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## Book review: power, knowledge and feminist scholarship: an ethnography of academia

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*Feminist Theory*

Maria do Mar Pereira. *Power, Knowledge and Feminist Scholarship: An Ethnography of Academia*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017. 228 pp. ISBN 9781138911499, £90.00 (hbk), £34.99 (pbk)

Reviewed by: Rachel O'Neill, University of York, UK.

I am late writing this review. Despite my efforts at forward planning, somehow things keep getting in the way. Manuscript revisions. Funding bids. Job applications. When I finally do get to sit down with the book, I realise it has been rather too long since I last read a new monograph cover-to-cover. That evening, an academic friend calls, panicking about an imminent deadline. Our conversation reminds me to get in touch with another friend who is ill and off work. The next morning, I see a news item relevant to a third friend's current project and send it to her, to which she replies: 'If only I had time to do the research!'

Maria do Mar Pereira's brilliant new book provides a novel vantage point from which to consider the epistemological dimensions of such everyday scenes in the life of a feminist academic. She begins from the recognition that women's, gender, and feminist studies (WGFS) scholarship is often placed beyond the boundaries of 'proper knowledge', regarded as simultaneously "too much" and "not enough" (Steinberg, 1997, p.195, cited p.31). Questioning why this may be rather than assuming it just is, Pereira examines the workings of 'epistemic status', understood as the degree to which and terms through which a particular claim to knowledge or field of study comes to be recognised as credible. Ambitiously billed as 'an ethnography of academia', this study traverses classrooms, conferences, and corridors to examine how the intellectual legitimacy and academic value of WGFS is negotiated on a day-to-day basis. Pereira is well-aware of the double complexity of *doing* epistemic status in a study of epistemic status, acknowledging this tension at the outset without attempting to definitively resolve it. With this in mind, I hope she will not mind my saying that this is a decidedly scholarly work: thoroughly researched, closely argued, and densely referenced.

Bringing together the conceptual recourses of Foucauldian analysis, feminist epistemology, and science and technology studies (STS), Pereira provides a conceptual language with which to describe patterns of engagement many feminist academics will undoubtedly be familiar with but may have previously struggled to name. Thus 'epistemic splitting' refers to the process whereby non-WGFS scholars take up aspects of WGFS — such as, for example, a concern with women or gender — while ignoring its deeper "epistemological, theoretical, methodological and political critique of mainstream academic knowledge" (p.95). Relatedly, 'dismissive recognition' delineates how the epistemic status of WGFS scholarship "is both asserted *and* denied" (p.114), often as a means to preempt feminist criticism on the part of individuals, or to cultivate a progressive veneer on the part of institutions.

Though Pereira characterises this study as a discursive ethnography, she is nevertheless closely attuned to emotional and affective dynamics, tapping into moods and atmospheres. The longitudinal approach she takes — interviewing more than thirty WGFS scholars and students in Portugal in 2008-09, and speaking with many of them again in 2015-16 — allows her to examine key shifts in the climate of academia. While reluctant to rehearse the "doom and gloom of neoliberalism" (p.183), she is compelled to pursue this line of analysis when, on returning to undertake the second round of interviews, she finds her participants "utterly drained and profoundly depleted" (p.184). Already worn out by the constant struggle to secure legitimacy for WGFS scholarship — by cultivating links with foreign institutions, publishing in high-profile international journals, generating research income, and increasing student numbers, among other activities — seven years later this exhaustion has mutated into something more pernicious. What had been a "righteous, self-asserting and galvanising" kind of fatigue has since become "melancholic, self-questioning and paralysing" (p.194).

From here Pereira develops an incisive critique of what she terms the 'culture of performativity' in academia, characterised by logics of productivity and profitability instantiated through regimes of audit and evaluation. While recognising the toll this takes on the bodies and minds of WGFS scholars – as the considerable body of research she reviews as part of this discussion also attests to – Pereira directs us to consider the impact performative academia may have on WGFS as a field. She argues that the impulse to turn inwards in an effort to manage ever-increasing workloads puts the wider epistemological and political project of WGFS at risk. Simply put, if we do not have time to engage with one another's work – by reading, thinking, meeting, discussing, debating and, indeed, reviewing – then the intellectual fabric of WGFS may come undone. Precisely because "WGFS is more than the sum of each of our individual outputs", maintaining the field "requires that we also turn *towards* others and participate in forms of collective and collegial engagement" (p.195).

*Power, Knowledge and Feminist Scholarship* has left me in no doubt that feminist scholars urgently need to recalibrate our relationship with work both individually and collectively. Without presuming to prescribe a singular solution for what is clearly a complex problem, Pereira offers practical suggestions as well as irreverent wisdom as to how we might approach this. In mapping the changing landscape of higher education in a way that foregrounds the epistemological stakes involved – stakes raised all the higher in a supposedly 'post-truth' era – this timely and original book better equips us to navigate this shifting terrain and challenge the performatisation of academia that not only encroaches on our lives but threatens to hollow WGFS out from the inside.