Estudos e Ensaios

«YOU CAN FEEL THE EXHAUSTION IN THE AIR AROUND YOU»: THE MOOD OF CONTEMPORARY UNIVERSITIES AND ITS IMPACT ON FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP

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Abstract

Science and higher education have undergone profound changes in recent decades, leading in many countries to the institutionalisation of academic cultures of performativity. In this article, I examine how that institutionalisation shapes women's, gender, feminist studies (WGFS) in paradoxical ways. Drawing on an ethnography of Portuguese academia, I show that the growing emphasis on productivity has created opportunities for WGFS but also produced a mood of exhaustion and depression that has extremely detrimental impacts on WGFS academics' bodies, relationships and knowledge production. I use this paradox to call for more debate in WGFS about contemporary academic working cultures, and our ambivalent personal investments in work.

Keywords: academia, feminism, gender studies, work, higher education.

Resumo

«O cansaço sente-se no ar»: o ambiente nas universidades contemporâneas e o seu impacto na investigação feminista

A ciência e o ensino superior têm sofrido alterações profundas nas últimas décadas, que têm levado em muitos países à institucionalização de culturas académicas performativas. Neste artigo, examino a forma paradoxal como essa institucionalização tem afetado os Estudos sobre as Mulheres, de Género e Feministas (EMGF). Tomando como ponto de partida uma etnografia da academia em Portugal, demonstro que a crescente valorização da produtividade na ciência gerou oportunidades para os EMGF, mas também criou um ambiente de exaustão e depressão que está a ter impactos muito nocivos nos corpos, relações e trabalho científico de quem trabalha em EMGF. Uso este paradoxo para argumentar que é necessário fazer um debate crítico e urgente nos EMGF sobre as culturas de trabalho na academia contemporânea, e as relações ambivalentes que temos com o trabalho científico que fazemos.

Palavras-chave: academia, feminismo, estudos de género, trabalho, ensino superior.

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Résumé
**« Vous pouvez sentir l›épuisement autour de vous » : l'atmosphère dans les universi-
tés contemporaines et son impact sur la recherche féministe**
La science et l'enseignement supérieur ont vécu de profondes transformations ces
dernières décennies, qui ont amené à l'institutionnalisation de cultures performatives dans
le milieu académique dans plusieurs pays. Dans cet article, j'analyse la forme paradoxale
dont cette institutionnalisation a façonné les études sur les femmes, de genre et féministes
(EFGF). En m'appuyant sur une ethnographie réalisée dans le milieu académique au Por-
tugal, je montre que l'accent croissant mis sur la productivité a créé des opportunités pour
les EFGF, mais aussi un état d'épuisement et de dépression qui a des impacts extrêmement
préjudiciables sur les corps, les relations et la production scientifique de qui travaille dans
les EFGF. J'utilise ce paradoxe pour faire appel à un débat critique et urgent dans les EFGF
sur les cultures de travail académiques contemporaines et sur nos relations ambivalentes avec
le travail scientifique.

Mots-clefs : milieu académique, féminisme, études de genre, travail, enseignement
supérieur.

Introduction

Sitting at my desk on a rainy morning in December, summoning the inspira-
tion to write this article, I try to imagine who will read it one day.[1] I wonder how you

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[1]   Note in Portuguese:
        Poderá parecer estranho, e até problemático, apresentar em inglês um artigo escrito para uma
        revista Portuguesa, por uma autora Portuguesa, sobre um estudo em Portugal. Este facto cau-
        sará menos estranheza se interpretado à luz da cultura académica que analiso aqui, cultura que
        sobrevaloriza os produtos em inglês, exige às revistas nacionais que se reposicionem como revis-
        tas internacionais, e as avalia em função do número de visualizações e citações. Neste contexto,
        é infelizmente mais vantajoso para a *ex aequo* (e para mim) publicar um artigo que possa ser «cli-
        cado» por um grande número de pessoas em todo o mundo do que um artigo compreensível na
        íntegra para quem trabalha/estuda em Estudos sobre as Mulheres, de Género e Feministas (EMGF)
        em Portugal e países lusófonos. Embora queira ajudar a aumentar a cotação internacional da *ex
        aequo* contribuindo com um texto em inglês, sinto-me desconfortável com a forma como isso repro-
        duz a hegemonia académica do inglês e invisibiliza as idiossincrasias da língua portuguesa e as
        especificidades do contexto português (cujos detalhes infelizmente omito neste artigo: como são
        menos pertinentes para um público estrangeiro, foram sacrificados para cumprir o limite de carac-
        teres). Espero que esta opção, apesar de problemática, possa de alguma forma contribuir para
        ajudar a *ex aequo* a chegar a novos públicos internacionais.

        Note in English:
        It may seem strange, even problematic, to write in English an article for a Portuguese journal, by
        a Portuguese author, about a study in Portugal. That fact will appear less strange when inter-
        preted in light of the academic culture analysed here, a culture that overvalues products in
        English, requires national journals to reposition themselves as international, and evaluates them
        on the basis of clicks and citations. In such a context, it is unfortunately more advantageous for
        ex aequo (and myself) to publish a text that can be clicked by a large number of people all over the

are feeling and in what conditions you are reading. I, myself, am tired and sleepy – a late night of work yesterday and the heavy grey sky outside are taking their toll and making me lethargic. But there is no time for lethargy, because I have a deadline and the clock is ticking. Writing these first sentences gives me a burst of excited energy, and I start typing faster. New questions pop into my head. I wonder if the sun is shining where you are now. I wonder if you are also feeling pressured by deadlines. I wonder if you are reading this calmly, or skimming through sentences hurriedly because you have limited time and unlimited to-do lists. I wonder if you are able to concentrate on reading, or getting distracted every few sentences by a thought or email. I wonder whether there is enough time in your diary, energy in your body and space in your brain to reflect deeply on my arguments. All in all, I wonder how your mood and workload will affect your knowledge production today, and shape the epistemic relationship that this article might establish between you, me, and other scholars.

This question, and those embodied experiences, are issues we seldom write about, though we might talk about them informally every day. I never properly analysed them, until they unexpectedly derailed my research. This article uses that derailing as an opportunity to analyse working conditions in contemporary academia, and ask how those changing conditions affect the lives of feminist scholars, and the production of feminist scholarship. It begins by describing the ethnography that got derailed and the context it studied. I then analyse academics' experiences of work, unpacking their effects on bodies, relationships and knowledge production. I finish by drawing on that analysis to identify possibilities for a rethinking and reshaping of feminist scholars' ambivalent relationship with academic work.

Turning the Academic Gaze back on Academia

In 2008/09, I conducted fieldwork in Portugal for an ethnography of academia, analysing the *epistemic status* of women's, gender, feminist studies (WGFS),[2]

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world, than one that is fully accessible to those who work/study in women's, gender, feminist studies (WGFS) in Portugal and other Portuguese-speaking countries. Although I want to help raise the international profile of *ex aequo* by contributing a piece in English, I feel uncomfortable with how this reproduces the academic hegemony of English and erases the idiosyncrasies of the Portuguese language and specificities of the Portuguese context (the details of which I do not explore here: as they are less relevant for an international audience, they have been sacrificed to fulfil word count requirements). I can only hope this decision, even if problematic, might help *ex aequo* reach new international audiences.

[2]   Approaches to naming the field are diverse and contested, and play out differently across countries (Pereira 2017). While I want to acknowledge that diversity, I cannot engage in depth with it here. Thus, I refer to the field with this umbrella term, which has become widely used in Portugal (as *Estudos sobre as Mulheres, de Género e Feministas*).

i.e. the degree to which, and terms on which, WGFS scholarship is recognised as fulfilling the criteria to be considered credible and relevant knowledge, however those criteria are defined in specific spaces, communities and moments (Pereira 2017). The aim was to observe everyday academic work and sociability to analyse how academics demarcate the boundaries of what counts as «proper» knowledge and how WGFS scholars/scholarship get positioned in relation to those boundaries (Pereira 2017). The study articulated feminist epistemology, feminist analyses of academia, the work of Foucault, and research in Science & Technology Studies. Fieldwork included 36 interviews with academics, students and funders, visits to universities throughout the country, archival research, and participant observation in over 50 academic events across institutions and disciplines.[3]

In 2015/16, while writing a book on the project (Pereira 2017), I expanded that ethnography, and conducted follow-up interviews with 12 of my original participants. Seven years had passed since I first sat with them and asked about their experiences of negotiating WGFS' epistemic status. Those seven years were a significant time in Portuguese academia, bringing many changes (Deem 2016; Augusto *et al.* 2018; Ferreira 2018), including austerity and the emergence of what I call – drawing on Ball (2003) – an *academic culture of performativity* (Pereira 2017).

The Emergence of Academic Cultures of Performativity

Performative academic cultures have become institutionalised in the last decade across many countries and rest on two key pillars. One is the reconceptualisation of academic activity as work that should aim to achieve the highest possible levels of productivity and profitability, and whose quality can be assessed on the basis of number of products produced (whether articles, patents or successful/satisfied students) and income generated (Burrows 2012; Sifaki 2016; Augusto *et al.* 2018). To monitor individuals' and institutions' productivity (and reward/punish them accordingly), it is necessary to maintain elaborate structures of auditing and surveillance (Gill 2010; Mountz *et al.* 2015), which constitute the second pillar of those regimes. These structures are based on extremely complex technologies of metricisation and ranking, which enable a 'quantified control' of academic labour (Burrows 2012) and lend increasing importance to citation indices, impact factors and other bibliometric indicators. A key feature of these auditing structures is that they generate intense additional labour, as scholars and institutions are forced to regularly produce reports to account for and evidence performance (Augusto *et al.* 2018).

From the late 2000s, this culture of performativity became institutionalised in Portugal, primarily through transformations in national science policies and sys-

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[3]   For more on my methods and the challenges of doing ethnographies in academia, see Pereira (2013).

tems of HE funding (Deem 2016; Pereira 2017; Augusto *et al.* 2018). The present configuration of this culture in Portuguese academia is specific and distinctive, namely because it combines elements of 'new' logics of performativity with 'old', entrenched structures of academic feudalism, as is the case also in other countries (Martins 2004).[4] This generates complex and contradictory dynamics, which unfortunately I cannot discuss in depth here (for more on this, see Pereira 2017). National specificities notwithstanding, Portuguese scholars have faced changes in their working conditions that reflect and reinforce the logics of academic performativity which have emerged internationally. In the 2015/16 interviews, participants reported a much increased workload (as a result of heightened expectations of performance, failure to replace departing colleagues, and downsizing or extinction of administrative support due to budget cuts); a vertiginously expanding audit culture, creating innumerable layers of extra administrative work, such as producing *never-ending reports that take ages to write*; the implementation of new systems of research evaluation, with much at stake – resources, reputations, relationships – but with constantly changing regulations; the reorientation of academic practice towards the constantly increasing production of measurable outputs of a certain (narrow) kind; and the escalating pressure to publish only or primarily in English (which is participants' second or even third language), and in international journals which often do not value research from/about Portugal (Pereira 2014). Through these changes, performativity has arguably become one of the organising principles of contemporary academic work in Portugal (Augusto *et al.* 2018).

When I first studied Portuguese academia in 2008/09, I found that although many WGFS scholars were critical of this emerging culture, its institutionalisation was, on some levels, creating more opportunities for WGFS research and teaching (Pereira 2015, 2017, 2018). According to the literature, and the WGFS scholars I interviewed, until the early 2000s the dismissal and repudiation of WGFS in Portugal was pervasive, public, intense, and sometimes verbally or institutionally violent (Magalhães 2001; Amâncio 2002; Pinto 2007; Ferreira 2018).[5] From 2000 onwards, successive centre-right and centre-left governments in Portugal reduced funding for HE and pressured universities to expand their sources of income, namely by creating new postgraduate degrees. This increased academic orientation towards profitability both animated and constrained the development of WGFS. Many Portuguese WGFS scholars had long publication lists, excellent international networks, and good track records of grant capture; moreover, WGFS courses and degrees attracted student interest. Therefore, WGFS could be considered successful and profitable in relation to these new criteria of academic value (Augusto *et al.* 2018; Pereira 2018). The recognition that WGFS had *financial* and *institutional* value (i.e.

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[4]   I am grateful to an anonymous peer reviewer for prompting me to think more explicitly and carefully about these contradictions.

[5]   For English-language overviews of the history of Portuguese WGFS, see Pereira and Joaquim (2009).

that it could yield profit at a time when institutions sorely needed it) dissuaded many from publicly questioning WGFS' *epistemic* value. As a result, university administrations that had long been hostile to WGFS become – gradually or suddenly – more accepting of it. However, this increased public recognition of WGFS is not always reflected in university corridor talk, where WGFS continues to be regularly dismissed and ridiculed (Pereira 2015, 2017, 2018).

When I returned to fieldwork in 2015/16, I hoped to use follow-up interviews to update the analysis I had originally produced. I did not plan to explore new questions. But there was something different about those follow-up interviews, a diffuse but palpable shift which unsettled the terms of my analysis and derailed my project.

Depression is in the Air: The Mood of WGFS in the Performative University

At first glance, my interviewees' situation did not appear to have changed much in 7 years: almost all were working in the same institution and position. However, one thing was conspicuously different: how they *felt.* From the first interview I was struck, and often deeply affected, by how drained and depleted participants were. Their exhaustion was conspicuous in their tone of voice. In some, it manifested as frantic anxiety, rushed sentences broken up by self-interruption, as if a sense of being in constant hurry bled into, and fragmented, their thought and speech. Others, however, spoke slowly and gravely, interviews punctuated by tired sighs, as if they had limited energy with which to speak. Their exhaustion was also something they spoke emotively and explicitly about, as one can see in the quotes analysed in this article, all taken from follow-up interviews with WGFS scholars of different ages, institutions and disciplines, with permanent positions in Portuguese academia.[6]

> [In universities] you're facing pressures and demands EVERY day, you're in a state of psychological exhaustion, you want to give up, because there's no energy left. [...] [speaks loudly and assertively] I CAN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE! [pause] You know that feeling of being completely WORN OUT, worn to the bone, NOT EVEN your free time is preserved? [pause, slows down] I haven't had proper holidays in ages. [...] It's just unacceptable.
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> Yesterday, someone looked at me and said 'you look tired!' [laughs]. Well, sleeping 5 hours a night doesn't do anyone any good, doesn't do your skin or health any good! We're tired because of [...] this pressure, [...] we must offer MAs, PhDs, so you must

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[6]   I do not provide more information on each participant to preserve anonymity within this small, but very visible, community of scholars. I present all interview quotes in italics.

teach much more. [...] It's absolutely draining, and at the end all they ask is: 'how many articles did you publish?' [pause] 'Well, I didn't publish a single one!' [nervous laughter]

Participants spoke not just of greater physical exhaustion, but also of a transformed emotional relationship with their work.

> What gets me is the alienation. [...] You're forced to spend lots of time on evaluations, paperwork, changing rules, endless surveys, online systems for this and that. [...] All the administrative bureaucracy of control within this audit culture, which you must comply with in incredibly tight deadlines, always very last minute, with lots of hysterics surrounding it, and that's completely alienating, because there's no creativity, it doesn't contribute to your growth, thinking, nothing! [...] Alienation is draining.
> The brutal imposition of [productivity] indicators 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 [...]. This is a sick climate, it makes us all ill. It's utter despair to live in these circumstances! The days are depressing, you know? [nervous laughter] [...] Relationships between people are subjugated by these requirements, and in this climate, you tell me – where is there space to debate?!

This *state of exhaustion* and *alienation* is not an individual experience. To cite participants, it is a *sick 'climate* that *makes us all ill'*, and determines the collective atmosphere. Some people are more deeply affected than others, depending, for example, on working conditions, temperament, or generation.[7] However, all scholars experience at least some of the detrimental effects of this culture. The shared nature of such feelings is compellingly described here:

> [Recent changes in academia] have affected people in the deepest core of their being. [...]
> MMP: Other people I interviewed say they notice a certain, how can I put it, not depression, that's maybe a very strong word, but a state of...
> But you can say depression, because [...] that's exactly what it is. [...] You notice that clearly every day all around you [...], people are more anxious, depressed, [...] have physical health problems, chronic pain, need medication to sleep. [...] You interact with people and it's clear they're always at the limit of their strength, their capacities, they drag themselves. [...] People always feel they're running, running, not quite knowing where, you know? [...] This affects the atmosphere, people's desire to be with each other, the exhaustion becomes so deeply entrenched and generalised you can feel it in the air around you.

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[7]   Some younger interviewees were less surprised and disrupted by these changes, most likely because their formative academic socialisation happened within this performative culture.

It is telling that in my intervention above, I could not find a term to describe the 'thing' that others noticed in academia, something diffuse but unmistakable, private but generalised, that '*you can feel in the air around you*'. This 'thing' was certainly a set of feelings, but we tend to understand feelings as individual sensations located in bodies and minds, rather than '*in the air around you*'. And yet, the depression generated by academic cultures of performativity is a collective, communal and contagious feeling. As Cvetkovich (2012) argues, it is a 'public feeling', one that can be considered an 'epidemic' in universities where workers are expected to 'live with [...] sometimes impossible conditions' due to a culture 'that say[s] that you are only as good as what you produce' (2012, 18-19).

I find it useful to theorise these feelings, both private and collective, both 'embodied' and 'psychic' (Cvetkovich 2012), both material (felt '*in the physical health problems, chronic pain*') and ethereal (felt '*in the air*'), as a *mood*.[8] To focus on mood is to attempt to describe something that escapes description. A mood is, as Felski and Fraiman argue, 'ambient, vague, diffuse, hazy, and intangible', it 'lingers, tarries, settles in, accumulates, sticks around', unlike, for example, emotions, which tend to be more intense and transient (2012, v). Crucially, moods are shared and collective: they are both within and beyond us, 'everywhere and nowhere' (Felski and Fraiman 2012, xii). Mood 'is like the weather' (Felski and Fraiman 2012, v), an atmosphere that affects us in imperceptible but indelible ways – like the heavy grey sky outside my window today, making me lethargic.

Producing Feminist Scholarship in a *Sick Climate*

This '*sick climate*' derailed my project. For many interviewees it seemed pointless to discuss the epistemic status of their knowledge when they felt they could not actually produce knowledge properly. Indeed, most told me that many epistemic activities are becoming difficult, if not impossible, to sustain in this performative culture. *Reading* was one of them.

> Obviously in these conditions the time available to read is minimal. [...] With the pressures I'm under, [...] I must set priorities and my priority isn't reading, can't find the time for it, as much as it pains me to say it.

Interviewees also struggled to think.

> To produce at the rate and format [...] that's required, you have to think less deeply, [...] your analysis must be more limited, [...] and it's hard and alienating to work like

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8   Note in Portuguese: É difícil encontrar em português um termo que traduza completamente a palavra *mood*; neste contexto, aquele que me parece mais adequado é «ambiente» (ou «atmosfera»).

that. [...] Even if you manage to produce work, you often don't feel excited about it, because it was rushed, and you didn't have time to think, and that's demotivating.

In a climate where there is little time to *read* and *think*, it is not surprising that scholars find it difficult also to *peer review*, *organise and attend events*, and *meet, and debate with, colleagues*.

I have interesting event ideas [...] but the exhaustion makes me think 'ouch, organising that is too much work, I can't face it!'.
We don't talk or do things collectively! [...] Because of this exhaustion, these bureaucratic demands [...] and productivity requirements [...] we don't have time to meet, so we don't discuss things. [...] That weakens everything. It may look like things are ticking along, but they're not solid because we aren't engaging with each other.

This climate also affects the running of many WGFS initiatives. A scholar involved in managing a WGFS degree explained:

It's hell finding 2 hours where 12 people can meet to think about a strategy. [...] This makes it incredibly difficult to develop growth strategies, which is something I'd like to do, because, if we don't grow, we die, but that can't be done by one person, [...] it has to be a team, and we struggle to get the team moving [...] due to our excessive workloads.

A member of APEM, the Portuguese Women's Studies Association, lamented that

In APEM, we find it hard to do things. [...] We want to, we really do, but we're not able to, we can't cope, we're too tired and overloaded, it's very hard.

The collective, collegial work that these WGFS scholars struggle to do is not an optional extra. A field cannot survive, let alone thrive, if its scholars cannot read, peer review, debate, attend events, meet, organise conferences, run professional associations, and manage journals. It is those activities, structures and organisations that constitute and maintain a field. In that sense, WGFS is more than just the sum of the outputs of each individual scholar. It is also, and centrally, the *field-making* work they do together. However, that work is generally not recognised in performative universities. Many WGFS scholars do this work '«between the lines» of academia, in the evenings' (Fernandes 2008, 89). This creates special challenges for WGFS, especially in those countries where it is precariously institutionalised, and thus requires more laborious field-making.

A Toxic but Seductive Academic Culture: Paradoxes of Performativity

As Gill and Donaghue predicted in their analysis of the 'deep crisis affecting universities' all over the world, what I encountered in follow-up fieldwork was a group of 'people stretched to breaking point', affected by a mood of exhaustion so significant that it can be described as a 'psychosocial and somatic catastrophe' (2016, 91). Because that catastrophe 'hamper[s] sharing and exchange' (2016, 93), it has undeniable epistemic consequences. As Davies and Petersen (2005) argue, the logics of the 'knowledge economy' actually work to undermine the production of knowledge. Their research, and mine, shows that the performative university's 'focus on end-products may put [scholars] at risk of losing the capacity to fulfil (or even to feel) the desire to carry out significant, creative or critical intellectual work' (2005, 78).

It is common to discount these feelings – of exhaustion or alienation – as personal ailments (if not failures) to be discussed privately and managed individually (Gill and Donaghue 2016; Pereira 2016; Augusto *et al.* 2018). But if this academic culture undermines our capacity to 'fulfil' and 'feel' the desire to produce knowledge – and also to care for ourselves, our colleagues and our communities beyond the academy (Pereira 2016) – then we must address it collectively. It is urgent to mobilise debate and action on this 'psychosocial and somatic catastrophe' and its effects on WGFS. That is, however, extremely difficult to do, because this mood contains and sows the seeds of its own reproduction. As Cvetkovich argues, the 'public feeling' of depression that shapes contemporary academia 'often keeps people silent, weary, and too numb to really notice the sources of their unhappiness'; it operates 'by making people feel small, worthless, hopeless' (2012, 12-13). Indeed, when the productivist logic of performativity is deeply entrenched in institutional life, it becomes very easily incorporated as part of academics' sense of self, scholarly work, and relations with others (Davies and Petersen 2005; Fahlgren *et al.* 2016; Sifaki 2016). Exhausted and overwhelmed by their workloads, and anxious about how 'behind' they are at work, academics get swept into a compulsion to work more. That compulsion (re)produces the feeling that they do not have time or energy to step back from, reflect on, and attempt to change the performative university.

Debating this 'psychosocial and somatic catastrophe' is challenging also for another reason: because WGFS scholars' relationship with their intense workloads is ambivalent, containing pain but also pleasure. The performative university is certainly toxic (Gill 2010), but also very seductive (Fahlgren *et al.* 2016). It purportedly offers WGFS scholars the possibility of circumventing entrenched epistemic inequalities. Unlike many traditional academic regimes, more explicit and aggressive in their sexist repudiation of WGFS, the performative university gives WGFS scholars the promise of – at least partial – recognition and support, '*as long as [they] produce and keep producing*' (as one interviewee put it in 2008/09). This offers an

empowering and pleasurable, if illusory, sense of control. As Hey writes, '[w]e hope that if only we work harder, produce more, publish more, conference more, achieve more, in short «perform more», that we will eventually get «there»' (2001, 80).

There is another reason why many WGFS scholars are so invested in hard work. When WGFS is precariously institutionalised, employment opportunities can be very scarce. In such conditions, productivity can become a lifeline for oneself and a responsibility towards others. One senior WGFS scholar I interviewed explained that she does not need to be as productive as she is, but creating research bids is the only thing she can do to secure livelihoods for unemployed WGFS students and colleagues. If our publications and other professional activities can supposedly change society, inspire others, give them a salary, as well as transform policies and practices, then it seems desirable to produce as much as we possibly can. And yet, in the performative university, this otherwise commendable drive to do more can have very problematic implications.

Being productive is seductive for WGFS scholars for yet another reason: it is easy to reconcile with our existing inclinations and broader epistemic-political project. According to Gill, 'academics are [...] model neoliberal subjects [...]. [Their] predispositions to «work hard» and «do well» meshed perfectly with [neoliberal-ism's] demands for autonomous, self-motivating, responsibilised subjects' (2010, 241). WGFS scholars' predispositions often mesh with those demands even more perfectly than the average academic. This is because many of us see our work as a form of intervention in, and care for, the world (hooks 1994), as a personal commit-ment to a broader project of social change, and as an integral part of our sense of self. Driven by that commitment, we try to 'play the game' of productivity for emancipatory ends. But it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to play that game without internalising and reproducing at least some of the game's assump-tions or rules (Fahlgren *et al.* 2016; Wånggren *et al.* 2017). We often end up unwit-tingly normalising an ever-receding horizon of productivity and an ableist aca-demic culture which excludes people unable to maintain those excessive levels of productivity (Mountz *et al.* 2015; Berg and Seeber 2016). We often end up 'exhaust[ed], stress[ed], overload[ed], [...] anxi[ous]' (Gill 2010, 229) and 'ontolog-ically 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). That ontological insecurity becomes part of aca-demia's mood, and hence it affects us all, even if we are critical of this culture of performativity.

Turning Away from, and Towards, Others

According to Sifaki, in the performative university, workers experience 'fee-lings of shame' when they do not fulfil ideals of high academic productivity. This

shame leads to 'avoidance of connections, as a process of […] survival' (2016, 116). The people around us become draining, rather than energising. It is not surprising, then, that many of my interviewees crave leave, silence, holidays, time alone. Indeed, when one is overwhelmed by the demand to produce more, better, faster, it can help to isolate oneself to do the work that might (temporarily) acquiesce one's anxiety. Turning inwards and away to focus on one's ideas may be especially pleasurable and empowering for women or people of colour, so often expected to care for others in their institutions, and disproportionately saddled with the demanding pastoral work that universities require but do not reward (Mountz *et al.* 2015; Wånggren *et al.* 2017). But maintaining a field requires that we also turn towards others, connect with and support them, participate in the collegial activities that often get sacrificed when time, energy and patience is limited. This collegial engagement generates richer knowledge and a stronger field. It also has another crucial benefit: it is the best way to fight 'the neoliberal university's ontology of individualism and ethics of disconnection' (Kašić 2016) and resist its '*sick climate*' of individualistic performativity (Wånggren *et al.* 2017; Augusto *et al.* 2018).

One of feminism's oldest lessons is that personal problems can, and should, be seen as political issues. This reframing often shows that 'the problem' is not in the individual, but in unequal structures that can be transformed (Pereira 2016). Applying this lesson in performative academic cultures may be difficult, because we lack the space and time to withdraw from the manic rhythm of the everyday and question our working conditions. But it is precisely that space and time that will enable us to remember that different academic cultures, and moods, are possible. Therefore, in our everyday work we must challenge academia's 'culture of speed' (Berg and Seeber 2016), reject the glorification and normalisation of intense work (Weeks 2011), and resist the (sometimes self-imposed) pressure to use one's working time always and only to do 'productive' things (Mountz *et al.* 2015). We must create in our institutions supportive environments to talk about these issues, and opportunities to engage with others in 'slow' ways (Mountz *et al.* 2015; Berg and Seeber 2016). This might mean, for example, holding regular meet-ups over food or coffee, where colleagues can reflect on the toxic effects of performative cultures, provide support, and discuss strategies of resistance. It is also important to publicly and regularly acknowledge – in our interactions with colleagues, line managers and students – that we are not able to meet existing expectations of productivity (Mountz *et al.* 2015). Admitting that inability is, of course, not easy. It is a strategy available only, or primarily, to the privileged, those who have a job, guaranteed income, and the status to be able to admit defeat. That is precisely why it is so important that such colleagues take the lead in questioning dominant ideals of productivity.

Many books and colleagues will also tell us that a key strategy to manage these toxic academic cultures is to say 'no', an often significant (but difficult) form

of resistance when so many of us, especially women, have been socialised to accommodate the needs of others and grab any professional opportunity thrown our way. But what does it mean to say no when you are in a more marginal field, like WGFS, that relies on many selfless 'yeses' for its continued existence and visibility? What does it mean to send others away (for the – very important! – sake of individual sanity) in a field, like WGFS, that wishes to promote connectedness to resist academic individualisation? In other words, how do we reconcile opposing drives: take care of ourselves and try to do academic work in more caring, collegial and connected ways?

Saying no is not *by itself* and *in itself* a solution. It may protect us individually from hyper-productivity but does so at the expense of undermining collegial practices of critical knowledge production. We must build more caring and collaborative academic relationships, without doing the performative university's dirty work by exploiting ourselves in saying yes to all requests from students, colleagues and managers. The focus of debate should not be on whether we individually answer 'yes' or 'no' to requests for work, but on how we can collectively question the academic working culture that generates those requests.

And yet, critiquing the culture is difficult because we are deeply entangled in the very processes which we critique (Sifaki 2016; Wånggren *et al.* 2017). This article provides a clear example of that. I wrote it to help change our investment in the performative university's ideals of productivity, but this publication will boost my productivity. I wrote to argue that we should not judge ourselves on the basis of productivity or engage with others as a hindrance to that productivity. However, as I write this at the end of the day, I feel a little resentful of those people – colleagues, students, my toddler, my tired pregnant body – who reduced my productivity today by demanding attention or care.

The irony of this inconsistency is certainly not lost on me. I would argue it demonstrates several important things. It shows that these thinking patterns and working practices are deeply entrenched in us, and in the field of WGFS. It indicates that it is necessary to have proper debates about those thinking patterns and working practices, the people they exclude, the things they erode and the seductive, 'perverse pleasures' (Hey 2004) they generate. It proves that changing these moods, thinking patterns and working practices is not something we can do alone, or once and for all, or that we can leave to others. It must be a concerted, constant and organised collective effort, in coalitions of stable, casual and unemployed academics, junior and senior staff, colleagues from different disciplines and institutions. It must be an integral part of the culture of WGFS locally and internationally, and we must pro-actively support each other in sustaining such efforts in our individual practice every day. We must also, of course, engage in broader political action, joining others (such as trade unions, student groups or activist movements) who are fighting to improve the conditions of contemporary work and to defend universities and the welfare state from austerity and marketisation.

On a more personal level, I would argue that this inconsistency between working practices and epistemic-political aims also demonstrates that it is high time for me to put my practice where my writing is, conclude this article and (re)turn to my family, friends and colleagues. As for you... why are you still reading? Put this article away, and spend the rest of your day connecting with others and being unashamedly and deliciously non-productive. Who knows what might happen if you, and all of us, do it more often?[9]

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