

## **Productive Tensions: Feminist Readings for Women Teachers' Oral Histories**

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According to Sandra Harding, the best feminist work ensures that research is grounded in women's experiences, includes the power relations between researchers and researched, and works towards the elimination of patriarchal oppression.<sup>1</sup> While these commonalities are pronounced in most feminist studies, feminist researchers study from diverse and contested epistemological positions.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, contests over the differences between poststructuralism and materialism have taken precedence in the quest for 'the best feminist work.' Poststructuralist feminists demarcate their work by asserting, as Barbara Johnson notes, that gender is a question of language that can only be subjectively deconstructed within local contexts.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, materialist feminists, such as Jennifer Wicke, insist that an examination of material conditions, both domestic and industrial production, is the bases for revealing the general and definable principles that produce gender hierarchy.<sup>4</sup> As a feminist researcher of women teachers' oral histories, I declared my loyalties within the constructed binary of poststructuralism versus materialism. The focused analysis of poststructuralists on the narrative form of scripts fit with my attempts for meaning-making from women teachers' oral histories. I did not heed Judith Butler's warning regarding the propensity for contemporary feminists to exaggerate 'difference' amongst their work. She writes: "the question of whether or not a position is right is in this case, less informative than why it is we come to occupy and defend the territory we do,

what it promises us.”<sup>5</sup> In light of this statement, it is important to question: Does a feminist reading of women teachers’ oral histories benefit from a poststructuralist versus materialist analysis or from an integrated framework?

A feminist reading of the historiography of women teachers’ oral histories, which integrates the strengths of poststructuralist and materialist feminism, provides productive tensions for historians seeking to explore the complex relations of power that create meaning making. When examining women’s oral histories, Joan Sangster argues that historians should be concerned about the dangers of poststructuralists’ propensity for “form over context, of stressing deconstruction of individual narratives over analysis of social patterns, of disclaiming our duty as historian to analyze and interpret women’s stories.”<sup>6</sup> Equally dangerous are implications from materialists’ work that they impose grand narratives for political expediency, and define power as that which is ‘objective,’ economic or unified. A feminist poststructuralist and materialist reading of women teachers’ oral histories challenges the simplicity of generalizing theoretical traditions, and, more importantly, the need for a feminist critique that is ‘right’ according to extreme theoretical categories.<sup>7</sup> In its place, an integrated analysis provides a feminist critique of oral history that encourages historians to, as Marjorie Theobald describes, work within layers of memory, rather than beyond them; a point at which women’s narratives can expose and destabilize essentialist tropes or myths inscribed by the male dominance.<sup>8</sup>

Poststructuralist feminists seek to destabilize male dominance, in part, by reading women’s oral histories as a process of historical knowledge, through which women make sense or meaning of their lives.<sup>9</sup> Narratives are thus treated as linguistic constructions and historical texts which, open to multiple interpretations, can provide evidence of how women conceptualize their past experiences or relationships to the social world. Jacques Derrida argues that life as text accentuates the notion that there is no clear window into the inner life of a person, because a window is always filtered through the glaze of language, and processes of

signification.<sup>10</sup> Experience as interpreted through oral history is thus a fluctuating 'truth' that exists within the layers of life as it happens, life as it is told by the subject, and life as narrative interpreted by the historian.<sup>11</sup> The role of the oral historian, even if it were possible, is not to provide the facts of female teachers' pasts; rather it is to analyze the way historic knowledge is created through the production of discourse as it is informed by their experiences and subject locations.

Poststructuralist feminists argue that oral history as evidence, set within a text, can lead to the reconceptualization of the study of women's work in education. Richard Quantz's study of the failure of female teachers' unionization in Hamilton, Ohio, during the 1930s provides an illustration. He reinterprets traditional historical claims that rely purely on structural or material explanations with respect to professional associations (the failure of unionization as a result of weak ties to labour, and harsh economic times).<sup>12</sup> Quantz argues that while larger forces shape the story, the event in question can only be fully understood through an analytic foundation that includes women who lived and their discursively constructed subjectivities. Contrary to structurally based studies, he demonstrates that failure to unionize was not because women teachers were unknowing tools of the educational elite or made claims to an altruistic purpose for opposing unions. Instead, Quantz illustrates that women organized their realities around cultural concepts, such as viewing the school as family and a legitimate female institution, which provided them with a perception of power that made external professional associations unnecessary.<sup>13</sup> Quantz's study ends by noting that he has provided temporal conclusions from patterns within the women's narratives of that time and place, and those inconsistencies are an inherent part of teachers' subjectivities.

Historian Kate Rousmaniere frames her narrative of teachers' diverse meanings of and relationships to work in similar terms, refusing to reinscribe an essentialist 'teacher.' In her book, entitled *City Teachers: Teaching and School Reform in Historical Perspective*, Rousmaniere argues that historical scholarship has

remained relatively silent about the diversity of women teachers' work, as accounts regarding the messiness of life inside schools are missing. She argues that traditionally historians have misread conditions of women teachers' work, narrowly defining it as factory-like labour constrained by material structures, namely, prescriptive policy and curricula. She implies, in part, that this is due to material feminists not listening to the language and the recurring echoes of meaning found in teachers' narratives. Through an ethnographic examination of teachers' experiences of work in New York schools, she refutes arguments that schools became rationalized, orderly, and financially efficient institutions during the 1920s' 'Progressive Era.'<sup>14</sup> As she looks ".sideways into the picture presented in order to identify teachers' motivations, feelings, and reactions," Rousmaniere illustrates that women teachers interpreted administrators' concept of 'progress' as more intense labour, divisions among teachers, and different meanings of order.<sup>15</sup> In addition, it also meant an adaptive work culture by which female teachers sporadically accommodated or resisted their conditions. Rousmaniere's narrative is, at times, an unrelenting form of historical advocacy for teachers. She provides, however, an illuminating concluding point: for reform to be effective in schools, in 1920s New York or present contexts, teachers' needs must be heard amongst the voices of educational reformers and historical texts.<sup>16</sup> For Rousmaniere and Quantz, it is the historian's job to explore knowledge as a linguistic representation of life which when studied provides clues, patterns, and themes that speak to how women teachers, in relation to a multitude of conflicting 'truths' and 'voices', understood and acted upon their surroundings.

This poststructuralist conceptual stance rejects an empiricist view of the past as objectively fixable through the scientific pursuit of facts and a singular, universal truth.<sup>17</sup> It thereby undermines traditionally male-based scientific claims to authority over knowledge, including biological determinism of gender disparities. At the same time, this framework rejects the attempts of feminist empiricists to reinscribe objectivist notions of 'woman' through the elimination of male bias in the sciences.<sup>18</sup>

All knowledge, including that of the women participating in research, is subject to deconstruction and scepticism. Materialist feminist researchers have argued that poststructuralist suspicion of all truth claims are disingenuous and politically untenable for a feminist agenda that seeks to research from and for women. Roberta Spalter-Roth and Heidi Hartmann are critical of any feminist epistemological position that does not claim scientific credibility and generalizability. Without such evidence, they argue, they would be discredited in policy debates and unable to actualize feminist goals for political reform.<sup>19</sup> Donna Haraway makes a similar argument claiming that feminist poststructuralists fall into a dangerous territory of relativism, which is the "perfect mirror twin of totalization in the ideologies of objectivity; both deny the stakes of location, embodiment, and partial perspective; both make it impossible to see well."<sup>20</sup> In her research, Haraway reclaims the notion of objectivity which she defines as feminists' articulation of subjugated knowledges.<sup>21</sup> She asserts that partial perspectives, as a way of seeing, enable accessible communication among feminist researchers for change in the 'real' world of women.<sup>22</sup>

Considering such calls for a strong political feminist agenda, the seduction for many oral historians has been to write a descriptive, coherent story that privileges the seemingly transparent knowledge of women.<sup>23</sup> Such narratives are founded on the belief, articulated by Paul Thompson, that ".transforming the 'objects' of study into 'subjects', makes for a history which is not just richer, more vivid and heartrending, but truer."<sup>24</sup> Alice Duffy Rinehart's study *Mortals in the Immortal Profession: An Oral History of Teaching* works from such a standpoint. Rinehart produces an extensive compilation of 38 interviews by women who had worked in various American schools throughout their lifetime.<sup>25</sup> She covers a number of important issues such as reasons for entering teaching, family background and major political events affecting education.<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, Rinehart presents oral histories as reminiscences or anecdotal personal insights, instead of scrutinizing them within a theoretical context. Rinehart's failure to analyze the 'historical knowledge' in teachers' narratives misses the

complex relations of power, both privilege and subordination, which underlie the dynamics of meaning making for women's experiences in education. Valorizing women teachers in an effort to let them tell their story is realized at the dangerous cost of depicting their narratives as another form of constrained consciousness similar to conservative rhetoric of teachers' apolitical subjectivities. Essentially, Rinehart does not treat memory as an unstable basis for women teachers' knowledge, a basis on which the historian must examine the contradictions and silences for the structuring paradigms and processes that shape their individual and collective pasts.<sup>27</sup> It is only through a respectful scepticism about narratives, that women teachers and historians will be able to find patterns in their voices to collectively deconstruct the power relations that shape the educational system.

Careful not to privilege a singular feminine 'voice', the oral historian can foreground Haraway's demands for the exposure and location of power relations in the relationship between researchers and researched. As such, material feminists' concern to provide a platform for political activism based on interrogation of power relations can be realized. In fact, Michel Foucault, an unwitting father of poststructuralism, argued against linear histories that did not analyze the power to name on the part of the researcher.<sup>28</sup> Within oral history particularly, where the researcher's role in the production of evidence is unique to historical analysis, the social location of the researcher is imperative to the deconstruction of the subjects' narratives. As Leslie Bloom argues, the feminist researcher provides the most illuminating illustration of meaning making in history, where there exists a genuine respect for a subject's right to define her own history, but with the acknowledgment of the researcher's explicit role in the history constructed.<sup>29</sup> This is clearly illustrated in the work of Natasha Mauthner and Andrea Doucet. These researchers employ a relational ontology for the analysis of women's interviews. They do not read for a positivist rational self, but, rather, for women as they define themselves in relationship to the others and contexts, and as they were defined by the researcher's

location within the interview.<sup>30</sup> For the feminist poststructuralist working with oral histories, therefore, women's narratives are inescapably embroiled in deep and controversial issues of power. Diane Wolf addresses a number of these issues in her work. She argues that feminist fieldwork across disciplines have to deal with the inherent power inequalities between the researcher and the researched, including questions of authorship, ownership of data, and use of evidence (sampling methods, relationship with subject, confidentiality, and editing power of the subject).<sup>31</sup> Ideally, the oral historian hopes for a correlation between the participants' and the researchers' inference from narratives, but this does not occur through scientific appeals to objectivity. Instead, it demands fostering a trustworthy relationship in the research process based on the researcher's continual reflexivity.<sup>32</sup> That being said, narratives are, ultimately, reported discourses created in particular contexts and conditions, which are analyzed within scholars' own discourses or seemingly 'objective' research frameworks. In order to reconstruct the multiple, conflicting stories of the past to characterize women's lives, the historian is forced to provide mechanisms that reveal the processes of production that occur during active dialogue with the subject.<sup>33</sup>

Margaret Nelson is one of a number of scholars who does not presuppose to solve issues of co-option, but manages to capture glimpses of what might have been by being both listener and elicitor. Nelson's various studies of up to 40 women who taught in Addison County, Vermont, provide another example.<sup>34</sup> Nelson put the narratives of teachers at the centre of a multi-resource study by creating a free-flowing, open-ended interview, which forwarded partial conclusions. Although her personal biography is omitted, Nelson does discuss her role in shaping the narratives of the female teachers, as she chose women within a single county who taught between 1920 and 1950. She also focused on the topic of women's work as it fit into larger social structures.<sup>35</sup> Nelson admits, however, that her role was not and could not be to control the agenda of the research. Initially, the subjects of her study were uninterested in her goals and, thus, failed to pursue the lines of

questioning she would pose. Instead of examining the structure of the educational system as it changed from a one-room schoolhouse to a graded school, the women teachers were more interested in information about how they structured their days during that transition.<sup>36</sup> As a result of these unexpected types of stories, Nelson was able to describe a divergent set of attitudes towards the meaning of work that varied according to the subjects' type of training, age of occupational entry and age at transition.<sup>37</sup>

The complex issues regarding control over the production of oral histories, by both the subject and the historian, speak to the need to be wary of imposing grand narratives when explaining women teachers' past experiences. Kathleen Weiler makes this point poignantly in her study, conducted by multiple interviewers with 25 women teachers who lived and worked in rural California between 1850 and 1950.<sup>38</sup> Weiler critically reads female teachers' narratives as discursive texts produced in specific historical contexts, of which the historian can only select and highlight certain themes in accordance with their class, gender, and racial locations. She notes that the oral history of an African American woman, obtained in an interview conducted in the 1970s by a black scholar, produced a narrative centred on the freedom struggles of black people to gain access into educational institutions. This narrative is set in contrast to one conducted by a white, male scholar and produced in the conservatism of the early 1950s that focused on the conventional characteristics of teacher sacrifice and community building.<sup>39</sup> With respect to her own interviews, Weiler cites incidences in which women, unaware of her liberal feminist perspective, intentionally edited their stories to present images of correct authority figures and happy endings which they believed fit with the expectations of her conservative family background.<sup>40</sup> These examples demonstrate that awareness and discussion of the context of interviews, the goals of the historian, and the interaction between the subjectivities of researcher and researched are mandatory to explore the 'historical knowledges' of women teachers' narratives. They illustrate how important it is for historians to not only be critical of their subjects' narratives, but the



processes they impose to construct a historical narrative from the stories.

While the location of the researcher's subjectivities are integral to feminist research, materialist feminists argue that the poststructuralist implication that narratives are equally valid knowledges could result in the textual dominance of the researcher's experiences, rather than the women he/she is studying. This is particularly evident in Kathleen Casey's work entitled *I Answer With My Life: Life Histories of Women Teachers Working for Social Change*. Casey undertakes a study of the life and work of 33 women who, obtained through snowball sampling, came from three general subject positions: religious Catholic women, secular Jewish women, and black women teachers.<sup>41</sup> Her study of these women's stories is framed by Casey's own awareness that knowledge is not produced 'out there,' but, rather, in relationship between her subjectivity and their subjectivities. In an effort to integrate this dialogue into the construction of the historical text, Casey provides a lengthy description of her family background, political stance, and contemporary perspectives on education.<sup>42</sup> Her narrative thus often dominates the text. This occurs despite her attempts to create an open-ended format for her interviews that, she claims, allow the interests of the narrators to be at the forefront of the content and interpretation. This assertion by Casey is at times an exaggeration, as her sampling, questions and categorizations are powerful forces in the study. With an awareness of her methodological and textual dominance, Casey is careful, however, to note that female teachers' interests can usurp her agenda. Specifically, Casey began her research seeking to interview Communist women teachers. She often confronted secular Jewish women with this title, but was repeatedly told by the women that they were not 'radical' or 'terrorist' Communists.<sup>43</sup> Casey recognized that, in the context of the 'Left' in the eighties, when she conducted the interviews, her categories did not correspond with the identities of the subjects. The subjects essentially challenged her to redefine activism within a greater scope of activities and experiences, rather than simply via organizational membership. In

retrospect, Casey realizes and discusses that her own biography of conservative schooling and remoteness from Communist networks prevented the inclusion of such evidence.

The works of Casey, Nelson, and Weiler can all be criticized for providing sanitized samples of women teachers. Their samples are based on women who are highly articulate, more radical than the average teacher, and mirror the characteristics of their interviewer. As a result, although analytically critical, these studies often fail to present, or have not yet uncovered, the gritty, and often negative, realism of teachers' own actions. Marjorie Theobald notes that feminist historians have been "enchanted by the marriage bars, the politics of exclusion, not pausing to ask whether the generality of women wanted to stay in teaching for a lifetime."<sup>44</sup> Women, Theobald argues, who are the 'mad lady-teacher in the attic' are waiting to be included in the history of female teachers in the twentieth-century.<sup>45</sup> Such debate, discussion and analysis amongst historians are a critical part of providing more enriched analyses of the experience of women teachers.

Feminist standpoint theorists criticize poststructuralist frameworks on this issue, arguing that neither the researcher's subjective location nor any other privileged group should take precedent over the central perspective of women. Nancy Harstock contends that women as an oppressed group, by virtue of their material realities according to the sexual division of labour, have a vision of social relations distinct from men.<sup>46</sup> She argues that this vision, struggled for by women over time, must be privileged for its unique commentary on patriarchy.<sup>47</sup> Dorothy Smith also acknowledges the need for researchers to begin from women's distinct standpoint. She, unlike Harstock, does not argue that women's standpoint refers to an authentic women's perspective.<sup>48</sup> Instead, Smith argues that standpoint is a research method for understanding the ruling apparatuses that women speak to as shaping their everyday worlds. One could assume that Smith would criticize many feminist poststructuralists for taking over discursive privilege from their subjects. She argues that researchers must concentrate on historically placing and embodying female

subjectivity in order to check the general validity of their accounts for the social order.<sup>49</sup> Smith and Harstock turn to a materialist Marxists framework as a means for 'escaping' seemingly poststructuralist abstract categories of meaning that ignore the "coordering of actual activities" and change in women's lives.<sup>50</sup> It is apparent that these researchers are reacting against work, often associated with poststructuralism, which describes women's lives as floating about their contexts, rather than within them.<sup>51</sup>

For example, Kathleen Casey's work centres on reproducing dimensions of female teachers' work for social change through the repetitive, yet distinctive concepts and metaphors they construct. Casey notes that she needed to identify with the particular, gender-bound, religious languages that were consistently being used by Catholic women teachers before she recognized their political theorizing.<sup>52</sup> For example, Casey argues that many women would not explicitly make negative comments against administrators in their schools, yet they often described times of school reform and disruption with the metaphor of death and sacrifice. One woman recalled the death of a fellow teacher when discussing a change in administration.<sup>53</sup> The inability of some women to vocalize their experiences must be understood with respect to the constraints they endured as both women and nuns in society. Considering the potential for women's voices to be 'privatized,' Casey also includes body language within her discourse analysis. She recalls an interview in which a woman was recounting her choice to become a nun, and traced a figure eight in the air to represent a sense of unity among her childhood, religious life, and teaching.<sup>54</sup> Casey's ability to read for cultural meaning or the construction of language enables her to highlight women's experiences. She fails, however, to show how women negotiated their relationships with the dominant discourses of institutions that shaped their voice, such as church, state, and school. Unfortunately, as Casey focuses intimately on her subjects' discursive structures, she fails to fully explore their material realities.

A feminist analysis of oral history does not need to set up a dichotomy between discourse and materialism. Michele Barrett

notes that poststructuralism does discount the supremacy of materialism over signs or discourses.<sup>55</sup> In particular, poststructuralism challenges material feminists' focus on the cause of women's oppression as being rooted in economic relations.<sup>56</sup> One should not interpret such a challenge, however, to mean that discourse is not intimately related to material life. Signs should not simply replace production as a root cause of women's oppression. An analysis of discourse with respect to women's narratives must seek to examine the system of "controlling metaphors, notions, categories and norms which develop and delimit the subjects' conceptions and expressions of personal, work and social relations".<sup>57</sup> Discourse is thus a way of perceiving women's experiences through multiple, competing and changing voices within society.<sup>58</sup> As theorist Mikhail Bakhtin argues, voices create structures through which the reality of a multitude of concrete worlds might be perceived or discussed.<sup>59</sup> In addition to perceiving how women construct themselves, such discussion enables the historian to better understand the ways that dominant discourses, as they relate to structural institutions, also construct women's narratives. The oral historian must not identify language as life. Women teachers' lives and language are active sites of negotiation for the historian to explore between their subjectivities and the material constraints that ground their language choices according to factors such as gender, class, race, region, and workplace. While the relationship between discourse and the material world is unavoidable in women's narratives, it is up to the historian to provide an effective reading of both parts in the texts. The Popular Memory Group argues that historians must approach oral narratives with dual, simultaneous interpretations, namely, a reading for structure, or the experiences of the material world and the workings of it, and a reading for culture, or the ways memories of events and experiences are organized through language.<sup>60</sup>

The work of Richard Quantz and Margaret Nelson is particularly attuned to how these discourse and material realities shape their subjects' histories. They each focus on teachers' negotiations of material factors as they are expressed through

discursive strategies. Quantz argues that women teachers during the Depression era in Ohio dealt with careers that were characterized by the duality of empowerment and confinement. He describes through the shared language and subjectivities produced in the women's narratives, that women used metaphors for teaching that publicly accommodated and personally resisted their situation. These metaphors include, the subordinate-authority figure (teacher as both respected/fearful by students and respectful/fearful of male administrators) and the school as family (mother/child relationship with students and a sister-like relationship with co-workers, but expected to be single with the father-like figure of an administrator).<sup>61</sup> Quantz notes that the complete picture of these women's experiences is not to be found in these abstractions, as women teachers did not approach life metaphorically, but concretely. He argues, however, that teachers' subjective redefinitions under the structural conditions of that period made it possible for teachers to think of themselves in oppositional ways rather than dominant discourses. This study provides interesting examples of how teachers' work experiences do not always conform to hegemonic discourses of material conditions. For example, the mother metaphor that was strongly identified with teachers during the period afforded them a great amount of authority within the community, while keeping them subordinate within the educational system.<sup>62</sup> Despite such interesting dynamics, Quantz's concluding remarks allude to the idea that these women attributed to their own powerlessness as teachers because they did not change their material realities, merely their subjective worlds.

Nelson, whose work deals with similar themes, reconfigures Quantz's conclusions regarding the relative impact of discourse and structure.<sup>63</sup> Specifically, Nelson's study of women teachers' relationships to their working conditions in Vermont notes that the meaning or satisfaction derived from teaching cannot be based solely on materialist terms. Rather, she argues that women in her study expressed both positive and negative feelings towards their positions in radically different work environments.<sup>64</sup> Unlike

Quantz, she concludes that women teachers' discursive expressions of empowerment were as 'real' as their structural context when determining their experiences of work.<sup>65</sup>

The importance of this demarcation is clear in the work of Sue Middleton and Helen May, which explores the strategies that over 150 teachers used to understand the dominant discourses and social movements that swept through New Zealand schools between 1915 and 1995.<sup>66</sup> Unfortunately, their study does not fulfil this goal as they confuse descriptions of structural conditions with discourse analysis. Using materials from administrators, philosophers, and a cross-section of teachers, Middleton and May assert that they want to recapture how teaching affected and was affected by a diverse range of issues (the purpose of schooling, the streaming of Maori children, and 'progressive' child-centered education).<sup>67</sup> What they construct is a descriptive historical account that focuses on the political irrespective of the personal, with little analysis of subjects' memories or languages. Although Middleton and May powerfully state ".now, let us listen as teachers talk teaching," they actually edit women's stories in compliance with competing dominant discourses of education that existed during the period in question.<sup>68</sup> This is particularly evident as the authors admit to cleaning up the raw data, removing subjects' 'ums,' 'ers,' slang words and digressions, as well as indiscriminately incorporating their own narratives with their subjects' stories.<sup>69</sup> As a result, Middleton and May, at times, treat oral histories as anecdotal evidence to documents. With the removal of the silences, and the inattentiveness to literary devices that structure speech, the reader can miss how women teachers organized or determined their subjectivities located within rapidly changing public institutions. Middleton and May do not examine some of the most fascinating questions: How did the mothers whom they describe as reserve labour in the 1950s rationalize their careers? How did teachers feel about students who espoused racism during the tension filled decade of the 1960s? As a whole, these works demonstrate that studies of women teachers' narratives cannot be founded on an analysis of discourse or materialism, as

the meaning of these concepts are defined in relation to one another.

Poststructuralist feminists express concerns that a reading for the material effects of a seemingly unified 'Woman's discourse, as with the case of Middleton and May, results in generalizable theories of oppression and singular definitions of 'Woman.' Poststructuralists challenge feminist standpoint theorists, arguing that their desire to locate the 'Woman's' perspective implies that they can locate the 'authentic centre' of the female identity through an examination of the personal, inner life.<sup>70</sup> Defined as such, the oppressed individual, or in this case a woman, can be politically liberated by articulating their fixed identity. Postcolonial feminists strongly argue that such inferences are inaccurate and continue to colonize the 'Third World Woman' or the 'Black Woman' according to western images of their lack of power.<sup>71</sup> Chandra Mohanty argues that many feminist researchers' discursive practices reproduce hegemonic public discourses of non-Western women's identities and cultures as statically 'Other.'<sup>72</sup> Material feminists argue, however, that the same static 'Other' can be produced when poststructuralists define the subject ahistorically. It is necessary to adopt, therefore, a materialist or contextual analysis of oral history, informed by the feminist poststructuralist negation of the search for unity. This synthesized analysis thereby acknowledges that women do not have a coherent self moving through history with a single identity. Instead, the self is a social, unstable identity constantly created and negotiated through both dominant, contradictory discourses and resistance to those conceptions. All female subjects, therefore, have agency or power for resistance. The notions of separated private, powerful selves from social selves, as Mikhail Bakhtin notes, are myths. The self is defined in its encounter with the 'other,' thus the self-identity is a product and provides passwords of social forces.<sup>73</sup> Passwords include issues of gender and power, or more generally, the processes and practices that create and recreate oppressive social relations and structures.<sup>74</sup>

The self as defined by the other should not mean, as some materialist critiques of poststructuralism argue, that women can

only control, know and define a fragment of themselves. Women can articulate a coherent identity but it is for the historian to explain the formation of that identity as an ideological struggle for agency within patriarchal and oppressive institutions and discourses. Michel Foucault articulates, “.in thinking of the mechanisms of power [researchers should] think of its capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions, attitudes, their discourses, and everyday lives.”<sup>75</sup> Identity formation thus needs to be deconstructed to understand the frameworks of women’s differentiated experiences. What it means to be a woman, how that is defined according to the subjects’ material needs and available languages for articulating them, are the main points of exploration for the historian.

Kathleen Weiler’s study of rural teachers illustrates that identity formation, as revealed through women teachers’ narratives, is free and structured, personal and public, as well as internally and externally shaped. These contradictions are particularly clear as Weiler explores why women chose to teach. Most respondents could not provide an answer, and only a few acknowledged their limited options or the few jobs that were considered ‘women’s work.’<sup>76</sup> Despite the awareness of structural constraints, almost all of the women interviewed presented themselves as autonomous individuals, making personal choices. Weiler notes that women’s identities as teachers were constructed around American nationalist discourses based on the freedom of individuals to make their own futures regardless of limitations.<sup>77</sup> Contradictorily, therefore, the subjects did not challenge the idea that teaching was women’s work, and they did not describe themselves in terms of ‘natural’ avocation, such as sacrifice, and nurturing. These women constructed themselves in opposition to stereotypical characteristics of femininity, while also presenting narratives that reveal taken-for-granted assumptions about the restrictions women faced. Such contradictions, or what feminist historians term ‘bad fits,’ highlight the very point at which the subject actively negotiates her concept of self.<sup>78</sup> As previously mentioned,



however, the language used to conceptualize the 'self' is not unitary. Instead, coherence obscures meanings of race, class, and gender that define female teachers' identities. This is evident in the narrative of a white Protestant teacher who framed her identity as a teacher in traditional terms, asserting her respectability within the community.<sup>79</sup> Weiler notes how the intersections of class and gender work subversively within this narrative. The subject represents her 'self' as a powerful, Christian, pure woman, without comment to her financial struggles and lack of upper class associates. This woman's choice of representation is very significant for understanding her perceptions of her status and roles in society.

Kate Rousmaniere, like Weiler, reads female teachers' narratives for self-representation, rather than literal content, in her effort to examine what it meant for her subjects to be teachers in 1920s' New York. Focusing on the collectivity of her subjects' narratives, Rousmaniere seeks to understand female teachers' occupational identities. She begins this study by explaining the problems associated with categorizing teachers' identities. She argues that women teachers exist within a paradoxical position. Teaching is characterized as a profession, but exists under close supervision; it is a middle class career but has a high proportion of minority groups.<sup>80</sup> An analysis of such incongruencies reveals the thin line historians tread between exploring common themes among narratives and over-generalizing, thus imposing an essentialist identity on the woman teacher. Foremost, however, it is evident to the reader that locating the identity of women teachers as a group means that the historian and the subject must negotiate the context of women's work in relation to intersections of class, gender, 'race,' sexuality, region, age and so on. For Rousmaniere, that means exploring the recurring themes of narratives in order to provide herself with a tentative roadmap to the internal and external ordering of teachers' subjectivities. She concludes from this map that women teachers created an identity for themselves as semi-independent workers.<sup>81</sup> As a result, teachers maintained some individual control and personal integrity for their job, but worked in collective isolation that discouraged effective change through

unionization. Rousmaniere argues that this collective identity shaped both city teachers' work and their responses to that work.<sup>82</sup>

While Weiler and Rousmaniere argue that the formation of identities for female teachers was defined primarily by accommodation, Kathleen Casey provides oppositional readings. Casey argues that the 'progressive' female subjects she interviewed consistently resisted or reinterpreted dominant and conservative constructions of their identities as teachers. The subversion of dominant meanings to represent the identities of female teachers is particularly explicit in the narratives of black women teachers. With an all too clear understanding of the systematic subjugations of black constructions of self within the United States, these black women teachers use their narratives to disclose, disguise and reverse their identities. In doing so they are exposing white produced stereotypes, undermining the construction of race as biological category, and asserting their power to articulate their own identities.<sup>83</sup> For example, within black women's narratives, whites often appear as caricatures, the timeless slave narrative provides a framework, and the meaning of derogatory words, such as mammy, are transformed.<sup>84</sup> While less likely to directly state the constraints of school life, these narratives represent the diversity, agency, limitations, personal and public frameworks that shape female teachers' identities.

These texts, as a field, reveal the productive tensions offered by a feminist poststructuralist and materialist reading for women teachers' oral histories. An integrated reading reveals how school structures shaped women teachers' identities, while also demonstrating the ways women invoked cultural concepts, such as the school as family, to assert their authority. Similarly, when openly acknowledging the complex production of oral history, historians can understand that their research priorities, such as the structure of the one-room schoolhouse, co-exists with women teachers' priorities, such as the daily workload. An integrated analysis also highlights that the diverse definitions of work are dependent on the discourses available for women's social status. The historian can understand how white women teachers' focus on

education as community building, while black women teachers' focus on education as a freedom struggle. An integrated analysis further reveals how an individual woman teacher's lack of 'official' autonomy can be inter-reliant on her perceptions of collective power for women teachers. As Joan Sangster has noted in her work on women's oral histories, poststructural analysis is beneficial to deconstruct the narrative form of scripts for meanings in women's oral histories and to acknowledge the construction of the narrative as text by both researcher and researched.<sup>85</sup> She further comments, feminist materialist insights are needed to focus historians to examine the ways relations of power shape women's choices within social, cultural, political and economic boundaries.<sup>86</sup> The knowledge base of women teachers' oral histories is information that comes complete with conflicting interpretations, evaluations, and explanations that are intrinsic to the representation of any historical reality.<sup>87</sup> The deconstruction of women's narratives, as an unstable basis for 'true' knowledge, potentially reveals the structuring paradigms and processes that shape women's individual and collective material realities in the pasts. Although often contested within feminist theory, it is the tensions that arise from an integrated feminist poststructuralist and materialist analysis for women teachers' oral history that provide a framework for 'good' feminist research.

## Endnotes

- 1 Sandra Harding, "Introduction," in *Feminism and Methodology*, edited by S. Harding. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 8-9.
- 2 Shulamit Reinharz, "Neglected Voices and Excessive Demands in Feminist Research," *Qualitative Sociology* 16 (1993): 71-72.
- 3 Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 37.
- 4 Jennifer Wicke, "Celebrity Material: Materialist Feminism and the Culture of Celebrity," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Fall 1994 (751-78), 741.
- 5 Judith Butler, "For a Careful Reading," in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, edited S. Benhabib, J. Butler, D. Cornell, and N. Fraser. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 127-128.
- 6 Joan Sangster, "Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History," in *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*, Third Edition,

edited V. Strong-Boag and A. Fellman. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), 317.

- 7 Feminist researchers have begun to challenge the monolithic characterization of these two 'camps' of thought. The diversity of analysis within poststructuralism and materialism is not central to this study, but, rather, the permeable boundaries between them are explored. Furthermore, this study does not attribute the identity of any theoretical tradition to the historians of the women teachers' oral histories under examination. Rather, the focus is on using feminist poststructuralist and materialist theorists for readings of the written oral histories of women teachers.
- 8 Majorie Theobald, "Teachers, memory and oral history," in *Telling Women's Lives: Narrative Inquiries in the History of Women's Education*, edited by Kathleen Weiler and Sue Middleton. (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999), 21.
- 9 See, for example, Kathleen Casey, "Why do Progressive Women Activists Leave Teaching?: Theory, methodology, and politics in life-history research," in *Studying Teachers' Lives*, edited I. Goodson. (London: Routledge, 1992); Luisa Passerini, "Women's Personal Narratives: Myths, Experiences, and Emotions," in *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*, edited by Personal Narratives Group. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).
- 10 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- 11 Joan Scott, "Experience," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, eds. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992).
- 12 Richard A. Quantz, "The Complex Vision of Female Teachers and the Failure of Unionization in the 1930s: An Oral History," in *The Teacher's Voice: A Social History of Teaching in Twentieth Century America*, ed. Richard J. Altenbaugh (London: Falmer Press, 1992), 139-140.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 153-155.
- 14 Rousmaniere, *City Teachers: Teaching and School Reform in Historical Perspective*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 1-2.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 3-8.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 9
- 17 Sandra Harding, "Conclusion," in *Feminism and Methodology*, edited by S. Harding. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 182-184; Spalter-Roth, Roberta and Heidi Hartmann, "Small Happiness: The Feminist Struggle to Integrate Social Research with Social Activism," in *Feminist Approaches to Theory and Methodology*, edited by S. Hesse-Biber, C. Gilmartin and R. Lydenberg. (New York: Oxford, 1999), 334-336.
- 18 Harding, "Conclusion," 184. See, for example, Spalter-Roth, Roberta and Heidi Hartmann, "Small Happiness: The Feminist Struggle to Integrate Social Research with Social Activism," in *Feminist Approaches to Theory and Methodology*, edited by S. Hesse-Biber, C. Gilmartin and R. Lydenberg. (New York: Oxford, 1999).

- 19 Spalter-Roth and Heidi Hartmann, 340-341.
- 20 Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspectives," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: the reinvention of nature*. (New York: Routledge, 1991), 191.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 188.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 187.
- 23 Joy Parr, "Gender History and Historical Practice," in *Gender and History in Canada*, eds. Joy Parr and Mark Rosenfeld (Toronto: Copp Clark Ltd., 1996).
- 24 Paul Thompson, *Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 90.
- 25 Alice Duffy Rinehart, *Mortal in the Immortal Profession: an oral history of teaching*. (New York: Irvington Publishers, 1983), v.
- 26 *Ibid.* Review by Richard Altenbaugh, "Introduction," in *The Teacher's Voice: A Social History of Teaching in Twentieth Century America*, ed. Richard J. Altenbaugh (London: Falmer Press, 1992), 3.
- 27 Kathleen Weiler, "Remembering and representing life choices: a critical perspective on teachers' oral history narratives," *Qualitative Studies in Education* 5:1 (1992), 40.
- 28 Foucault as cited by Michele Barrett, "Words and Things: Materialism and Method in Contemporary Feminist Analysis," in *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, edited by M. Barrett and A. Phillips. (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1992), 211.
- 29 Leslie Rebecca Bloom, "Stories of One's Own: Nonunitary Subjectivity in Narrative Representation," *Qualitative Inquiry* 2:2 (1996).
- 30 Natasha Mauthner and Andrea Doucet, "Reflections on a Voice-centred Relational Method," in *Feminist Dilemmas in Qualitative Research: Public Knowledge and Private Lives*, edited by J. Ribbens and R. Edwards, 119-146. (London: Sage, 1998), 125-133.
- 31 Wolf, Diane, "Situating Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork," in *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork*, edited by D. Wolf. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996), 2-3. Methodological issues such as these are explored at length in the following resources: Lynda Measor and Patricia Sikes, "Visiting Lives: Ethics and Methodology in Life History," in *Studying Teachers' Lives*, ed. I. Goodson (London: Routledge, 1992); Sherna-Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds.) *Women's Words: the feminist practice of oral history* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Joyce McCarl Nielsen (ed.) *Feminist Research Methods: Exemplary Readings in the Social Sciences* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990).
- 32 Wolf, 34-36
- 33 Joan Sangster makes a similar point in her book *Earning Respect: The Lives of Working Women in Small-Town Ontario, 1920-1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 12. Sangster acknowledges in her study of female factory workers in Peterborough that: "While I have tried to use the interview method to

communicate women's own perceptions and truths, my interpretation of those truths is inevitably given some precedence in this book."

- 34 Margaret K. Nelson, "From One-Room Schoolhouse to the Graded School: Teaching in Vermont, 1910-1950," *Frontiers* 7:1 (1983); Margaret K. Nelson, "The Intersection of Home and Work: Rural Vermont Schoolteachers, 1915-1950," and "Female Schoolteachers as Community Builders," in *The Teachers' Voice: A Social History of Teaching in Twentieth Century America* ed. Richard J. Altenbaugh (London: Falmer Press, 1992); Margaret K. Nelson, "Using Oral Case Histories to Reconstruct the Experiences of Women Teachers in Vermont, 1900-1950," in *Studying Teacher's Lives*, ed. I. Goodson (London: Routledge, 1992). All of her studies work from the same sample of subjects. Nelson interviewed up to 40 women in the totality of her work, but each article uses a different group from this sampling.
- 35 Nelson, "From One-Room Schoolhouse to the Graded School," 15-16.
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 *Ibid.*, 18-19.
- 38 Kathleen Weiler, *Country Schoolwomen: Teaching in Rural California, 1850-1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1-7; Kathleen Weiler, "Reflections on writing a history of women teachers," in *Telling Women's Lives: Narrative Inquiries in the History of Women's Education*, edited by Kathleen Weiler and Sue Middleton. Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999. She discusses various uses of the same sample of subjects.
- 39 Weiler, "Reflections on writing a history of women teachers," 45-55.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 55-56.
- 41 Kathleen Casey, *I Answer with My Life: Life Histories of Women Teachers Working for Social Change* (New York: Routledge, Inc. 1993), 13-17; Kathleen Casey, "Why do Progressive Women Activists Leave Teaching?...." In this article she uses the same subjects' narratives as in her book, *I Answer With My Life*.
- 42 Casey, *I Answer With My Life*, 8-9.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 69-71. A similar point is made clear in the narratives of religious Catholic women teachers.
- 44 Majorie Theobald, "Teachers, memory and oral history," 21. She also notes that most historians of female teachers' oral histories have been teachers themselves, and, thus, provide less of the potential negativity of teachers' own actions.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 46 Nancy Harstock, "The Feminist Standpoint," in *Feminism and Methodology*, edited by S. Harding. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 159-160. See also Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," in *Feminist Approaches to Theory and Methodology: an interdisciplinary reader*, edited by S. Hesse-Biber, C. Gilmartin and R. Lydenberg. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Collins discusses the distinct standpoint of Black women academics (as Outsiders Within) to influence the knowledge interrogation of concepts such as family and culture. She

argues that her outsider within status enables an analysis of women's experiences based on the simultaneity of oppressions (class, race, gender).

47 Ibid.

48 Dorothy Smith, "The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Methodology," in *The Everyday World as Problematic*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 111.

49 Ibid., 108 and 122.

50 Ibid., 141.

51 See for example critiques of Judith Butler's, *Gender Troubles: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall Incorporated, 1990).

52 Casey, *I Answer With My Life*, 31.

53 Ibid., 42-43.

54 Ibid., 48.

55 Barrett, 202-203.

56 Ibid. Barrett discusses feminist poststructuralist critiques of a single causality of women's oppression.

57 Casey, *I Answer With My Life*, 31.

58 Parr, 15. Parr states: "Experience, this is to say, is formed through discourses. Experiences are not made by discourses, but discourses are the medium through which experiences are comprehensible..Thus the study of the elements from which experience is constituted is not a diversion from the analysis of power, but a way to understand how power works."

59 M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), as quoted by Casey, *I Answer With My Life*, 20-21.

60 Popular Memory Group. "Popular memory: Theory, politics, method," in *Making Histories*, eds. R. Johnson, G. McLennan, B. Schwartz, D. Sutton (London: Hutchinson. 1982). 228-234.

61 Quantz, "The Complex Vision of Female Teacher.." 142-146.

62 Ibid., 145-148.

63 Ibid., 156.

64 Nelson, "From the One-Room Schoolhouse to the Graded School.." 14-15 and 19.

65 Ibid., 15-16 and 19

66 The description of the method of interviewing and sampling is provided in both of the following resources: Sue Middleton and Helen May, "Disciplining the teaching body 1968-78: progressive education and feminism in New Zealand," in *Telling Women's Lives: Narrative Inquiries in the History of Women's Education*, eds. Kathleen Weiler, and Sue Middleton (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999), 76; Sue Middleton and Helen May, *Teachers Talk Teaching, 1915-1995: Early Childhood Schools and Teachers' Colleges*. (New Zealand: Dunmore Press,

1997), 9-17.

- 67 Middleton and May, *Teachers Talk Teaching*. This work is reviewed by Laura Docter Thornburg, "Review of Teachers Talk about Teaching, 1915-1995: Early Childhood Schools and Teachers' Colleges," *History of Education Quarterly* 38 (1998).
- 68 Middleton and May, *Teachers Talk Teaching*, 17.
- 69 Ibid., 9-17.
- 70 Barrett, 210.
- 71 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, edited by C. Mohanty, A. Russo, and L. Torres. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 54.
- 72 Ibid.
- 73 Bakhtin as paraphrased by Casey, *I Answer With My Life*, 26.
- 74 See, for example, C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
- 75 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison* (New York: Vintage, 1979).
- 76 Weiler, "Remembering and representing life histories.." 44-46.
- 77 Ibid., 46.
- 78 Ibid., 43.
- 79 Weiler, "Reflections on writing a history of women teachers.." 52-54; See, for example, Weiler, *Country Schoolwomen*.
- 80 Rousmaniere, *City Teachers*, 5-7; Kate Rousmaniere, "Where Haley Stood: Margaret Haley, teachers' work, and the problem of teacher identity," in *Telling Women's Lives: Narrative Inquiries in the History of Women's Education* eds. Kathleen Weiler and Sue Middleton (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999). She provides similar discussions of the categorization of female teachers' work.
- 81 Ibid. She discusses this theme in most chapters.
- 82 Ibid., 135.
- 83 Ibid., chapter entitled "A Signifying Discourse of Black Women Teachers Working for Social Change."
- 84 Ibid.
- 85 Joan Sangster, "Telling Our Stories.." 317.
- 86 Ibid.
- 87 Casey, *I Answer With My Life*, 13; Popular Memory Group, "Popular memory."