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Working with Imposter Feelings: A Queer Feminist Invitation to Imposter Sociology

Maddie Breeze*

Department of Sociology, Social Policy & Criminology, University of Stirling (United Kingdom)

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Abstract

Imposter "syndrome" is anecdotally ubiquitous among academic workers, and is overwhelmingly understood as an individual personal problem of self-esteem or confidence. However, queer feminist sociological approaches reject such prevailing discursive frames, and push back against equally ubiquitous self-help style responses. Rather than conceptualizing imposter feelings as internalized deficiency, this work turns towards feelings of unbelonging, inadequacy, and inauthenticity as public feelings in the university. Understanding imposter feelings as social, political affect means situating them in the context of intersecting educational inequalities and epistemic hierarchies, including as a diagnostic that can tell us about the operation of power in contemporary Higher Education, and asking how such emotional states might serve as grounds for agency and collective political action. This essay reflects on my attempts to work with imposter feelings sociologically, offering readers an invitation to imagine a queer feminist imposter sociology, focusing on how we might turn towards imposter feelings as a political resource in the contemporary university.

Keywords: Imposter syndrome; higher education; queer; feminist; academic activism.

* maddie.breeze@stir.ac.uk

1 Introduction

Feeling like an imposter is — anecdotally — near ubiquitous in academic work. In university common rooms, on social media, and in career development training workshops, talk about imposter "syndrome" (re)circulates (Breeze et al., 2022a). In such common-sense talk imposter "syndrome" is understood to involve convictions of the inadequacy of one's own teaching and research, a felt sense of unbelonging in the university, and a certainty that your demonstrable accomplishments are fundamentally fraudulent. Feeling like an imposter might mean convincing yourself that you have achieved a doctorate, research funding, a teaching award, and/or an academic job only via luck, deliberate deception, or systemic error. Feeling like an imposter involves a fear of being found out, unmasked not only as an incompetent outsider, but as an inauthentic, untrustworthy fake.

Imposter "syndrome" is something of a buzzword, in everyday academic talk (Addison et al., 2022) and in a steady stream of publications both reflecting on contemporary higher education (HE) via autoethnographic narrative (Lumsden, 2022) and offering self-help style advice on pursuing and negotiating an academic career (Wilkinson, 2020). Across contexts, imposter "syndrome" is overwhelmingly (but not exclusively) approached as an individual problem of faulty thinking or a deficiency in confidence and/or esteem; an inability to internalise evidence of competence, success, and belonging. A popular definition of imposter "syndrome" as an internal deficiency-of-the-self to be fixed, managed, and overcome is congruent with neoliberal self-management in HE. Such common-sense understandings de-contextualise, depoliticise and individualise feeling like an imposter in academic work. As such, feeling like an imposter is repeatedly positioned as a personal problem to be remediated with individual-level interventions for boosting confidence and esteem, definitionally detached from well-evidenced inequalities and hierarchies that structure academic entrance, recognition and success. A good portion of research literature too recommends individual solutions such as "building confidence" (Chapman, 2017), keeping a reflexive diary, and even dressing for success (Wilkinson, 2020).

An emergent body of sociological research however re-thinks imposter "syndrome" as a social, political, and structural phenomenon (Addison et al., 2022), in part critically interrogating such prevailing understandings. In this article I discuss the conceptual life of imposter "syndrome" before considering how contemporary sociological scholarship puts imposter feelings in conversation with long-standing queer, Black, and working-class feminist research, especially critical studies of equalities, diversities, and inclusion (EDI) work in universities. These rich bodies of scholarship have long attended to affective registers of how intersecting inequalities structure entrance into and progression within academic work shaping who (and what) is recognised as a legitimate academic subject. This research offers a substantive challenge to the enduring tendency to individualise, depoliticise and fix or overcome imposter feelings in academia.

A good portion of new sociological work reconceptualises imposter "syndrome" as a public feeling (Breeze, 2018), drawing on queer feminist cultural studies of affect, particularly Cvetkovich (2007 & 2012), which advances a concern with politicising, collectivising, and depathologizing negative affect. Generally, imposter "syndrome" is pathologized not via a strict set of diagnosable criteria — although there are those who advocate for its inclusion in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Bravata et al., 2020) — but perhaps more subtly via the self-help and self-improvement paradigms that are so often mobilised in response to feeling like an imposter, and which reimpose discourses of individual deficiency

and individual responsibility, positioning feeling like an imposter as a personal problem to be overcome.

Re-thinking imposter "syndrome" sociologically means shifting away from individually felt experiences of inadequacy, unbelonging, and inauthenticity and towards how imposter moods and atmospheres are structured/structuring in universities, the discursive effects of naming, claiming, and sharing imposter feelings (Taylor and Breeze, 2020), the work of occupying an imposter position (Murray et al., 2022), and the political potential in embracing imposter feelings. This piece concludes by drawing on my research to offer an invitation to a queer feminist imposter sociology, centred on approaching imposter feelings as a collective resource rather than a personal problem to be solved, asking how imposter feelings might serve as a site of agency and means for political action in contemporary HE.

2 The Conceptual Life of Imposter "Syndrome"

The idea of *imposter syndrome* has a lively conceptual life, in social sciences as well as in popular psychology and self-improvement genres. However, attention to imposter "syndrome" can tend toward detachment from established bodies of queer, feminist, sociological work on felt experiences of inequalities — for instance epistemic boundary work (Pereira, 2017), inclusion regimes (Ahmed, 2012), and misrecognitions of (in)competence (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012) — in education and HE workplaces. Clance and Imes' psychological research (1978) with "high-achieving women" in US HE is often identified as a starting point for imposter research. It is noteworthy that their research frames feeling like an imposter as a *women's problem* but does not directly explore how the phenomenon relates to gender inequalities. Clance and Imes developed a psychotherapeutic approach to "the impostor phenomenon", referring to how:

> Women who experience the impostor phenomenon maintain a strong belief that they are not intelligent; in fact they are convinced that they have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise [...] In other words, these women find innumerable means of negating any external evidence that contradicts their belief that they are, in reality, unintelligent (1978, p. 1).

On the one hand, Clance & Imes (1978) define impostor phenomenon in terms of "clinical symptoms" and "beliefs", attributing its genesis to early family experiences and parental expectations, consistent with an individualising, depoliticised framework. On the other hand, Clance and Imes acknowledge "factors" which "tend to maintain the impostor phenomenon" (1978, p. 4). Thinking sociologically, such factors look very much like gender inequalities in 1970s academia, including the pressures on "high achieving women" to maintain the gender order by performing aspects of normative femininity, such as using "friendliness, charm, looks, humour, sexuality, perceptiveness" to "win the approval of superiors" (1978, p. 5). However, when it comes to Clance & Imes' recommendations for interventions these sit at the depoliticised, individual level of changing individual women's beliefs and behaviours. As such the well-cited 1978 article can be picked up by sociologists to show how the socio-political (especially gender) has long been implicit in imposter research *and* to evidence the need for sociological enquiry that attends to the structural and interactional genesis of imposter feelings, pushing back against their prevailing operationalisation at an individual, asocial level.

Repetitions of well-worn citational paths (Ahmed, 2017) obscure paths less travelled, including by drawing upon while not acknowledging marginalised intellectual labours. In always looking to Clance and Imes (1978) as originators, there can be a tendency to overlook parallel bodies of scholarship which may not name imposter "syndrome" but nevertheless concern emotional landscapes of (un)belonging, (in)competence, (mis)recognitions of success and failure, and (in)authenticity, and especially those which evidence how these are contoured by intersecting inequalities in HE. Taking a sociological approach to imposter feelings in academic labour invites engagement with decades of empirically rich and theoretically sophisticated work on how success, competence, belonging and epistemic authority are systemically (mis)recognised (Collins, 1986; Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Pereira, 2017; Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993). And how entrenched inequalities and hierarchies are contested and (re)constituted via our emotional lives and in the affective landscapes of academic work (Ahmed, 2012; Taylor, 2013; Taylor & Lahad, 2018).

An instructive example of the broader conceptual life of imposter feelings can be found in queer feminist and anti-racist scholarship on equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in universities. Feeling like an imposter in the contemporary UK university means feeling like an imposter even when (or perhaps especially when) universities are more concerned than ever to promote themselves as *inclusive*, as *committed to diversity*, as *promoting equality as a core value*. Inclusion regimes in UK HE (Breeze & Leigh, 2022) require a visible, measurable, demonstrable presence of staff and students from "widening participation groups" or "non-traditional backgrounds", marked by class, race, gender, disability, and sexuality. As "diversity" becomes another metric, co-opted into neoliberalising universities' marketing strategies (Taylor, 2012) student and staff identities, figured as *protected characteristics*, embodiments of diversity and personal narratives are extracted as promotional material, valuable evidence for the profitable "happy diversity" of the institution (Ahmed, 2012). Ahmed offers an analysis of EDI in HE as non-performative, in that policy commitments, mission statements, equalities audits, and complaints processes not only do not bring about the *equality*, *diversity*, and *inclusion* they proclaim, but in practice function to block genuine institutional transformation, meaning that in universities "a fantasy of inclusion is a technique of exclusion" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 112). In such a context, imposter feelings start to appear more as a structural affect, rather than as a problem of faulty individual thinking (Breeze, 2018).

The affective regimes of entrance into, belonging and success within, academic work under such conditions have been extremely well researched. Particularly when it comes to how "being diverse" in HE "can be personally painful" (Taylor, 2013, p. 53). Students and staff of colour encounter racist microaggressions that undermine belonging and expertise in the university (Johnson & Joseph-Salisbury, 2018) and women of colour are much more likely to be *presumed incompetent* (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012). Working-class students and staff enter the "starkly unfamiliar field" of elite universities dominated by the middle-upper classes (Reay et al., 2010, p. 121). Working-class students may develop what Abrahams and Ingram (2013) theorised as a "chameleon habitus", switching between their working-class worlds of home and the middle-upper class field of the university. Loveday (2016, p. 1140) argues that shame structures working class experiences in English HEs and leads to "the embodiment of deficiency" among working class students and staff. A thread of imposter feelings — feeling out of place, feeling inadequate, feeling like a fraud — run through these works, even when not explicitly named, and sociological research that *does* directly take imposter "syndrome" as its object is enhanced by engaging with such a broader body of literature.

More recently, a surge of sociological research addresses feeling like an imposter in HE di-

rectly, as a social, political, and structural phenomenon, rather than a personal failure of self-esteem (Addison et al., 2022). This body of literature demonstrates how imposter feelings can be contoured by intersecting inequalities and processes of marginalisation in HE (Hewertson & Tissa, 2022). Including for instance how racist othering of Black students contributes to "growing imposter beliefs" (Perkins & Durkee, 2024), how even demonstrable success can be reconfigured as failure for working class women in the academy (Wilson et al., 2020), and how hostility towards sign languages contributes to excluding deaf academics (Chua et al., 2022). Others have shown how the structure and governance of academic labour provokes imposter feelings, such as the institutionalisation of competitiveness (Wren Butler, 2022) and management demands for never-ending improvement, achievement and entrepreneurship (Lumsden, 2022). Here imposter feelings are also configured as a diagnostic, with the imposter as a "canary in the coal mine" sounding the alarm on HE inequalities (Addison & Stephens-Griffin, 2022). Popular publications too advance sociological approaches, for instance arguing that imposter "syndrome" falsely medicalises what should properly be understood as a class problem (Olah, 2019).

Within this rich body of contemporary literature, feeling like an imposter in academic work has been theorised in several novel ways, all contributing to a shift away from the pathologizing implications of a "syndrome" and the prevailing self-improvement framework. Including, firstly, as a *position*, showing how naming and claiming imposter feelings in everyday talk and in research can co-opt and resonate with, yet fail to engage with, more permanently held forms of marginalisation such that talking about imposter feelings might distract from relative power and privilege in HE (Taylor & Breeze, 2020). Second, as a form of emotional *work*, demonstrating how feeling like an imposter demands a particular kind of labour to manage such feelings, from students who are already excluded or marginalised in the UK university (Murray et al., 2023). And thirdly research has attended to the various ways that imposter feelings and the dominant framework that individualises imposter "syndrome" are *resisted*, for instance by Black women early career scholars' creative practice (Wells & Sobande, 2022), and by working-class women academics' counter-narratives (Rickett & Thompson, 2024). What these diverse approaches have in common is a shared commitment to excavating the politics of imposter feelings. Much of this work draws upon a re-conceptualisation of imposter "syndrome" as a public feeling (Breeze, 2018).

3 Imposter Syndrome as a Public Feeling

This work is grounded in Cvetkovich's (2007) public feelings project which aims to destigmatize bad feelings or negative affects — especially those tied to depression such as inertia, apathy, and indifference — and to reconceptualize them as resources for political action. For Cvetkovich, this means working *with* feelings of "despair, burnout, hopelessness, and depression rather than dismissing these ostensibly negative affects as debilitating liabilities or shameful failures" (2012, pp. 132–133), asking how "feeling bad might, in fact, be the ground for transformation" (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 3).

Inspired by Cvetkovich, I set out to re-think imposter "syndrome" as a public feeling. Including in ongoing collaborative projects. Methodologically, this has encompassed writing autoethnographic fiction grounded in my own experiences of feeling like an imposter in academia (Breeze, 2018), collaborative autobiographical methods including fictionalising "Twitter" data (Taylor & Breeze, 2020), and creative methods such as letter-writing workshops and events where participants took on the role of "imposter agony aunts" responding to composite, fic-

tionalised academic problem page letters (Breeze et al., 2022b). Throughout, these methods have followed precedent in autoethnography and sociological fiction (Watson, 2016), aiming to "tell tales" in order to "speak embodied truth" (Inckle, 2010), and adopting fabrication as ethical practice (Markham, 2012). Likewise, feminist sociology offers a rich methodological history of prioritising experiential ways of knowing, and has long considered the validity of autobiographical methods (Stanley & Wise, 1993). There is much precedent in feminist research on the emotional landscapes of HE Inequalities for using autoethnographic methods (Taylor, 2013), and particularly collective biography (Breeze & Taylor, 2020; Gannon et al., 2015; Gannon et al., 2018). Autoethnographic, collaborative, creative, and fictionalising methods are particularly appropriate for investigating imposter "syndrome" as a public feeling because they facilitate an excavation of "the hunches, intuitions, and feelings" that traditional methods and "intellectual analysis can restrict" (Cvetkovich, 2012, pp. 80–81).

Mobilising these methods I have drawn on Cvetkovich (2007 & 2012) to make three conceptual moves to re-think imposter "syndrome" as a public feeling (Breeze, 2018). The first is situating feeling like an imposter in social and political context and attending to how HE inequalities variously position many students and staff *as imposters*. Much contemporary imposter research and a broader evidence base on how class, race, gender continue to structure academic entrance, success, and (mis)recognitions of competence and authority make it clear that feeling like an imposter is perfectly rational for many of us. Rather than pathologizing and diagnosing imposter "syndrome", the second move involves approaching imposter feelings themselves as diagnostic. This means asking what imposter feelings can tell us about the structure and governance of HE, including endemic marketization, entrepreneurialism, workforce casualization, performance management, and cultures of audit. This involves turning towards imposter feelings as with other bad feelings, and staying with them to see what we might learn about foundational hierarchies and power dynamics of HE. The third move is working with imposter feelings as potential resources for collective action and political agency in the university, turning towards and embracing sensations of unbelonging, inadequacy, and inauthenticity and asking what strategies they might offer for inhabiting and contemporary higher education.

Prioritising this third move, I aimed to see what happened if we re-thought affective regimes of fraudulence, inauthenticity, inadequacy, and the fear of *getting found out* in HE, not as individual problems of faulty self-esteem to be overcome but instead approached such moods as resources for doing feminist academic work in the non-feminist or anti-feminist university. I read imposter feelings and ambivalent feminist investments in the university through each other, with a particular focus on how, as feminists, we often find ourselves positioned both within and against the university, invested in *and* simultaneously seeking to intervene in and transform the dominant measures of success in academic work. Feminist academic workers encounter a particular kind of ambivalence in seeking legitimacy, recognition, belonging, and career advancement, while at the same time actively making attempts to resist and rework how value, authority, belonging, and competence are understood and distributed (Ahmed, 2017; Pereira, 2017). Here the question becomes whether feeling like an imposter might be a useful tool for creating alternatives to conventional visions of authenticity, success, and belonging:

> Thinking through "imposter syndrome" as a public feeling shows how a felt-as inauthentic, fraudulent, and inadequate relationship to established measures of "success" and indicators of belonging can be refigured as a critique of these standards, rather than as a deficiency of the self (Breeze, 2018, p. 194).

My previous work has explored this dynamic particularly in relation to how felt sensations of — for instance — fraudulence and illegitimacy can be mobilised to query epistemic hierarchies in the university, especially in relation to the position of feminist knowledge production, teaching and research. This means drawing on standpoint theory and Black feminist thought (especially Collins, 1986) to understand how "imposters" are particularly well positioned to critique (and perhaps re-work or refuse) the structures that position many of us as unwelcome, unknowing, or less credible in the first place (Ahmed, 2009 & 2012; Gutiérrez Y Muhs et al., 2012; Pereira, 2016). This is grounded in how feminist scholarship bumps up against the problem of how to advance convincing feminist knowledge claims whilst simultaneously intervening in and working to change dominant understandings of what counts as "knowledge". Feminist research and teaching in the contemporary university often adopts a critical orientation to epistemic boundary making *at the same time as* seeking some degree of legibility, if not legitimacy, within the terms of those very same processes (Pereira, 2017). This tension — of seeking recognition while struggling to transform the terms of such recognition — can be traced through the argument that women's embodied experiences of the everyday could form the primary basis for feminist sociological knowledge (Smith, 1990, pp. 21–22) and the development of women's standpoint theory (Smith, 1974), feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 1997; Hartsock, 1997; Hekman, 1997), and Black feminist thought (Collins, 2009). This is especially the case in Black feminist thought which makes a direct challenge to the "power dynamics that underlie what counts as knowledge" (Collins, 2009, p. 292).

I've previously argued that such a positioning, or standpoint, can foster imposter feelings for feminist academics, interacting with class, race, and gender — and with career categories that imply insecure, temporary and precarious employment practices — to contour felt senses of unbelonging, inadequacy, and inauthenticity (Breeze, 2018). Simultaneously, an imposter position (Taylor & Breeze, 2020) can be a fruitful location — or epistemic standpoint — from which to continue the ongoing feminist project of questioning what "counts" as knowledge and developing alternative ways of knowing. This means embracing imposter feelings not only as a clue or early warning system (Addison & Stephens-Griffin, 2022) that tell us something useful about institutional inequalities in HE, but potentially as offering strategies for negotiating academic work in institutions we are "struggling to transform" (Ahmed, 2017).

4 Invitation for Queer Feminist Imposter Sociology

Here once again I am most interested in turning towards bad feelings associated with imposter affect in universities and exploring what grounds they might offer for action. This follows public feelings projects, and joins those thinking "about what happens when academics feel bad, and the kinds of transformations these negative felt experiences might generate" (Burford, 2017, p. 73). This also involves a willingness to stay with negative affect in its own right, rather than reaching for solutions or rushing to *get over it*, "holding space for bad feelings in the present rather than making promises to fix the future" (Smilges, 2023, p. 73). This is particularly resonant for feeling like an imposter, which aligns with Ngai's (2005) conceptualisation of ugly feelings. Ugly feelings refer to "weakly intentional" affective states such as envy, irritation, and paranoia that are typically associated with frustrated, suspended agency and often dismissed as politically irrelevant and "unsuitable [...] for forceful or unambiguous action" (*ibidem*, p. 22). In Ngai's theory this unsuitability amplifies the power of ugly feelings "to diagnose situations, and situations marked by blocked or thwarted action in particular" (*ibidem*, p. 27). Beyond revelation and diagnosis, looking to bad, ugly feelings as sites of collective, political ac-

tion involves attempts to apprehend agency and action beyond the "mirage of a straightforward exercise of will" (Stewart, 2007, p. 16).

What follows then is an invitation for a queer feminist sociology of imposter feelings grounded in the political potential of constantly feeling like a phoney, unlikable, inadequate, intruder. Throughout my intention is not to present a set of strict instructions or a definitive programme of advice, but to encourage readers to imagine what possibilities for collaborative action in and against the contemporary university might flow from the embrace of imposter feelings, not as a deficiency of the self but as a social, political, collective phenomenon and as resource for collaborative action.

1. *Sneaking In and Stealing Access*

How might being made to feel unwelcome be reclaimed as a site of agency, or a tool for re-working regimes of inclusion and exclusion in academic labour? Turning towards feelings of (un)belonging, a sense of intruding as an uninvited guest or "space invader" (Puwar, 2004) might alert us to intersecting patterns of inequality shaping the uneven, unreliable, and non-linear trajectory of an academic career. An internal, repetitive narrative of *I'm not supposed to be here* might be refigured as a "diagnostic of power" (Abu-Lughod, 1990), sounding the alarm (Addison & Stephens-Griffin, 2022) on how class, race, and gender shape who gets *in* and who gets *on* in an academic career. This can involve pausing on — for instance — how categories like "early career", "tenure track", "caring responsibilities" (Breeze & Taylor, 2018) alongside employment practices like hourly paid contracts, surveillance of international students, and processes of application, review, award, qualification, and recruitment contour such affective states.

Working *with* imposter feelings to reveal and diagnose inequalities, exclusions, and insincere, non-performative inclusions (Ahmed, 2012; Breeze & Leigh, 2022) is a preliminary step to taking action. Queer feminist imposter sociologists might then investigate possibilities for trespassing into hallowed academic halls, sneaking into institutions that were never meant for us, and taking what we need — whether or not this is provisioned via the institution. This means aligning with, taking inspiration from, and joining with existing movements occupying the university including the Black radical traditions articulated in the "undercommons" (Harney & Moten, 2013), the "access theft" advocated by radical disability scholar-activists (Smilges, 2023; Giles, 2018), working class incursions into middle-upper class culture industries (Olah, 2019), and queer sharing (Mahn et al., 2022) of resources that otherwise are fundamentally unevenly distributed in the marketized and profit-driven university.

Rather than pursue inclusion and a sense of belonging on the university's truncated terms, doing queer feminist imposter sociology might instead necessitate collectivised approaches to securing and redistributing the resources and accommodations that imposters need, beyond official access/inclusion policy. This means refusing and divesting from institutionally-led inclusion initiatives, that do not deliver on their promise, and instead forging networks of solidarity to create for ourselves what the university fails to provide (Breeze & Leigh, 2022). This might include: redirecting research funds to underfunded third sector partner organisations working with and for marginalised communities, activism against temporary and insecure employment contracts, stealing stationary from the university, stealing food from the university, refusing to collaborate with the UK Visa & Immigration Service to monitor and deport international students, letting anyone use your swipe card to get in to the building to use toilets and showers, calling in sick, "quiet quitting", union organising, demanding actually affordable student

housing, organising for divestment from fossil fuels and weapons manufacturing, demanding really accessible toilets, chairs, buildings (*ibidem*).

2. *Surviving Nepotism*

Turning to imposter feelings as a site of action means turning towards felt convictions that *nobody likes me* and/or *I don't fit in* as a potential resource for negotiating the nepotism that can shape academic work. At first glance *being liked* may not seem particularly relevant to doing queer feminist sociology. However, considering how vital collaborative team-work and professional networks are to academic work, the importance of building a network and maintaining connections is clear. Advice to "find a mentor" and "build networks" is regularly dispensed in response to a wide range of career blockages (Breeze & Taylor, 2020). The prevalence of nepotism in hiring practices, assembling large grant teams, and career progression is hard to ignore. While acknowledging how essential networking can be to academic labour, embracing imposter feelings means thinking critically about social capital in academic work.

Queer feminist sociologists, especially Black feminists and women of colour, already know about the possibilities and limits of reclaiming being unliked, familiar with the potential (and pitfalls) of divesting from likability with all its ableist, gendered, racialised, and sexualised, baggage. Feminist academics are likely already familiar with being labelled "angry" and "emotional" (Taylor, 2013), with critiques of unjust systems and epistemic hierarchies being dismissed on the same spurious grounds (Pereira, 2017), with how the imperative to be likable, the "happy" (Ahmed, 2012), "smiling" (Swan, 2010) face of a diverse and progressive institution smooths over enduring inequalities, and with the racialised governmentality of "conviviality" (Hernando-Lloréns et al., 2023).

Putting the insights from these imposter feelings into practice means assessing when it might be strategic to embrace unlikability, making attempts to sabotage governance via conviviality, finding opportunities for disrupting nepotism, and for building collaborative connections that dismantle the power of "old boys" networks. Research evidence already demonstrates how the imperative to be "nice" and "kind" in education work not only is vastly unevenly distributed according to class, race, and gender, but can also distract from and obscure enduring structural limitations to inclusive education (Pascoe, 2023). This provides compelling context for existing calls to embrace killing joy as a feminist project, for instance in Ahmed's killjoy manifesto (2017) and *Feminist Killjoy Handbook* (2023). Imposters might take inspiration here, including Ahmed's calls to "be willing to cause unhappiness" (2017, p. 258), to burst bubbles (*ibidem*, p. 259), to refuse to laugh (*ibidem*, p. 261), to refuse inclusion (*ibidem*, p. 263), and to "snap" (*ibidem*, p. 266). An imposter refusal to get on and be liked might similarly take aim at the distribution of access, resources, and belonging, repudiating nepotism by divesting from its unreliable promises in a refusal to *fit in*.

3. *Refusing Meritocracy*

A queer feminist imposter sociology would stay with feelings of inadequacy and the conviction that your *work will never be good enough*, seeking potential in such moods for embracing mediocrity and exposing the myth of meritocracy in academic work. A persistent ideology, meritocracy acts to justify vast disparities of wealth and power (Littler, 2017) and promulgates the belief that academic success is deserved, earned via effort and/or talent. Imposter affect however, alerts us to the felt sense that indicators of achievement might be undeserved. Refusing meritocracy means experimenting with reclaiming the feeling that success has been achieved

in error, by luck, by subterfuge, or according to measures irreducible to individual merit, skill, talent or other ideology of deservingness.

Observing that academic success — and even keeping on top of increasingly stretched workloads day to day — can become "ever-receding horizon[s] that cannot be reached" (Pereira, 2016, p. 106), a queer feminist imposter sociology might imagine divesting from official measures and creatively envision alternative definitions of success, getting by rather than moving on up. While reclaiming *failure* (Halberstam, 2011) can gloss over material risk in individual failures, anti-work perspectives (Frayne, 2015) offer prompts for building solidarities across differential risk and developing reciprocal material supports that create conditions for collaboratively escaping the trap of meritocratic success. Disability scholar-activists are at the forefront of this movement, and imposters might take inspiration from advocates for "crip negativity" (Smilges, 2023). Likewise *quitting* and exiting academia — willingly or unwillingly, partially or in its entirety — continues to offer a strategy for imposters to consider, and Coin (2017, p. 705) analyses quitting as "rebellion intended to abdicate the competitive rationality of neoliberal academia and embrace different values and principles".

Refusing meritocracy also invites an unseating of authority in the university, loosening the hold of "senior" positions as justified or deserved. Here imposters might experiment with different forms of disobedience within academic hierarchy, and are invited to consider what alternative values might guide our actions if advancement up the career ladder and success within the terms of the contemporary, neoliberal university no longer holds appeal, or is even realistically achievable in an(other) time of cuts, closures, and crises. Divesting from meritocracy however also necessitates working together to build forms of community support and solidarity — like queer sharing — (Mahn, et al., 2022) that mean the unreliable promised benefits of career progression (material comfort, higher wages, job security, making a contribution, improving the institution via liberal reforms, symbolic recognition) cease to hold power.

4. *Faking It until You Make It*

Finally, how might feelings of fraudulence serve a resource for action? Here we can start by querying the value of authenticity in academic work and exploring the political potential of collectivised fakery and duplicity. Expectations of legible authenticity are central to (neo)liberal valorisations of the idealised "diverse" academic worker. Imposters may therefore explore strategies for refusing visibility and embracing misrecognition and deception. Imposters might withdraw the work of "coming out" in academia and the alienating labour of being visible (as disabled, as queer, as racialised minority) by refusing to perform authentic "diversity" in the academic workplace (Taylor, 2013). Embracing misrecognition and deception might also involve refusing to disclose "protected characteristics" — like sexuality, gender, race — on workplace surveys, refusing to stand in as a measure or count of diversity (Breeze & Leigh, 2022). Faking it might mean lying to those in the university who hold power over you, time theft, refusing to "be yourself" at work, strategically masking (Smilges, 2022) to make it through the day.

This final strategy is about reclaiming the political potential of illegibility, and the attitude that "there are more things you can do when the people in power don't have the capacity to recognize your existence" (Cooper, 2012). This echoes anti-assimilationist queer social movements, which reject visibility and recognition — and essentialist approaches to gender and sexuality — as inadequate, self-defeating strategies for liberation (Conrad, 2014). This means asking how imposter affect can serve as resource for negotiating tensions in needing recognition while working to dismantle the conditions that create such need. A queer feminist imposter sociology would explore misrecognition and illegibility as collective strategy for deceiving those

who hold power in the unequal university; acting the part of the good worker, feigning just enough compliance. Embracing inauthenticity may involve drawing attention to the many moments of fakery in academic life, such as over-claiming the originality, significance and rigour of a new piece of research, performing more confidence than is felt in interviews and in conference presentations, pretending not to notice the endemic absurdity and contradiction in so many aspects of neoliberal governance of universities.

Embracing fakery here is *not* about tricking yourself into feeling more confident and competent than you otherwise might — as self-help approaches to "overcoming" feeling like an imposter repeatedly advise — but rather turning towards faking it more broadly as a way of attending to and perhaps starting to dismantle some of the most disingenuous foundations of academic life.

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Maddie Breeze – Department of Sociology, Social Policy & Criminology, University of Stirling (United Kingdom)
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6553-9128 | maddie.breeze@stir.ac.uk
https://www.stir.ac.uk/people/1987010
Maddie Breeze is a queer feminist sociologist and lecturer in Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Stirling (Scotland, UK). Maddie researches and teaches across the Sociology of Education (especially higher education and academic work) and the Sociology of Emotions (especially "bad feelings" in education contexts). Maddie is interested in the social inequalities associated with gender and sexuality, exploring how these are lived, resisted, and reconfigured. This work is driven by a concern with agency and collective action.