

Feminist activism between worlds: Of mermaids, narratable selves, and narrative research as a counter-rationality to neoliberalism.

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Paper

Text

My paper engages with the notion of activism in/through neoliberal times as an embodied struggle between alternative rationalities. I argue for narrative research as one moment of this struggle where the focus is on responding to rather than simply representing stories of critical, informal pedagogical practices. My presentation is based on my own research with three women, self-identified as feminist activists through women's community education, who I invited to 'Tell me a story of voice that has some significance to you as a feminist community activist'.

The presentation is framed through the Irish language poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's poetic account of a mermaid in exile on dry land who must learn to forget about water. On the dry land of neoliberalism, women's community education is appropriated for the production of neoliberal subjects, and instrumentalist policy rationalities set the terms of politics. But the inquiry simultaneously brings forward alternative, delegitimised critical pedagogical rationalities of open and fluid narrative processes as the conditions of possibility for critique.

I theorise these two worlds through a double-analytic based on Hannah Arendt's distinction between the discursive registers of 'what' and 'who'. This provides for a dynamic synthesis of Michel Foucault's analysis of neoliberal governmentality (What) and Adriana Cavarero's feminist philosophy of the 'narratable self' (Who). This double-analytic supports an open-ended dialogical research process which troubles foundational/terrestrial rationalities of research. It finds expression in a heteroglossic text which interrogates and subverts policy rationalities through oral narratives. Through this 'mermaid activism', I argue that the narratable self opens up eruptive counter-rationalities to neoliberalism, and possibilities for radical feminist futures.

Question: In neoliberal times, is narrative research a source of activism in its own right?

Key words: narratable self, neoliberal governmentality, struggle, resistance, dialogue.

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