Unmentionable Things in Social Studies: Women's Issues?

Jean-Claude Couture

Abstract

The author is a middle-aged male teacher in Alberta, living under the Klein revolution and the corporatist pressures for so-called accountability. Feminism has reminded him that teachers are as much subjects as is the prescribed program of studies that they teach. Exploring women's issues helps teachers mediate what counts as a question in social studies. The author encourages social studies educators to revisit how patriarchal language sometimes limits our understanding of terms such as "security" and "politics."

Only as subjects can we speak
bell hooks

Gloria Steinhem wrote in the introduction to *Revolution from Within* that she realized late in the completion of her manuscript that she was attracted to the subject of women's self-esteem "not because other people needed it, but because I did" (1992, p. 6). At this point she understood what "deep shit" she was in—she had spent much of her life knowing better what other people were thinking and feeling than she did herself. Steinhem characterizes this "deep shit" as a psychological malaise she calls "empathy sickness." For me, graduate work in women's studies over the last few years has pulled back the mask of pure reason and objectivity that I used to confidently wear as a middle-aged male, privileged with access to the material resources of society. Speaking through this mask of pure reason, I taught *government*, *power*, and *security*, as if I knew what these words were about for everyone, in all places, and at all times. In what follows I will explore the growing concerns I have about my complicity in teaching political and economic concepts defined in ways that are at best incomplete and, at worst, debilitating and marginalizing for female students.

While it would be dangerous to characterize feminism as a single impulse or method of social inquiry, I believe exploration of what has been loosely characterized as "women's issues" does offer teachers some escape from a curriculum that enjoys (within its patriarchical sensibility) its own definitions of what it means to be a "citizen" who experiences *power*, *security*, and *government*. Permit me to explain with a few examples from my own personal experiences as a classroom teacher, and from concerns I have with the way the Alberta social studies curriculum deploys political and economic concepts in ways that limit the possibility of what feminist writers such as Haraway (1988) call an *embodied* curriculum.

The Alberta Program of Studies, like many provincial social studies curricula, depoliticizes certain spaces (homes, schools) and politicizes others (provincial and federal governments) in ways that privilege certain ways of *seeing* and *talking about* political and economic systems. After the threat of a province-wide labour walkout subsided in Alberta in mid-November, 1995, I was discussing with a class of Grade 12 students a statement made by Premier Ralph Klein that since there were so few student protests to his fiscal restraint program, there was probably not a lot of opposition to the cuts he was imposing on post-secondary institutions. I asked my class what they thought about the implications of Klein's remarks: *Are mass rallies and public displays of protest important barometers that a government should use to shape its policies?* Several students agreed with Klein's assertion: "These are tough times and despite the vocal opposition of interest groups (a.k.a. nurses, doctors, teachers), Klein should stick to his original plan." Others disagreed, claiming that public protest in the province never got off the ground because few people have been immediately or directly affected. Then one student asked me about the teachers: "Why have they not been more vocal? What about the kindergarten cuts?" I can recall sort of mumbling something about our provincial association's public awareness campaign, and how important it was for teachers to appear as supporters of public education and not to get *too* political. But I had no idea what I was trying to say. "What does it mean not to be *too* political." "What crap!" I thought as I felt the words spill out of my mouth. Then another student remarked:

> My cousin Alison worked at a laundry place in a Calgary hospital and was taking home around $1,000 a month after she took a 25% pay cut. And she has a kid at home. My mother's a nurse and she said 5,000 nurses lost their jobs in Alberta—and they are the ones that do a lot of the 'shit jobs' in a hospital. You hear about the doctors threatening to go on strike and look at what they make—what a joke! And teachers—they do pretty well compared to the laundry workers and nurses—plus that they don't have to clean up other people's vomit.

After the nervous laughter subsided, I realized how sanitized our conversation in class had been that day. Our conversation had been about abstract ideas like "democracy" and "participation." Yet the student's remark brought us back to a place where women's issues are often located—the less visible "shit jobs" like cleaning up other people's vomit. These are jobs I recall my wife doing with our young children in the early years of our marriage as they passed through the inevitable bouts of flu and colds. Gradually, I learned to do them too, but never to the full satisfaction of my children. Visiting an ailing relative in an extended care facility recently, I was struck by the intense and publicly invisible labour involved in caring for those who are not well. It was *all* women doing this work.

The low status and money accrued to daycare workers in this country is probably more of a meaningful comment about

"power" and "politics" in Canada than anything you could read in a standard social studies text on government. Politics finds many women where they labour at the less visible jobs—jobs that society demeans through structurally discriminatory pay scales and employment practices. Feminist writers like Haraway remind us that when social studies moves down from the "view above" into the embodied world of women, we soon discover that women do not need to look for politics—politics finds them. Later in the same discussion that day, one of my students wrote about difficulties she was having with her employer who was sexually harassing her: "I don't need to study power in dictatorships in the textbook—*it* studies me at work."

Feminism reminds us that language does not merely say something, it performs something. Language circulates differences that come to matter over time. Judith Butler argues that the *body* is a "style" constructed over time as the *flesh* becomes *materialized* through the "effects of power" circulated through the relations of labour and capital (1993). Haraway would say the ideas become *embodied* here (1988). For women, as with any marginalized subject, their particularity or difference lies within the stylings of the unequal access to economic and social resources (Butler, 1993). Women's issues are about the language of power and the power of language.

In Alberta, the current Program of Studies for Social Studies represents a series of hypertrophied compromises that largely sidestep the particular embodied concerns and issues that students face in their daily lives. The stated goal of the course is to evaluate critically the political and economic ideologies of modern nations as well as identify and evaluate the sources of conflict and co-operation among nations in the 20th century. Not bad for one course! One of my students commented of the course's ambitious scope, "There's more stuff in this course than at *Walmart* where I work." As pressure for accountability mounts, the language that constructs "citizenship education" in high school social studies across Canada attempts to be comprehensive in its coverage, robust in its descriptions and detail, and rigorous in its demands on students' critical thinking abilities. In patriarchy, it is not uncommon for academic rigour to be achieved through the god-trick of distance: the view from far away calls on one to equate quality with the breadth and number of historical examples instead of with the depth of a few localized cases. Few teachers would disagree that most high school curricula are overloaded with content specifications and prescriptions. Substituting breadth for depth is a common problem that feminist curriculum criticism sees in public education's rush to be seen to be accountable. As Haraway reminds us again, the patriarchical "view from nowhere in particular" is much more comfortable than the view from within the complex difficulties of an individual's everyday living. In Alberta, where I teach, students write a three-hour examination that represents 50 percent of their final mark and consists of 70 multiple-choice questions and a so-called "position paper" prepared without any reference material. Standardized external examinations limit the posing of interesting questions like what is politics? what is security? and who counts as a citizen? Let us examine how we might begin to expand the limits of what counts as knowledge in social studies.

Feminism encourages us to think about the way we use language and the way language uses us. Consider the term "security." In what context should the questions who has security? and who does not have security? be asked? In answering these questions, subject position is everything. As Butler would argue, concepts such as "security," "politics," or "economics," need to be examined within the lived experience of the flesh becoming a body. In a society such as Canada where 54 percent of women are afraid to walk outside at night (*Edmonton Journal*, November 29, 1992, p. A3), the definition of "citizenship rights" and "security" becomes devoid of any generalizable meaning (unless of course you are a male). Consider the case of a 20-year-old Calgary woman who was sexually assaulted and knifed and then charged $181 by the city's ambulance service for the trip to the hospital (*Edmonton Journal*, June 16, 1993, A6). The woman complains that, since she already finds it difficult to keep up financially working as a waitress "This is going to make it tough, I'm already behind on my rent." Her predicament raises the question within Butler's sense of the *materialized body*: for young women in our classrooms, what meaning can be given to the concept of "security" where every 17 minutes in Canada a female is sexually assaulted? This is what I would call an embodied social studies question (Fulford, 1994).

Some say we plan a curriculum much as we build a house. I prefer to think of "planting" a curriculum, where concepts such as security are allowed to grow within the middle spaces between community, students, and teacher. Feminism reminds educators that the word "concept" is derived from the Latin, *concipere*, "to gather the male seed." For feminist curriculum theorists such as Madeline Grumet, curriculum ought to become the bonding of thought (seed) to the relationships within the world: "The child and the idea are generated in the dialectic of male and female, of the one and the many, of love" (Grumet, 1988, p. 8). A female student once told me about walking down the hallway at lunch time while a group of male students sat on the floor staring at her as she went by. A couple of them snickered, one remarked "she's a 4." Knowing, as she did, that the number referred to a score out of 10, she walked away and cried. As Wendy Brown suggests, "Even when women acquire civil rights, they acquire something that is, at best, partially relevant to their daily rights and the main domain of her unfreedom" (1992, p. 17).

When is the fact that girls in many high schools feel intimidated walking down a hallway ever addressed as a social studies issue? Or that access to contraceptives in a small rural town in this province is virtually non-existent compared to that of a larger centre? Why is not the study of labour unions and employee-employer relations a fundamental part of social studies curricula across Canada? How many social studies courses make an effort to examine the labour practices of trendy clothing stores that so many of our female students work in? Feminist writer and activist, Naomi Klein, has thoroughly documented the exploitative labour practices of many chains, such as *Club Monaco* and *le Chateau* (1995). Should learning how to speak up for one's rights and organize collectively be part of an "essential learning outcome" (to use current accountability buzz-words) in social studies? Or should we keep our students occupied studying the failure of the Treaty of Versailles to maintain European stability in the inter-war period?

The splitting off of the public sphere from the private sphere is an obvious example of

how a patriarchal coding of social studies concepts acts to diminish and erase feminine agency in our society. Consider the efforts by women's advocacy groups to have housework included in the calculation of Gross Domestic Product. In 1992 StatsCan reported that the replacement value of 44 household activities necessary for maintaining a family would be $285 billion (*Globe and Mail*, April 11, 1994). There is an acrimonious debate going on in this country about what should count as GDP, yet how many teachers discuss this question with their students? Questioning the meaning of a concept as seemingly innocuous as GDP is only one example of how feminism reminds us that subject position is everything. How one's work is "viewed from above" by the dominant patriarchal capitalist discourse as it hovers above women's embodied and often invisible experience is a central issue for women that social studies needs to address.

Recall that *women do not have to find politics, it will find them*. I believe this is a crucial message that surfaces from the conversation broadly framed by discussion of women's issues. In 1991 Canadian women with college degrees made $1,000 a year less than men with primary school education. Women with university degrees earned 63 percent of what men did (Ministry, 1992). It is up to individual women how they will respond to their material conditions. Some activists see a chance for women to find a political voice in current institutions of state-centred political organization; others see this discursive democracy as insufficient. These activists call for an embodied material democracy, one that seeks locally to build equal access to social and economic resources by reconstituting fundamental relationships and institutions in society. Either way, the road ahead for women will be a difficult one. If women, as co-breadwinners in the home, quit working today, half of the families in Canada would drop below the poverty line (Ebert, 1995, p. 212).

With questions about what counts as a question, I begin to sense the "deep shit" I am in as a middle-aged male social studies teacher. I suffer with many of my students the same unmentionable "empathy sickness" that Steinhem wrote about: the failure to live the connection between private life and public life, and to explore my own preoccupation with hypertrophied terms such as "human rights," "security" and "democracy." With increasing pressures to be accountable to the normalized state-centred language of politics and economics, the Diploma Examinations in Alberta have increased the symptoms of "empathy sickness." I hyperactively struggle through the obstacle course that has become "teaching the curriculum"—now more and more a preparation for a final comprehensive examination envisioned by others who live outside our classroom. In the language of accountability our students are made normal according to the number of tests they pass.

The Diploma Examinations do the limiting job they are designed for, which is to define and circulate among the teachers which language it is worthwhile speaking. Students can now purchase commercially produced test booklets appropriately entitled *The Edge*, which denotes for me two significations: one implying the winning edge of the high performance athlete who is running an obstacle course, as a downhill skier would, the second being the delineation of what is *in* and *out*. I recall a discussion I had in a Grade 12 class about the May 1993 fire in the Kader toy factory in Thailand that killed 188 workers (mostly women and girls as young as 13). When I mentioned that Chinese workers make $1.00 per day in toy-factories that sell to transnationals like Kenner, Gund, and Mattel, a few students raised the issue of moral responsibility in their toy buying habits. And then I heard the question from the back of the room: "Is this on the test tomorrow?" I could not say anything, choosing to hide my disgust behind the mask of a dispassionate listener. I leaned back, pressing my anger into the back of the chair.

As I read more about feminism, I guess I learn that I am as much a subject as what I teach. Maybe writing this paper is a way to stuggle through "empathy sickness." I do not claim to be getting much better though. Paying attention to women's issues reminds us that we are all subjects of the language we speak. Writing about the erasure of women's experience in what has been traditionally accepted as political science, Struening recently wrote that given the ecological and social problems facing the world, the academic disciplines can no longer afford to separate the languages of experience of men and women. For Struening, the imperative for students of the humanities and social sciences is to broadly define politics as "the activity of speech that has the potential to bring strangers together" (1992, p. 207).

Women's studies reminds social studies educators that we need to be mindful of the political effects of our educational practices. More than bringing women's issues into the curriculum, perhaps we can hope for a reconstitution of the language used in our teaching—a language of embodiment that recognizes that, like ourselves, our students live politics and economics every day as subject-bodies within patriarchal regimes of language relations. I have argued that power, security, and GDP are words spoken behind the mask of pure reason, what Haraway called the "view from above." What I hoped to demonstrate is that this place behind the mask is a distant and empty one where the bodies and flesh of our students do not live. Neither can ours as teachers.

References

Brown, W. "Finding the Man in the State." *Feminist Studies* 18 (Spring 1992): 7-34.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Ebert, T.L. "Subalterity and Feminism." In K. Myrsiades and J. McGuire, *Order and Partialities: Theory, Pedagogy, and the Postcolonial*. New York: SUNY Press, 1995.

Fulford, Robert. "Putting the Spotlight on 'date rape'." *Globe and Mail*. December 21, 1994. A14.

Grumet, Madeline. *Bitter Milk*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.

Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism as a Site of Discourse on the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14 (Sept. 1988): 575-99.

hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Klein, Naomi. "Salesgirl Solidarity." *This Magazine* 28 (Feb. 1995): 12-20.

MacKinnon, C. *Feminism Unmodified: Discourse on Life and Law*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987.

Nicholson, L. *Gender and History: The Limits of Social Theory in the Age of the Family*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

continued on page 89

about violence as a form of entertainment? I know girls can separate reality from media fantasy, but how many murders and violent scenes or lyrics are they exposed to before they reach this understanding? Is violence simply a part of life—always has been, and always will be? Having listened deeply to conversations Amy and I shared, I wonder how and where she made sense of watching and reading about violence, in particular, about film that connects sex with violence. Where could she talk about what she watched in educative ways? Where could Amy write about her movie-watching experiences? In diaries? At home? At school? With whom?

Each time my conversations with Amy began with the opening of her blue social studies binder and the stories she constructed of failing, of not making the grade. This leaves me to wonder why writing journal entries of experiences of viewing, seeing, and hearing about violence in popular culture was problematic—why are these stories ignored? Can there be spaces for these experiences in social studies classrooms?

Note
This work was supported by an Alberta Advisory Council on Educational Studies grant to K. Cairns and D.J. Clandinin.

References

Bach, Hedy. *Listening to the Voices of Girls: Narratives of Experience.* Unpublished Masters thesis, University of Alberta, 1993.

Brown, Mikel and Carol Gilligan. *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.

Clandinin, D. Jean and F. Michael Connelly. *Teachers' Professional Knowledge Landscapes.* New York: Teachers College Press, 1995.

Jaggar, Allison and Susan Bordo. *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstruction of Being and Knowing.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989.

Rubins, Nancy. *Ask Me If I Care: Voices from an American High School.* Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1994.

Hedy Bach is currently a Killam Fellow at the University of Alberta.

---

continued from page 82

Steinhem, G. *Revolution from Within.* Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1992.

Struening, K. *Gender and the Division Between Public and Private in the Political Writings of Aristotle and Rousseau.* Ph.D. diss., Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1992.

Jean-Claude Couture is a teacher and a doctoral candidate in the Department of Secondary Education, University of Alberta.

---

continued from page 86

Cherryholmes, C. "Knowledge, Power, and Discourse in Social Studies Education." *Journal of Education* 165, no. 4 (1983): 341-58.

Code, L. *What Can She Know?* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991.

Davis, F., and G. Nemiroff. *Gender Fairness in the Classroom: Theory and Praxis.* Paper presented at the annual conference of the Association of Canadian Community Colleges, Montreal, May 1992.

Hannam, J. "Women, History and Protest." In *Thinking Feminist* edited by D. Richardson and V. Robinson, 303-23. New York: The Guilford Press, 1993.

Light, B., P. Staton, and P. Bourne. "Sex Equity Content in History Textbooks." *The History and Social Science Teacher* 25 (Fall 1989): 18-20.

McKenna, K. "An Examination of Sex Equity in the 1986 Ontario Curriculum Guide for History and Contemporary Studies." *The History and Social Science Teacher* 25 (Fall 1989): 21-24.

Noddings, N. "Social Studies and Feminism." *Theory and Research in Social Education* 20 (Summer 1992): 230-41.

Stobart, G., J. Elwood, and M. Quinlan. "Gender Bias in Examinations: How Equal are the Opportunities?" *British Educational Research Journal* 18, no. 3 (1992): 261-76.

Walter, C. *Gender Bias in Social Studies 30 Diploma Examinations 1991-1993.* Unpublished master's thesis, University of Alberta, Edmonton, 1995.

Wilder, G., and K. Powell. *Sex Differences in Test Performance: A Survey of the Literature.* New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1989.

Connie Walter is a teacher at Victoria School in Edmonton and Beth Young is Associate Professor, Department of Educational Policy Studies, University of Alberta.