



Qualitative Sociology Review

Volume VII, Issue 2 – August 2011

<https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.07.2.08>

Iza Desperak

University of Lodz, Poland

Book Review:

Erotic mentoring: Women's transformations in the university by Janice Hocker Rushing. Walnut Creek, Calif.: Left Coast Press, 2005

Erotic mentoring, by late Janice Hocker Rushing, explores gender dimensions of academic institutions with the use of qualitative research of personal stories of life in academia. It focuses on some patterns of female university careers, especially the role of male mentors, and the results of those relations on women themselves. The book might be read as a multibiography of numerous female academics representing a few generations of women finding their space in academia, thanks to the narrative style used by the writer and the universal character of the subject.

One of the objectives of this book was to reveal hidden aspects of women's experience in the academia, to point out how everything being 'feminine' intrudes university career pathways, how women have to bury it deeply – and how necessary it is to uncover that. The starting point for reflection on the subject was the author's own mid-life crisis, experienced after reaching the top of her career. Overcoming that crisis was possible only thanks to the analysis of its deep roots, internal conflicts faced by female academics, being buried deeply in the private sphere of the 'feminine.' As the conflict is experienced by the majority of academics, the book should also help them in understanding their own dilemmas, defining and solving problems and avoiding some of them in the future. Before she started her research, Rushing had discussed with other women their everyday health problems, but did not associate them with those dilemmas, now she offers to discuss those internal conflicts before psychosomatic diseases signal the problem.

The book is about women, deliberately, as the 'feminine' aspect is still absent from the collective vision of academe. This book aims to encourage the inclusion of the feminine aspect into its vision of academe not only for women to live fully as individuals in and of themselves, but also for men, who similarly are expected to suppress their feminine sides. It is also a form of compensation for Rushing's previous cooperation in the process of exclusion and undervaluation of 'feminine' in favor of 'masculine.'

The text ostentatiously sets scientific writing standards aside. Its author declares her knowledge of the rules, and finally conforms to them, but indicates her

reservation. Being a professor in communication, specializing in gender studies and myths, she doesn't aspire to the specialization in research methods, but lets her husband lecture on that subject. The research is considered by the author as only filling requirements of quasi-social scientific study. However, her choice of new ethnography as a methodological paradigm is deliberate.

Rushing situates her method as new ethnography, autoethnography or personal narrative. She tries to fulfill Harold Lloyd Goodall's definition of new ethnography, as "creative narratives shaped out of a writer's personal experiences within a culture and addressed to academic and public audience" (2000:9). Such an attempt needs the use of standards of creative writing, as well as standards of accurately representing the reality. Rushing purposely avoids dryness of academic prose replacing it with a literary style that makes reading passionate adventure; where the general is contrasted to the personal and research results are juxtaposed with particles of everyday experience of the author: her conversations with her husband and recollections from the past.

Rushing calls her research 'archaeological,' an attempt "to dig up shards of what lies beneath the surface, piece them together into whole figurines, and make inferences about a culture that still remains mostly in the dark" (p. 8). The research includes her own experiences, observations made during years spent at university, or even earlier, and other women's stories; gathered through intensive interviews conducted during several years with women from a wide variety of fields, ages, geographical regions, countries and ethnicities ranging from students to professors and from deans to a university president. The research results include not only 'real' tales, but also some stories adopted from movies, literature, autobiographies, biographies, music, and dreams. Rushing shaped some separate interviews with different interlocutors into the voices of 'composite characters,' condensing several stories into one.

What made the research results universal is the interpretation of women's individual and collective dilemmas in academia by their interpretation through ancient myths. These are the myths that help to illuminate how women live and work within the academy and, in particular, how they relate to men and to academia as a masculine institution.

The book is divided into three parts, the first and second concerning those relations, while the third part shows how women attempt to build a self that is not dependent upon men. The three parts represent three different sets of stories that may be articulated in the language of myths.

The first part tells the tale of the 'Man-Made Maiden,' being an account of women's stories of relationships to actual men. Most of these relations are sexual, either in fact or in tone. The man-made maidens are essentially roles that women play in a man's search for his role. They have both payoffs and pitfalls for the academic woman, but they do not result from her own search for self. Unless she progresses beyond them, she tends to remain dependent upon the man – or upon the patriarchal structure of the university. The heroine follows the pattern of abandoning the role of daughter, becoming muse, mistress and beloved brainchild, as Athena born from Zeus' brain, following the fate of Galatea and Persephone. The muse, or mistress, is in opposition to the wife, her role means avoiding the mother in herself and sacrificing her femininity and ambitions for the male mentor, playing the role of almighty father and Pygmalion. The sexual aspect of that relation does not, however, mean a woman's sexual satisfaction, as sex in such relation is treated as purgative, and female hunger has to be controlled.

The second part of the book focuses on 'fatal attractions.' This term, quoting the title of a once popular movie, describes a close relationship between resisting and perfecting the male ideal within the academy. Such a pattern includes trying to gain independence and success by asserting women's own sexual dominance by hiding their femininity from view or by becoming toughened warriors who fight for their rights. The figures of *fatal attractions* are personified into a Siren, Veiled Woman and Amazonian. Each of these figures asserts her own power, but still may capitulate unknowingly to men's expectations; or may even become an enticing target for their domination. The *Siren* openly uses her sexual powers to seduce, the *Veiled Woman* covertly employs her hidden femininity to charm, and the *Amazonian* separates from men and becomes a warrior. She breaks away from the plots that men write for her, but often ends up acting just as strictly according to their script. These figures are named *fatal attractions* because they offer the woman a path to power that may, in the end, prove to be a mirage. Each of them has their own downsides. The *Siren's* power is limited only to her sexuality and can evoke domination from men, the *Veiled Woman* ends up either as 'respectable' or 'whore-like', and the *Amazonian* often becomes a target for men who boost their heroism by conquering or bedding her.

Where does one look for a model which wouldn't lead to failure? The process of gaining stabilization is described in the third part of the book, titled *One-in-Herself*, after the term coined by Esther M. Harding. Rushing states that women should search for themselves in the myth of the ancient goddess *Virgin*, remembering that the ancient meaning of this adjective was completely different and meant a woman who was autonomous, whole and free. Only following her example leads to real fulfillment of contemporary female academics. For Rushing, the traces of old goddesses may be found in another Greek myth, the myth of Eros and Psyche. This myth may be used to symbolize the model of how a woman can become one-in-herself without final separation from men, making self-fulfillment possible without resignation from one's ambitions or love. This complex process is illustrated by three stages of Psyche's marriage, her labors and, finally, a divine child. This mythological metaphor shows women how to develop their own self by lighting a lamp in the rooms that have been closed to them; so that they may see their own dark marriages to men and to the numerous possibilities of a woman building self-in-relationship that does not deny 'feminine' ways of being and that makes possible the birth of their most creative gifts. Only following the pattern symbolized by Psyche's myth, may an academic woman find a 'voice of her own,' which is necessary after obtaining a 'room of her own,' demanded by Virginia Wolf a century ago.

References

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Citation

Desperak, Iza. 2011. "Book Review: Erotic mentoring: Women's transformations in the university by Janice Hocker Rushing, Walnut Creek, Calif.: Left Coast Press, 2005" *Qualitative Sociology Review*, Vol. VII issue 2. Retrieved Month, Year (http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php).