

**Feminist Scholarship and the “performative university”:** A book review of *Power, Knowledge and Feminist Scholarship: An Ethnography of Academia* by **Maria Do Mar Pereira.**

London and New York 2017: Routledge, 228 pp.

How do scholars in countries such as Portugal, the US, the UK, or Scandinavia situate feminist scholarship in the current academia? How is the claim to scientificity in women’s, gender, and feminist studies (WGFS) produced and negotiated? And what happens to these emerging fields, and the individuals inhabiting them, under the accelerated corporatisation of higher education? This book provides insightful and novel answers to these questions and anticipates future directions of research on the institutionalisation of feminist scholarship.

The book is based on ethnographic research of academia mainly in Portugal. During the years of 2008–2009 and 2015–2016, Pereira interviewed 36 WGFS and non-WGFS academics and conducted participatory observations at national and international conferences, WGFS associations’ meetings, lectures, and PhD vivas also in Sweden, the UK, and the US. In her feminist discursive analysis, she focuses on the question of ‘how academics demarcate the boundaries of “proper” knowledge, and how WGFS scholarship gets positioned in relation to those boundaries’ (p. 2).

As outlined in chapter two, this examination builds on the premise that the epistemic status of feminist scholarship is not only constructed and situated within particular geopolitical, socio-cultural and linguistic contexts, but is also inherently and irreducibly paradoxical. The concept of ‘paradox’, as explained further in the book, is particularly useful for the research of WGFS’ epistemic status because it ‘renders visible the ways in which seemingly contradictory practices might not just

coexist, but be mutually constitutive’ (p. 86). This conceptualisation stems from Pereira’s productive reading and a combination of diverse methodologies by Lorraine Code (feminist epistemology), Michel Foucault (poststructuralist philosophy), and Thomas Gieryn (science and technology studies). It allows her to examine epistemic demarcations as contingent products of ongoing contestations implying diverse or even contradictory truth- and power-effects, while, simultaneously, taking into account more prevalent structural hierarchies which (re)produce ‘gendered, racialised, classed and Eurocentric hegemonies ... both within and outside academia’ (p. 47).

Following these theoretical and methodological premises, chapter three examines how the transformation of the ‘political economy’ of academia into a culture of ‘performativity’, which is defined by enhanced emphasis on productivity and profitability, influences negotiations of WGFS’ epistemic status. According to Pereira, in the 2000s, when this academic culture had just begun to emerge in Portugal, it produced a complex combination of integration and dismissal of WGFS: its epistemic status was *conditional* (dependent on the ability to attract research funding and students) and *partial* (WGFS were officially and publicly acknowledged but disputed in unofficial and non-public settings).

Chapter four investigates how the threshold of what counts as ‘proper scientific knowledge’ divides WGFS from within. For instance, this chapter shows how the analytic category of ‘gender’ has been accepted with relative ease outside WGFS, whilst the epistemic and political premises of feminist scholarship and politics, which ground and frame this category, have been overlooked or openly dismissed. Chapter five examines how WGFS scholars draw epistemic maps. Here Pereira stresses that the context—the audiences and the positions of the individual

scholars—is key for how claims to epistemic status are employed and whether they are successful.

Chapter six entitled ‘The Importance of Being Foreign and Modern: The Geopolitics of the Epistemic Status of WGFS’ develops this theme further. On the case of Portugal, Pereira examines how unequal global relations within WGFS shape and are shaped by local boundary-work in the (semi-)periphery. She argues that ‘we must consider both what gets silenced’ because of various hegemonies (namely the western hegemony of Anglophone feminism), while also paying attention to ‘what becomes possible and speakable for WGFS scholars in (semi-)peripheral contexts through the invocation of a hegemonic modern foreign’ (p. 168).

Pereira’s book thus provides a number of valuable insights for those interested in research on the institutionalisation of WGFS and the intricacies of today’s university. Following the protocols of feminist ethnographic research (e.g. drawing on well-defined theoretical paradigms, using innovative and interdisciplinary methodologies, providing insightful discursive analyses of empirical material, etc.) this study can be considered to have produced—to use Pereira’s terminology—‘proper scientific knowledge’. Yet, importantly, this work also produces an ‘additional value’ that fundamentally complicates categories, frameworks, and outcomes of research on the institutionalisation of WGFS—including Pereira’s work—and opens them beyond their pre-established boundaries.

This is demonstrated by a number of self-reflexive turns Pereira takes throughout the book. One such turn is the way in which she applies attention to claims of ‘scientificity’ in her own scholarship. In chapter one Pereira backs off from providing a conventional literary review, i.e. a narrative by which the value of

the presented research is claimed through situating it as an individual endeavour which improves existing knowledge in the given field. Similar care is given to citational practice. Instead of invoking the hegemonic ‘foreign and modern’, i.e. referring world-renowned or ‘canonical’ authors, Pereira disrupts the existing asymmetries by committing to a citational practice that references scholars who occupy diverse positions within the hierarchies of the academic establishment from a range of geographies.

A particularly productive distortion opens through the problematisation of the notion of ‘performativity’. Although Pereira draws on a premise, which she attributes to Foucault, that discursive practices ‘systematically form the objects [and subjects] of which they speak’ (p. 10), she also points to the limits of this conceptualisation. As she rightly argues, ‘performativity’ does not just stand for the ability to exercise a power to do or to claim things, but also for the very interweaving of knowledge with structures of power. This insight is developed in two directions: First, Pereira shows that in order to make a ‘powerful’ claim, the individual scholar must be situated within a context of ‘power’, i.e. within a context of authority and legitimacy. Second, ‘performativity’, understood as an output of technical system where knowledge and power are no longer distinguished, is a means through which the author accounts for the transformations within higher education over the last two decades. As argued previously, in chapter three Pereira concludes that the emerging culture implies paradoxical effects for WGFS’ epistemic status. However, in the final chapter (chapter seven), which draws from the follow-up interviews conducted during 2015–2016 and again picks up on the problem of the ‘performative university’, Pereira shifts and unsettles the terms of her analysis and reframes the issues at stake.

She argues that it is not WGFS' epistemic status or the professional situation of WGFS' academics that changed when the culture of performativity became the dominant and overriding organising principle in Portuguese academia. What did change was the general *mood*. During the second round of interviews with Portuguese WGFS academics, Pereira observed that the academic culture of performativity generated collective, communal, and contagious feelings of 'physical exhaustion, intellectual depletion and emotional despondency' (p. 186). This leads her to argue that instead of asking questions such as how the epistemic status of WGFS can be negotiated (a question which has guided her study), we have to direct our attention to a 'more basic and foundational' question of 'how to guarantee working (and living) conditions' which will also enable WGFS scholars to 'individually and collectively' carry out 'significant, creative and critical work both within and beyond the performative academy' (p. 192).

*Power, Knowledge and Feminist Scholarship* thus also recognises and bears witness to a fundamental shift in what is at stake regarding the presence and the future of feminist scholarship in establishments of higher education. Furthermore, it recognises that to address the challenges which WGFS is currently facing, scholars researching the institutionalisation of feminist scholarship will have to significantly re-adjust their analytical tools and conceptual frameworks.

In the 'Postscript', invoking a 'vision' of 'postwork society' by Marxist feminist author Kathi Weeks [2011], Pereira rightly suggests that this task must begin with a re-consideration of the very notion of feminist work. This raises the question of *how* WGFS academics can formulate this re-consideration. Following in Pereira's footsteps, a further problematisation of the notion of 'performativity' can help us answer this question. For as Pereira also points out in her book, the academic culture of performativity, defined by the enhanced emphasis on

productivity and profitability, does not operate only through ‘monitoring’ and ‘auditing’ but also through ‘seduction’ (p. 213), that is, in the realm of desire. Feminist research on gender and sexuality, in which the notion of ‘performativity’ and the critical reflections of it have played significant role, can help us carry this uneasy but important feminist work forward.

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### *References*

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