

Sarah Elaine Eaton  
Amy Burns *Editors*

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# Women Negotiating Life in the Academy

A Canadian Perspective

 Springer

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Sarah Elaine Eaton  
Werklund School of Education  
University of Calgary  
Calgary, AB, Canada

Amy Burns  
Werklund School of Education  
University of Calgary  
Calgary, AB, Canada

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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  
Amy Burns

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We would also like to thank everyone at Springer who believed in us and guided us through the process. Special thanks to Nick Melchior, Lay Peng Ang, Jayanthi Krishnamoorthi, Muruga Prashanth, and Albert Papp for your support.

We are also grateful our colleagues at the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary. We received unwavering support from this project from our fellow academics, as well as students and staff. We offer special acknowledgement to Barbara Brown and Katherine Mueller, who were early-stage collaborators that ended up leading to this larger volume.

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

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# Editors and Contributors

## About the Editors

**Sarah Elaine Eaton** Ph.D., is a faculty member at the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary. She has worked in post-secondary contexts in a variety of roles since 1994. Her research interests focus on higher education leadership, policy and governance, with specific expertise in applied ethics and integrity.

**Amy Burns** Ph.D., is the Associate Dean of Undergraduate Programs in Education with the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary. She has worked extensively in both the K-12 public school system as well as in the post-secondary context. Her research interests focus on two primary areas including feminist leadership in education and the role of leadership in pre-service teacher education.

## Contributors

**Violet Baron** University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada

**Kristine Bauer** University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada

**Lahleh Behjat** University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada

**Jo-Anne Brown** University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada

**Amy Burns** University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada

**Lorraine M. Carter** McMaster University, Hamilton, ON, Canada

**Sarah Elaine Eaton** University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada

**Marina L. Gavrilova** University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada

**Dianne Gereluk** University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada

- Jocelyn L. Hayley** University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada
- Diane P. Janes** Southern Alberta Institute of Technology, Calgary, AB, Canada
- Margaret Kovach** University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK, Canada
- Hiroko Kubota** University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, Canada
- S. Laurie Hill** St. Mary's University, Calgary, AB, Canada
- Gabrielle Lindstrom** Mount Royal University, Calgary, AB, Canada
- Emily A. Marasco** University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada
- Jennifer Markides** Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada
- Mairi McDermott** University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada
- Jinny Menon** University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, Canada
- Karen Ragoonaden** University of British Columbia Okanagan, Kelowna, BC, Canada
- Lorna E. Rourke** St. Jerome University, Waterloo, ON, Canada
- Muna Saleh** Concordia University of Edmonton, Edmonton, AB, Canada
- Bonnie Stelmach** University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, Canada
- Brenda M. Stoesz** University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, MB, Canada
- Brandy L. Usick** University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, MB, Canada

# **Our Academic Selves**

# Bringing My Past into My Future as a Woman in the Academy



Amy Burns

**Abstract** This chapter describes my engagement with feminism from my time as a public school teacher and educational leader into my work as a tenured Faculty Member and Associate Dean in a large research-intensive university. It draws heavily on doctoral research concluded over a decade ago (Burns in *Feminist educational leadership in the Alberta public school system: The possibilities and challenges of leading from the nexus*, 2008) and examines how many of the themes developed in that doctoral research still ring true today. Ideas around evolutionary feminism, activist feminism, and generational feminism are introduced and both my own story and the words of those featured in the doctoral research are presented side-by-side. The chapter concludes with a discussion of what feminism means in my role as an academic and the path forward that requires me to make my feminist ethic visible.

**Keywords** Evolutionary feminism · Activist feminism · Generational feminism · Educational leadership · Academia

What follows is both story and research, including my experiences and the experiences of others. It is located in time and, while it begins in the present, it is centered on work I completed over a decade ago (Burns, 2001, 2008) and then put on the shelf, mostly out of necessity. Currently, I enjoy a fulfilling and joyous career in academia, but at the time of the aforementioned research, I was a public school teacher; also mostly fulfilling and joyous.

My career as an educator began in 1996 in a variety of classroom teaching and educational leadership roles. That career spanned almost 20 years, and in that time, I completed my Master of Arts (Burns, 2001) and Doctor of Philosophy (Burns, 2008). I got married, had a child, and began to learn about and understand the skills so necessary to trying to having it all (Burns, Brown, Eaton, & Mueller, 2017). I sought out experiences in my teaching career that led me to four different school divisions, to schools nestled in the countryside with 200 students in kindergarten to grade 12 classes, and then to urban high schools with 1000 students. I worked with incredible people who shaped me and helped me find my voice. One of the

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A. Burns (✉)  
University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada  
e-mail: [amburns@ucalgary.ca](mailto:amburns@ucalgary.ca)

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most compelling and encompassing lessons for me happened in the first year of my career and led to my interest in women in leadership and, more specifically, feminist leadership (see, e.g., Blackmore, 1999; Skrla, 2003). It was a difficult lesson but an important one: it shaped my academic career from that point on.

I am currently the Associate Dean of a large undergraduate teacher education program, and at the time of this writing, have been doing this work for just over a year. Prior to this, I held a directorship in the same program where my primary responsibility involved placing approximately 1000 preservice teachers into academically appropriate practicum placements several times a semester. Of course, teaching, research, and service, all aspects that are synonymous with a life in the academy, came with both leadership roles. I have been in the postsecondary world in a full-time way for just over six years and recently attained that most important of milestones, tenure.

This chapter is different than anything I have yet written for publication, and I will admit to a sense of nervousness in “putting it out there”. I draw on my experiences moving from the public school system to the academy and the ways in which feminism has been lived and described in these two environments. I also draw on my doctoral dissertation (Burns, 2008) in which I examined, among other things, differences between the public school system and the academy in relation to feminism and how it is taken up. I reflect on how some of these concepts were apparent or not in my early teaching career and in my current reality. But more than that, it is my story located beside and within the experiences of those I engaged with over a decade ago.

## **A Statement of Feminist Belief**

It would be inappropriate for me to begin my story without locating myself in the feminist discourse. Even today, feminism and feminist epistemology is debated and contentious. Schumann (2016) noted that this debate is “distorted by pre-existing biases” (p. 2). Indeed, Schumann continues to say that it goes much further than the word to a need to rethink “customary conceptions of knowledge and take into account the particular, contextual, embodied and emotional dimensions and conditions of knowledge generation” (p. 2). But this contention and debate are not new and spring from the continually evolving history of feminist thought. From Wollstonecraft (1792/2004) who noted that her early experiences “in childhood and as a young woman, in a class-bound and male-dominated society, influenced and shaped the ideas she would later develop into a feminist argument” (p. x) to the works of more recent feminist authors (see, e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Jones & Hughes, 2016; Wallace & Wallin, 2015; Weiler, 2001) to the movement into a conception of feminism aimed at the digital world (see, e.g., Guillard, 2016), the discussion continues.

I come to feminism from a poststructural perspective, with a deeply held belief that it is language which creates and shapes us in innumerable ways that are both explicit and invisible. I believe that by questioning and troubling entrenched societal

discourses, feminists can begin to see, acknowledge, and change societal structures that silence those outside of the dominant discourse. I also believe that feminism is a political act, a movement based on acts of resistance, however small. Through my experiences, I have come to believe that feminism demands action, be it a rally or a protest or attendance at a board meeting. To deny action is to prevent change. Having said this, I have also come to know that this isn't always easy. I didn't necessarily recognize this idea when I was younger, and I like to believe that I have come to a place in my life where I am more forgiving of the fear that often accompanies inaction, although others may not agree or see this as a positive change.

What has not changed for me is my commitment to a poststructural perspective, and it is with this lens that I revisit my doctoral study alongside my own experiences. Hesse-Biber and Yaiser (2004) describe poststructural feminism as “a new form of political creation that occurs by creating resistance to dominant knowledge and then allowing that resistance to disrupt the social system thereby necessitating change” (p. 19). This understanding was echoed by Irigary (1985) who discussed poststructural feminism and critical deconstruction as the means by which one goes about “jamming the theoretical machinery” (p. 78). Common to these conceptualizations is reliance on discursive knowledge and constitution of knowledge based on complex and shifting notions of power and meaning.

This constant state of flux results in a poststructural feminist belief in the socially contextualized and constructed nature of reality. Language, a tool by which we create our social reality, is also socially contextualized and constructed and, therefore, by its nature, language is not neutral or objective (Foucault, 1980). A poststructural feminist examination of social practice and ideology is one that scrutinizes the complex and shifting power relations which create meaning in our social world while pursuing a politically transforming agenda.

Reflecting on the experiences I have had and the day-to-day workings of my life, I cannot pretend to have stopped and noticed each and every encounter from a poststructural lens. But, in 2008, I had the opportunity to interview six university academics and six practicing school principals on the topic of feminist leadership specifically and feminism more generally. This experience led to themes on topics such as the discourse of equality and the perceived role of feminism in the academy and the public school system. It is from this study (Burns, 2008) that I have chosen to present three narratives focused on evolutionary feminism, activist feminism, and generational feminism. These narratives and experiences of feminism have played a significant role in my life both as a teacher and as an academic. The quotations I offer in this chapter are the ones I have curated from among the 12 participants. In this chapter, I share the perspectives of three principals and two academics who shared their stories in my study. The names they are known by here are not their real names, but ones they chose for themselves: Julie (principal), Elizabeth (academic), Marianne (principal), Karen (academic), and Lois (principal).

## Narrative 1: Evolutionary Feminism

As a woman in the academy, I am acutely aware of the impact that my past experiences have had on my conception of myself as a feminist in this space. When I began my teaching career, I couldn't put a name to the ideas I had and the issues I noticed regarding women in teaching. But, through the formative experiences of my early career and over time, my feminist awareness began to evolve and change. I began to have a sense of the ways in which women evolved in their roles through exposure to the educational environment. For example, I watched as many of my early female colleagues evolved from nurturers of children to advocates for the educational experience of children and this evolution often led to increased responsibility and a moral imperative to make a difference. This was also true of the academics and principals I engaged with during my doctoral journey. A number of them described the ways their feminist commitments had changed over time and could be traced back to the ways in which they had been influenced by the educational environment.

For Julie, a principal who, at the time of her interview had been in educational leadership for more than ten years, evolution in feminism meant an evolution in available opportunity:

I think it [feminism] has evolved over time. Twenty years ago, females were not as accepted into the domain of principalship. It's like females couldn't drive heavy duty equipment in Fort McMurray, and I think if I'd been born twenty years later that's what I'd have been doing instead because it's a lot of money you stand to make doing that. But girls didn't do that, and twenty years ago not so many girls did this. It's tough to get into a man's domain as a heavy duty mechanic, for example, or a welder, or a plumber, or some of these high-tech positions. It was tough twenty years ago, not so much now, and in ten years I believe that won't even be a point of discussion. I really don't. (Julie—Principal in Burns, 2008, pp. 83–84)

In discussing Julie's lack of opportunities and the ways in which she had perceived traditional ideas of gender to have changed, Julie painted a picture of the way feminism had evolved for her. This evolution and the deconstructing of traditional notions of womanhood are certainly not new (see, e.g., Butler, 1990, 1993; Hekman, 1999) and are often now taken up in examinations of identity, particularly where gender norms are challenged. Wallace and Wallin (2015) noted that the participants in their study described a feeling of being tested. "They were held to differential criteria, or were tested, by the patriarchal culture of the enterprise that seemed them worthy (or unworthy) to participate as academic scholars" (p. 419).

I too experienced a shift in my early career as I began to consider leadership and my role as a decision-maker. But it wasn't until I came to the postsecondary environment as a student that I realized how little I understood of the foundation upon which the evolution of feminism was built. In graduate studies I was introduced to a body of feminist thought that would change my feminist vocabulary and understandings. Guest (2016) described this sense of "coming to" feminism as starting with "having a feminist inclination, instinct, or feeling" that is then crystallized in higher education through reading and discussion (p. 474). Indeed, it was through study and discussions with academics like Elizabeth that I came to understand my own feminist evolution. For Elizabeth, an academic who shared her perspective in my study, the evolution of

feminism, specifically, the postmodern movement which acknowledged and honored the existence of multiple perspectives and differences between marginalized groups, involved a softening of the divisive theoretical and political lines drawn through feminist thought generally:

I have really appreciated the post-modern turn in feminist thought because I got tired of being dismissed by other feminists as not radical enough, while they had no appreciation of the sort of contexts that I and others like me were working in, trying to open spaces. And so, the whole idea of being critical between groups of feminists is something I don't have a lot of time for at all. I think the post-modern turn of course broke apart the notion that there was only one right way to be a feminist even though some people certainly cling to that. (Elizabeth—Academic, in Burns, 2008, p. 85)

Elizabeth, in considering her own past, applauded the growing notion of a plurality of feminist thought and action, although she also acknowledged that this growing acceptance was not shared by all. She remarked that she was “tired of apologizing for her liberal feminist beliefs. All of a sudden, it's not good enough to be feminist. You have to be the right kind of feminist. I am sick of being not radical enough to please other feminists and too feminist for everyone else”. (Elizabeth—Academic, in Burns, 2008, p. 137)

This debate about the definition of feminism, liberal notions of feminism, and what it means to be feminist have likewise been put forward by hooks (2000) who spoke against the plurality of feminist thought, describing the need for feminism to define itself in the interest of ensuring meaning:

Currently, feminism seems to be a term without any clear significance. The “anything goes” approach to the definition of the word has rendered it practically meaningless. What is meant by “anything goes” is usually that any woman regardless of her political perspective (she can be a conservative right-winger or a national communist) can label herself feminist. Most attempts at defining feminism reflect the class nature of the movement. Definitions are usually liberal in origin and focus on the individual woman's right to freedom and self-determination. (hooks, 2000, p. 25)

Considering this debate from these two perspectives, what stands out is the role of political activism and the extent to which each of these women felt activism must be undertaken. Whether one believes, as hooks does, that we must declare ourselves and define feminism, as Elizabeth does that we must acknowledge our everyday activities, or as Julie does that it is the improvement in opportunities for women that is important, all of these ideas speak to the evolution of feminism from a fight for equality to a much broader discourse. This realization struck me when this interview was first conducted and continues to resonate with me today.

From one context to the next, feminism continues to evolve and our understanding deepens. As I noted earlier, this expansion of my view was something I needed to come to the academy with true experience. There simply wasn't the time or the encouragement to pursue the theoretical understandings associated with feminism. Reflecting, I can see that my time in the public school system enabled me to understand and trouble the positional issues I saw with regard to power and voice but it wasn't until I came to a place, the academy, that I could evaluate those experiences from a more theoretical stance. I could see then that Julie and Elizabeth were opening

spaces but they were doing so with a different vocabulary and a different perspective on the evolution of feminism.

## Narrative 2: Activist Feminism

A second narrative that arose out of my doctoral work in 2008 and one that has been most difficult for me to see myself in is the idea that feminism implies some kind of action, be it protest or the opening of spaces described by Elizabeth. I will admit that, in the early years of my teaching career, I vacillated between a fear of speaking up and an inability to be quiet. What I learned and came to understand very clearly was that any kind of public activism was mostly unappreciated and often led to my feeling a sense of isolation. This realization, this hard lesson, led me, like Julie, to feel uncomfortable with the activist elements of feminism for some time:

To me it [feminist activism] conjures up females with placards demanding something that they don't have, and I'm not sure what that is. But it's very intense, very female oriented. They're looking for something that they feel they need. I don't like it. I don't use it. (Julie—Principal, in Burns, 2008, p. 88)

Other principals who participated in interviews also used terms and descriptions that identified a fear of being labeled, and, again like Julie, described activism as intense and unappreciated. Even Marianne, a principal who at first blush appeared more comfortable than the others with the term activism, noted that she “wouldn't ever want to be construed as someone who wasn't fair because of a feminist perspective” (Marianne—Principal, in Burns, 2008, p. 89). I, too, experienced feelings of fear of being labeled in my early career although I came to better understand later that I was viewing activism from a narrow lens.

In many respects, I was able to re-envision what activism meant for me through my conversations with the participants in my study who shared a wider view of activism. For Karen, an academic and leader in the postsecondary environment, activism was a commitment to action and formed the basis of the political and ideological agenda that she felt underpinned feminism in the past and in the present:

Feminism is a way of being. It's also a kind of ideological commitment and the ideological commitment is to democratic relations. In my classes it means that, when we're talking about the world that we occupy, we talk about it in a caring and meaningful way and that all voices are heard around the table. It also means commitment to social justice particularly for those who are vulnerable within our cities, our towns, our world. It means all of those things, and it means that not only do I have an ideological commitment to that, but I do something about it. (Karen—Academic, in Burns, 2008, p. 86)

In speaking with Karen, I came to see that I had been engaging in feminist activism, in opening spaces for everyone to be heard. Additionally, I was able to look back and see that this kind of activism was happening in all of the schools I had been a part of during my time in the public school system. Through the work of committed, passionate teachers who believed in social justice and the importance of all people,