

## Women negotiating life in the academy: A Canadian perspective

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Volume 51, Number 4, 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085343ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47678/cjhe.v51i4.189375>

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### Publisher(s)

Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education

### ISSN

2293-6602 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Kadiyska, R. (2021). Review of [Women negotiating life in the academy: A Canadian perspective]. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education / Revue canadienne d'enseignement supérieur*, 51(4), 102–104.  
<https://doi.org/10.47678/cjhe.v51i4.189375>

# BOOK REVIEW

## WOMEN NEGOTIATING LIFE IN THE ACADEMY: A CANADIAN PERSPECTIVE

REVIEWED BY

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Eaton, S.E., & Burns, A. (Eds.) (2020). *Women Negotiating Life in the Academy: A Canadian Perspective*. Singapore: Springer. Pages: 201 (e-book). Price: CAD 153.64 (Amazon) or USD 119 (Springer US).

“A literary bouquet” (Kuipers, 2008, p. 122) of the stories of twenty-five women, their professional and personal experiences of what it means to be a woman in the academy is, in brief, what this edited collection is about. The uniqueness of the stories stems from women’s distinctive perspective as faculty, leaders, researchers and student services professionals in Canadian higher education contexts, thus expressing a variety of personal and professional, and uniquely Canadian viewpoints. Contributors voice their Indigenous, Metis, immigrant or children-of-immigrants perspectives through scholarly but at the same time personal accounts of their journeys throughout the academic world.

This collection of essays has been carefully and purposefully curated. The editors, Amy Burns and Sarah Eaton, have taken a holistic approach to the compilation and have grouped all the stories in the book based on emerging themes, thus deliberately selecting and arranging the individual chapters. The anthology has been an authentic emotional and scholarly journey for all authors. Each story complements and feeds on the previous one and has a special place in the arrangement. Contributors have been given the freedom to bring in their own approach to their story—i.e., select their flower for the bouquet and choose how to present their viewpoint of being a woman in the academy. There is no pretense of having all the answers or for universal representation of all women’s issues in academic life, but this collection of stories does open up the door to understanding the

complexities of being a woman in the academy. Authors recount their experiences with vulnerability, openness, honesty and reflection of how the personal and the professional intertwine and overlap for women in this profession.

The book opens with the editors’ reflections on their own roots revealing how some encounters have shaped their own development, present and future. Burns’ essay focuses on feminism and how her personal feminist stand has evolved throughout her career in education, as a teacher and a leader. Eaton has chosen to comment on the notion of servant leadership through the feminist lens of her own experience as a child of a servant mother in the house of a wealthy English family. That is followed by Ragoonaden’s story of what it is like to be a professor from a racialized background in a world full of elusive sisterhood, micro-aggressions, micro-inequities and constant competition. Aiming to encourage more women to mentor other women, Janes, Carter and Rourke focus on the importance of mentorship for women’s professional growth in the academy from a critical-social theory standpoint. They draw on rich experiences gathered in informal conversations with female colleagues. Kovach and Stelmach next choose to unravel what they have become and unbecome by securing tenured positions in the academy. Their “[W]here we are...” (p.51) exploration of their own academic identity quickly turns into an invitation for self-reflection. The identity thread is continued by Hill, decoded from a feminist standpoint—a

personal exploration of her own pedagogical and teacher education career, "...over time and across professional landscapes..." (p. 61). The story of a first-generation student turned "Third space" professional (Whitchurch, 2008) in the academy involves boundary exploration of identity and its relations to dominant cultures—Usick's chapter. The ambiguity and uncertainty of the "Third space," that place between faculty and academic management, the hybrid academic and blended professional, "the challenges and satisfactions" of that "Invisible Labyrinth" (p. 89) are further explored by Baron. Bauer, Behjat, Brown, Gavrilova, Hayley and Marasco add to the discourse a conversation on gendered equity and gender gap for women in STEM. They emphasize the importance of historical role-models in supporting their journeys in such traditionally male dominated areas.

Following that, Lindstrom offers her personal narrative experience as a Blackfoot Indigenous woman in the academy from an anti-colonial theory angle. Markides' account of being a mother, doctoral student, and academic with teaching responsibilities grabs the reader with the complexities and challenges that academic life can bring. Through poetry and evocative autoethnography (Ellis, 1997), Lindstrom reveals the demanding terrain she encountered in her academic and professional journey in an emotional and moving personal narrative. Kubota, Saleh and Menon tell their stories through the lens of women scholars of colour—the "travelling across worlds," physical and academic, building bridges over borderlands and viewing differences as a demonstration of love (Lugones, 1987) instead of separation. Through a feminist inquiry into motherhood in academia, McDermott writes a letter to her children reflecting on occupying those two often "at odds with one another" spaces (p. 161). The form of a letter-chapter is also used by Gereluk in her own reflection on being a woman academic for 25 years. Gereluk draws attention to the gender inequities she experienced in academia. The final contribution, by Stoesz, an autoethnographic narrative, is a representation of her quest for personal and academic balance and freedom, quest to understand the impact of her own Mennonite culture, religion and work ethic on her life as a woman in the academy.

Throughout the book, contributors have given us their perspectives using the themes of identity, relationships and reflecting on what becoming and being a woman in academia entails. The editors have collected contributions from women coming from all spheres in

the academy—tenured professors, academic leaders and leaders working in the "Third space" (Whitchurch, 2008)—i.e. being higher education leaders but not having faculty positions (Baron, Usick).

Language, social class and privilege are intertwined in all the chapters. Sometimes that is through the ethnic heritage of some of the authors: The reader will find words taken from Blackfoot (Lindstrom), Cree (Markides), and Mennonite Low German (Stoesz). Other times this is through the influence of the author's first language on their scholarly development (Kubota, Saleh and Menon) or through personal experiences of class, privilege or non-privilege such as being a first generation student (Burns, Eaton; Kovach/Stelmach; Stoesz; Usick; Lindstrom).

In their final note, the editors point out that not all voices have been heard (e.g., LGBTQ, Francophones) and invite further contributions from the field to complement the stories written so far, thus ending and at the same time opening the book for further conversations. Personally, I would have liked also to see more stories on the joys of working in the academy. Also, some of the challenges in the book seemed to me like challenges that we, all, encounter as working people in today's complex world - a good opportunity for wider discourse.

This book has prompted me to explore my own journey in higher education as a woman immigrant, mother, faculty member and lower-level manager in higher education. I have found many parallels and opportunities for comparison and reflection about my own space, privilege and non-privilege. The multiplicity of roles, the richness of the stories, the openness and vulnerabilities of all these women have shown me that I am a part of academia with my own unique and at the same time non-unique voice. I am a part of something bigger, and proudly belong to a world multifaceted, complex and full of challenges and rewards, called "the academy".

Whether you are a woman, academic, professional in higher education or simply a human, you will find something to relate to and inspire you in this collection of stories.

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