



## **Gendered Subjects: The Dynamics of Feminist Teaching**, Margaret Culley & Catherine Portuges, Editors. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985

*Reviewed by*

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*Gendered Subjects: The Dynamics of Feminist Teaching* is a collection of essays written during the past decade and edited by Margo Culley and Catherine Portuges, both of whom teach at the University of Massachusetts. The essays articulate in diverse voices a pedagogical method based to a great extent on progressive educational theory and the radical critique of education which emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Many of the contributors credit or refer to the work of Paulo Freire, and most trace their political and intellectual development back to the various movements of rebellion and resistance that arose in the 1960s. The essays reflect many of the ideas of radical educators such as Freire, Holt, Kozol, and Farber. There is the rejection of the "banking" concept of education and of the commodification of knowledge. There is a rejection of rigid hierarchical structures in the school and a call for greater attention to personal experience and process in the classroom. There is a focus on the social/political/psychological oppression of individuals and groups, and on the way, knowledge is socially constituted and historically conditioned. There is a critique of competitiveness and technological consciousness as these are fostered in schools. Finally, there is an emphasis placed on empowering students and teachers. What makes the overall critique of education and schooling and the pedagogical method presented in *Gendered Subjects* different from the radical educational critiques to which they tip their hat is that they infuse or imbue that radical critique with feminist theory. In many respects feminist pedagogy is a reformulated and represented version of radical pedagogy. Feminist pedagogy, the educational theory of the female outcast, has forced radical pedagogy to become conscious of itself. All those rebellious sons who questioned the Father from an unquestioned stance have been forced to look at their own collusion in the patriarchy. The essays in this collection give credit to radical pedagogical theory, but they subsume it and move beyond it.

One of the great values of this book is that it does breathe life into the older progressive or radical educational movement and stands in opposition to what is increasingly becoming the dominant discourse on schooling and education in the United States. When Secretary of Education, Bennett, the Superintendent of California's state

schools, Bill Honig, and Mortimer Adler are beginning to monopolize the discussion on how we should educate our children, it becomes extremely important to listen to the voices of people such as Frances Maher who reminds us of the multiplicity of human experiences and the need for multiple interpretations of those experiences. It is important that we are reminded of the need to, as Margo Culley puts it, "confront, uncover, and empower." It is important to hear the wonderful words of Michele Russel as she encourages teachers to "take one subject at a time; to encourage story telling; to give political value to daily life; to be able to speak in tongues; to use everything; to be concrete and have a dream." It is important to hear Adrienne Rich admonish teachers to be rigorous as they help students "name our selves." It is important to listen to teachers like Susan Friedman discuss not only the dynamics of sexuality and gender in the classroom, but also how our family dramas are reenacted in the classroom. It is important to be reminded by Judith McDaniel and Erlene Stetson of the reality of being a lesbian and a Black in this culture. It is important to listen to teachers like Joan Cocks and Nancy Miller grapple with transforming feminist theory into pedagogical practice.

It is also important, however, to ask a few questions of this text, in order to subject it to an analysis of its own gender, and to do this, I want to start with the physical appearance of the text. After all isn't that the easiest way to establish sexual identity?

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The first thing that strikes me is the cover. It is glossy black with hot pink and glaring white letters across the top. The cover reminds me of books I hid under my mattress in the 1950s—*Women Behind Bars* or *High School Confidential*. Perhaps these associations aren't so far fetched since many of the essays advocate the use in the classroom of personal experience or material which has often been considered confidential. The cover also reminds me of the new wave sensibility of the early 1980s and some of these essays do indeed deal with female students raised with a new wave sensibility and with the pop icons of Madonna, Cindy Lauper, and the Go-Go's. These are the students who consider themselves postfeminist, students who wear thrift store pink prom dresses and feel liberated.

Most of the essays in this book concern women students enrolled in courses on women's studies taught by women, and here on the cover in hot pink is *Gendered Subjects*. Is it pink for girls? Is it hot pink for independent girls or for women unafraid of their sexuality? Certainly the *Subjects* of the title refers to women's studies, women teachers, women students, and, in the case of the curriculum in general, to the stereotypic female absence. And then ripping into the hot pink letters, cutting across *Subjects* like a scissors snipping a constricting pink prom dress is *The Dynamics of Feminist Teaching*, suggesting a method of teaching which will free women from the

sexual grid which imprisons them. Finally, there is the black background of the cover, ever present, reminding one of the issue of race and its relationship to gender and feminism.

So what gender is this text? The appearance certainly suggests that it is female and so do the insides. All but three of the contributors are women. All the essays concern courses which are anchored in women's lives and most of the students referred to are women. As a physical object, as a discourse and as a sensibility, the text is anchored in, locates its origin in, and establishes its horizon in and on women's bodies. Listen to Margo Culley:

No amount of knowledge, insight and sensitivity on the part of a male instructor can alter the deep structures of privilege mirrored in the male as teacher, female as student model . . . One would not want to deny that many positive things can happen when a male is the instructor of female students . . . [b]ut these teachers cannot be the agents of the deepest transformation in a culture where women have been schooled to look to male authority and to search for male approval as the basis of self-worth. (p. 211)

Here is Frances Maher on the subject of women:

This essay has described some features of a classroom pedagogy to fulfill women's needs as students in relation to classroom treatment of the new scholarship on women. (p. 45)

Listen to Janice Raymond:

If separatism ultimately means integrity, then what Women's Studies as an independent, autonomous discipline seeks is its own original unity—a unity of context and methodology, a unity of its own traditions and values, and the unity of asking its own questions . . . If separatism ultimately means integrity, a separate Women's Studies program asserts that the nature of women's knowledge is *organic*. (p. 54) [italics mine]

And finally, here is Adrienne Rich:

Nor does this mean we should be training women students to 'think like men.' Men in general think badly . . . To think like a woman in a man's world means to think critically, refusing to accept the givens, making connections between facts and ideas which men have left unconnected. It means remembering that every mind resides in a body; remaining accountable to the female bodies in which we live . . . In breaking those silences, naming our selves, we begin to define a reality which resonates to us, which affirms *our* being, which allows the woman teacher and the woman student alike to take ourselves and each other seriously . . . to begin taking charge of our lives. (p. 28)

I quote these writers at length, because their words reveal how deeply anchored in female anatomy feminist pedagogy is. These are

mainly women writing about women teachers who teach women's studies with a woman-centered method. Both separatist and essentialist arguments run through this text, and this leads to two questions as well as what I see as the danger of a "feminist pedagogy."

The first question is raised by the editors themselves in the introduction. Culley and Portuges ask, "How then, one might ask, does feminist pedagogy differ from plain good teaching?" My answer is that it does differ, but only because it is literally for women and because it is discursively moored in gender. Good teaching involves the willingness and ability to communicate with students, to question and challenge everything and everyone including oneself, to be oneself fully and consciously in the classroom while examining that self, to utilize all methods or critiques ranging from theater techniques to a radical homosexual analysis, from group dynamics exercises to feminist theory, from jokes to critical theory, from dream work to Louis Farrakan's problematizing of white culture. It means staying alert or awake in the Buddhist sense, and it means never stopping one's own education. It means exactly what the writers in this collection advocate, only they have rooted their theory and practice in the female body.

The second question raised by the gender of this text is not spoken aloud but whispered around the edges of the pages of these essays. That question is "How do we educate our sons?" If we follow Culley's logic, only men can truly teach males since only those of the same sex as their students can be "agents of the deepest transformation." If we take the logic one step further, perhaps those men who are the real male pariahs or outcasts of this society, that is homosexual men, can be truly good teachers. Such an argument has been implied by a few writers, notably Hocquenghem (1978), Pinar (1983), and Ginsberg (1978). If in one sense women as mothers and teachers have been producing and reproducing sons who become the Father, and such an argument is clearly visible in the work of Chodorow (1978), Dinnerstein (1977), Gilligan (1977), and Grumet (1981), then perhaps we should entrust our sons to men who truly love men. If essentialism informs the discourse of feminist pedagogy and if separatism is an implicit stance in that pedagogy, then on the horizon of feminist pedagogical discourse emerges a kind of reformulated sexually segregated educational system. I am reminded of the Amazonian utopias of Sally Gearhart and Monique Wittig with their separatist communities and uneasy truce between men and women.

It is true that there are three male contributors to *Gendered Texts: The Dynamics of Feminist Teaching*, which at first glance might suggest that this is not a female text, but there is something

superfluous or anomalous about the inclusion of their essays. The tone of their essays tends to be apologetic. Here is Diedrick Snook on being a male feminist teacher.

While he may get a welcome hearing in the feminist community, as a man he remains an ally and cannot become, in the full sense of the word, a member of that community. This makes the male feminist doubly marginal: traitors to the common world of men and hangers on to the newly forming world of women. (p. 142)

John Schilb describes his temper as "another disadvantage of my gender" (p. 246). In becoming "feminist men" or "feminist pedagogues," these men deny their own experiences as men and place themselves in a discourse in which they are "other" and which colonizes their reality as men.

The practice and discourse of feminist pedagogy as presented in *Gendered Subjects: The Dynamics of Feminist Teaching* is informed by essentialist and separatist arguments and assumptions, and therein lies the danger of a feminist pedagogy. The old dualities are preserved. The origin of truth is found in anatomy. The oppressive grid of sexuality which feminism seeks to dismantle is preserved. The texture or richness of experience is etiolated and reduced in the service of a discourse and practice which are anchored in anatomy. Feminist pedagogy loses its usefulness to the extent that it sees itself as synonymous with good teaching, having an exclusive claim on good teaching and controlling the discourse on good teaching. It loses its force to the extent that it locates the origin and horizon of pedagogy in and on the bodies of women.

What I would argue for is a pedagogy which incorporates gender analysis, and by that I mean the analysis of how men and women are socially and psychologically constituted and the analysis of the political reality of men and women. I would argue too for seeing sexuality and gender as political realities rather than physical ones. I would suggest that the relationship between students and teachers and the transformation of both cannot be reduced to gender. Certainly, the transformation is more complex than Culley would have us believe. It also seems to me that the project for men should not be to become feminists, but rather to deconstruct our own gender; to understand our oppression of each other; to reimagine those qualities that have been ceded to or appropriated by men such as courage, toughness, fortitude, and justice; to come to grips with our primal hurt and rage; and ultimately to dismantle the sexual grid that oppresses us all. It seems to me that as the world becomes more and more homogenized and standardized, we educators must seek to preserve the differences and the multidimensionality of our experiences without letting them become frozen, without letting them overdetermine our behavior. *Gendered Subjects: The Dynamics of*

*Feminist Teaching* and the feminist pedagogy it advocates provide a method and theory for unfreezing our identities, for digging up and dissolving the assumptions and hidden perspectives which oppress us and make us less than we can be, but as it does so, it preserves certain anatomical moorings which keep us stuck in the very sexual grids we wish to suspend, investigate and loosen.

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