

preface

Doctoral Degrees in W/G/S/F Studies: Taking Stock

This special issue revisits a question our journal has taken up before: what are the possibilities and risks of the doctoral degree in women's studies? Twenty years after we staged a conversation about how to structure doctoral degree programs in the classic 1998 special issue titled "Disciplining Feminism? The Future of Women's Studies," and fifteen years after a 2003 forum on interdisciplinary graduate training, we pause and reflect on the state of the field. The landscape of graduate education in women's studies has certainly changed—there has been unprecedented growth in new PhD programs—but some of the dilemmas faced by doctoral degree holders remain troublingly familiar. The many short peer-reviewed essays in this issue about the doctoral degree in Women's, Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies (wgsfs), received in response to our call for papers, are organized along three thematic lines: 1) The job market for wgsfs doctoral degree holders, including the relationship between graduate certificates and doctoral degrees in women's studies; 2) Curricular and methodological challenges within doctoral degree programs; and 3) Structural challenges faced by wgsfs departments and universities. Our authors range from veteran to midcareer scholars to recipients of PhDs granted in the past decade. Our content includes data-driven analyses and proposals for best practices, as well as a wide array of personal narratives. In addition to our articles on the doctoral degree, we have an article and a short story about the topic of sexual assault and education, an art essay, creative nonfiction, and poetry. We should clarify that throughout this issue, departments are named in varying ways (as women's studies, WGSS, GWFS, etc.), reflecting the array of naming

practices in the field; we deliberately decided against imposing a standard name in view of their freighted meanings.

We open the issue with a cluster of essays that take stock of the successes and continuing challenges for doctoral degree holders on the job market. Two essays emerging from the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) PhD Interest Group, a collective focused on advocating for wgsfs doctoral degree holders, offer data generated by the group's information-collection efforts. Stina Soderling, Carly Thomsen, and Melissa Autumn White review what they see as a period of growth in the field, particularly in the number of doctoral programs and job openings in the past decade, but pose a sharp question: why are so few tenure-track and tenured lines in wgsfs PhD-granting programs held by those with a PhD in the field? They track the faculty composition of wgsfs PhD-granting programs, noting that two-thirds of faculty members training doctoral students in wgsfs hold PhDs in traditional disciplines. While this may be understandable among senior ranks of faculty trained in an earlier era, the authors worry that this trend persists among junior faculty. Jennifer Musial and Christina Holmes take up the matter of current hiring trends in wgsfs, asking: how have those holding wgsfs degrees actually fared in tenure-track job searches? They analyze who is being hired in the increasing number of wgsfs positions available and argue that the placement rate of those holding a wgsfs PhD has not kept pace with the increasing numbers of wgsfs faculty lines and jobs where wgsfs is listed as a preference. A joint statement by chairs of US PhD-granting departments offers a different vantage point on the job market and hiring practices. For the most part, there is broad agreement that the health of the wgsfs job market is good (in comparison with other fields) and that several departments report significant success among graduates. The one point of disagreement is about whether it is possible and preferable to specify in job advertisements that only those holding PhDs in wgsfs will be hired. It is clear that department chairs recognize the importance of hiring people "with the same credentials [they] are producing." Yet the constraints faced by most departments in obtaining administrative approval for faculty lines—including the compromises made with other departments and their own diversity needs—mean that the pool is frequently widened to include those holding allied doctoral degrees. At the same time, several chairs recognize and celebrate the invaluable and distinct knowledge, expertise, and training that

wgsfs doctoral degree holders provide. The NWSA statement on wgsfs PhD students' placement, which collates updated information collected from chairs, presents a snapshot of the job market success of doctoral degree holders: it suggests that the placement rate of wgsfs students is quite high, although less than half of those placements are in tenure-eligible positions.

A critical issue related to the placement is that wgsfs PhD holders sometimes compete for wgsfs tenure-track jobs with candidates holding graduate certificates. Jennifer C. Nash and Priti Ramamurthy offer two distinct and important angles on the question of what role graduate certificates in women's studies play in the current configuration of wgsfs graduate training. Nash critically questions the feminist credentials a graduate certificate promises to offer, asking, "If scholars can secure tenure-track employment in women's studies through completion of a graduate certificate, then what is the value of the women's studies PhD?" She asks us to consider how credentialing students from conventional disciplines with graduate certificates might potentially harm those whom we train for women's studies PhDs, given their competition for common tenure-track jobs. Ramamurthy considers the contribution that graduate certificates make to the health of individual departments because of how such programs deepen reciprocal ties with other departments and with affiliated faculty who can prove important for wgsfs doctoral student training. She also notes an important constraint, that "without graduate certificate students in women's studies, departments would be hard pressed to justify offering core and elective courses" because of the small size of most women's studies PhD student cohorts.

The next cluster of articles focuses on curricular and methodological challenges in doctoral programs. Michelle V. Rowley, Elora Halim Chowdhury, and Isis Nusair reflect on their training in one of the earliest wgsfs doctoral programs in the country, at Clark University, and how their experience shapes their views on graduate studies. They laud their doctoral program's "commitment to training activists/scholars who had returned to school later in life" and its "struggle to incubate a space for the study and growth of transnational feminism." Chowdhury calls for pedagogy that teaches a "productive engagement with conflict, inequality, and asymmetrical power relations;" Nusair describes how transnational feminism equipped her with the courage to embark on projects critical of US foreign policy; and Rowley asks for more open-ended

methodological training at the doctoral level to enable greater confidence in experimentation. Taken together, their essay calls for a celebration of the new orientations that women's studies doctoral degrees have initiated within university settings.

Ashley Glassburn Falzetti, Amy Bhatt, Lisa Rofel, and L. Ayu Saraswati consider the various forms of methodological training that doctoral students encounter within programs. Falzetti critiques WGSFS curricula for seeing "methods as a means to interdisciplinarity," finding that this approach "prioritizes discrete methods training over feminist criticism." She celebrates the deep forms of interdisciplinarity that WGSFS doctoral training can cultivate, noting that "defamiliarization with disciplinary norms" actually allows WGSFS scholars to "ask questions beyond disciplinary frameworks." She fears that too many methods courses taught in nonfeminist departments "are not necessarily prepared to support WGFQS scholars thinking though the tensions between the methods being taught in the class and the feminist criticism of embodiment and knowledge production taught in core WGFQS courses." Through her own case, Bhatt illustrates how the kinds of interdisciplinarity and methods cultivated in WGSFS doctoral degree programs allow students to pose and pursue questions that are not sufficiently addressed in conventional disciplines. Rofel, on the topic of methodological training, makes a plea for women's studies departments not to see conventional disciplines merely as methods trainers; she notes that any methodological training in her field of anthropology, for instance, is always attuned to matters of epistemology and power—matters that certainly are not the province solely of women's studies. Saraswati underscores how widely doctoral programs in women's studies vary in their approaches to methods and specialization and exhorts those who are considering enrolling in WGSFS doctoral programs to play close attention to these differences. Like Falzetti, she suggests that WGSFS departments continue to focus on helping students develop good questions before attending to methods training and also develop tracks for those interested in careers beyond academia.

Our final cluster focuses on structural constraints faced by doctoral programs. Kristina Gupta offers a commentary on the structurally vulnerable position of WGSFS doctoral students, asking what new and specifically feminist administrative orientations might ameliorate these conditions in doctoral programs. Drawing on a study of doctoral

program handbooks, she offers a set of best practices for increasing graduate student well-being. Susan Stanford Friedman turns our attention to programs beyond the United States, sharing the experience of a European consortium that designed a three-year PhD degree program with a mobility year built in for students to spend time at one of the other consortium universities. She also points to how European programs have oriented doctoral training toward careers beyond academe from their very inception. Both these innovations underscore lingering drawbacks within the structure of US women's studies programs.

Taking a longer, historical view on US universities, Abigail Boggs and Nick Mitchell review recent scholarship in critical university studies, which refuses to share the "crisis consensus" that marks conversations on both the Left and the Right about the state of universities today. They do not disagree that universities are in crisis, but they do challenge the consensus about the nature of the crisis. More specifically, they question what exactly universities are and whether they play the "salvific" role that scholarship presumes they do. The books that Boggs and Mitchell review underscore how interdisciplinary departments do not experience university crises in the same way that other disciplines do. The books also point to how universities are complicit in an imperial order, beneficiaries of slavery and Native dispossession, and participants in capital accumulation.

We also offer a sociological article and a short story on the topic of sexual violence in education. Claire Raymond and Sarah Corse engage the effects of college sexual assault on student-survivors' academic performance and sense of self in relation to the university community. In doing so, these authors move beyond a simple narrative of victimization and explore its consequences with nuance, making visible the endemic and pervasive sexism embedded in many universities and their approaches to sexual assault and harassment on campus. They also discover (and complicate) an important finding: that many students have left their previous STEM-based majors after experiences of violence and turned to WGSFS programs and departments for degrees as a way to make sense of the violence they experienced. The narrator of Jennifer Anne Moses's short story also vividly reflects on sexual violence in education, but in a private middle and high school setting. The narrator reveals how a teacher, to whom many students were drawn, turned out to be a sexual predator. Moses portrays how such predation works in

sharp relief against the mundane choreography of the school's routine, as well as the backdrop of pervasive economic disparities.

Our art essay by Jean Kane extends the theme of violence in a different direction, analyzing the deceptively domestic images of German-Iranian artist Parastou Forouhar. Kane draws our attention to Forouhar's use of wallpaper, upholstery, and fabric swatches to create a pastiche of images that upon closer review dissolve into body parts and weapons of torture or violence. Kane argues that in doing so, Forouhar's art presents the domestic as both "beautiful and punitive" and expands how we understand torture.

This issue ends with two additional creative offerings. Francesca T. Royster's nonfiction piece recollects how a group of friends processed the news of the 2016 Pulse Nightclub shooting, entwining it with other moments of hurt they have experienced in their lives as marginalized women, and how a sense of healing emerged. Angela Sorby's piquant poem reclaims the power of being "plain" in response to the normative compulsion to be beautiful.

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