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‘Demeaning, Frustrating, and Exhausting’: Academic Women’s Labour and the Contradiction of Dependence and Devaluation in the Capitalist University

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Abstract

This paper examines the experiences of academic women through a social reproduction theory (SRT) framework, analysing how academic institutions perpetuate gender and class hierarchies while simultaneously depending upon and systematically devaluing women’s labour. Drawing on illustrative survey data from 453 academic women across multiple countries, we demonstrate how productive and reproductive labour intersect in the academic labour process, with women disproportionately absorbing service and relational work that remains invisible in formal productivity metrics. Findings show that working-class women academics face compounded exploitation through precarious employment, class-based cultural exclusion, and acute awareness of the structural contradictions sustaining their exploitation; an awareness that, we argue, contains within it the conditions for transformative possibility. In advancing SRT as an empirical research method, this paper contributes to an emerging body of SRT-grounded work in higher education, calling for structural transformation over reformist frameworks proven unable to address the material conditions documented here.

Keywords: Academic Labour Process, Social Reproduction Theory, Gender, Class Stratification, Higher Education

Introduction

I want to belong. I believe in the project of higher education. But academia has broken me. I am desolate. (Participant 160)

Having to do the often invisible work that men/those from a higher station get away with not doing is demeaning, frustrating, and exhausting. (Participant 136)

The material conditions of academic labour enable systematic reproduction of gender and class hierarchies within higher education institutions (Bhattacharya, 2017a; Bunn et al., 2020; Vogel, 2013). Women from working-class backgrounds face intensified exploitation through both (un)productive and reproductive labour demands in academia, their position further stratified by intersecting relations of race, disability, age, and more (Baker, 1999; Bourabain, 2021; Costello, 2012; Davis, 1994; Grant and Elizabeth, 2015). This paper examines how these structural mechanisms of exploitation operate through the academic labour process, with particular attention to how institutions of higher education function as sites of social reproduction under capitalism (Bunn et al., 2020; Federici, 2020). Traditional feminist reformist approaches to equity have failed to recognise how gender and class operate as mutually constitutive forces within capitalist higher education systems, particularly in terms of social reproduction (Bell, 2026a; Bhattacharya, 2017a; Vogel, 2013). This artificial separation has generated incomplete theoretical frameworks which continue to obscure the material conditions shaping women's academic labour, especially for those navigating multiple forms of structural oppression (Bannerji, 2020).

Our methodology draws on social reproduction theory (SRT), to illuminate the relationship between academic labour and broader systems of capitalist reproduction. Through qualitative survey data from 453 women academics across multiple countries, with primary representation from Australia and the United Kingdom, we examine how women from working-class backgrounds experience heightened exploitation through the academic labour process, where their intellectual and emotional labour is simultaneously devalued and extracted for essential institutional functions (Roebuck et al., 2013; Rowell and Walters, 2022). This contradiction manifests as a necessary feature of academic institutions operating under capitalism (Ferguson, 2020). The data presented here are illustrative of this structural argument rather than offered as representative or generalisable empirical claims. Our findings are organised around two interconnected analytical dimensions (the material and ideological mechanisms reproducing gender and class hierarchies, and the persistent devaluation of women's reproductive work despite its essential institutional role), which together map how this contradiction operates in practice: how it is structured, how it is maintained, and how it is lived. We argue that working-class women academics, precisely because of their position within these structures, are not only its most acute casualties but its most potent challengers.

Women and Academic Employment Patterns

Despite decades of equity policies and initiatives, women continue to face significant structural, cultural and institutional barriers in higher education, which are further intensified by deeply embedded class biases (Crew, 2020; Dews and Law, 1995; Luke and Gore, 1993; Maguire, 1997; Morley, 2018; Morley and David, 2009; Saulnier and Swigonski, 2006; Winchester and Browning, 2015). Women remain as 'other' academics (Acker, 1994) and continue to be positioned as outsiders within the ivory tower, despite institutional rhetoric of inclusion.

The persistence of structural inequalities is particularly evident in employment patterns and promotional pathways. Women academics have been systematically concentrated in subordinate positions within an occupation organised and managed predominantly by men from privileged educational and class backgrounds (Jones and Maguire, 2021). This hierarchical stratification is reinforced through increasing casualisation of academic labour, a process that disproportionately affects women (Cornelius-Bell and Bell, 2021, Mulligan et al., 2021), maintaining Oakley's (1995) metaphor comparing research work to 'housework' within the academy, and mirrors the historical devaluation of women's labour more broadly (Federici, 2021; Ferguson, 2020; Fraser, 2017).

In Australia, recent governmental data boasts that women's academic employment prosperity continues to improve: women in or above senior lecturer roles has grown by 46.3% since 2015, with 44.8% holding academic roles above level C – albeit a reflection of trends in overall increases across the sector (Department of Education, 2024). Importantly, governmental data collected and presented often provides only limited breakdowns of employment status and classification by gender and other important intersectional variables. Further, it does not reflect where seemingly positive, or well-intentioned, changes through policy and workplace relations (e.g., efforts to de-casualise the academic workforce; c.f. Closing Loopholes No. 2, 2024) may have negative consequences to the profession (e.g., reducing casual workers pushes work back onto already overworked continuing staff whilst depriving precarious workers valuable career opportunities). Moreover, it does not follow that an apparent focus on equity and increase in women in senior academic roles leads to an increase in power, agency and privilege (Thornton, 2023). Indeed, more delineated research conducted by Hamilton et al. (2022) captures that women represent 58.3% of staff across the sector, make up 58.3% of the casual workforce, hold 63% of junior and lower level A and B staff and only 19% at senior levels D and E. Women are overrepresented in teaching only (61.4%) and professional (64%) roles and remain underrepresented in senior executive positions, with 24.3% holding vice chancellor positions and 37.5% holding deputy vice chancellor positions.

Similar patterns emerge internationally. In the United Kingdom, a modest

improvement has been claimed in the representation of women professors over the last decade to 30.8% in 2022/23. Women remain underrepresented in senior academic positions and overrepresented in part-time and fixed-term contracts, and pay gaps persist, with women consistently in lower salary bands compared with male staff across all professional and academic positions (Advance HE, 2024). In the United States, AAUP data reports that women comprised 46.7% of full-time faculty members but only 32.5% of full professors, and despite increasing representation at entry levels, women's salaries were approximately 81.2% of men's overall (AAUP, 2020).

These patterns show that despite gradual improvements the 'leaky pipeline' persists globally. Even where legislative frameworks (*Fair Work Act* 2009 (Cth); *Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (*Cth)), formal initiatives (Universities Australia Executive Women guidelines, 2019) and institutional strategies exist to promote equity, profound barriers persist. Institutional structures and cultures continue to disenfranchise women from senior academic and leadership levels, with positions structured around (masculine, colonial) norms that systematically disadvantage women through rigid understandings of how merit is defined and rewarded, the gendering and distribution of duties, and a culture of 'overwork' that disproportionately impacts women (Gilbert et al., 2020; Hamilton et al., 2022; Richards et al., 2023; Winchester and Browning, 2015).

Women academics from working-class backgrounds face additional, distinct challenges navigating an environment historically shaped by and for middle- and upper-class norms, values and capital. Working-class academics experience everyday challenges of systemic injustices, exploitation, microaggressions and persistent feelings of being outsiders in academia despite bringing valuable skills and perspectives to their roles (Crew, 2020). They also struggle with precarious employment disproportionately, frequently being relegated to contract and service work which further intensifies their lack of belonging and as 'taken for granted' by and as 'property of' the academy (Reay, 2000, 2018). The intersection of gender and class adds further complexity to experiences of alienation, persistent feelings of insecurity, stress, guilt, and anxiety within the demanding academic environment (Rickett and Morris, 2021; Thwaites and Pressland, 2017).

The experiences of working-class women academics with disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, and those from cultural minority backgrounds face compounded challenges in academia through inaccessible spaces, inflexible policies, and deeply embedded social and cultural assumptions (Dolmage, 2017; Menzel and Bennett, 2024; Merchant et al., 2019). Scholars experience marginalisation through both overt and subtle means (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012; Braddock, 2001), through racism and ableism in hiring, promotion and publishing, and curriculum and pedagogy (Henry and Leroy-Dyer, 2024; Leroy-Dyer and Menzel, 2023; Parsons, 2017). Moreover, women academics of colour and with disability face different forms of isolation, tokenisation and additional, disproportionate service burdens, and their work is often devalued or accused of bias when

it addresses forms of systemic injustice (Dixon, 2008; Melaku, 2019).

To understand the academic labour process, we next turn to our theoretical framing and methodology. Using SRT, we explicate how women academics must simultaneously perform both productive and reproductive labour, with the latter remaining largely devalued in systems of academic reward.

Social Reproduction Theory and the Academic Labour Process

Our study leverages a materialist framework, grounded in Marx's analysis of alienated labour (1844/1978), and is informed by Gramsci's (1971) analysis of intellectual labour as a tool of hegemonic reproduction to see academic institutions as sites of both domination and possibility for transformation. Specifically, our SRT methodology provides a crucial theoretical framework for examining how labour power is simultaneously produced and reproduced through social relations beyond *direct* capitalist production.

Social reproduction refers 'to the reproduction of the capitalist system as a whole' and the behaviours, relationships and responsibilities necessary to maintain life daily and intergenerationally (Bhattacharya (2017a, 6). SRT allows us to analyse how material and ideological mechanisms in academia interconnect with broader systems of reproduction across both worlds of production/reproduction which are necessarily interlocked, with social reproduction subordinated, by capital, along gendered lines. Within the higher education context, use of SRT for empirical research enables lucid examination of how women's academic labour simultaneously reproduces institutional functioning and class/gender hierarchies through both paid and unpaid work. To understand contemporary academia, then, we need to understand that the capitalist market creates dependencies among individuals, making social reproduction a collective process that cannot be attributed solely to individual actions or agency (Weiss, 2022). Moreover, social reproduction, here, is not an external feature of capitalism, but is integral to its functioning, reinforcing the structures of power and exploitation inherent in capitalist societies and present and imbued in all its social relations (Fraser, 2017; Weiss, 2022). Throughout this analysis, we frame the university as a capitalist institution rather than primarily a neoliberal one (Heller, 2016); following Fraser (2017, 2022) and Harvey (2005), we understand neoliberalism as a particular phase of capitalism, and locate the structural devaluation of women's reproductive labour within capitalism's longer logic accumulation rather than its contemporary policy expression alone. This integrative theoretical approach allows us the opportunity to examine some of the contradictions between institutional dependence on women's (exploited) labour and its persistent devaluation as women workers straddle the demands of both (un)productive *and* reproductive labour.

From our Marxist perspective, productive labour creates surplus value through

commodity production (Marx, 1990, 1974), while unproductive labour facilitates capital circulation without directly creating surplus value (Marx, 1973). Reproductive labour, later theorised by Federici (2020) and Mies (2022), describes unwaged work that reproduces labour power. Critically, labour under capitalism depends on production *and* reproduction, but reproduction, the connected sphere which *literally* reproduces the labour (power) for capital, is, per Vogel (2013), systematically devalued.

The academic labour process, drawing first from Braverman's (1974) conception, can be understood as the work conducted, by academic staff, in their teaching, research and service work. In academia, productive labour manifests in creating commodifiable knowledge products, while unproductive labour reproduces conditions for knowledge production. The reproductive dimension appears in often invisible service, relational and pastoral care work, which is devalued in formal metrics and disproportionately performed by women and minority scholars, a racialised and gendered division of reproductive labour that extends well beyond academia (Glenn, 1992; Federici, 2020). As with industries everywhere, academia increasingly faces standardisation and managerial control (Anderson, 2008; Davies, 2003; Luescher-Mamashela, 2010), with teaching labour particularly subject to deskilling through standardised curricula and learning management systems (Ball, 2012, 2016). This creates hidden forms of labour disproportionately absorbed by women academics, who perform essential emotional and relational work that resists standardisation yet remains outside 'countable work' (Baker, 1999; Grant and Elizabeth, 2015). This academic housework mirrors broader labour patterns, while research processes are controlled through measurable outputs (publications, grants, impact metrics) (Aronowitz, 2004; Blackmore and Sawers, 2015; Lipton, 2020). The growing divide between teaching and research focused roles also exemplifies this separation of conception from execution, where casual and fixed-term staff deliver standardised 'content', often having limited input into its design (Avolio et al., 2024; Brommesson et al., 2022), creating gendered academic proletarianisation alongside intensifying performance measurement.

The corporate (financialised) university, as we examine through a SRT lens, compensates 'productive' work, but separates reproductive work (as non-productive) and subordinates women workers in the process (Fraser, 2017). This creates a particular form of contradiction where women academics, especially those from working-class backgrounds, must simultaneously perform both (un)productive labour (measured through research metrics and teaching evaluations) and reproductive labour (unmeasured institutional maintenance work), the latter remaining largely invisible in systems of academic reward and advancement. As such, academic institutions, rather than standing outside cycles of social reproduction, actively organise and maintain gendered divisions of labour which mirror and reinforce broader patterns of reproductive labour under capitalism. Our analysis examines how this contradiction between institutional dependence on women's reproductive labour and its systematic devaluation operates through the material

conditions and ideological mechanisms documented in the findings below.

Empirical Methods

This research employed a qualitative survey designed to capture both quantitative and qualitative data about academic women's lived experiences, designed to probe the intersections of material conditions and social reproduction processes. The survey contained 59 questions which included multiple choice and open-ended with free text options. The survey was structured around four sections: descriptive demographic data, academic and career progression details, employment status and workload perceptions and experiences of academic labour, including class and gender-based alienation. Participants who self-identified as having working-class backgrounds were asked several additional questions to further explore their experiences of class bias in academic work. To be clear, this paper does not seek to generate generalisable claims about the prevalence of these experiences, nor to establish causal relationships between class background and workplace outcomes. Rather, survey data (both descriptive statistics and qualitative responses) are used illustratively, to evidence and ground a structural analysis of how academic institutions organise and devalue women's labour. Our aim is critical and theoretical: demonstrate the operation of a structural contradiction, not to measure its precise scale.

Sample

Data were collected through the online survey hosted on Qualtrics between February and September 2024[1]. Participants were recruited utilising multiple channels to reach a diverse sample of women academics, including professional networks and associations for women in academia, social media platforms and snowball sampling through participant sharing, resulting in international engagement across diverse academic contexts.

The survey was commenced by 694 participants, with 453 providing meaningful responses through Section 2 and beyond. The sample was internationally distributed, with just over half from Australia (53%), approximately one-fifth from the United Kingdom (19%), and smaller representation from the United States (8%), Canada (4%), New Zealand (2%), and other countries across Europe, Asia, and South America. The sample was evenly split for comparative analysis between those self-identifying as having working-class backgrounds (49%) and middle-class backgrounds (just over 49%), with a small number reporting upper-class origins (under 2%).

[1] Ethics permissions were obtained from relevant human research ethics committees: CDU-HREC H24022 and UQ-HREC 2025/HE000137

Participants represented diverse identities and experiences. Culturally, half identified as Anglo-Celtic, just under one-third as European (28%), and 4% identifying as Indigenous (16 of whom identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander). The majority identified as heterosexual (78%), with approximately one-fifth identifying as LGBTIQA+. Nearly one-quarter reported having disability (23%). Age distribution centred on mid-career academics, with the largest cohort aged 41-49 years (32%), followed by those 35-40 years (22%). Career experience ranged from early-career (1-7 years: 33%), mid-career (8-15 years: 38%) through to senior academics with over 16 years' experience (29%), providing comprehensive representation across academic career stages.

Data Analysis

We employed thematic coding to examine qualitative survey data (Robson and McCartan, 2016), noting that the dataset included extensive free-text responses, with 176 participants providing answers of 100+ words and 62 responses exceeding 200 words (some reaching 1,175 words). Analysis proceeded iteratively, beginning with descriptive statistical analysis of demographic, employment, multiple choice and Likert scale data, followed by open coding to identify initial patterns across qualitative responses. We conducted interpretative analysis systematically mapping emerging themes to our two analytical dimensions, treating contradictions within participants' accounts as productive sites of the coexistence of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic consciousness (Gramsci, 1996). Quantitative data was cross-referenced against qualitative themes where available, with further investigation of variables including class background, cultural identity and disability status. Throughout, participants' detailed experiential accounts were centred in the analysis, with each response read individually to ensure sentiment was understood and appropriately coded, privileging participants' own theorisation of their structural positioning over interpretations imposed from above (Hesse-Biber, 2007).

Limitations

As this study was conducted at a point in time and uses self-reported data gathered through self-selecting recruitment channels, we acknowledge that participants may disproportionately represent women with stronger awareness of or experience with gender and class inequity in academia. Findings should be read as an *illustrative* snapshot of structural conditions rather than as representative or generalisable empirical claims about their prevalence. The relatively early development of SRT as an empirical research method means our operationalisation requires ongoing refinement and debate; we offer this study as a contribution to that development rather than a definitive application. With that said, this survey formed the first stage of a larger research project, with the second stage

involving oral history interviews with a selection of participants to further interrogate class and gender dynamics in higher education through historical materialist analysis.

Findings and Analysis

The findings below are organised through two interconnected analytical dimensions derived from our SRT framework. Dimension 1 examines the material conditions and ideological mechanisms through which academic institutions organise and distribute labour to reproduce gender and class hierarchies, mapping how employment precarity, workload distribution and class discrimination concentrate exploitation among working-class women. Dimension 2 examines how the systematic devaluation of women's reproductive labour persists despite its essential role in sustaining institutional life, capturing the contradiction between institutional dependence on women's care, service and emotional work and its deliberate obscuring in formal measures of productivity. These dimensions are analytically distinct but mutually reinforcing and together elucidate the structural logic through which universities reproduce capitalist social relations along gendered and classed lines.

Dimension 1: Material conditions and ideological mechanisms that organise and distribute labour to reproduce gender and class hierarchies

Employment Patterns and Precarity

The material basis of labour stratification manifests clearly in employment security patterns. As shown in Table 1, less than half of all participants held continuing or permanent positions, with over one-third in precarious employment through casual, contract or sessional arrangements. This precarity was concentrated along class lines, with working-class women overrepresented in precarious positions (41% compared to 32% of middle-class women), facing a 16 percentage point gap in permanent employment. Working-class women were also over four times more likely to have left higher education entirely (8% compared with under 2%), raising questions about whether many are pushed out rather than choosing alternative pathways.

Table 1: Employment status by class background

Employment status	Working class (n=222)	Middle class (n=224)	Upper class (n=7)	Total (n=453)
Permanent/continuing	81 (36.5%)	117 (52.2%)	4 (57.1%)	202 (44.6%)
Precarious (contract with end-date, casual or between)	92 (41.4%)	71 (31.7%)	2 (28.6%)	165 (36.4%)
Retired or left academia	18 (8.1%)	4 (1.8%)	0 (0%)	22 (4.9%)
Other (incomplete response, professional role, PhD student)	31 (14.0%)	32 (14.3%)	1 (14.3%)	64 (14.1%)

This employment stratification extended to academic role distribution. Working-class women were overrepresented in teaching-focused positions (31% compared to 24% of middle-class women) and underrepresented in research-focused roles (19% compared with 31%). While both groups were similarly represented in balanced teaching-research roles (approximately half of each), the concentration of working-class women in teaching-intensive work with limited research opportunities creates distinct career trajectories that privilege certain forms of academic labour while devaluing others.

Workload Distribution, Division of Labour, and Unpaid Work Patterns

Participants were asked several questions about their workload, including duties outside of defined roles, additional/disproportionately performed work, and unpaid labour; questions used Likert scales with free-text options for contextual examples. Patterns of compulsion to perform unpaid labour emerged consistently across multiple domains. Working-class women reported higher rates of feeling compelled to perform additional work outside of paid and defined duties, with 23.4% of working-class participants answered 'always', compared with 18.8% of middle-class participants; the results were relatively even between responses 'often' and 'sometimes', showing the compulsion for women to perform additional, unpaid labour and service work in the academy more generally, irrespective of class background. When participants were asked about working in research teams and feeling compelled to perform tasks unrelated to the core research (administrative tasks, networking, relationship management, etc.), class seemed to intensify the perceived sense of pressure. Working-class participants were more likely to report 'always' (22%) to those with middle-class backgrounds (14%), who were more likely to answer 'often' (38%). Indeed, the overall majority of both groups reported feeling compelled to take on additional, devalued tasks, with only 7% of working-class and 8% of middle-class participants stating they 'never' felt compelled to take on additional, unrelated

labour when working in research teams, demonstrating the invisibility and 'service work' of women's labour in the academy. For teaching academics, working-class participants were again more likely to report they 'always' (12% vs 8%) and 'often' spend extra time with students outside their allocated teaching time (25% vs 21%), and were less likely to report 'sometimes' spending extra time (32% vs 36%). The data also suggests extra time spent with students is consistently unpaid or is unaccounted for in workloads across both groups.

The extraction of unpaid labour was particularly acute for women with disability, who reported even higher rates of always spending extra time with students. As shown in Table 2, women with disability were substantially more likely to always provide additional student support (20% compared to 12% of women without disability), with 95% reporting at least some regular extra time. These patterns capture the systematic extraction of reproductive labour through women academics' unpaid labour in student support, pastoral care and institutional maintenance work, often rendering these essential contributions invisible in formal workload allocation and compensation systems.

Table 2: For teaching roles, how often do you spend time with your students outside of your allocated teaching times (i.e., within lectures, tutorials, seminars or scheduled consult sessions)?

Class background and disability variable	Always	Often	Sometimes	Never	No Response
Working class	27 (12.2%)	55 (24.8%)	70 (31.5%)	15 (6.8%)	55 (24.8%)
Middle class	18 (8.0%)	47 (21.0%)	81 (36.2%)	18 (8.0%)	60 (26.8%)
Respondents with Disability (n=66)	13 (19.7%)	19 (28.8%)	31 (47.0%)	3 (4.5%)	-
Respondents without Disability (n=259)	32 (12.4%)	78 (30.1%)	119 (45.9%)	30 (11.6%)	-

Working-class women also reported higher responses in experiences of gendered exploitation, with discrimination reflecting both material extraction and its recognition. As shown in Table 3, working-class women were more likely to report frequently experiencing discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation. Both groups experienced discrimination at substantial rates, however working-class women's higher rates of

frequent discrimination experiences align with their disproportionate burden of undervalued labour.

Table 3: Experiences of discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation

Class background	Always	Often	Sometimes	Never	No response	Combined always/ often/sometimes
Working class	13 (5.9%)	39 (17.6%)	101 (45.5%)	54 (24.3%)	15 (6.8%)	153 (68.9%)
Middle class	4 (1.8%)	27 (12.1%)	115 (51.3%)	56 (25.0%)	22 (9.8%)	146 (65.2%)

However, while working-class participants responded more strongly on the Likert scale compared to middle-class participants, the written responses from both groups demonstrate the similarities of experiences of exploitation of labour based on gender. For example, participants used the common phrase that they felt 'expected to…', for example, perform pastoral care, administrative work, set up for presentations, do the printing, tidy up and do the dishes after meetings, fetch the coffee, and so on, one stating there would be 'a tangible air of disappointment when I consciously choose not to perform these tasks' (Participant 93). The expectation to 'nurture' was identified as an unfair burden carried disproportionally by women in a system which 'respects men's boundaries but holds women to impossible standards' and where asking for the same respect is 'offensive' (Participant 124).

Indigenous participants identified race as a central factor in exploitative, undefined and invisible labour through institutional expectations to educate others. In particular, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women working in Australia consistently raised the burden of 'racism and colonial load' and the institutional expectation to advise, educate and represent from an Indigenous perspective without formal recognition, for example holding a 'somewhat tokenistic role as advisor to the Dean' (Participant 396). This tokenisation operates alongside a more insidious visibility, captured by one participant who described feeling 'flaunted as the young female Aboriginal academic who is working so hard' (Participant 433), a dynamic in which Indigenous women's labour is simultaneously exploited and performed for institutional reputation, while remaining unrecognised in any meaningful structural sense. Across these accounts, participants identified a persistent disconnect between institutional rhetoric of inclusion and the material reality of cultural

load carried without compensation, recognition or respect[2].

Awareness of Class Bias and Discrimination

Participants with working-class backgrounds were asked additional questions probing experiences of class discrimination. When asked whether they faced challenges or discrimination in academia based on their working-class background, approximately two-thirds (65%) reported experiencing this either directly or indirectly. Participants described perceptions and assumptions made about them academically, professionally and socially through direct and indirect messaging, leading to feelings of isolation in the academy. There were frequent references to colleagues' assumptions about financial security (e.g., ability to travel to conferences) and social/family experiences, which alienate and exclude, as well as references to not understanding the 'unwritten rules of academia', which led to concealment of their working-class background in order to survive, succeed and avoid discomfort for others. Language and expression were identified as defining examples of navigating class discrimination. One participant recounted being told by a female executive, 'Don't tell people that you were a hairdresser before you went to University... That is behind you now' and described how '"The VC has asked me to speak with you. As the elected member on Council, you'll need to be a little more polished... you know, like one of us"' (Participant 262). These kinds of experiences demonstrate how academic institutions police class presentation through expectations of middle-class cultural norms and communication styles.

Table 4: Pressure versus desire to shed working-class identity

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Felt pressured to shed working-class identity	13%	13%	20%	41%	14%
Wanted to shed working-class roots	32%	18%	18%	26%	6%

The data reveal a significant disconnect, though, between external pressure and internal desire regarding class identity. As shown in Table 4, over half of working-class participants (55%) felt pressured to shed their working-class identity to be accepted or

[2] We examine cultural load and expropriated labour in higher education for Indigenous women academics in dedicated detail, necessarily, elsewhere.

succeed in academia, yet only 32% reported *wanting* to shed their working-class roots. This finding challenges dominant class mobility literature that frames working-class people as aspiring to middle-class status, suggesting instead that pressure to conform represents institutional violence rather than individual aspiration. Participants located this pressure in both structural and cultural mechanisms, one identifying 'an anti-working class bias embedded in the structures of academia' where 'precarity, short-term contracts... can be more easily navigated by those from financially stable backgrounds', alongside 'more intangible things like working-class people lacking confidence or having more negative experiences with education in their early life' (Participant 172). The frustration of having one's material reality theorised by those with no experience of it was captured sharply by another: 'it's frustrating hearing privileged white men speak with authority about what is my life' (Participant 391).

The systematic nature of this exclusion manifested through both overt discrimination and subtle unease with working-class presence, described as being 'often not included in conversations or treated with the same respect as the "normal academics"' (Participant 112). Many participants navigated institutional cultures where their class background was simultaneously invisible and hyper-visible, both unacknowledged in formal equity initiatives yet marked as difference in daily interactions. This dynamic is captured with particular acuity by one participant working in English literature, who noted the striking contradiction of a discipline that 'frequently thematises' poverty and working-class experience yet whose colleagues had 'nothing to say' when confronted with it in person, leaving her wondering whether she 'should avoid the topic' to avoid 'making THEM feel uncomfortable' (Participant 382), a dynamic in which the working-class academic becomes responsible for managing middle-class discomfort with her own existence.

These experiences provide a picture of the landscape of academic institutional maintenance of class hierarchies, not only through material employment conditions but through cultural violence that positions working-class academics as perpetual outsiders requiring assimilation rather than equal citizenship. Critically, the ideological work of this system runs deeper than what can be identified through the work patterns and conditions depicted above; the contradiction between institutional dependence and exploitation becomes most visible in participants' articulations of the systematic devaluation of their reproductive labour – labour that is essential to the capitalist university yet deliberately rendered invisible within it.

Dimension 2: Systematic devaluation of women's reproductive labour despite its essential role in sustaining academic institutions

Mechanisms of Systemic Exploitation through Alienation

The ways women are positioned as 'supporter of' and 'in service to' others in the academy, as a means to others' ends as opposed to their own, was crystalised in reflections about their sense of belonging. Here, responses highlighted the ways women academics, particularly those with working-class backgrounds, are kept at the periphery as 'imposters' or 'outsiders' to the publicly valued knowledge work, with their service work devalued and hidden. This peripherality manifested materially in employment precarity: one participant captured the recursive trap of teaching-intensive casualisation, describing how teaching 'SO much' had cost her the identity of 'scientist', leaving her permanently 'trying to squelch the inner monologue of why the F am I here' with 'no guaranteed future past this term' (Participant 306). For others, the exclusion was more simply structural with feelings that 'only certain people are welcomed and given opportunities and the rest are left' (Participant 137).

Some participants described their sense of belonging as conditional and context-dependent, describing feeling like they belong in *some* spaces and with *some* people, present in relationships with students and close collaborators, absent in encounters with institutional power. Women from working-class backgrounds were more likely to include students as part of their community and to seek belonging through formal support networks and unions, suggesting a class-inflected orientation toward collective and relational solidarities over institutional or professional ones. One captured this split precisely: 'sometimes, when I'm working with my PhD students or some of my close collaborators, tremendous sense of belonging and comradeship. Other times, at some conferences, dealing with higher administrators, dealing with funding agencies, I feel like a complete outsider' (Participant 310). This distinction is significant: belonging is experienced in the reproductive, relational spaces of academic work and withdrawn in its productive, credentialing spaces, mapping directly onto the gendered division of labour. As another observed bluntly, 'I love my team, but the wider uni is a racist, sexist, agist place that is concerned only with covering its own ass' (Participant 266).

The data also captures how this exclusion compounds over time and across intersecting identities, generating not merely disappointment but structural disillusionment. One participant described the particular exhaustion of advocacy work that advances students and institutions while costing the advocate herself: 'I do, I just never get credit for it. My work is often actively hidden by colleagues and then when complete they take credit for it... the cost of successfully advocating for student needs comes at a cost of my own career progression' (Participant 128). This dynamic is one in which reproductive labour is not merely unpaid but actively weaponised against the women performing it. This moves beyond alienation in the experiential sense toward what Marx (1990) understood as its structural form: the worker's product turned against its producer. The accumulated weight

of these experiences produced, across many responses, a verdict on academia itself as a 'hateful, patriarchal institution which exploits its staff, parades any Indigenous/LGBTQI+ people for the paper, but makes no meaningful contribution to improving their situation or recognising their labour' (Participant 145).

Mechanisms to Maintain Patriarchy and Distract through Manufactured Competition

Participants identified the necessity of collegiality and supporting other women and marginalised workers in a competitive work environment. Many identified the ways competition and conflict are leveraged to maintain a patriarchal status quo, disrupting women from efforts of solidarity for systemic change, as well as through concerns of bullying by women in leadership with self-serving ends to 'succeed' within the exploitative institution.

Participants identified the ways institutional competition and conflict are actively leveraged to maintain a patriarchal status quo, disrupting women's solidarity efforts while concentrating the costs of dysfunction onto women themselves. This dynamic operated through what one participant named plainly as the institution's systematic vilification of women, forcing them to 'fight each other rather than the unequal system' (Participant 255), a mechanism through which manufactured competition displaces structural critique. This was experienced most acutely in encounters with other women, including those in leadership: one participant described the 'sad irony' of her biggest career challenges coming from 'the negative actions of other women - who have bullied me, silenced my voice, stolen my ideas, exploited my kindness' (Participant 453). The structural logic here is not individual betrayal but institutional capture, where women in leadership positions frequently reproduce rather than challenge the conditions of their own advancement (Bell, 2026a), as illustrated by one participant's account of a female Vice Chancellor whose position was that 'if she made it in a man's world without assistance then so could others' (Participant 97). This is not hypocrisy but the predictable outcome of a system that rewards individual ascent over collective transformation.

The class distinction in how participants understood and built support networks was also notable. Working-class participants emphasised cross-level solidarities and building networks that included students as well as colleagues, oriented toward collective learning and mutual support: 'solidarity and willingness to support each other, building communities of continuous learners, willing and able to facilitate and teach within those communities' (Participant 96). Middle-class participants, by contrast, felt well-supported by women leaders and aspired toward more horizontal professional networking and collegial relationships, with one calling for 'more feminist criteria such as mutual aid and collegiality' (Participant 319), a formulation that names solidarity as an aspiration rather

than a practice already underway. This distinction signifies a critical difference between liberal-reformist feminism, which tends to be adopted by and best supports white, middle-class women through *reform*, and social reproduction feminism, as a working-class movement which fundamentally seeks to *transform* the oppressive regime (Bell, 2026a). The first, corporate style of feminism strives for a chance for (some) women to work 'equally' within the capitalist status quo which necessarily exploits them; the second seeks to understand the capitalist social relations which benefit a minority and, through solidarity, assert new forms of relations which benefit the majority (Arruzza et al., 2019).

Institutional Dependence Patterns

In their frustration with the exploitative, devaluing system, participants also demonstrated acute awareness of how they are integral to it, recognising, in terms that map directly onto capitalism's central contradiction, that it is their exploited labour that maintains the very system exploiting them. Consequently, women being forced into service work has the dual effect of costing them career advancement and security (while they are kept busy tending to student needs and quite literally doing the dishes), while simultaneously positively advancing men's careers by freeing them up and enabling them to focus on self-serving ends. Importantly, participants' consciousness of this fact is not resignation but structural diagnosis and should not be confused with a lack of value they see in their own work (in particular, many responses detailed enjoyment of teaching and awareness of the contribution their teaching has). One participant named this as 'always, always women's work', the relational labour of 'holding institutions together' and 'doing the work that benefits students most' (Participant 278), performed without recognition and without end. The contradiction is sharpest for precarious workers, for whom institutional dependence and personal invisibility coexist most acutely: 'the university depends on my casual labour, but I'm kept invisible and treated as illegitimate' (Participant 114). This formulation of dependence without recognition and extraction without legitimation, captures capitalism's 'cannibalistic' relationship to the reproductive labour it simultaneously requires and destroys (Fraser, 2022). It is here, in this lived recognition of structural contradiction, that we move this data beyond documentation toward real possibilities.

Beyond Reform: Structural Transformation and the Contradictions of Academic Labour

The findings documented above identify systematic stratification of academic labour along class lines, yet, and most significantly, they capture instances of participants' acute awareness of the contradictions sustaining this system and their emerging recognition

that transformation, rather than reform, is necessary. Critically, this consciousness does not represent accommodation or aspiration toward assimilation; the finding that working-class women feel pressured to shed their class identity yet largely refuse to do so is not incidental, but foundational. It signals that these women are not class traitors in waiting but potential organic intellectuals emerging from within the subordinated class itself (Gramsci, 1996), carrying, in their refusal of assimilation and their structural critique, the seeds of counter-hegemonic possibility.

This consciousness coexists with, and is partly forged through, profound anger at systemic failure. Some participants described incremental progress achieved through the very service work that exploits them, noting how gender equity advances often depend on women's 'hidden work of agitating and advocating' with 'little recognition of the longevity needed to create even small changes' (Participant 352). Yet, for many, decades of witnessing institutional impunity generated (beyond frustration) a revolutionary consciousness. The complete absence of accountability for gendered violence and discrimination produced not despair but structural diagnosis: universities named explicitly as 'sexist, exploitative, racist, ableist' spaces that 'reward incompetent, despicable white men and a few women willing to sell their souls' (Participant 112), and as requiring 'radical transformation to be legitimately inclusive' (Participant 121). This should not be mistaken for pessimism. It reflects class consciousness developed through direct experience of exploitation (Marx, 1990) and the lived recognition of structural antagonism that liberal reformist frameworks, precisely because they naturalise existing arrangements, cannot produce. For some, this consciousness took its most unambiguous form: one participant, after twenty years of witnessing institutional impunity and the systematic protection of perpetrators of gendered violence, reflected that the complete absence of accountability 'makes me want to set up a guillotine in my university and cut off heads' (Participant 126). This collective structural diagnosis is the kind of revolutionary consciousness that emerges when the ruling ideas of the ruling class become visible (Marx and Engels, 2015).

Academic cultural and institutional norms are deeply embedded yet not immutable, operating through conjunctural formations that are historically specific and thus historically contestable (Gramsci, 1996; Hall, 1986). Hegemony is never total; it must be actively reproduced, and the sites of its reproduction are therefore also potential sites of its contestation. The material organisation of academic work through precarious contracts and unequal workload distribution directly enables the systematic devaluation of essential reproductive labour, creating a self-reinforcing system of exploitation that particularly affects women at intersections of class, race and disability. This is endemic to the capitalist university's subordination of critical thought and care work to market imperatives (Giroux, 2002, 2020). Participants' awareness of institutional dependence on their labour, and its simultaneous devaluation, exemplifies the inherent contradiction in capitalism between capital accumulation and life-sustaining activities (Bhattacharya, 2017b; Fraser, 2022;

Vogel, 2013). Critically, participants' anger coexists with genuine commitment to and love of teaching; it is the devaluation of work they find meaningful, not alienation from work they despise, that generates the impetus for transformation.

For transformation to occur, we must understand two premises about academia. First, universities are sites which reproduce and discipline workers, developing their labour power for the capitalist labour market (Bhattacharya, 2017b; Gramsci, 1996; Heller, 2016). Second, the academic labour process involves both the direct production of knowledge commodities and the essential reproductive labour maintaining the institutional and social conditions necessary for this production. Social reproductive labour, precisely because it sustains life under capitalism while being systematically devalued, contains within it the possibility for resistance and transformation. This is the fundamental contradiction Fraser (2022) identifies at capitalism's core: the system simultaneously depends upon and undermines the conditions of its own reproduction, and it is exactly at this point of contradiction that collective agency becomes not merely possible but structurally located. The division of academic labour is gendered, with reproductive labour falling disproportionately to women workers, and it then follows that as a site training the next generation of workers, the university carries genuine possibility to become a site challenging the reproduction of labour power for capital. Women academics, performing the bulk of this reproductive labour through teaching, pastoral care and service work, are structurally positioned to do just this. Ferguson (2020) argues that those engaged in social reproduction labour (including teachers) already defy capitalism's alienating tendencies daily through the relational and life-sustaining character of their work, and when this becomes collective and conscious, oriented toward building solidarities among oppressed groups, it carries genuine transformative potential. The participants in this study are already engaged in this work, specifically working-class women academics, through their teaching, research and acts of institutional solidarity, and are not merely subjects of exploitation but active agents refusing the reproduction of capitalist social relations from within the very sites assigned to perpetuate them (Bell, 2026b).

The recognition of these contradictions by participants themselves, combined with their continued commitment to teaching and reproductive labour despite systematic exploitation, demonstrates both the depth of the crisis in higher education and the conditions of its disruption. By examining academic institutions through SRT, we move beyond liberal-reformist ideals of individual adaptation toward transformative practices that challenge both the material conditions of academic labour and the ideological frameworks maintaining its current organisation. This requires building solidarity across positions within academic hierarchies while connecting university struggles to broader movements for social transformation. The capitalist university's dependence on women's reproductive labour is, in this sense, also its vulnerability, and it is from this vulnerability that transformation becomes not utopian but materially grounded.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how academic institutions function as sites where productive and reproductive labour become inextricably entangled yet are artificially separated in ways that ceaselessly enable exploitation. Through qualitative survey data from 453 women academics, we have shown that the two dimensions of this exploitation – the material and ideological mechanisms reproducing gender and class hierarchies, and the systematic devaluation of women's reproductive labour despite its essential institutional role – are mutually reinforcing features of how universities organise social reproduction under capitalism.

This paper does not seek to make definitive empirical claims, nor to rehearse a deficit account of women's academic experiences, nor to arrive at a call for policy reform. Rather, drawing on women's own accounts, it offers a critical structural analysis of the capitalist mechanisms reproducing their exploitation, contributing, we hope, to a more consequential conversation about challenging those mechanisms than liberal frameworks of inclusion have been able to sustain. In doing so, it also advances SRT as a research method in its own right; empirical deployments of SRT remain relatively underdeveloped, and this study demonstrates both its analytical purchase and its capacity to centre participant consciousness without reducing their experiences to descriptive illustration. That consciousness is, we argue, theoretically significant in itself, reflecting Marxian class consciousness developed through direct experience of exploitation, not abstract political education but the lived recognition of structural antagonism. The finding that working-class women academics feel pressured to shed their class identity but largely do not want to is not incidental, it signals that these women are not aspiring to assimilation into the very system exploiting them. It is this refusal, alongside their acute awareness of how their labour sustains the institutions that devalue it, that points toward the transformative potential this paper opens onto rather than resolves. The structural problem documented here is the necessary precondition for understanding what resistance to it might look like. The problem is systemic; so too, we suggest, is its possibility for resolution.

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Data Availability

Our data contains sensitive information that cannot be adequately de-identified for

public access while maintaining its integrity and protecting participant's confidentiality.

Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare

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