
Five movements in an embodied feminism: A memoir

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Abstract

How can bodies, embodied experiences and feelings, be recognized as central elements of becoming and being feminist? This article – a mixture of memoir and research reflection – aims to reveal the emergent and embodied nature of feminist paths using myself as case in point. Recounting five personal ‘movements’ over three decades, I show how my material situations, physically-felt struggles and embodied encounters with others, especially women, wrested – sometimes catapulted – my precarious self-identification as a feminist. Writing this as a memoir, I hope to evoke in the reader memories and experiences that highlight their own embodied feminism. The article identifies some problems feminists commonly face, contesting unhelpful hierarchies of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ feminists. I explore some gifts of feminism – encounters with writing and people – which have provided theoretical innovation and personal insight for me, and offer fertile avenues for further research. Avoiding trying to ‘trap’ feminism as one set of views or experiences, I seek to show how our feminisms are always embodied: opportunistic, emergent, sometimes inconvenient, neither comprehensive nor respectable, but frequently bringing agency, invigoration and surprising pleasures. It gives all who call ourselves feminists, cause for optimism.

Keywords

bodies, embodiment, feminism, feminists, feminist scholars, physicality, materiality, women’s writing, memoirs

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Feminism is a movement in many senses. We are moved to become feminists.
(Sara Ahmed, 2017)

It is time to return to what feminism has to tell us. It is time to make the case for what women have uniquely to say about the perils of the modern world.
(Jacqueline Rose, 2014)

We're all bad feminists.
(Declared at a feminist writers festival)

... writing autobiographically (i)s a feminist-sociological practice.
(Lauren Richardson, 1997)

At the start of 2016, I was sitting in a café with one of my recent MBA students – an impressive young woman interested in leadership and the obstacles women face. She was lamenting that among her friends, feminism was often viewed as unnecessary (equality had been achieved), outdated (an old solution to a superseded problem, the bigger problem being lack of cultural, sexual, age diversity) or extreme in its tactics (the domain of man-haters) (see also Gill et al., 2017). Listening and wanting to encourage her, prompted me to reflect on my own journey of belated awareness of the issues facing women in society, then haphazard embrace of feminism as a means of understanding and advocating change.

I am a feminist and have been for three decades. Through this time, I have intermittently felt a fraudulent feminist, a lightweight. I came to it late, captivated by the audacious 'woman-as-carcass with handles' 1971 cover of Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, but inwardly wondering what all the fuss was about. It became a necessity in the 1980s as I, an academic researcher just out of my PhD, grappled with listening to and understanding the experiences of women in local politics and then trying to survive, and perhaps change, business school and university cultures. Feminism has moved forward and back in my research and life, a nagging companion that has made life (and relationships) difficult, yet simultaneously provided powerful sustenance to understand what on earth is going on in society, in organizations, and in my life, as well as what I could do about it.

I have written this article as a memoir for two interrelated reasons. First, I wanted to not just write *about* how embodiment is central in becoming a feminist, I want to try to evoke it *in the writing*. Feminism is an embodied practice, not just an intellectual one. A memoir opts for 'genre-bending' to explicitly mirror the historical and material, the lived, felt ways feminism interposes itself into our work and lives; our feminism sometimes 'written across our foreheads' (Katila and Merilainen, 2002a: 185).

Second, I follow a feminist tradition of writing differently as a political act, a form of liberatory practice in itself (Cixous, 1976; Irigaray, 2002a, 2002b). Feminists have a long record of fearlessly subverting academic discourse, including by inserting their embodied selves. Helene Cixous (1976: 875) advises: '[W]oman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement'. As feminist sociologist Laurel Richardson (1997) challenges, how might we 'de-discipline' our academic regimes, what might we learn about our theories, and what other audiences might we reach, if we embrace different genres of writing?

Yet writing a journal article as a memoir has been no small challenge for myself, the reviewers and editors of this Special Issue. It flies in the face of academic requirements

such as anonymizing for review. How could I remove my body and other identifiers such as my Australian place of origin? Also, the research that I cite here is an idiosyncratic assortment of feminist thinking influential for me, not the more comprehensive compilation one might expect from a journal article. But this is one of the points I want to make about becoming a feminist. I read the writers I bumped into, those discussed in my own sheltered orbit. I read writers I, often desperately, sought out (or discovered) in the dusty, deserted shelves of the library and university bookshop, there because they were on a reading list for a feminist subject being taught surreptitiously somewhere in the university.

I say to you as reader, do not fret if you are baffled by Butler or if Cixous is not your thing. I am seeking here to avoid enacting intellectual hierarchies – rather – to elicit some of your own embodied experiences and memories, whether you are a woman or a man, to narrate and legitimize diverse narratives, as well as theorizations, of embodied feminism. It is the lived realities of *becoming* feminist I am interested in rather than the circumscriptions of a fixed feminist identity. As Sara Ahmed (2017: 4) challenges us to ask: ‘When did *feminism* become a word that not only spoke to you, but spoke you, spoke of your existence, spoke you into existence?’ And how can we best support those, like the MBA student introduced at the start, who are exploring contemporary feminist identities for themselves, and introducing them to friends, families, colleagues, sons and daughters?

Mid-1980s: Meeting feminists

I completed undergraduate study in politics and psychology in the mid-1970s. It was a time of upheaval and rejuvenating feminism through the work of women like Germaine Greer, Bella Abzug and Gloria Steinem. Feminism came in many forms, including Shere Hite and the Hite Report, vaginal versus clitoral orgasms, critiques of penetrative sex. Yet I was sheltered. I had my husband (at this stage anyway) and wondered – I hesitate, appalled, as I write this – what all the feminist fuss was about.

After finishing my undergraduate studies, and despite the refusal of a male lecturer to provide me with a reference, I got a job as a government ‘social planner’. I enjoyed that job, and a subsequent one in consulting. The multi-disciplinary ‘teams’ that I was working in later became the focus of my PhD. Occasionally I was joined by the only other professional woman: an equally junior voice of the environment and non-human species. Both of us were short and she was shy, like the possums she studied. It was hard to be heard. The other women in the organization were secretaries, receptionists or condemned to the ‘typing pool’: a room where women sat all day typing – and retyping – on IBM golfball typewriters the weighty deliberations of the men. Rosemary Pringle’s pioneering book *Secretaries Talk* (1988) documents vividly these norms and routines of women’s subordination. My own organizational experiences provided damning evidence of the degree and impacts of sex-segregated work environments. I puzzled through the late 1970s about why my views were ignored at work, but was yet to grasp the potential of feminism.

From 1982 everything changed for me. Struggling through the last stages of my PhD, my husband left. I was pregnant with our daughter. My son was two. I listened compulsively to Madonna’s hit record: ‘You’ve abandoned me...’. With little time, I needed an income and something to drag me from my sense of worthlessness.

A politics lecturer who had taught me put my name forward for a research position exploring the experiences of women elected to local authorities – more accurately the lack of them.

My first encounter with activist feminists was the Steering Committee for this project. Elected through 1970s and 1980s surges of community, urban and environmental activism alongside second wave feminism, many were the first women on councils. Most endured sexism and sabotage – from putdowns to hair-raising misogyny – on the way to being elected and once on council.

Working with the demanding steering committee, interviewing women councillors and later writing the findings up for my first book was a wild mixture: a confronting immersion in women's subordination and a personal lifeline. Hearing their experiences propelled me from feeling marooned to finding a voice. I wrote a journal article and some newspaper columns suggesting that women in leadership was a phenomenon we should be investigating and supporting. The journal rejected my article as 'not serious' political science.

While I was trekking around the countryside interviewing women, my mum – herself an academic – was looking after my young children. She had taken herself to university in her own effort to break out of suburban domesticity – the 'mystique' Betty Friedan identified. Going to university – a move that annoyed many, including her children! – enabled my mother to become a teacher and meant that our family had an income when my father died suddenly. In retrospect, I appreciate the roots of my feminism in the stubborn, eccentric women of my family. Despite their grumbling, and just as my mum did for me, they supported each other practically, with their bodies and physical care, as well as their fervent belief in women's capabilities.

Late 1980s and early 1990s: Encountering institutionalized sexism and finding feminism

It was not until I began lecturing at a business school that I started to both personally experience and see the bigger shape and impacts of the systematic exclusion of women from management and leadership. It was not just an absence. There were policies, norms and processes in business and management education that meant, for example, that very few women applied to undertake MBAs. Early on, many MBA students were sponsored by employers (given time off or in some cases continuing salary while they studied). Few women could obtain an employer's sponsorship. Also, they were invariably earning less – a gender pay gap that many of us felt confident would close but that has become more pronounced especially at senior levels.

Another barrier was that most MBA programs were inflexible and had to be completed within a limited time. There were no leave provisions for women who needed to take a break or reduce their study commitment due to family responsibilities. These obstacles were glaring to me because I was in the same boat of having to juggle work and lecturing with a young family. Yet they were not seen by the mostly male 'fish' swimming in (and benefitting from) the seas of the dominant system.

My first effort to record these observations was a paper that I gave to an internal seminar in 1988 – 'A woman's guide to teaching in a business school' – describing my

experiences struggling as one of only two junior women teachers. I got caned in student evaluations and 'done over' by assertive male students in classrooms. Criticized for being too soft, too loose, too intrusive, 'like my mother', 'like a kindergarten teacher', when I described these experiences my male colleagues said 'Are you sure you're not imagining things?' Initially, I wondered whether I was.

Luckily though, when I began to articulate these experiences to groups of university women, there was recognition: I was onto something. At this point, as with many others in my career, feminist research and supportive feminist academics saved me. In disparate university faculties, feminists were adopting a gender lens in their research and teaching, often despite the disdain of male peers. These ranged from weighty examples – like registering the absence of women in medical trials or the marginalization of 'women's health' – to more quotidian matters. A female professor of physiotherapy pointed out that textbooks had long instructed women (not men) to pee often so as not to be 'caught short' without a toilet. The textbooks reflected outdated norms, not the research, which showed trainee physios should be taught the opposite: to encourage women to develop their pelvic floor muscles.

I began to read feminist research and found with enormous relief that the tendency for men to be threatened by women with power was a well-researched phenomena – a fear of 'the monstrous feminine' to use film academic, Barbara Creed's phrase (1993). Feminist academics had shown how male-dominated professions, such as the law, reduce the power of capable women through sexualization, maternalization and infantilization. Psychologists Maggie Kirkman and Norma Grieve (1984: 488) concluded pithily 'we feel more comfortable when female power is trivial and female sexuality controlled'.

Initially, I read my feminist stuff voraciously and secretly, not because it had anything to do with what I taught but to explain my experience. Then I got braver and started to let feminism into my research. My first PhD student who was studying the Country Women's Association, introduced me to Jane Flax's work (1987). Via recommendations of women I read Judi Marshall (1984), Kathy Ferguson (1984) and Arlie Hochschild (1983): all writing from a feminist perspective about organizational and leadership phenomena I knew to be important. For a period, our sympathetic female business school librarian agreed to become a subscriber to *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. I was clearly the only person to read it but it gave me an inordinate amount of pleasure to see it sitting there subversively on the business school library shelves.

Reading emerging organizational scholarship on gender showed that sexualities were not absent from organizational life, but crucial means of upholding hierarchies of masculinity and subordinating women (Hearn et al., 1989; Pringle, 1988). I fell upon Marta Calas and Linda Smircich's classic 1991 article showing how discourses and ways of writing are complicit in the seduction of leadership, in reinforcing 'the homosocial libidinal economy of competitiveness and glory' (1991: 583). For me this was mind-blowing, for how it was written and for what it named.

Collectively, this research gave me courage to name gendered norms and practices in leadership that I was uncovering in my own work. At the invitation of a group of feminists at the University of Western Australia (including Vice Chancellor Fay Gale and pioneering academic Joan Eveline), in the early 1990s I gave a conference keynote (later article) entitled 'Sexuality in Leadership' (1995a). It was frightening to give that keynote

but also my first (and still rare) experience of addressing a conference with an audience energized by my arguments. The support that the women organizers had crafted was not incidental. Over enjoyable drinks I met other women such as Judith Pringle, writing about feminism and management (1994). I experienced first-hand what I was theorizing: a sense of freedom that could be made available to women bringing their identities as women, to leadership.

Late 1990s and early 2000s: Being braver, bringing bodies and me in

Climbing the academic promotions ladder and feeling marginalized as a ‘part-timer’, I was advised by senior colleagues to avoid gender research. It would limit my ‘promoteability’ branding me as narrow and ‘difficult’. Rather, I should focus on diversity. In 1995, when I did get promoted to Chair, my inaugural professorial lecture warned against taking a simplistic view of diversity as a ‘business tool’ for ‘managing the differences’ of ‘others’. I recently had reason to go back and look at that lecture titled ‘Journey without Maps’, which drew on the Graham Greene novel of the same name. His journey was through Liberia, mine, female business school professor. The advice he gave for Liberia was to ignore maps, especially those made by the Americans that had a ‘dashing’ quality but revealed mostly just ‘vigorous imagination’. It was good advice for me too. The authors I drew on in my lecture included Simone de Beauvoir (1972 [1949]), Luce Irigaray (1993), bell hooks (1990), Camilla Stivers (1996), Cynthia Cockburn (1991), Patti Lather (1991), pioneering Australian feminists Clare Burton (1985) and Joan Eveline (1994).

It is an eclectic group. But in their very different ways, reading each of these feminists freed me to maintain a strong sense of my gender and sexuality, of being a woman in leadership, arguing for women. These authors showed me to be clear about power: not to join it in but to keep naming and fighting systemic oppression, while also practising generosity and forgiveness, including toward myself.

Feminist work on discourse and identity was another treasure of this period. It came to me via a young American Masters student who I was asked to supervise. Bless those students! Through working with her, I read Chris Weedon (1987), Wendy Hollway (1989), Nicola Gavey (1989), critiques of social psychology methods and feminist approaches to discourse analysis. Paying attention to how phenomena is constructed through discursive processes offered new ways of theorizing concepts such as managerial accountability, formerly treated as fixed and calculable. Drawing on feminist discourse analysis, I wrote what is now my most widely cited article: on constructions of organizational accountability (Sinclair, 1995c).

Reading these and other feminists, in interaction with my own embodied experiences, was the inspiration for much subsequent research. For example, as I struggled to teach and teach critically, my body as a woman in male-dominated classrooms felt highly problematic (Sinclair, 2000). I found Jane Gallop and her essay ‘The Teacher’s Breasts’, which I had to source from some far away library – the only copy in Australia as it turned out. Educational researcher Erica McWilliam’s work was an oasis in a parched desert of writing about teaching (1999; McWilliam and Taylor, 1996), as was Angela Trethewey’s

on the disciplining of female bodies (1999), and how we might retaliate in, for example, desire and laughter (2004). In organizational and management scholarship, scholars such as Saija Katila and Susan Merilainen (2002a, 2002b), Jo Brewis (2004), Elaine Swan (2005), Jackie Ford and Nancy Harding (2008) provided instantly recognizable, visceral accounts of management classes and conferences, academic rituals designed around a particular male experience and potentially alienating for women.

Yet these scholars also offered an array of responses including subversion, resistance and pleasure seeking. I remember the delight of coming across Heather Hopfl's work with colleagues, and particularly the baby on the original cover of *Interpreting the Maternal Organization* (Hopfl and Kostera, 2003), which stayed with me as a subversive act. Could a book do this? Demonstrably, yes! (Though I note the baby was later replaced with generic circles.) Collectively, this research helped me at a personal level – to make choices and not feel too damaged – but it also showed how resistance, enacting an embodied self (rather than going into camouflage), researching and writing differently could all be forms of leadership. It kept me from buying the view of some colleagues: that my research was fringe and I was a ridiculous oddity that did not belong in a business school.

Feminists in person emboldened my research agenda. For example, a medical academic visited me when I was on maternity leave with my fourth baby, Charlie. She had read my *Doing Leadership Differently* (1998). It turned out we both had young babies and were breastfeeding. We wrote a paper entitled 'Breasts, babies and universities – reflections of two lactating professors' critiquing the whole edifice-like identity of a university professor that was inimicable to people like us: mothers with babies. Invited to give our paper to a conference, instead we made a film highlighting the difficulty for lactating women of doing something as 'normal' as attending an interstate conference. We offered a version of it as a Higher Education opinion piece but it was deemed of no relevance to universities. A transcript eventually appeared in 1999 in *The Breastfeeding Review*. Although that was almost 20 years ago, New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, encountered similar disbelief that she could be leader and mother when she announced she was expecting a baby in 2018. Critics maintained she should go rather than envisage her leadership might be enhanced by this experience. These examples and many others I could cite, have kept demonstrating to me why, as feminists, we should keep dragging into our research agendas, issues not deemed legitimate subjects of management research.

In 2002, I began working with the new Victorian Police Commissioner, Christine Nixon. This involved literally being alongside her while she led police. Her body and her identity as a woman were front and centre in her approach – for example, her commitment to visit and listen to employees and communities, to look after the diverse bodies that were being recruited into police, including marching in the Gay and Lesbian parade. Christine's fearless feminism is uncommon among leaders and I have learned an incredible amount from listening to and working with her: in offices and seminars but also at our kitchen tables.

Despite my promotion and ostensible success, there were many disheartening – sometimes humiliating and excoriating – experiences through this period. I doubted myself: that things were as bad as I was seeing; that women benefitted from my work; that my work was changing anything. I was confronted with the evidence that my

institutional activity sometimes let others off the hook. I saw this occurring with other women leaders as well as myself: the more women spoke out about gender issues and mentored young women, the more male peers sat back and said ‘well, thank goodness that’s taken care of’. It was, and continues to be, a brutal but crucial check on our feminist practice: to notice if we create superficial change while effectively entrenching subordination.

Partially in response to these problems; a research project where I had interviewed male CEOs about the absence of women; and drawing on research on managerial men and masculinities (Cockburn, 1991; Collinson and Hearn, 1996; Connell, 1995); I changed tack. To get more change in gender relations, I decided to stop writing about women and start problematizing leadership. Leadership was, after all, what needed to change. I gave speeches and presentations including to fellow academics, when I laid out the reasons to extend our research to focus on men and masculinities. Rooms went silent. Hostility seeped from conference delegates. I learned at least two important things from these embodied confrontations. The first was not to accept speaking invitations that are better given by football personalities! Second though, I learned I could speak unpopular, unnameable things. I could speak truth to power.

Mid-2000s to 2010: Accessing a wider feminism

When I think about Judith Butler, the memory that comes are the train journeys when I had *Bodies that Matter* (1993) in my bag to read. Reading Butler is a difficult business. Frequently bewildered, I would then be unable to stifle a ‘wow! Of course that’s how it is.’

Around 2009, I attended a talk by a cultural studies professor about Butler’s work that included photos of Butler herself. Perhaps paradoxically, images of the ‘real’ and embodied Butler made her more accessible to me.

My clear recollection of that talk is enhanced because my daughter – who was just launching into a PhD on Italian early modern women writers – came along with me. We don’t do much of that kind of thing together. She has young children and it’s hard to arrange childcare. Yet her and my feminism are interwoven. Like many of us, her feminism has emerged over time in fits and starts, from her experiences in the workforce and in relationships, and despite some contemporaries denouncing feminists as hairy-armed man-haters. My daughter’s research has opened my eyes to a long tradition of bold, innovative feminist writers who, often at their peril, devised ingenious discursive means to speak against the systemic oppression of women.

Around the same time, I was approached by a prospective American doctoral student to supervise her PhD subtitled ‘A feminist inquiry into globalization, growth and social change’. Initially skeptical about such an ambitious project, I wondered whether feminism had a comprehensive critique of capitalism to offer. Despite never meeting in the flesh, we challenged each other to extend the boundaries of our different, but equally limited, feminisms. Uncovering a lineage of feminist critique by people such as Marilyn Waring (1985, 1988), Chilla Bulbeck (1998) and Chandra Mohanty (2003), we indeed found comprehensive critiques of capitalism and alternative methods of organizing guided by feminist values and ethics.

2010 Onwards: Taking pleasure in contemporary feminisms

Recent years have brought many opportunities – academic and other – to appreciate the rich and dynamic philosophy, ways of thinking, living and being that make up contemporary feminism. A research project aimed at reinstating women's leadership in Australian democracy, prompted me to work with feminist historians, sociologists, legal scholars, biographers, who asked 'where were the women?' in official accounts. Going back to primary sources, these scholars uncovered a vibrancy and diversity of women's activism that unequivocally qualified, but was never recorded, as leadership. Writing letters, fomenting discontent, organizing protests, as well as successful enterprises, women led resistance in ways that official histories disappeared or dismissed as 'back room' work. Significantly, and as recent histories of the Suffragette movement show, women often practiced a particularly embodied leadership (Atkinson, 2018). They marched in numbers over long distances, chained themselves to railings, tamed police horses, went on hunger strikes. Pivotal to my ongoing research of leadership has been learning from feminist cross-disciplinary colleagues painstakingly reconstructing – not history – but 'herstories'.

In August 2016, I attended a Feminist Writers Festival (I have a closet desire to write a novel). The day was put together by a group of volunteers, with the barest of sponsorships; for example, from Spinifex, a long-term feminist publishing house. It was a sell out (much quicker than the mainstream Festival) and began with poetry – five diverse women reading their remarkable poetry, including Koraly Dimitriadis and her punchily-titled 'Fuck Off' – to which we could all relate. The room was electrified. After morning tea, a panel session focused on the politics of being a feminist writer and blogger, including the risks and pleasures of influencing change through blogging and online writing. The session was underway for around five minutes when down the centre aisle came a stroller, followed by its mother. The speaker was determined to be here with her new baby who promptly woke up and needed breast feeding. Another panellist held the microphone allowing Clementine Ford to continue her passionate address while feeding. Multi-tasking at its most potent. We all cheered.

I loved this day and others, such as a comedy festival, to hear and see how women are embodying feminism: women from diverse cultural, racial and socio-economic backgrounds, proud of their sexualities, their bodies, their piercings and painted nails, their cardigans, their babies strapped to fronts, their biker platform boots, red stilettos and sensible shoes. Tackling tough issues, no hierarchy evident. Rather, the mood was appreciative: courageous and inventive embodied feminisms being practised before our eyes. Feminism can – perhaps must – be pluralistic. This does not mean that we conflate feminism with personal brands or celebrity movements (though there may be nothing wrong with the latter). As novelist and essayist Roxane Gay (2014: x) concludes: 'feminism is flawed, but it offers at its best, a way to navigate this shifting cultural climate'.

Problems feminists encounter

While issues like dealing with social media attacks have been widely explored elsewhere, here I focus on two common (and embodied) problems about being a feminist. I hope articulating them in this way will enable women, especially younger women, to

recognize these hurdles as commonly encountered, therefore ‘no big deal’ and not to take personally. I do not mean this flippantly or under-estimate its difficulty. I have spent a lifetime learning how not to take things personally, drawing particularly on feminism and mindfulness to notice and reduce ego-centred outrage and defensiveness, focusing instead on the bigger outcomes I am after.

Problem number one in declaring oneself a feminist is that others may see you as an inadequate one. Early in my career and as a junior academic in a heterosexual relationship with young children, I was viewed as too mainstream, too hungry for male approval to qualify as a ‘serious feminist’. I got put down – and had journal articles rejected – by others who found my feminist credentials wanting (this still happens). But I began listening to feminist visiting speakers – for example, Naomi Wolf. She made no apologies or compromises in her feminist work but she was also glamorous. This attracted the usual murmurs of dismay among some women around me in the chilly lecture hall, but I thought, ‘great!’ It is a waste of effort to worry about whether one ‘qualifies’ as a feminist or to measure one’s feminism against others.

Good feminism can be done by all sorts of women. Some have critiqued ‘corporate’ or ‘liberal’ or equality-oriented feminism. ‘Celebrity’ and ‘lifestyle’ feminism gets attacked in its various consumerist and capitalistic forms. While there is undoubted value in critiquing co-opted feminism, too much effort on this exhausts us and plays into the hands of those who want to construct feminists as warring within themselves (Ahmed, 2014; Harding, 2013). One of the things that is most remarkable about feminism is its ability to be taken up by women and applied to addressing the issues that different groups of women face.

Indeed, problem number two is co-option, a challenge I have experienced frequently through my career. That is, in raising issues about gender and women’s exclusion, one starts to make a system one is critiquing look better. The institution starts to look progressive and the blokes leave the issue up to you. You find yourself mentioned in the marketing or the rankings as evidence of openness to diversity or support for women but rather than have this change things, it installs the status quo with a better veneer. It has felt vital for me to step back from being the gender and diversity advocate at times, allowing systems to reveal themselves in all their not so subtle sexism, misogyny and racism.

Gratitude for the gifts of feminism

The gifts of feminism began for me back in the mid-1980s listening to women making changes in public life. As I have shown above, reading women scholars – in organization and management studies and beyond it – has been critical. But becoming a feminist is not just a project of the intellect. Feminist ideas land on our bodies and earn our attention because of particular material conditions. They make sense to us, give us grief or new ways of moving forward because of bodily experiences and resonances. For example, my feminism has gained urgency through working with women activists and researchers in domestic violence prevention. The most powerful openings from feminism have come from these embodied encounters with people, issues and texts. Here are some of particular significance to me.

Teaching 'Management and Ethics' to MBAs in the early 1990s, it was women scholars like Carol Gilligan, Sissela Bok, Judith Shklar and Luce Irigaray who I turned to for critiques of philosophy and the 'Business Ethics' canon. It is often women, I learned, who tackle the sacred tropes. Critical perspectives also came from meeting women, developing relationships, discussing their work. An example is an international law scholar and friend, who mounts a persuasive critique of discourses of human rights and how they can become instrument of, not a remedy for, 'third world' exploitation. She arrived at my office door because of a University-orchestrated academic women's mentoring program, with me her designated mentor. Devastatingly smart, I knew from the start she would be my teacher in postcolonial critique while I could assist her in more pragmatic ways to navigate academic hierarchies. (We have also shared baby clothes and recipes.)

Similarly, it has been my work with Australian Indigenous women leaders and scholars who have shown me intersectionality: the stark embodied difference in women's experiences across racial and class lines. If I had a tendency toward a cosy all-inclusive notion of feminism, it was shattered working with Australian Indigenous leaders such as Lillian Holt and my then PhD student, now colleague, Michelle Evans. Through them and their work, I saw and experienced how intersectionalities and individual responses to them were embodied and practiced. Constructed by history, political and material relations, there is also agency in 'the simultaneity of [our] compliance and resistance as Indigenous sovereign female subjects' (Moreton-Robinson, 2013: 331). While I have read and benefitted greatly from feminists like bell hooks, it has been face-to-face interactions with Indigenous women in my own – contested – backyard that taught me most.

Feminist scholars have long led critiques of academia and business education for their reproduction of masculinist cultures (Martin, 1994; Simpson and Lewis, 2005; Sinclair, 1995b; Van den Brink and Benschop, 2012), and calls to retrieve materiality and eros (Bell and Sinclair, 2014; Fotaki et al., 2014). Working with women – scholars such as Emma Bell and Donna Ladkin and practitioners such as Christine Nixon – has supported me to challenge disembodied academic conventions in my own research and writing, to bring my embodied self into my work and urge others (women and men) away from camouflage and conformity. An example is an article I wrote with Emma on 'Reclaiming eroticism in the academy' (2014). We proposed that our erotic selves might be a valid source of power, voice and care in academic life, rather than a worrisome blasphemy in a university policy regime geared to eradicating sexual harassment. Writing this required courage and a preparedness for the predictable critiques from both ends of the ideological spectrum. It would have been impossible – for me at least – without our togetherness, our different experiences shared through Skypes and pleasurable (dare I say erotic?) conversations. Another example comes from my collaboration with a leader, who I would sometimes meet after she had a massage at the appropriately-named 'Body Shop'. The masseuse remarked that she had a great body to massage. An integral part of her effectiveness in leadership for me was her physical presence and her example encouraged me to begin advocating for a reinstatement of bodies in leadership (Sinclair, 2005). On this theme, I recently attended a Circus Oz 'Strong women' play performed by three acrobats from different generations committed to encouraging women to know and develop their strength and to apply that strength to projects of social and personal change.

These and other generative relationships and experiences have fuelled in me a desire to critique gendered and racialized norms of physicality in academia and leadership, but also to show how bodies matter by writing them differently into organizational research. As feminist scholars show, our bodies and body parts (tongues, arms, ears) are often less compliant than our minds, enabling us to resist and protest what society says we ‘should’ do (Ahmed, 2014). My body is a crucial part of who I am. Born short – and trying to make up for my shortness – has driven quite a lot of my behaviour, including the riskier sides. My breasts have fed four babies and I like them. Being present in my body when I do things, especially challenging things, is central to how I prepare, how I seek to be open, to who and how I want to be.

I grew up without sisters. My family, school and wider cultural environment was more interested in what boys and men did. Despite my own struggle to get recognition for my achievements, I was slow to offer my support to other women. Now I look for opportunities to write and work with women: PhD students, colleagues, leaders. I particularly enjoy working with groups of women leaders: confident feminists along with those ambivalent about this label. Some feel an affinity with other women. Many do not. Whatever they bring and wherever they are coming from, watching them realize they do not have to agree but that they can learn from each other, is a reminder of the power and connectedness that a feminist perspective offers.

I began this piece with a desire to support women and especially younger generations, to see the richness of feminism – its historical and contemporary forms – to feel confident to acquaint themselves with its gifts, whatever experiences, texts, encounters that entails. I want to avoid people feeling as though they do not qualify as feminists unless they have imbibed prescribed knowledges. I have written it as a memoir to show that our bodies and embodied experiences are key in our turning toward feminism. I hoped a memoir would prompt readers, both women and men, to reflect on their own embodied histories, how their views have been enlarged by bodies, as well as books.

In the last stages of drafting this manuscript, I shared it with the former student I mention in the opening pages. She responded before ‘dashing off to childcare’:

I’ve just read your memoir Amanda and it’s moved me in a way I can’t describe – I’ll need to think on it to fully figure out what words suit these many feelings, but to begin with I think it’s a sense of relief to not be alone but simultaneously a feeling of heaviness about all the change yet to be made, and the intangibility of it all, and a feeling of wonder at how beautifully you’ve articulated many of the thoughts that swim around my head but that I struggle to communicate with people who are not feminists or for whom these lines of thinking never enter their consciousness . . . and a sense of guilt, maybe, or inadequacy that I try so hard to make change but it feels so small and intangible that I wonder if I’m doing it wrong? But not wanting to do it any other way. Even after reading your line about not worrying whether one qualifies as a feminist, I know that to be true yet actually shifting that sense is easier said (or read) than done.


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