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Book review

Pereira, Maria do Mar. Power, Knowledge and Feminist Scholarship. An Ethnography of Academia 2017 Routledge 246 pp £90.00 (hardback)

In her beautifully written book, Pereira sets out to analyse the ‘epistemic status’ of Women’s, Gender, and Feminist Studies (WGFS) – that is, to unpack when and in what ways WGFS is understood (or not) as ‘proper’ scientific or scholarly knowledge. Through a detailed feminist ethnography of discourse, she demonstrates that there is no straightforward answer to this question. Rather, that WGFS’s epistemic status is constantly achieved and negated across time and context, though always situated in a contingent and precarious position, making it difficult for WGFS scholars and their work to be taken seriously.

To find out how the boundaries of scientific knowledge are negotiated, Pereira studies different sites of everyday academic work and sociability, drawing on an impressive amount of original data. This includes participant observation of over 50 public, semi-public and private events, such as: classrooms, conferences, book/journal launches, and PhD vivas, and 36 semi-structured interviews with scholars and students from across different academic disciplines. The primary focus of Pereira’s research is Portugal, where she collected her data between 2008–2009 and 2015–2016, in addition to some ad-hoc observations from the UK and other countries. Portugal is an interesting case study as a ‘semi-peripheral’ site in geo-political terms. It seems to echo the position itself of WGFS and brings in much-needed attention to the difference location makes in epistemic boundary-making. The data is also collected at an opportune time in the advancement of the liberalization of the Portuguese university. This allows for a comparative and deeply contextual analysis, which unpacks how the political economy shapes the processes through which the epistemic status of WGFS is negotiated.

Pereira’s research focuses on the discourses employed by scholars within and outside of WGFS. The author uses critical discourse analysis to interpret the disciplinary boundary work of WGFS scholarship, drawing mainly, but not exclusively, on Michel Foucault’s work. Pereira argues that it allows for flexibility, as it is both a methodological device and a mode of critical engagement with the power effects of scientificity. Here, important questions are being asked: Who decides what is scientific and what is not? Why and how are the boundaries drawn between what is seen as proper (and relevant) scientific research on the one hand, and WGFS scholarship on the other? The question of what constitutes scientific knowledge is, of course, deeply political, and Pereira makes the important point that every author has her/his own values and ideological standpoints that shape their research, even if they do not want to acknowledge it.

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Pereira starts off by noting that WGFS research has, overall, become more institutionalized at Portuguese universities over the past decade. And yet, feminist scholarship in Portugal and elsewhere remains under-represented, as it is often considered trivial and dismissed for being too biased and ideological by non-WGFS scholars. Female scholars conducting WGFS research are often criticized for being insiders who lack the critical distance necessary to study gender relations and their research criticized for not being generalizable. This overlaps with various debates in epistemology across the social sciences and we felt a discussion on these, both within and outside feminism, which have surely intersected with troubles in negotiating epistemic status, would have been helpful (see, for instance, Oakley 1990, *Women and Health*).

This attitude towards WGFS is certainly not new, but Pereira highlights how the current climate has shaped these discourses. In the UK, but also in Portugal, universities have embraced a culture of performativity where research and researchers are constantly evaluated on the basis of their performance. What is more, the UK's government-led Research Excellence Framework (REF) and its Portuguese equivalent have set the parameters for what counts as proper or 'REF-able' research. In this context, WGFS holds a complicated situation, imbricated as it is within a critique of mainstream knowledge production. This contributes to a 'chilly climate' for WGFS scholars.

On the other hand, Pereira notes that many 'mainstream' scholars no longer dare to openly disregard WGFS scholarship, but instead make negative and ridiculing comments during 'corridor talk' with their colleagues or with students. The increased marketization of higher education has worked for and against WGFS in this regard. It has strengthened the position of WGFS in some universities since they are able to draw students and funding, but has also put an enormous amount of stress on WGFS scholars, leaving their position contingent on the preferences of potential students. In this way, Pereira manages to go beyond the reductive 'it's all about neoliberalism' by examining in depth the varying ways in which a 'performative' university can work for and against WGFS.

Pereira's aim is not just to highlight the everyday challenges faced by WGFS scholars and scholarship. She also examines how WGFS scholars can – and already have – put WGFS on the map(s) in order to be recognized as 'proper' science. She presents five (at times overlapping and compatible) mappings that she observed. None are perfect, and none are without their risks, but they can nonetheless guide WGFS scholars as they practise their own boundary-making. The only map that Pereira cautions against is one which creates boundaries within WGFS, bracketing off some WGFS scholarship as more worthy than other.

At the end of her book, Pereira makes some much-needed recommendations as to how WGFS scholars can 'work' in the contemporary performative university. Her most compelling suggestion is for a 'reflexive flexibility' in feminist epistemology. In practice, this means that feminist scholars should not talk their feminist colleagues down by calling their epistemology unscientific. A more respectful and considerate tone should be used in academic writing and in everyday practices. As a feminist herself, Pereira implicates her own self, her work and indeed the very book that the reader is holding as part of her project of analysis. This results in an intensely reflexive book, or what we came to understand as a 'double ethnography'. As she examines her own practices, she invites the reader to do the same. Her literature review (and our own review here) have been shaped by her reflections on how as feminists we can ethically engage with one another's work. This will make for excellent reading for those interested in ethnography and reflexivity.

More broadly this book will be of interest to (of course) WGFS scholars, but to many beyond too, perhaps most especially those in more 'peripheral' locations of scholarship. Pereira has produced an ethnography which is nuanced in its approach to gains and losses of strategies used by scholars in achieving epistemic status. She shows how the performative

university can be seductive, but is ultimately a pressure cooker that does not allow for thought and reflection. Especially WGFS scholars feel the pressure to over-perform because their place remains contingent and precarious. Her insights make for sobering reading. Finally, we also recommend this book for students and scholars of science and technology studies and anyone interested in better understanding knowledge production in the contemporary academy.

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