

# Theorizing Autobiography and Materialist Feminist Pedagogy

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This article offers a materialist feminist critique of commonly held, although naturalizing assumptions, about the appropriateness of “nurturant” pedagogy in feminist university classrooms. Using, yet interrupting, the theoretical autobiographical accounts of British feminist educators Valerie Walkerdine and Carolyn Steedman and American literary critic bell hooks, I interpolate passages from my own educational autobiography in my own critique, thus illustrating how what I call a “deconstructivist materialist feminist” pedagogy works in classroom situations.

Cet article fait appel au féminisme matérialiste pour critiquer des hypothèses courantes, quoique naturalistes, sur la pertinence d’une pédagogie “nurturante” dans les salles de cours féministes des universités. Utilisant tout en les questionnant les comptes rendus autobiographiques théoriques des éducatrices féministes britanniques Valerie Walkerdine et Carolyn Steedman et de la critique littéraire américaine bell hooks, l’auteure interpole des passages de sa propre autobiographie d’éducatrice dans sa critique, illustrant ainsi comment la pédagogie “féministe matérialiste déconstructiviste” fonctionne dans les salles de cours.

In this article, I use autobiographical texts, primarily but not exclusively my own, to theorize about changes in my understandings of one of the cultural and social texts of feminism, feminist pedagogy. My method of deconstructing commonly held feminist assumptions about feminist teachers as nurturers requires that I interpolate passages from my educational autobiography with more conventional analysis of the limitations of my own and others’ feminist pedagogy. Autobiography is introduced here to explore a gap or a lack about class in the academic literature of pedagogy. The approach I take, like that of Carolyn Steedman, in her theoretical autobiography, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (1987), implies that “the central interpretative devices of the culture might fail to account for the lives of women like ourselves” (p. 5). Like Steedman, I use the form and the trope of interruption to emphasize that I am not trying to reverse a binary, “nurturing teaching” versus some unnamed but brutal form of “repression” or “deprivation.” Invoking such a binary would be senseless, for it only reproduces classist assumptions about people like Steedman and myself who were brought up in working-class families and continue to identify with that class even after becoming members of the professoriate.

Like British Foucauldian feminist educational theorist Valerie Walkerdine (1990), I must struggle to name my subject position as an “educated working-class woman,” emphasizing that it may be provisional and shifting, a labour of identity-production no less fictional than any others (p. 158). Since that position is under construction personally, politically, and theoretically, I use extracts from my autobiography to name and take a place from which to write and to live my materialist feminist pedagogical practices, full well realizing and expecting that they should be and will be interrogated by readers who read from very different subject positions themselves.

The autobiographical extracts attempt to produce a counter-discourse of feminist pedagogy about the possible meanings of classroom nurturing. This article is a look inside myself as a working-class daughter become feminist academic trying to understand my own contradictory formation as a teacher at the same time promoting learning for critical consciousness. In disentangling those contradictions, I tell a different story about the categories used to name and pathologize working-class mothering and daughtering and I relate that story to what I see as the implicitly classist assumptions of most feminist pedagogical discourses. Although in my struggle to develop a feminist pedagogy sensitive to class and race as well as gender, I find the greatest inspiration and illumination in bell hooks’ (1984, 1989, 1990) practice of a pedagogy of confrontation, my own practices are much less demanding of myself and my students. Furthermore, since I am white, I am not so readily assumed to be as angry and dangerous as bell hooks is by her most privileged students: another disturbing intersection of autobiography and pedagogy.

Theorizing pedagogy through autobiography, especially working-class female autobiography, has been profoundly difficult for the few writers who have so far attempted it (hooks, 1984, 1989, 1990). Valerie Walkerdine (1990) remarked, several years after writing one, that, “my ‘coming-out-as-a-working-class-person’ piece . . . was the most frightening thing I’d ever written because it felt so exposing” (p. 38). Max Dashu, a working-class lesbian feminist theorist, wrote that “You risk being insulted by someone who doesn’t even know they’re giving offense” (1991/1992, p. 16). According to Walkerdine and Helen Lucey (1989), “In the USA it is no longer easy even to talk about class, since anything other than middle class is considered a pathological category (black, poor)—those who haven’t by dint of their own efforts, escaped” (p. 205).

If my argument is successful—because it is an interpretation within a story within a story about anger, loss, and belonging nowhere, not even in the bosom of the “talking left” or of women’s studies—reading it will likely be unsettling for many readers, not only or necessarily those who have grown up in middle-class families. Not all of those who grew up in working-class homes want to interrogate the notion of nurturing motherhood as a culturally and historically-specific constructed concept seen as the positive term of the binary whose negative term is a pathologized, insensitive and

authoritarian working-class mothering style. Some working-class women and men in general and feminist academics in particular, though I don't know any other than myself personally, might want to claim that their mothers were nurturing as that word is understood in the discourses of child development and pedagogy. They might not agree that the term is culturally loaded. In addition, they might claim that nurturing is not limited to middle-class mothering. I have no quarrel with the last claim, since mine does not primarily concern empirical realities, but the politics of making interpretations.

For the same reason, I do not and cannot argue here whether or not "The Working Class" is real now, was real once, but is no longer, is a European import which doesn't belong on North American soil, which in any case failed to make the revolution and must be replaced in progressive academic discursive concerns by the "new social movements" such as feminism, lesbian and gay liberation, and so on (Laclau & Mouffe, 1986). Instead, my concern is much more limited and hermeneutical: I want to question the process by which nurturing is constructed as what is sensitive, normal, and feminine for mothers, and, then, by extension, is assumed to be appropriate for female teachers, and then, by an even greater extension, is appropriated, sometimes, in my opinion, without critique, for and by feminist university teachers.

Taking seriously current arguments about theoretical and political problems of false universalizing means refusing to appear to universalize working-class families in general and child-rearing practices in particular. Nothing about "the" Working-Class Experience is universal. When I began the research for this article several years ago, I found an absence in left and feminist literature about how class forms, on a day-to-day basis, the complex and contradictory subjectivities of a woman like myself. Although much current feminist theorizing attempts to produce a simultaneous tri-systems approach to differences of gender, race, and class, most of those working in the field will admit that class, especially in North America, is the most occluded member of feminism's holy trinity. Determining what class means for feminists and for feminist theory and practice, especially perhaps pedagogy, is particularly hard and open to contestation. Moreover, in the current ideological and intellectual climate, it is easy for progressive academics to reject class as a meaningful material and discursive formation and to call those who wish to retain class as a problematic though still useful category of analysis "essentialists" (see Spivak's key discussion of the "strategic" use of essentialism, 1990, pp. 10–12; Christian, 1990, p. 62).

Current feminist writing about class as a form of difference is still relatively underdeveloped, by comparison with the theorizing of gender, race, and even sexual orientation. Most recent writing consists of anthologies of personal narratives by women who identify as working-class, arranged by editors thematically, and special issues of feminist and lesbian journals (Zandy, 1990; compare the similarities of approach and the similar com-

plaints about exclusion in *Quest's* special issue on race, class, and culture, Spring 1977, and *Sinister Wisdom's* special issue on lesbians and class, Winter 1991/1992).

Speaking, reading, and writing about class differences tend to make many feminist academics anxious and uncomfortable. Mary Childers and bell hooks, two working-class feminist academics in Oberlin College's English department, the first white and the second black, used a conversational format to discuss their similarities and differences across race and class in the anthology *Conflicts in Feminism* (1990). They believe the frequently used feminist cultural mode of shared story-telling tends to break down when women who have been "victimized" (their word) by race and class as well as gender use it in mixed speaking situations:

if a working-class woman intervenes with her stories, people often react in two unhelpful ways. One is to say, you are trying to make me feel bad; they assimilate that experience as an attack on themselves because they are afraid it makes it seem that their experience hasn't been difficult. Or they think we are holding on to little details and refusing to let go, so they need to correct our obsession. There is a resistance to recognition. (p. 72)

Fragmented narratives can produce similar anxious effects on readers who desire closure. Given the state of my autobiography and of the working-through of conflicts within feminism, closure is an impossibility. Finally, I want to make clear that this account is not offered as a conversion narrative. Having given my reasons for rejecting a nurturant feminist pedagogy, I can offer as an alternative only what I call a "deconstructive materialist feminist" pedagogy (compare Lather, 1991).

I can only suggest that teachers attempting to use a tri-systems approach work through the painful contradictions of gender, race, and class oppression by essaying a deconstructive materialist feminist pedagogy in dialogue with their students. Such an approach is costly in time, energy, and resources, and is best done one-on-one or in small groups. Although the literary critic Nancy K. Miller and the educational theorists Patti Lather and Valerie Walkerdine have in very different ways suggested how a theoretically sophisticated, decentred, and deconstructive analysis of feminist or progressive pedagogy might be done, they haven't provided readers with as many useful—that is, concrete and provocative—suggestions about how to develop alternatives to "nurturing for autonomy" as hooks has in her brief autobiographical essays, nor have they written with a specific interest in pedagogical practices as they relate to the women's studies classroom.

#### MY BRILLIANT (LEARNING AND TEACHING) CAREER

In this section, I use my own teaching history to illustrate what I believe is absent from most accounts of feminist pedagogy. As an educator, my personal history is one of "complicitous critique" (Hutcheon, 1989) with the

accent on both words. I've taught women's studies courses since 1977, first, in interdisciplinary or humanities courses where I was a very junior participant who inherited a nurturant pedagogical approach from senior feminist professors. My feminist teaching mentors displayed a care and compassion for their students, male and female, unlike anything I had previously encountered as student or teacher. Feminist university teachers are expected by their students as well as by themselves to behave like nurturing mothers who offer a form of unconditional love to their symbolic daughters (Morgan, 1987, p. 50). The familial metaphor is hard to shake in women's studies, but though I have never felt that teaching for critical consciousness was as easy to do as when I used a nurturing approach, eventually I came to critique it.

In 1985, I returned to my earlier disciplinary formation in English, but I still taught women's studies courses in literature. In the late 1970s, two things changed in my intellectual and political life. I began to study what is usually referred to as "theory" and I stopped calling myself a radical feminist (as that term is used in most of the feminist taxonomical literature, which is reviewed concisely and critiqued in a footnote in de Lauretis, 1990, pp. 267–268) because I became convinced its analysis of oppression was flawed with respect to race and class, and that it had evolved into cultural feminism and no longer had a theory or practice I considered textually or politically useful (Echols, 1984). My new understanding of the need to produce readings of texts sensitive to race and class as well as gender went hand in hand with my conviction that exclusions in feminism were both unjust and politically disastrous (Davis, 1981; hooks, 1984; Lorde, 1984; Lugones & Spelman, 1983). As one feminist literary critic put it, "there is no singular, monovocal theory worth writing" (Meese, 1986, p. 147), nor, I think, worth reading or using to inform political practice.

Nonetheless, I was unsure what I should do to make my pedagogy more consistent with both my theoretical and political analyses. My desire to do so was complicated by the fact that the earlier "nurturing," if not even "seductive mother" (Moglen, n.d.) approach seemed to work so well with so many students. Moreover, most feminist pedagogical literature seemed to support that approach, even to assume that it was by definition feminist. Feeling baffled and excluded by my own cultural and political analysis, and by my own learning and teaching experience, I wrote a paper together with one of my graduate students for the 1988 Socialist Studies conference in the Learned Societies meetings of that year which attempted to assess feminist pedagogy. I stress it was not so much my commitment to a certain kind of deconstructive essay form that problematizes its own limitations, but, initially, pain, rage, and bafflement over what felt like my own exclusion within the feminist literature and, then, a desire to work them through by means of a process of political sense-making, that led me to write as I did (compare Walkerdine, 1984). I interspersed a critical review of the literature with sections of my own educational autobiography. This is how I began the paper, which I have again and again re-worked:

*My mother, my first teacher, was a working-class woman of great will who venerated experts. When I was growing up, in the 1950s, she had not read Dr. Spock, but she had heard that mothers, who were not experts, should not teach their children to read because it would confuse them and actually hold them back. I had other plans. By the age of three, I wanted to learn to read. Because it was forbidden, it attracted me even more. I tricked my mother into reading me car license plates. And so, I gradually learned to read. The next problem was keeping it from her. By the age of four, I could read newspapers and some books. Luckily for me, we got a tabloid, so I could explain the length of time I spent looking at the newspaper by claiming I was just looking at the pictures. (Martindale & Majzels, p. 1)*

This extract from my educational autobiography is open to many different interpretations, as are those to follow. For example, a reader can apply to it Bowlby's classic ethologically based idyll of instinctual mothering, which was sensitive and required a mother who did not work outside the home, and its opposite, insensitive and inadequate mothering. In the work of his many followers, notions of maternal deprivation were extended considerably and included linguistic deprivation. These are still very popular today, for obvious ideological reasons. The liberal counter-argument to the "working-class mother as depriver" argument, arguing that working- and middle-class mothering styles were different but "equal," is discussed and rejected by Walkerdine and Lucey (1989, p. 42). (For their materialist feminist critique of classist feminist analyses of inadequate mothering, see pp. 144–147, and Steedman, 1987, pp. 125–139.)

I foreground that admission of multiple readings of my mother's behaviour for many reasons. Among them is intellectual consistency; my teaching and writing about women's autobiographies is informed by feminist literary theories which treat autobiographies as works of fictional self-construction and concealment as much as or even more than as confessions and simple exercises in self-revelation (Brodzki, 1988; Fox-Genovese, 1988; Godard, 1990). My theoretical claim also implicitly problematizes the tendency to use the reading or writing of women's autobiographies as a means of inevitably promoting community building, as in this claim: "Personal histories create a sense of community and affirm the premise that the personal, the political, and the 'professional' are one" (Archer et al., 1980, p. 33).

Deleuze and Guattari (1986) say of the political aspect that the collective values of "minor" literature, such as autobiographies, female, even feminist autobiographies, do not exist in some utopian terrain beyond ideology (in particular, the ideology of possessive individualism). Teasing out the relationship in autobiographies, and in our interpretations of them, of the personal and the political, is an endless though necessary activity of feminist scholarship (Harlow, 1987). Post-structuralist understandings of the fictiveness and opacity of autobiography, even my own, should be used to problematize discourses of self-disclosure and nurturing in feminist pedagogical theory and to suggest that what has been called "the turn to the personal"

(Miller, 1991) in feminist theory must be interrogated by those interested in developing a materialist feminist pedagogy.

#### THE DISCOURSES OF MATERNAL AND PEDAGOGICAL NURTURING

In this section, I discuss how the discourses of nurturant mothering and teaching are collapsed in feminist pedagogy. I have used the extract from my autobiography to discuss feminist theorizations of motherhood and its relationship to writing in my autobiography course, where it immediately provides opportunities for class discussion, in both senses of the word. In related ways, Audre Lorde's *Zami* (1982) offers a brilliantly narrated example of similar mother-daughter conflict about educational ambitions in a racist school setting (pp. 60–65). Many students are disturbed by these narratives about mothers and about what appear to them to be very unusual and very unhappy, because “non-nurturing,” mother-child relationships.

They say that my mother did not do her homework. She did not read “parenting” books, even the standard Dr. Spock, whom “every mother” read in the 1950s, but that at the same time she allowed her fear of experts to retard her child's cognitive development. My mother stifled my intellectual curiosity and positively took steps to keep me from developing my mind. (Compare Walkerdine and Lucey's [1989] analysis of what they call the “democratic fantasy” of education and its basis in the oppression of women: “The bad mother is the one who either does not prepare or prepares the wrong way. She may teach her child facts instead of reason, or present an authoritarian instead of nurturant view of the school” [p. 117].) Not only did I learn to read unaided and at an early age, I had to conceal this ability from my mother out of fear of punishment were the truth and the accomplishment revealed. Where there should have been celebration, instead there was deprivation.

So baffling is my mother's behaviour to many of my students that they tend to conclude that she must have been rather mentally and emotionally disturbed to have refused to teach, that is, to nurture, that is, to mother. They also feel pity for me, the non-nurtured, non-mothered child who has unaccountably become their teacher. What might I do to/for them? What's wrong with the mother who doesn't apparently feel duty-bound to care for her gifted daughter in ways that seem natural and indeed definitional of maternal love to them? Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) show how class is naturalized in the discourses of pedagogy so that it seems as if we could all “potentially be middle class with the right brains and the right mothers” (p. 178). Similarly, bell hooks (1989) describes the pedagogical work she had to do in attempting to de-naturalize and de-universalize class- and race-specific assumptions about maternal caring made by another female graduate student: “To my white, middle-class California roommate, I explained the way we were taught to value our parents and their care, to understand that they were not obligated to give us care” (p. 76).

Interestingly enough for my purposes, the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, as well as most feminist pedagogy, supports my students' apparently class- and race-specific associations of nurturing with mothering and feminist teaching and, for me at least, seems to produce an unintentional but no less suggestive fantasia about their implications/complications:

**nurture** n., & v.t. 1. n. bringing up, training, fostering care; nourishment. 2. v.t. nourish, rear, foster, train, educate.

**nourish** v.t. 1. sustain with food (lit. or fig.); hence nourishing a. 2. foster, cherish, nurse, (feeling, hope, etc.) in one's heart.

**cherish** v.t. protect or tend (child, plant, etc.) lovingly; value, hold dear, cling to (esp. hopes, feelings. etc.)

**nurse** n. 1. (sick-) , person, usu. woman, employed in & usu. trained for care of the sick or infirm. 2. (dry-) , woman employed to take charge of (but not suckle) young children; WET-nurse . . . nurse-maid, young woman employed to take charge of child (ren), (fig.) one who takes solicitous care of another. [reduced f. ME and OF *norice*, *nurice* f. L.L. *nutricia* fem. of L. *nutricius* (*nutrix -icis* f. *nutrire* nourish)]

**solicitous** a. eager to do; desirous of; anxious, troubled (about, for, etc.).

(*Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 7th ed., 1982)

Political assumptions about the classed and gendered labour of mothering, nursing, and teaching stand behind and underwrite the etymological connections between these words. The *locus classicus* of this discourse is probably the 1985 article by Margo Culley, Arlyn Diamond, Lee Edwards, Sara Lennow, and Catherine Portuges, "The Politics of Nurturance": "We are, inescapably, also their mothers" (p. 14). I am also troubled by Nancy Schniedewind's (1979) untroubled maternalist discourse (p. 25). Writing later and more critically than Schniedewind, Kathryn Morgan never doubts the fundamental claim that feminist teaching is nurturant, although questioning how it can simultaneously be academically rigorous. She argues the feminist teacher is beset by paradoxical expectations that she will promote autonomy for her students while unconditionally nurturing them. *Gender* associations make this a difficult thing to mix:

it will be a difficult struggle partially because of the depth and origins of *our* idealizations of the nature of maternal love and partially because *our* current definitions of nurturance, in the context of the new woman-centred moralities of care, are not developing in this integrationist direction. (1987, p. 51; emphasis added)

These passages are problematic for me because their uncritical dependence upon a universalized experience or fantasy of nurturing motherhood informs their pedagogical expectations, if not the practice of nurturing motherhood. They keep the issue of nurturance-autonomy at the individual or dyadic level, as a paradox of and for the feminist teacher/student, rather than at the societal level, as a potentially politically useful contradiction.

The suggestion seems to be that if the solicitous and nurturing teacher can only balance these competing expectations, then the various intrications of power/knowledge between and among teacher and students can somehow be smoothed over and forgotten. The feminist classroom will function as a haven from the rat race outside, just as the bourgeois family is supposed to do. After all, the teacher and the students are on the same side, even though the teacher has access to and distributes scarce resources, such as grades, recommendations, awards, and so on, that the students are competing for but do not have equal opportunities to obtain (Roberts, 1988/1989).

By contrast with the assumptions of nurturant feminist pedagogy, as my autobiographical extract suggests, learning for me has always been conflictual. Since the beginning, it has been linked to and almost identical with transgression. Learning was something to be struggled for and sometimes even concealed. It was clearly a discourse of power. Although I was exposed, first by my mother and then by my female teachers, to traditional repressive models of education, I knew that resistance was nonetheless possible, even if I knew its price. (Perhaps this very early experience of resistance was what made my becoming a feminist possible in the first place.)

*My body was a site of learning too. I was left-handed. My mother felt that being left-handed in a right-handed world was catastrophic. Every time I reached for something with my left hand, I was slapped. Eventually I conformed in most ways, but learning to write right-handed was a struggle. My mother conferred with the kindergarten nun, who was equally committed to eliminating left-handedness. If I persisted in writing left-handed, they agreed, I would be hit with a metal ruler and locked in a closet for a while. It worked. I write right-handed, but when I play squash, I have two forehands. It looks strange, but I'm formidable. I stay out of closets as much as possible.*

In the autobiographical anecdote I've just related, some feminist mothers/teachers might see a clear case of repressive mothering/teaching. Throughout her work, which is informed by a feminist Foucauldian analysis of overt and covert systems of regulation and networks of power/knowledge, Valerie Walkerdine (1985) offers another perspective: the nurturing model conceals a binary opposition between normal and pathological, covert and overt regulation, which constructs working-class mothers and children as "different" and deviant:

Where everywhere middle-class parents are identified as more "permissive" in relation to children's transgressions and disobedience, they also "provide more warmth and are more likely to use reasoning, isolation, show of disappointment or guilt-arousing appeals in disciplining the child." Working-class parents, on the other hand, "are more likely to use ridicule, shouting or physical punishment in disciplining the child, and to be more generally restrictive." Permissiveness in child-rearing is thus associated with an absence of coercion, an absence of overt regulation which is seen as punitive, and harmful. (p. 216)

Walkerdine (1985) denies that power imbalances between mothers and children or teachers and students can be done away with simply by talking about them (p. 211). This is a departure from other feminist attempts to deal with domination in the classroom through interpersonal communication, particularly through self-disclosure on the part of teachers (Beck, 1983) or students, as in Schniedewind's practice of using "structured participatory experiences to draw out feelings" as ways of fighting racism and sexism:

I explain that we will do an exercise in which a volunteer, on the outside of a circle, tries to break in. A person volunteers, all others hold hands to form a close circle, and the outsider tries a variety of strategies before she gets in or gives up. I process the activity by asking how people felt during the activity and how they compare their experience to the dynamics of racism and sexism in society. (Schniedewind, 1979, p. 27)

The claim that this is how feminist pedagogy integrates cognition and emotion legitimates such practices, which are painful and infuriating to those students who experience oppression daily, especially on grounds other than gender. Power can't be wished away. Students and teachers who have been formed in a misogynist, racist, and class-stratified society cannot undo what has been inscribed in us simply by acting as if our subject positions and our social realities have already been transformed.

*In twelve years of Catholic schooling, I learned a lot about power/knowledge. Had the nuns read Foucault's Discipline and Punish, but mis-read the subtitle as "The Birth of the Parochial School"? Like my mother, the nuns did not approve of thinking or asking questions. We learned long division for several years and we recited the times tables as much as we prayed for the destruction of communism. The main method of instruction was abuse, emotional, verbal, and physical, although I couldn't name it as that at the time. In spite of spending many days in the waste paper basket or in the "bad writers" row (it wasn't what I wrote so much as that messy right-handed writing), I was always first in my class. Though the abuse was similar to what I experienced at home, there was one magical difference. At school, I was praised for being smart. In my family, I was considered strange. (If they had been more sophisticated, I might have been considered neurotic.) I got hooked on praise and winning prizes, medals, and the other paraphernalia of academic prowess. Because girls were considered stupid, beating them was not interesting; beating boys was. Knowledge was power, all right, and power was male. I was female, but I was smart. And so, I became an honorary male.*

One of the most memorable ways in which feminist philosopher Kathryn Morgan names herself as a living contradiction is as a "bearded mother" (1987, p. 50), by which she means that in the classroom she has power and she nurtures. The contradiction generates paradoxes. As acute as her observations about pedagogical practices are, Morgan downplays the contradic-

tions in the enterprise of feminist teaching, emphasizing instead the contradictions in the *experience* of the feminist teacher as role model (p. 49). By focusing on the professor as atomized individual, Morgan assumes a relatively uncomplicated subject position. That allows her to turn the contradiction of “nurturing for autonomy” into a paradox in which the feminist teacher mothers her students, but wants their papers in on time. Power is assumed to be a fixed possession, subjectivity is taken as unified and non-contradictory, and desire is denied or turned into nurturance.

*The elementary school nuns had been working-class bullies. The high school nuns were petit bourgeois thugs. That is, the abuse continued, but it was carried out with more style. My lack of respect for the nuns’ sacred authority was thought to be a result of my poor background. I was still first in my class, but I didn’t look right. The algebra teacher wouldn’t start her class until I got the hair off my forehead; the nun who took our pictures for the yearbook wouldn’t take mine until I covered my ears. I refused to pray. The nuns were confused. They had never encountered a smart girl who wasn’t docile. My mother died when I was nine and my father didn’t have her patience for educational repression. In fact, he loved to argue with me about history and politics. I always lost, no matter how many “facts” I had at my command. He was proud to call himself a reactionary. We lived out the cold war in our apartment until I finished high school. A working-class Irish Catholic with a grade 8 education who nonetheless managed to perform more or less as a corporation lawyer, he was paid peanuts and lived in terror of losing his job. He had been fired once when the bank found out he was Catholic. My middle-class friends haven’t believed his job history; he, almost as stupidly, insisted that his employers had a right to hire and fire as they saw fit. In spite of his personal contradictoriness, he taught me to argue well most of the time. In any case, arguing was better than crying, that is, that smart girls who want to be listened to should turn tears of rage into cold, controlled rationality.*

*At sixteen, I ran away to university, a mediocre place where they gave me a full scholarship and free room and board. As far as I knew, all such institutions were the same: no nuns and no family. I was free. I intended to go to school as long as I could.*

As my understanding of the relationship between gender, race, and class deepened, I came to see that “autonomy” and “nurturing” are profoundly class- and race- as well as gender-loaded terms. Generally speaking, the working-class girls in my neighbourhood grew up faster, and had more independence and more family responsibilities than middle-class girls. If they failed at school, there was generally no safety net beneath to catch them. Nonetheless, this is not an experience of “autonomy,” of freely chosen self-regulation. Working-class mothers, preoccupied with more basic issues, such as their children’s survival, do not tend to see themselves as nurturers. As Walkerdine (1985) explains,

working-class mothers . . . remind [their children] that for a variety of tangible reasons, they do not have the choice, a central component of the bourgeois order which is continually held out to them as a possibility. So, working-class mothers . . . shatter the illusion. But, such shattering is difficult to live if dreams of fulfillment—of constant presence, constant happiness—are proffered as reality. (1985, p. 238)

#### CONTRADICTIONS AND COMPLICITY

*I believe my background has placed me in a privileged epistemological position. Because family life and school were so remarkably similar, I couldn't help but make connections between them. The ways of power/knowledge were naked, my complicity with their seductions was transparent.*

*Nonetheless, when I began to encounter the bourgeois family and educational system at a closer range rather late in my career as a student, I was, for a time, enchanted. Who wouldn't prefer the company of a female professor of graduate English who takes you to lunch to that of functionally illiterate nuns who beat you with a yardstick? Who wouldn't jump at the chance to be welcomed into the community of scholars as an honorary male and honorary bourgeois? At the very least I had to be silent about my working-class background or admit that my parents were merely deprived and pathological. That was part of the bargain if I hoped to become an "autonomous agent."*

[This autobiography could and probably should be interrupted and interrogated at any point. Here, in 1992, I must add that frequently, all too frequently, my middle-class friends and colleagues have argued with me that I couldn't be working-class for the following reasons: I'm too smart and it was a long time ago. Sometimes they grill me on the details, hoping to find redeeming features that they can read as evidence of bourgeois traces. They really don't believe that I'm working-class, and/but they can't figure out why I insist on claiming such a stigma. Cultural theory colleagues tend to be bored with my talk about class. Am I economistic or something?]

*Though I had learned how to re-tool my working-class persona to fit into the petit bourgeois world of my university, when fellowships and anti-war activity took me to the University of Toronto, I didn't know how to pass at the Harvard of the North. Within weeks of arriving at graduate school, I had blown it. I thought you went to graduate school in English to learn about literature, in particular to discuss ideas. Very soon, the faculty and other students knew I wasn't serious, knew I wasn't one of them.<sup>1</sup>*

*I can't completely explain why I persevered with higher education since it failed to satisfy most of my needs. Though I still succumbed to the lure of praise and prizes, in the classroom itself I never felt the euphoria and intimacy I felt doing political work or arguing about ideas in coffee shops.*

*As my growing political activism increasingly competed with graduate school, I was no longer number one. My thesis supervisor told me I'd never*

*finish, and that it didn't matter anyway, because there were no jobs. When I did finish, and won an award for best thesis, he told me that, unfortunately, he couldn't help me get even books to review, let alone a job. I became an academic feminist and joined the part-time professoriate. I still had no political analysis that could explain my situation.*

My lack of personal experience during childhood with the bourgeois fantasy of nurturing motherhood and progressive education, would appear to offer little grounding for my earlier pedagogical practice. Nonetheless, until the early 1980s, I attempted to be nurturing, especially in my women's studies classes. I would do nearly anything to win over the students, but in general, I felt that I failed when the classes remained polarized. I'd come out of those classes feeling drained and discouraged, whereas in the more advanced courses, where more students tended to be feminists, there would seem to be less conflict and more cosiness, and I'd come out feeling euphoric.

I'm not sure why I used the nurturant approach; perhaps because all the other feminist teachers seemed to use it, or because nearly all my students were determined to present themselves as "middle class." I wasn't always brave enough to allow polarized classes to duke it out. I sometimes "managed" the conflict. Even in my cosiest classes, all women, most identifying as some sort of feminist (Davis, 1983, pp. 89–97), there was always conflict and passion, but I sometimes preferred to think of it as coming from students hostile to feminism, and they were usually the majority in the introductory courses. Unlike the few other feminist educators who have recently been trying to theorize resistance to feminism in women's studies courses (Ellsworth, 1989; Lewis, 1990), my experience comes from largely if not exclusively female classrooms. Most of the resistance to the feminist analysis I rely on, a tri-systems approach which sees gender as inextricably interwoven with class and race, and which also attempts to be anti-homophobic, comes from female students, many of whom would describe themselves as feminists.

By the early 1980s, my apparent success, rather than my failure, began to trouble me. As I attempted simultaneously to make my teaching less ethnocentric and more theoretically nuanced, I began to question what I had been doing and whose interests I had been serving. In particular, my analysis of female and feminist subjectivity had been inadequate and self-alienating, trapped as it was in the humanist concept of the individual as autonomous agent, "who, as in the humanist dream, sees all relations as personal relations, in which power, struggle, conflict and desire are displaced and dissipated" (Walkerline, 1985, p. 207). Sadly, coming to understand this did not immediately dissolve or destroy the appeal of such a vision of subjectivity, since it is deeply encoded in teaching/learning relations in patriarchal capitalism. For this and other reasons, my autobiographical extracts should not be read, for they were not written, as an uncomplicated conversion nar-

rative of how I have found a feminist pedagogy that has saved my or my students' souls.

Recently, when I have given papers on pedagogy for critical consciousness, some feminist colleagues have indicated that they are confused by my critique of nurturing. If my practice is not nurturing, what is it? Is it repressive? How could that be, for they admit that I do not seem to be a cold or unfeeling person or teacher. Thus, they invoke the binary opposition again (nurturing/repressive) and suggest how politically problematic is the so-called "turn to the personal" in feminist pedagogy, as well as in feminist theory in general (Miller, in Christian et al., 1990, pp. 74–81; Walkerdine, 1986, p. 55).

What's nightmarish about this dream? It takes one model of feminist interaction and accountability—still a culturally-specific familial paradigm, but one based on notions of egalitarianism—and transforms it into the mother-child pattern, a relationship which might have an appeal for some, but can never be egalitarian, and, as constructed in capitalist patriarchy, must be oppressive. The dream's logic is the logic of capitalism: offer tainted and partial glimpses of "freedom" to one sector of the population while taking it away from another. Net gain: zero. The dream's logic is also the logic of patriarchy: offer work to women in the public sphere but turn it into a ghetto that is an extension of the family, the private sphere.

Walkerdine's writing, unlike that of most other feminist pedagogues, shows how denying the teacher's power by transforming overt policing into covert regulation displaces conflict and reframes work into play. Through this transformation, female teachers, who are after all working professionals, are transformed symbolically into mothers or playmates. Like all idealisms, the dream of teaching as a way of playing our way into freedom has its crazy-making component neatly built in. By collapsing the differences between the possible and impossible, it encourages feminist teachers to think they can and ought to do the impossible. When they can't free their students, the symbolic mothers are made to feel guilty and inadequate and the symbolic children feel deprived and cheated.

It's important to inquire why most feminist pedagogical writing fails to treat the classroom as a workplace. Schniedewind and many others emphasize the playful aspects of feminist teaching. By that, I mean the usage of techniques such as creative visualization, role-playing games, free journal-writing (which is nonetheless commonly graded and can be used as a method of surveillance), and various forms of group-work that try to make learning about frequently grim social and cultural texts more like "fun." Because I've used many of the techniques she and the others discuss, and successfully, too, I have felt conflicted about analyzing their cultural and political limitations. Since I have given up many of them, I have been uncertain what to put in their place.

## TOWARD A DECONSTRUCTIVIST MATERIALIST FEMINIST PEDAGOGY

In this final section, I discuss how and why I've attempted to transform my pedagogical practice in the light of deconstructivist understandings of power relations in the classroom. Partly because of my observation that the nurturing for autonomy approach increases what I call "dominance bonding," or eases the contradictions for more privileged students by allowing them to think that they still occupy the mainstream, I've attempted to resist them by re-designing the curriculum of my courses. In particular, in my women's autobiography course, I refuse to tokenize the writings of women of colour, working-class women, and lesbians.

Although I've also tried to re-think my methodology, it seems that in terms of technique alone, there is nothing "new and improved" about the ways I work through contradictions in the social and cultural texts my students and I bring to the classroom. The first year I directed a women's studies program, and the class polarized between self-identified feminists and non- or anti-feminists, I brought in an excellent psychotherapist and part-time women's studies colleague to help them "process" their anger. The second year, when two students clashed almost violently about the degree to which women have the choice to plan their lives, particularly their education and their reproduction, I developed an exercise for focusing on some of the differences within the class.<sup>2</sup>

In literature classes, abandoning what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1987) has provocatively termed the "pop psych" or "babysitting" model for more overtly confrontational teaching (p. 117) has meant a more intense opening up of the contradictions within assigned readings and my students' and my own interventions in class. Results so far have been mixed. My classes feel less "comfortable" to me, at least, in the sense that they are more overtly polarized (Bannerji, Carty, Dehli, Heald, & McKenna, 1991). bell hooks (1989) also refers to her teaching style as confrontational and admits that many of her students, particularly the more privileged women, do not immediately experience it as "fun or positive or safe" (p. 53).<sup>3</sup> Of course, the worsening political climate may very well account for some of these changes. While all students have some difficulty with theories of women's autobiography that critique common-sense notions of experience, self-disclosure, and unified subjectivity (Martindale, 1991), those who have previously felt like Others in some women's studies classes feel curiosity about and engagement with texts that do not appear to ignore or marginalize them.

Nonetheless, resistance to both the curriculum and the methodology has become more vocal, at least from some of my more privileged women students (Bauer, 1990; hooks, 1989, p. 102). Wherever possible, I use students' resistances to further their own and my understanding of our lives and their relationship to a materialist feminist pedagogy. For example, they frequently ask, with some irritation, why I don't teach more texts that focus on the lives of "normal," that is, white middle-class heterosexual Canadian

women like themselves. In return, I try to theorize about their discomfort with some texts and insist that they not short-circuit personal disclosures in them and in the classroom in order to silence alterity, but go full circle with personal accounts to reveal their contradictions. (A literary theorist trained to stress the intertextual nature of all texts, hooks gives a concrete example of how she uses her students' written passages of what she calls "personal confession" to encourage them to relate their experiences to the published texts they are reading. hooks's intention in requiring such writing is not to promote students' narcissism, but to deepen their reading of the social and cultural texts they are studying and creating in their own lives. If they don't read them differently, then she concludes that her writing exercise has failed pedagogically [1989, p. 54].) Although such interchanges between students and teachers can be tense, some students' movements from silence or non-verbal indications of disagreement and discomfort to articulations of their methods of reading and writing autobiography can also be useful in opening up discussion of the textual and political implications of difference in the feminist classroom. (Contra Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986, some feminist educators recognize that women students' silence can mean many different things [Ellsworth, 1989, esp. pp. 308–314].)

It's not incidental that Nancy K. Miller, another theorist who has written about feminist pedagogy at the graduate English level, is less playful and optimistic than most writers. Miller is very aware that feminist pedagogy belongs to the politics of cultural work (1991, pp. 38–42). Unlike Morgan, Miller perceives her situation not as paradoxical, but as contradictory. Given that, she attempts not to "soften the edges" (Morgan, 1987, p. 51), but to expose "the blind spots in the dominant codes (and modes) of meta-critical discourse as they are pressed into the service of a feminist analysis" (Miller, 1985, p. 196).

Miller (1985) concludes her essay by questioning "how to create a critical identity which understands the discourses of mastery without succumbing to their seductions" (p. 198). Walkerdine (1985) notes that her analysis is "not to be countered by a total pessimism but rather a working with and through an exploration of both our own formation in all its historical specificity and the formation of other possibilities of practice, as well as locations from which to struggle within existing ones" (pp. 238–239). Because we are attempting to be feminist teachers as we work within the deconstructive moment of feminist theory, we are caught up and limited by the work of undoing, rather than of reconstructing. While I answer my colleagues' questions about what to call this approach by telling them I call it a deconstructivist materialist feminist pedagogy, I believe they want more than a name: They want a methodology and theory of pedagogy. I cannot, at this point, provide those kinds of closure, either. For my theorizing practice aims to be not merely transgressive or progressive, but revolutionary, while acknowledging how far we now are from the historical conditions which would make revolution possible (Spivak, 1987, p. 92).

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For the only other similar printed accounts I know of about what institutional intellectual life was like for racially or politically non-conforming female graduate students at this university, see Bannerji (1991, especially pp. 67–70, and the introduction to Mukherjee (1988).
- <sup>2</sup> I use two narrative extracts based on students' lives in my women's autobiography class to teach how class affects classroom dynamics. After my students read both accounts, which are written in the third person, I lead a general discussion involving questions appended to the narratives. Then I ask students to re-write the extracts in the first person and notice what happens. Sometimes I tell the class that the working-class woman is my sister. This entire exercise produces extremely lively discussion in which nearly every student participates, and seems pedagogically effective.
- <sup>3</sup> I do not believe that any classroom can be made completely "safe" for all students and teachers while we live and work in a sexist, racist, and homophobic society. In Canada, Marc Lepine offered the clearest and most deadly evidence of that unfortunate fact. Videos such as the University of Western Ontario's "Chilly Climate for Women" (1991) suggest how "unsafe" Ontario universities are for all women. As a teacher who is not only a materialist feminist but is working-class and untenured, too, I am and have always been aware of being unsafe. Perhaps my very sense of unsafety allows me to endanger myself further by "permitting" my students to feel uncomfortable about uncomfortable topics.

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