

Women Negotiating Life in the Academy

Sarah Elaine Eaton · Amy Burns
Editors

Women Negotiating Life in the Academy

A Canadian Perspective

 Springer

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Preface: Insights into Women Negotiating Life in the Academy—A Canadian Perspective

In our preface to *Women Negotiating Life in the Academy: A Canadian Perspective*, we share an overview of the chapters. This edited volume includes individual and collaborative contributions from twenty-five women. The contributors share their perspectives about their professional experiences navigating life in higher education. These experiences encompass the voices of faculty members, graduate students, and higher education professionals. One of the purposes of having the focus of this volume be on the Canadian experience is to showcase aspects of our experience that is uniquely Canadian. This includes the voices of Indigenous and Métis contributors, immigrant women, children of immigrants, and those whose families came to this country many generations ago.

This book started as a conversation with colleagues at our home university. At that time, we were early career researchers learning to navigate full-time careers in the academy. We answered a call to write a submission for the special issue of the *Journal of Educational Thought* on well-being of those in higher education (Burns, Brown, Eaton, and Mueller 2017). We began documenting our stories and experiences, weaving together reflection, analysis, conversation, and support for and with one another.

The experience of working and writing together proved to have a deep impact. We further developed that work the following year into a presentation for the annual conference of the Canadian Association for the Study of Women and Education (CASWE), (Burns, Eaton, Brown, and Mueller 2018). The work also evolved into a small, but funded research project, called *Leading with Heart*, with Amy Burns as the Principal Investigator, with Barbara Brown, Katherine Mueller, and Sarah Elaine Eaton as collaborators. That project led to the development of a four-course graduate certificate with the same name, nested into the Interdisciplinary Specialization of the Master of Education program offered by the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary.

This work has been expanded and amplified through the graduate certificate, but we also felt compelled to capture the voices and experience of women in higher education in a more intentional and permanent way. That is when the idea of putting together this edited volume, *Women Negotiating Life in the Academy: A Canadian Perspective*, emerged. Two of the collaborators from those initial projects opted to pursue other projects as their careers progressed, but we owe them much in terms of the development of this work in its early phases. They remain dear friends and we are grateful for their support not only of the work, but of us, as colleagues and human beings.

We have chosen to focus on the Canadian perspective, as we felt a need for the voices of Canadian higher education professionals not only to be heard, but to be situated within a broader discourse that has, in our opinion, not often captured Canadian women's experiences to the extent we would have liked. One of the purposes of having the focus of this volume be on the Canadian experience is to showcase aspects of our experience that is uniquely Canadian. This includes the voices of Indigenous and Métis contributors, immigrant women, children of immigrants, and those whose families came to this country many generations ago.

As we read through this collection of essays, we note that they are as scholarly as they are personal. Kuipers (2008) notes that the word anthology, "generically designates a collection of texts pertaining to almost any field" (p. 122), and that the Greek origin of the word meant "literary bouquet" (Kuipers 2008, p. 122). The idea of a collection of essays as a "bouquet" resonated with us for esthetic reasons. There is beauty in each individual contribution, which is unique, and when combined, the unique contribution of each can clearly be seen in relation to the others. Kuipers (2008) talks about this "arrangement of those selections into a greater whole" (p. 124) as a second creative act that happens after the writing. The arrangement of the works in this volume is neither random, nor arbitrary. We have not placed the chapters in alphabetical order by first author, for example. Instead, we have taken care to mindfully arrange each chapter in the volume with intentionality so it relates to those directly adjacent to it, but also situated as part of a greater whole.

Like a piece of twine that might hold the individual flowers of a bouquet together, there are intertwining common threads that stretch across and connect the individual chapters. These include themes relating to identity, relationships, contemplations of what it means to be a woman working in the academy and the various tensions that are ever present in our chosen way of life. These threads emerged organically and naturally, and we noticed them only after all the chapters had been submitted. We purposely offered contributors of individual chapters freedom in how they chose to interpret and write about their perspectives as Canadian women negotiating life in the academy. Although between us as editors we had met many of the lead authors, we did not know all of the contributors individually—and they certainly did not all know one another at the beginning of this project. We have come to know our fellow authors through their work, and we have observed these common threads that emerged on their own, throughout the various chapters.

Other prominent themes that can be seen in various chapters include that of “becoming” or finding oneself through and within scholarly work (Burns; Eaton; Kovach/Stelmach; Lindstrom; McDermott; Ragoonaden; Stoesz). Those who were writing their chapters after having achieved tenure mentioned this as a notable moment in their careers (Burns; Ragoonaden; Kovach/Stelmach), and those who wrote through the lens of leadership noted how their roles had shaped them as scholars, professionals, and women (Baron; Burns; Gereluk; Janes, Carter, and Rourke; and Usick). Of particular note are those who contributed as leaders working in the “Third Space” (Whitchurch 2015), meaning that they hold leadership as higher education professionals, but do not hold faculty positions (Baron, Usick). We thought it was especially important to include their voices in this volume, as these contributors share important perspectives on what it means to be a woman negotiating life in the academy, but with a status that stands apart from those with academic positions.

Some unexpected commonalities caught our attention. Three contributors (Gereluk; Markides; and Stoesz) mentioned the amount of driving and time on the road that impacted their lives as women in the academy. This was not a theme that we anticipated, but upon reading the chapters, it was impossible to ignore it after we read it. Similarly, the approach of several chapter authors to frame their contributions as letters, either to themselves (Gereluk), each other (Kovach/Stelmach), or their children (McDermott) was an authorial choice that the contributors made consciously and independently of one another, but provided an interesting thread among various contributors.

In addition to the professional, these chapters are intensely personal. Heritage and cultural background are topics echoed throughout the volume, as are ancestral languages. Individual chapters are peppered with words from Blackfoot (Lindstrom); Cree (Markides); and Plautdietsch or Mennonite Low German (Stoesz), with others sharing stories about how their first language played a role in their development as scholars (Kubota, Saleh, and Menon).

The topic of social class and privilege was evident in a number of chapters (Burns, Eaton; Kovach/Stelmach; Stoesz; Usick), with some contributors explicitly noting the impact of being first-generation students when they entered their undergraduate degrees (Eaton; Lindstrom; Stoesz; and Usick).

A recurring theme woven throughout the volume is that of motherhood, with contributions from a number of chapter authors exploring how motherhood has impacted their life as a scholar, and shaped their approach to their work (Bauer, Behjat, Brown, Gavrilova, Hayley, and Marasco; Burns; Gereluk; Hill; Kubota, Saleh, and Menon; Lindstrom; Markides; McDermott; Stoesz; Usick). In some cases, daughters reflected explicitly on their relationships with their mothers (Burns; Eaton; McDermott; Stoesz; and Usick). These mother–daughter relationships ranged from uncomfortable relationships to positive mentorship, and we note that there is no singularity among contributors’ experiences.

This lack of uniformity is an important motif. As we were writing this introduction and contemplating its contributions as a collection of essays or a scholarly anthology, it occurred to us that this volume shares the stories of the authors, but

these should not be seen as representative or archetypal of all women in the academy. This book is not like the medieval morality play, *Everyman*, that is supposedly representative of humans in a universal way. In contrast, this collection is the antithesis of an *Every(wo)man*. Instead it speaks to individual experiences, and though there are themes, we are careful to add that the contributors do not speak for all women.

We are cognizant that some voices have not been heard in this volume. Despite it being framed from the Canadian perspective, contributions are in English and represent those who work in Anglophone regions. We also note that none of the contributors has written explicitly through an LGBTQ lens. For these reasons, we call upon our fellow scholars to continue the conversation by sharing their stories, particularly in ways that showcase Canadian voices, to further develop this dialog over time.

We conclude on a personal editorial note. This is our first time as book editors and we have learned much through the process. We are grateful to our fellow contributors, from whom we have learned much. As we went through the process of working with contributors, we were surprised, at times, at how contributors e-mailed us, stopped to talk with us at conferences or other points where we encountered one another in person, to share their thoughts about this work being an emotional labor, as much as a scholarly one. The end result is intensely personal, authentic, and vulnerable, while being simultaneously scholarly and grounded in theory.

Calgary, Canada

Sarah Elaine Eaton
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As we went through the various stages of this project, we commented to one another how helpful the lingering influence of our Ph.D. supervisor, J. Tim Goddard, was to us. We were separated by a few years in our doctoral journeys, and when we came together as colleagues and friends, we recognized the similarities in our work ethic, our training and our overall approach to our work. Tim, you taught us to focus on creating community, while simultaneously having the courage to critique and persist in our quest for quality. You told us when you retired that it was up to us to carry on with the work, and we heard you. We approached this book not only as an edited volume, but also as an opportunity to connect and create community among academic women in Canada who may not have known one another previously. Now, not only do we know one another's names, but we know each other's stories, which is at the heart of our work as educators.

Finally, we know that our work as scholars is supported by those outside the academy, our family and friends. We love and appreciate you.

Sarah Elaine Eaton
Amy Burns

Contents

Our Academic Selves

Bringing My Past into My Future as a Woman in the Academy	3
Amy Burns	
Challenging and Critiquing Notions of Servant Leadership: Lessons from My Mother	15
Sarah Elaine Eaton	
Her Stories	25
Karen Ragoonaden	
Mentoring as Support for Women in Higher Education Leadership . . .	33
Diane P. Janes, Lorraine M. Carter and Lorna E. Rourke	
The Surprisingly Empty Feeling of Getting Full: Contemplations on the Contradictory Nature of Full Professorship—Margaret Kovach/Bonnie Stelmach	51
Margaret Kovach and Bonnie Stelmach	
Professional Identity: Creating Stories in the Academy	67
S. Laurie Hill	
Betwixt and Between: Navigating Academia as a First-Generation Student and Higher Education Professional	79
Brandy L. Usick	
Negotiating the Invisible Maze as an Academic Professional	89
Violet Baron	
First Wave, Second Wave, Third Wave: Women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics	101
Kristine Bauer, Lahleh Behjat, Jo-Anne Brown, Marina L. Gavrilova, Jocelyn L. Hayley and Emily A. Marasco	

Negotiating Roles and Identities in Addition to the Academy

**Looking Back While Moving Forward: A Narrative Journey
Toward Self** 119

Gabrielle Lindstrom

***Driving: The Unseen Responsibilities of a Doctoral Student,
Mother, and More*** 131

Jennifer Markides

**Shaping Love as Experience: Travelling Within and Across
(Academic) Worlds as Women of Colour** 147

Hiroko Kubota, Muna Saleh and Jinny Menon

Becoming a Mother in the Academy: A Letter to My Children 161

Mairi McDermott

Gendered Inequities in the Academy 175

Dianne Gereluk

**Trapped Between the Expectations of Others and Self and the Search
for Balance and Freedom** 185

Brenda M. Stoesz

Postscript: Conclusions Drawn from the Exercise of Writing a Book ... 199

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