

CIEG International Congress



**‘Something is in the air’:
Doing feminist scholarship in
academic cultures of performativity**

The Performative University

“Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation (...) that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of control, attrition and change. The performances (of individual subjects or organisations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of ‘quality’ (...). They stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organisation within a field of judgement. ‘An equation between wealth, efficiency, and truth is thus established’ (Lyotard 1984, p. 46).”

(Ball, 2000: 1)

Image by Jim Berry





Interview with senior feminist scholar

‘There used to be more resistance to my [feminist] work, but things are changing now. Departments are now keen for people to produce a lot and do innovative things, with connections beyond the university and the works. If you publish a lot and do all those things, they no longer worry that much about you being feminist and doing activism, it makes no difference, just as long as you produce and keep producing.’



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‘If we weren’t so productive, and indeed more productive than people working on more traditional areas of research, we’d probably be much more discriminated on account of the kind of work we do, you know? That’s my feeling – we’re not discriminated against for being feminist because our productivity protects us. (...) In a productivist academic culture like this, what matters is productivity, not what kind of work you do. (...) That doesn’t necessarily mean we’re producing what we most enjoy and actually would like to produce. (...) This is a sort of dilemma: we can maintain the field because we produce, although we don’t actually agree with the epistemology at the heart of this academic logic! But if we’d completely refused to play the game, by now we’d probably be a dying field, because it’d be discriminated against.’



Interview with senior feminist scholar

‘This brutal imposition [of publication productivity as the aim and measure of academic work] drove everyone to complete madness. (...) [speaking quickly] All that people talk about is (...) where they’ve published, and where they’ll publish, and how little the other person has published but I published more and so I’m better, I mean, listen, this is a sick climate, ok, and it makes us all ill. It’s utter despair to live in these circumstances, it’s a desperate life! The days are depressing, you know? [nervous laughter]’



Interview with senior feminist scholar

‘Yesterday, someone looked at me and said “you look tired!” [laughs]. Well, sleeping 5 hours a night for months on end doesn’t do anyone any good, doesn’t do your skin or health any good! And yes, we’re tired because all these changes, (...) this pressure to publish, this pressure to generate profit (...), you must offer MA degrees, PhD degrees, and that means you have to teach much more. (...) This is absolutely draining, and at the end the one thing they’ll ask you is: “so, how many articles did you publish?”’



Interview with senior feminist scholar

‘[Every day] we are thinking: ‘How will we cope with fewer people? How will we produce more?’ (...) You’re facing those questions EVERY day, and you’re left in a state of psychological exhaustion, and you want to give up, because there’s no energy left at all. (...) I haven’t had proper holidays in AGES. [voice raises and becomes more assertive] I CAN’T TAKE IT ANYMORE! [pause] You know that feeling? That feeling of being completely WORN OUT, worn to the bone, NOT EVEN your free time is preserved. [silence] I mean... [slows down] I’ve only had [lists the small number of days off had in the past 18 months]. This is unacceptable. (...) It’s just devastating, devastating!’



Interview with senior feminist scholar

‘All my life I’ve said that after retiring I would take an emeritus role and hang around here until I was 70, because why would I want to go home? To get depressed? I no longer think like that. (...) This place is wearing me down, day by day, and has a destructive effect on me. I never, ever thought I’d feel like this, but I find myself craving retirement so all this can stop.’

Image by Judy Horacek



Interview with senior feminist scholar

'I'm very critical of the change in academia in the past years. (...) It has affected people in the deepest, most intimate core of their being. (...) This has really affected people's lives.'

MMP: Other people I interviewed say that they notice a certain, how can I put it, not depression, that's maybe a very strong word, but a feeling, a state of

'But you can say depression, because in a sense that's exactly what it is. (...) people's psychological health has been affected, you notice that clearly every day all around you (...), people are more anxious, depressed, less able to deal with frustration, they have physical health problems, chronic pain, they need medication to be able to sleep. (...) You interact with people and it's clear they're always at the very limit of their strength, the limit of their capacities, they drag themselves. (...) People have the constant sense that they're running. Running, running, running, not quite knowing where, you know? (...) This affects the atmosphere, affects people's desire to be with each other, the exhaustion becomes so deeply entrenched and it's generalised, you can actually feel it in the air all around you.'



Who will do the devalued work?

‘Who will want to continue doing the work of journal editing [and peer reviewing] in these conditions [of academic capitalism]? Are we not giving up that work and leaving it entirely in the hands of the structures of knowledge capitalism, which will take it upon themselves to exclude everything which cannot be converted into profit? We are confident that this will not be the route chosen by *ex aequo* to tackle the current challenges... will we be able to survive and resist? Let’s, at least, have some hope... in the meantime, we will continue doing our best...’

(Virgínia Ferreira, 2015: 5*)

Times of Crisis



“there is a psychosocial and somatic catastrophe in universities” (Gill and Donaghue, 2016: 91)

“deep, affective, somatic crisis [that] threatens to overwhelm us” (Burrows, 2012: 355)

“ontologically insecure: unsure whether we are doing enough, doing the right thing, doing as much as others, or as well as others, constantly looking to improve, to be better, to be excellent” (Ball, 2003: 220)

For more information...

...on this research project and ideas, see

- Pereira, Maria do Mar (2016), "[Struggling within and beyond the Performative University: Articulating Activism and Work in an «Academia Without Walls»](#)", *Women's Studies International Forum*, 54, 100-110.
- Pereira, Maria do Mar (forthcoming in early 2017), "[Power, Knowledge and Feminist Scholarship: an Ethnography of Academia](#)", Routledge.

