Are You a Woman or an Historian?
A Feminist's Guide to Surviving the Academic Job Interview

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ABSTRACT

The academic job interview is far from being a neutral proceeding that effectively and inevitably determines "merit." It is, in fact, a highly gendered construction that disadvantages women candidates and poses special problems for feminists. Gender imbalance on hiring committees, gendered questions and criteria of evaluation, a perceived conflict between "femininity" and "professionalism," and overt hostility to feminism all add to the difficulties faced by female candidates. This paper provides a step-by-step guide to the academic job interview for the benefit of the female graduate student and recent graduate just entering the academic job market.

RÉSUMÉ

L'entrevue pour un emploi universitaire est loin d'être un processus neutre qui permet de déterminer d'une façon efficace et inévitable le «mérite». Il s'agit plutôt d'une construction qui, par sa forme, désavantage les femmes et crée des problèmes particuliers pour les féministes. L'inégalité entre les sexes sur les comités de sélection, des questions et des critères d'évaluation qui désavantagent les femmes, l'idée selon laquelle il existe un conflit entre la «féminité» et le «professionnalisme», ainsi qu'une hostilité ouverte envers le féminisme font augmenter les difficultés auxquelles les femmes doivent faire face. L'article suivant est un guide détaillé sur l'entrevue pour un emploi universitaire. Il est destiné aux étudiantes du 2e et 3e cycles et aux diplomées qui entrent sur le marché du travail.

FOR ASPIRING HISTORIANS JUST COMPLETing their graduate training and embarking on the quest for an academic appointment, there is little information available about the hiring process, and few graduate students receive orientation to the job market as part of their training.[1] During my three years on the job market, I learned some hard lessons as a candidate before landing a coveted tenure-track appointment and, during the past year, I have had the opportunity to view the process from the other side as a member of a hiring committee. I would like to offer my reflections for the benefit of the prospective candidate who might otherwise, as I did, approach her first job interview in the same manner as Alice fell down the rabbithole, with equally disconcerting and distressing results. The academic

job interview can bear an uncanny resemblance to the Mad Hatter's Tea Party, and an understanding of its format and sometimes bizarre dynamics can go a long way toward helping a candidate perform well and emerge psychologically unscathed. In the belief that forewarned is forearmed, my intention here is to provide a step-by-step guide to the academic job interview for the benefit of the female graduate student and recent graduate just entering the academic job market.

Female candidates have a special need for advance preparation because the academic job interview is far from being a neutral proceeding that effectively and inevitably determines "merit." In fact, as I shall argue, it has built-in gender biases that disadvantage women and create special problems for feminists. Exacerbating the difficulties facing female candidates is the fact that women have been less well served by the mentoring system which has traditionally initiated the most promising graduate students into the profession. As women in academe, we need to share our experiences of attempting both to reconcile the contradictory demands that are placed upon us and to define ourselves as women in a male-dominated environment. At the beginning of my teaching career, I once sought the advice of a colleague after being greeted with wolf whistles by a class of 150 first-year students. A response that had worked perfectly for her, she assured me, was: "If you ever try that again, I'll have your balls on a plate and serve them up to the Dean." In this case, while appreciating my colleague's helpfulness, I recognized that I would have to adopt a different set of tactics. The following is offered, then, with the understanding that we might learn from one another but, ultimately, each of us must choose to act in the way that seems appropriate and comfortable for her.[2]

A job interview is not to be approached lightly. It contains elements of an oral comprehensive examination and a thesis defence but, as a day-long ordeal in which you are also being evaluated in other more personal and consequently more threatening ways, it can be more gruelling than either of these. In this situation, it helps to remember that an interview is a two-way process and that you are also there to evaluate the department and your prospective colleagues. In deference to the time and energy that you have put into preparation and travel, you should expect to be treated as a visiting speaker, and if the department is sensitive to the needs of the candidate, there are some aspects of the experience that can actually be enjoyable. With luck, you may make some friends and useful contacts even if you are not offered the job. If you learn from your mistakes and remember that an interview is never a wasted effort, no matter how badly it may seem to have gone, your performance will improve dramatically. Furthermore, you are being given a unique opportunity to observe the dynamics of different departments and, in the process, you will learn what kind of environment and what kind of colleagues would be most congenial to you.

The invitation to come for an interview will be delivered by telephone. You may be fortunate enough to receive several weeks notice but it is equally possible that you will be asked to come in three days. For this reason, it is advisable for aspiring candidates to be prepared with everything from a freshly dry-cleaned "interview outfit" to a formal research presentation that can be packed at a moment's notice. So that you will appear at your best, always take advantage of opportunities to travel to your destination the night before. Start your preparation immediately by taking advantage of your initial telephone conversation to ask

many questions, beginning with an enquiry about the identities of the other members of the hiring committee. If there seems to be no female names, do not hesitate to ask if there will be other women present during the interview. This may have the effect of galvanizing the Chair into correcting what may have been an oversight ("the only woman in your field is on leave this year"). Ask detailed questions about the agenda for the day and be sure to ask about provisions for a scheduled break if this is not specifically mentioned. At more than one interview I was forced to hide in the washroom in order to have a chance to be alone because too many hiring committees forget that, so far as the candidate is concerned, lunch is not a break.

During the initial conversation, you will also be provided with information about the presentatiron(s) you will be expected to give during your visit, about the courses you will be expected to teach if hired, and about the long-term prospects of this particular appointment. Ask as many questions as you can think of (and call back with more if necessary) because it is to your advantage to have as much information as possible about the situation into which you will be walking. If you feel uncertain about whether you want to do the interview, do not hesitate to ask for a few hours, or overnight, to think it over. It is probably not a good idea to continue if you are virtually certain, based on the information that you have been given, that you will not be taking the job. The hiring process is expensive and a big drain on everyone's time and energy. You will not make any friends in the department if the committee is left with the impression that your interest in the job was not sincere.

Following your conversation with the Chair, you should proceed to do some serious research. Make full use of your network of contacts to make discreet enquiries about the department and about the members of the committee. If you have difficulty with any member of the hiring committee, it can be important for you to know whether that individual is powerful and respected in the department or is not well regarded and has a reputation for being obnoxious. In badly divided departments, conflicts having nothing to do with the candidate might surface during the hiring process, and it might help you to deal with the resulting tensions if you know that they are not a reflection on you personally. Find out what you can about the research interests and principal publications of department members in your field. Study a copy of the current calendar, paying particular attention to the course offerings of your prospective department. If you are really serious about the job, you may also choose to make more information about yourself available to the hiring committee before the interview by mailing or faxing additional publications, research proposals, course proposals and outlines, and similar materials. I found this to be an excellent strategy.

The interview format varies from one department to another. Some departments extend the visit to two days, requiring the candidate to deliver a lecture to a class of undergraduate students as well as a research presentation. Mercifully, however, I have found the following schedule to be more typical.

1. Arrival at the department around 10 a.m., followed by tea or coffee and an introduction to the hiring committee and other members of the department.
2. Interview with the hiring committee.
3. Brief interview with the Chair of the department.
4. Lunch with the available members of the hiring committee.
5. A break of one-half to one hour during which time you will be given an office in

which to be alone to look over your presentation.

6. Research presentation to the committee and interested members of the department, followed by a question period.

Do not be fooled by the informality of lunch. It is one of the most important parts of the interview because it provides the members of the hiring committee with their best opportunity to find out what you are like as a person. On a very concrete note, remember that all eyes will be on you during the meal, so choose something you can eat elegantly and with minimal concentration.

Always remember that, during the many informal conversations throughout the day, you are being evaluated as a potential colleague. You may be sounded out with discreet questions intended to shed light on your lifestyle, your background, and your politics. Try to be as relaxed and forthcoming as you can, under the circumstances, without sounding arrogant or overconfident. On the other hand, do not become so anxious about saying the "wrong thing" that you convey the impression that you do not have any opinions at all. Since the evaluation is a two-way process, feel free to ask questions about the department, the university, the students, and the city in which the university is located; genuine interest and enthusiasm on the part of the candidate can only help to make a favourable impression. Take advantage of opportunities to talk to prospective female colleagues about the environment for women in the department and the university (a sensitive department will make a point of giving you such an opportunity). Use these informal contacts to pass on any information you would like the committee to have about yourself and your circumstances, but do not create false impressions. If your objective is to end up in a situation where you will be working with congenial colleagues, it is best to be yourself rather than to try to be someone you are not.

The formal interview with the hiring committee is probably the most gruelling test that you will face during the day. As in the case of an oral comprehensive examination or a thesis defence, it is to your advantage to take an active role in directing the discussion, rather than passively waiting to be interrogated. During the interview you will be asked many questions about teaching. Be prepared to discuss at some length exactly what kind of teaching experience you have had, why you like teaching, and what you consider to be your personal philosophy and objectives as a teacher. Be able to discuss your thoughts about students, and the kind of teaching techniques you would employ for large and small classes. Regarding the courses you will be asked to teach, be prepared to discuss the texts, the structure of the course, the main themes to be developed, and the nature of student assignments. Remember that most committees are prepared to make allowances in cases where it is obvious that the candidate does not have much teaching experience; showing some initiative, however, can help to compensate for this lack. In my own case, a written proposal for an unconventional course of my own design helped to get me two jobs and the offer of other jobs and interviews before I had ever taught the course.

Interviews for limited-term appointments generally focus almost entirely on teaching. In the case of tenure-track appointments, you should also be prepared to answer questions about your current and future research. These questions are intended to determine how your presence would influence the future direction of the department. You may also be asked broad historiographical questions relating to your field, similar to those you would encounter in a Ph.D. oral comprehensive examination.

Be aware that these questions can be intended to shed light on your politics as much as on your command of the literature. Answer all questions as fully and forthrightly as you can, keeping in mind that there are undoubtedly divisions among the committee members and there is no way your answers will satisfy everyone; in fact, generating some lively debate can work to your advantage. Obviously, candidates with considerable teaching experience have a big advantage here, but again, remember that most committees, no matter how it may seem to you at the time, are aware of the difficulties of your situation. Actively redirecting the interview, although it may require an admission of ignorance on your part, is preferable to pontificating on a subject about which you know nothing or allowing yourself to become overwhelmed by feelings of embarrassment or inadequacy.

Following lunch and a break, it is time for you to give your presentation to the committee and interested members of the department. You should have been briefed about the type and length of presentation required during the initial telephone conversation. I have personally found this matter of the presentation to be extremely problematic. In no doubt well-intentioned attempts to make the process seem less intimidating, particularly in the case of limited-term appointments, Chairs will often stress that this is to be a very informal event, and that the department is mainly interested in seeing how you present yourself. My advice is to forget the "chat" and prepare a formal written paper since, in a high-stress situation and at the end of a gruelling day, you will need all the help you can get. With a prepared text, you are free to concentrate on delivery. Never present anything but your best work on the topic on which you can most comfortably field difficult questions, even if this is not your most recent project. In presenting your research, keep details to a minimum, and never go over the suggested time allotment. Put the emphasis on situating your work in its historiographical context, stressing its strengths, its originality, and the importance the contribution will have within the literature. Speak slowly, confidently, authoritatively, and never, ever, demean your accomplishments or apologize for the inadequacies of your work.

At some point during your visit, you will probably be given a brief interview with the Chair of the department to give you more information about the terms of the appointment and to discuss your teaching assignment in more detail. This is your opportunity to ask about such specifics as class sizes, marking load, and the possibility of teaching or marking assistance. You will be briefed about benefits and the faculty association, the university's policy on moving expenses, your starting salary, the arrangements regarding sabbaticals and obtaining tenure, and the long-term prospects for the position if it is not tenure-track. Here it is appropriate to inform the Chair, as well as the hiring committee, of other interviews or job offers in the works, again without seeming arrogant or overconfident. Should you later be offered the job, do not blurt out your grateful acceptance, but take the time to consult with colleagues and advisors about the courseload and the starting salary. Especially in the case of a tenure-track appointment, there might be some hard bargaining involving yourself, the Chair of the department and the Dean. If you have made it this far in a tight job market after facing stiff competition, you should not sell yourself short.

Most of what I have said so far applies equally to male and female candidates, but the academic job interview is in fact a highly gendered construction that greatly disadvantages women candidates unless elaborate precautions are taken. Most obvious, of course, is the gender imbalance on hiring committees, a

problem that many departments are now trying to address. In my experience as a candidate, it was only during the research presentations, generally attended by substantial numbers of graduate students, that a significant female presence in the room allowed me to stop feeling acutely conscious of my gender. The presence of other women not only provides support and encouragement to the female candidate, but also serves as a visible reminder to everyone present that the prospective woman historian is neither an interloper nor an alien being. While some would have it that such reminders are unnecessary where "merit" is the primary basis on which candidates are evaluated, my experience bears out the claim that, in some quarters, merit continues to be strongly correlated with masculinity and the identity of the historian is assumed to be male.

Because female candidates will be judged as "professional" or "unprofessional" by standards that continue to be derived from male models and male behaviours, the matters of dress and presentation of self become both problematic and highly political. Women must attempt to conform to these standards while avoiding any obvious transgression of gender boundaries that would have the effect of setting off alarm bells. Decisions about appropriate dress assume major significance as the candidate tries to avoid appearing "too feminine" and therefore unprofessional, or "too masculine" and therefore threatening. Body language and speaking style present similar difficulties as women who are self-deprecating and unassertive in their bearing can be perceived as lacking confidence and authority, and therefore unprofessional. At the same time, assertive and confident behaviour in women is perceived by some men as aggressive, and therefore both uncollegial and personally threatening. While male candidates, too, are surely anxious to appear well-groomed, confident and professional, they are not confronted with the possibility that doing so will make them appear "unmasculine." Women candidates, by contrast, are disadvantaged by their gender identity which, potentially at least, conflicts with the presentation of an appropriately professional demeanour.

The matter of gendered questions during the job interview is only beginning to be recognized as an issue and many departments have still not addressed it in a systematic way. While it is now less likely that women will be asked inappropriate questions about their lifestyle, marital and other attachments, childcare arrangements and child-bearing plans, a female candidate must always be prepared for this possibility, particularly during informal conversations. Recent studies of the dynamics of job interviews have also suggested that female candidates are more likely to be grilled by their questioners, while male candidates are given more space to talk about subjects that interest them. At one department I visited, it was explained to me that, during the interview on teaching, all candidates are asked a standard set of questions in order to eliminate this kind of obvious discrimination. My experiences on both sides of the hiring process have left me convinced that such policies have much merit and are, for the present at least, necessary to protect female candidates from offensive interrogations. One insensitive questioner can determine the entire dynamic of the interview and, in my experience, other members of the committee, who must consider their own position in the department and their future relations with their colleagues, are frequently unwilling or unable to protest or intervene.

The minority of interviewers who still regard female candidates as unlikely historians will require women to prove that they have overcome the "handicap" of their gender. They will need to be convinced that a woman candidate has the ability and the commitment that

they would take for granted in a similarly qualified male. Feminist candidates who are so identified by their research and publications need to be aware that they may be in for a particularly rough ride, since the prospect of a feminist joining the department can cause extraordinary anxieties and insecurities to surface. I sometimes found myself wondering how many male candidates were regularly asked about their position on affirmative action, their attitude toward students of the opposite sex, and their handling of gender issues in general survey courses. Would their answers not be construed differently, in any case? I also resented being asked "loaded" questions about my course content that invariably came from interviewers who were suspicious of women's history and hostile to feminism. Responding to such questions in an interview situation, where one's career may be hanging in the balance, can create enormous stress and anxiety for the feminist candidate.

To develop an effective strategy for responding to questions of this kind, and to avoid being caught offguard, it helps to recognize that such questions are standing in for a set of unspoken questions that goes something like this. "Are you a 'militant,' 'strident' feminist, as opposed to the kind that I consider acceptable?" "Do you teach anti-male hate propaganda to your students?" "Do you resent the presence of male students in your classes?" "Will you advocate 'politically correct' measures such as affirmative action and curriculum reform?" Answering these questions in an interview situation is like picking your way through a minefield, and the challenge is to respond in a way that will mollify the questioner but will leave you feeling that you have not sacrificed your principles or your integrity. Be aware that at a time like this, you are probably not as alone as you feel, and often you will be told later that other people in the room were silently cheering for you. In cases where the question is really out of line and you are sure of your position, the delivery of a sharp and challenging response will not necessarily jeopardize your chance at the job. Witnesses to the exchange — even those who do not share your outrage — may perceive your answer as proof that you can handle hostile questions in a high pressure situation.

All calculations aside, there may simply come a point when you have reached your limit. I reached mine following a particularly strained morning spent entirely in the company of seven men, during which time I was not allowed to forget for a single moment either my gender or my feminism. Hoping to be given some breathing space during lunch, I was instead asked to explain to the committee, over my Caesar salad, whether I considered myself to be a woman or an historian. Experiencing a sudden surge of adrenaline as I felt that my right to consider myself an historian at all was being fundamentally challenged, I resisted the temptation to hurl my salad, refused to respond, and demanded to know whether the interviewer would ask a similar question to a male candidate. While the other members of the committee took an intense interest in their shoes, my questioner insisted that he personally never paid any attention to gender, but he was extremely concerned about the serious question of excellence in the academy. I suspect that my purple hue at this point must have alerted the other members of the committee to the fact that the candidate and the interview were about to explode and they hastily intervened to change the subject. I then faced the challenge of setting this unpleasantness aside, being gracious and collegial for the rest of lunch, and going directly into my research presentation to the department. Later on, I did receive profuse apologies from other members of the department for the fact that I was asked

this question; I was congratulated on my handling of a difficult situation, and I was also offered the job.

Not all interviews, of course, include scenarios such as this one, and I did visit several departments that were obviously making sincere efforts to be sensitive to the particular needs of the female candidate. It is encouraging and evidence of progress that incidents such as this are now generally viewed as unacceptable and are cause for considerable comment. Many departments, often under pressure from their administration, are now drawing up guidelines for hiring committees so that such incidents can be avoided, specifying female representation on committees and designating some kinds of questioning as inappropriate. Standardized questions, however, continue to generate strong opposition, and there is a widely held view that the very notion of enforceable guidelines in the hiring process is reprehensible and offensive. In this atmosphere, so far as the female candidate is concerned, the potential for unpleasantness hangs over every interview, creating additional anxiety even if trouble never actually materializes.

It does appear that the pressure is coming down on some departments to hire more women, and this may be helping more female candidates get to the interview stage. In my experience, however, this has not turned the interview into a cakewalk for the female candidate. Those who continue to equate calls for hiring women with pressure to "lower standards" will force you to prove that you are not only good but exceptional. You will have to jump through all the hoops through which male candidates are expected to jump, and show that you can do it just as well, or better. Women candidates, however, face an additional set of hoops in the composition of the hiring committee, the unspoken doubts and assumptions, the gendered questions and criteria of evaluation, the perceived conflict between "femininity" and "professionalism," and the ever-lurking paranoia about feminism. Should you actually land an appointment, however, there is one thing on which you can count. The congratulations will be generously laced with comments to the effect that it certainly does help to be female these days, because all the jobs are going to women.

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NOTES

1. Although my remarks are addressed to prospective historians and derive from my experiences with history departments, I suspect that much of this discussion will be of interest to candidates in other fields. I would also recommend Linda Gordon, "Successful Interviewing," *Perspectives: Newsletter of the American Historical Association,* November 1989: pp. 6-7; Linda Kealey, "The Status of Women in the Historical Profession in Canada, 1989 Survey," *Canadian Historical Review* 72.3 (1991): 370-388; Lykke de la Cour, et al., "Highlights of the Preliminary Report on the Status of Women as Graduate Students in History in Canada," *Canadian Historical Association Bulletin* 17.1 (1991): 1.8; Ruth Roach Pierson, "Colonization and Canadian Women's History," *Journal of Women's History* 4.2 (1992): 134-156; Barbara Sicherman, et al., "Gender and Employment Challenges of the Nineties," *Journal of Women's History* 4.3 (1993): 137-161; and Nadya Aisenberg and Mona Harrington, *Women of Academe: Outsiders in the Sacred Grove* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).
2. It should be noted that women of colour, women with disabilities, and lesbians so identified by their research face additional discrimination that is outside my experience and so is not addressed here. On discrimination against openly lesbian historians, see "Committee on Women Historians' Report on the Lesbian and Gay Historians Survey," *Perspectives* 31.4 (1993): 13-15.