

Review Essay

Feminist WPA Work: Beyond Oxymorons

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Ratcliffe, Krista, and Rebecca Rickly, eds. *Performing Feminism and Administration in Rhetoric and Composition Studies*. Cresskill: Hampton P, 2010. 272 pages.

We approach this review as an opportunity to discuss *Performing Feminism and Administration in Rhetoric and Composition Studies* (henceforth, *Performing Feminism*) and, more broadly, its significance to the current state of feminist WPA work. We have been invested in this relationship since graduate school. In fact, we had the incredible good fortune to be part of a study group led by our own WPA, Alice Gillam, in which we explored the possibility of feminist approaches to administrative work. At the time, in the mid to late 1990s, a conversation about feminist WPA work, spurred on by the wider political turn, was energetically investigating this most unlikely of relationships. Hildy Miller, in her 1996 article “Postmasculinist Directions in Writing Program Administration,” offers one articulation of “how to transfer feminist principles to an administrative domain” (49). For Miller, a feminist approach to WPA work implies “cooperation, collaboration, shared leadership, and the integration of the cognitive and the affective” (50). She sees a conflict between the traditional “masculinist” leadership style in the academy, in which self-interested arguments and hierarchical stances predominate, and a “feminist” style, in which conversation and collaborative models make way for shared leadership. She argues that making use of feminist approaches can be difficult and tricky, given that women’s authority may be always already questioned in academic settings. For her, the goal is to find ways of combining the two approaches, of blending feminist approaches with masculinist ones.

Miller’s thesis might be considered emblematic of early feminist WPA work. Indeed, when we were working with Alice fifteen years ago, the basic

assumption informing feminist approaches to WPA work seemed to be that feminist principles offered a way to break down hierarchies. Even when not explicitly feminist, the dominant model for alternative approaches to administrative work was collaboration. In 1998, for example, Jeanne Gunner edited a special issue of this journal on collaborative administration. Collaboration, whether feminist or more generically “democratic,” was the alternative approach *du jour*.

As it turns out, collaboration remains a central, if not defining, characteristic of scholarly approaches to feminist administration. Reading *Performing Feminism* was something of a déjà vu for us in that respect. In addition to foregrounding collaborative strategies, we found that, much like those earlier scholars, the authors in this volume focus on situated practices, care, ethics, process, gender issues, authority and its problematics, and mentoring. We hear echoes of Sally Barr-Ebest (1995), Marcia Dickson (1993), Amy Goodburn and Carrie Leverenz (1998), Jeanne Gunner (1994), and Hildy Miller (1996). Which brings us to one of the reasons why writing this review essay is conflicted for us: the terms of reference are so familiar that we wonder how far feminist WPA work has evolved since our first encounter, even as we are grateful that scholars continue to find relevance in feminist theory and activism. And another point of conflict for us: Donna is in the odd position of having contributed a co-authored essay to *Performing Feminism*.

While her double-role here might strike some as stretching credibility, we mean to intentionally forefront the entangled relations of academic work, so often repressed in book reviews, book blurbs, peer reviews, and letters of recommendation. There’s nothing objective about our membership in various intellectual communities, as feminists have long argued, and yet professional etiquette regularly requires that we pretend otherwise. Dispensing with that performance, we take this opportunity to assess the state of feminist WPA work filtered through multiple standpoints: Donna’s doubleness, our history together, our individual experiences as WPAs, our investment in feminist theory and practice, and the publication of *Performing Feminism*—the only recent book to take an explicitly feminist approach to WPA work. Its status as such makes it especially important to us, given our linked investments, and should also give the wider community of WPAs pause, for *Performing Feminism* is a lonely book, a genuine outlier in the field (which is why this “review essay” reviews only one book).

(UNDER)PERFORMING FEMINISM

As noted above, we found terms in this collection to be very similar to the ones we encountered in the 1990s, both of which reflect the prominence

of second-wave feminism, particularly via practices like mentoring and collaboration. Interestingly, though, the title of *Performing Feminism* gestures toward the third wave, characterized by a rejection of prescriptive feminist ideology and affirmation of identity as flux rather than fixed categories. While the performativity of gender is a key insight from the last two decades, “performing” here mostly signifies ways of doing feminist administration (hereafter femadmin), but in general does not explicitly reference views of performance from queer theory or performance studies that might more emphatically call attention to intentional choices to refuse identity categories, the effects of contradictory embodiments, or reiterative subversiveness and its consequences.

Feminism and WPA work have always been strange, even estranged, bedfellows. High-minded principles and political commitments are nearly impossible to uphold in the seductive scene of management. Indeed, Ratcliffe and Rickly identify the dominant trope threaded throughout the volume as “oxymoron—the ability to keep two contradictory ideas in one’s mind and still function effectively” (xiv). Likewise, contributor Sibylle Gruber acknowledges the longstanding tension between theory and practice for feminist administrators, encouraging readers to embrace rather than dismiss ambivalence about this relationship.

Even the most dogmatic politico needs to staff sections on Monday, review hundreds, if not thousands, of student evaluations, deal with zealous upper administrators who view composition courses as ripe for common readings and countless other institutional initiatives, and observe classes guided by pedagogical strategies considered timely some 20 years ago (and then rehire the instructor without resources to extend professional development opportunities). Yes, this business will dull the edges of the sharpest knives in the drawer. Thus, it’s no surprise that feminism has never really gained momentum in WPA scholarship or practice, both of which have been largely guided by instrumentalist thinking, the sort of pragmatic, outcomes-based decision-making familiar to most WPAs. *Performing Feminism* affirms feminism’s constipated emergence in WPA and offers glimmers of striving toward different relations.

Focused on femadmin carried out in various locations, the book is organized into five parts that respectively address ethical and theoretical issues, collaboration and its problematics, gendered assumptions that affect administrative practices, WAC and Writing Centers as sites for doing femadmin, and other institutional contexts where femadmin is performed.

While one does not come away with a strong sense of the political edge that feminism offers these administrators, the desire to *find a way* to do femadmin, however oxymoronic, drives the volume. For example, Farris

finds her way in a lit-centric department, often experiencing her role as comp director in terms of a self-sacrificing mother-figure; Mattingly and Gillespie address power-sharing and expanding agency among writing center tutors; and Hanson, reflecting on her experiences as department chair, recounts how she sought to put feminist principles into practice. Offering a surprising take on how to find a way to do femadmin, Ronald, Beemer, and Shaver write from a context usually at odds with feminist practices—the Business School, where they serve as writing consultants. The title sets the tone perfectly: “Where Else Should Feminist Rhetoricians Be?” The authors configure their role in the Business School as partly to “challeng[e] any notion or practice that portrays business as a male pursuit” (166). They continue, “Because we claim rhetorical authority as expert consultants, we can often perform critiques that colleagues, especially untenured women colleagues, might hesitate to voice” (166).

Moving from location to principles, Leverenz urges readers to engage with feminist ethics recursively—highlighting issues related to care, otherness, and process—in an effort to develop administrative strategies guided by such thinking. Reid’s discussion of a “good enough” femadmin model in which care (of self and others) is a cautious centerpiece resonates with Leverenz’s focus on ethics. Reid offers a strategy mindful of directors’ and programs’ limits and needs: “We can enact caring in a wide range of ways that can all be good enough, manageable, flexible, and locally successful—in ways that can fully engage our feminisms to help us and our programs grow and prosper” (141).

The inclusiveness of feminist ethics has direct connections to collaboration, a subject that gets considerable attention in this volume. In their chapter, Strickland and Crawford propose interruption as a tactic for calling out status differentials among collaborative partners. Christoph *et al.* also acknowledge power variances in relation to graduate WPAs, calling for decentralized, situational mentoring that arises organically from a given administrative context. Also proposing a ground-up model of administrative work, Hea and Turnley develop a model of feminist technology administration that repudiates the mastery model; more specifically, they describe their approach to mentoring new computer compositionists as a “collaborative, praxis-based model of mentoring...[to] work against technological determinism” and to open spaces that value mentee knowledge and experience (115).

The goal of collaboration, regardless of difficulties, might be best summed up by Gaillet and Guglielmo, who write that collaborative models “create space for innovative leadership, draw on the strength of individual faculty members, allow opportunity for building problem-solving strate-

gies, encourage experimentation, and foster mentoring” (65). These laudable goals do tend to pass here (and elsewhere within Composition Studies) as feminist. Collaboration and mentoring are smart, pragmatic administrative practices, but it’s not always clear what is distinctly feminist about them. This nagging sense that feminism stands for practices dissociated from politics is an issue not confined to this book; rather, *Performing Feminism* invites us to pivot toward a broader consideration of what difference particular feminist frameworks make to the viability of femadmin.

PERFORMING OTHERWISE

“What works?”—a pragmatic and instrumental logic—is the pervasive mode of thought in WPA discourse, as Donna has argued in her recent history of composition (see Strickland). This orientation informs theory’s uptake too, often limiting inventiveness that might evolve from varying, and in some cases, esoteric critical standpoints. WPAs are often embattled, busily getting things done. The two of us recognize, have experienced, and understand why this reality frequently becomes the grounded location for doing theory. However, we’d like to argue for the value of theory for innovation and inspiration, not necessarily (always) for implementation. Our guiding assumption is that we all need thinking tools for rejuvenation, for learning how to ask fresh questions, for reframing the ordinary in less familiar terms so as to experience and examine it anew—something Donna has referred to as “operational” reason (what happens if we do this?) as opposed to instrumental.

Theory can offer an interruption in the application to practice, a valuable way to slow down and think with others, which may lead to surprising (if indirect) insights. In addition, approaching theory this way can take femadmins, in particular, beyond a second wave frame of reference—so rich for practical application—to engage with a diverse range of feminist and other critical theories that invite affective dissonance. Gruber makes a similar point in *Performing Feminism* when she confides that “theoretical guideposts sometimes fall short of understanding our practices” (50). Rather than using theory to explain practices, we might approach theory less pragmatically and, in Gruber’s words, use “theoretical foundations to create a working environment” (50). In other words, theory can sometimes influence mood, feeling, or sensibility in relation to one’s work, if not always directly influencing content and frames of action. It can also engender innovative performances of femadmin that spring from theoretical insights.

A recent example of the latter is evident in Tara Pauliny's "Queering the Institution." Offering a counter-narrative to the downtrodden WPA narrative, which Laura, for example, discussed in "More Than a Feeling" (2002), Pauliny describes her queerness, coupled with her administrator status, as a productive wedge for generating institutional change. She formulates queer not exclusively as an identity or political category but as "an analytic methodology" that "has the capacity to challenge dominant ideologies and normative, repressive structures." For example, she writes, "When the APA [assistant professor administrator] chooses not to reproduce expected versions of the teacher/scholar/administrator, she is also refusing an identity-based formulation of her professional self. She makes clear the innate hybridity—and innate queerness—of her professional identity." Pauliny taps into the disruptive power and sensibility of queerness to help her construct a convincing alternative embodiment for jWPAs.

Just as Pauliny takes queer performativity to enact a different way of understanding the WPA position, so do Rebecca Dingo, Rachel Riedner, and Jennifer Wingard use a transnational feminist lens to consider the rippling out of effects that connect local writing program decisions to global economies. They take the out-sourcing to India of WAC/WID assessment at one US university as a cautionary tale and argue "if we are moving our disciplinary knowledge, practices, and commitments across borders . . . we must lay bare the relationships among material effects of labor, economic structures, institutional arrangements, ideological assumptions, and the unforeseen impact of policies and decisions made by seemingly disconnected actors." A feminism informed by transnational theory can provide the resources to reflect carefully on what happens "As universities turn 'global,' and as writing programs are built in new countries, often with the help of US-based writing program administrators."

The changing economic and geopolitical contexts of writing programs represent large-scale material realities; on a smaller-scale are economies of bodies, affect, and things. Seemingly peripheral to the workings of a program, these matters can in fact reveal quite a bit about WPAing. Laura sought to make this point in "For Slow Agency," which began to take form after some daydreaming about her doorstep, passed down from a former WPA who inherited it from once director Jim Berlin. The doorstep—a trivial thing, in some ways—became an object for meditating on administrator agency and pace through the lens of new materialism. WPA authority and agency, its abuse and its lack, have been important to feminist WPAs for some time now, and Laura's piece suggests alternative ways to conceptualize and enact both. The piece also illustrates our earlier point about the value of reframing the ordinary in less familiar terms, a key move in femi-

nist analysis, and of working with a wider palette of theoretical ideas. Both can lead to unexpected lines of thought; in this case, new materialism helps Laura address alternative work structures guided by “suspended agency,” a practice that interrupts the standard academic workflow and has implications for femadmin.

We offer these three examples of “operational” feminist reasoning, of trying out ideas to see where they take us, because open inquiry leads to surprise and inspiration, affective resources essential to the viability and evolution of feminist community. *Performing Feminism*, appearing over a decade after the high point of a feminist conversation about WPA work, gives evidence that many within the field still want to think about these possibilities, and still struggle to think beyond the apparent contradictions of such couplings. We’re suggesting that it’s time to release the worries about contradictions and to move toward new visions of feminist WPAing. We’re also suggesting that one way to do so is to expand the theoretical and critical frameworks at our disposal, aiming for what Donna Haraway calls “bag-lady storytelling,” which “proceed[s] by putting unexpected partners and irreducible details into a frayed, porous carrier bag” (160).

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