

4. I AM (NOT) A FEMINIST

Unplugging from the heterosexual matrix

THE QUESTION

"This is a very male-oriented school, and we've had problems in the past with teachers who identify as feminists. Would you describe yourself in this way? How do you see yourself working in a male-oriented environment?"

I am not a feminist. Or so I thought when I was interviewed for my first teaching job in the winter of 1993. During my day long visit to a private boarding school in the mountains of upstate New York, I was asked these questions in one of my interviews. I was surprised by the questions, and I didn't know what the right answer would be. I had never really thought about it. The dean who posed these questions filled my puzzled silence by stating that she was a working mother who believed in equality, but did not identify as a feminist.

Following her cue, I echoed back that I was not a feminist and talked about my ability to work in a male-dominated environment since I grew up with two older brothers. She nodded in approval and went on to explain that they had difficulties in the past with feminist teachers who had created problems in the school community.

It seemed like an odd thing to discuss in a job interview, but I didn't think much more about it. I was 22, didn't have a teaching certificate and was anxious to land my first real job out of college.

This was one of many moments that played a role in my development of a critical consciousness. The following chapter outlines the key moments on my personal journey and my intellectual awakening. In crafting this chapter, I reflect on my privileged upbringing as well as the conflicts I endured during my teaching and graduate school experiences. The emotional crisis moments that occurred along this journey helped me develop a deeper understanding of critical theory that went beyond the intellectual. By sharing these moments here, I hope to help others develop a new understanding of the world they live in.

THE MATRIX

Growing up I always loved school and had done well there. I changed schools many times due to my father's job in the U.S. Air Force, so I was constantly the new kid who had to step back and find a way to fit in at the beginning of school every other year. I became quite a chameleon who was good at changing my clothes, speech patterns, and after school interests in order to blend in to my new
community. As a middle class white girl from a nuclear family with two educated parents, two cars, and 2.2 kids, I was pretty successful at blending in at any school I attended. I was a Campfire Girl in Maryland, a second baseman on my Little League team in Ohio, head cheerleader in Texas, an actress-singer-dancer at prep school in Connecticut, and a sorority girl at college in Louisiana. I got good grades. I joined clubs. Boys liked me. I was an all-American girl. Aside from a few bumps along the road, life was going to be a smooth ride—except something changed after my second year of college. I fell in love.

This love radically changed me and how I experienced the world. Marie was a strong, outdoorsy, white, working class woman I met while working at a summer camp in New Hampshire. She challenged my thinking and views of the world in many ways. Initially, she hated me because I was a part of the clique of counselors who had spent many summers at that camp. We were loud, had endless inside jokes, and had deep connections with many of the families whose daughters summered there. We ran the place.

Marie was new and kept to herself. She lived nearby, but was from a different world. After a series of staff scheduling overlaps—life guarding, days off, and nights by the patrol fire—we eventually became friends. Over the course of two months, I had become fascinated with her outdoor skills and was touched by her painful life experiences and emotional strengths as I learned more about Marie and her world. She was a survivor of child sexual abuse. She was a member of the canine search and rescue team. She had been supporting herself since she was 17. Her life was so different from mine that I was forced to see the world in a new way. I admired her, respected her, and had fallen completely in love with her. I was also unbelievably freaked out about what that meant. I was terrified of being ‘gay.’ I started to see how privileged my life was when I saw how my life would change if I lost one aspect of it: my heterosexual privilege.

It took four months of exchanging long letters across the ocean while I was studying in France (this was in 1991 before email) for us to share our feelings with each other. We had vowed not to date anyone while we were apart, but didn’t share a first kiss until 6 months later: New Year’s Eve. We were together for almost a year before I could tell my family. In coming out to them, I was slowly coming out to myself, but I never used the words “gay,” “lesbian,” or “bisexual.” I was simply in love with Marie.

I finished college a semester early to be with her. I was horrified with my life as a southern sorority girl and couldn’t play the part anymore. I moved in with Marie in December of 1992 and got a job teaching skiing at a nearby resort in New Hampshire. We were finally together for real. Life was good—for a moment. It turned out we weren’t ready for the realities and pressures of living in a small mountain town as a closeted same-sex couple. The relationship ended, and I moved out. I had not formulated an identity for myself as a lesbian, so I went back to dating men. I believed that Marie was an exception and, when that relationship was over, I returned to my expected heterosexuality.

I was looking to start a career, and I wanted to find a job at a boarding school similar to the one I had attended. What do you do with a BA in French? I figured I
would try out teaching until I decided what I really wanted to do with my life. I found a placement agency that sent me to the mountains of upstate New York for the interview I mentioned at the beginning of my story. I got the job.

THE GATEKEEPERS

During my first few months working at Winter Mountain School, I quickly learned why feminist teachers had “caused problems” there in the past. This was a small school of around 120 students that was 65% male. The school had three boys’ hockey teams but none for girls. There were strong female athletes at the school, but most of them excelled in individual sports and had their own private coaches. The hockey culture dominated everything at the school, and although I am a huge hockey fan, I felt how the macho hockey ethos (which I now name as hegemonic masculinity) silenced and marginalized other teachers and students. Ruby was one of them.

Ruby was a senior who had attended Winter Mountain for four years and was a leader in her class. I didn’t have her in any of my classes, but it was a small school and she began seeking me out to talk. She loved to tell me about her recent summer experience on a wilderness expedition and the amazing friend she made over the summer. She told me about their long late-night conversations on the phone and how she missed her so much it hurt. She talked endlessly about her plans to visit her on the next vacation. I understood. It made me miss Marie. Her dorm-mates were starting to joke about her late night phone calls, and the boys were starting to harass her. They called her “rug-muncher,” “muff-diver,” “dyke.” I did what I could to offer support, but I felt pretty helpless to change the negative repercussions she was feeling for falling in love with a girl.

One day, my boyfriend (and assistant coach for the varsity hockey team), John Spear, showed me a copy of a newsletter that had arrived at the school library called Speaking Out. I had had many conversations about my relationship with Marie, and he was incredibly open and supportive. The newsletter was published by and for gay and lesbian teachers. I was intrigued. I was slowly developing a feminist consciousness in opposition to the culture of this über-macho school and wanted to do something for myself and for Ruby. John and I both decided to write articles for the next newsletter about how to support gay and lesbian students in the school. I wrote about how I shared with my students Melissa Etheridge’s new album Yes I am and Rita Mae Brown novels such as Venus Envy and Rubyfruit Jungle. I also wrote about the recent play I directed that featured a lesbian and bisexual character due to my regendering of roles. I framed the piece by reflecting on my hopes as a teacher: “I graduated from high school fairly ignorant of [gay] issues and was extremely homophobic. I’m hoping that as a teacher in a similar environment, I can save a few students from fumbling through the same frightening dark haze that obscured my soul for so many years” (Meyer, 1994). The article wasn’t radical, but it was offering support by trying to reduce the feelings of isolation and invisibility that both Ruby and I felt. In a small town,
before the internet, these representations were important to us both. It was what I could offer.

I began to take more risks as the school year went on, and I felt more confident in my position there. I had my contract renewed, and I was looking forward to returning the following year. That April, John and I attended a conference in Boston organized by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Teachers Network (GLSTN, now known as the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, or GLSEN). This conference inspired me and filled me with ideas and opportunities for action. I was developing a more active political consciousness. I also was starting to recognize the potential I had as a teacher. I began to brainstorm ways that I could introduce some new ideas at Winter Mountain. Just a few weeks before graduation, Ruby was kicked out of school and sent home because a friend accused her of using her calling card without her permission. It was the final straw in a series of unfortunate events and she was forced to go home.

After Ruby’s departure, the head of school ambushed me by calling me to his office on a Sunday afternoon in May when the school was deserted. I left that meeting shaking and confused. I had been fired. I was told I was losing my job over that newsletter article in which I had named the school where I worked, and had come out as bisexual. This had infuriated the headmaster. There were two weeks left in the school year, and I had to find a new place to live, a new job, and try to make sense out of what had just happened. I was furious. I was filled with self-righteousness. This is America. I’m going to sue. I wrote letters to GLSTN, the American Civil Liberties Union, The National Organization of Women, and Lambda Legal Defense Fund. I filed a complaint with the state labor board. I called lawyers in my family, cried to my parents and wrote letters to local newspapers about what had happened.

There was no massive call to action. No one rallied around a first year bisexual teacher losing her job.

THE REAL WORLD

That was the summer of 1994. It was also the summer of the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. The Gay Games were being celebrated at the same time in New York City. I followed my hurt and my anger to Manhattan and came storming out of the closet by joining the Lesbian Avengers. They met weekly on the top floor of The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Community Centre. I had tried out several different community organizations that used the centre to meet, but I knew the minute I walked into that room I had found the group I was looking for. I was blown away by the strength and passion and knowledge of the women in this group. I learned about direct action campaigns: grassroots activism and the gay and lesbian community. I heard about frustrations between gays and lesbians, the division between ACT-UP and the Avengers, anger between white lesbians and lesbians of colour, misunderstandings between lesbians and transgender women, as well as the impacts of class divisions and linguistic barriers.
Injustice was more common than I thought. I had been carefully taught my entire life to believe in the myth of meritocracy— that this country is one of endless opportunity and that if you lose your job or can’t find housing or don’t finish school, it is your individual failure. Did this mean I had failed? This was my crisis moment.

The world that I had been brought up in had disappeared. I was being forcibly ripped from my comfortable cocoon, and I couldn’t crawl back in. Initially I fought hard to get back in. I liked the safety and the warmth of these walls, the glow of these lamps, the way the world looked from here. It was what I knew. I didn’t want to lose that. I didn’t want to know differently. But this crisis meant that I could no longer imagine that life was fair and that bad things only happened to bad people. So I finished the job myself: I fled my cocoon and plunged into the real world. As Ani DiFranco sings, “some guy designed the room I’m standing in/another built it with his own tools/who says I like right angles?/these are not my laws/these are not my rules” (1992).

My middle class white girl woes were surprising only to me. My privilege had carefully protected me from this knowledge and kept these social realities invisible to me. My NYC Lesbian Avenger friends seemed to shake their heads and chuckle at my naïveté—was I the only one who had completely bought this “America, the beautiful” shit, hook, line, and sinker? I felt betrayed, duped, misled. What was all that crap about “the land of the free” and “all men are created equal?” Why aren’t more people pissed off? Why did this have to happen to me for me to see what was always there? What about people with privilege who never experience overt discrimination? Will they forever remain plugged into the Matrix living the manufactured reality that is being pumped into them? Or is there a way to raise their consciousness? How do we get people to unplug when it is so painful?

I spent a year illegally wheatpasting city signposts, marching in the streets, participating in kiss-ins, and demonstrating in front of homophobic businesses in New York. I wore black leather and pierced my eyebrow. Was anybody listening? Did all of this public fury ever result in any long term change? I didn’t know. I only knew that I had to know more, and this activist shit was draining me. I was sick of screaming myself hoarse on the streets, so I decided to “learn the code” and work from within: I applied to graduate school.

**TRAINING BEGINS**

I fled the city and my activist angst and returned to the mountains for temporary relief. First, I taught wilderness medicine in Idaho, and then led adventure trips in Maine before landing in Boulder, Colorado to start a Master’s degree in Social, Multicultural and Bilingual Foundations of Education. I was in my first semester of graduate school taking the obtusely titled course “Disciplined Inquiry” with Professor Margaret LeCompte when I first encountered the writings of Henry Giroux.

I had been suffering through my first semester of coursework dutifully digesting all the theory that was being thrown at me when I read Giroux’s “Critical Theory
and the Politics of Culture and Voice: Rethinking the discourse of educational research" (1986). Something changed when I read that article; it resonated with me. This was a scholar whose ideas got at what I had been struggling with. In my final standpoint paper for the course, I wrote:

Henry Giroux’s article on “Critical Theory and the Politics of Culture and Voice” was very exciting for me to read. It was the first article that I completely identified with and spoke to many of the ideas I had begun to formulate on my own. Acknowledging the fact that schools reinforce the oppression of society and the need to undo these structures was very reassuring to hear .... In short, I see myself as a post modern, critical theorist, lesbian feminist activist. How this came out of a traditional Air Force upbringing is still a puzzle to my family. I have experienced privilege in my life as well as discrimination. The combination of these forces is what drives me to understand and deconstruct the damaging structures of our culture. By virtue of my experience in the schools, I feel that education is one of the most powerful ways to reach people. (Meyer, 1995b, 8-9)

This class offered me the language and a body of work from which my emerging ideas could grow. It also forced me to go back and reflect on a course I had taken in my last semester of college for my B.A. in French: “Concepts of Literary Criticism.” I was finally able to make some sense out of the theories of Jacques Derrida (1967/1986), Jacques Lacan (1957/1986), and Michel Foucault (1971/1986) that had baffled me back then by connecting them to Giroux’s discussion of Bakhtin. I wrote “The common thread these writers develop is the idea of language as power .... The word is more powerful than the symbol or idea that it represents, so by controlling language, one can control the way people think and define the world around them” (Meyer, 1995b, p. 8).

I was grateful for the introduction to Giroux and other theorists such as Ann Fausto-Sterling (1981) and Evelyn Fox Keller (1978) who enriched my ideas about gender and feminist theory. I remember revisiting the feminist question with this class. One night when we were talking about issues of gender equity, I was getting frustrated with many of the students’ comments and posed a question that had been posed to me in that first teaching interview: are you feminist? In a class of 30 graduate students—predominantly female—only about five people (including the professor) raised their hands. I was so frustrated. Why didn’t people get it? I got it. Partly. Mostly. Why can’t they?

RADICAL THEORIES OF EDUCATION

The next semester I enrolled in another obtusely titled course “Radical Theories of Education” with Professor Dan Liston. I didn’t know what we were going to study, but a classmate encouraged me to take it, so I signed up. It was great. I was so excited by the treatment of the topics of class, race, ethnicity, and gender that were presented on the syllabus. Did this make me radical? I wasn’t sure. It seemed like a scary word, and I wasn’t really sure what it meant. This was where I first
encountered the work of Paulo Freire. I wrote about his discussion of banking versus problem posing education and praxis:

One of the strongest points in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is Freire’s discussion of these two opposite forms of education [banking and problem posing], and how productive problem posing education can be to achieving a truly liberated society. The concept of praxis, and stimulating creativity and reflection are very exciting ideas in the development of human beings. It can help reduce feelings of alienation by encouraging people to “transcend themselves, [and to] move forward and look ahead” (1970/1993, 65). (Meyer, 1996, p. 6)

I appreciated the theories studied and thrived on the class discussion, but was left wondering how all of these theories might talk about sexual orientation. Why did we never discuss homophobia? We were constantly grappling with racism, sexism, and classism, but the only time homophobia came up was if I made the connection, or Angela, the other lesbian in the class, asked the question. We read Michael Apple (1990), bell hooks (1994), Sandra Bartky (1990), Jonathan Kozol (1991) and talked about oppression, inequality, and systemic problems in capitalist schools. In this moment, I couldn’t help but ask myself: why are these theories radical? What is it about equality, human rights, and valuing individual differences that is radical? Is radical a state of mind or a level of action? Can it be one without the other?


Unfortunately, ten years later, these ideas are still considered radical. Although my scholarship has evolved from a framework of gay and lesbian identity and experience to one informed by queer theory (see Jagose, 1996; Meyer, 2006, 2007; Sullivan, 2003), the realities in schools and classrooms haven’t changed significantly. We still have to fight to include issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity in education courses and texts. The actions taken by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education in 2006 to remove “social justice” and “sexual orientation” from their accreditation standards, and research on the under and misrepresentation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues in Foundations of Education texts are evidence of this ongoing struggle (Jennings & MacGillivray, 2007). My scholarship, as informed by my understandings of critical theory, hopes to contribute to meaningful social change.
In August of 1999, I got a phone call from Ruby. She'd had a rough patch after leaving Winter Mountain, but was proud to tell me that she was finishing college and had found a job in NYC. She told me how she really appreciated everything I had done that year and apologized for not helping me more in my legal case against the school. She told me about her girlfriend and said that I had saved her life that year. It was so rewarding to reconnect with her and know that she was well. Although I look back and feel that my actions then weren't "radical," they had impacted someone else's life for the better. For educators, even small acts of resistance can be radical.

I am a feminist. I am a radical queer scholar activist educator who is aware of the political nature of these labels. I know they scare some people. I know I might not get jobs because of what I am writing here, but I also know that I can't work where I'm not allowed to act responsibly in the face of oppression. We need to name things. We need to interrupt sexist, racist, and homophobic incidents when they occur. If we get mired down in the liberal humanist discourse of generic kindness and the "can't we all just get along" attitude, we will never be able to take apart and make visible the deeper structures that allow inequalities to persist. Just as Peggy McIntosh's work as a feminist trying to expose male privilege helped her learn to see white privilege (1988/2004), it was my loss of heterosexual privilege that forced me to swallow the red pill and build a new understanding of the world. This is the language and the strength that critical theory has given me. I am still in the process of learning to renegotiate the world and my place in it. I hope the story of my queer journey may help others to "unplug" and work against oppression in all its forms. Follow the white rabbit (Carroll, 1865; Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999).

NOTES

1 See (Butler, 1990) for more on the concept of the Heterosexual Matrix.
2 When first names only are used, a pseudonym has been provided. When last names are provided, they refer to the actual individual whose public scholarship or activism is relevant to the experiences shared here.
3 Not the actual name of the school.
4 The concept of hegemonic masculinity is taken from (Connell, 1995). He proposes that there are four main categories of masculinity: hegemonic, subordinate, complicit, and marginalized. Hegemonic masculinity is a form of culturally dominant masculinity that can shift and change depending on the relations involved. In North America, it often includes such characteristics as athleticism, hyper-heterosexuality, violence, and dominance. Please see (Woog, 1998) for more information on hockey and homophobia.
5 John went on to become a key staff person in the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network and a national figure in its projects aimed at creating safer schools for all.
6 I recast one of the male parts with a female actor due to the limited number of males interested in auditioning for the play and the amount of females interested in participating. This change made one character lesbian, and another bisexual.
A meritocracy is a society in which each individual earns his/her status due to his/her own efforts, without a connection to one’s family or status at birth. This myth of meritocracy allows the financially successful in a democratic capitalist society to believe that they earned their place on the economic ladder on their own merit. It also perpetuates the elusive American dream: with hard work and initiative anyone can succeed. This myth allows those living in poverty to be blamed for their circumstances and allows society to ignore the impact of systemic factors such as sexism, racism, and classism on one’s economic status.

This refers to Neo’s learning how to maximize his impact on the world inside The Matrix by mastering the code (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999).

Democratic theories of education argue for more equitable access to and outcomes from educational opportunities. These theories explore barriers and facilitators to academic success in public schools and argue for educational reforms that would more effectively “level the playing field” for all students in public schools.

REFERENCES

Carroll, L. (1865). Alice’s adventures in wonderland.


