


Fall 2014

## Introduction: Education, Intersectionality and Social Change

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### Recommended Citation

Wånggren, Lena, and Maja Milatovic. 2018. "Introduction: Education, Intersectionality and Social Change." *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 7 (Fall): v-viii. <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/jfs/vol7/iss7/2>

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# Introduction: Education, Intersectionality and Social Change

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In her book *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks argues that the classroom remains “the most radical space of possibility in the academy” (1994, 12). hooks here frames possibility as an active engagement with radical ideas and social change within and beyond the classroom, necessitating a profound destabilization of frames of reference. Enacting education as a space of possibility means positing educators and teachers as politically engaged and active subjects, dedicated to critical thinking and dialogue as well as invested in the understanding of learning as a form of social transformation. However, recent decades have witnessed an increased corporatization of universities in Europe, North America, Australia and beyond, through funding cuts, increased workloads, casualization, job insecurity, and neoliberal managerial techniques that stand directly opposed to hooks’s view of education as a space for enacting critical thinking and social change. Where is the place for radical critique in universities conceptualized as corporations, where students are made to function as customers and educators are modeled as passive customer-service providers? Most importantly, what is the impact of marketization on those who traditionally have been excluded from academia? Inspired by the scholarship and educational work on equality, diversity and institutional whiteness by scholars such as Heidi Mirza and Sara Ahmed, this special issue brings together scholars and activists working to critique and challenge the status quo of the neoliberal university and to promote an education dedicated to social justice.

Despite policy changes and an increased emphasis on equality and diversity, higher education remains an overwhelmingly white and male space. As Mirza states, “Universities in the UK are still very much white, male institutions of privilege and self-reproduction” (quoted in Williams 2013). Those who do not fit the norm are, as Angela P. Harris and Carmen G. González point out, “presumed incompetent as scholars, teachers, and participants in academic governance” (2012, 1). The commodification and corporatization of education have an adverse effect on students and staff, in their intensification of already existing inequalities in academia. Our use of the term “staff” in this context (equivalent to “faculty” in the United States) refers to the teaching, research and administrative staff impacted by corporatization, particularly the increasing number of casualized teaching staff on contingent, fixed-term contracts with little job security or attendant benefits. Casualization, that is, the favoring of insecure fixed-term and hourly contracts, leaves hourly paid (UK) and adjunct (US) staff working many hours unpaid and often without basic facilities such as an office, access to printing or other resources, or even training. With the introduction or rise in tuition fees, education itself is turned into a commodity on a market—something to be bought and sold—and becomes possible only for those who can afford it. Those already in positions of privilege will retain their access to education, affirming and perpetuating their privileged status. Furthermore, the marketized university is not only detrimental to research and to staff well-being, tending to cause “demoralization, demotivation and stagnation” (Fenton 2011, 105), but also works against an inclusive learning and teaching environment. Drives to advance the “student experience” by improving feedback and teaching have not been accompanied by increases in pay or time allocations to staff, or an effort to truly address equality and diversity in relation

to these issues. Unrealistic workloads, overwork, stress, and job insecurity harm learning and teaching practices in the marketized university.

With a neoliberal focus on the profitability of education and employability of students, critical thinking and pedagogies—which often offer “uncomfortable” questions and knowledges—might be overlooked in favor of viewpoints that are less complex and more easily accountable (in terms of economic value). As Harris and González suggest, “What is insidiously troubling about Western intellectual culture is its espousal of ‘value-free’ science to mask the ways that the idea of pure and interest-free truth has been and continues to be used to perpetuate unjust social hierarchies” (2012, 5). It is precisely this emphasis on “neutrality” and “value-free” education that feeds the neoliberal university and the customer-service model. Framing knowledge as “neutral,” education as a product to be purchased, and educators as customer-service providers, the corporatized university has a profound effect on educators and students invested in critical thinking and social transformation. Crucially, the concept of “neutrality” effectively maintains the status quo and the implicit conceptualization of academia as a white male space of privilege and legitimacy.

How can we imagine hooks’s “space of possibility” in institutions where education is treated as a product to be purchased? How can we facilitate critical thinking and learning in seemingly “neutral” spaces where the imagined neutrality of education serves to not only maintain but increase inequalities and to silence dissenting voices? This special issue aims to address some of these concerns by focusing on issues of equality and diversity. Our use of these two terms is informed by Ahmed’s critique of diversity as “non-performative,” elaborated in *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, where Ahmed suggests that “diversity provides a positive, shiny image of the organisation that allows inequalities to be concealed and thus reproduced” (2012, 72). Indeed, while equality and diversity work is threatened by cutbacks, at the same time “diversity” is often used as justification for increasing the speed of marketization. Diversity gains a commercial value, now being used “as a way not only of marketing the university but of making the university into a marketplace” (Ahmed 2012, 53), to “sanitise and sweeten unacceptable neoliberal policies” (Reay 2012, ix). Following this critique, we are interested in exploring issues of equality and diversity in the context of social justice in the changing, increasingly corporatized university.

In a time of globalization and marketization of education, this special issue aims to create a dialogic space in which to question how the neoliberal paradigm impacts learning, teaching and researching in higher education, as well as how wider communities and structures are put in play through this process. Black feminist scholars and activists such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Angela Davis, Akasha Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, Barbara Smith, and numerous others have provided fundamental critiques of the structural oppressions and exclusions within academia. In their collection *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia* (2012), Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. González, and Angela P. Harris break silences surrounding corporatization, sexism, racism, and various other interlocking systems of oppression in US higher education. More specifically, they gather the narratives and stories of those most fiercely impacted by such processes, addressing the silencing, marginalization and exclusion of women and minority academics. Critiquing higher education’s illusory emphasis on meritocracy, the editors point out how the very discourses of neoliberalism and marketization serve to obscure continuing injustices and ongoing oppressions (Harris and Gonzales 2012, 1). Through an intersectional framework which examines interlocking systems of oppression, highlighting the “need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (Crenshaw 1991, 1254), this special issue revolves primarily around discussions on gender, race, sexuality, disability, class and numerous other intersections within and beyond academia.

Bringing different perspectives together through feminist and intersectional methodologies, the issue explores, to echo again hooks's words, the classroom as "the most radical space of possibility," strategizing to counter racist, sexist, ableist, class-based and other hierarchical structures and oppressions. Although our focus is predominantly on contexts relevant to the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, we believe these contributions will provide insight relevant for diverse contexts where universities are facing rises in tuition fees, marketization, casualization, and an intensification of already existing inequalities.

The issue begins with Heidi Mirza's article examining intersections of race and gender in higher education through the professional experiences of postcolonial diasporic black and ethnicized female academics. Drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, Mirza's essay challenges institutionalized whiteness by underscoring ethnicized black feminist and womanist presences in higher education. Moreover, the author posits educational desire and women's agency as crucial for educational and social transformation. Developing the dialogue on whiteness and hierarchies in higher education, Aretha Phiri's essay explores the ways in which "austerity logic" works to perpetuate white masculinist privilege. Focusing in particular on the UK and recent political events, Phiri's contribution suggests that discourses on austerity "entrench the normative value of whiteness" while simultaneously "masking and marginalizing those ethnic minority populations traditionally othered from mainstream socio-political discourse." In particular, Phiri analyzes the ways in which certain kinds of strategizing around precarity and insecure employment in higher education risks affirming the centrality of whiteness instead of challenging managerialism, casualization and mechanisms of exclusion. As Ana Lopes and Indra Dewan demonstrate in their case study of precariously employed staff, job insecurity, overwork, financial difficulties, and continuous sense of isolation and alienation so frequent in the marketized university adversely affect teaching and research practices. Lopes and Dewan's study fills a critical gap in engaging with what they term "precarious pedagogies," or the ways in which casualization impacts and inflects teaching practice as well as the health of educators. These three articles break silences surrounding experiences of exclusion, racism, insecurity and various other intersecting oppressions, reasserting the need for agency and action, while it is precisely such action which informs the following texts focused on teaching, activism and community engagement.

Moving on to strategize around feminist politics and pedagogy, Eva Giraud in her article evaluates various tactics drawn from critical and cultural theory for deconstructing hierarchies within the marketized university system. Underscoring the role of queer pedagogy as an affirming methodology, Jennifer Fraser and Sarah Lamble's essay considers how non-normative processes, such as "queer conversations," productively transform the relationship between the teacher and the student, as well as challenge the instrumental logic of neoliberalism. While the framing of education as a commodity circumscribes the agency of feminist academics and activists, politicized teaching aimed at social transformation works to counteract the illusory "neutral and unbiased" consumption of education. Addressing this complex issue, Stephanie Spoto's essay analyzes the connections between teaching and activism and examines the positionality and predicaments of feminist academics who do socially engaged work. Drawing on her teaching experiences in the United Kingdom and the United States, Spoto provides a potential strategy for engaging in activist work within and beyond the marketized university. Extending Spoto's emphasis on activism, Donna Lester-Smith and Peter Wanyenya's "viewpoint" essay explores the effects of marketization and internationalization on Canadian Aboriginal and low-income communities and the role of the educator in these contexts. Addressing this change in higher education, the essay examines programs which can support students and address the particularity of their experiences in a changing institutional environment. Lastly, the issue concludes with

Michelle Keown's reflection on her own positionality as a Senior Lecturer in Postcolonial Writing at a research-intensive Russell Group university.

All of these contributions resonate with each other and complement or complicate one another's premises. They extend the ongoing and much-needed discussions on privilege, language, power relations in academia, and decolonizing methodologies initiated by numerous black feminists and antiracist scholars and activists. Trying to locate spaces of possibility in the marketized university, we hope that the articles will work to challenge silences, opening up spaces for radical learning and change.

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