

Situated Writing as Theory and Method: The Untimely Academic Novella.

Mona Livholts (2020). London and New York: Routledge. 98pp. £36.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-367-27-602-7, £9.75 (e-book), ISBN 978-0-429-29-683-3

Is it possible that feminist critical theory transgresses the limits of dry prose and becomes poetic? And what would be the effects of such a transposition? Mona Livholt's book, *Situated Writing as Theory and Method: The Untimely Academic Novella* is a lively response to this question. It is a book that mingles fact and fiction in following the struggles and ambivalences of a woman to obtain a professor's chair in social work in Sweden while maintaining her passion for writing that remains marginalised and unrecognizable in her discipline. The book comprises two parts: 'situated writing', as an approach that combines feminist theorising of situated knowledges and writing as a tool, is the focus of Part I, while the three 'untimely academic novellas' that the author has written over the years are presented in Part II. However, the reader can start with the novellas in Part II and then move to Part I 'to get the theory'. This is not to suggest that there is a divide between 'theory' (Part I) and method (Part II). Both parts encompass theoretical, epistemological, methodological, as well as literary components. My suggestion to start with Part II, that is with the novellas, derives from the mere pleasure I have felt through my encounter with this hybrid academic genre.

I first heard Livholt's untimely academic novella, 'The Professor's Chair', back in 2008, at a research seminar organized by the Centre for Narrative and Auto/Biographical Studies at the University of Edinburgh in the UK. Twelve years later, I still remember my excitement at listening to the story of Mona, writing letters to her friend Maj about her obsession of becoming a professor, to the point of stealing a professor's chair from her department and bringing it home as a forbidden object of desire. Moreover, I have always found new ideas and insights in the novellas, every time I have re-read them, either because I had been asked to write a response to the novella for an academic journal (Halldórsdóttir et al. 2010), or when I decided to use the novellas for my inaugural professorial lecture, back in 2012. Livholt's sensitive, poetic and witty reflection on the harsh gendered regimes of the academic world in Sweden, reverberated with my own experiences of women's academic lives in the UK. It has to be noted here of course, that, by writing an 'untimely academic novella', the author did not want to create any form of generalities, but rather to use a mixture of fact and fiction within 'other spaces' and times yet to come — 'the untimely'. Although horizontal connections can be made, the author's intention in writing the novellas was to speak from a very specific situated position, what she articulates and discusses in the first part of the book as 'the politics of location'.

Although there are continuities between 'The Professor's Chair' and the two other novellas of the trilogy, there are also different foci in the three pieces. In 'The Snow Angel and Other Imprints', it is not only gender, but also 'social class' and 'race' that intersect in the author's experience through her love for the whiteness of the snow, but also through remembering her mother as 'the large woman, who was forced to carry her child in a box and eat on a small plate'. Finally, in 'Writing Water', where the dream of becoming a Professor ultimately falls apart, it is the author's embodied experience with the water she lives by and loves that inspires her to deploy the metaphors of 'ripples' and 'diffractions' taken as both physical and onto-epistemological phenomena in the work of feminist science studies and feminist new materialisms, amongst the many strands of feminist thought that the author discusses in Part I.

All three novellas highlight the importance of using different genres of writing in reflecting upon women's academic lives and the power/knowledge contexts within which they unravel.

What is also characteristic about the novellas is the deployment of the epistolary mode in decentering the subject, but also in showing that the writing subject is always already in conversation with real and imaginary audiences.

This is an excellent book that, apart from the pleasure of the text, also offers a great variety of ideas for graduate reflexive methodological and writing workshops. Livholts has used materials from this book in her teaching and in the last section of Part II, she has compiled a very useful list of open questions and concerns in guiding 'situated writing'. After so many years of having read the novellas and having discussed the epistemological and methodological framework of the author's approach, I am glad there is now a book that I can return to, as well as use with my graduate students.

References

Halldórsdóttir, Erla Hulda, Hyvärinen, Matti, Israel Kali, Jackson Stevi, Misztal Barbara A., Salter Andrea, Stanley, Liz and Maria Tamboukou. 2010. 'Commentaries on The Professor's Chair', *Life Writing*, 7(2), 169-172.