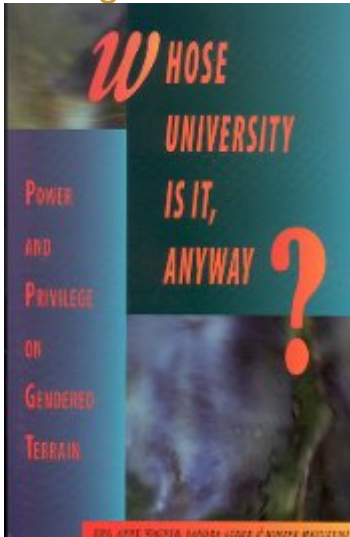


## “Whose university is it, anyway?” A question we need to keep asking



*Whose University Is It, Anyway? Power and Privilege on Gendered Terrain, edited by Anne Wagner, Sandra Acker, and Kimine Mayuzumi (Sumach Press, 2008)*

by Jennie Hornosty

This year marks the 25th anniversary of Rosalie Abella's report, *Equality in Employment*, which drew attention to systemic discrimination as a structural factor that creates barriers in employment opportunities for members of certain groups. Abella named four designated groups: women, visible minorities, aboriginal Canadians, and persons with disabilities. Soon after, the federal government brought in employment equity legislation, including the Federal Contractor's Program, which required employers to set goals for increasing the proportion of members from designated groups to reflect their representation in society. Universities responded by developing employment equity policies and guidelines and setting numerical goals for hiring members from these designated groups. Today, these policies are commonplace.

An important question to ask now is whether these policies have made a difference. Is the university today more diverse? Is it more inclusive? Has equity been realized? If we look simply at the number of women teaching in Canadian universities today, we might conclude that significant progress has been made. However, as the various contributors to *Whose University Is It, Anyway? Power and Privilege on Gendered Terrain* remind us, there is more to equity than numbers, and while gender is important, there can be other bases of inequities such as race, sexual orientation, age, class, Aboriginal status, and disability.

Since the late 1980s, countless articles and numerous books have been written by Canadian feminists about the chilly climate and the under-representation of women faculty in universities. More recently, authors have examined the ways in which racism is embedded in the academic milieu. So, one might be tempted to ask, why another book about equity and diversity? While much of what we learn is not new, this collection of essays nonetheless provides an important contribution to the on-going critique of how universities remain places where the dominant discourse

is that of white, Eurocentric, heterosexual, middle-class men.

The contributors write from different perspectives and as “diversely situated subjects within the academic community.” Included in the collection are personal narratives and analyses as well as discussions of findings from qualitative research. The contributors include administrative support staff, teaching assistants, graduate students, a middle-level administrator, contract academic staff, as well as tenured and tenure-track faculty. While the academic terrain is gendered, as the title indicates, this collection makes clear that people’s experience of marginalization is shaped by the intersection of socially constructed categories such as race, sexuality, Aboriginal status, ethnicity, class, disability, and gender. Through these essays, it becomes clear that universities may, in some respects, be more diverse and inclusive today than 25 years ago, but systemic inequities still persist.

A central theme throughout the book is that equity and diversity mean more than numerical presence. They require that all voices be heard and acknowledged in the university, including in curriculum and pedagogy, research, and scholarship. In this review I attempt to acknowledge this point by sharing briefly some of the insights provided by each of the contributors.

When employment equity policies were first developed, I, like many other feminists in the academy, pressured our administrations and faculty associations to take these policies seriously and monitored closely the progress being made. There was optimism when it seemed that these policies were addressing some of the gender gap in faculty hiring. While female academics are still found disproportionately at the lower ranks, it is nonetheless significant that nearly a third of the full-time faculty in Canadian universities today are women. This increase in women faculty, as Maria Athina Martimianakis argues in her critical examination of competing discourses around equity, is to be welcomed. Yet there is reason for concern about how equity policies are being used today.

Through an analysis of reports and policies at the University of Toronto, Martimianakis makes it clear why we need to interrogate the current equity discourse that now forms part of the “language of governance.” She makes two important points. First, equity processes are increasingly equated with “benchmarking” and accountability measures. This approach reduces complex processes to the simplistic one of equating equity with institutional performance indicators. Second, she points out, a focus on numerical data obscures the necessity to raise awareness about the various forms of systematic discrimination that can, therefore, hinder cultural change within the academy. The “ethical and ideological foundations [of equity work] are being directly and potentially eroded through techniques of governance...”

When equity was first discussed in the 1980s, a great deal of emphasis was placed on the importance of role models. Today, we need to ask whether this doesn’t create another form of “otherness”? Are there unrealistic expectations placed on those put in the position of role models? In her contribution, Patrice White explains how

dominant pedagogical practices and expectations frequently place racialized minority women on “the hot seat,” and how it is presumed their academic interests are limited to areas that pertain directly to their race and gender. As she point out, this limits their role as authoritative scholars and further marginalizes their contributions in the academy.

A number of the contributors illustrate the different ways that certain knowledge continues to be marginalized. Using information from her research project with Aboriginal social work students, Cyndy Baskin, explains how the exclusion of Aboriginal peoples’ “ways of knowing” and world values from mainstream social-work curriculum has a negative impact on Aboriginal students. Similarly, Donna Murray speaks to the importance of expanding definitions of knowledge in the academy to include the wisdom of Aboriginal peoples and others whose voices and contributions are frequently ignored. Kimine Mayuzumi and Riyad Shahjahan write about their experience as “spiritually minded racially minoritized women faculty,” whose interest in spirituality and social justice projects is considered a subjugated form of knowledge, with little chance of being funded. They speak of the chill they felt when they tried to bring their spiritual identity into the academy. Njoki Wane, a visible minority African female professor, discusses the resistance she experienced from teacher-education students to including topics such as racism, sexual orientation, disabilities, and diversity in the classroom. When she brought her concerns to colleagues (the majority of whom were of European descent), it was suggested that “maybe you are being too sensitive.”

According to Anne Wagner, certain forms of feminist pedagogy are also marginalized in the academy. One type of pedagogy encourages students to examine their personal experiences as a basis of theorizing. She acknowledges that encouraging students to “theorize the personal” can be fraught with difficulties, but she points out that it is also a powerful tool for challenging hegemonic assumptions that the personal has no place in academic discourse

The body and sexuality are important identity markers that can become a basis for discrimination. Susan Ferguson and Tanya Titchkosky explain how the university (both physically and in academic work) is organized around notions of the “normal body” such that embodied difference is absent from consciousness. It then becomes the responsibility of those ascribed with the status of “disabled” to make individual accommodations. Wayne Martino discusses how, as a white, gay, male faculty member, normative expectations of compulsory heterosexuality mediate his experience in the classroom. His gender non-conformity becomes a “master status” that can be used by others to discredit his academic views.

When talking about equity we need to remember that potential access to privilege is shaped not only by gender and race, but also by class. This point is illustrated in Si Transken’s contribution. She describes her academic journey as a “white anglophone Canadian born working-class woman,” who, despite the odds, is now a tenured faculty member. Her class origins shape her pedagogy and make her conscious of her privileges. As someone

from a similar class background, I easily identified with what she calls “gratitude/entitlement ambiguity.”

Inequities can take other forms: one such example is the differential status accorded to different types of work. Although they do much of “the hidden work involved in maintaining university life,” administrative support staff, the overwhelming majority of whom are women, are often made to feel invisible and are absent from discussions about equity. They facilitate and support the work of academics on an on-going basis, yet their contributions are seldom recognized or acknowledged by faculty or administration. In her essay, Ann Kristine Pearson explains that the work of administrative support staff requires considerable expertise and knowledge, but their position has little prestige. In her words, “the most debilitating part of our experience remains the lack of professional respect.”

Contingent faculty, sometimes known as contract academic staff, is another group of academic workers who experience forms of “structural injustice.” Based on findings from their national study of nursing, Linda Muzzin and Jacqueline Limoges explain how those who depend on part-time, contractual work in the academy become, in effect, a “reserve army of labour.” Contingent faculty do a significant portion of the teaching — sometimes up to 40 per cent of courses taught in a university are taught by contract academic faculty — but without the benefits and privileges accorded to tenured and tenure-track faculty. Their salary is low, and they lack job security. They generally do not have private office space and seldom receive health care, pension benefits, or professional development allowances. They are usually not invited to departmental meetings or asked for input. Given the trend towards greater corporatization in higher education, it is likely that the number of exploited academic workers and the types of inequities they experience will increase.

Teaching assistants stand in a location between students and teaching faculty. Using interview data, Michelle Webber talks about the marginal position of teaching assistants who perform academic labour (leading tutorials, grading assignments), but sometimes with little supervision and guidance. Although they are required to deliver the curriculum of others, they also have power (although limited) to negotiate their own teaching style and can play a critical role in the classroom by challenging dominant discourses.

From yet a different place, Sandra Acker reflects on the emotional and gendered dimensions of her work as chair of a department. Although she enjoyed some privilege as a result of her status, and her tangible accomplishments were appreciated, the vast amount of relational work required in the position was seldom valued or recognized. Her position, which carries symbolic power, also made it difficult for her to develop close friendships with her departmental colleagues or reach out to them for emotional support.

There are a number of reasons to read this timely book. Most important, it challenges us to examine critically the academic institutions in which we work and to ask what we really mean when we talk about equity and diversity. Each of the contributors provides a unique lens for how we might think about equity differently. The theory of inter-

sectionality provides an important framework through which we can understand the complex ways by which people's ascribed identities interconnect and shape their experience of discrimination. Equity requires much more than just physical presence: it includes many things. Equity means working in an academic culture where all voices are heard and acknowledged, where different knowledge and pedagogies are welcomed, even encouraged, and where the different needs of all people are respected. To achieve this goal, we must challenge hegemonic practices and ideologies. There is a need to problematize the concept of academic excellence. In short, to accomplish equity we need to radically transform much of academic scholarship and culture. While much of the focus in these essays, not surprisingly, is on structure, many of the contributors also speak to the fact that individuals have agency and the power to create things differently.

Universities, like other societal institutions, are shaped by outside forces. Today, globalization and corporatization are structuring the nature of academic and administrative work. Various books have shown how corporate models and values in the academy affect research, teaching, collegiality, and governance. I would suggest this growing trend poses a significant threat "to the ongoing transformation and integration of social justice [needed] in sites of higher education." A number of the contributors indicated briefly how corporatization affected their experiences; however, I believe the book would have been strengthened if this issue had been foregrounded more.

Another shortcoming is that this collection is Toronto-centered. In many cases the contributors are from the same department at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. I am not suggesting that manifestations of racism, homophobia, disability, classism, etc. are so radically different from place to place. But I would argue that social context matters: it shapes both how inequities and discrimination are experienced by individuals and how structural and institutional inequities might be best addressed. For example, there are important differences between large, medium-sized, and small institutions. Different dynamics may operate in universities located in cosmopolitan centers compared to those situated in smaller more racially homogeneous communities. Including the perspectives of individuals from a variety of places would have given additional strength to the arguments that were made. Also, including the voices of those in other disciplines, such as the physical sciences or faculties of engineering and computer science, would have provided an important dimension to this collection of essays.

In sum, this book provides us with an inside look of how differently-situated individuals see equity: it makes us aware of why we must remain vigilant about equity, the successes to date, and the limitations of traditional approaches that focus primarily on setting equity goals and increasing numbers. As for "whose university is it"? – there is no clear answer except that we must continue asking the question.

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