

## Call for Participation

PhD Workshop with Helen Verran (Charles Darwin University, Australia)

Relational empiricism–relational vulnerabilities?

De-/postcolonial methodologies within Humanities and Social Sciences

### Venue:

Global South Studies Center (GSSC)

Classen-Kappelman-Str. 24

50931 Köln

3rd floor, Seminar Room 3.03

### Date and Time:

Wednesday, November 28, 2018

9am to 1pm

### Abstract:

With this call, we want to invite all interested PhD students within Humanities and Social Sciences to take Helen Verran's work as a starting point to discuss following questions and concepts:

### Call:

Are we currently facing a time of increasing global inequalities? If so, what are these global inequalities? Are we facing a time of increasing economic, social, political and scientific inequalities? Moreover, how do we deal with epistemic inequalities? How are these inequalities, which can be differentiated into inequalities along the intersections of race, gender, class, sex, etc., related to doing research within Humanities and Social Sciences? On our quest for answers to these questions, our scientific curiosity led us through the rich literature of postcolonial and feminist STS and thereby to the works and writings of Helen Verran.

Helen Verran holds a professorship at Charles Darwin University in Australia. Before taking up her Professorship, she taught and researched in History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Melbourne. In the 1980s Helen Verran worked as a math teacher in Nigeria which culminated in the publication of the book *Science and an African Logic* (2001). Working with math

teachers in Nigerian schools made her think and write about the different number systems which Nigerian math teachers enact in order to mediate mathematical knowledge to their students. Central to Helen Verran's reflections and thinking are the notions of *difference*, *sameness*, and *incommensurability* as concepts. In her work difference is conceptualized as a mode of experience which is collectively performed and embedded in different asymmetrical power relations. Therefore, *difference* can be enacted, claimed, perpetuated or overcome but is never given a priori. Verran's notion of *difference* goes together with her notion of *sameness*. Here *sameness* is not reducible to shared experience but rather to the endeavor of simultaneously making separations (*difference*) and connecting (*sameness*) with the purpose of eschewing "universalizing claims, and instead look for local, particular and contingent symmetry" (Verran 2001: 731). Seeing how practices and strategies can "really be the same while being profoundly different, continues the torque of the postcolonial moment which began in acceptance of incommensurable difference" (Verran 2002: 750). Verran's elaborations on *difference*, *sameness*, and *incommensurability* can also be read as an attempt of overcoming epistemic and political inequalities and violence. Consequently, Helen Verran calls for an epistemic reconciliation. A reconciliation that "must allow metaphysical difference to be respected, while shared embodied and embedded concerns [can act as] grounds for respectfully going on together" (Verran 2002: 754).

Trying to achieve political and epistemological reconciliation, which takes into account the epistemic violence (Spivak 2008) and epistemic inequalities of modernity/coloniality (Mignolo 2002), is not unique to Helen Verran's concept of *relational empiricism*. Moreover, it is a shared effort of postcolonial and feminist Science and Technology Studies (STS). Postcolonial and feminist STS scholars not just point out how *western science* contributed to the project of colonialism but also the profound interweaving of science, technology, society, and politics. Even though this seems to be a universal claim of feminist and postcolonial STS, scholars like Helen Verran have argued that it is necessary to situate research and epistemological reconciliation within the relationalities of the past-present-future. Situating knowledge production, be it in natural sciences or Humanities and Social Sciences, within the relationalities of the past-present-future nexus, is not merely an essential practice of trying to achieve epistemological reconciliation but also a crucial strategy to avoid the all too powerful formulation of essentialism and universalism.

Nevertheless, even though Helen Verran and other postcolonial and feminist STS scholars seem to have a clear political programmatic, a set of questions remains. How are relational vulnerabilities linked to a call for epistemic reconciliation? How are vulnerabilities, which are

situated in the relationalities of the past-present-future, and the claim of difference linked? Are the concepts of inequality and difference interconnected? If so, how? How do vulnerabilities come into being during the practices of relational empiricism? Why should researches within Humanities and Social Sciences care for relational vulnerabilities while conducting empirical research and writing? Moreover, how can caring for relational vulnerabilities and research relationships be done in neoliberal academia?

We are glad to announce that all these questions can directly be posed to Helen Verran during this workshop. Of course, all participants are free to bring questions with them. Since we are planning on doing a text-based discussion on the above-posed questions, please find attached the reading list for the workshop. This reading list contains all mandatory readings for the discussion during the workshop. Since this workshop is taking place on rather short notice, we will also provide short excerpts of the mandatory articles during the workshop. Furthermore, there will be a short input coming from Helen Verran.

The workshop is open to all interested PhD and graduate students (max. 20 participants). However, we ask you to announce your participation via email at:

[szeinedd@uni-koeln.de](mailto:szeinedd@uni-koeln.de)

[julian.schmischke@uni-koeln.de](mailto:julian.schmischke@uni-koeln.de)

We are further inviting you to participate in preparatory reading sessions. During the next weeks, we will meet once per week to discuss Helen Verran's contributions and subsequent discussions of her work. For more information, please contact us via email.

## **Mandatory reading:**

- Kenney, Martha (2015): Counting, accounting, and accountability: Helen Verran's relational empiricism. In: *Social Studies of Science*, 45(5), 749-771.
- Raasch, Josefine & Sørensen, Estrid (2014): Helen Verran: Pionierin der postkolonialen Science & Technology Studies. In: D. Lengensdorf & M. Wieser (Eds.), *Schlüsselwerke der Science & Technology Studies*, Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 257-267.
- Schramm, Katharina (2017): Einführung: Postkoloniale STS. In: S. Bauer, T. Heinemann, & T. Lemke (Eds.), *Science and Technology Studies: Klassische Positionen und aktuelle Perspektiven*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 471-494.
- Verran, Helen (2001): Part One: Introduction. In: *Science and an African Logic*, Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1-47.
- Verran, Helen (2002): A postcolonial moment in science studies: Alternative firing regimes of environmental scientists and aboriginal landowners. In: *Social Studies of Science*, 32(5-6), 729-762.
- Verran, Helen (2009): On assemblage. Indigenous knowledge and digital media (2003-2006), and HMS Investigator (1800-1805). In: *Journal of Cultural Economy*, Vol. 2, Nos 1-2, March/July 2009.