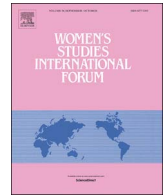




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Book Review

Power, knowledge and feminist scholarship: An ethnography of academia, M. do Mar Pereira. Routledge, London (2017). (228 pp., ISBN978113)

This analysis of women's, gender, and feminist studies' (WGFS) epistemic status makes a significant contribution to addressing the 'striking dearth of research on academic labour' (Gill, 2014: p. 12). For scholars and students working in WGFS, the book offers the welcome yet challenging experience of seeing a familiar 'object' analysed in new, at times revelatory, ways. The concern of science and technology studies (STS) with how truths are established and contested in practice has rarely included humanities and social science, and Pereira takes up this task with finely tuned attention to the conditions and practice of feminist knowledge in academic institutions.

The book is the result of 10 years of research, including ethnographic fieldwork at WGFS and non-WGFS departments and academic events (in Portugal, the UK, the US, and Scandinavia) and qualitative interviews with WGFS scholars working in Portugal across a range of institutions and career stages, over a period of dramatic changes in academia. Initial interviews took place in 2008/09 and participants were re-interviewed in 2015/16. This longitudinal scope and combination of methods allows the central concern – the epistemic status of WGFS scholarship – to be analysed in relation to the power relations of everyday 'corridor talk', official discourse, WGFS institutionalisation, regimes of performativity in neoliberal universities, the consequential changing 'mood of academia' (p. 197), and global hierarchies of epistemic authority.

The introduction does not impose a definition of WGFS, and emphasises the contested and shifting meaning of the field in practice. Likewise Chapter 1 shows how impossible it is to 'tell a linear story' (p. 29) about WGFS institutionalisation and unpicks how the value and validity of feminist knowledge are negotiated in external struggles for institutional recognition and resources, as well as in internal contestations within WGFS (p. 36). Chapter 2 proposes a feminist theory of epistemic status, drawing on feminist epistemologies, Black and post-colonial thought, STS, and Foucault. Pereira conceptualises and the boundaries of 'proper knowledge' as 'structurally ossified (in gendered, racialised, sexualized ways), institutionally shaped, and open to contingent negotiation' (p. 59). The complex theoretical content benefits from careful and sustained clarity of expression, and Pereira's elaboration of metaphors of epistemic 'climates' and 'maps' offers tangible concepts for non-specialists and enables the cumulative insights into the boundary-work negotiations of 'proper knowledge' that follow.

Chapter 3's analysis of the 2008/09 interviews shows how increased requirements for publishing productivity, and attracting research funding and fee-paying students, enabled a *partial* recognition of WGFS as 'proper knowledge' that was *conditional* (often on individual scholars) meeting these performative and income-generating demands (p. 79). Pereira demonstrates how WGFS' precarious epistemic status is therefore *contingent* on a great deal of hard work, accompanied by a parallel dismissal of WGFS knowledge in the 'jokes' and 'teasing' of informal 'corridor talk', and highlights the paradox of how opportunities for epistemic status come 'at the expense of compliance with mechanisms that clash with key principles of WGFS' (p. 89). Focus on such paradox continues as Chapter 4 shows how the entwined aims of WGFS 'to generate more and/or better knowledge but also... to question and transform dominant standards... of academic knowledge production' (p. 95) are *split* when mainstream academic engagement with WGFS simultaneously recognises analytical insights and dismissively rejects WGFS as too 'political' and 'ideological' to count as 'proper knowledge'.

How WGFS scholars engage with such dismissive recognition in their own boundary-work negotiations is explored in Chapters 5 and 6. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork at conferences and other public academic sites, Chapter 5 gives an account of five epistemic maps, that WGFS scholars draw in order to 'put WGFS on the map of proper knowledge' (p. 120), in different positions relative to both 'proper science' and 'mainstream science'. Centrally, this chapter attends to how boundary work very often does not work, and negotiations of epistemic status are marked by power and inequality, constituted by and of sexist and racist standards of credibility and authority. Chapter 6 moves from the locally-unfolding epistemic negotiations analysed in previous chapters to the global hierarchies of colonialism and imperialism in which they are enmeshed. Analysing the politics of both time and space – how being *modern* and *foreign* intersect with epistemic claims – illuminates how some countries are privileged as more able to produce 'proper knowledge' than others. Here Pereira asks 'how credibility travels' across borders, and 'how global academics relations shape, and are shaped by, local boundary-work' (p. 150).

Chapter 7 returns to the performative university, analysing 12 follow-up interviews conducted in 2015/16, and attending to the profound changes of the intervening seven years. This continues the earlier commitment to recognising 'openings' as well as 'closings' for WGFS' epistemic status in neoliberal institutions. However, these interviews also lead Pereira to re-examine previous arguments, including the 'optimistic... assumption... that openings for *individual* scholars... equate to openings for the *field*' (p. 183). Pereira was 'deeply affected by how utterly drained and profoundly depleted' interviewees appeared, characterizing this as a state of 'pressured exhaustion' (p. 184) and develops an analysis of the 'mood' of academia, the 'depression in the air' and the intractable difficulties of producing WGFS knowledge in a 'sick academic climate' (p. 185). These issues are examined in relation to collegial work – as both draining and empowering – and as a potential site of resistance to the insidious dismissal of ubiquitous exhaustion as an *individual* problem.

The book's conclusion does not avoid the heavy *yes, but what do we do?! question*, and has recommendations for how WGFS scholars might negotiate boundaries of both knowledge and (impossible) workloads, noteworthy for their perceptiveness and generosity, and for the refusal to ignore the seduction of academic productivity. In sum, many WGFS traditions disrupt the boundaries of the 'proper' object of scholarship by analysing (and intervening in) the gendered, classed, and raced power relations of 'the everyday'. Pereira's work is exemplary in these terms, re-

focusing as it does our 'collective "averted gaze"' toward 'the inner workings of academia' (Wisniewski, 2000: pp. 5–7).

References

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Wisniewski, R. (2000). The averted gaze. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 31(1), 5–23.

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