

The Purple Collar Project: A Manifesto For Quiet Rebellion Against Class Erasure

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Abstract: “The Purple Collar Project” introduces a feminist manifesto addressing class erasure in academia. The authors, women professors from working-class backgrounds, explore the tensions between gratitude for educational opportunities and anger at persistent systemic barriers. The project advocates for “subtle feminism,” emphasizing small acts of resistance against institutional norms. Through personal narratives and analysis, the authors critique the myths of meritocracy and resilience that perpetuate inequality in higher education. They also expose the daily challenges faced by academics from low socioeconomic backgrounds and propose strategies for change. The manifesto calls for reimagining notions of academic labor and success, rejecting individualistic narratives in favor of collective action. By sharing their experiences, the authors aim to create space for more nuanced conversations about class in academia and inspire others to join their movement for equity and authenticity in higher education.

Tags: [feminist academics](#), [class](#), [rage as a productive emotion](#), [resilience](#), [autoethnography](#), [manifesto](#), [labor issues](#)

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We are women¹ professors, scholars, and educators. We are the daughters and granddaughters of factory workers, waitresses, and laborers. We are the first in our families to go to college, to get advanced degrees, to enter the hallowed halls of academia. We are the inheritors of a promise—the promise of education as a means of social mobility, as a way to break free from the constraints of class and circumstance.

We are also the inheritors of a lie. We internalized the lie of meritocracy, the lie that hard work alone is enough to overcome the structural inequities that permeate our society and our institutions. We are the products of a system that celebrates individual resilience while ignoring the systemic barriers that make resilience necessary in the first place.

¹ Our definition of woman is inclusive of all marginalized genders including women, women-identifying individuals, and non-binary and gender non-conforming people. The authors identify as cisgender women.

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We are tired of being grateful. We have been grateful for the scraps we are thrown, grateful for the opportunities that should have been ours by right. We are tired of being told to be resilient, to be gritty, to be tough. We are tired of being told that our anger is unproductive, that our rage is unbecoming.

We are angry. We recognize the institutions that exploit our labor, and we are angry at the systems that devalue our contributions, narratives that erase our experiences. We are angry at the class ceiling.

We are not alone. We are a growing movement of women professors who are refusing to be silent, who are refusing to be complicit. We are the Purple Collar Project, and we are here to stay.

This is our manifesto.

Our Collars Are Purple

We chose to name this manifesto The Purple Collar Project because it mixes the concept of blue collar jobs (manual, skilled labor, often carried out in low-paying jobs) with pink collar jobs (service-oriented jobs, performed predominantly by women) to suggest that women^[1] professors like us engage in acts of subtle rhetorical feminism when they resist erasure of socioeconomic bias across the institution. The familiarity of consistently overextending ourselves (often with meager financial returns) for the sake of trying to meet the (frequently unclear) expectations of others and secure our professional ethos, while simultaneously finding solace in the educational promise that led us to higher education in the first place, keeps us tethered to the narratives of individual merit across academic institutions. The promise of education was, for us, not about jobs and paychecks but about the opportunities it might afford us to do something different from our families of origin. However, a recent University of Colorado study found that “university faculty are, on average, 25 times more likely to have had a parent with a PhD than the general population. In addition, those faculty tended to grow up in neighborhoods that had a 24% higher median income than the general public” (Nietzel). Moreover, first-generation college graduates are overrepresented in teaching-focused faculty positions and underrepresented in research-focused faculty positions (Kniffin 61), which are often considered more prestigious and accompanied by higher salaries. These statistics show not only how we are outliers but also why we are socialized to feel grateful for succeeding in a space that doesn’t seem meant for people like us.

Narratives about individual education histories and their psychological and economic consequences are not new (Rose; Smith; Westover); at the same time, current conversations in higher education around resilience and mental health are at an all-time high after the shutdowns of COVID-19. We’ve read stories about graduate-student labor issues (Oppenheimer) and articles dismantling the promise of success in meritocracies (Markovits). Rarely, however, do we see academics in significant writing studies journals engaging with the “class ceiling” (Hurst) as foundational to the broken system of the professoriate. Notably, a pivotal 1993 text, *Working-Class Women in the Academy: Laborers in the Knowledge Factory*, stands out for its feminist engagement with class in academia (Tokarczyk & Fay). The editors of this manuscript critique the imprecise nature of class discourse, advocating for “if not multiple definitions, at least a fluid one” of the working-class academic woman (5). We seek to advance this critical dialogue, recontextualizing it for contemporary discourse, in large part because we find these are the conversations we have behind-the-scenes at conferences, in the hallways with contingent faculty, and in confidence with friends.

The manifesto is a genre borne out of both the frustration with the inequity of the status quo and one borne of hope. Manifestos are often considered loud genres, “once the serious business of warmongering princes, party politicians, and revolutionaries” (Hanna). That said, we choose the manifesto explicitly for its “elasticity” as a genre, particularly as it has been adopted more recently by a diverse group of artists and writers, such as Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber’s *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* and the collaborative project “On Multimodality: A Manifesto” (Wysocki, et al.). Manifestos can be screamed; they can be whispered. What is coming to define the genre is *what* it does and not necessarily

how it does it. What matters most in a manifesto is that people's emotions become the very air that carries a message.

In our manifesto, we are calling *to* rather than calling *out*; while we identify issues with particular practices and institutional biases, we are more interested in what happens when we begin to coalesce around the everyday ways in which feminist teacher-scholars enact subtle resistance to socioeconomic erasure. Through this process, we hope to validate the experiences of others who may see themselves reflected in our stories and to foster a sense of community among those navigating similar challenges.

Rage is Our Fuel (even though we seem 'nice')

The Purple Collar Project was born from the rage we carry in our bodies—a simmering fury in the pit of our stomachs—and the ongoing experiences that shape us as feminist academics and rhetoricians. This rage is fueled not only by present injustices but also by the paradox of our positions. As Ballif, Davis, and Mountford suggest in *Women's Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition*, the narrative of “making it” pervades academia, especially for women faculty. Yet, for those of us who've risen from lower-class backgrounds, this narrative is incomplete. We occupy a contradictory space: celebrated for transcending our circumstances, yet forever tethered to histories we can never fully reconcile and institutions rarely reflect our full humanity.

Rage is often dismissed as an “outlaw” emotion in feminist work, seen as unproductive. Cheryl Glenn describes this dismissal as a “roadblock to accepting the power, agency, and validity of all emotions” that don't evoke positive feelings in listeners (88). Our rage, however, isn't always obvious or loud. For various reasons, explored in the stories that follow, we haven't always been comfortable with this anger, partly due to the expectation to appear grateful for having “made it.”

Instead, we've learned to harness our rage quietly, challenging its dismissal by using it to fuel what Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch call an “ethics of hope and caring.” This approach teaches us “to listen and speak, not just with our heads but with our hearts, backbones, and stomachs” (146), with patience and quietude as key features.

By acknowledging our rage, even when it feels uncomfortable or negative, and sharing it with each other, we've come to embrace it as a powerful force. This process of listening to, and speaking from, our anger has led us to this project. It allows us to navigate the complex terrain of being both “successful” academics and individuals still grappling with our working-class roots. Accepting rage as our fuel hasn't been easy, largely due to our own histories and the societal expectation to appear “nice” and grateful despite our inner turmoil. Even now, it is precisely this rage that drives us to challenge the incomplete narratives of success in academia and to create space for more nuanced understandings of our experiences.

The roots of our rage run deep, intertwined with our personal histories and the complex journey that brought us to our current positions in academia. Each of us carries a unique story of resilience, struggle, and the ongoing tension between our past and present selves. These individual narratives not only illustrate the source of our rage but also demonstrate how it continues to shape our perspectives and drive our work. Our goal in sharing these narratives is to highlight the often ignored experiences of academics with working-class roots. These stories also serve as crucial components of our feminist toolkit (Ahmed 236), since storytelling forms a “habitable space” that we often find lacking in our environment, and hopefully they also become a space for readers to seek commiseration as well (Powell).

Jess's Fuel

I grew up in a suburb about twenty minutes outside of Cleveland, Ohio. I was raised in a family and near a city that seemed to thrive on the notion of resilience. The circumstances of my childhood required resilience to survive. Further, my understanding and experience of resilience lead to my current struggles as a feminist professor from a low socioeconomic background. I find myself wanting students to demonstrate an ability to ‘do what needs to be done regardless of extenuating circumstances—the way my grandparents, my brother, and I have done. Nonetheless, I am angry and disappointed at having given so much to, and at having always done what needed to be done within, a system that will never match my contribution. The unjust circumstances for me to overcome should have never existed to begin with.

My grandmother was awarded custody of me and my brother when I was seven and he was four years old (Fig. 1). Because I had been attending school intermittently, I was behind my peers academically (and because of various forms of trauma, socially). I was placed in all the “basic” classes and was enrolled in tutoring and psychotherapy. But by the end of the academic year, I had moved from the “basic” English class to the “advanced” one. There was some natural ability involved there—because I’ve never seen the inside of an “advanced” math class. But this “resilience,” rooted in academic success, planted the seed for my later identity as a scholar, though it would be many more years of subpar grades before I made a conscious decision to pursue that identity.

Although I didn’t have a model for academic success per se, my grandparents had instilled in me the value of hard work and a sense of duty, which never took into account any notion of being inconvenienced. My grandparents were born during the Great Depression, during a time when, and in environments where, helping others was a moral obligation. As an adult, my grandmother worked in a factory and has endured an entire life of hardship. My grandfather worked as a property manager for apartment complexes and had also overcome his own share of personal misfortune before he died of COVID-19 in 2021. And yet they consistently offered their time, energy, and financial resources to those who needed it. So, what I was taught, and deeply internalized, was that I was supposed to work hard for what I wanted (without instant gratification) and then to both be grateful for what I had received due to my hard work and to help others along the way. Arguably, this mindset is a reasonable expectation; however; it can quickly turn exhausting and fail to hold unjust systems accountable for the fact that I (and many people) have to work so hard for the same—or lesser—reward as others. I contribute to a system, regardless of whether—or to what extent—it “gives back.”



Figure 1: Four smiling people stand in front of a house with white siding.

Rhiannon's Fuel

I am somewhat unique for the women in my family—33 now, I have no children, have never married, and work at a prestigious university as a “professor”² after finishing my PhD. One grandmother finished eighth grade and left school to work, spending the bulk of her career as a nightclub waitress. My aunt dropped out of high school before eventually getting her GED. My stepmother got her bachelor’s degree—at age 54. All were married young with multiple children. I share a snapshot of this family lineage to highlight how unusual and significant education was a “way out” for me, even within one generation; it was through education that I would go beyond what was the norm of the women around me.

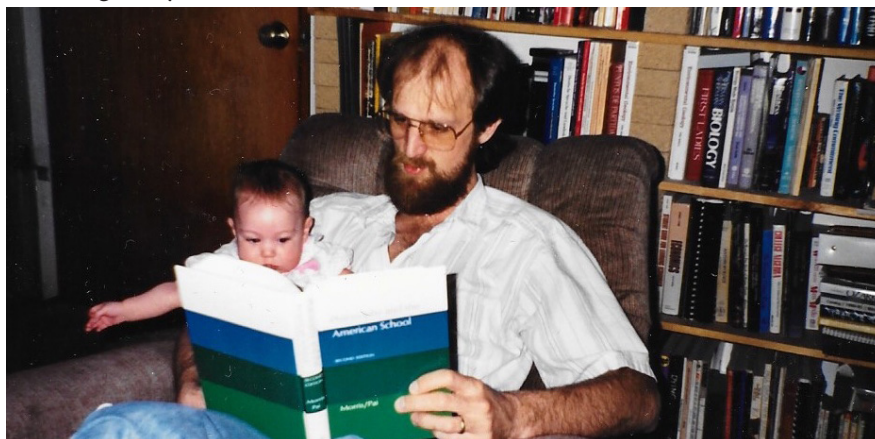


Figure 2: A photograph of baby Rhiannon sitting in her dad’s lap while he reads from a textbook.

2 Technically, my formal title is Senior Lecturer. I am considered a member of the regular-rank faculty, which includes those with tenure. Trying to explain academic title hierarchy and the ins-and-outs of the job market system to my family has primarily led everyone to just call me “professor,” so I honor them by using the term here. The distinctions between academic titles is just one example of how I see class patterns replicated—and how my own history compels me to provide clarity about the distinctions as such.

At the same time, my closest family member is my dad, who spent ten years getting a bachelor's degree part-time while working at the Coleman Company in Wichita, Kansas (Fig. 2). I spent childhood weekends in the factory with him, often getting to use the copier machine (a joy of mine!) to make copies of forklift invoices for him. He spent 43 years at Coleman, and during that time I routinely heard about institutional issues, management problems, and workers' rights at the factory.

It is probably this background—the promise of education as a way out coupled with the work ethic that means having your six-year-old making copies on the weekends—that makes me especially cognizant of labor discourse across the educational landscape. And now I work as a (factory) faculty³ member at a school that charges more for one year's tuition than anyone in my family made—and in fact charges more than I and many others in the humanities make now still. How do I couple my own history with the narrative that I should be “grateful” to be where I am? That my students should be grateful to be here? That we should all be grateful to institutions that have no thought or care for us? More often than not, I'm simply angry. And it wasn't until I started using that anger to do something—even small acts—that I started to feel better.

Let's Name and Expose the Bullshit

This is the daily grind of overstuffed inboxes, underpaid classes, and the endless hustle for scraps of recognition. It's the sting of being told to be “grateful” while our labor fuels the academic machine. We may not be able to dismantle the entirety of the machine in one fell swoop, but we can call out the bullshit and find subtle ways of pushing back against it (Fig. 3).

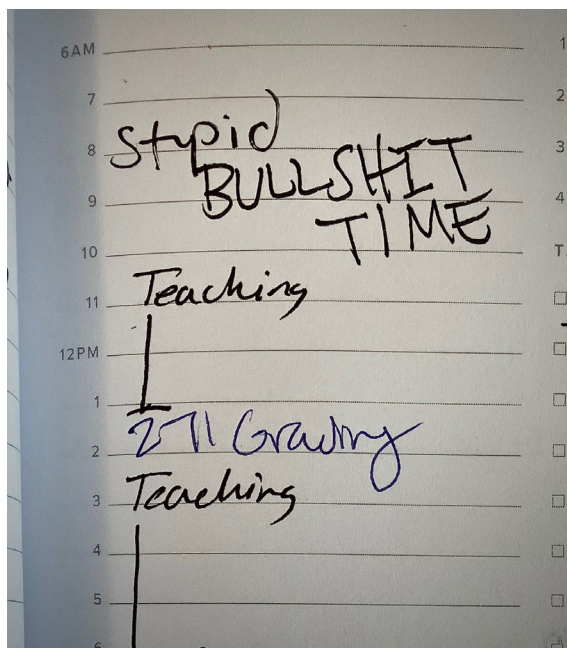


Figure 3: Close-up photo of a calendar page.

3 More than once in writing this piece I accidentally replaced the word “faculty” with “factory” and the irony wasn't lost on me. With administrative bloat and the growing contingent workforce, aren't we all just factory workers in the educational machine?

The Bullshit of Meritocracy

The academic world loves to preach the gospel of meritocracy, but we're here to call bullshit. Jess and I, despite our different paths, have found common ground in recognizing the absurdity that permeates our professional lives. We didn't grow up in the same world of privilege as many of our colleagues and students, and this shared outsider perspective has become our lens for exposing the lies of the system.

Every day, we witness the same tired narrative: work hard, and you'll be rewarded. Fair pay, equity, manageable workloads—these are the carrots dangled before us. But let's be real—in the patriarchal structure of academia, these promises are as substantial as smoke. We're told our hard work matters, but the when, how, and to what extent remain mysterious. Those questions are addressed at the institution's whim. It's a false agency, a rigged game where we're always one step behind.

The neoliberal university doesn't care about your dedication or your sleepless nights. It will wring you dry and still demand more. The idea that hard work alone determines success in higher education is the biggest lie of all. In a just world, maybe. But in our capitalist world, we have learned it's all about who you know, where you come from, and how well you play the game by pleasing the powers that be.

We use our rage in small but potent ways: calling out workload inequities in faculty meetings, strategically choosing collaborators, and sharing our stories with students when it matters. But it's a tight-rope walk. How do we stay vulnerable while maintaining professionalism? How do we avoid being seen as “different,” “special,” or “lesser”? How do we protect ourselves while still doing the necessary work?

Let us make these struggles concrete: we are women who have endured trauma at different points in our lives, become “successful” by our own definitions of the word, and fulfilled responsibilities and met deadlines. Along the way, we didn't seek accommodations, even if we would have been deserving of such. These experiences can cause us to struggle with those who don't seem to have the same “grit” or meet “buck up buttercup” expectations. At the same time, we realize that the system unfairly requires people to “buck up” and that perpetuating some of those standards serves patriarchal ideological narratives. This internal conflict is yet another manifestation of how deeply the myth of meritocracy has embedded itself in our psyches, even as we work to dismantle it.

These narratives we share may be softened, less “loud,” than some might expect from a manifesto. That's deliberate. Even in rebellion, we must consider the reality of CVs, job applications, and promotion materials. But make no mistake—our stories, however muted, are powerful catalysts for those who recognize themselves in our words.

We reject the toxic norms of “resilience” (Duke Endowment Report); “grit” (Duckworth); and “toughness” (Pinkser) that the system uses to gaslight us into compliance. Instead, we offer our experiences

as a mirror, a rallying point, a validation for those who've felt alone in their struggles against the bullshit of academic meritocracy.

The Bullshit of Doing It All

As we expose the myth of meritocracy, we confront another pervasive lie: the idea that we can and should “do it all.” The bootstrap mentality is deeply ingrained in our psyches, a double-edged sword that has both propelled us forward and trapped us in a cycle of endless striving. We've internalized the mantra of “keeping our eye on the prize,” believing that if we just push harder, work longer, we'll break through to a better place. On paper, it seems we've succeeded—we've climbed from our working-class roots to become writing professors at a top-ten university. But this apparent success story masks a more complex reality.

The truth is, we're given titles instead of equitable pay and promotions instead of economic stability. The system dangles the carrot of advancement while conveniently forgetting to mention that the race never ends. We're expected to be grateful for these symbolic victories, even as we continue to straddle socioeconomic lines, never fully belonging in either socioeconomic world. This expectation of gratitude comes with a hefty price tag: constant service. We're left grappling with how to serve others without becoming servants to a system that demands everything and gives little in return. How do we embody our values while adapting to fit into spaces that weren't designed for us?

In our quest to “do it all,” we've become cultural chameleons, infiltrating spaces that once seemed off-limits. But in doing so, we've inadvertently become “the other” - fitting in everywhere and nowhere simultaneously. As Dews and Law and Lubrano have noted, this is the paradox of our existence: we're insiders and outsiders, success stories and cautionary tales, all at once. The bullshit of “doing it all” isn't just about workload—it's about the exhausting mental and emotional labor of constantly code-switching, of trying to bridge worlds that the system is designed to keep separate. It's time we call out this impossible standard for what it is: another tool of patriarchal oppression masquerading as opportunity.

Our Daily Practice is Subtle (Remember: we seem “nice”)

A driving force of this project was the acceptance that systemic change is not immediately feasible from within. Instead, we must find creative, often quiet, ways to resist and reshape our academic lives. This includes saying “no” when possible, pursuing scholarly work that may not be traditionally valued by our institutions, and finding allies across the spectrum of our work lives.

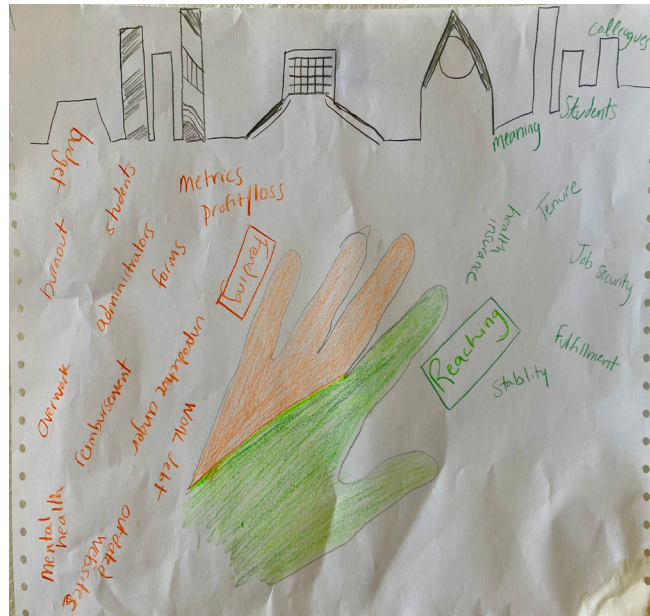


Figure 4: A drawing on paper depicts a hand

In sharing our stories, we expose the everydayness of our academic lives, of practicing (imperfectly) the “reaching out while fending off” of institutional work (Schnapp and Presnor). This often looks like reaching towards things like job stability, credibility, and meaningful work while simultaneously fending off overwork, financial instability, and overly complicated bureaucratic systems that only pay lip service to addressing real issues (Fig. 4). In the following narratives, we lay bare the subtle feminisms woven into our daily resistance, the quiet acts of defiance against a system that seeks to grind us down. Key to either of our daily practices is imperfection: what keeps us so often from saying “no” to doing something are feelings of guilt and insecurity (born out of the bullshit named above).

Jess’s Daily Practice

At 39 years old, I struggle to reimagine my identity. I am no longer “the job.” And I’m no longer willing to be the “team player” because the idea that there is “no I” in “team” is true in spelling and in theory, but not in practice.

I want to be clear that my identity shift is not a temper tantrum. I am not pulling back because I am not getting what I want. More simply, this is not “quiet quitting” (Creely). I am choosing to change in light of new awareness of my own motivation and the motivations of the institutions in which I live and work. Previously, I understood my academic pursuits and the positions that would come from them as a positive outlet for my psychological struggles, one that held the promise of being able to help my family while also serving a “prove them wrong” mentality regarding a lack of support from people who should have supported me (emotionally and/or financially) along the way. What I failed to realize is that internal motivations and rewards don’t warrant external injustices. People deserve to engage in meaningful work and be awarded equitable salaries and fringe benefits. As the job demands more of me—and I’m not allowed to demand

more of it—I need to find new ways of being.

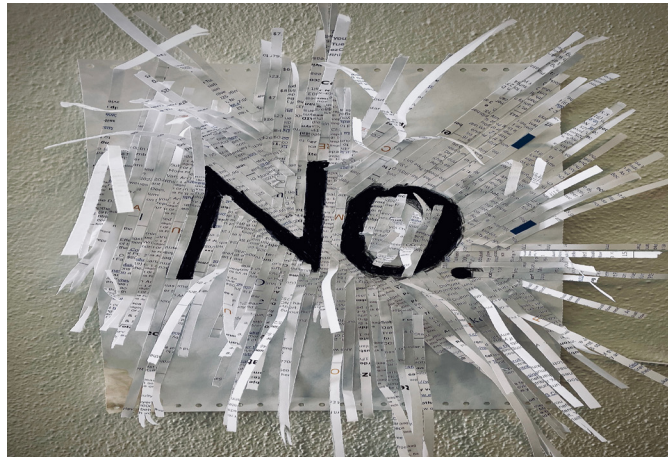


Figure 5: An artwork created by Rhiannon during the process of drafting this project.

So, I prefer to think of my identity reconstruction—and acts of saying “no” to some requests—as carrying out “subtle feminism,” whereby I advocate for myself (Fig. 5). And at a very wealthy institution populated by mostly wealthy students, I need to carve out a sense of belonging in different and sustainable ways. Along those lines, I have recently become a member of our University’s office for first-generation and/or low-income students (DukeLIFE), another act of “subtle feminism” that allows me to [align my values publicly but in some ways silently](#)—“subtly” but meaningfully (Duke University Office of Undergraduate Education). In my original DukeLIFE profile, I described myself as an “underdog,” emphasizing how I am both vulnerable (through naming my background as different from the norm) and called to take on more work to exist on a campus that routinely minimizes its own role in the economic stratification of higher education (Leonhardt). My work in the institution has brought about feelings of pride, contentment, and gratefulness, as well as feelings of disappointment, discontent, and resentment. Holding these tensions is, in itself, an act of subtle feminism.

Rhiannon's Daily Practice

My story doesn’t fit neatly into the academic mold. My journey from a child making copies in a factory to a faculty member is one fraught with contradictions — a deep gratitude for the opportunities afforded by education, yet a simmering anger at the systemic barriers that remain. This unique vantage point allows me to critically examine the narratives of meritocracy and institutional benevolence that permeate academia. It’s like having a flashlight in a dark room: I can shine the light where others might not even notice the darkness.

Most often, I redirect my rage into teaching—how can I make sure these students are aware of what happens behind the scenes of a university? Thus, I leverage my background as a pedagogical tool, connecting with students who share similar stories and challenging the assumptions of those from more privileged backgrounds. I ask them honest questions about what it means to do this work; about what the purpose of education is; about the hierarchies of academic labor behind the scenes that no one has bothered to expose to

them.

Additionally, by openly sharing my own “failures”—the times I stumbled, the times I questioned my career path—I create space for vulnerability and authenticity in my classroom. These small acts of disclosure may seem inconsequential to some, but they chip away at the façade of effortless success and open up a dialogue about the realities of class in academia. This is not to say this strategy works for everyone; it’s simply to say it is one subtle way I try to create space for thoughtful change.

We Reject False Promises and Substitute Our Own

This manifesto is not just a theoretical document; it’s a call to action rooted in our lived experiences. It urges us to recognize the power of these small, subtle acts of feminism—the everyday resistances that chip away at the status quo. In embracing our anger and channeling it into purposeful action, we create space for a more inclusive, equitable, and authentic academic experience. We gather our fragments, assemble our stories, and amplify our collective voice for change.

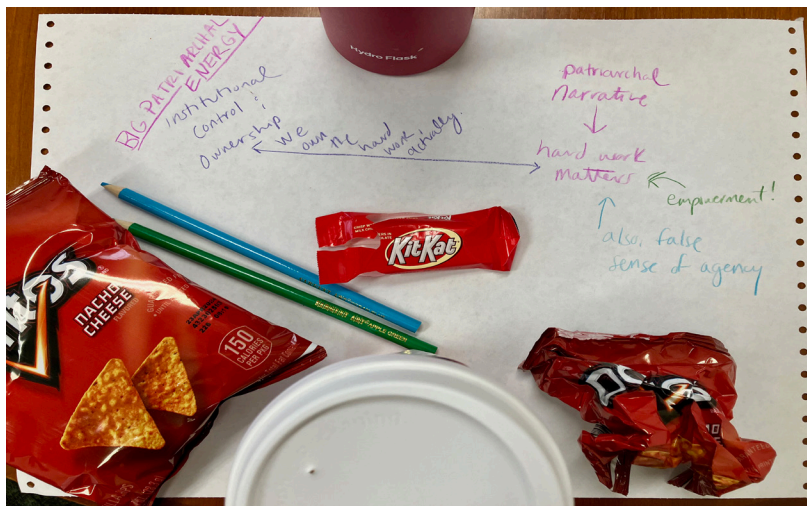


Figure 6: A photo of a tabletop scattered with snack foods, paper, and pens.

We envision this project as a living, breathing example of rhetorical feminism (Fig. 6.) By sharing our personal narratives and images from our lives as we composed this piece, we begin to dismantle the invisibility of class and labor issues faced by women professors. We have dissected oft-touted values of resilience and hard work, acknowledging the inherent vulnerability of our positions within a system that thrives on perpetuating these very ideals. We can’t promise this will fix much—if any—of the major systemic problems. But maybe it can spark a broader conversation and connect us with others who share our frustrations.

Moreover, we are in the process of transforming The Purple Collar Project manifesto into a non-profit organization. In drafting this work, Jess found a space of belonging and energy that she had long been searching for. After completing the first version of this text on a Friday evening, she spent the entire weekend thinking, “What if the Purple Collar Project” was more than a manifesto and a line on a CV? And what if we provide the space for others to share their narratives loudly or quietly—or loudly *and* quietly? We are assembling our fragments into something much larger.

We end, then, with a series of calls-to-action. These calls are coming from inside the house, so to speak. We want to reiterate our commitment to an “ethics of care” but also empower others to challenge the status quo and continue to build a more supportive academic environment across institutions. This will look different for different folks; actions themselves can be as simple and subtle as necessary. Our calls to action are intended to be read as reflective and meaningful first steps to thinking through the reader’s own relationship to this issue. Feel free to use our work to quietly justify not engaging in the bullshit, to loudly challenge the myths when you encounter them, and/or to contribute to the larger Purple Collar Project narrative.

Our current “success”: in academia comes with the responsibility to critique and change the very systems that claim to have elevated us.

Subtle Calls to Action You Can Start Practicing NOW

Question your own narrative: The “myth of meritocracy” makes us believe in a false sense of personal agency. How do your experiences, shaped by your socioeconomic background past and present, influence your approach to established practices within the institution?

Challenge the “bullshit” of academic life: Question the daily operating bullshit of bureaucracy, even if you do so quietly. Recognize the power of subtle subversions against institutional norms. Reflect on how you can practice such subtle subversions.

Disrupt individualistic narratives: Counter narratives like “grit” and “toughness” that pressure academics, particularly those who escaped hardship through education, to feel grateful for their burdens. What can countering these narratives look like in your position at your institution?

Assemble with others: We invite academics, particularly women, to assemble with us by sharing your stories at [The Purple Collar Project](#).

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