

## **Feminisms, crises and affect: women in academia contemplating publics and performativities**

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In recent years, locally and globally, there has been intense transformation in higher education and academic practice, as forces of neoliberalization, privatization of public services, precarization of labor, and corporatization/commodification of education dismantle previous models of educational provision. These transformations have had significant impact on scholarship, critical and radical thought in academic cultures and the learning/teaching experience.

Even more alarmingly, such transformations have created a state of crisis in work-life balance and have exacerbated further gendered inequalities, thus highlighting more challenges in the academic landscape for women who face complex obstacles and paradoxes as scholars and academics. Although the specific challenges are by and large global, they may take different forms in each regional, institutional and disciplinary context, but holistically they pose similar urgent questions that require a critical lens of inquiry. This realization further underscores the need for more feminist politics of collective action and struggle in the Academy.

This reflective piece aims to provide a research report on the impact of these contemporary transformations on the lives of women academics, academic feminism and the career trajectories of feminist academics. Drawing from pilot ethnographic fieldwork in Iceland, Greece and the UK, this contribution seeks to explore some of the current constraints that women academics are facing given the wider transformations in the education sector as shaped by neoliberalization and the wider global restructuring in exploring an account of affect and crises in the production of knowledge and the sustainability of work/life balance in contemporary social life.

Additionally, this contribution aims to highlight the importance of strengthening further feminisms of resistance and activism, in developing ways to respond to the current challenges through, for instance, more connected, compassionate and caring mentoring initiatives. Such interventions should be responsive to both the inequalities women academics face and to ameliorating unbearable working lives.

Hence, the reflections here are not merely about the wider issues engulfing neoliberal academia. This piece endeavors to stimulate ‘praxis’ and potential for activist engagement in addressing the affective and political potential for performative feminist resistance. It wishes to engage directly and substantially with collective agency and strategies for change; primarily a change of what my participants have voiced as a ‘misogynistic academic establishment’ and a landscape of gendered power networks that consistently undermine the possibility of the transformative potential *for* personal growth of women in

academia. In this sense, this contribution is feminist, addressing the feminist imagination and aiming to stimulate dialogue with diverse feminisms.

This piece is also politically grounded in my personal experiences as a union organizer during which I repeatedly observed how the conditions described here constrained time and time again the mobilization of colleagues collectively and individually, the recurrent attempts to combat bullying and inequality in the workplace, the repetitive re/creations of women academic groups. One clear channel of progressive resolution I would like to advance is that of a personal commitment of women mentoring women in developing new platforms of agency, change and empowerment for women academics.

### **Feminisms, crises, affect and academia: trepidation and transformation**

The inevitability of paradoxes in academic life almost resembles a natural succession of stages in the life of most intellectual ‘workers’ in academia. In the post-PhD stage one often finds oneself in a loop of struggle against time, so that one’s research does not date and is published in a timely fashion and in highly esteemed international peer reviewed outlets, as one shifts from an interminable state of un/under-employment limbo to a reified state of interminable work hours, the latter mostly in fixed/short-term contracts of the precarious labor status but with workloads of boundless despair. But having at least an ‘institutional affiliation’ in spite and despite inconceivable demands, paradoxically again, seems to be preferable than falling back into a rather ‘dehumanized’ state of the ‘independent’ researcher status, where, ironically, there is no institutional identity or belonging to a higher education institution, which in a sense frustratingly ‘legitimizes’ one’s academic ‘worth’ since employers find these desirable.

The language above sounds appallingly economic and quite reminiscent of my past, not so very long ago; it echoes numerous discussions with academics and researchers in several European and international destinations. Although there is an auto-ethnographic component in this research, reinforced by concrete cases as union representative and member of its executive at a previous institution, this analytic optic has been enriched by recent pilot fieldwork in Iceland and longer term research in the UK and Greece. This scoping study has also gained insight from discussions with academics in the US, Canada, Norway, Denmark, Germany, Portugal and Spain. I am very grateful that participants selflessly engaged in articulating their experiences during ‘caring and sharing’ sessions; quite therapeutic for all of us to know that we are not alone in our struggles.

Spatially and temporally, the dys-rhythmia and divergence amongst the three countries (UK, Iceland, Greece) is manifest in socio-cultural, politico-historical and economic contexts. Although past wealth trajectories and post 2008 financial degradation may be at surface level elements to compare, in essence,

the UK, Iceland and Greece could not be more different in their human geography and systems of governance (or lack thereof). This is indeed one of the compelling reasons to delve deeper into the current challenges and constraints in academia as they appear to be equally and fiercely present in all three countries, from North to South(!)

Such a realization reconfirms the spread of the neoliberal framework within higher education, the instrumentalization of such as a skills supply market and top-down managerial control, but more distressingly, such neoliberal values have also intensified the emergence of ‘retro-sexist behaviours’ that compel an activist call for the fostering of more ‘dialogue and partnership between feminist and anti-marketisation politics’ (Phipps and Young, 2015: 305).

### **Reflecting on the politics of academic practice**

I enter the analytical scope with a threefold narratological lens in rendering a hermeneutical account of performativities, publics and possibilities. That is, I approach the study of oppressive regimes in the current academic landscape through the cultural codes of the performance of actors, the activism publics that they construct and the possibilities that emerge as part of that struggle. To that end, I try to understand a narratology of the neoliberal academic institution as legitimating a culture of the disciplined knowledge producer/worker through regulation, surveillance and restraint. The above creates academic subjects of complicity, conformity and control, where any transgressive act of resistance is crushed and met with punitive and categorical classification of those seen as the ‘problematic trouble-makers’. As a result, such ‘trouble-makers’ stirring the scene may not be promoted, may be given ‘dirty’ departmental work and even implicitly threatened with dismissal.

Perhaps the above appears to be a rather simplistic and generalizing rendering of the contemporary academic condition as an ‘inconvenient truth’. Thus it is imperative to recognize the sophisticated conception of the power and production/reproduction regimes of inequalities as translated in the Academy. This is especially pertinent for those academics who are squeezed further into the dark and dystopic corner of uncertainty and the limboness of un/underemployment. In such a position of precarity they struggle to find a voice and a place in the absence of pedagogic objectives and regimes of governmentality of the corporate institution. Such a status ceases their deprofessionalization/dehumanization through zero hour contracts and recurrent expiration dates of any existing ones.

Epistemologically, I view the Academy as an object of subjugation in the multipolarity of an oppressive logic of neoliberal governance of the (*Psychotic*; cf. Sievers 2008) University, as an institution of learning, teaching and the pursuit of knowledge. To transform such a liminality of learning, I find alternative initiatives of education provision to be refreshing modalities of revolt against the marketization of learning. One such alternative I am involved in is

the Free University Brighton (FUB) which is both a protest against the growing marketization of education and a practical response. The FUB is inspired by the free school movement of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the 1960s Anti-university, the Occupy movement and other contemporary free universities around the world. It aims to create more democratic educational experiences where teachers and students actually learn from each other in an interactive and inclusive context. The emerging learning unfolds in locations placed into the heart of the community by making use of existing public spaces. This is a project focused on creating alternative education accessible to all, regardless of income and providing space to think critically about the world and how it could be otherwise (<http://freeuniversitybrighton.org/about/>).

Hence, the focus should not solely be on the institutions of higher learning but on the contrary the discussion should point to the establishment of scholarly knowledge as the output of *wisdom*. And so rebuilding the Academy on the premises presented here reflects the collective establishment of scholarship as a societal and spatial constellation of not solely information transfer but above all, as the transmission of knowledge co-production with learners, its dissemination and impact in the attainment of equitable, just, decolonizing, democratic, feminist and anti-racist social spheres. The emphasis again here is on the core elements of such a pedagogic vision/ethos to embrace teaching as a developmental pathway to facilitate a transformative learning which will enable students to actively enhance their potential as global citizens who are socially and ecologically aware and deeply sensitive to international contexts and cultures.

I view such teaching as responsive to the postcolonial historicity of societies, minority and migrant diversity and the changing global and transnational influences on political, economic and cultural contexts, communities, crises and practices. Such pedagogic tools can also advance theoretical understandings, practical knowledge and a social justice agenda.

### **Articulating the Academy of power, privilege and pain**

At the same time, in reflecting on such matters I am also questioning the politics of place and space and deciphering my academic positionality and situated role in the struggles over knowledge. All the same, what women academics who participated in this and other studies underscore is that it always seems to be easier for male academics; they have ‘sponsors’, support systems inside the institution and outside, personal/domestic support and often the ‘audacity’ to go forward for posts and promotions without essentially meeting the criteria. Heijstra et al. (2013) refer to Acher (2006) in observing that ‘those who are privileged do not see this privilege’. Thus while for male participants in their study the support they receive from their department is openly acknowledged by the male participants, ‘this support cannot be taken for granted by women at the same academic level’, something that Sonja gets frustrated about:

The only thing that sort of annoys me is when you see those young boys, they're warmly welcomed to the academic environment that they get here, and positions are created for them. And you are like, yeah no wonder they are doing so well. You both admire them and, (you are) a bit annoyed by the whole thing, it is not equality, it is not equal circumstances....(quoted in Heijstra et al. 2013).

However, not only have women academics voiced the injustice they felt in similar cases such as the one outlined above, but, more importantly they felt that they were deliberately held down by male (senior) academics, exploited and disturbingly bullied<sup>1</sup>.

In one of the more poignant narratives, one of my participants indicated:

The boys' club is still going strong. I get so angry and I know it is toxic and it poisons you but it is very painful to have it staring in your face every day. ... all these men who get to climb the ladder of career and salary progression in a blink of an eye while the women keep staring at the glass ceiling, in shock and disgust with the realization that decades transpire and they are still lecturers even if they have ticked all the boxes ... And, to top it all off, they also feel guilty that there is something they are doing wrong when in reality they are continuously victimized! (UK, mid career)

While I prefer to steer away from discourses of victimization that further exacerbate the symbolic violence of accountability for those challenged by systemic and structural elements of the neoliberal university, it is more constructive to perhaps problematize the ethics of such discourses of victimhood, the claims and contestations over blame and responsibility (cf. Dahl, 2009). This is coupled with continued demands for income generation and the surveillance of such grant applications that make the process demoralizing and paralyzing as academics are expected to bring vast amounts of research income to their departments and schools, often a condition for sustaining their jobs<sup>2</sup>.

While it is true that over-generalizing narratives create a homogenizing and disempowering context of despair, the intricacies of the 3 case studies while

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance: 'Why women leave academia and why universities should be worried', and 'Culture of cruelty: why bullying thrives in higher education', accessible respectively from: <http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2014/nov/03/why-bullying-thrives-higher-education> and [http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2012/may/24/why-women-leave-academia?CMP=tw\\_t\\_gu](http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2012/may/24/why-women-leave-academia?CMP=tw_t_gu)

<sup>2</sup> Among numerous campaigns for unfair dismissal on such grounds see for instance one of the latest regarding a Lecturer in Connective Tissue Biology in the Department of Clinical Veterinary Science at the University of Bristol, UK: <http://epigram.org.uk/news/2015/02/ucu-launches-campaign-to-reinstate-dismissed-lecturer>

analytically interesting remain politically reducible to the issue of power/oppression. So while scale is an element for consideration and this includes both the wider population context but more specifically the sheer numbers of actual institutions of Higher Education and the variations within (eg. UK 150, Iceland 7), and so do curricula, appointment and appraisal processes, etc. the essence remains that irrespective of any metric representation and triangulation of sampling representability and validity, similar issues of pedagogic social justice, social reproduction, and similar politics of compassion, sharing and caring are salient across all three countries.

For all these reasons, this research and writing project has been both traumatic and cathartic, reflexive and revealing, in the making and in undoing, unpicking and unpacking, and of course ongoing. Here in this reflective contribution I outline some of the central parameters of the research while providing some narrative insights drawn from the qualitative data gathered. This reflective piece is intended to provide a scoping overview of the themes, issues and reflexive arguments that I am currently grappling with in reporting about this research in progress.

### **Commodification, corporatization and the construction of the entrepreneurial University: neoliberal paradigms of the knowledge economy**

The intensification of neoliberal restructuring over the past decades is exemplified in the erosion of guarantees and rights as the achievements of previous struggles of organized labor (c.f. Federici, 2006), and the emergence of such policies have resulted in flexitime informalized working circumstances that has exacerbated a gendered crisis (Chant, 2008), the slow demise of welfare and the fast privatization of such public and collective goods including education (Castree and Sparke, 2000).

Within this context Motta et al. (2011: 1) observe that women carry the burden of ensuring survival of their families, ‘combining escalating domestic responsibilities with integration into a labor market that is increasingly precarious and unregulated. Furthermore, their integration is accompanied by accelerated sexualization of public space, and the concurrent objectification and commodification of women’s minds and bodies (McRobbie, 2009). Such conditions serve only to deepen women’s experiences of poverty, inequality, exclusion, alienation and violence’.

In its neoliberal discursive formation, the University today as an institution of ethical wisdom and social justice has eroded such ideals, since it privileges the deployment of regimes of neoliberal governance as rendered within the knowledge economy and by extension, instead of empowering academic citizens, it reproduces control, surveillance and injustice, especially for those who as activist academics seek to combat such inequalities.

I was basically told that it gets better and that in an age of overqualified candidates still looking for jobs that I can't afford to say "no" to whatever they ask me to do, if I was to be considered for a permanent post. So I did put my head down, did the dirty work and stayed silent. (UK, early career)

The degree of oppression and bullying described above is the outcome of academia being 'colonised' and 'occupied by management' to the degree where such a regime is 'impervious to cogent arguments' and changes can only occur if academics take direct action since 'by now, we academics no longer have any allies' and 'there is no societal support either' (Haffman and Radder, 2015: 165, 174). Collective refusal and collective action to resist the further degradation of academic lives are necessary measures to formulating a meaningful response to combat inequality and the further demise of academia. But this action has to be fostered with supportive continuity of a caring context as an emancipatory movement where both men and women academics care, act, change.

## **Gendering the de-humanization of the University**

Well it is oppressive and utterly exhausting, it is a total trap because you think you have the flexibility that wouldn't be the same with a 9-5 job...but then again it ends up being 24/7 when you are replying to emails all weekend just to catch up or when you are still working past midnight. (Iceland, senior career)

As Gill and Scharff argue, neoliberalism is '*always already gendered*, and ... women are constructed as its ideal subjects' (2011:7; emphasis in the original). And, in my experience, it is women academics who are rarely encouraged to pursue equity issues and are more than often advised to 'move on and let go' by their line managers<sup>3</sup>. On those occasions when women academics persist and engage in voicing sexism, bullying and wider injustice in the Academy, and enter struggles, those are long drawn, demanding and further dehumanizing (cf. 'Academics Anonymous: sexism is driving women out of science': <http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2014/mar/15/women-science-research-university-discrimination-academics-anonymous>).

Further dehumanizing is the continuous blending of work-life with no balance and no boundaries. In her PhD Dissertation (2013) entitled *Seeking Balance: A*

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<sup>3</sup> A 'line manager' is the terminology utilized in the UK to denote the person to whom academics report to, usually a Head of Department or Head of School. Although 'managing' people has a subjective element to the process, no doubt line managers are representing (or compelled to represent) the institutional direction and ethos when they are approached by academic staff with issues for discussion in the hope of reaching a resolution.

*study of gendered life within Icelandic academia*, Tamar Melanie Heijstra starts her introduction with the following personal observation:

As an undergraduate student I received an SMS at three o'clock at night from a fellow student texting that the final course grades had just been published online. Similar incidents took place during my graduate studies where I received emails from faculty at odd working hours; during night time or in the early hours, through the weekends, or on feast days. It appeared as if constraints were non-existent within the working hours of academics.

The exploration of odd working hours was encapsulated in the narrative extract below as one of my Greek participants described her predicament with deadlines:

Every time I meet one, another comes along that very same day. It's like that myth with Hercules and the monster, chopping off one head of the beast and another dozen pop up! (Greece, senior career)

The embodied effects of working in a neoliberal educational framework in how time is experienced, instrumentalized and co-opted for metrics and appraisals is an added layer to the overwhelming demands and costs that punishing and oppressive workload regimes have on not just the individual academic but also on their partners, children, parents, wider family and other dependents at large. The temporalities of both demands and modes of resistance are important here in the way that 'slow scholarship' has been suggested as a feminist politics of collective action and resistance (e.g. O'Neill, 2014; Martell, 2014, Mountz et al. 2015). But, again, this has to emerge as a collective practice of collaborative change, one driven by feminist ethics of care and caring (i.e. Mountz et al. 2015) for each other in a process that ensures affective ethics of enhancing an inclusive sense of belonging to a process of reducing the paralyzing, individualizing and disguised oppressions that we academics are complicit in as much as the institution as a structure of power.

And, yes, this often involves immersing ourselves in the very messy and personal spaces of forging friendships in order to form collaborations. It includes a deliberate effort to be honest and open, to assist and support each other. As Mountz et al. (2015: 8) underscore, 'collective commitments to slow scholarship, fostered by academic alliances and friendships, can help us to come out of moments of depression or exhaustion, lest we drown in shame, loss, and discontentment'. At the same time, it should become a liberating pathway to share the personal in reaching the political. So often our personal circumstances are amplified further because of isolation and an added pressure to conform or not to become a burden to colleagues. The strength and authenticity of collegiality is to create spaces of caring that will make such misconceptions



evaporate by truly engaging with others in true friendship, where friendship is a potential for a culture of changing individualist and instrumentalist behaviors.

### **Towards erasure of exploitation, annihilation of alienation and re-constitution of the Academy?**

One of the core steps forward to improving working conditions for academics is to revitalize collective efforts. One of the limits to this is that ‘academics continue to be individualistic rather than putting up a collective response’ (Martell, 2014: 18), and this has to change.

Well, I think it is a love-hate relationship but ...I thought it would be more fulfilling, more life transformative or rather, idealistically, I thought I could change the world. The world has changed and for the worse and that’s why education is in complete shambles, in this and other countries. (UK, senior career)

The Academy must be re-built on the foundations of its mission: that of the pursuit of wisdom as a life transformative energy that will regenerate values of global ethical citizenship in advancing decolonizing knowledge for the pursuit of democratic and equitable societies. Societies of cosmopolitan values of the kind that Kevin Robins (2014: 273) proposes as a vision for Europe and advocates ‘an engagement that is more committed to lived experience and to creative exploration of the immensely commodious resource that is cultural complexity’.

What then is imperative to develop is new cultures of academic labor that take into consideration the constructive elements of conversational engagement with issues, academics and learning. A new culture of an Academy that will rectify the erasure of the authentic dialogical process and the transparency of collective consultation that goes beyond ‘decision-less decision-making’ and ‘performative consultations’ that co-opt academic actors into pre-decided outcomes.

An Academy that incorporates a transactional pedagogy of discussion-deliberation-reflection in decision-making for the collective benefit of the academic staff and student body; one that transforms academic labor into a ‘labor of friendship/philia’ with each other and the subjects we teach and research. This may sound utopian but as Luke Martell (2013: 35) declares, ‘we need utopianism’; perhaps the only pathway to the return of social democracy in all spheres of life and higher education is certainly in imminent need of democratizing.

With this contribution I hope to trigger further reflection and action on both an individual and collective scale. We deserve and can rebuild a better University, but we have to do it together. Historical evidence should remind us that we are stronger in numbers and transformative when agentic collective consciousness becomes praxis.

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