

Marketing Difference: Two Teachable Moments at the Intersection of the Neoliberal University and Geopolitics

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Abstract: This article looks at the effects the neoliberal university has on feminist pedagogy when it is practised in a programme that stresses geopolitical differences. The material for the study comes from my experience as a teacher of a gender studies class for a US study abroad programme based in Prague, Czech Republic. The richly researched paradoxes of doing feminist pedagogy in the neoliberal university assume firm contours when the geopolitical location of both those ‘teaching’ and those ‘taught’ becomes the focus and indeed the ‘commodity’ to be sold. In my article, I focus on my situation as a teacher in an increasingly precarious educational environment in the Czech Republic, exacerbated by the specific framing of the US-based programme and its economic-moral rationality. I reflect on the ethical discontents inadvertently produced by the teaching experience and related commodification of ‘difference’. I argue that the geopolitical context of that commodification is crucial for understanding the local forms and impact of the neoliberal university. The contested standing of gender studies in the Czech Republic, which has been shown to stem in part from the post-1989 developments, intersects with the reform of the Czech science system. By exploring how this setting affects the micro-level of class dynamics and lesson content I show that there is a need to study the repercussions of the neoliberal university as geopolitically located.

Keywords: transnational feminist teaching, commodification of education, feminist pedagogy, neoliberal university.

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Doing feminist pedagogy has been lately conceptualised as at odds with the changes introducing a market logic and highly individualistic corporate culture into the functioning of universities and research institutions (Alvanoudi 2009; David 2016; Gill, Donaghue 2016; Giroux 2002; Nash 2013; Pereira 2016; Sifaki 2016; Weber 2010). These authors use different concepts, such as university without walls, corporate culture, academic capitalism, and new managerialism to describe and analyse the defining aspects of the 'neoliberal university'. In relation to feminist pedagogy, which I will discuss here, a highly relevant aspect is the bodily and emotional harm inflicted on both teachers and students (Berg, Huijbens, Larsen 2016; Gill 2010), with most of the focus on rising anxiety levels. I understand feminist pedagogy as a form of political activity that foregrounds and fosters relations within and beyond the classroom while challenging the social status quo with a particular emphasis on gendered workings of power. Thus, physical and psychological harm perceived as stemming from the very setting where education is to be achieved logically leads to critiques of that setting and the search for possible ways in which to undo this harmful situation. This article is a contribution to these critical debates. I reflect on what feminist pedagogy and the relations it hopes to foster can gain from a focus on geopolitics as an integral part of the neoliberal university. I try to show this using the example of a US study abroad programme based in Prague, in the Czech Republic, as it makes the geopolitical embeddedness of the neoliberal university easily observable.

The study is based on an autoethnographic analysis of the sixteen semesters I have so far spent teaching a gender studies (GS) class to mostly US undergraduate students as part of a study abroad programme. The article is organised as follows: I first focus on the interconnections between feminist pedagogy, neoliberalism, and geopolitics. I then briefly summarise the local neoliberalising trends in higher education (HE) and the establishment of gender studies in the Czech academic environment and the geopolitical contingencies of this. I then proceed to focus on the methods and material used and the concept of a teachable moment within feminist pedagogy. After introducing two such teachable moments, I analyse what role the neoliberal university explicitly informed by geopolitics plays in them. I conclude by highlighting that a focus on the intersection of geopolitics and the neoliberal university through concrete, embodied examples makes it possible to find novel ways of practising feminist pedagogy.

Feminist pedagogy intersects with the neoliberal university and geopolitics

I understand the neoliberal university less as a neatly defined term and more as an umbrella term denoting the effects of introducing market principles and their corollary types of relations into academia across the globe from centres in Anglophone coun-

tries. One of the most salient issues the term covers from the perspective of feminist pedagogy is the uneasy combination of neoliberalism with academic relationality and values. As Jeremy Gilbert (2008) noted, the relations to be found in an educational setting (teacher/student; peer/peer) are not easily reducible to the consumer/provider relation that he believes is the dominant type of relationality in a neoliberal consumer society that is striving to become a hegemonic one. For anyone invested in critical pedagogy and its feminist form, it is this new consumerist relationality that represents one of the key barriers to the perceived desirable outcome, i.e. the development of critical thinking in students coupled with social consciousness and sensitisation to the need for political action (Amsler, Canaan 2008). At the same time, however, as Amsler and Cannan (*ibid.*) but also Weber (2010) point out, it is an opportunity to think of new ways of teaching.

By feminist pedagogy I understand a teaching methodology that is based on consciously and reflexively building a relationship with and among the students, with an emphasis put on highlighting the workings of power in the given field of study and in the classroom in order to trigger political consciousness and possibly even action. Feminist teachers consequently tend to see their role and work as political (David 2016; Dever 1999; Felman 2001; Pétursdóttir 2015) and aimed at challenging the social status quo both within and beyond the classroom. This may entail challenging the dominance and knowledge claims of the academic environment, as it is not just the given disciplinary content that is questioned, but also the forms of instruction and their relationships of authority and domination, and the effort is to transform them (hooks 1994). Tension and the relevance of the material to the students' personal lives are seen as key for learning (Mei-Hui 2014).

Multiple authors have pointed out the discrepancy between the neoliberal university, which characteristically frames students as customers and teachers as highly dedicated (precarious) service/product suppliers, and the key characteristics of feminist pedagogy. The issues that tend to stand out are the market logic that deems demand to be the ultimate measure of the quality and worth of what is on offer. It taints the learning context and replaces education's significance as a precondition for truly full and conscious citizenship with self-enhancement that can be directly translated into an advantage on the labour market (Brown 2015; Giroux 2002; Weber 2010). Another issue identified as contradicting efforts at feminist pedagogy is when we find postfeminist attitudes running the show even in settings that previously seemed immune to them, such as classes in sociology (Nash 2013). Given the focus of feminist pedagogy on fostering actual relations among the students and the teacher, growing numbers of students also do not fit well with the small-group discussions that are at least partly modelled on US-based feminist consciousness-raising groups (Newbery 2009). In sum, the position of students in a neoliberal university setting is

characterised by '[c]ompetition, self-sufficiency and strident individualism – which are both the symptoms and disease of neoliberalism – [which] appear entirely at odds with the overthrow of power relations' (Feigenbaum 2007: 337). On the side of teachers, one's worth in academia is controlled by the constant auditing of one's output, in the form, for instance, of articles published in high impact journals. Both the position of teachers and students is thus framed by common principles understood as specific to neoliberalism. In order to understand them better it is necessary to point out the difference from classical liberalism.

Olssen and Peters (2005) note that the focus on competition, belief in the self-governing superior capacity of the market, and so forth, are not novel and can be found in classical liberalism (Olssen, Peters 2005: 314–315). The novelty comes from the new perspective on the state: once viewed in an utterly negative light for standing in the way of free trade and laissez-faire principles, it is now seen as the actor that is meant to create 'the appropriate market by providing the conditions, laws and institutions necessary for its operation' (Olssen, Peters 2005: 315). Thus, the state is reframed as the guarantor and maintenance provider of the conditions for a thriving free market. Since knowledge society is defined as important for the free market and production, it is up to the state also to oversee and guarantee that academia does its share in the process, that is educates malleable individualised forms of human capital (Berg, Huijbens, Larsen 2016).

What, then, does geopolitics have to do with this? Firstly, neoliberalism with its primary focus on economic profit-making uses inequalities that define the transnational economy. This is most clearly visible in the case of transnational corporations and their bargaining power, which is boosted by supranational political entities such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. These entities use nation-states to implement policies that support their operation and neoliberalism as an ideology.¹ Secondly, inequalities do not stop at the economy. Rather, they influence and are influenced by the symbolic values assigned to specific geographic locations, which had the effect of dividing the world into hierarchical units, such as East/West, First/Third World, Global North/South, centre/semi-periphery/periphery etc. These values then directly and indirectly affect academia – for instance, in terms of which countries are seen as the 'centres' of knowledge production (Felt 2009; Stöckelová 2012). Actual analysis is prevented because the answer is purportedly ready beforehand ('because of the geopolitical location') and this gives rise to the danger of perceived difference becoming solidified in the form of entities that are then believed to have insurmountable ontological differences (Ang 2003; Cerwonka 2008b; Mohanty 1988). Moreover, such a reading of transnational relations obscures the actual

¹ I would like to thank Zuzana Uhde for pointing this out to me.

interconnectedness. However, that is not to say that the aforementioned divisions do not hold symbolical value and do not have actual effects that are observable and well documented in global academia.²

Indeed, the preoccupation with the impact of neoliberal reforms on academic cultures often seems to rely on its manifestations in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia (Brown 2015; Weber 2010), which are seen as negative role models of sorts. Local developments are criticised as the most extreme examples of neoliberalism and it is assumed that they have a universal value, so that when neoliberal reforms are introduced elsewhere, outside their place of origin, they are expected to produce the same outcome.³ Importantly, they are also believed to produce similar results, such as atomising and breaking up collectives, which prevents any possible (identity and common interests-based) opposition (Bourdieu 1998). In many respects, this is the case as policy-makers certainly look for inspiration abroad, yet the actual effects need to be understood as affected by local settings, including academic policies, but also the geopolitical location of any given case. Such studies can help us understand what future shape the changes may take. Analysing what happens when neoliberal reforms are implemented in places where gender equality is not necessarily a universally shared value can help us understand what may be coming to the places, from which the reforms spread in the first place. This may be especially so when gender equality faces erosion under political developments in the countries that initiated the reforms that make them 'negative role models'. This article seeks to show both the impact of geopolitically grounded neoliberal reforms on feminist pedagogy and the possible ways of coping with them.

The general setting of the material explored here is the internationalisation of higher education (HE), which is at present compatible with the concept of marketing HE as a path to self-improvement and increasing one's market value. While ideally an increase in the internationalisation of HE might be seen as contributing to the launch of a truly transversal dialogue in GS (Yuval-Davis 1994), the effects of internationalisation may be the opposite of what is expected. The stakes in internationalising HE are high, with ambitions to create a global university (Halangescu 2015) and guarantee the development of global citizenry (Gacel-Ávila 2005). At the same time, however, most authors note the instrumentalisation of education that affects how internationalisation is approached by national governments, which is directly affected by the neoliberalising

² The effects of these divisions are, for example, the prevalence of English as the hegemonic language of academic production (Bennett 2007, 2009) or limited canons used in teaching gender studies (Hemmings 2005).

³ In 2015, Gabriele Griffin gave a speech at the first RINGS conference held in Prague where she used the metaphor of a 'postcard from the future' to describe the upcoming developments in British academic assessment policies as what is coming globally.

tendencies. They stress the advantage of study abroad stays⁴ in terms of increasing a student's marketability in a knowledge society (Teichler 2004). The context of internationalisation is of key importance here as the study abroad programme claims allegiance with both the promises – the market value – and the idea of the actual exchange of values that is more compatible with the idea of a feminist pedagogy.

The establishment of gender studies as an unintended consequence of the neoliberalisation of HE

While public HE in the Czech Republic remains free of charge⁵ it has undergone some of the changes associated with neoliberalisation, such as massification⁶ (Šima, Pabian 2013, 2016) and precarious working conditions until teaching faculty reach the senior positions of reader/associate and full professor, which tend to come with a permanent contract. The local academic setting is characterised by mechanistic output-oriented research evaluation policies and a steep decrease in available institutional funding, which is largely replaced by competitive one (Linková, Stöckelová 2012; Linková 2016). The driving factor in the policies is that the quantity of output translates into state budget funding, i.e. the more an institution produces, the more money it obtains. This further contributes to neglecting HE pedagogy, as the policies do not stress HE pedagogy quality, and quality teaching takes up time that could be spent producing impact factor articles, patents, etc. (Dvořáčková et al. 2014). This directly contradicts the transformative, experiential learning-based aspirations of feminist pedagogy that gained new space with the full institutionalisation of gender studies (GS) in 2004/2005, when a BA programme opened at Masaryk University in Brno and an MA programme at Charles University in Prague.

The timing of the institutionalisation of GS is no coincidence: the faculties launched the programmes at a time when HE was undergoing massification, albeit after substantial pressure from feminist researchers and lecturers (Havelková 2009; Linková 2006; Pavlík, 2004; Václavíková-Helšusová 2006). The establishment of the programmes is not to be mistaken for an automatic recognition of the salience and

⁴ There are of course also other forms of internationalisation of HE, such as studying whole degree programmes in a foreign country or attending a branch campus of one's own university based in a different country as a way of extending the university's international presence (University of Oxford International Strategy Office 2015). Nevertheless, since the data for the article come from a study abroad programme, this prevalent type of international education determines the focus of the paper.

⁵ Although some fees are in place for when the regular study period is exceeded and HE contributes to reproducing inequality even in the stage of the massification and universalising of HE.

⁶ Given the political developments, reform started in the 1990s. The massification and universalising stage of the process of opening up the HE system to large populations of students reached its peak in the 2000s (Prudký, Pabian, Šima 2010; Šima 2013).

academic worth of the discipline on the part of the academic community. Moreover, institutionalisation itself is not to be taken for granted, as was shown by the fate of an earlier attempt to establish a GS programme at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University (Lorenz-Meyer 2004; Pavlík 2004). The precarity faced by GS teachers is thus manifold: it concerns the relatively low wages,⁷ blurry assessment of their pedagogical input, and the uncertain status of their programmes. The situation is further exacerbated by the fact that gender equality and its benefits for society are still far from established within the public discourse, as research into social movements has shown (Císař, Vráblíková 2010; Císař 2008). This reluctance to acknowledge the merits of GS on almost all levels of society has been associated with geopolitically perceived historical developments and their interpretation, which frames emancipation as a matter of the past and feminism as an alien import (Hašková, Uhde 2009; Havelková, Oates-Indruchová 2014). The setting for feminist pedagogy in the Czech Republic is therefore characterised by fragile institutionalisation and the discipline's contradictory status both in academia and in society (Sokolová 2004; Václavíková-Helšusová 2006). It is a result of a selective adoption of neoliberal university models together with a highly selective interpretation of local history informed by geopolitics.⁸

Autoethnography, feminist pedagogy, and the teachable moment

The material that I analyse to explore the possibilities for feminist pedagogy that stem from the above-described setting comes from my eight years of experience teaching a general undergraduate class on gender in the Czech Republic (CR) and Europe at a US study abroad programme centre based in Prague. The programme is called the Council on International Educational Exchange and it has been operating in the international educational market with study abroad programmes since the late

⁷ Women academics comprise the majority of staff in GS programmes. Women academics' median monthly salary in the Czech Republic is EUR 1194 before tax. However, it is unusual, especially for junior faculty, to have a full-time job at a university so their actual salary is often lower. The data come from the Czech Statistical Office and are for 2015; <https://www.czso.cz/documents/10180/32846295/11002616A22.pdf/91cbc71e-5e1b-4281-b267-1f3c295d7fbc?version=1.0>, accessed: September 10, 2016. The average exchange rate for 2015 is taken from the Czech National Bank: https://www.cnb.cz/cs/financni_trhy/devizovy_trh/kurzy_devizoveho_trhu/prumerne_mena.jsp?mena=EUR, accessed: September 10, 2016.

⁸ As Maria do Mar Pereira (2014) has shown, this situation is not exceptional and does not wholly determine the standing of the discipline of GS. Her study shows that the divisions that exist within the EU and posit Portugal as 'lacking' and needing to 'catch up' with the 'West' have resulted in the adoption of citation-based research metrics in science policy. This policy has somewhat paradoxically helped entrench gender studies as a discipline in Portuguese academia due to its solid English-language academic output (although without corresponding local academic recognition of the discipline).

1940s. After 1989, the programme established its centre in Prague and its website invites students to come to Prague to 'discover a society that is steadily developing while recently transitioning from a communist past'.⁹

Although it is officially affiliated with Charles University, a public university, since the students come from the United States they cover the costs of their stay with their own money unless they manage to receive one of the rare scholarships. In many cases the fees they pay for one local semester are higher than the fees they pay at their home university. The class usually has between nine and fourteen students who are in their early 20s, most of them white, cisgender women, frequently of Jewish heritage. Economically speaking, the vast majority of students come from the middle class, with a few from low-income families who mostly come on a scholarship. Given the relatively small class size guaranteed by the programme, I run the class as a seminar.

The material I use for the autoethnography varies. In 2011, I began keeping a file of the questionnaires that the students fill out at the beginning of every semester.¹⁰ I also keep a file of my own observations and exchanges with colleagues about the programme, how it functions, and changes to it. I often make these notes at the mandatory faculty and academic meetings that take place before every semester. Another source is the changes I have made to the syllabus as a result of specific situations that occur in class: in most cases, these lead to the removal of texts deemed too difficult for the students to understand. Furthermore, I also use email communication with students, which is an integral part of the class, as well as numerous informal one-on-one and whole-class discussions, especially on the topic of geopolitical location.

I approach the material from an autoethnographic perspective (Ellis, Adams, Bochner 2010). An autoethnography combines the description of an insightful moment with an analytical approach enabled by the author's research training. Analysis and namely the capacity to link the epiphany to a general cultural phenomenon or show it as such distinguishes an autoethnography from an autobiography. While some claim the style of an autoethnography 'should be aesthetic and evocative, engage readers' (Ellis, Adams, Bochner 2010: 4), I am afraid this is beyond my capacities in a foreign

⁹ <https://www.ciee.org/study-abroad/czech-republic/prague/>, accessed: September 10, 2016.

¹⁰ At present, the questionnaire includes the following questions: What is your name and what do you want to be called in the classroom? Please provide your email address; University/major/s/minor/s?; Why have you decided to come to the CR/take this class?; How would you define gender?; What do you think people in the CR believe to be an ideal family (as to its composition)?; Is abortion legal in the CR?; Is the CR a religious country? What is the main religion here?; Do you think feminism is relevant today? Would you call yourself a feminist? Why/Why not?; What is neoliberalism and how does it relate to you? When you come across a word you don't know in a text, what do you do?

language, so instead, in part also because I am focusing on a rather abstract and complex issue, I strive to emphasise the analytical side of an autoethnography. In particular, I focus on specific localities and the geopolitical contexts and frameworks attached to these contexts in order to analyse the mutual influence of the above-mentioned position of gender studies at Czech universities, the impact of changes to the HE sector on the possibilities of engaging in feminist pedagogy as a study abroad programme straddling the Atlantic. The focus of an autoethnography *per se* is inevitably on the micro-level. However, the goal is to show the relevance of the concrete experience for our understanding of more general phenomena. Thus, my goal in using the autoethnographic approach is to show that concrete experience from the classroom may shed light on the workings of global phenomena, such as the insidious combination of specific geopolitics within the neoliberal university and the teaching opportunities the neoliberal university offers even to those invested in feminist pedagogy.

When aspiring to live up to the ideal of a feminist teacher, who keeps her students engaged and learns from them, and is highly self-reflexive at the same time, it is rather difficult to avoid self-doubt. What if they get bored because I am not able to start 'that' relationship with the class? How am I supposed to make students listen to and respect one another when six weeks into the semester some still cannot remember each other's names? Why has he fallen asleep when the others seemed to really care? Is any teaching actually taking place?

The questions above hint at the frustration that seems to haunt the feminist teacher and threatens to strike anytime. Liz Newbery (2009) even talks about 'surviving' feminist pedagogy as she focuses on a situation where the tension could not be worked through and was experienced as a failure and violence. It is this possibility of failure, both in terms of not living up to the (self-imposed) expectations and encountering a breakdown that does not lead to learning, that makes the experience potentially emotionally draining. Moreover, the discontents of situations in which it becomes clear that one's former students support sexual violence lurk as an even bigger threat (Bretz 2014).

As these issues are hardly new, the notion of a 'teachable moment' has been coined to refer to a difficult situation in the classroom that leads to actual learning (and teaching by default). It tends to be based on a confrontation of personal experience represented by the classroom. As Anna Feigenbaum puts it:

The teachable moment is a disruption, a misfiring, a tangent, a digression, followed against the will of critical ordering, occurring in the vulnerable space which opens when the teacher re-envisioning student resistance as an attempt to escape. Yearning for more than the text, yearning for the text to be applicable,

yearning for knowledge to be produced elsewhere; this attempt to escape is not a resistance, a blockage or a refusal to learn. Rather, it is an attempt at encounter. Acknowledging the impossibility of thought being complete, in this encounter of student and teacher, knowledge is always becoming. (Feigenbaum 2007: 340)

Thus, teachable moments occur when the teacher and the student/s attempt to actually engage with one another as embodied subjects. It is relatively easy then to see why teachable moments and feminist pedagogy in general are understood as at odds with the neoliberal university. The neoliberal university promises not to raise a citizen with critical thinking skills applicable primarily to her/his personal and political existence but rather a neoliberal subject driven by her/his endeavours in the labour market, which in the case of the study abroad programme is distinctly global and complex (Tuchman 2009).

The teaching/learning setting of the study abroad programme

Arguably not all teaching methods I use in the course could be labelled as feminist pedagogy. I follow the assessment criteria designed by the programme and at times do not refrain from using the authority that derives from the hierarchical relation with the students. The relationality that is invoked in such a class cannot, however, be expected to follow a simple pattern, such as that of customer/provider. Thus, although the challenging of hierarchies and their backgrounds is crucial, there are unavoidably moments where referring to authority (one's own or of published authors) is both expected and beneficial (Gilbert 2008). Joint deliberation, whole-class discussions, sometimes led by the students, the possibility to influence the syllabus and classroom decorum, and most importantly an emphasis on forming bonds and personal connections still make up an important part of the class. At the same time, however, the geopolitical framing of the programme as presented in its official documents is heavily grounded in treating the students as customers who are presented with beautiful images of Prague and a list of things to see and do, but are also promised that they will 'grow ... professionally'.¹¹ Some of the students indeed openly (in class discussions of why they had come) acknowledge that the expectation that their education/degree will guarantee them good employment opportunities is the reason both why they enrolled in the first place and why they feel enormously stressed. A contributing factor here is the possibility to be awarded at least some scholarship in the case of an excellent academic performance, which leads students

¹¹ <https://www.ciee.org/study-abroad/why-ciee/ciee-difference/>, accessed April 25, 2017.

to unprecedented pressure on their teachers to give them a grade A regardless of their actual performance.

As the bulk of the programme consists of area studies courses, the curriculum often capitalises on assumptions of ontological difference that stem from an acceptance of the Cold War discourse dividing the world into the distinct, hierarchically ordered categories of the developed, modern West and the modernising East that is trying to catch up (for a critique of this perspective on geopolitical relations, see Buden 2010, 2013; Kampichler 2010; Nyklová 2017). The geopolitical underpinning of the programme has been a stable focus of the class since 2010. The context is specific, for it combines a local academic setting characterised by low wages with a very small number of permanent positions, which come with requirements on academic standards and a level/type of performance defined by the corporate culture of the US programme headquarters (HQ). At the same time, the programme itself profits from the perception of Prague as being both safe and interesting due to its communist past. What gets marketed here is the perceived and thus co-constructed ontological difference between the CR and the United States that allows for an 'immersion' in and exploration of 'Prague', 'Czech', 'local', and even 'Central European' culture.¹²

The students' beliefs reflect the assumed insurmountable difference contained in the broadening horizons metaphor, including its implicit geopolitical power hierarchy. '*I came to learn about the region*', is how one student put it in a class discussion, paraphrasing the programme's website both on the first day of class and later in the semester. As the class covers various issues stemming from gendered social realities and relations,¹³ the geopolitical power hierarchy is even more frequently implied by the expressed belief in the inevitable progress that will lead to policies and cultural change that are seen as 'advanced'. The hierarchy gets reflected in how students approach the study material, where difficulties with understanding are at times blamed on the 'difference' such as when one student wanted to make sure that Judith Butler '*is from here, right?*'.

To challenge such assumptions, in class we focus on the theorisation of location in relation to GS, highlighting the local long history of emancipation and feminist activism. Critical accounts of silencing, subalternisation, and unequal recognition of those on the 'periphery/semi-periphery' by feminist theorists of the 'core' countries seem to prevail in the theories of location and local influences of solidifying geopolitical

¹² <https://www.ciee.org/study-abroad/czech-republic/prague/central-european-studies/>, accessed April 25, 2017.

¹³ We cover topics such as reproductive rights, sterilisations, vertical and horizontal segregation of the labour market, globalisation of care, etc.

divisions (Blagojevic 2005; De Haan, Daskalova, Loutfi 2006; Gal, Kligman 2000; Loutfi 2009). Epistemological consequences of the different levels of dominance that are experienced and practised have also been studied (Phipps 2016; Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, Koobak 2016), including issues regarding the im/possibility of cooperation across geopolitically grounded difference. This is relevant for the possibility of feminist teaching as a situated process, especially in a context that stresses – and capitalises on – an alleged difference, i.e. it to an extent copies the situation analysed by the mentioned authors. I now turn to two teachable moments that form the core of the autoethnography as they were moments where the belief in the 'difference' was successfully challenged.

Teachable moment 1: sexual assault

In three semesters in the past three years, students approached me describing incidents of sexualised violence they experienced during their stay in the Czech Republic. These included incidents of verbalised sexual harassment in public spaces (e.g. in front of the programme's building), on public transport, and in clubs. Furthermore, there were instances of groping both on public transport and at clubs. In one winter semester, a student approached me just before mid-terms to apologise for not being able to sit the exam as she had just been raped on her way from a party. This incident led to the most serious crisis for me as a teacher and nearly made me quit the programme.

Feminist pedagogy stresses the importance of challenging power hierarchies, including the teacher/student dichotomy. The sexual assault led to other dichotomies being challenged as well, namely the student/programme and teacher/administration dichotomies. Unfortunately, the case gave us ample space for making such a challenge. In the two months that followed the assault, I became the key faculty member with whom the student discussed her situation. This was partly because she expected me to understand aspects of her experience given my focus on gender relations and partly because she found that none of the members of the administration seemed to fully grasp her situation. There were instances of victimisation and misplaced blame, most brutally from the police, who refused to investigate and hinted that they believed the accusation was false, but later also from a psychoanalyst (!) to whom she was referred, and even in the attitude and approach of the administration of the programme.

Those two months were the hardest two months I have ever had to teach so far, although dealing with personal students' issues has always been part of the job. The administration was trying to dissuade me from talking to the student about the incident and I increasingly felt my position was threatened by my repeatedly pointing

out instances of sexual violence faced by students.¹⁴ I was told that ‘intercultural misunderstanding’ may have been behind these other incidents and despite not being the only teacher to ever teach on gender in the programme, no one else was consulted and I would have been completely left out had the student not approached me.

The incident taught both the student and me more about our situatedness and location than any reading alone could. While texts by Allaine Cerwonka and Chandra Talpade Mohanty are covered in my course, and when teaching on any issue I strive to find authors who do not ignore geopolitics in their writing, the breakthrough only came with the embodied experience of the assumed, ontological ‘difference’ between Czech and US ‘culture’ being used to shield the programme against its own teacher and student. In the case of the student, this was possible because the programme’s local leadership adopted the local highly stereotypical understanding of sexualised violence and this was further compounded by the leadership’s fears for the reputation of the programme, especially in the eyes of the US HQ. In my case, it was possible because of the precarious contracts and zero protections granted contract teachers by the university and the programme HQ. The whole situation made the intersection of sexualised violence as gendered violence with geopolitics and neoliberalism and its effects palpable for both the student and me.

Teachable moment 2: a death in the family

In September 2014, my paternal aunt passed away. Although she had been to the hospital for the second time that year, her death came as a shock and was unexpected. Moreover, I was unable to see her in the hospital because on Friday I arrived from a demanding, week-long conference abroad, so I did not travel to see her on Saturday morning but decided to see her on Monday, when another family trip to the hospital was planned. However, we learned on Monday that she had passed away, so instead of a visit, the trip turned into funeral preparations. This event, together with the funeral, sent me down a path to depression, which lasted for almost a full year and made focusing on my relatively challenging academic job rather difficult.

The funeral was scheduled for the first day of classes at a time when a US-born teacher of English literature was appointed academic director of the US study abroad programme. The position is meant to deal with the academic aspects of the programme, such as supervising and evaluating teachers, selecting them and making decisions on the termination of contracts/courses. The management of the teachers was bureaucratised in a manner that incorporated some aspects of audit culture

¹⁴ One positive exception was a joint consultation of the students who were sexually harassed during their stay with the pedagogical advisor and me although it did not lead to a solution to the situation.

(Apple 2005; Gill, Donaghue 2016). The academic director came up with a page-long assessment sheet instead of the previous informal evaluation. The number of administrative tasks expected of faculty was increased, even though the teachers only get paid for the contact hours they spend teaching. An electronic learning environment was introduced, with training for teachers presented as an asset rather than as time that should be, but was not, remunerated. The programme is academically run by academics who mostly work on renewable one-year contracts.¹⁵ The way in which the new learning environment and its mastering by the teachers was stressed made it clear a faculty member's position would be jeopardised if s/he refused to comply with the new conditions (as some colleagues indeed did). The stress the new system triggered in some teachers was substantial, unnecessary, and deeply unethical (Gill 2010). Moreover, despite the emphasis officially put on experiential learning, the programme did not address the problem of converging all the teachers' styles into a single mould, which clearly poses some issues for experiential learning.

Thus, as both my aunt's funeral and the very first day of class were approaching, I started to grow increasingly anxious as to what would be the right course of action. I realised that the academic director would not appreciate my absence on the first day and I was also concerned for my job, as it was clear to me that the students were expecting to meet their teacher for the first time. Moreover, the programme has an add-and-drop period in place, meaning that the students may drop a class during the first two weeks of classes. Thus, the first week of classes in particular is especially important for determining whether the course is opened (and you have a job) or not. As the depression had kicked in, I simply followed expectations and decided to teach the class after the trip from the funeral.

As a result, the teachable moment occurred on the very first day of class. The class was packed, as the rooms are small and 15 students are too many for the classroom. I arrived straight from the funeral, still wearing black. I did not start with the usual introduction and motivational welcome speech. Instead I looked around and spotted students I knew had come to tick off the mandatory 'gender class' box while abroad. I gave a discouragement speech, explaining why I came to teach on the day of a family funeral, introducing them to the concept of neoliberalism and precarity, and to repercussions such as permanent stress, health issues, sleep deprivation, and so on. The students were startled, but 12 turned up for the second class that week.

The short-term effect of focusing on the intersection of gender studies, geopolitics and neoliberalism as lived and embodied locally was that the class was marked by an intrinsic motivation to learn about globalisation, geopolitical location, and the students' own shifting position within. The long-term effect of that experience was

¹⁵ The only relative stability is in administrative positions.

that I ventured to make geopolitics, location, and neoliberalism the central frameworks for understanding gender relations as well as the students' own expectations of the class and the whole study abroad experience. Thus, at present, we focus on the politics of (paid) education and neoliberal reforms of research and HE institutions (Cerwonka 2008a; Evans 2004; Gill 2010; Olssen, Peters 2005; Pereira 2016; Readings 1996; Žarkov 2015). We try to define what neoliberalism is and discuss why the students take part in the programme. To do justice to the programme's goal, we focus on why many of the students understand the changes to the political and social realms, such as precarisation of work and life and increased demands placed on the state by the economy, described by Bourdieu (1998), as logical, inevitable, and de facto right and justified.

Localised feminist pedagogy in a neoliberalising geopolitical setting: what did we learn?

Autoethnography as a method strives to arrive at an understanding of general phenomena from their micro-level manifestations. The two teachable moments presented above are approached and analysed here as just such manifestations. In this particular case, they should help clarify how a certain geopolitical location contingent on a specific, Cold War discourse-driven interpretation of the world order combines with the local neoliberalising university setting, and the fully neoliberal setting of the headquarters of the US study abroad programme to substantially affect the possibility of doing feminist pedagogy. At the same time, on a practical level, the two teachable moments present us with a chance to develop new, though hopefully less drastic, feminist teaching practice.

The US study abroad programme benefits from how some features of the neoliberal university have spread in several geopolitically meaningful ways. Firstly, the HQ are in the US and the standards used for making decisions about hiring a new teacher or retaining an old one are based on the standards of the US neoliberal university (Brown 2015). These stress, among other things, the need for programme faculty to regularly update their CV with publications and academic achievements, and faculty are reminded of this periodically at faculty meetings. The influence of these standards is also observed in how the CIEE prides itself on its continuous monitoring of the academic quality of the programmes on offer.¹⁶

Secondly, the programme benefits from the situation at Czech universities described above, as it offers a comparatively high salary, especially for teachers in the humanities and social sciences. Since the programme does not offer any research funding, it de

¹⁶ <https://www.ciee.org/study-abroad/why-ciee/ciee-difference/>, accessed April 25, 2017.

facto often parasites on local public HE. In order for teachers to have the required publishing record and inform their teaching with actual research, they either pay for their research with their own money or need to be employed at a public academic institution so that they are eligible for public funding, while the neoliberalising of local academia has primarily taken the form of foregrounding competitive funding, which is supposed to guarantee scientific quality.

Thirdly, geopolitics come into play when notions derived from the Cold War discourse dividing the world into 'East' and 'West' are used to market the location or as it gets called – the 'region'. Other aspects that are sometimes blamed on the very same division, such as relatively widespread sexism, do not get mentioned when marketing the programme as the 'region' is defined as safe and with a low crime rate. In class this is also manifested in how students associate certain locally observable social phenomena solely with the past, especially when those phenomena are seen as negative.

The described situation raises several issues for feminist pedagogy striving to challenge power relations as described by Feigenbaum (2007), which the two teachable moments show. The power relations to be challenged may come from different sources, so geopolitical divisions of the world and the abuse of transnational inequalities by particular actors merit the attention of feminist pedagogy. The first teachable moment shows the dangers implicit in the marketisation of alleged cultural difference or at least in marketing it as the only aspect of the programme with all other things being the same or even better than in the USA. The sexually assaulted student and I fell for this marketed version of the programme, which resulted first in frustration and then in the possibility to learn what the geopolitically informed neoliberal university actually feels like. Only as a result of this case did it become clear that there was no procedure in place to address this situation, but also that the programme did not want to use the case to prepare one.¹⁷

By 'falling for' I mean the expectations on the part of the student that the assault would be handled the way it would be in the United States. On my part, it meant the belief that the programme would have a procedure in place for such a situation. Instead, we were both reminded of the relativity of the customer/provider relation. While it might seem logical to expect the programme to meet the needs of the 'student-customer', the fear of her becoming living evidence of sexualised violence outweighed her value and turned her into a threat to the programme's standing with the US HQ.¹⁸ This was further exacerbated by the highly sexist perceptions of

¹⁷ It was not until two years later that the programme introduced a procedure and appointed a member of staff to deal with students' psychological issues.

¹⁸ Similar efforts have been observed in the United States, as shown in the documentary *The Hunting*

sexualised violence in the CR. I was reminded of the high precarity of my position when the assistance I gave to the student and the massive investment of my free time were not welcomed by the programme.

As a whole this incident makes it possible to understand the vulnerability and harm that stem from turning academic staff into human capital, as Berg, Huijbens and Larsen note (2016). It is the introduction of a specific customer/provider relation into the university mentioned by Gilbert (2008) that affects the possibilities open to feminist pedagogy, which has a responsibility for fostering equal relations. To some extent, these were actually boosted by the programme leadership, as the fact that I risked my position turned actions such as finding a different psychologist, meeting with the student regularly outside class, and meeting her mother, into political actions.

The second teachable moment highlighted primarily for me and then also for the students the concepts of precarity and of the neoliberal university as a set of practices, such as auditing, and the psychological pressures that result from this (Apple 2005; Gill 2010). At first this teachable moment seemed to be going against the grain of feminist pedagogy. Power hierarchies were not challenged, as Feigenbaum (2007), hooks (1994) and Felman (2001) call for; they were obeyed. They were in fact internalised and embodied, which on my part to some extent at least was due to more than just economic necessity, as some of my personal traits, such as anxiety, fit well with the tenets of neoliberalism, where every individual is responsible for turning herself into the best possible human capital (Berg, Huijbens, Larsen 2016). All this is further exacerbated by the precarious employment situation both in the programme and in the Czech academic sector.

This teachable moment resulted from a highly uncomfortable realisation of one's own embodiment of some of the power hierarchies a feminist teacher is expected to challenge. This realisation came about when I was returning from the funeral and it made it possible for me to present the students with a very concrete example of how neoliberalism has managed to extend its effects from a location that claims a superior geopolitical status, i.e. the United States. In response, the students were called on to reflect on their own situatedness and the ways in which the programme and their participation in it further the neoliberal university and normalise it.

The two situations may thus be seen as teachable moments because they managed to show the workings of geopolitics and the neoliberal university on different levels (personal, embodied, institutional, national political, transnational) demonstrated

Ground (filmed by Kirby Dick in 2015) about the prevalence of sexual assaults on US college campuses. The main difference is that the study abroad programme did not have an explicit and publicly available policy for dealing with such cases at the time of the assault. The programme responded in a very 'Czech' way, as it is typical for Czech universities, including many Charles university faculties, not to have any policy in place.

in a concrete example. I see the setting of the programme as ideally positioned for exploring how the neoliberal university is situated and what use it makes of geopolitical inequalities. Moreover, given the power dynamic of the programme, it also makes it possible to explore the possibilities for a different type of relationality than that of customer/provider. As the two teachable moments both show, even the often frustrating context offers such possibilities. The two situations also show that it is not possible to do feminist pedagogy on one's own – the relations fostered before and after the situations only made the mutual learning possible.

Conclusion: why should we care?

What I have tried to do in this paper is to consider what effect geopolitical location, combined with a neoliberalising local university setting, has on feminist pedagogy in a gender studies undergraduate class taught to US students at a study abroad programme headquartered in the United States. The situation of gender studies and feminism in the neoliberal university has received extensive attention since the late 1990s, as this special issue also shows. The specific situation and issue of feminist pedagogy forms whole panels at feminist conferences and has been lamented worldwide.¹⁹ Some even see the neoliberal university as incompatible with feminist pedagogy as neoliberalism transforms the student–university relationship so dramatically that critical thinking and subversion of the status quo seem the least attractive options for students to choose. However, I have tried to show how the adverse conditions may contribute to the development of the actual 'encounters' called for by Feigenbaum (2007). These result in mutual knowledge development that may in turn lead to enhancing the curriculum and possibly changing it altogether.

Both teachable moments described above and the second one in particular, which led to an even stronger refocusing of the curriculum towards geopolitics and location, substantially improved the class. I can newly address the deep-set expectations the students arrive with partly also because of the marketing of the programme and some of its content. The local neoliberalising academic setting contributed to the massification of the student population, and that was at least partly what made it possible to establish new programmes such as gender studies. However, it did not lead to the creation of stable employment conditions and higher wages for junior teachers, especially for women, who make up the absolute majority of staff teaching in gender studies departments. In this situation, study abroad programmes for US

¹⁹ For instance, at the AtGender 9th European Feminist Research Conference - Sex and Capital in 2015, Panel 4 on Practicing Feminist Teaching focused exclusively on the issues posed by changing structural settings.

students present gender studies (and many other) scholars with an opportunity to teach their discipline for a comparatively very good salary. However, the working conditions of such programmes are ruled by the logic of the US neoliberal university, which is increasingly market-driven and approached as a business.

The course I teach in particular and writing on the neoliberal university in general are enriched by focusing on the specific setting and situatedness, which are made especially visible in the framework of internationalised HE. Gender studies as a discipline has been repeatedly criticised for its universalising approach to the subject of its study and for perpetuating and contributing to thinking about geopolitics in terms of difference and hierarchies (Blagojevic 2005; Cerwonka 2008b, 2009; Hemmings 2005; Pereira 2014). The refocusing of the class in question on geopolitics has allowed me to discuss and foreground the students' own situatedness and complex ethical position, things that otherwise tend to remain hidden as a result of, rather than despite, how the study abroad programme and its teachers are marketed.

Moreover, the experience of the two teachable moments led to my recognition that I need to take care of both myself and my students. When grappling with what neoliberalism means for the students, they come across the reasons for the decreasing quality of the education they and their parents pay so dearly for, which, perhaps paradoxically, is the driving force behind some of their newly discovered political activism. I believe this is a direct consequence of the adverse conditions that can trigger teachable moments in GS classes, for these conditions affect us all, albeit in very different ways. Geopolitical differences should not be taken for granted or considered irrelevant for our understanding of higher education. The contrary seems to be the case, as I hope I have shown here.

I would like to finish on a personal note. Although I am notorious among my colleagues for being the pessimist in the room, with a great capacity for presenting the gloomiest scenario possible for every situation, the two situations invite us to actively oppose and question the almost palpable anxiety, fear, and loathing of neoliberalising reforms in the academic environment. The teachable moments show that the dystopian conclusions of some texts criticising the neoliberal university and the geopolitical inequalities it ab/uses should not be taken as definitive. It was, after all, the students who understood that there are merits to students having a different type of relation to their teacher (and hopefully to one another) that go beyond the customer/provider relation. New teachable moments for feminist and critical pedagogues may thus arise when we focus on the intersection of the neoliberal university and specific geopolitical readings of the world order and actual power inequalities between different 'regions'.

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