

Book Reviews

Here We Go Again: More Ways of “Making It,” Circa 2018

Women’s Professional Lives in Rhetoric and Composition: Choice, Chance, and Serendipity, edited by Elizabeth A. Flynn and Tiffany Bourelle. Ohio State UP, 2018. 286 pp.

Surviving Sexism in Academia: Strategies for Feminist Leadership, edited by Kirsti Cole and Holly Hassel. Routledge, 2017. 316 pp.

Reviewed by Michelle Ballif, University of Georgia; Diane Davis, University of Texas at Austin; Roxanne Mountford, University of Oklahoma

It is the ten-year anniversary of *Women’s Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition*; published early in 2008, the book emerged just months before the economic downturn that threw higher education into a crisis. By 2011, the American Association of University Professors was reporting a sharp rise in non-tenure track job openings and a similar drop in tenure-line openings, and those of us at doctoral-granting research institutions watched as our PhD students increasingly took fixed- or limited-term contract jobs or were turned away from the academic job market altogether. In such a market, Kristin Bivens, et al., flat-out asked, what use is there for a book like ours, focused as it is on traditional tenure-track career paths in rhetoric and composition? Our response, then and now, is that the current state of the market makes our book more necessary than ever for those who do aspire to that traditional path, where the available positions are few and extraordinarily competitive. While we would revise our book substantially for today’s job market, it continues to be studied by graduate students and young professionals, from whom we still hear frequently, and who hope to learn from the successful women we profiled.

At the same time, graduate students and junior faculty in the field obviously need to learn and practice strategies for other sorts of successes as well, and they need to be open to other types of rewarding positions, inside and outside of the academy. So, over the past decade, we’ve read with interest a continuously growing list of publications focused on women’s diversifying career paths and success strategies in higher education. Especially noteworthy among them is this journal’s special issue in spring 2011, which focused on responding to and expanding the scope of our project. What we’ve learned is that women in the field today face many of the very same challenges they have always faced, in addition to some new ones wrought by the economic downturn and the recent,

soul-crushing emboldenment of sexist, racist, and homophobic habits and practices that threaten our civil liberties. On the upside, though, the #MeToo and Time's Up movements may be indicative of an intensified collective will to aggressively address systemic sexist roadblocks.

It just so happens, to our utter delight, that the whimsical ABBA musical *Mamma Mia!*, a film that celebrates intimate relations among women—as mothers, daughters, friends—is also (my, my) celebrating the ten-year anniversary of its premier. So it's in honor of all these relations and of the field itself that we embraced the subtitle of the just-released sequel to *Mamma Mia!*—*Here We Go Again*—and agreed to read and respond to two recent edited volumes on women's challenges and strategies of success in academia—*Women's Professional Lives in Rhetoric and Composition* and *Surviving Sexism in Academia: Strategies for Feminist Leadership*—while revisiting our own.

Women's Professional Lives in Rhetoric and Composition extends our curiosity into how women “make it” in the profession by offering the stories of women who consider their careers through metaphors other than a “pathway.” Intended to challenge what counts as a “normal” career, the volume's chapters are autobiographical reflections on how unexpected life events—death, depression, commuter marriage, a working-class upbringing—can be leveraged into a career. The introduction emphasizes “serendipity,” but these stories illustrate shrewd and cunning use of opportunity when it arrives and perseverance when it does not. As Lynn Bloom states, “Making good choices positions you to take advantage of serendipity” (58). Readers will be familiar with many of the names in the volume: Linda Adler-Kassler, Lynn Z. Bloom, Lisa Ede, Elizabeth Flynn, Anne Ruggles Gere, Malea Powell, Jacqueline Rhodes, and Shirley Rose, all of whom have “made it” by conventional definitions. But the book also includes a woman who left academia to develop a business and several who serve or have served in non-tenure track positions. In this way, the book nicely straddles our book and Amy Goodburn, Donna LeCourt, and Carrie Leverenz's edited volume, *Rewriting Success in Rhetoric and Composition Careers*, which, in response to our book's focus, explores success in the field off the tenure track. Unlike our profiles, which were based on interviews, the authors in *Women's Professional Lives* freely explore the obstacles they encountered trying to succeed at their goals and the unconventional sources of wisdom that sustained them. By emphasizing serendipity and resilience and pathways to positions in our field that are far from linear, the chapters collected here offer hope to women who do not see their lives reflected in the existing literature.

The essays in *Surviving Sexism in Academia* depart both from our book and *Women's Professional Lives in Rhetoric and Composition* in important ways. Edited by Kirsti Cole, a rhetoric and composition scholar, and Holly Hassel, who works in both women's and gender studies and rhetoric and composi-

tion, this book addresses obstacles for women leaders in higher education across the academic spectrum and strategies for addressing these problems. Of particular interest are seven chapters that address discipline-specific contexts, such as philosophy—long a boy’s club—and STEM disciplines. The book also explores ways to use shared governance, mentoring, coalition building (e.g., among mothers—the focus of four chapters), resistance, and interruption to overcome oppression. There are two chapters on how to respond to bullying—including one on dealing with the queen bee, a sad theme in our own book—and to intersectional oppressions (particularly of gender and race). The stories of men behaving badly in philosophy and geography will resonate with feminists in the humanities and social sciences—particularly the gaslighting that seems a universal strategy of bullies. The story of one geography department stuck with us because of a particularly innovative feature of the volume: comic-book and other forms of visual essays interspersed throughout the book. There is something deeply satisfying about seeing problematic faculty members rendered as monkeys in the comic-strip version of an interview study (thank you, Heather Rosenfeld). Practical and nuanced, this book will be welcomed by women leaders (the target audience) writ large: department chairs, deans, faculty senators, committee chairs, and reformers in the ranks. At the same time, graduate students might find the book helpful for gaining strategies not so much to *make it* but to *break it* when the system reveals racist, sexist, ableist, and cis-gendered bias on such issues as dressing professionally (cf. Katie Manthey).

Though the editors of *Women’s Professional Lives* attempt to draw a semi-clear distinction between the “ways of making it” depicted in *Women’s Ways* and those they spotlight, we noted considerable overlap among all three volumes. One of the key themes that runs through each is collaboration: in the lived experience of our multiplicitous connections, in scholarly productivity, and in any political effort to combat sexist challenges. Throughout *Women’s Ways*, we noted the role of collaboration especially in women’s professional and scholarly successes. Many of the contributors in *Women’s Professional Lives* addressed the significant ways in which their collaborative relations with colleagues helped them personally, as well as how they collaborated professionally. Several chapters in *Surviving Sexism* point to a collaborative *political* approach (a sisters-are-doing-it-for-themselves approach), noting that *women* need to work to change sexism in higher education, and that advancing any “strategy for success” or way of “making it” will need to refigure a system that has always banked on the service of women—both in the university and in the home (care of partners, parents, children).

Unsurprisingly, not much seems to have changed since we addressed the question of how to balance the personal and the professional in *Women’s Ways*.

Chapter thirteen of *Surviving Sexism in Academia*, by Kyrstia Nora, Rochelle Gregory, Ann-Marie Lopez, and Nicole A. Williams, devotes itself specifically to issues facing mothers in the field of rhetoric and composition, and the stories gathered from their survey echo many that we gathered in ours. There is no getting around it: teaching a writing course is a labor intensive endeavor; teaching multiple writing courses requires, as one of our own survey respondents wrote, “most of the energy I possess” (*Women’s Ways* 9). (1). Writing teachers who also have children at home, the authors note, “can be overwhelmed by the second shift—the work of the home and caregiving” (Nora, Gregory, Lopez, and Williams 138). They discuss the “motherhood penalty” faced by many mothers in the field who say, again echoing our own survey respondents, that they have faced discrimination and belittling by colleagues who resent them for not being able to stay late when a meeting runs over or attend every departmental event because they have children at home.

Of course, this second shift involves more than raising children. Many of our survey respondents told us they had

partners, children, aging parents, and/or ill siblings under their care; many women reported difficulty in maintaining two-career partnerships, especially when they had to live separately, in different parts of the country, or when they had to ask a husband or partner to relocate to accommodate a career move, or when they had to work in the same department and negotiate the challenges that arrangement invites. (*Women’s Ways* 11)

To address these issues of care, Nora, Gregory, Lopez, and Williams propose that the enactment of “two sorts of universal policies” are necessary: first, programs designed to “increase awareness and sensitivity to parental and caregiver issues”; and second, policies that “provide multilayered structural support for mothers” (142). While we noted some of these strategies in *Women’s Ways*, the chapters on motherhood and academic careers in *Surviving Sexism* are much more focused on advocacy, which make them a valuable addition to the conversation.

Obviously, and for stated reasons, *Women’s Ways* focused on success in research intensive tenure-track positions in a more direct and linear way than most of the chapters in *Women’s Professional Lives*. Still, the theme of serendipity, which is a major focus of the latter, runs through four of the nine profile chapters in *Women’s Ways*, each of which is devoted to the strategies for success outlined by a successful woman in the field. *Women’s Professional Lives* takes up serendipity at its point of convergence with choice and chance, kairos and resilience. As Elizabeth A. Flynn and Tiffany Bourelle write in their introduction:

All of our contributors made choices within the constraints necessarily imposed by chance and serendipity involving changes in direction that seemed risky at first but that usually resulted in productive work involving teaching, administration, and research within rhetoric and composition. While our themes revolve around choice, chance, and serendipity within the contexts of *kairos* and resilience, these terms call to mind other concepts such as agency, control (or lack thereof) over one's path, and a general openness to various experiences. The intention of these narratives is not only to illustrate how scholarship and outside influences have impacted careers and lives but also to provide guidance for women and men who find themselves in similar situations. (3-4)

In her *Women's Ways* profile, Sharon Crowley notes that women tend to talk about their own success in terms of serendipity, as if they had no agency in it. Reflecting on her decision to follow her husband to the University of Northern Colorado at Greeley rather than going to the University of Iowa where she had also been accepted (but he had not), Crowley said: "It never occurred to me not to go with him. . . . For women, up to the second wave, we sort of went with the flow," she told us. "We did what we were told, and it did seem like serendipity if things happened for us. Or we were taught to rationalize it as serendipity. If we made it happen, we told ourselves it was luck" (218). There certainly is a great deal of chance in life, but women's tendency to consider their own hard-won paths to success as "luck" appears to be a problem that persists beyond the second wave.

By explicitly focusing on the "intersection of agency and accidental sagacity," *Women's Professional Lives* insists that serendipity is not "solely coincidence or luck but the willingness to act on hunches or trust one's own intuition—to learn from one's experience" (5). Their point is to challenge the debilitating sexist narrative that women *luck* into success and to urge women in the field to prepare themselves to recognize and seize upon serendipitous gifts, even when they sometimes take the form of sizeable challenges. Shirley Wilson Logan and Cindy Selfe described their professional success to us as serendipitous, being in the right place at the right time; yet it was clear that both had actively participated in the steering of chance situations into avenues for success. They both kind of "stumbled into a job," as Selfe put it, and then into administrative positions that aligned with their research interests (and vice versa) mainly by saying yes to challenges that presented themselves. These "lucky breaks" were obviously also a product of explicit choices they made and their general willingness to size up and accept a challenge. That is to say, they co-created much of the "luck" for which they then expressed gratitude.

Lynn Worsham deliberately created opportunities for a productive chance encounter in her research practices. She told us she spent every Friday afternoon browsing the current periodicals section of the library, discovering journals she didn't know about and reading articles she might otherwise not have found. "I learned a tremendous amount about my chosen field and various debates in other fields," she told us. And she added that "to use the internet databases, you have to have some idea of what you are looking for. What I learned on my Friday afternoons was the result of pure serendipity, and it made all the difference in my intellectual formation and development" (*Women's Ways* 309).

An especially shameful arena in which not much has changed for women in the academy over the last decade is what we called "queen bee" politics: dealing with senior women colleagues who make it in the profession precisely by making it impossible for other women to do the same. Although collaboration and sisterhood are the main messages in both the recent books under consideration here, bullying is not a male-only sport. At the time we were writing *Women's Ways*, one of us had experienced a queen bee along her career path and considered it an aberration, but we were shocked by the number of respondents to our survey who reported encountering a queen bee at a particularly vulnerable moment in her career. It led us to ask the women we interviewed for our profiles about the issue. One of the more entertaining responses we received was from Selfe, who opined that her husband Dickie raised bees, and she "never did much like the queen," who was far too "privileged" for her taste. Hanging out with the worker bees, she argued, was far better. "There's always one queen bee in the hive, but you *don't* have to *like* her, nor do you have to *be like* her. Do your own good work, help others, and feel good about yourself" (*Women's Ways* 145). Nevertheless, women bullies can be particularly pernicious, which is why we weave advice about them throughout our book—including in the chapter about life beyond tenure, in which we admonish women to be obnoxious if necessary, but *never* be the Queen Bee.

Unfortunately, the queen bee is still with us. In a chapter dedicated to this subject in *Surviving Sexism in Academia*, Fran Sepler offers a welcome review of more recent studies, including a 2011 survey that found that a whopping 95% of women respondents had been a recipient of what Sepler calls "quiet bullying" (e.g., gaslighting, shunning, gossip) by a woman colleague (298). Sepler has pioneered techniques for conducting workplace investigation and in her chapter offers advice both to the queen bee's target and to institutions. She goes much further than we did, pointing out that post-traumatic stress will emerge if the target of bullying does not receive help, and they should be prepared to leave for their own mental and physical health "when an institution has made protecting the bully a priority" (303). Sepler's chapter offers a taste of the practical wisdom in this edited volume.

If we were to put out a second edition of *Women's Ways* in 2018, we would make significant revisions in a few areas. First, while issues of racial injustice emerge through the profiles in *Women's Ways* (see, for example, particularly powerful statements by Royster) it is crystal clear to all three of us today, in hindsight, that we should have attended to race, sexual orientation, ableism, and intersectionality more explicitly and more carefully in *Women's Ways*. The book especially needs to be queered: it's a cis-gender story right from the opening scenes of closet-snooping and earring advice. We so appreciate E-K Daufin's chapter in *Surviving Sexism*, "The Problem with the Phrase 'Women and Minorities,'" which illustrates how important addressing these issues continues to be.

Second, we would address ways the profession has changed because of current market conditions and other sociocultural and economic shifts. Though neither *Women's Professional Lives* nor *Surviving Sexism in Academia* deals specifically with graduate student issues, that's a part of our book we think is in need of an update a decade later. Most preliminary job interviews in rhetoric and writing studies are now conducted via Skype rather than at the MLA convention, for example. In fact, Paula Krebs, the current executive director of the Modern Language Association of America, is now actively discouraging interviewing at the convention. Among other things, holding MLA interviews forces graduate student candidates to spend money they very likely do not have, Krebs argues. She admonishes her readers to go to the convention for the right reasons—to hear the latest research in your area, to catch up and/or drink with old friends from graduate school, to network, to learn new approaches to teaching or mentoring or hiring, etc. "But for the love of all that's good and holy," she pleads, "please stop going to the MLA convention to conduct first-round job interviews." In a new edition of *Women's Ways*, we'd therefore want to offer advice about preparing for video interviews, which come with their own singular challenges.

At most public universities, time to degree has shrunk substantially, too, so students have to get through their program more quickly or risk losing funding. We'd want to address the challenges this time constraint presents to graduate students, especially to their research program, and to offer some strategies for negotiating this squeeze while producing a quality dissertation without sacrificing academic integrity or professional marketability. And of course, given the sharp decline in tenure-track positions, we'd need to offer a variety of other models for professional success and ways students might prepare themselves at every level for the possibility of all sorts of fulfilling academic and alt-ac careers. Inside and outside the academy, today's market requires some familiarity with digital literacies, so we'd suggest a number of ways graduate students might incorporate emerging technologies in teaching and research,

and we'd offer some advice about how to claim appropriate digital skills on their curriculum vitae or work them into the conversation during an interview.

Third, because the culture of abuse within universities is finally being aggressively exposed by the #MeToo movement and an invigorated enforcement of the Title IX law, it seems crucial to include sober and concrete discussions, especially for graduate students, about what constitutes actionable behavior and by whom, where to go if there don't appear to be safe reporting structures within the department, and what to expect from each stage of the Title IX process. For faculty, we'd want to discuss not only what to do when a student comes to you to report a potential Title IX infraction but also ways to advocate for and develop safe reporting structures at every level of the academy. It also seems necessary, on the flipside, to discuss ways (especially feminist and queer) faculty might protect themselves against potential allegations.

The themes shared across *Women's Ways*, *Women's Professional Lives in Rhetoric and Composition*, and *Surviving Sexism in Academia* suggest that "here we go again" isn't always a positive thing for women pursuing a career in our field. It would be wonderful, obviously, if the rising economy would spark renewed support for higher education and an accompanying increase in tenure-track positions, both in our field and in higher education more broadly. Since we see no evidence that such a shift is on the horizon, we highly recommend the important volumes edited by Flynn and Bourelle and Cole and Hassel. Their attention to ways one might have a life within the field (*Women's Professional Lives*) and ways one might survive and fight back against the injustices within our institutions (*Surviving Sexism in Academia*) are a welcome addition to and expansion of feminist interventions in higher education like ours.

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Notes

1. See also "From Feminized to Feminist Labor," Jennifer Heinert and Cassandra Philips's chapter in *Surviving Sexism*, where they argue that the academy's increasingly reliance on contingent laborers, "the majority of whom are women," has had a particularly crippling effect on writing teachers, who are also exceptionally vulnerable in this climate:

Because the teaching of writing is process driven and labor intensive in both instruction and assessment, those who do it are disproportionately affected by universal cost-saving measures and often have neither the time nor the political or academic capital to effect change. As a result, teachers of writing have become even more vulnerable in political and budget climates that target feminized labor as expendable and non-essential. (127)

They contend that there has been very little change in this “problematic labor dynamic” since the 1990s; in fact, it could perhaps be argued that “conditions have worsened, largely because solutions to inequity often focus on things that women should or should not do to become visible or valued in the current system rather than challenging the system itself.” They advocate the creation of “feminist working conditions,” which “means engaging in the complex patriarchal system while simultaneously working to change the system itself” (127-28).

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