

Book Review

## **Reconsidering Knowledge: Feminism and the Academy**

edited by Meg Luxton and Mary Jane Mossman. Halifax & Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2012. \$29.95 CAN, paper. ISBN: 978-1-552266-476-6. Pages: 1-168.

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In 2009, a group of feminist academics at York University participated in a lecture series revisiting key themes from the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAOW)'s 1984 collection *Knowledge Reconsidered: A Feminist Overview*. The lectures were held with the aim of "refocusing the lens on feminist knowledge in the academy" (15). This book is the literary product of these lectures.

The seven substantive chapters in the book deal with one or more of three central themes: 1) the importance of feminist knowledge production; 2) challenges posed by neoliberal approaches to education and university corporatization; and 3) feminist scholarship as a form of activism and/or resistance to the increasingly corporate university environment. As a whole, this is a collection rich in reflexive analysis of how knowledge production shapes, and is shaped by, the environment in which it occurs. In chapter one, Meg Luxton explores the transformative nature of feminist scholarship on the academy while effectively demonstrating through the discussion of gendered distribution of elite research positions in Canada that academia is not exempt from patterns of inequality.

In chapter two, M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty further explore the politics of knowledge construction by mapping transnational feminism throughout women's studies and LGBTTT/queer studies syllabi in U.S. colleges and universities. The author's conceptual use of cartographies to map histories and geographies of power is a significant contribution, as is their challenge to the academic/activist divide so often employed in academic discourse (see Eschle and Manguerra, 2006). Chapter three shifts from feminist knowledge in the academy to a focus on sexuality research in a global context. Here, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl

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reminds that in exploring the politics of knowledge construction it is important to explore not only what knowledge is created, but also what terms or concepts remain absent. To this end, Young-Bruehl provides the example of “childism” to illustrate the conceptual absence of terms to speak of groups that disproportionately inflict harm on children (e.g. child pornographers, child sex traffickers, armies recruiting child soldiers). While the argument that there is increased global tolerance for multisexuality (sexual identities outside binary understandings of sex and gender) is convincing, the implication that this will naturally lead to an understanding of sexual minorities as “different but equal” (73) is less so given the lack of historical evidence of this occurring.

Part two of *Reconsidering Knowledge* shifts from exploring feminism and knowledge production to consider current neoliberal influences on the university and the implications for its role in knowledge production. In chapter four, Margaret Thornton unpacks the concept of “neoliberalism” and focuses on three central phases in the university’s evolution (modernization, feminization, corporatization). Thornton argues that we have entered a period of focus on a “new knowledge” economy, which has enabled “the remasculization of the economy behind a façade of rationality, neutrality, and technocratic knowledge” (77). While overall a convincing chapter and important contribution, considering the focus on the book (feminism and the academy), I found more explanation of feminization and remasculization to be needed, in particular a more clear distinction between remasculization and neoliberalism. In chapter five, Janice Newson situates neoliberalism within the university “on-the-ground” through an analysis of how universities have responded to policy changes that “promote the corporatized trajectory” (98). A significant contribution of this chapter is its resistance to the notion that neoliberalism simply “happened” to universities, absent of any agency of the actors within. Instead, Newson argues for complex (and reflexive) analysis, provocatively suggesting that we consider the academic attitudes and practices that have allowed, and may even be implicated in “the shift of the university towards more commercially oriented endeavours” (97). Although further unpacking is needed around how to separate attitudes and practices from their institutional context, I found the author’s detailed use of historical explanation of policy development as a multi-faceted process convincing as an initial argument for reflexivity.

In the final section of this collection, chapters six and seven illustrate the research richness that comes from applying feminist lenses to cultural histories. In her discussion of Bluestockings and Goddesses, Ann Shteir

draws from mythology and iconography to challenge feminists to “take the past more seriously” (130) when pursuing present-day scholarship and activism. In particular, Shteir identifies new technologies and digitized materials as tools to opening up new (or freshly revisited) research avenues. In reconsidering the past through feminist praxis, Shteir summarizes a core idea of this collection: that we must remember that “scholarship is activism too, and we should be making it work for us” (147). In the concluding chapter, Lorraine Code moves themes of reflexivity, feminist praxis, and the politics of knowledge production back on front stage by analyzing the work of eminent marine biologist Rachel Carson (1907-1964) in “unsettling” key tenets of scientific knowledge and practice in the twentieth century.

Overall, *Reconsidering Knowledge* does important work through connecting core themes of social inequality, transformative knowledge, and the role and purpose of feminism and the university in our current social world. Despite the eclectic mixture of chapter subject matter, the revisiting and resurfacing of feminist praxis and reflexive knowledge production as core themes holds this book together well; part of its success may, therefore, lie in highlighting that these important strands of debate transcend perceived boundaries of subject matter. Yet given the vastness of feminism as a theoretical orientation, and the absence of explicit discussions and definitions of feminism in many chapters, an editorial introduction and conclusion would have been helpful to bring together the contributors’ various theoretical lenses as well as to increase accessibility of the text more broadly. Nonetheless, this collection is a valuable read, not only for those committed to feminism and its role and relationship in the academy, but also for scholars and students concerned more broadly with the expansion of neoliberalism in universities and the politics of knowledge production. While *Reconsidering Knowledge* provides plenty of reasons to be concerned about entrenched resistance to feminist research and activism, it remains optimistic and steadfast about feminism’s transformative potential and critical importance in scholarship and activism, or, perhaps more accurately, scholarship-as-activism.

## REFERENCES

- Eschle, Catherine and Bice Maiguashca. (2006). Bridging the academic/activist divide: Feminist activism and the teaching of global politics. *Millennium-Journal of International Studies*, 35 (1), 119-137.