
Neo-liberalism and Feminism in the South African Academy

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Abstract

Internationally, neo-liberalism shapes universities' institutional cultures and research practices in similar ways. Neo-liberalism also augments and redeploys core-periphery relations, creating market-based and developmentalist knowledge-producing networks that pose distinctive challenges for feminists in different geopolitical spaces. By analysing the location of current feminist work in South African universities, this article considers how an analysis of globalisation's effects in specific contexts can help deepen transnational feminist critiques of the neo-liberal academy. The article is also concerned with how transnational feminism can challenge the entrenched power relations that global neo-liberal research and knowledge production reproduces.

Keywords

Centre, Globalisation, Knowledge Economy, Transnational Feminism, Periphery, South Africa, Neo-liberalism, Universities

1 Introduction

Neo-liberalism's effects on academic feminism have been remarkably similar in the global North and the South. At universities throughout the world, feminists confront the gutting of earlier feminist pedagogies, the 'mainstreaming' of feminist topics and registers, and the surreptitious institutionalisation of conformist research agendas. Feminist scholars such as Margaret Thornton (2009, 2014), writing about Australia, the Sangtin Writers Collective and Richa Nagar (2006) and their critique of trends in India, Shona Hunter (2015) and her analysis of neo-liberal whiteness in the United Kingdom, and Charmaine Pereira (2004) dealing with gender research and developmentalism in Nigeria have all honed in on the "overtly instrumental role" of universities and the ways in which sites of teaching and research on gender are "now deployed by the state specifically to serve the new knowledge economy" (Thornton 2014, p. 1).

As these scholars show, neo-liberalism's reach into universities has extended earlier affiliations between institutions of higher education, the state and corporate capitalism. Neo-liberalism has also harnessed specialist knowledge to the imperatives of the market, albeit in the guise of 'social responsiveness' in research and teaching. Traditionally, the mission of universities has been to undertake research and to teach, priorities that have easily laid them open to charges of elitism and ivory tower disengagement. With the emphasis on a 'third mission' in neo-liberal planning, university teaching and research have been yoked to the academy's direct engagement with economic growth activities that have been redefined as 'social engagement' (for a detailed discussion see Pinheiro et al. 2015). The call for engagement through a third mission consequently stems not from politically transformative agendas, but from a neo-liberal quest to mobilise knowledge commercially and for capitalist growth.

The current hegemony of the neo-liberal scenario has generated a chorus of lament among many radical commentators.¹ But while neo-liberalism's impact should be appraised sharply, urgently and consistently, it is also vital to ask what feminist possibilities exist or can be created to challenge its deadening effects.

In what follows, I am therefore concerned with two related aims. One is a careful unpacking of specific challenges for feminists in a specific neo-liberal context. In contributing to existing critiques, then, I offer a site-specific analysis of trends in South Africa as a distinctive periphery in a neo-liberal globalised circuit of cores and margins that both constitute and are constituted by global streams of capital

1 See, for example, John Higgins (2013) and Premesh Lalu (2012) writing about South Africa, and Stuart Hall (1990) and Terry Eagleton (2010) dealing with the UK.

and knowledge. By developing this context-specific analysis, I raise the broader significance of mapping the diverse forms that neo-liberal co-optation takes. A second, connected objective of this article is to reflect on the possibilities for radical feminist responses to the neo-liberalising of the academy. While the hegemony of neo-liberalism rests on how its logic of efficiency becomes entrenched in academic structures, institutions and the minds of managers, teachers and students, I argue that sites of dissent and opposition can continue to be driven by the spirit of feminism in the academy.

2 The Global Knowledge Economy Vortex and South African Feminism

As several radical critics (e. g. Duggan 2003) have shown, current global capitalism has become increasingly knowledge based, with the production, marketing and consolidation of commodities relying on specialised knowledge (and universities as key powerhouses for its production) in unprecedented ways. In *Universities in a Neoliberal World*, Alex Callinicos (2006) shows that it was mainly at the start of the twenty-first century that governments in the global North began to champion knowledge economies as engines of endless economic growth. University management, in synch with many governments' macroeconomic policies, began to ensure that the new knowledge economy would buttress neo-liberalism's concentration of productive expertise, political control and knowledge resources through what Callinicos (2006, p. 7) has described as "a particularly pure form of the logic of capital".

This vortex is not just regional or national; its global scope means that knowledge capital is instrumentalised around the world to serve the centres of global capitalism directly, or to support this system's levers. These levers include international policy, North-South research collaboration or research funding arrangements. Although rarely acknowledged, relations around academic research mirror those associated with the extraction and processing of material commodities such as food. In effect, knowledge and its production have therefore been thoroughly commoditised within the global capitalist chain: uneven flows of knowledge, funding and research expertise lead to concentrations of expertise and resources in the North that construct and feed off nodes of data and data gathering in the South.

This North-South dyad is often explained as a carry-over from neo-imperial and neo-colonial power relations. In other words, the definition of Southern research subjects by Northern researchers is seen to echo centuries of constructing subject

matter and defining knowledge expertise according to colonial logic. As an identity-constituting process, colonialist knowledge production since the twentieth century othered objects of research in inventing the coherence of Western authority and superiority. Drawing on a tradition of postcolonial theorising in her analysis of Western feminism's colonialist logic, Chandra Mohanty (1984, p. 352–353) argued in the 1980s that the effect of Western-centric constructions of 'data' in the third-world South is to constitute 'Western' subjectivity.

It is “only in so far as ‘Woman/Women’ and ‘the East’ are defined as Others, or as peripheral, that (Western) Man/Humanism can represent him/itself as the center. It is not the center that determines the periphery, but the periphery that, in its boundedness, determines the centre. [...] Universal images of ‘the third world woman’s (the veiled woman, chaste virgin, etc.), images constructed from adding the ‘third world difference’ to ‘sexual difference’ are predicated upon (and hence obviously bring into sharper focus) assumptions about Western women as secular, liberated and having control over their own lives. [...] I am referring to a discursive self-presentation, not necessarily to material reality.”

Despite the ongoing relevance of identifying the discursive logic of colonial discourse, it has become more and more important to reconsider the material effects of core-periphery relations, since the economic logic of data-gathering in the South is becoming increasingly central to the neo-liberal knowledge economy. By reflecting on current gender and sexuality research in South Africa, I show that the colonial knowledge circuit has now become an instrument within broader economic imperatives that direct the production of knowledge towards consolidating a global market economy. As Lisa Duggan (2003) therefore stresses, neo-liberalism entrenches racialised and neo-colonial relations in efficiently mobilising cultural capital.

In *The Posthuman*, Rosi Braidotti (2013, p. 4) argues that theory has lost its pivotal status within feminist scholarship and is now often “dismissed as a form of fantasy or narcissistic self-indulgence”. As she states, a philosophically eviscerating neo-empiricism – what she terms “data mining” (Braidotti 2013, p. 4) – has become the norm. Her critique echoes Margaret Thornton’s identification (2009) of the way in which valued knowledge in the new knowledge economy has become data, rather than wisdom. It is data, Thornton (2009, p. 387) argues, rather than models and tools to explain and analyse structures and relationships, which constitutes an untapped source of wealth in terms of market logic.

Although Braidotti (2013) and Thornton (2009) confront an empiricising drift in the North, African feminist research, as Charmaine Pereira (2004) notes, has been even more data driven. Pereira describes the developmental agenda that determines how gender research sites operate and reproduce themselves in relation

to the North, which retains epistemic and economic power. Since research on gender is often pivotal to the fields around which Northern policy and economic interventions into Africa revolve, applied research on gender plays a key role in a knowledge economy linked to fields such as epidemiology, public health, development or public participation.

Elsewhere I have explored the status and history of South African feminist research, showing that “South African universities, scholars and networks have featured prominently in collaborative networks with scholars in the United States, Britain and, more recently, Scandinavia” (Lewis 2007, p. 18). Compared with research in other post-colonial African countries, South Africa has not had a legacy of national sovereignty or cultural nationalism for driving African-centred research,² a situation that has been the focus of much of the student protest between 2015 and 2016. The Northern-centric focus of South Africa’s global networks has also fed into the evolution of universities under rapid neo-liberal economic restructuring since the late 1990s. Humanities and social science work in the academy has therefore been informed both by a legacy of academic deference towards the North and by a more recent history of neo-liberal nation building.

Within work on gender, consolidated research testifying to these trajectories is evident in the steady and dramatic rise – since the start of the new millennium – of sexualities studies. As evidenced by the surge of interdisciplinary research in this area, funds that have been made available for research, and the industry of publications it has generated, ‘sexualities’ has become a prime locus for data mining and neo-empiricist study. The fact that sexuality has become an important subject in feminist research is of course not in itself noteworthy or alarming. Feminists have focused innovatively on sexualities by considering how heteronormative institutions and practices become hegemonic, and how gendered identities and ideology are sedimented under patriarchy and other authoritarian and exploitative systems.³

But much of the recent work on sexuality in South Africa demonstrates little of this theoretical and political insight into the entanglement of patriarchy, sexuality and power; instead, the focus has fallen largely on sexuality as a sectoral field amenable to being mapped, extensively described and brought within the purview of applied

2 This includes research trends, publishing houses focusing on the work of black African scholars and research capacity networks such as *Southern African Political Economic Series (SAPES)* in Zimbabwe and *Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA)* in Dakar.

3 Such work includes Adrienne Rich’s path-breaking essay in 1980, Lisa Duggan’s more recent analysis of homonormativity and neo-liberalism (2003) and Patricia McFadden’s attention to sexuality and feminist resistance (2003) defined with reference to Audre Lorde’s notion of the erotic (1978).

research into developmental problems. What could be described as neo-empiricist humanities research therefore enlists aspects of post-positivist and theoretically grounded scholarship, yet ultimately falls back on the assumption that knowledge that matters is observable and quantifiable information, elicited through unmediated experience and/or comprehensive description. The neo-empiricist tradition therefore differs from the applied research comprehensively described in Pereira's discussion (2004) of donor-driven gender research that services the state. It has become a procedural approach, learned and passed down through formulae set in place by supervisors, mentors and established scholars (who often have the best of intentions) for producing 'rigorous' work sanctioned in the academy.

Within the wider global field of knowledge-making and interpretation, a large proportion of the sexualities research in South Africa is constituted by a multicultural gaze, a form of surveillance that only appears to make space for exploring difference in the globalised academy. Jigna Desai, Danielle Bouchara and Diane Detourney (2010, p. 59) remark astutely on this dynamic by stating:

"The university's call for inclusion of 'global difference' is not simply benevolent and aimed at redressing past crimes of exclusion, but is necessary to the expansion of its global purview."

My intention in identifying how this is manifested in South Africa is not to condemn individual researchers, or to provide a detailed appraisal of their work on its own terms. Work on sexualities is frequently produced by writers with deep commitments to socially engaged education both in and beyond the academy. What does concern me, however, are the discursive effects of particular discursive and methodological emphases. As I go on to show, these reinforce the location of South African sexualities work in uneven knowledge-creation circuits.

The operation of these circuits is evident in the work anthologised in several publications⁴ produced by the *Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC)*, the South African statutory organisation that conducts, coordinates and publishes research into aspects of human and social development. In 2009 alone, the HSRC published two volumes dealing with sexuality, *The Prize and the Price: Shaping Sexualities in South Africa* (Steyn and van Zyl 2009) and *From Social Silence to Social Science: Same-Sex Sexuality, HIV & AIDS and Gender in South Africa* (Reddy et al. 2009). The following neo-empiricist threads in these collections warrant attention.

4 Apart from books, see the archive of reports and articles on sexualities on the Human Sciences Research Council website at <http://www.hsrc.ac.za/en>.

A first is the explicit way in which the categorisation of sexual orientation and sexual practices entrenches health agendas that function, according to market logic, as mechanisms for reproducing economically viable bodies. As illustrated in writings collected in *From Social Silence to Social Science* (Reddy et al. 2009) the language for describing tabooed sexual identities often refers directly to bodily experiences and sexual activity. Thus, diagnostic terms such as MSM (men who have sex with men) or WSW (women who have sex with women) (see Reddy et al. 2009, p. xxix), focus on identifying and monitoring the sexual activity of high-risk groups. Such terms therefore become blunt tools for intervention-based surveillance research on HIV/AIDS.

Extensive work on youth and sexuality, in which gendered performances are explored in relation to sexual behaviour and practices, perpetuate the instrumental orientation of work on same-sex practices. The result, as Katarina Jungar and Elina Oinas (2011) have noted, is overdetermined data with direct-use value in epidemiology, public health policy and other interventions driven from the North.⁵ Overall, therefore, conceptual and theoretical work, evident especially in the use of reductive terminology and concepts, is yoked to global discourses for locating and containing sexually transmitted diseases.

While research is often painstaking and detailed, it can indirectly feed into the moral panic evident in obviously 'biased' representations of diseased and unproductive bodies in South Africa. Websites, newspaper reports and non-academic accounts are fairly obvious in constructing spectacles of wasted South Africans and the region as a danger zone whose diseases threaten to spill over into the North. Although seemingly at odds with the alarmism and sensationalism of popularised information, much academic research on sexualities echoes the former's emphasis on the naming, surveillance and containment of sexualised and diseased bodies.

A second noteworthy pattern in sexuality research is its attention to meticulous research processes and 'methodological work'. For example, contributions on sexualities to two South African feminist journals, *Feminist Africa* and *Agenda* reveal a heavy emphasis on detailing the processes through which researchers extracted data about their research participants or subjects. The following extract from an article titled *Vela Bambhentele: Intimacies and Complexities in Researching Within Black Lesbian Groups in Johannesburg* (Matebeni 2008, p. 90–92) illustrates this:

"I embarked on a study to investigate the lives of black lesbian women in Gauteng. Throughout the study, I had to negotiate my own position as my identities and sexuality

5 The phrase here does not always literally involve interventions coming from the North, since those based in the South can echo and entrench Northern-oriented agendas.

continue to be influenced by the people who inform my research. I am interested in what it means to be engaged in doing research in areas that have been considered taboo, unresearched or working with those who have been represented in ways that limit their agency. [...] Prior to starting the research I was aware of some of the challenges I would face. While my identity as a lesbian was an asset in terms of gaining access, I had to be cautious of the implications this might have on my academic career as my study could be dismissed on the basis of writing ‘for my own group’ and my work ‘tainted by personal concerns.’”

As this writer’s discussion reveals, a great deal of attention is paid to validating knowledge emanating from an “insider-outsider”⁶ position, one that vindicates findings for a global academic gaze at ‘difference’. The meticulous analysis of information about gender performance with reference to geopolitical space is a function of the writer’s location between the academy and the non-academic world she has privileged access to. Her position therefore vindicates her role as a reliable data gatherer.

The theoretical, conceptual and methodological orientations traced above reveal the extent to which sexualities research can feed into the extractivist form of South African knowledge as meticulously obtained ‘data’ for its interpretation or resolution elsewhere. The valued knowledge produced is ‘rational’ in an instrumentalising sense, having ‘use value’ in the sense of serving the requirements of practical interventions or policy research grounded in others’ primary interests. The significant amounts of donor funding that have gone into ‘researching sexualities’ reflect the servicing role of data and data gatherers. ‘Data’ becomes the raw material within a global apparatus within which interpretive or responsive products and expertise are created elsewhere. In the same way that corporate capitalism plunders raw materials from the South for external processing, ‘raw data’, elicited from data gatherers as methodological experts, is extracted for expert processing in the North.

3 Governmentality, the Academy and Feminists

Shona Hunter’s (2015) analysis of how neo-liberalism generates relations and responses of melancholia, loss, and revolutionary hope and renewal (Hunter 2016, p. 19) provides subtle insight into neo-liberalism’s psychoanalytic and political

6 The author here explains her position as ‘hybrid’, seeming to question the neatness of “insider/outside”, yet adhering ultimately to the binaries that structure dominant ideas about ‘expert’ knowledge production (Matebeni 2008, p. 90–92).

paradoxes. Hunter demonstrates that, rather than these reactions being disparate, they often cohere in the messy entanglements that neo-liberal governance sets in place among subjects, institutions, morality and the state (Hunter 2015, p. 1–21). Drawing on Hunter's insights, this section maps out some of the key ways in which neo-liberal governance has affected feminists' agencies within the academy's institutional culture.

Growing critical commentary on neo-liberalism and governmentality stresses the extent to which governance in the interests of the state and capital are inter-nalised by subjects who effectively rule themselves (see especially Callinicos 2006 and Thornton 2014). This self-rule is effected through discourses that stress, for example, individual responsibility, a deferential attentiveness to the 'social good', or the positivist myth of 'normless' academic research agendas. Analysing feminists' choices in the face of these discourses – as though individuals had the voluntarist option to conform or not – simplifies the complex ways in which neo-liberalism, especially within academic sites, recruits and positions willing participants in enterprises whose effects extend beyond the academy. In explaining the valence of sexuality research among many progressive South African scholars, it is therefore important to recognise that they are not simply 'duped by rewards'; instead, as Margaret Thornton (2009) and Hunter (2015) remind us, neo-liberalism recruits complicit subjects. Hunter describes this recruitment from a "feminist psychosocial" point of view, which sees "relational politics" as the "everyday actions, investments and practices of the multiple and shifting range of people [in relation to] other material and symbolic objects that make up the state" (Hunter 2015, p. 4). She consequently makes us aware of how governmentality persuades academics within the neo-liberal academy that their (politicised) relations with dominant bureaucratic structures, performance criteria and research processes are normative, irresistible and definitive measures of excellence.

The freighting of research agendas such as sexuality work among feminists occurs in the context of the comprehensive bureaucratising of the university in relation to the state. The relationships between universities and the state in South Africa have always been complex ones. Under apartheid, universities were often directly controlled by the government, although struggles by many staff, students and very often management meant that battles for academic freedom took the form of liberal struggles between those opposed to apartheid instrumentalisation and a profoundly authoritarian state. As John Higgins (2013) notes, however, the shift from the apartheid to post-apartheid university did not entail institutions' progressive extrication from state capture. Instead, higher educational policy and institutional management in various universities allowed "the system to be increasingly defined by a neoliberal agenda" (Higgins 2013, p. 50). State control became

benign, masked by universities' seeming responsiveness to 'academic accountability' and 'social engagement'.

This situation demands thorough administration and oversight. And as the explosion of student protests between 2015 and 2016 for free public education and an end to the outsourcing of workers so clearly showed, it has also meant pernicious connections between university management and the state. From the start of the protests in October 2015, students quickly targeted both university managers and the neo-liberal post-apartheid state in condemning escalating fees, the exploitation of workers on their campus, and – from the perspective of many women and LGBTQ students – entrenched sexism and homophobia in institutions (see Bond 2017). Whether or not the South African government – like governments in the North – explicitly promotes an instrumental economic role for universities through managers, universities' purpose vis-à-vis the state is constantly stressed by the emphasis that the state-manager alliance places on universities' centrality to, for example, 'social cohesion', 'development', and rational and efficient 'growth'.

Regulation and reward systems associated with neo-liberal marketisation have been swiftly implemented at all levels. This rapid implementation is a sign of how deeply the "market has entered the soul of the university" (Thornton 2009, p. 3). Universities' regimes of auditing now emulate businesses' bureaucracies in regulating productivity and efficiency. Within the current regimes, academics, including feminist and progressive academics, are enlisted to police one another in terms of performance criteria that tend to prioritise quantifiable tasks and achievements rather than scholarly, intellectual and teaching ability. The main South African regulating mechanism, the National Research Foundation, rigidly grades research outputs and the standing of individual academics by locking academics into schemas that pay little attention to the merits of innovative and radical thought.

Related to the culture of regulation and reward has been a cutthroat ethos of individualism, one which pervades many levels of academic research. An aggressive ethic of survival of the fittest seems to have been naturalised as the only way to thrive in academies. Universities are always elite institutions that carefully regulate success, merit and ability, and have therefore historically encouraged exclusivity, individualism and competition. But the obsession with outputs, achievements and productivity under the present audit culture encourages unbridled and ruthless competitiveness.

Alan Burton-Jones (1999, p. 3) remarks on this by arguing:

"Capitalism and emerging knowledge capitalism thrive on capital accumulation, open-market competition, free trade, the power of the individual and survival of the fittest."

Unlike the effects of racial, class and patriarchal injustices, then, the impact of neo-liberalism is extremely hard to identify and contest; it is often 'in here', rather than only, and of course, more manageably 'out there'. In other words, our universities' auditing technologies become generalised and often bring the aims, methods and passions of what individual feminist academics do in line with the institutional good.

The homogenising and monitoring of goals behind the aegis of collective good is especially evident in the new technocratic regulation of university teaching. South African feminist traditions have long pioneered innovative methods for encouraging critical literacy among students. In their introduction to a country-wide study of feminist popular education, Shirley Walters and Linzi Manicom (1996) explore the thriving body of feminist popular education in South Africa in the early 1980s. As they also demonstrate, this legacy sought to connect the intellect, the body, the spirit and the emotions, challenging separations that allow mainstream teaching and scholarship to marginalise certain knowledge-making and suppress certain areas of study (see Walters and Manicom 1996, p. 7–11). Feminists in South Africa have also experimented boldly with creativity, active learning, and the use of students' knowledges in challenging elite and masculinist forms of learning. In fact, feminist popular education in South Africa has a long history in the work of feminist activists working for non-governmental organisations and trade unions. Drawing on the philosophy of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, this work has enlisted traditions of popular education and specifically feminist pedagogies that establish the personal as political, and challenge hegemonic epistemologies and patriarchal claims to universality.

An example of this progressive teaching is the University of the Western Cape's *Centre for Continuing and Adult Education (CACE)*, which drove critical literacy programmes for adults whose social marginalisation had constrained their educational ambitions. Like other radical teaching sites, the *Centre for Continuing and Adult Education* not only sought to prepare students academically, but also sought to support students' critical engagement with their worlds, preparing them to challenge local, interpersonal and global forms of power and injustice, and the ways in which governments and market economies safeguard minority privileges (see Walters and Manicom 1996). The *Centre for Continuing and Adult Education*, like other popular educational sites in universities, therefore worked to make marginal voices heard within the confines of the academic centre.

In its pursuit for a market-oriented social engagement in 2014, the university's management recommended the Centre's closure⁷ on the grounds of its no longer being relevant to the institution's educational priorities. At the same time, enormous financial and academic resources have gone into transforming teaching and learning into a new site for professionalism and regulation. Apart from the employment of a senior academic to oversee teaching and learning in all departments and faculties, the university appoints deputy deans in several faculties for this portfolio, and considerable energy and resources have been invested in managerial strategies for 'enhancing' teaching and learning. Long-established academics, with excellent track records of innovative teaching, are now required to submit elaborate teaching portfolios or attend training sessions to qualify for promotion.

This bureaucratic restructuring of teaching exemplifies not only the direction taken by one university, but also many others in South Africa. The new teaching and learning expertise offers far less than the rich, animated, organic and impassioned pedagogical explorations that feminists and popular educators have pursued in and beyond South Africa. Ultimately, the new technologies for teaching and learning operate within broader systems of managerialism and auditing.

4 Feminist Resistance in the Face of Neo-liberalism

What might it therefore mean to step outside of the academy as neo-liberalism's 'teaching machine'?⁸ Given the overwhelming ways in which governmentality works not only to maintain the status quo, but also to assure all subjects that the status quo is rational and just, what does 'resistance' mean? It is worth stressing here that gendered forms of narcissism, competitiveness and manipulation quickly intensify among women located in institutions that exploit and encourage individualism and other socially learned behaviours. One important route for feminist resistance in the academy involves courageous, self-reflexive critiques not only of where we are currently situated, but also of our complex ties of co-dependence and complicity with the academy's various technologies of management and self-management. Such self-assessment would entail questioning collective stakes in security zones, the layered investments we make in affiliation, and the dangers of speaking out and

7 The *Centre for Continuing and Adult Education* has not closed; however, it has now merged with another centre, and its original focus on critical popular education has been significantly weakened.

8 I adapt the title of Gayatri Spivak's *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (1993) here.

stepping out of line. By drawing attention to the “psychosocial” and to the way that neo-liberal ethics and morality are manifested in our everyday actions, seemingly spontaneous responses and psyches, Shona Hunter (2015, p. 46) alerts us to the vigilance and humility that such self-interrogation must entail.

Yet in institutional contexts where the progressive effects of seemingly radical practices are easily compromised, ‘self-reflexive’ practices also warrant critical reconsideration. In her conceptual work on methodologies, Richa Nagar (2014) concludes that ‘reflexivity’ has become a mantra in much feminist work today. Invoked to mystify research that reproduces earlier blind spots, reflexivity often works to perpetuate moderate and even conservative ends. As her work with activists outside of the academy demonstrates, self-reflexivity in an age where neo-liberal logic clouds our every motivation requires risk, courage and humanity. It would mean, for example, that research into areas considered important or exciting must be subjected to a researcher’s efforts to position herself at the very localised level of knowledge-making, and interrogate her motivations and efforts in relation to wider global contexts.

This would also entail questioning the implications of what work one does, and under which conditions within our particular sites as well as in wider domains of knowledge-making. One of the central arguments of this article is that the taken-for-granted tasks of researching and teaching in certain areas must be subjected to constant scrutiny by academics and students. Although South African feminists have fought hard and with great determination to introduce particular theoretical models, concepts and research areas into the academy,⁹ it is, to say the least, cause for concern when industries of knowledge-making and funding accrue in some areas at certain moments. It is even more alarming when particular approaches to these research areas become institutionalised in the academy, forming a corpus of postgraduate study and writing by established researchers, and swiftly become a research industry with direct and indirect connections to national and international economic and foreign policy. Acknowledging how our work can sometimes feed into an economy that now relies on sectoral knowledge banks should therefore be central to our self-reflexive scrutiny.

Alongside this kind of self-reflexivity is the value of rebuilding research communities that have traditionally strengthened feminism. It is predictable that the neo-liberal emphasis on productivity has generated considerable interest in cross-country and cross-regional research collaboration, especially North-South

9 It is especially important to recognise the work on sexualities which particular feminists developed long before the growth of an industry around this work. Interventions by Mary Hames (2003) and Patricia McFadden (1992) are especially noteworthy here.

work where large amounts of donor funding go into, for example, researching sexualities or masculinities. In confronting the ongoing need for research and activist communities for feminists today, Chandra Mohanty (2013, p. 967–991) describes alternative forms of networking. By focusing on specific and general patterns in relation to sites including the US, Sweden, Mexico and Palestine, she unravels ways in which feminists located at centres and peripheries can activate critical alliances that actively trouble the exploitative North-South dyad associated with commodity extraction and processing.

Central to her conceptualising of radical networks is her distinction between global alliances (which function to consolidate North-South relations and the servicing role of universities), and substantively transnational connections¹⁰ that seek to dismantle the discursive and material relations that create cores and peripheries in the first place. Among these relations, discourses of multiculturalism recruit peripheries into global circuits as ‘respected’ zones of difference, while ultimately mobilising these zones in larger global apparatuses for managing knowledge and information in the interests of the market, political stability, and the production of compliant and economically productive bodies.

5 Conclusion

It is not surprising that the knowledge economy underpinning university work in the present often leaves individual feminist academics and students extremely vulnerable, isolated, fragile and battered, even as it seems to offer certain individuals scope for quantitative growth and advancement within the academy. The testimonies of black South African feminists¹¹ especially indicate that they have endured tremendous physical, emotional and psychological distress. Their experiences of alienation in the academy raise the necessity for strengthening alliances and support networks.

Networking and research collaboration under neo-liberalism, however, continues to spawn larger, better-funded and increasingly aggressive global, rather than transnational, alliances. And global feminism, as is the case with global

10 Richa Nagar and Amanda Swarr distinguish between global and transnational alliances as editors of *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis* (2010).

11 This became evident between 2015 and 2016 in the context of the *#Fees Must Fall* protests. Both radical black academics and students spoke out in print and social media about ongoing racism and patriarchy in the context of neo-liberal administration and bureaucracy.

orientations generally, effectively incorporates peripheries into the centres in line with the latter's strategic objectives. As students, academics and intellectual activists in the academy, feminists can continue to subvert or elude entrenched power relations under globalisation by strengthening transnational solidarity community-building. Neo-liberalism in the academy fosters the loss of perspective: losing sight of struggles, power relations and critical knowledge-making that satisfy our radical intellectual and political energies. In joining the race to produce outputs for outputs' sake, or to meet endless auditing and self-regulation criteria, we can quickly lose sight of the vital sources of our critical engagement in knowledge-making that thrives beyond the academy. Re-invigorating transnational alliances and regaining radical perspectives therefore require the (now) radical move of alliance-building with constituencies that first strengthened feminism,¹² but which academic feminists today seem to have little time for. Mohanty (2013, p. 991) articulates this cogently:

"I believe we need to return to the radical feminist politics of the contextual as both local and structural and to the collectivity that is being defined out of existence by privatization projects. I think we need to recommit to insurgent knowledges and the complex politics of anti-racist, anti-imperialist feminisms."

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