

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

ANNE WAGNER, SANDRA ACKER and KIMINE MAYUZUMI, *Whose University is it, Anyway?: Power and Privilege on Gendered Terrain*. Toronto: Sumach Press, 2008, 231p.

Whose University is it, Anyway?: Power and Privilege on Gendered Terrain, edited by Anne Wagner, Sandra Acker and Kimine Mayuzumi, immerses the reader in current scholarship related to gender and the university in Canada. The idea to put together an edited volume focusing on a broad cross-section of gendered experiences in Canadian universities emerged from a panel presentation at the 2006 Congress of the Social Sciences and Humanities. The book was written, in large part, to fill a perceived gap in Canadian feminist scholarship which tended to neglect “the heterogeneity of gender categories,” and which focused on some aspects of identity over others (16). The editors have therefore chosen authors to address the many ways in which gender intersects with other identities such as race, sexuality, ability, age, and class, to name a few examples. The editors have also highlighted the experiences of women in gendered roles in the academy which often go unnoticed and unstudied – roles such as teaching assistant, support staff, and contingent faculty.

Although the book is divided into four sections, each with its own theme, the themes seem to run throughout all the articles. The four sections are “Contesting Curriculum, Policy and Representation,” “Navigating the Academy,” “Supporting the Enterprise,” and “Finding Sources of Strength.” They focus on how individuals resist dominant discourses (despite the danger of being co-opted); how individuals simultaneously navigate the university and their own identities; the ways in which women’s roles in the academy are marginalized; and how, within a gendered university context, spirituality and the arts can be used to resist, to persist, and to heal.

This book illustrates how power and privilege have been and are currently experienced by individuals working in the university – an institution founded on masculine values, and structured around masculine ways of being in and engaging with the world. These values and styles of being are experienced in diverse ways by different constituents within the university context; some women may experience them as benefits, while others may experience them as barriers to self-knowledge and transformation (see Donna A. Murray’s chapter on cultural identity), to career advancement and professional acknowledgement (see Ann Kristine Pearson’s chapter on university support staff and Si Transken’s chapter on the paradoxes of academic success), and to implementing feminist pedagogy (see Michelle Weber’s research on women’s studies teaching assistants). The authors vividly describe how the university is gendered at all levels of analysis,

from its history, structure, and administration, to curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher-student-staff relations.

Many authors use first-person stories in their chapters, privileging the lived experiences of the story-teller as a legitimate form of knowledge in the university. Two good examples of this are Wayne Martino's analysis of the body's role in the "policing and surveillance of masculinity" in the university classroom (117), and Sandra Acker's reflection on the gendered nature of the Chair position. All authors draw heavily on classical feminist texts from Donna Haraway, Judith Butler, Dorothy Smith, bell hooks, and others to theorize their experiences and research findings.

Two strengths in particular stand out in this book. The first is the careful balancing of stories of hope and struggle. Stories of marginalization are accompanied by stories of hope, which predominate towards the end of the book. But even these stories of hope are fragile, as we read how forms of resistance are co-opted by individuals and organizations with power, to minimize the impact they might have as tools of resistance. Two particular examples of this process of co-optation come to mind. In the first, Sarah Ferguson and Tanya Titchkosky outline how university students' disabilities are "disappeared" – or at least that is the intention – by means of technological assistance provided by Disabilities Services. In doing so, the disability can be defined, confirmed, measured, and controlled by the institution (69) minimizing any need to actually change how "writing, teaching and knowing" occur in the academy (71). In my second example, Maria Athina Martimianakis' astute analysis of university discourses shows how the principle of equity is absorbed into university policy-discourse as a means to advance excellence; in doing so it is subjected to processes of accountability, rendering it a thing to be measured and enforced, rather than a constant reminder of the active presence of power in the university setting.

The second strength of this book is the diverse presentation of individual and collective forms of resistance. For example, Wagner shows how speaking about experiences of trauma in an academic setting can be an individual act of resistance to societal norms which require victims to remain silent about their experiences of trauma. As a contrary example, Patrice A. White engaged in resistance by NOT speaking about her race, defying her teachers' and fellow students' assumptions that race was the organizing feature of her identity. Finally, resistance is not just an act of individuals. For example, Cyndy Baskin argues that knowledge of the history of colonization and Aboriginal ways of knowing are not just important for Aboriginal students, but for all students and faculty of social work and their clients, as a means to work towards decolonization.

As with all edited works, there are differences in the quality of the contributors' writing, but the quality of writing between chapters in this book is particularly unpredictable. Many authors write clearly, present carefully crafted arguments, and use provoking imagery; a small few, however, offer writing that is diffuse and full of unexplained assumptions and jargon. To be clear, the quality of writing in this book is in no way related to the authors' status (or lack thereof) as a "professional."

Readers who would most want to read this book are upper-level undergraduate or graduate students in critical disciplines such as women's studies or sociology, and faculty looking to review current Canadian scholarship on gender issues in higher education. Readers of this book will feel as if they are eavesdropping on a conversation that is underway between practitioners of gender research and theory. And indeed, this book's genesis at a recent Canadian Congress of the Social Sciences and Humanities panel clearly shows; it is a collection by scholars of gender working at the limits of their chosen fields, pushing the boundaries of how we know ourselves and are known by others.

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