

How to queerly disrupt the academy?

Book Review for Special Issue 'Intersectionality and precarious subjectivities: within and beyond labour and organisational perspectives'

Taylor, Yvette, Brim, Matt and Mahn, Churnjeet (eds) (2023) *Queer precarities in and out of higher education: Challenging institutional structures*. London; New York; Oxford; New Delhi; Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic.

In *Queer Precarities In and Out of Higher Education*, Yvette Taylor, Matt Brim and Churnjeet Mahn propose that precarity is always already attached to queer. While the term “precarities” has a certain fluidity, generally referring to states “of flux, insecurity and uncertainty” (p. 1), it here primarily indicates our current historical moment of economic instabilities, health pandemics, and global insecurities. In this context, queer people are subject to – and subject of – changing laws, policies and practices, the current era being beset by the rise of populism and a subsequent “queerphobic backlash” (p. 1). As a result, queer spaces are precarious, queer curriculums are precarious, queer rights are precarious. Furthermore, “queer practices” (p. 3), in the broader sense of destabilising actions that disrupt normatives and that thereby critique privilege within hegemonic structures and institutions, are similarly subject to precarity.

This edited volume focuses on the dynamics of such “queer precarities” encasing higher education. The scope is deliberately expansively defined, given this broad institution’s inextricable connection to the “betterment” (p. 2), of both the self and society, as well as the reproduction of social exclusion and stratification. Navigating this ambiguous political position, the book adopts a framing of “queer pragmatism” understood in terms of “getting by” (p. 4) – a set of practices that address everyday survival needs in the above context of precarity while simultaneously sowing “the seeds of what more equitable futures might look like” (p. 4). This is contrasted with “getting on”, understood as individualized approaches to survival, security, and advantage. The book thus engages both with what it means to *be* queer, in terms of the “everyday struggles” (p. 3) of precarity, and *to* queer, as a political practice with potential to address such precarity’s structural roots. Whilst in recent years the term “queer” has

come to serve as a ‘catch-all’ identity tag that is more fluid yet more concise than the various LGBTQIA+ acronyms, the present volume emphasizes the perspective that “queerness can never define an identity, it can only disturb one” (Edelman 2004, p. 17). It thus presents lived experiences beyond heteronormativity as a context for the exploration of the political practice of *queering*, with the aim always being to disturb and dismantle structures that enforce normativity.

Concretely, the book comprises ten chapters, structured into three parts, supplemented by an epilogue, prologue, and introduction by the editors. Part 1 addresses the intersections of class, race and queer identities that produce intricate structures of privilege and power and explores practices of solidarity across these intersections through queer care and mutual aid. Part 2 takes aim at the dominant approach to dealing with such identity hierarchies in higher education – equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives – examining the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion they engender. Part 3 expands our view of higher education beyond the university as such, exploring queer community pedagogies as practiced across, for instance, community projects, secondary schools, and church congregations. This expansive view of higher education is reflected in the diversity of chapter authors, including not only academics across various domains, but also activists, practitioners, and students. Both the content and choice of authors deliberately decentres privileged queer identities – white, middle-class, cisgender, etc. – demonstrating a wide range of ways to live a queer life. Furthermore, notions of communities and the sharing of stories, experiences and practices are recurring themes throughout the book. Attention to the diversity of needs and experiences across the LGBTQIA+ community is apparent in, for instance, descriptions of communities operating across intergenerational divides and acknowledgement of older queer people’s particular vulnerability to isolation and potentially fraught history with terms like “queer”.

The book itself can be understood as engaging in the “queer practice” of challenging academic norms through chapters that deliberately play with structure and form, such as the prologue’s exploration of the author’s experiences through a meandering narrative, and the roundtable discussion in chapter two concerning the *Davidson Community Fund* – a mutual aid project run by queer students in a liberal arts college in

North Carolina. The latter chapter, in particular, offers an informative record of an astonishing practice of perseverance, ingenuity, and care, which I found very moving. The edited conversation both suits and enhances the topic, working to illustrate how queer practices *can* operate, and what this means for those involved. Here, I found the authoritarian academic voice to be decentred.

The book's central argument regarding queer pragmatism clearly contributes to a wider body of scholarship that questions *its own* role in the production of academic and elitist structures of knowledge and power. For example, Kjærgaard et al. (2024) describe "subtle activism" in academia as a means of "quietly unsettling norms rather than overtly opposing or rejecting them" (p. 412) through practices that, while alternative, nevertheless "deliberately comply with the system" (Kjærgaard et al., 2023, p. 419). Such work highlights a core theme (and complexity) within the book – how far *should* or *can* someone resist? Is there perhaps a space that is somewhere *between* overt conformity and extreme disruption? A similar vein of subtlety is found in de Souza and Parker's (2022) "practices of freedom", where there is a "bending" of rules, norms, and actions, through "thinking with trans" – the trans positive framing being imperative for the most oppressed people under the queer umbrella. This idea would sit comfortably within queer practices, and possibly bend them towards a more radical gait.

A related challenge concerns the framing of the queer practices of collective action and solidarity. As the editors state, there is a kinship in being part of a marginalised community and navigating oppression, and queer people have often had to configure their own communities and families. Many chapters present queer kinship and collectivism as means of resistance against the instrumentalist and individualist neoliberal academy, resonating with Kjærgaard et al.'s (2024) argument for collective scholarship. Yet the optimal academic subject of the neoliberal academy is arguably changing, with recent managerial movements intentionally seeking to engineer networks of scholars and interdisciplinary research. As such, queer kinship and collectivism may rather find itself co-opted to serve this new ideal of academic productivity. If such "kinship" were to become an instrumental strategy within the academy's reward structures, its status as a means of queer resistance may be called into question (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999). On the other hand, given the anti-

individualism and equity affordances of, for instance, shared scholarship practices, their unlikely widespread adoption could indeed be understood as an effective queering of the academy.

The chapters I found most intriguing were the ones that stepped outside the organisation of the academy. This includes chapter two discussed above, chapters eight and nine addressing intergenerational queer communities, and chapter seven recounting the story of educators in a New York High School that is “self-consciously progressive” (p. 117). These chapters have in common that, to my knowledge, they exist as separate spaces beyond academia – they exist without a researcher project, funding, or scholarships. In that way, they are probably the least “straightened” *by, and to, the academy* (Ahmed 2006). The academic-led chapters I found more challenging – although that may be because of the perspective I bring to the reading. For me, academic spaces can be infuriating in their lack of internal contestation of universities’ systems of hierarchy and domination, where status begets status. Indeed, academics who hold precarious employment positions, or are without high status, can less easily afford to interrupt these institutional rules. This is acknowledged in the book, and steps are made to work around this, for example through the diversity of contributors included – however, it is not a position that is easy to acquiesce. These contradictions are perhaps useful examples of what queer pragmatism means in practice.

Queer pragmatism is perhaps similarly reflected in the book’s limited geographical scope, exclusively focusing on the US and UK. This focus provides a clear framing, and the editors explicitly acknowledge and work to deconstruct the privileges inherent to these Global North contexts. Yet, while they rightly highlight the relevance of scholarship regarding precarity to the Global South, it would be interesting to take this further: To what extent do queer precarities, as articulated here, translate to broader contexts? How can meaningful solidarity work across these even larger structural and geographical divides?

Regardless, this book is a thought-provoking record of some ways in which institutional structures can and have been challenged. It is also an acknowledgement of the hard work that many have contributed towards this pursuit, without obvious reward. Moreover, the choice not to contain itself to the boundaries of higher education is

inspired – it literally breaches the institutional and organisational walls. This is perhaps my foremost takeaway and leaves me with the challenge to work in manners and spaces that subtly disturb.

## References

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