Dear SEM

Rainbow Lifejackets on the Ship of State

from Tes Slominski

Coach and Freelance Editor
The Feral Freelancer
tes@theferalfreelancer.net

Many of us have been "doing academia" queerly for a while. By writing how and what we want, we've queered what counts as scholarship. By finding venues for our work that bridge academic and nonacademic contexts, we've helped promote more expansive understandings of what scholarship might do in the world. And by living in and alongside academia in a multitude of ways, we've demonstrated possibilities for thinking and acting "otherwise."

Today's threats to so-called "normal" ways of academic life are not really new to those of us who live outside one or more of the domains of white, straight, cisgendered, neurotypical, nondisabled, and/or middle-class society. To participate in institutionalized academia, many of us have tried to adopt tactics of passing, masking, or keeping our heads down only to discover that our survival depends on being in communities that value us for who and how we are. In other words, our tactics can undercut our strategy: if survival is the goal, we need to share enough of ourselves—in whatever quiet and coded ways—to find people we can trust. Institutionalized academia, with its competition for jobs, resources, and recognition, is often not safe for this kind of sharing (and that's probably a feature, not a bug…).

But what *is* academia? Is it a set of accredited institutions that collect imposing buildings and faculty? Does it live behind a paywall of peer-reviewed journals and monographs? Is it like *Project Runway*, where—as Heidi Klum so famously said—you're either in or you're out? Institutionalized academia certainly feels that way sometimes.

When academia's people operate with an institution-first mentality—which we are asked to do sometimes as administrators, members of an academic society's board of directors, or even as students or faculty members—at least two things happen. First, our peers can forget that we are individuals. I remember how jarring it was to sit on the SEM Board and hear some of my peers talking about "SEM" and "the Board" as though we were a single, inhuman machine rather than the people they'd known for years. Second, *we ourselves* can forget that we are individuals—or if we don't, we may itch and squirm when we recognize that we hold the responsibility of separating what's good for an institution from what we might want to do as individuals. (I believe this responsibility is valuable: understanding the difference between institutional sustainability and personal inclination is part of professional and personal formation. For one thing, engaging in this kind of work can be supremely useful in helping us evaluate and (re)articulate our values.)

It's easy to elide talking about individuals with talking about individualism, and that is not what I mean to do here. Instead, I want us to think about collections of individuals—about communities, however much capitalism has tried to water down the word and the concept it represents. *Real* communities that think, act, learn, teach, and sound together, whether IRL or online. In an era when only a small fraction of graduate students get faculty jobs—and even fewer remain in them—narrow conceptions of "the institution of academia" will only get us so far. That confined and confining institution has always needed those who work outside its central roles of student/faculty, although it seldom recognizes that it does. Beyond the many academic staff members, university press workers, museum curators, and other academia-adjacent professionals who make the whole thing work, academia needs its people "on the outside" to sustain a larger society that values what it does.

Experiencing normative social worlds from "the outside" is a common experience for those of us who identify as LGBTQIA+ (etc.). I suspect that right now, even academics who have never considered themselves queer may feel disoriented. Grasping narrow understandings of academia is not going to save us—or it. But holding onto our people and committing to a community- and scholarship-first mindset (rather than an institution-as-edifice mindset) will.

It's time to act like we're all queer now.

Dear SEM: a conversation

Anne Elise Thomas

Assistant Professor of Performing Arts, Music

Sweet Briar College
athomas@sbc.edu
Director, Itraab Ensemble, Virginia Tech

Deborah Wong

Professor Emerita of Music
University of California, Riverside
deborah.a.wong@ucr.edu

How have concerns and theories in gender and sexuality changed throughout the course of your career, and in what directions do you see the field heading within these paradigms?

Anne Elise: To be honest, when I was in grad school feminist and queer theories were barely on my radar. I chose a graduate program that did not feature these theories in the curriculum, and on the odd occasion that topics related to gender came up in a class discussion, all heads would turn toward me and the one other female student, since we were the ones who were thought to be gendered, to have a stake in the matter. Talk about cringe!

But I was lucky to have in my undergraduate background some familiarity with earlier feminist anthropologists like Lila Abu-Lughod and Elizabeth Warnock Fernea. A course in Performance Studies in grad school gave me the background to do some self-study with Judith Butler and their paradigm-shifting theory of gender performativity. The more I learned, and the more I lived, the more personal relevance I found in queer and feminist scholarship.

As much as feminist and queer theories are facing political backlash, I do feel overall that concerns brought forth through these critiques are resonating, and more importantly being heard and amplified more broadly than ever, in our field as elsewhere. It is discomforting to those who have traditionally enjoyed unexamined power. The backlash demonstrates Sara Ahmed's oft-quoted observation that "when you expose a problem, you pose a problem" (2017, 37) The friction we encounter may feel relentless, but I believe it is necessary for durable change to take hold.

Deborah: Like Anne Elise, neither gender nor sexuality were part of my graduate training in ethnomusicology at all. *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective* was published while I was doing my doctoral fieldwork (Koskoff 1987) and I remember the buzz around it, but I was already finished with coursework and read it several years later on my own, while writing my dissertation.

A bunch of things happened for me in the mid-1990s. My pathway into intersectional thinking was from Asian American studies, US ethnic studies, and US American studies. It was very apparent to me that my lived realities as an ethnomusicologist and as an Asian American woman put me on a collision course with university-based music ideologies, which are always racialized, gendered, and full of deeply contradictory messages about erotics!

I started attending the Feminist Theory and Music conference. With Elizabeth Tolbert, I co-founded the SEM Committee on the Status of Women in 1996. Not coincidentally, that's the year I started teaching at the University of California, Riverside. Philip Brett was my department chair and I went to UCR because I was electrified by him. He was doing amazing work on music and sexual orientation alongside Sue-Ellen Case, Susan Leigh Foster, and Susan McClary. Spending time with Philip and learning from him as he queered historical musicology was thrilling. His milieu became mine, at least a little. It felt as if that kind of radical rethinking was only possible on the Left Coast, far from the Ivies. I learned that the university's political foundation will always be White-dominant, patriarchal, and homophobic unless pushed toward new formations. I learned that theory and lived experience are interrelated. I used my methodological skills to reflect on ethnomusicologists' experiences in music departments (Wong 2006). I became increasingly certain that ethnomusicologists needed feminist of color and queer of color thought.

As I've said before, ethnomusicologists have been rather slow to activate erotics, sexuality, and sexual orientation as core questions (Wong 2015), but I think we're now making up for lost time. Ethnomusicologists have stepped into queer theory with tremendous energy and imagination. I just wish ethnomusicologists were more consistently provoked by feminist theory. Sometimes it seems as if queer theory and feminist theory have been bifurcated by ethnomusicologists.I hope both can be directed toward the most urgent needs of the moment, e.g., antifascism, the critique of liberal humanism, new ecologies, and speculative futures.

How are feminist and queer theory both distinct from, and related to, your identity as queer scholars and/or women? How might these entanglements complicate research?

Deborah: For me, it's all inextricably related! Making sense of my life, my institutional locations, and my research has taken place through feminist of color critique. I was drawn to play taiko and to research it because I was thinking in terms of Asian American feminist theory and activism. Tsong, Kim, and Yokoyama refer to Asian American Feminist Critical Race praxis as "AsianFemCrit," i.e., as a critical formation that's activist and intersectional from the get-go (Tsong and and Yokoyama 2024). Still, my thinking is imperfectly intersectional. I've mostly learned different kinds of queer theory from my extraordinary grad students. I sometimes forget to pay enough attention to the power of heteronormative bedrock assumptions. Asian Americans are often invited to serve as the (presumed) almost-White minorities in the room. And so on.

Anne Elise: My identity as a white, cisgender woman allowed me a degree of safe passage through the early stages of my journey as a student. I did not encounter feminist and queer theories through coursework or mentors, but rather through friendship, life experience, research and eventually through the responsibility to teach and convey these ideas to my students. And indeed the relevance of these theories has complicated my work, especially as I reflect on prior research and realize I did not give them near enough attention in my dissertation work.

Over time I realized I needed these theories more than I thought, as does the next generation. The "digital natives" in my classroom are much more savvy to the workings of heteropatriarchy in their lives, and it's a shorter bridge to connect the structural injustice they experience and witness around them to theoretical frameworks offered by feminist and queer scholarship.

What advice do you have for graduate students as they continue to navigate heteropatriarchal academic spaces and fieldwork sites? How do you create safety, inclusivity, and community in the classroom?

Anne Elise: This is a difficult moment, and I know it looks quite different depending on one's vantage point. I teach at a small women's college where the current culture war around gender has played out in a particularly painful way over the past year – last summer, with no input from faculty or students, our institution's admissions policy was quietly revised to allow only someone who "confirms that her sex assigned at birth is female and that she consistently lives and identifies as a woman." The overwhelming majority of my colleagues and I reject this policy, and it has been gut-wrenching to experience the administration's disregard for trans and non-binary students and faculty. Not only does this policy violate their rights and insult their humanity, but it has had significant repercussions: the policy change has undermined recruitment and retention of students and faculty, dismantled long-term partnerships and led to the cancellation of major speaking events at our college. To date, our requests to rescind the policy have been met with stonewalling, doubling down, intolerance of dissent and stifling of further discussion. Many of my colleagues are leaving or have left their tenured and tenure-track jobs at the college in the aftermath, and those of us who remain are struggling to support our students, and each other, in this environment.

Deborah: My advice is twofold: (1) show up for the institutional work, and (2) show up for one another.

Sometimes we need to categorically reject the racist and heterosexist infrastructures that surround us. I've also felt a responsibility to serve on university and SEM committees, to do the changework from within. Lei X. Ouyang acknowledges that change can result from a range of different efforts. As she writes, "Burn it down? Reform? Rebuild? Many possibilities exist. [...] Systems change will require connecting moments to movements and asking new questions" (Ouyang 2024, 344, 345).

For me, showing up for each other has often meant creating new spaces where we can say, think, and talk openly about the things that matter to us. The SEM Section on the Status of Women has been one such space for me, and the SSW writing group we've held this spring and will hold this summer is another. I'm talking about literally holding space.

Anne Elise: With my home institution in such flux, I feel that **I** may be more in need of our readers' advice than they are of mine! But in the spirit of mutual support I will say this: whatever way(s) you choose to resist discriminatory policies and practices and to advocate for yourself and those in need, stay focused on the core of what you know to be true and just. Don't be disheartened. Persistence IS progress.

References

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SEM Section on the Status of Women summer writing meetups, June 30 to August 28, 2025.

Mondays and Thursdays 8-10am PT/11am-1pm ET — twice a week, 2 hours each session, https://ucr.zoom.us/j/97708361550, meeting ID 977 0836 1550.

Need to get some writing done? Writing groups are a way to clear time and space for yourself! The SSW writing group is feminist, supportive, and non-judgmental. Come when you can. No preregistration, no commitment. We will have a quick round-robin check-in at the beginning (5 mins total) and will then settle into silent writing… in community.

Every other week or so, we will spend the first 30 minutes talking informally about writing, led by an SSW member or guest, in response to a prompt. Possible prompts include: In what ways

for you is writing gendered, or even a women's issue? How do you write through imposter syndrome? Describe your best-ever writing experience. Etc.

Questions? Contact the SSW Co-Chairs Anne Rasmussen (akrasm@wm.edu) or Anne Elise Thomas (athomas@sbc.edu).