

# Blogging while Sessional: Self-Censorship or Bust

Margrit Talpalaru

**W**HEN I THINK ABOUT BLOGGING, my disciplinary training shows through, and I reach for genre in order to divine the rules. What is the genre of academic blogging as I see it? The best illustration I can think of is Aimée Morrison's post on *Hook and Eye* titled "The Personal is the Professional." In it, Morrison talks about the challenges of strictly delineating the two, especially in those moments when life proverbially happens. In its conclusion, Morrison rhetorically asks:

What might happen if I bring a little bit of my personal life into my work, asserting my competence *and* my challenges all at once? Maybe incorporating the personal into the professional in this way might be a feminist act: I am a fully-fleshed-out human being, just like anyone, and a pretty good professor, at the same time. Shit happens, even to female professors, and so long as the challenge isn't fatal, I have the will and the capacity to get on with the shoveling. Maybe to get ahead [as] a woman, I might no longer have to pretend I'm not a real person. Hm.

In a way, Morrison is pre-empting the conversation around women having it all,<sup>1</sup> while also offering an illustration of what academic blogging is all

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Anne-Marie Slaughter's "Why Women Still Can't Have It All."

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about, especially for *Hook and Eye*. It is about taking (carefully curated) tidbits of one’s life, whether personal or academic, and inscribing them into the other. In her post, Morrison explodes the pre-supposed dialectic of the personal and the professional for academics’ lives and in this way leads into the whole conversation of “do what you love,”<sup>2</sup> which controversially presumes personal affect imbricated with professional activity. However, the proposition here points to the need for academia to accept and even to enable the various personal aspects of womanhood, motherhood included, as a means of inclusion. What’s the saying? It takes a village?

In this way, academic blogging offers an avenue of thoughtful exploration in a genre that is less constricted and disciplined than peer-reviewed academic writing. It is so very seductive to think of blogging as enabling a discursive freedom otherwise unavailable to academics in the public sphere. Its reality, however, belies this idealism. We need look no further than the multitude of posts on *Hook and Eye* labeled “Notes from the Non-Tenured Stream,” a category which could collect the majority of regular writers on *Hook and Eye* these days.

The operative euphemism in this case is curation or, more bluntly, self-censorship. If we did a search on this label here, or in other academic blogs, especially written by women who are precariously employed, we encounter countless variations on the topic of self-censorship, its necessity, the struggles it generates, the crises it gives rise to. Trapped between the desire to be outspoken, to exercise one’s carefully honed critical skills on topics that are close to one’s heart on the one hand, and the reality of precarious employment on the other, leads to many cryptic posts, which leave the blogger and her audience feeling like somewhat of a failure. Why a failure? Because maybe we’re not that valuable scholars when we don’t really have the guts to blow the whistle, to step up and expose the inequalities of academia, when our own meagre livelihoods are on the line. We suggest, we wink, we nudge, but we never spell things out like we do in our scholarly writings, in which we over-analyze our texts to death, if our first-year students are to be believed. That is the opposite of freedom, I think. In fact, it works to reinforce the precarity of our positions, by taking away one of the defining traits of being a scholar: academic freedom.

In the absence of academic freedom, how academic is the precariat, anyway? Erin Wunker’s many posts labeled “Notes from the Non-Tenured Stream” illustrate the theme of self-censorship in poignant ways. Wunker

<sup>2</sup> See Miya Tokumitsu’s “In the Name of Love” and Melissa Dalglish’s “The Damage Done by DWYL.”

first talks about it in a post that comes immediately on the heels of Morrison's, titled "Being Frank Feels Risky: Notes from the Non-tenured Stream." In it, Wunker talks of her reluctance to admit the exhaustion of a 3/3 academic load, garnished with research grants applications, and topped with the insidiousness of job insecurity that never leaves a sessional. In "Bouyant Plans: More Notes from the Non-tenure Stream," Wunker confesses:

So let me fess up: in the last month or so my deliberately cultivated and self-preserving pluck has been worn a bit thin. I've been down, both bogged down and blue. Part of this is March, which is a notoriously difficult month for many of us. Part of this is the resounding number of rejections I've received in the last month (jobs, grants). Part of it is the ennui that comes with thinking "what has all this work accomplished?" And part of my pluck has been worn down by things I can't write about on the blog despite the fact that they might well be the most informative and useful for others in a similar limited term position.

And Wunker is hardly the only one in this position of ambivalence toward blogging, when blogging undermines one's possibilities of engaging in the profession one loves and strives for. Here's Lee Skallerup-Besette:

I have to keep trying to tell myself that this isn't a blog post, so maybe I can write in this space again. There's a vulnerability in writing about this (or at least around this) that I'm as surprised as anyone I'm not willing to expose, at least not here. And when I can't write about what I really want to write about, I can't write about anything.

What does it mean for anyone in this saccharine culture of positivity to confess to being "worn thin" and "bogged down and blue"? My thinking flies back to Barbara Ehrenreich's takedown of the culture of positivity in *Bright Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*. Ehrenreich talks about how well this culture of positivity works with neoliberalism to foster capitalism's growth at the expense of people's wellbeing, by divesting responsibility from the community and devolving structural problems on to individuals. Thus, downsized employees alongside cancer patients are forcefully encouraged to be positive in the face of misfortunes over which they have little control. What this relentless pressure to be positive couches is the rabid individualism that propels neoliberalism by telling their people exactly the opposite: misfortunes take hold only if you allow them. You, the individual, are the

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only one who can avert them, and do not think your community or society owes you any assistance in the matter.

This series of posts by precariously employed academics seeks to resist this discourse that so many of us, myself included, have embraced. Anger and some of the other ugly feelings that Sianne Ngai has theorized, such as envy, irritation, and paranoia, emerge on *Hook and Eye's* "Notes from the Non-tenured Stream" and elsewhere as a means to counter the discourse of positivity that blindsides us to the decrepitude of the academic job market. Ngai's inventory indexes affects that can easily emerge from an intimacy with contemporary academia.

And isn't this intimacy, or even co-dependency, exactly what "do what you love" promotes? The notion that, as academics, we are intrinsically defined by the work that we do leads immediately to some form of corollary: if you display any other kind of affect, especially an "ugly feeling," then you are already unfit to be an academic. You have brought it upon yourself, and therefore your precarity is your own doing. Such is the paradox of academic blogging.

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