitment to a Calvinist conception of vocation where consuming asceticism constitutes a form of sacrifice and a route to salvation (Weber, 1917). This attitude invites ‘ceaseless striving rather than submissive surrender’ to passion and sexuality (Burrell, 1997: 244). Bodies are thereby cast as unnecessary, intrusive or incidental to reasoned academic work (Bell and King, 2010).

Yet at the same time, university students and academics are subject to discourses of academic sexualization. Examples include celebrity academics like physicist, Brian Cox, otherwise known as the ‘pin-up professor’,<sup>3</sup> women students taking part-time jobs as lap dancers to finance their studies,<sup>4</sup> universities holding female beauty contests<sup>5</sup> and hiring strippers for student parties,<sup>6</sup>

university newspapers containing sex columns written by students and publishing glamour shots of female students (Reimold, 2010). They also include popular accounts like those of blogger and former London prostitute Belle de Jour (2005) who in 2009 revealed herself as Dr Brooke Magnanti, a medical research scientist and former PhD student. Interest in sexualized aspects of university life seems to derive from its juxtaposition 'against the ivy-covered walls of Harvard or Yale or Princeton' (Krinsky quoted in Reimold, 2010: 44) where scholarly bodies have historically been seen as an 'eros-free zone' (McWilliams, 1999: 115).

The trend to acknowledging and celebrating sex in universities is hailed by some as a new form of female sexual empowerment, while others note the construction of a post-feminist female sexual aggressor built on male fantasies and objectified female stereotypes (Reimold, 2010). It also reflects a commodification of bodies and sexualities in the postmodern, 'post-feminist' (Schroeder and Borgerson, 2005) university, which is increasingly subject to market and consumerist discourses (Delanty, 2002).

We suggest that these experiences cannot be understood without appreciation of the gendered organizational cultures within which they arise. Highly masculine, competitive cultures and the severe under-representation of women, particularly at senior levels, means that British universities are experienced as alien spaces by many women academics (Thomas and Davies, 2002). Added to this, university appraisal systems serve to construct and perpetuate gender bias in universities by judging individuals against a gendered, disembodied norm in the form of a quantitatively productive, entrepreneurial, goal oriented subject (Wilson and Nutley, 2003). Working in these contexts is likely to make women feel they can never become full members of the profession or 'true' academics, and that they must be better than their male colleagues in order to succeed (Bagilhole, 1993). Women are also more likely to be the targets of workplace bullying in the university, through work overload, unfair criticism and excessive monitoring (Simpson and Cohen, 1994).

Speaking as business school academics, we might hope for greater awareness of the costs of such cultures in our own context (see also Fotaki, 2011). And yet here the impact of gendered power relations is equally or even more pronounced. Mainstream management theory and practice, which forms the *raison d'être* of the business school, is rooted in masculine values, discourses and practices (Alvesson and Due Billing, 2009; Wilson, 1996). Hence 'the structure, culture and position of academic women in Business/Management schools can be seen to perpetuate the perception that management equals male' (Mavin and Bryans, 1999: 3). Business school academics are expected to embody and express a masculine ideal of management in their face-to-face interactions with colleagues (Bell and King, 2010), and with students in the classroom (Sinclair, 2005b). Women academics in business schools enact masculine behaviours in order to position themselves as successful, rationally controlling their work environment and repressing their emotions (Priola, 2007). Consequently, a particular form of gendered sexuality based on phallic superiority is privileged in the business school, to the detriment of women academics. Expressions of masculine sexualities are thus not an 'add on' or an artefact of life in university business schools but a platform upon which knowledge is built (Fotaki, 2011).

These cultural dynamics are of central importance in understanding how corporeal identities are formed in the university in ways which privilege particular bodies. Most importantly, as Fotaki notes, 'knowledge production processes in academe do not arise from disembodied activities... but are actively performed through *gendered* power relationships' (Fotaki, 2011: 43, emphasis in original). Women in all types of organizations are already required to perform and maintain themselves according to very exacting standards of corporeality, such as not putting on too much weight and dressing appropriately, so as not to disrupt the rational, masculine organizational order through their bodies (Kenny and Bell, 2011; Trethewey, 2000). They must also adopt emotional strategies

of ignoring, minimizing, overcoming or resisting efforts by others to sexually stereotype or to denigrate (Fleming, 2007). We suggest then that both the traditional ideal of disembodied academic life and the contemporary realities of sexualizing and gendering academic bodies, work against women in profound and unacknowledged ways.

## Telling stories about academic bodies

Rather than trying to deny or 'eradicate' the erotic from academic life, our intent is to show how these trends impact upon academic identities in gendered and unequal ways, valorizing male academic performances, yet often rendering women's identities as sexualized, causing their academic performances to be stereotyped or marginalized. To do this we draw on our own experiences and those of colleagues in a form of autoethnographic storytelling (Parry and Boyle, 2009). As Butler and other theorists of discourse and knowledge argue, the language and linguistic conventions we use limit what we can know. Experimentation with methods such as storytelling provide the possibility for a different kind of insight to arise. Our approach also stems from the view that academic work is a fundamentally corporeal activity that relies on visceral know-how (Wacquant, 2005), as a form of prediscursive knowledge acquired through interactional experience, particularly in situations of face-to-face interaction (Bell and King, 2010). By exercising critical reflexivity in relation to our own experience we seek to destabilize existing practices and challenge orthodox understandings about the disembodied academic. Through this we seek to show that these established corporeal norms relate to an essentially gendered, rather than a gender neutral, corporeal subject (Acker, 1990).

Yet there are personal and professional risks associated with this type of self-disclosure. We have found that telling stories about embodiment and eroticism prompts strong reactions from readers and audiences. The erotic details may be the main, or indeed the only thing, that is remembered about our stories.<sup>7</sup> Narrative accounts are also difficult to anonymize, often becoming closely associated with the person who tells them and leaving us as authors with nowhere to hide. These problems are particularly associated with being a woman in the academy, and with research that focuses on issues relating to embodiment and sexuality, where there is more likely to be a conflation between the author's biography and the subject of her research (Brewis, 2005; Irigaray, 1991). Yet we believe it is only by revealing the bodily practices through which vulnerable selves are formed that existing forms of social organization which privilege certain bodies and exclude others may be challenged.

The stories presented below are based on selected personal experiences and those of other women academics. We present them as a 'methodology of the heart' (Pelias 2004; Sparkes, 2007) located in the researcher's body. This constructive process, 'inspired by partial happenings, fragmented memories, echoes of conversations, whispers in corridors, fleeting glimpses of myriad reflections seen through broken glass, and multiple layers of fiction and narrative imaginings' (Sparkes, 2007: 522), helps us to draw out the affective and emotive, in addition to the analytical aspects (Pelias, 2005) of our gendered experience of academic life.

## Bodies and power

*A male professor of around my own age insisted on referring to me as 'young Emma' in formal meetings and emails, despite my requests to him to stop on the grounds that I was hardly at an early stage in the life course. Eventually, after I set out an academic explanation in an email of why I found it objectionable, he agreed to stop using the term—his explanation was that, as a tall, white man, he was sometimes unaware of the effects of his actions on other people.*



*The final year undergraduates had organized a graduation party to which they invited teaching staff, and my Head of Department was keen that a number of us should attend. At the party the students announced I was the winner of the 'sexiest lecturer' award. On recounting this at a later gathering, a male colleague sitting opposite me commented that academic work was inherently sexualized, stating that he had found himself in numerous situations with students where they had made it known that they found him sexually attractive. He turned to another man at the table, urging him that he must have experienced this as well. Then he turned to me again. He commented that he had recently been looking for information on the web about my department and had come across my web page photo which he thought his male students would regard as sexy. I made some adjustments to my workplace appearance and behaviour in response to these experiences. I replaced the photo with another picture. I also bought a pair of glasses with clear lenses which I wore in meetings or lectures, even though my eyesight was perfect.*

*I was trying to understand the large gap I experienced between the image of the knowledgeable academic and me. My body seemed wrong somehow to the groups of (usually) male-dominated students I was teaching. I felt I needed to engage in a lot of active management to minimise the apparent disappointment that my body seemed to elicit in classrooms, particularly in executive education contexts. There was a distinct 'lack'—perhaps of a penis—when I was in charge. The fact that I had breasts not only didn't make up for that, my breasts seem to make things worse. They were distracting, I could see that. They also drew attention to the fact that I was a woman in an environment that expected men and a traditionally masculine performance of academic expertise. It occurred again recently that a student said to me, 'oh but you are so small, I thought you'd be bigger'.*

*I tried to capture some of these experiences in a working paper that I presented to my colleagues entitled 'A Woman's Guide to Teaching in a B-School'. The response of at least one senior academic colleague was an overtly solicitous 'Are you sure you're not imagining things?'*

*I co-wrote a paper with a friend from the medical faculty called 'Breasts, babies and universities: Two lactating professors speak' about the institutionalised hostility towards mothering we had both experienced. We tried to publish it in various journals and higher education supplements. It ended up in the *Breastfeeding Review*. The rather sour feedback of one editor was that it sounded like 'whingeing'.*

*A female professor spoke about a female MBA student she once taught who later confessed that when the professor first entered the classroom, the student could not believe this short, white-haired woman could possibly have anything relevant to say to them.*

*A female academic colleague was once told by her Head of School after he had seen her university web page photo that she needed botox treatment to remove her wrinkles.*

## Resuscitating eros

In this section we draw mainly on the considerable wealth of feminist theorization to make three proposals for the reclamation of eros in the university. First, we wish to acknowledge the role of bodies, including the visceral and sensuous, in acquiring knowledge; second, we seek to recall the role of love and pleasure in learning, writing, researching and the pursuit of wisdom; and third, we call for greater attention to be devoted to eros in engaged pedagogic and collegial relations.

Many feminist theorists have explored the neglected role of the body in mediating knowledge (for example Butler, 1993; Casey, 2000; Gatens 1996; Grosz 1994; Jaggar and Bordo 1989; McWilliam 1996; Sinclair, 2005b, 2011). Luce Irigaray argues that Western philosophical traditions tend to offer a narrow, knowledge-based notion of wisdom as a 'mental exercise'. This ensures the prioritization of formal, technical knowledge, 'passed on from a master to disciples', which is 'of use in populating universities and in having discussions among the initiated but without the impact on our lives that a wisdom supposes' (Irigaray, 2002a: 3). Irigaray suggests male

philosophers and their texts largely ‘ventriloquize’ or mimic the words of the ancients (1991). The masculine imaginary and the masculine subject has left behind nature, woman and children, constructing a culture which is a ‘monologue’, a world of appropriated words ‘signifiers which separates him from the real and from all others’ (2002a: 7). Instead of pursuing a love of wisdom—the traditional preoccupation of universities—Irigaray advises us to pursue the wisdom of love. Here, heart and mind, body and breath are united in the search to live better with oneself and with the other in the world (2002a, 2002b). Rather than naming and ‘speaking about’ things, this involves ‘turning back to the origin of subjectivity’ (2002a: 49), by reducing the distance between self and other through dialogue and ‘being-in-relation’, a path which is neither about cleverness nor ‘separated off from the body and desire’ (2002b: 8–9).

Our first proposal therefore is that eros in the university must involve the pursuit of ‘carnal’ knowledge (Wacquant, 2005), founded on the tradition of participatory human scientific research wherein the researcher immerses her or himself in ‘the sound and the fury of the social world’ (Wacquant, 2004: vii). Within this project the body is not seen as an object about which knowledge can be generated, but instead as a tool of inquiry, a vector and wellspring of knowledge. Such practices are based on the premise that all social agents are embodied with access to ‘visceral know-how’ which operates ‘beneath the controls of discursive awareness and propositional reasoning’ (Wacquant, 2005: 466–467; see also Casey 2000). Exploring such knowledge therefore involves not only being aware of the body as an instrument of knowing, but also according the knowledge that the body generates a status equivalent to linguistic and materialistic structures of meaning. However, such body-mediated knowledge must be recognized as arising within the context of gendered structures. Women’s bodies are surfaces and physiologies that are used to reproduce dominant practices of social control. As Susan Bordo explains, the body is ‘a text of culture’ (1989: 13).

Eros in the university should also involve recognition of love for writing, for taking pleasure in conveying insight through words and experimenting with powerful ways of writing that change readers’ experience of the world. Hélène Cixous is perhaps best known for advocating that every woman should ‘write her self’. She suggests women should use writing as a way of expressing the ‘infinite richness of their individual constitutions’ and to construct an erotic aesthetic in writing (Cixous et al., 1976: 876). Cixous regards women’s imaginary as inexhaustible: ‘my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs’ (1976: 876). As she sees it, women and their writing have been cowed by self-congratulatory phallogocentric codes and by ‘crafty, obsequious’ publishing houses, the relayers of an ‘imbecilic capitalist machinery’ (1976: 877). Cixous makes no apology for saying that women, their bodies and their writing are agents for beauty, for passionate interrogation of their own heterogeneity, for re-connecting women with their sexuality and womanly being. Women are a ‘cosmos tirelessly traversed by Eros’ and though ‘the wind (has been) knocked out of us, we the labyrinths, the ladders’ need to liberate the New Woman ‘by coming to know her—by loving her’ (1976: 889, 878).

While Cixous is interested in women’s freedom, she also suggests such emancipation benefits society more widely: ‘writing is precisely... the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures’ (1976: 879). For Cixous, these activities produce a new ‘economy’ that can no longer be put in economic terms, ‘Wherever she (woman) loves, all the old concepts of management are left behind’ (1976: 893).

Cixous’ writing itself is spine-tingling. It is not flat text on the page, inert argument. In her writing Cixous does what she advocates, evoking pleasures and new possibilities of loving, living and being (see also Cixous and Clement, 1986). Like Cixous, Irigaray argues for and experiments with forms of discourse and writing which stand outside or precede masculine forms and conventions

which are particularly at play in the academy (Irigaray, 1991). She is particularly interested in dialogue: 'a here and now' in which two interlocutors meet in 'amorous exchange', in which the flesh and word are combined and women are not rendered object to man's subject (1991: 7).

Also within this second area of writing, researching and learning, we suggest that love may play an important role in the conduct of research. Many critical researchers, but especially women, have argued that academics have a responsibility to avoid unproblematized research which speaks about, and for, Others. According to this view, much research perpetuates knowledge elites and adds to the suffering of others in the cause of building CVs and academic careers. Drawing on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Julie Laible's delineation of a 'loving epistemology' puts love and compassion at the heart of doing research (Laible, 2003). Laible maintains that our knowledge building and theory-making must make sense to, and be useful and empowering for, those we research.

Turning to the third area of collegial and pedagogic relations, we argue that love, pleasure and the cultivation of erotic wisdom are antidotes to the competition and dominance that so often characterize relations with peers and students. Feminist writers such as Benjamin (1988, 1998) have explored the space between self and other to put a primary value on the capacity to be with, and listen to, the other, without domination. While the maternal is often represented as disruptive and dangerous to organizations (Höpfl and Kostera, 2003), tenderness, nurturance and care already play an important though undoubtedly under-valued role in universities. This has implications for how we are with others in the academy, with our colleagues and our students, with whom non-dominating, pleasurable relationships may be cultivated. Eros could be drawn on as a frame to guide these relations, as an alternative to relations based on individualistic competition; this may lead to very different learning and knowledge outcomes.

Women scholars also have taken the lead in putting pleasure, bodies and transgression onto the pedagogical agenda (Gallop, 1995; hooks, 1994, 2003; Luke and Gore, 1992; McWilliam, 1999; McWilliam and Taylor, 1996; Swan, 2005). McWilliam and Jones, for example, explore 'powerful pedagogy as an erotic engagement' (1996: 132). Their view is that engaged teaching is where teacher and student are not just re-enacting rituals of information transfer. This inevitably elicits recognition of the materiality of bodies, including tone of voice; the desire to instruct and be instructed; the pleasure and exhilaration of sharing experiences and a passion for knowledge. McWilliam and Jones quote Gallop as taking 'a diffuse yet unmistakable pleasure when calculating grades at the end of term' (1982, quoted in McWilliam and Jones, 1996: 134). They summarize:

If teaching-as-usual is unpleasant, dull and restrictive, then 'good', exciting, motivating teaching is erotic, passionate, dangerous, and evokes body pleasure. (McWilliam and Jones, 1996: 128)

Paying greater attention to eros in collegial and pedagogical relations in the university might involve consideration of the aesthetic and sensuous pleasures in teaching and how insight, wisdom and creativity might arise for students, mediated by eros. There might be spontaneity and communion in classrooms; or shock and thrill with subversion and transgression of institutional or customary norms. We might emphasize the enjoyment of writing and the mediating role of nurturance and love in academic supervision—an aspect widely regarded as critical in the psychoanalytic and relational psychology disciplines.

## Concluding thoughts

Eros is not primarily about sex, but rather the wish for deeper connection and continuity that may be mediated through forms of language, knowledge and the body. Acknowledging the complexity

and risks of engaging with re-eroticization, our desire in this article has been to explore how different forms of eroticism may be cultivated within the university, and to show how this may be helpful for academics struggling with disembodied gendered academic identities. Starting from the definition of eroticism as pleasure and love rather than sexuality, we have critiqued the traditional view of academic life as vocation that necessarily involves active subjugation of everything that is not the 'life of the mind'. The established corporeal norms of the disembodied academic, as an essentially gendered, rather than a gender-neutral concept therefore need to be deconstructed. Our further observation is that, despite traditional ascetic ideals, universities have also become increasingly sexualized environments. In such circumstances, and contrary to what commentators like Hakim predict, women typically lose power and choice, not gain it. Women have many organizational experiences to relay about having their bodies and sexuality evaluated. They face the additional burden of actively managing their sexuality, their sexual and erotic selves, within gendered norms of acceptability.

Yet drawing on feminist formulations of pedagogy, the resolute rejection of the erotic turns out to have many negative consequences for the university classroom, for women and, we suspect, for many men. Accordingly, and as Brewis and Grey (1994) warn, any exploration of eros and eroticism must actively resist and problematize gendered discourses and power relations in organizations, including the academy, which turn eroticism into sexuality and a problem that women must fix or 'capitalize' on, as Hakim seems to suggest.

However, we also believe eroticism is relevant to academic life, and that its loss to notions of, on the one hand, disembodiment, and on the other, commodified sexualities, is detrimental to academics and universities. While some may read our arguments as romanticized and idealistic, or at another extreme, detrimental to women, our own experience sharing these ideas in different forums is that they are resonant, arresting and empowering. They help academics and students think again about their values, practices and options in pursuing an academic life. In this article we have focused on three areas of academic life where we believe a focus on erotic possibilities can lead to new understandings: in the importance of bodies to mediate knowing; in the love of writing and pursuit of a wisdom of love; and in the nurturing and pleasurable relations that arise between colleagues, teachers and students. Re-valuing eros and the possibilities of pleasure and love in the academy may lead to a more nuanced understanding of the impacts of gendered norms on university staff and students, but it may also be an antidote to the increasingly factory-like experience that many encounter, working and studying in universities. Reclaiming eros, we argue, could re-inspire meaning, enjoyment and pleasure in university life—something likely to be welcomed by women and men, academics and students.

## Notes

1. Causing London School of Economics to distance itself from any association with her, see 'Honey Money not to LSE's taste' THES. Retrieved September 22, 2011, from <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=417516>
2. *Times Higher Education*, Reader's Comments, posted by 'William'. Retrieved June 3, 2010, from <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=411840>
3. 'Brian Cox is the pop star turned pin-up professor whose series on the solar system has sent his career into orbit', *Mail* online. Retrieved March 31, 2010, from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1262449/Brian-Cox-pop-star-turned-pin-professor-series-solar-sent-career-orbit.html>
4. 'Hard-up students turn to lap dancing', *BBC News* online. Retrieved January 20, 2003, from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/2675841.stm>
5. [Telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/3545587/University-beauty-contest-sparks-ugly-row.html) 'University beauty contest sparks ugly row'. Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/3545587/University-beauty-contest-sparks-ugly-row.html>

6. <http://www.parisetudiant.com/etudiant/sortie/la-nuit-la-plus-chaude-a-l-essec.html>
7. Feedback on earlier drafts, particularly from supportive male colleagues, indicated that this might well be the case

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## Author biographies

Emma Bell is Professor of Management and Organisation Studies at Keele University. She is interested in the critical study of management and organizational behaviour in a range of contexts, including her own. Her research is informed by a commitment to understanding cultures and focuses on the organization of learning and change and the role of spirituality and belief. She also teaches and writes about methods and methodologies of management research. Her most recent books are *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Management Research* and the *Routledge Companion to Visual Organisation* (both published in 2013). Address: Keele Management School, Keele University, Staffordshire ST5 5BG.

Amanda Sinclair is an author, academic, researcher, teacher and consultant in the areas of leadership, change, gender and diversity. Currently a Professorial Fellow, she formerly held the Foundation Chair of Management (Diversity and Change) at Melbourne Business School, University of Melbourne. Amanda's research and teaching is in leadership, gender and diversity, with a focus on bodies and identities. Her books include: *Leadership for the Disillusioned* (2007) and *Doing Leadership Differently* (1998, 2004). In her work with individual leaders and teams, Amanda seeks to incorporate insights from meditative traditions, mindfulness research and her practice as a yoga and meditation teacher.