

The Ghosts of our Sisters: "Each Life Has Its Place"

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I hope we are as concerned as Colette Gosselin is that "girls' voices, knowledge, and experience fail to enter the discourse of classrooms at a critical moment when girls are eager and desirous of questioning their own enculturation and the structural and material forces that attempt to frame their emerging femininity and sexuality. It is true that at a moment when perhaps the opportunity is ripe for discourse, we educators let it slide by unnoticed. We fail to question the structural and material forces, as well as the emotional, cognitive, and body forces, that are on the loose in a girl's or young woman's life.

Gosselin has covered much ground in her essay, and I would like to offer my interpretation of one aspect of her work that focuses on Jane Roland Martin to demonstrate that Martin's concept of schooling can powerfully address the concerns that both Gosselin and I share. Before turning to this work, I would like to say that I am wary that several assumptions that I find in Gosselin's argument are somewhat generalized and, in taking such a broad sweep, lose some of their significance. First, while I understand that our socio-economic class, ethnicity, and gender influence us in divergent ways, I am not confident that middle-class white girls are not also swallowed up by the same orientation of "how to be female" in this world, even if they do not manifest this by turning toward romance novels as an act of resistance. If this is the case then middle-class girls may indeed have larger strides to make in deconstructing how gender plays out in their lives. The simple fact that the majority of middle-class young women see themselves with a career of some sort does not mean that they are not constrained by the same patriarchal hegemony.

Second, it is a large jump to assume that the choice of working-class white girls to read romance novels expresses opposition to the "schools dominant hegemony which the girls wish to oppose." I agree that dialogue about girls' desire is purposely and patriarchally suppressed in schools, but I am not sure that the turn to read romance novels is a resistance to that purposeful patriarchy. It may be safer to say it is a rejection of school control, which may not be conscious of any underlying gender constraints and definitions. In fact, it seems a little romantic to see it as Gosselin does. From what I know of romance novels (which without a doubt is very limited), they appear to countenance a discourse of desire, but only within a dominant patriarchal modality. In fact, some might argue that fleeing to a fantasy world of romance novels is a way of contributing to the continuing oppression of women, that is, to letting them play their fantasies out in a safe space where the privileged patriarchal world is never challenged. The girls have a sense of "bucking the system" by choosing these books, but their conscientization goes no further.

The last general assumption that concerns me is closely related to the second, that is, that by choosing romance novels, working-class girls are signaling that they are ready to oppose the dominant hegemony of the patriarchal world. Gosselin states

that “it is clear that these working-class girls desire a critique of their enculturation and question male hegemony.” I find this claim needs more support.

Gosselin correctly suggests that what we need to learn is how to be feminist teachers who could bring these issues to consciousness by utilizing a counterhegemonic dialogue. She criticizes Martin’s model as simply “flirt(ing) with the celebration of the virtues of the private sphere...which have been culturally assigned to women.” In defense of Martin’s model that Gosselin claims falls short of providing a challenging feminist pedagogy, I would argue that it is a more comprehensive and life-changing model. It goes far beyond any notion implied by the words “family studies.”

Let me make two main points in support of Martin’s model which I find most directly described in her book, *The Schoolhome*.¹ My concern is that critical dialogue is not enough to truly change paradigmatic views of oneself in the world. To support this, I will draw upon a quote that Gosselin herself uses. She cites Patti Lather as saying that counterhegemony is the “development of counter institutions, ideologies and cultures that provide an ethical alternative to the dominant hegemony, a *lived experience* of how the world can be different.”² What is key to this point is that Lather’s definition of counterhegemony includes two small words that often get overlooked by the looming concept of dialogue. So let me point them out again: *lived experience* is necessary to developing a counterhegemonic discourse and bringing individuals to critique a dominant discourse.

Conscious self-reflection is rarely enough. For example, for years schools focused on intervention programs for developing self-esteem where young people would make lists of their strong points, would share them with neighbors, make positive “I” statements, and more. After such a strong emphasis on these programs, research began to show that they had little, if any, gain in children’s self-esteem and what little they did generally was of short duration. Currently, intervention programs that are labeled character education are taking their place. In many ways, children again are repeating this process. They make lists of virtues to be developed, practice them as spelling words, draw pictures of what they look like, and then put away their projects in time to do math or social studies. I am afraid that programs such as these will demonstrate the same non-significant gains.

Alternatively, what Martin’s *Schoolhome* proposes is that students and teachers are immersed in a schooling context where one has the lived experience of bodily, emotionally, and cognitively encountering a paradigm in contrast to the dominant. And when contradictions arise, they arise out of this life-shared experience. In addition (and this is where Gosselin felt that Martin remained in the sphere of private feminized virtues), Martin proposes that the *Schoolhome* be imbued throughout with the “3 C’s.” These are care, concern, and connection. Martin’s conception of these descriptors is meant to cross the bridge between the private and the public world. They are not meant to keep women “feminized” and in the private world, but they are meant to *change* our world where there is currently unfettered hatred and crime and war. What could Martin mean by asking us to infuse our *Schoolhome* with the “3 C’s”?

First, drawing upon Paulo Freire, the type of study it takes to bring people to conscientization is demanding and recurrent over time. Once again, it requires a lived experience to provide a backdrop of meaning within which a critical dialogue can take place. Relying on critical pedagogy alone may focus too much attention on the teacher as the transformative or organic intellectual who provides the language of critical discourse that the students will need. More powerful than this model is one where students and teachers, engrossed in the existential nature of daily living within a school that has been infused with the “3 C’s,” bring their own contradictions to the fore.

Those acquainted with Freirean pedagogy know that a requirement of dialogue, as Gosselin points out, is having an intense faith in humankind and a profound love for the world and the people in it. A question that begs to be asked is if a Freirean pedagogy is based upon such intense faith and profound love, from where do these two background conditions come? Are we simply born with them in our emotional psyche? Do they come from nurturing early years in the home? From our larger culture? Due to our changing culture, if these are traits that need to be learned somewhere along the way of life, then we may be in trouble relying on all our homes or our larger culture, both of which often perpetuate the dominant culture we wish to critique for the well-being of girls and women. So where then do we turn? This is where and why Martin has described the *schoolhome*. Martin provides an environment where intense faith and profound love for humankind has the opportunity to grow and flourish for both girls and boys, women and men. Perhaps Freire’s dependence on these virtues corresponds to the virtues of the “reproductive sphere” that Martin maintains are necessary to imbue our public world. The values of the “reproductive sphere” should not be identified as either male or female because the work of raising our young, and caring for our world, and the skills needed to further humanity’s development, belong to both genders. Martin wants to raise the values of the reproductive sphere to the same significance as those of the productive sphere, and in so doing put a halt to the damaging dichotomy between the productive and reproductive spheres of life. Her school model is not one that includes a new, updated 1990s version of home economics or family studies, nor does it introduce “Caring 101” into the curriculum. Rather, she wants us to ask in each content area, what does *caring* have to do with science? What does *connection* have to do with history and what does *concern* have to do with math or English?

On top of these curricular changes and in order to move beyond dialogue only, she proposes that the *Schoolhome* create a holistic lived and shared experience where students and teachers alike are practicing care, concern, and connection. This is done by creating an environment where each person is needed for all the tasks of living and learning together. Students are not empty cognitive vessels, as we know; they are whole human beings who learn topics best by doing, and so in the *Schoolhome* the students and teachers all serve lunch, clean the floors, take care of the grounds, and so forth. Returning to Freire’s underlying value system, where does the security of having the faith and love come from? It comes from experiencing it on a daily basis where one’s very existence is needed and acknowledged in a relational whole.

Gosselin draws her essay to a close by utilizing a distinction made by Gatayi Spivak that indicates that we need to provide room for translation (not just interpretation) in order for students to critique the formation of their own subjectivities. While it is critical that we help girls and young women develop their own agency, it is just as crucial that they/we understand that this agency and understanding is an act of co-constructors. As dialogical selves, where do we find those who will co-construct with us? I would suggest that most schools now leave deep spaces of silence for girls and young women, and so they are forced to take upon them the male as the co-constructor or retreat to a fantasy world...neither of which challenges the dominant paradigm. As teachers, yes, we can be a voice to help fill the spaces of silence, but I would also bring into my *Schoolhome* the ghosts of our sisters and their experiences. In her book *Silences*, Tillie Olsen records the various ways that girls and women are expected to “write like a man” if they choose to be successful. These are:

1. Denying profound (woman) life comprehensions and experiences expression.
2. Casting (embodying) deepest comprehensions and truths in the character or voice of a male, as of greater import, impact, significance.
3. In writing of women, characterizations, material, understandings, identical to that of most male writers.
4. Refusing “women’s sphere” subjects altogether.
5. Writing in dominant male forms, style, although what seeks to be expressed might ask otherwise.
6. Proclaiming that one’s sex has nothing to do with one’s writing.³

As you listen to this list, imagine what a girl or woman is giving up to deny life comprehensions and to lose her voice. But rather than use the romance novel as a means of liberatory discourse, perhaps we may seek the ghosts of our sisters. Bring in the ghosts who speak of desire, who model what it means to accept oneself with desire and pleasure and who are not afraid to speak about it. Have our young sisters read of Virginia Woolf, of Maya Angelou, of Maxine Hong Kingston and find out what desire means in their young lives, and the costs often attached. Do not let them retreat to the fantasy world of romance novels that are only a fabricated façade of desire.

Who are the ghosts of our sisters and how do they haunt us? One of my favorite ghost stories comes from the well-known group, the Indigo Girls. Emily Saliers, one half of the songwriter/performer duo, had spent time in high school and college reading literature, including works by Virginia Woolf. Taught in the traditional manner, it was just more “words in” and “words out” with no educative transformation. Then one day, Emily’s mother, a librarian, gave her daughter a copy of Virginia Woolf’s diary. Emily set about reading Virginia Woolf’s diary. What occurred was the wonderful way that literature can haunt you and transform you and make sure you are never the same. As Emily learned about Virginia’s thoughts and personal life, she found the profundity matching her own struggles. And so Emily wrote a song in tribute to how the life of Virginia Woolf was not wasted, but had actually reached through the generations of time and touched her. It connected. She wrote and sang,

they published your diary and that’s how I got to know you, key to the room of your own and a mind without end,

Explaining the connection, Emily writes further of herself in relation to Virginia:

here's a young girl on a kind of telephone line through time,
the voice at the other end comes like a long-lost friend...

Then the powerful sense of care and concern come through as she beautifully describes the worth and value of Virginia's life as it has now touched and transformed her own:

if you need to know that you weathered the storm of cruel mortality
a hundred years later I'm sitting here living proof...
and so it was for you when the river eclipsed your life
but sent your soul like a message in a bottle to me and it was my rebirth so we know it's alright,
each life has its place...
each life has its place..."

For all the girls and young women who have felt or do feel that their place in life has been circumscribed by the dominant hegemony existent in the world today, or by the silences they encounter in schools, or the lack of meaning in a public world that shuns care, concern, connection, and desire, be assured that each life, your life, has its place and through living the experiences of care, concern, connection, and desire, and by hearing and listening to the ghosts of your sisters and the sisters who walk with you now, you will find that place and flourish.

1. Jane Roland Martin, *The Schoolhome: Rethinking Schools for Changing Families* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

2. Patti Lather, cited in Kathleen Weiler, *Women Teaching for Change* (New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1988), emphasis added.

3. Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1965).

4. Emily Saliers, "Virginia Woolf" (song), *Indigo Girls: Rites of Passage* (Sony Music Entertainment Co., 1992).