

BOOK REVIEWS

KATHLEEN WEILER (Editor). *Feminist Engagements: Reading, resisting and revisioning male theorists in education and cultural studies*. New York, NY & London, England: Routledge Falmer (2001). 207 pp. C\$32.95. (ISBN 0 415 92576 2). HB C\$128.00. (ISBN 0 415 92575 4).

“Education feminists, like other feminist theorists,” writes Weiler in the Introduction to *Feminist Engagements* “have been profoundly influenced by classic male theorists. Despite the claims of some feminists that women must create a new language and a new imaginary, it seems self-defeating to ignore the work of male thinkers who have addressed questions of knowledge, culture and power. Education feminists have shared both a language and political goals with these democratic and liberatory writers” (p. 1). What these goals have been, how they have been ‘gendered’, and how there have been particular gendered ‘points of departure’ for the project overall is the focus of this book. It is divided into an Introduction and nine chapters, each one addressing a different male theorists or ‘set’ of theorists ranging from Dewey (Maher), Dubois (Waite), Gramsci (Kenway), Freire (Weiler), Felman, Freud and Lacan (Pitt), Bernstein (Arnot), Foucault and Deleuze (St. Pierre), Hall (Henry), along with a more general chapter on critical theory by Lather. The book includes a section on Contributors’ Notes and a full index.

Although it is difficult to do justice to the expanse of the overall project in this review, or to the high quality of writing throughout, what I do here is draw attention to what I think are just a few of the “gems” of the book, and to why I think this book should be required reading in the programme of any doctoral student (male or female) in education. In a section early on in her essay on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre puts it like this:

I am currently teaching a new ‘high-level’ theory course to doctoral students, and I tell them my story about how I came to theory since I believe it is important to demystify our supposed expertise by hearing not

only what we know but how we've come to know. The students in this class seem to want theory, but others I teach, particularly in qualitative research courses, are not at all convinced that Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Patricia Hill Collins, Walter Benjamin, Elizabeth Grosz, Frantz Fanon or Karl Marx might help them, with their dissertation studies. . . . So when a student asks me, "Why do I need to read theory/philosophy to write my dissertation on student teacher beliefs?" I find myself making the feminist move of relating my own lived experiences with theory. And when some of the feminists in the classes ask me why I use male theorists, I tell them I'm not very fond of those, feminist or otherwise, who would police my reading and thinking. . . (p. 143)

She then goes on, in the essay, to relate the story of 'coming to theory' as a librarian, graduate student in the area of reading/writing theory, and finally as a professor at the University of Georgia.

Or, consider Kathleen Weiler's 'Rereading Paulo Freire.' In this essay, which comes out of other writing she has done on Freire's work, including a presentation at the American Educational Research Association conference in 1999, she draws attention to some of the tensions in how Freire writes about the public and the private, and how, even though his masculinist language of the 1960s was the accepted norm at the time, it nonetheless speaks to both inclusion and exclusion if one subscribes to the notion of how thought and language are shaped. What is fascinating in this essay is Weiler's own "take" on the various attacks she has received publicly for speaking and writing about Freire. One critic for example argues that it should be a Latina who speaks about such a prominent Latin American scholar as Freire in this way.

Frances Maher's essay "John Dewey, progressive education, and feminist pedagogies: Issues in gender and authority" is a fascinating one for anyone who began teaching in the sixties and seventies. Maher describes the constructions of 'facilitative' and 'democratic' that are central to Dewey's work in the context of what it meant to be a female teacher in apparently learner-centred progressive classrooms in the sixties. Her essay is particularly interesting for how she brings in other feminist scholars such as Valerie Walkerdine and Jane Miller who have similarly reflected on the problematics of the progressive movements in education. Walkerdine's essay in *Schoolgirl Fictions* on the pathological nurturance of women teachers, as Maher points out, is particularly insightful. Speaking of the Dewey-ite "triumvirate" of Herbert Kohl, Jonathan Kozol, and James Herndon, she writes,

I learned subliminally that all truly great teachers inspire their urban, disruptive students with a love of learning through their own deep sensitivity, respect for the students, and antiestablishment values (see Kozol 1967; Kohl 1967; and Herndon 1968). Their authority is a kind of magic; early failures are overcome through the teachers' idealistic commitments to the students. Meanwhile, the villains of their stories are all those authoritarian racist female teachers, archtypical spinsters who presumably

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remained behind while these three left the classroom, wrote their books, and became new (male) authorities themselves for the education of (female) neophytes. (14-15)

I could not help smiling, having recently revisited a personal journal that I kept through my first seven years of teaching in the early seventies, in which I write, at length, about another male theorist who surely belongs in this grouping, Paul Goodman (Mitchell, forthcoming). It is only 6 weeks into my first year of teaching junior high students in a small fishing village and, like Michelle Pfeiffer in the movie *Dangerous Minds*, and Glen Ford in the movie *Blackboard Jungle*, I am in search of theory. Somewhere I must have managed to get my hands on *Growing Up Absurd*: "He (Paul Goodman) writes about how incidental learning is the only real learning, and that teachers are only wasting the time of the children. I can't help but agreeing with him. Today was a totally frustrating one with the grade eights. They bitch and grumble about everything they have to do, and so it gets to the point where I might as well go in and dictate notes for 40 minutes and walk out" (journal notes, October 16, 1970). Clearly this wonderful collection of essays by my feminist colleagues has the desired effect of invoking further narratives on male theorists!

In essence, then, *Feminist Engagements* is precisely the kind of book that should find its way into as many of our graduate classrooms as possible. Over and above what is in the book, it has all the potential for a further "curriculum-in-the-making" in that one can easily imagine students using it as both an entry point to reading many of the theorists cited, and as a point of departure for engaging with other male theorists not covered in the book – from Habermas to Chomsky. But it should also inspire other scholars – male and female – to address the contributions to scholarship and teaching of feminist theorists like Kathleen Weiler, Frances Maher, Cally L. Waite, Jane Kenway, Alice Pitt, Madeleine Arnot, Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, Annette Henry and Patti Lather.

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