

Everyday Feminist Research Praxis

Everyday Feminist Research Praxis:
Doing Gender in the Netherlands

Edited by

Domitilla Olivieri and Koen Leurs

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P U B L I S H I N G

Everyday Feminist Research Praxis:
Doing Gender in the Netherlands,
Edited by Domitilla Olivieri and Koen Leurs

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NOG 
Netherlands Research School of Gender Studies

To Xavier, your laugh makes the world a better place.

To M., L. and my nomadic community, for being a constant reminder
of how much what we do really matters.

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The anthology emerged from discussions, input and support of a wide network of colleagues and friends. Our academic environments have made this trajectory possible: Utrecht University in the Netherlands, London School of Economics and Political Science in the United Kingdom, the international networks of the Netherlands Research School of Gender Studies (NOG) (www.graduategenderstudies.nl), ITN Gender Graduates financed by the Marie Curie EU Sixth Framework Programme, the Utrecht University 2006 High Potential Research Program, the Marie Curie EU FP7 Intra-European Fellowship Programme, the GEMMA Erasmus Mundus Programme, the European Association for Gender Research, Education and Documentation (AtGender), and our Gender, Postcolonial, Anthropology, Media, Communication, and Cultural Studies networks in the Netherlands, Europe and beyond.

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This book originated from a brainstorming session held in Utrecht on a warm afternoon on May 24, 2012 during one of the PhD “Reading/Writing seminar” of the Graduate Gender Programme (www.genderstudies.nl). Almost two years later, in the first weeks of spring 2014 the manuscript was finalized.

In this whole process, the NOG conferences and the Dutch gender studies community were not only our starting point, but also our main academic networks. We are grateful for the support we received being members of the NOG as PhD candidates and afterwards, in our careers as researchers and lecturers. We participated in the three annual National Research Days in 2011, 2012 and 2013, and in hindsight we appreciate the value of having such a safe space to exchange, discuss and develop cutting edge work of junior researchers of Dutch universities in the field of Gender, Ethnicity, Sexuality and Diversity. Koen Leurs presented his paper “Community and voice: Dutch-Moroccan youth using online discussion boards” in 2011, and gave the introductory key-note lecture titled “Digital Passages. Moroccan-Dutch youth performing gender, diaspora and youth culture across digital spaces” in 2012 and acted as a respondent to several papers in 2013. Domitilla Olivieri delivered a paper on “Indexicality, Vision and the Artifice of Reality: for a feminist study of documentary film” in 2011; and in 2013 she partook to several panels as a respondent to younger scholars.

This trajectory of our engagement in the NOG conferences is but an example of the kind of academic sharing of knowledge and experiences that characterizes this community and inspired this volume.

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remain enthusiastic, humble and engaged in the potential of feminist research and praxis.

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INTRODUCTION

KOEN LEURS AND DOMITILLA OLIVIERI

The political is a form of subjectivity that cannot be dissociated from the cultural or the aesthetic, simply because it involves the creation of sustainable alternatives and social horizons of hope.

—Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*

The contributors of this anthology on Everyday Feminist Research Praxis are researchers who are working at or who have crossed the universities part of the Netherlands Research School of Gender Studies (NOG). The NOG is a platform for gender research and teaching started in 1995. As such it offers training options specially designed for postgraduate and PhD students, from the Netherlands and abroad. The NOG is a top European programme and has a longstanding international reputation for its pioneering work in the field of literary, cultural, philosophical, anthropological and epistemological Gender Studies. This anthology, entitled *Everyday Feminist Research Praxis. Doing Gender in The Netherlands*, presents selected, previously unpublished work presented during the 2011, 2012 and 2013 NOG conferences. On the 18th of February 2011 the first conference of the NOG took place at Utrecht University. The call for papers announced: “To celebrate the recognition of the Netherlands Research School of Women’s Studies as the national platform for gender research... we would like to invite you for a National Research Day dedicated to the cutting edge work of junior researchers in the field of Gender, Ethnicity, Sexuality and Diversity.” After that, two more of these events took place respectively, at Radboud University in Nijmegen in 2012, and at Maastricht University in 2013; and one more is planned for 2014 at the University of Amsterdam.

The exchanges of knowledge and expertises that started there, between young and senior scholars, made it possible for many of us participating in these conferences to not only share our research concerns and learn from others, but also to start or strengthen important national and transnational networks and personal and professional collaborations. In fact, although based and strongly rooted in the Netherlands, the NOG opens to the many

international students and researchers traversing Dutch Gender Studies programmes and related departments.

The themes of these conferences address various key interdisciplinary issues, from questions of spatiality and geopolitics, to the issue of generations, from feminist epistemologies to postcolonial approaches and transitional justice. More precisely: in 2011, the conference theme was *Doing Gender in the Netherlands: Discovering the Global in the Local*; on March 9, 2012 the conference theme was *Doing Gender in the Netherlands: Transgenerational Perspectives*; and on April 5, 2013 the NOG day was entitled *Doing Gender in the Netherlands: Taking Turns in Feminist Theory*, and the plenary state of the art lecture was delivered by NOG affiliated Erasmus Mundus scholar Associate Professor Vicki Kirby (University of New South Wales, Australia). On May 26, 2014, the conference is titled *Doing Gender in the Netherlands: Feminism in Transition (Activism, Institutions and Canons)*. Within this variety, the constant key concern of these conferences was how using a lens informed by gender studies, in an interdisciplinary and intersectional framework, can shed light into past and present everyday cultural dynamics and power relations, and how this insight contributes to triggering social change and producing new knowledge and new practices in theory and in everyday lived experiences.

Consequently, reflecting the broad scope of gender studies, the volume brings together both conceptual and empirical feminist research, grounded in film studies, feminist theory, media studies, cultural studies, digital media studies, literary studies, anthropology and sociology. The richness and variety of research done in the interdisciplinary field of Gender Studies and Feminist Theory in the last years in, from and across the Netherlands can hardly be summarised within one single direction or heading. Nonetheless, one of the main common threads that can be identified is certainly the concern with uncovering and discerning how gender plays a crucial role in the everyday relations of power, in the everyday experiences of men and women, in the everyday interconnections between gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class and other axes of difference. Alongside and together with this main aim is a methodological feminist perspective interested and engaged in the relation between theory and practice, ethnography and philosophy, visual culture and literature, between subjectivities and culture, society and identity, geopolitical contexts, representation and memory: a focus on doing, doing research and doing with research; the praxis and politics of affecting change.

It shall be noted that, in this context, feminist/gender research is considered as a field of enquiry that explores the socio-cultural implications

of the processes of knowledge production for the constructions of subjects and subjectivities, and that proposes political spaces of resistance to hegemonic discourses and promotes change (Braidotti 2011; Buikema et al. 2011; Lykke 2010). These are then approaches and matters that, both in academic and theoretical terms, as well as in practices and actions, focus on people as gendered, racialised and classed subjects. Charting the relations between power, discourse and subjectivity, reveals political dimensions of individuals and emergent collectivities. Finally then, the politics of feminist/gender research here considered are “a matter of bringing about changes in the very structures of subjectivity” and in “our collective modes of relation to the environment...to our cultural norms and values [and] to our bodies” (Braidotti 2011, 74-75).

Accordingly, the central emphasis of this book is twofold: first, the everyday is approached as a concretely grounded site of cultural and socio-political power struggles. Expanding prior feminist critiques that exposed the subordination of women in everyday private spheres of domesticity, housework and sexuality, the anthology moves beyond the private/public dichotomy by showcasing the urgency of feminist research unraveling various micro-politics at work in quotidian life across time and space. Everyday experiences are acknowledged as situated sources of knowledge that emerge in relation to patriarchy and other intersecting differences and geo-historical privileges. Questions include: where and how to look for micro-politics in the everyday? What gendered, ethnic and/or racial space-time relations sediment in the everyday? How to unpack historical/transnational/national/diasporic quotidian power constellations? What affective consciousnesses shape everyday experiences?

Second, all the contributors to this volume make explicit connections between the theories they explore and their everyday feminist research practices. The authors provide a reflexive account of their research, and put into words what drives them. The relation between theory and practice has been one of the ongoing and crucial concerns of feminist research for the last decades. The aim of this volume is not to reinforce the two domains as oppositional, but rather to explore their interconnections and entanglements. The underlying questions then are: how does the practice of doing research affect the theoretical frameworks therein chosen? What is the relation between their everyday, gendered, geopolitically situated experiences and the knowledge explored and produced by the researchers in this volume? Therefore, while addressing specific topics at the core of contemporary feminist debates in original and previously un-published articles, the authors pay attention to these relations and present a self-reflexive approach to the processes of research praxis.

Everyday life beyond domesticity

Intuitively, the ordinariness of the everyday is self-evident. However, the prosaic, quotidian, banal and mundane are elusive. Often times, the everyday is downplayed as uneventful, superfluous and fleeting. However, exposing taken-for-grantedness reveals that the everyday, although of fleeting character, has long-lasting and serious repercussions. Therefore, we vow in this anthology to take the everyday seriously as a valuable point of departure. Recently, scholars have begun charting everyday practices, across different fields including philosophy, history, geography, literary, visual, cultural and media studies (e.g. Highmore 2002; Rigg 2007; Bakardjieva 2005; Moran 2005; Silverstone 2005). We are therefore tempted to speak of a turn across the humanities and social sciences towards everyday life as an entry point to explore discipline-specific focus points. However, from various directions also comes the call for approaching quotidian life in an intersectional manner and especially from a gender studies angle: the everyday concerns “demand more attention from scholars working on race, class, gender and sexuality” (Centre for Modern Studies 2013).

The foundations to come to grips with the everyday can be located in philosophy and cultural studies. According to G.W.F. Hegel “the familiar is not necessarily the known”; for Henri Lefebvre, everyday life is “in a sense residual, defined by ‘what is left over’ after all distinct, superior, specialized, structured activities have been singled out by analysis,” and he added: “Everyday life is profoundly related to *all* activities, and encompasses them with all their difference and conflicts, it is their meeting place, their bond, their common ground” (1991, 97).

In feminist research, prior work on everyday life predominantly focused on the gendered domain of the household and the confines of domesticity. Domesticity is dominantly considered as “a source of critique of the contemporary social world”: as a “housewife” one was “sentenced to everyday life” (Johnson & Lloyd 2005, 160). However, attention for the situation of housewives established one of the fundamentals for the emergence of second wave feminism: “in order to achieve a proper subjecthood, we are suggesting then that *the figure of the housewife made the feminist subject possible*. She made it possible, in the first instance to think about all women as having something in common” (ibid. 152) Indeed, Betty Friedan broke the “happy housewife myth” by critiquing the idea of fulfilment being tied to the household. As such the second wave feminist project of consciousness raising to make women aware of sexist ideologies grew from acknowledging everyday life as an important site of

struggle. However, these early projects and studies predominantly only made visible the experiences of a certain kind of woman: middle class, white and heterosexual. In the meantime, black feminists, among others, were addressing and fighting against other forms of oppression and other expressions of hegemonic power. Subsequently, the variously intersecting axes of difference among various groupings of people have received increasing scrutiny, especially addressing how people differently negotiate diverse and multiple times and spaces, both face-to-face as well as in mediated settings.

We expand the focus on the gendered everyday beyond the confines of domesticity, which was the focus of many earlier studies but which has remained somewhat in the shadows in more recent feminist enquiries. With this anthology then, we aim at bringing the everyday into the field of feminist scrutiny as a critical lens and a conceptual tool that can shed light onto daily power dynamics. Pointing the attention to the everyday can function as a critical strategy to ‘making strange’ everyday common thinking, unsettling taken for grantedness, questioning quotidian habits otherwise made to seem natural by hegemonic discourse, and thus, eventually, opening towards a situated politics of difference. ‘Making strange,’ estrangement, is here understood as the act of defamiliarising the perception and understanding of the everyday, the habitual. In a rethinking of Viktor Shklovsky’s concept of ‘ostranenie’—beyond the level of formal and stylistic change in the domain of the arts, along the lines explored, for example by Annie van den Oever (2010)—this defamiliarization of the quotidian, has a potential for questioning the known and the ‘taken for granted,’ for unsettling hegemonic discourse, and for triggering change in the way of thinking, in the imaginary, and finally in the social reality. Thus, following Jondi Keane, researching and writing about everyday “relationships is a way of generating meaningful consequences” (2013, 42-43).

It is in this sense that “[e]veryday life might therefore seem to constitute a field of doubt,” Ben Highmore notes, “a field of experimentation, of possibility” (2002, 4). What we are addressing here is a move from the everyday only understood as prosaic and banal, to an attention to the potential and the performative character of intervening in norms sedimented in the everyday. However, the possibility of experimentation in the everyday should not be accepted as a blanket term for a micro-politics of resistance and agency, as power asymmetries may just as well be reinforced in everyday practices. For this reason, the other key focus, that of *praxis*, has to be brought into this conversation.

Praxis: the everyday as problematic

The relation between theory and praxis has been a central concern of feminist research since its outset (for a genealogy of this relation see, for example, Hesse-Biber 2012). Following from the knowledge, reclaimed by feminist movements and activists over the last fifty years, that the personal and the political are deeply intertwined, many scholars have elaborated on how “[f]eminist epistemology and methodology directly affect feminist praxis” and vice versa (ibid., 15). This praxis refers not only to the various ways in which feminist research is conducted, but it always also refers to how these processes of knowledge production engage questions of difference, power, visibility, reflexivity, authority, and the potential for social change.

In this anthology, feminist research praxis is understood as a reflective, critical dissociation from naturalized routines of daily life, which in turn enables the scrutiny of, for example, the arbitrariness of entrenched views and the revealing of contradictory and layered everyday trajectories; and thus opens new possibilities for new forms of recognition, representation and redistribution of power (Fraser 2003). In working on the nexus between praxis and the everyday, we are inspired by the seminal 1987 work of Dorothy E. Smith to approach the “everyday world as problematic”:

We constitute the everyday world as our problematic. We do so by interesting ourselves in its opacity for we cannot understand how it is organized or comes about by remaining within it. The concept of problematic transfers this opacity to the level of discourse. It directs attention to a possible set of questions that have yet to be posed or of puzzles that are not yet formulated as such but are ‘latent’ in the actualities of our experienced worlds (1987, 110).

Problematizing the everyday demands researchers to pursue desires to critically expose what has become engrained and naturalized. Taken for grantedness and common sense should be treated with suspicion. Paul Ricoeur used the term “hermeneutics of suspicion” to unravel a red thread woven through the works of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Beyond their notable differences, Ricoeur argued that these thinkers together shaped a new “school of suspicion.” That is to say, they shared a commitment to unmasking “the lies and illusions of consciousness,” by doing so they paved the way for critiques of the obvious, the self-evident and the everyday, charting hidden truths by drawing out mechanisms operating beneath the surfaces (Ricoeur 1970,

356, see Felski 2012).

This endeavour of denaturalising self-evident assumptions, which far from being natural or neutral are instead informed by gendered power relations and hegemonic discourse, is accompanied by the commitment of feminist scholars to making visible the invisible yet very material and quotidian dimensions of cultural, geo-political and social power inequalities. Religion scholar Corinna Guerrero summarizes the workings of this interpretative focus in the field of feminist research praxis:

The underlying principle that links a feminist critique to every other critical lens since the rise of feminist discourse is the “hermeneutic of suspicion.” Essentially, a hermeneutic of suspicion identifies the disconnect between rhetoric and a lived reality. The lived lives of women are different than the pontifications espoused directly and indirectly by the traditionally patriarchal social, political, cultural, religious, and educational structures in which individuals participate (2012, np).

Therefore we would like to argue for a feminist research praxis that is fuelled by a “hermeneutic of suspicion.” When considering praxis as the suspicious unravelling of everyday life as problematic, both as an ‘action’ and as a ‘custom,’ we can pay attention to the complexities of what research praxis means. Praxis as action refers to the application or use of a certain knowledge or skills; in this sense we then address practice as distinguished from, but not oppositional to, theory. Importantly, as already mentioned, this anthology looks at the interconnections between theory and practice, and the feminist potentials therein. Praxis as convention, habit, or custom instead connects it again with the everyday as well as with the process of self-reflection upon one’s research, goals, motivations and methodologies.

In this volume, by always implicitly or explicitly addressing these two understandings and modes of praxis as entangled, we are focusing on what feminist research does or can do, its effects on the social world—research as action—; as well as on the necessity of such approach to address and make visible what often remains unsaid, unpredictable and invisible: the mundane, the taken for granted, the habitual. Making visible the invisible also means revealing contradictory and layered trajectories and paying attention to the positionality of the researcher, his/her situatedness (see also Adrienne Rich’s politics of location in Rich 1986). Only through these situated and partial knowledges (Haraway 1988) it becomes possible to unearth complexities in grand narratives while still leaving room for ambiguity, dialogues and coalitions. The chapters demonstrate how differently situated “politics of location” of feminist researchers fuels