Learning to be a Bluestocking: An essay and short manifesto in honour of Janet Siltanen

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In the spring of 2022, I learned that my promotion to full professor was granted. I am a member of a growing body of women who are reaching the top ranks of the professoriate. As Statistics Canada (2021) data show, the gap between males and females reaching the rank of full professor is steadily shrinking, even though we remain the demographic that is least likely to be promoted. I have reached a milestone in my career and find myself asking – "now what"? This is a moment of reflexiveness for me: where have I come from and where do I want to go? How have I grown into being an academic woman and what do I want to do with the second half of my career? These are not questions unique to me and did not spring up suddenly like a hot flash; they are ones that bubble under the surface.

A few years ago, I discovered Mary Beard, Professor Emerita of Classics at Cambridge University and host of many BBC documentaries. Besides her insightful and thought-provoking commentaries on everything from how to be a working mother, dealing with the rigour of academic careers, and the rise and fall of the Roman Empire, it is Beard's small book *Women and Power: A manifesto* (2020) that really struck me. Beard chronicles the misogynistic silencing of women by powerful men since antiquity -- culminating with the "classical" chauvinistic treatment of Hilary Clinton in 2016. One passage particularly struck me as an academic woman – Beard describes the first academic interview she had:

> … so that eventually the most stereotypical female accessory [Margaret Thatcher's handbag] became a verb [handbagging] of political power … I did something similar when I went for my first interview for an academic job… I bought a pair of blue tights specifically for the occasion. It wasn't my usual fashion choice, but the logic was satisfying: 'If you interviewers are going to be thinking that I'm a right bluestocking, let me just show you that I *know* that's what you're thinking *and* I got there first' (emphasis in original, 78).

Through Beard's recollection and material action, we can see that perhaps there is still some validity to the way people think about academic women as "Bluestockings." Maybe it is a concept that can be reclaimed and critiqued in light of women's place in the academy?

Academics such as Kelly argue that now could be a ripe time to reintegrate the philosophy and "transformative potential of Bluestocking practice" (in Heller 2015: 14) as alternatives to current norms of academia. By highlighting the way academically-minded women saw no disconnect between the labour of our hands and the work of our minds we can see how "ordinary people seek to remake themselves and their world daily with the material available to them, guided by imagination and desire, in repeated acts of creativity" (ibid). For me this leads to thinking not only theoretically about our work but also methodologically. In particular, I set out to engage in what I call "making as method". It is where we are combining the creative labour of our hands with the thinking process of our minds.

This paper is an essay in its most classical sense, "the process of trying or testing" an idea (Oxford English Dictionary Online (OED)). I want to think through this idea of what a Bluestocking identity might look like, the ethic it might entail, and a potential way in which we can come to practice it in the contemporary university. In a way, this will become a manifesto of sorts about how to be an academic. A manifesto is literally a slap with the hand (OED), as words are actions in themselves. By drawing on the ways women intellectuals, artists and academics of the past have struggled and succeeded, I hope to engage in dialogue about a possible road map for moving forward, not only with the second half of my career but others in the professoriate. My guiding principle is that of Ruth Levitas' utopia as method. I am embracing her call to recognise "What is required of us is both specific to our distinctive situation, and the same as for every earlier and later generation: Mourn. Hope. Love. Imagine. Organise." (2014: 220).

Before moving further into my essay, my career and indeed this paper have been influenced by the mentorship of numerous academics, but here I wish to speak to the important work of Janet Siltanen. Like others in this collection have demonstrated, Dr. Siltanen's work has been important to shaping subsequent generations of Canadian sociologists. Her strong forays into feminist political economy have been trailblazing. For me and many others, it was through her supervision and mentorship at Carleton University where she demonstrated how to be an academic woman. Dr. Siltanen's compassion, empathy and thoughtfulness made numerous women (including myself) and men understand the importance of feminism in the academy. I see her as a true bluestocking, "combining the material with the literary, the historical with the contemporary, the work of the hands with the life of the mind" (Davies and Pohl 2021: 9). In appreciation for Dr. Siltanen's gifts, I knit her a pair of bluestockings as symbol of both my

gratitude and as a way for me to literally, creatively and intellectually test and try the bluestocking concept.

Photo One: starting the blue stockings

Photo Two: Completed blue stockings

What are Bluestockings?

The OED traces back the phrase "bluestocking" to the era of Cromwell, when blue stockings were a part of Puritan male attire. They were a symbol of simplicity of dress in reaction to the black stockings worn in the monarchs' courts. This symbolism reappears in the eighteenth century as the salon era arose out of Enlightenment. This was particularly significant as women would gather informally to have intellectual and literary conversations, having been barred from more public settings. In recognition of the informality, men would arrive wearing worsted woolen blue stockings, again symbolising the "informality" of this social event. Mrs. Vesey, one of the original members of the "Bluestocking Circle," entreated a male guest to "Come in your blue stockings!" and not worry about formality. This symbol became indicative of the women coming together to discuss literary and intellectual issues in the living rooms of various members.

The initial key women of the eighteenth-century Bluestocking circle were Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Vesey, and Frances Boscawen (Heller 2015). They were elite Londoners who organised informal gatherings of men and women. The objective was the "pursuit of intellectual improvement, polite sociability. The refinement of the arts through patronage, and national stability through philanthropy" (Pohl and Schellenberg 2003: 2). It was "a relational structure of various affiliated individuals rather than as a single grouping of individuals" (Heller 2015: 97). The label rapidly spread to other women engaging in literary and scholarly pursuits. The Bluestocking circle was not confined to London but used the technology of print to have personal access to texts and make connections through correspondence with like-minded individuals (Kelly 2015). This all leads to the OED stating, "Hence, of a woman: having or affecting literary tastes in a manner originally associated with the women of the Bluestocking circle; … Frequently derogatory. Now archaic." As well as, "Hence: a woman devoted to literary, scholarly, or intellectual activities … Now somewhat archaic … That depreciative usage was common throughout the 19th century, but has died out as attitudes to women's education changed in the 20th century." Bluestocking therefore came to mean "a dangerously intellectual woman" (Pohl and Schellenberg 2003: 5). Satires arose as bluestockings were lambasted for their social privilege and conservative politics as well as having intellectual or artistic qualities, and quite frankly, for being women.

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women intellectuals were continuously seen as problematic at the very least and dangerous in the extreme, pejoratively called bluestockings and bachelor-ettes (Robinson 2009). As Shils and Blacker (1996) chronicle, women at Cambridge University needed two world wars before they were granted full entry into the university, despite being the first university in Britain to welcome women on campus in 1863. Protests at the time against women included "a hideous dummy of a woman in 'rational dress' dangled from the window of the shop" and the belief that "[w]omen were out for power, not for an education or intellectual training" (Shils and Blacker 1996 xiii). While it may not have been a named concept familiar with those of this time, patriarchy in all its glory was being challenged by the very presence of women.

Misogynistic put-downs are nothing new to bluestockings. Felicia Dorthea Hemans was a Romantic poet of the early 19th century. She attracted the attentions of the likes of Percy Shelley, with whom she briefly corresponded. Hemans was multilingual and well-versed in classical and contemporary poetry. It is she who is credited with coining the phrase "stately homes," often used to describe large country manors. She truly embodied what it was to be a bluestocking. However, some seem to have felt threatened by her. It is reported that Lord Byron was not fond of her work and dismissed her by saying Hemans should "knit bluestockings instead of wearing them." This reiterated the idea that women should not engage in thoughtful pursuits but stay in the domestic sphere. This derogatory sentiment toward women was seen to have been repeated numerous times, including through the 21st century. In Canada in 2006, Member of Parliament Peter MacKay told fellow MP Alexa McDonough to "stick to her knitting" during an election debate (CBC News 2006). While MacKay stated that it was not meant to be a sexist remark, he would never have made such a comment to a male counterpart. During the US presidential election campaign of 2020, much was made of the fact that Joe Biden's wife used the title "Dr." in her name. An opinion piece in *The Wall Street Journal* stated, "Jill Biden should think about dropping the honorific, which feels fraudulent, even comic" (Epstein 2020). The sentiment is that she did not earn her degree (which she did), or at the very least it is a lesser degree (Ed.D). The opinion piece ends by making this plea, "Forget the small thrill of being Dr. Jill, and settle for the larger thrill of living for the next four years in the best public housing in the world as *First Lady* Jill Biden" (ibid, emphasis added). While she was not admonished to return to her knitting, Biden was told to stay at home, in the domestic

sphere, where she should be nothing more than a good housewife. Again, an educated woman, a bluestocking, being treated in a misogynistic manner because she knows too much.

Bluestocking methodology: Making as method

Jane Bennett (2010) points out that "objects" produce effects and affects. These could be either natural or cultural objects. Bennett calls these items vibrant matter. She articulates that this is "the capacity of things … not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own." (viii). Objects can in and of themselves produce affect, or what Wetherell (2019) calls "embodied meaning-making". As Miller points out (2008: 38) "objects store and possess, take in and breathe out the emotions with which they have been associated." Objects can embody affect and have emotion embedded in them. Engaging with craftwork becomes one way in which to subjectively experience material culture.

Over the last couple of decades, we have seen the rise in popularity of crafts. Fiona Hackney (2006:23) speculates that this "may be read as a means of addressing the problems and anxieties surrounding the acceleration of modern life." Others, such as Turney (2009) and Gauntlett (2019) see crafts as ways of creating relationships and connections with a maker that other objects cannot provide. For Susan Luckman (2015: 68), craft represents the "enchanted engagement with making." It is the activity of making that becomes embedded in the craft; making is what makes the object enchanting. There is what Luckman calls the *aura* (others have called it the swerve or the flow) that glows from the craft. This aura is not in the object itself, as Bennett (2010) argued, but Luckman states that it comes from the "process of making" (2015: 81). Making reminds us of our "agency within the physical world" (ibid: 82). Ingold tells us that making is "a correspondence between maker and material" (2013: xi). It is when knowing is movement and we don't separate the ways and means of knowing.

Sociologist Richard Sennet articulates this very idea of connecting ways and means of knowing in *The craftsman* (2008). This book is premised on Sennet's desire to have the debate with his supervisor, Hannah Arendt, he felt he wasn't brave enough to have had. As a young graduate student, Sennet was never comfortable with the division Arendt made between homo faber and animal laborans in *The Human Condition.* Arendt articulates that labour and work must be distinguished from each other. *Animal laborans* sees work as an end in itself. They are primarily concerned with how something is made. *Homo* faber is involved in a more

contemplative task, whereby they come to judge *Animal laborans'* practice. They are concerned with questions that seek explanation – why questions. Sennet believes that this is a somewhat derogatory division of human action and states that "thinking and feeling are contained within the process of making" (2008: 7). He continues that "people can learn about themselves through the things they make, that material culture matters" (8). What we make, why we make it and how we make things matter. Following along this thinking then, I would contend that we as sociologists have long followed Arendt's model of maintaining a "world" between labour and work. By making, sociologists should not shy away from materialistic engagement but come to embrace it.

The Bluestockings themselves were dealing with these very issues around the distinction between the hand and the head. The Georgian women did not think that making crafts as a distinct exercise separate from intellectual discussions of the day. Women's crafts and arts were elevated. As Heller and Heller (2015: 57) notes, "Crafting in natural objects and floral illustration might look dainty and esoteric to us, but to the Georgians these pieces signalled an engagement in publicly aware life." Men of their day did not necessarily see it in the same light. Samuel Johnson, a friend of Elizabeth Carter, pronounced "… my old friend Mrs Carter could make a pudding as well as translate Epictetus from the Greek and work a handkerchief as well as compose a poem" (Samuel Johnson quoted in Davies and Pohl 2021: 53). This leads to the question that Davies and Pohl (2021: 53) ask in their project that connects knitting patterns with mini biographies of the early Bluestocking women:

> Does the implied opposition Johnson draws between the life of the mind and that of the hands – one masculine, one feminine – grate upon us a little … might we unintentionally reinforce the artificially gendered distinctions that are so obviously implicit in his famous remark?... What if, for talented eighteenth-century women – just like so many women of similar talent today – the life of the mind, and the life of the hands, were bound up together and were part of the same thing?

This questioning adds a layering to the debates that Arendt and Sennet would engage with some 300 years later. Is there a strong gender element to the separation of labour done by the hand and work done by the mind? The analysis of the Bluestocking societies would certainly attest to this. For the first-wave of Bluestockings, there was not the artificial distinction between the material and the intellectual. This meant that during their informal gatherings, the women (and

potentially men but there is no discussion of this in the literature) would think nothing of working with their hands (such as knitting, sewing, paper crafts) while discussing the importance of Shakespeare, for example. The making was complexly woven into their intellectual pursuits; Mary Delany, for example, made paper "mosaicks" flowers that were ingenious in their botanical accuracy. The informal space that the Bluestockings met was "… a dialogic space in which the intellectual life of the mind and the practical life of the hands were always bound up together" (ibid: 56).

Crafting A Bluestocking Ethic: Grace, dignity and care

No matter which era of bluestocking women we talk about, at the core of what they do is a commitment to grace, dignity and care. No matter which century we discuss, patriarchies' centralities have made it difficult for intellectual women to be taken seriously. Under enormous constraints, women have used a different ethic to tackle challenges head on. This ethic is an active one that requires much of the women to support other women in similar circumstances.

Grace, while often tied to the religious passive understanding of God granting grace, in its secular and post-secular understanding is active, existential and relational. In analysing Paul Tillich's work, Ruth Levitas (2014) states that grace "entails connection, acceptance, reconciliation, wholeness … [it is an] intrinsic reference to emotional depth and in its otherness" (13-14). Like the words of similar root, such as gracious, we enact grace, we do it, we live it. The power of grace lies in the relationships we have with ourselves and others. The ethic connected with grace is one that places a "responsibility for the other which cannot be demanded in return, which is unconditional" (Levitas 187). Bluestockings were very much operating in a graceful manner. Female patronage and being "feminocentric" (Heller and Heller, 2015: 102) was often a hallmark of bluestocking women. Women would support other women's work without the need for return favour. While this may have been tied in part to the economic and social class positions of the women patrons, nonetheless the fact that they chose to support women's literary, intellectual, and artistic work is remarkable and runs counter to many patriarchal tendencies. When it started with the Bluestocking circle it marked women's "growing awareness of themselves as a class: as potential social and cultural innovators and leaders" (Heller 2015: 88).

Grace therefore means that we will look out for others without the expectation of return or reward. In sociology, the act of grace is often an act of critique. Our job is to articulate where

people's ability to flourish is hampered by social structures and conventions and provide possible solutions to overcome these deficits. H.G. Wells (1906) stated that sociologists need to critique and create utopias, which Levitas takes up in her Imaginary Reconstitution of Society, a utopia as method approach. In this she "attempts to establish the institutional basis of the good life, of happiness, and the social conditions of grace" (2014: 65).

Like grace, dignity operates both on the level of the individual and that of the relational. Sociologist Andrew Sayer (2011) argues dignity is a concept similar to grace. Dignity is about "our relation to the world of concern, our extraordinary sensitivity to the quality of our relationships with others, about both our autonomy and our dependence, and about our embodiment" (190). It is both an object that is to be granted based on our very humanness and is subjective and intersubjective in relation to how we come to act with and be acted upon by others. At the heart of this for Sayer is vulnerability. Vulnerability and dependence are inherent to being human. To treat someone with respect is not to ignore their vulnerability but to ensure that one does not take advantage of it. In turn, we trust that the other person will not take advantage of ours. "To respect people's dignity is to treat them as responsible for their actions, and to respond positively or negatively towards them according to what they deserve" (197).

Care is a term often associated with the work placed upon women to ensure the health and well-being of primarily her family. However, as known, care work has now expanded to be part of the capitalist economy where women sell their labour to look after others. In some ways, this is a narrow interpretation of care, in that it ties it too strongly to the notion of work. As many feminist scholars of the last few decades have argued, care is an ethic that needs to be promoted. Carol Gilligan, one of the first to articulate this approach, provided her succent definition of ethics of care in an interview in 2011:

> As an ethic grounded in voice and relationships, in the importance of everyone having a voice, being listened to carefully (in their own right and on their own terms and heard with respect). An ethics of care directs our attention to the need for responsiveness in relationship (paying attention, listening, responding) and to the costs of losing connection with oneself or with others. Its logic is inductive, contextual, psychological, rather than deductive or mathematical (ethicsofcare.org).

Like grace and dignity, care prioritises the relation and context as critical to understanding. As Tronto's (1993) work has shown over the years, care can be used to highlight the importance and

legimisation of shared power, rather than it being in the hands of a few "uncaring" or those with "privileged irresponsibility".

What Tronto (1993) further does is to highlight various goals of an ethic of care. These include: 1. Being attentive to need; 2. Being responsible to respond to take care of need; 3. Having the skill to care; and 4. Being considerate of the positionality of others and to be aware of potential abuse of care. What intrigues me about this is the acknowledgement of the necessity of skill. Often there is the assumption that women are natural caregivers and are therefore it makes sense that we turn to them to do the caring. But as Levitas points out, care is a craft. This idea of craft will be taken up more fulsomely shortly, but the idea here connects with the notion that care most certainly requires skill. Care is "a relational social practice that engages both parties emotionally, cognitively and physically and demands and develops embodied skills" (Levitas 2014: 209). It is the ultimate affective practice (Wetherell 2012).

Utopia as method and Prefigurative politics

Ruth Levitas (2014), a British sociologist and social critic, has developed a wonderful methodology for us to start to think about the conditions for human flourishing. The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society (IROS) is a holistic approach that engages in speculative sociology. It looks for the connections between economic, social, and political processes to understand our ways of life. Ultimately it is to have a transformative capacity to provide a path whereby we can imagine a better and more just society.

The IROS has three key methodological elements to it: architectural, archaeological, and ontological. The architectural asks us to examine the forms of utopia both in design and delineation. In doing so, it lays out the underpinning of what a model of a "good society" looks like. The archaeological is about taking all the fragments of the desirable and even undesirable (for Levitas, meritocracy would be an undesirable) to create a holistic picture of what good societies could look like. Lastly, the ontological mode focuses on the subjects and agents of utopia. At the core of this is "grace."

By employing this methodology, we create a holistic and normative approach to the social world. We come up not with blueprints to a future society, but a hypothetical model that we could work toward. It is through "provisionality, reflexivity and dialogical modes" (Levitas 2014: 138) that we can devise this imaginary reconstitution of society. It will ultimately lead us to think about what kind of people we want to be. As Raekstad and Gardin (2020: 2) state this

exercise falls in line with the call that "[o]ur societies don't need resistance, they need reconstruction."

Women and feminist work have long been doing IROS without necessarily calling it such. Sarah Robinson Scott, one of the first-generation bluestockings, "produced the clearest and most comprehensive literary embodiment of bluestocking principles" (Kelly 1995). Her most well-known work is *Millennium Hall*, written in 1762. In this book, Scott argues for a "feminization" (Kelly 1995) of both society and economy. Like many of her compatriots, Scott is wishing to shake off the shackles of courtly manners and patriarchy and work toward women having a more unfettered life. It is unarguably a utopian vision for its time. Its purpose is to imagine a society where those on the margins of politics, in particular women, are not confined by prescribed roles that allowed for little agency or opportunities to flourish. While this book is still of its time (Christian and "gentry capitalistic"), it speaks to the necessity of imagining a reconstituted society whereby women are subject to neither gender bias nor patriarchal norms but can develop into intellectuals and be able to participate fully in society.

Much like utopia as method, prefigurative politics aims to make a better society by imagining ways in which we can create "a better understanding of how power and social structures work and often [engage in] non-hierarchical organising" (Raekstad and Gadin 2022: 3). Feminist praxis has long been key to this work, where we are prompted to " 'live' our theoretical positions" (Massey 1994: 260). Siltanen et al (2015) illustrate how a women's urban organisation is doing this work. The focus of this group is to "open doors and ... see to it they remain open, so that others can pass through" (Siltanen et al. 2015: 262). They work to ensure that women who are at risk of being among the most marginalised in the city have a place where they can learn, engage in politics, and work to improve municipal conditions. The group operates as an in-between space – both in and out of the local state. This in/out relationship with city government means that the group provides both advice and knowledge to the city, but it operates its meetings and discussions outside the confines of the state apparatus. The operations include having "dream days," promote statements of solidarity despite diverse membership, and continual examination of how the organisation operates. Like the bluestockings before them, and Mary Beard's intentional wearing of blue tights, women in the organisation wear peach scarves when at public forums or celebratory events. The peach scarf is embedded with meanings of "unity and solidarity" (ibid: 273). It is a reminder of the importance of the material

as “vibrant objects” (Bennett 2010) that are outward reminders of head and hand needing to come together to have a holistic engagement. This urban women’s group provides a path for many diverse women to be able to gain knowledge, participate in politics, have a safe place to do so, and as the title states, encourage women to feel like “This is how I want to live.” All of this is again similar to previous generations of bluestocking women.

Manifesto for the contemporary academy

What can we learn from the bluestocking examples over the last couple of centuries? How can some of the brief examples I have put forward help us to imagine a university that moves toward being a place where all can flourish?

- University should be a place that cares. We should care about each other, students / faculty / staff. This doesn’t mean being a place that is paternalistic but a place where we are attentive and responsive to others. This requires putting grace into action, where we look out for others to ensure all have the opportunity to flourish. To do this will require us to recognise that all come with vulnerabilities, some more than others, but that we don’t use the vulnerabilities against people.
- University should be a place that promotes a democratic culture. This is not to mean an instrumental understanding of “one voice, one vote” but a place where all have the opportunity to speak and be heard. Expressed thoughts and opinions are treated with dignity and are responded to accordingly. This means that the university should have at its core an obligation toward social justice – ensuring that all can flourish.
- University should be a place that offers space for debate and where truthfulness is welcomed. This doesn’t mean that there is one unassailable “truth” but there are various ways in which truth can be presented and experienced. In doing so, we can be sure that impediments are in place that challenge elitism and privilege.
- University should be a place where various ways of creating and disseminating knowledge are encouraged and promoted. Making as method, something that is perhaps more recognisable in science labs then in humanities offices, is an example of how the connection between head and hand comes to challenge preconceived ways of knowing. In doing so, universities can be places where creativity should thrive, where different forms of knowledge such as Indigenous and local ways of knowing are integrated, and dissemination of knowledge goes beyond the confines of the campus.

- University should be a place where Levitas' "utopia as method" can be employed to overcome injustices, inequalities and to present obstacles in the way of privilege. Creating a prefigurative social institution with flattened hierarchies and a democratic ethos can be an example for other institutions to follow.

Conclusion

This has truly been an essay, as I tried on the ideas from the many generations of bluestockings that came before me. Their spirit of intellectualism, desire for equity, the combining of head and hand in their work, and the tenacity to care for one another when it bucked the patriarchal norms of many eras is inspiring and provides lessons that are still relevant in academic circles today. From Mrs. Vassey telling people to keep their bluestockings on to Mary Beard finding feminine power in wearing blue tights, women have been in the forefront of social justice movements to open the academic doors to marginalised persons. This is not to say all were perfect, and sometimes they reflected some of the more questionable ethics of their time, but they always strived to give women the opportunity to think and find a voice.

This prompted me to create a short manifesto for the type of university I wish for myself, colleagues, and students. It would be a place where *everyone* feels like they belong. It is my small way of trying to think about how we can employ an "imaginary reconstitution of society." The university can be so much more than a technocratic monolith that is about creating the workers of the future. When critical engagement is encouraged, people can have opportunities to flourish. When people flourish, society can only benefit.

Lastly, this is my testament of thanks to Janet Siltanen. Her mentorship over the last couple of decades has been invaluable. I knit the bluestockings for Dr. Siltanen as a symbol of those women who came before her, herself, and the women she inspired. I do not know exactly which way my own academic path with wind, but I know it has been shaped by the generosity and empathy of Janet Siltanen. From one bluestocking to another, thank you!

Photo Three: Two bluestockings, Janet Siltanen and her former student Lynda Harling Stalker

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