

# Whispers in the Halls

## Exploring the Mother/Teacher in Madeleine Grumet's *Bitter Milk: Women and Teaching*

SARA CARRIGAN WOOTEN  
*Tufts University*

**B**ITTER MILK: WOMEN AND TEACHING provides an illuminating autobiographical look at Madeleine Grumet's (1988) experiences as a teacher and mother and calls for established and future educators to make space for her voice as well as those voices of the many others who mother and teach. By looking at how women's epistemologies can be understood as relational to mothers and children, Grumet offers a new conceptualization of embodied knowledge and how it can change education. Writing twenty years after the book was first published, I examine the relevance of Grumet's work in the context of the continually changing North American educational landscape. Using the research essay format, this analysis consists of three major parts: a description of the structure of the book and each chapter, a discussion of Grumet's central tenets, and finally a discussion locating Grumet's work within current feminist discourses and theories.

In Part One of her book, Grumet describes the battles between man and woman, mother and father, and the resulting dialectical tensions that spill over into curriculum. She sets the course of the book in Chapter 1, "Conception, Contradiction, and Curriculum," by using the tools of object relations theory and psychoanalysis to address the relationship between curriculum and reproduction. In short, psychoanalysis highlights these underlying, often gendered, tensions and strives to trace the internalized emotional struggles that they may produce. Within psychoanalysis, object relations theory connects the attachments and rejections that occur during infancy to our interactions and relationships later in life. In Chapter 2, "Pedagogy for Patriarchy: The Feminization of Teaching," Grumet walks her readers through the history of the feminization of teaching as industrialization overpowered rural ways of life and landscapes. In Chapter 3, "Feminism and the Phenomenology of the Familiar," Grumet uses narrative histories that rely on the language of psychoanalysis and phenomenology to convey the situation of the contemporary woman/teacher. Taken together, these three chapters constitute Part One and provide a fluid contextual analysis of the experience and identity of the woman/teacher as read through shifting notions of reality, time, and space. It is here that Grumet calls for recognition of

the trap that woman fell into when the door to the classroom was opened for her: a heavily gendered system in which women are prescribed as the best caregivers and still viewed as incapable of true control over a field in which they are overrepresented. “Women’s work” remains governed and defined by a system that is predominantly male, particularly in the classroom.

In Part Two, Grumet shifts the conversation from historical analysis to the complicated dialogues between women and schools. In Chapter 4, “Where the Line Is Drawn,” she emphasizes the act of transgressing the boundaries between domestic space and school that teachers encounter every day. Grumet writes of teaching as an act of artistic expression within the context of finding silence and space to allow for reflection. Instead of creating boundaries, she promotes making connections and drawing lines between expression and curriculum. Chapter 5, “My Face is Thine Eye and Thine in Mine Appears: The Look in Parenting and Pedagogy,” and Chapter 6, “On Teaching the Text: Trapped in Transference; or Gyped Again,” discuss what Grumet (1998) calls “the look” in the context of parenting as well as teaching and how “the look” effects both past and present subjectivities (p. 95). In Chapter 7, “Bodyreading,” Grumet positions the subject of “bodyreading” and the destabilization of idealism within literature as necessary to understanding the performance of knowing or how knowing is performed. She urges teachers to become artists of their own curriculum, to unite as women who teach, and to ultimately rewrite the curriculum that they have been silent on or silenced about for so long.

The importance of the complex interconnections between women is at the forefront of Part Three. In Chapter 8, “Redeeming Daughters,” and Chapter 9, “Other People’s Children,” Grumet interrogate the relationships between mother and daughter, teacher to Other’s child, and the process of working through the histories of our mothers to gain insight into our own constructed utopias in hopes of better understanding the pedagogy of the female teacher. In Chapter 10, “The Empty House: Furnishing Education with Feminist Theory,” the final chapter of the book, Grumet argues that if curriculum is directly influenced by our relationships to our mothers and to our children in an ongoing generational conversation, then the experiences of women provide space to rupture the Father’s curriculum in transformative ways.

From the very beginning of the book, the concept of reproduction is vital to Grumet’s woman/teacher epistemology as she links it directly to the development of curriculum. When she writes about reproduction, she takes into account the three main applications of the word – the biological reproduction of children, the ideological reproduction of parents within their children and women who teach within their students, and the critical (re)production of transformative curricula that utilizes both of the previous forms – and how each interplays with the others in inseparable ways. If we think of these three as always influencing a woman’s life, we see how she must mediate them in the public and private spheres. Most notably, woman as teacher and as mother is mediator between man and child in both her worlds. Woman in the link between the natural and the industrial – between what is of her body and by her body. It is because of this mediation that woman is placed in a bind, and compelled to pass patriarchy on to the child.

Grumet interrogates the masculinization of curriculum as it affects not only the classroom but also the order of the school itself. Patriarchal pedagogy transcends the textbooks of the child and hovers over the teacher, creating an atmosphere of mother keeping order while father tends to business. She explains:

This pattern becomes even more obvious in the social arrangement of faculty within schools, where male administrators and department chairmen dominate female teaching staffs, who secretive and competitive, vie for their Father's approval while at the same time disregarding the rational schemes and programs that emanate from the central office in favor of more contextual, idiosyncratic curriculum of their own. (Grumet, 1988, p. 25)

Present is the rebellion, absent is the voice. Women's curricula remains silenced and cloaked in the muffled ruminations behind their closed doors in favor of maintaining the tradition of hierarchical praise and order. In this dynamic, man remains absolute authority, and thus, woman is easily replaced and disregarded at the whim of the child who can exchange her for paternal relief. This dynamic is most commonly seen in schools with predominantly female teachers who are supervised by a male principal. The disciplinary authority that ultimately rests with the man down the hall easily circumvents the control the female teacher has over her classroom, and her students know it.

As urbanization and industrialization lured men out of the fields and into the city, woman was left to redefine her purpose. Finding herself a consumer of goods instead of a producer and finding her house now emptied daily of the man who went to find an immediate, actualized progress for himself that only the city could offer, she, in turn, flooded the schoolhouse to reproduce herself. As Grumet (1988) asserts, "Women, intertwined with our children and our mothers in biologically and emotionally symbiotic relationships, have seen education as differentiation, a gradual growth in independence" (p. 54). The consequence of this perceived independence, however, was that there was ultimately no such thing. Women became tools of the Father. School became a space where the Mother mediated contact between the Child and the Father, preparing an in-between, whereby she trained the (male) Child to be born into the public world of the Father (p. 84). Instead of a revolutionary act of progress, teaching for women in reality meant teaching *for* men. Woman became entrapped in a system that sought to define her solely in sentimental terms, conflating the ideal mother with the ideal teacher (p. 53). Thus, women who taught became complicit in reinscribing the educational hierarchies that still exist today and were unable to significantly infuse experiences of the home or maternal bonds into the ever-masculinized curriculum (p. 56).

Grumet (1988) provides three personal narratives done by one of her students in various stages of her life as a teacher, student, and mother in Chapter 3, "Feminism and the Phenomenology of the Familiar," in an attempt to examine the phenomenology of the self in varying states of experience: "... I look through phenomenology to read the intentionality in these texts, seeking meaning not only in story but also in the dance of the body-subject through the prereflective landscape nestled in the shadows" (p. 61). In the first narrative, Grumet's student reflects on the restlessness of an identity as wife and mother built on labor, whether it be child, domestic, or academic. Her life has been a process of continual (re)production to the point where peace and rest have become unsettling. Women's lives are constantly structured around, and defined by, activities of one sort or another, often in ways that critique their personal worth. This narrative conveys the tension between the desire and necessity of women's work, and the failure to detach personal value from what they produce. The second narrative describes a teacher constructing a world of perfection inside her classroom that is smashed by a male child during a teacher evaluation. The appearance of the classroom at first is one of strict organization, sterile and methodical. By the end of the day, the classroom shifts to a messy and comfortable imperfection, perfectly capturing the dichotomy between the expectations placed upon female

teachers and the realities of teaching. The last narrative is a flashback to youth and a time when the confines of the school and the gaze of the Other mediated the body and desire. The struggle of mediating the public and private spheres becomes apparent for the graduate student who is all the while trying to reproduce herself and her meaning. A woman, who is at once child, mother, teacher, and student in the fluidity of her memories, finds herself swimming in the depths of each. However insightful her accounts are to the relationships of women in the male world of teaching, wifely duties, and heterosexual constructions of love, it is by searching within these texts that Grumet (1988) offers us what is missing:

The relations of women to each other, of girls to their mothers, to their female teachers, are obscured by this reading as they are obscured by our culture, and it is feminist theory that returns those relations to this text, to our understanding of the process of engenderization and the differentiation, betrayals, and denials with which it is accomplished. (p. 74)

Through the process of autobiographical inquiry, women may find the agency they need to develop a curriculum of their own, whereby they may transcend the male scripts of epistemology and locate their own histories and reproductions of themselves in every word they write (p. 74). Narrative inquiry here must take on a less rigorous form than traditional research methods require. The pitfalls of traditional, formal narrative inquiry methods, such as time-commitment, ethical utilization of others' personal histories, and researcher/participant tensions (Bell, 2002) can be avoided through a more informal approach that adapts well to the complications of the classroom. Instead of an outward focus, narrative inquiry must become an inward process and a locus for community building within schools systems and even within classrooms. Exercises in journaling, story-sharing, and open communication between teachers and students become the building blocks for transforming the classroom as a whole.

Grumet (1988) issues two calls to action. First, teaching must be understood as an art form where the teacher-artist is connected and yet detached from her means of production and from her final product. This teaching-art must be expressed in pedagogies of creation that are based in complex notions of reproduction. Grumet calls for an understanding of the teacher as an artist empowered to draw from her own faculties and history, her notion of the world, and her vision of aesthetic phenomenology to teach. Such potential for action is banished and silenced, much like the voice of a rebelling child. Women's discourses are continually interrupted, and "the response of curriculum developers, book publishers, and administrators to this perception of the potential power of the teacher has been to prescribe teacher/student interactions by providing scripts for their discourse" (p. 90). Father has spoken. Thus, the quiet rebellion behind the closed door of the classroom begins. The female teacher is alone, carefully constructing new ways of knowing, while removing any semblance of the volatile paternity that would chide her efforts. She burrows her successes within the confines of the walls for fear of being rejected and rebuked by the Father. It is in these whispers and secrets that women who teach may find commonality and reverence with one another. It is here that they might find freedom and begin to open their doors.

The classroom, as it exists now, is governed by the gaze of the teacher, instead of her touch, and the evaluation of the task, instead of its interest (Grumet, 1988, p. 143). Left outside the room are the possibilities for emotion, intensity, and connection between bodies and text. Drawing on the need for a more fluid, open understanding of texts, Grumet (1988) advocates the returning of text to a flexible and bending construction that might be used by teacher and student

in ways that each individually need (p. 146). It is here that the female teacher can create her work of art and provide an example by which students may find their own meaning. The possibilities for this exercise are endless, but must focus on mutually beneficial and cooperative relationships between students and teacher – relationships that utilize a broad definition of curriculum in order to explore and identify those teaching/learning techniques that are most liberatory and least rigid.

The reproduction of children, both inside the womb and inside the school, is a theme that runs through *Bitter Milk: Women and Teaching*. It is through her own experience of bearing and nurturing children that Grumet comes to understand the importance of such intimate connections reproduced inside the classroom. It is within her own descriptions of maternal bonds that we see an essentialized experience of sensuality and sexuality fully embodied, such as when she writes, “the day following the birth of my daughter, my first child, when my skin, suffused with the hormones that supported pregnancy, labor, and delivery, felt and smelled like hers, when I reached for a mirror and was startled by my own reflection, for it was hers that I had expected to see there” (Grumet, 1988, p. 10). It is here that the rally cry of cultural feminism begins – on the altar of pregnancy and birth, upon which few men will ever be sacrificed (Kristeva, 1986; Rich, 1976; Ruddick, 1989; Suleiman 1985). It is also here that the power of women, those who can conceive and do, shakes the foundations of human experience and ties us forever to a nature that at times appears to be otherworldly. Represented is the political starting point of an identity embedded in time and space, that can never be challenged, and that is the foundation of humanity (Rich, 1976; Ruddick, 1989). Reproduction is the signifier of woman’s sexual validation (Grumet, 1988, p. 27), the only form of her sexuality that is considered natural while remaining largely revered. To give up the power of the act and the power in the acknowledgement of the act is deemed too costly (Glenn, Forcey, & Chang 1994).

With this theoretical understanding of the history of, and the challenges that remain, for women who teach, the language Grumet uses to describe the mother/child bond and the teacher/student bond has the consequence of entrapping women in a script that, in turn, oppresses them (Alcoff, 1988; p. 41). Is that a position women truly want or can afford to bargain for? Women cannot remain relegated to such prescriptive spheres because of their “natural” abilities and connections with children. It is critical that K-12 teaching, as a profession still dominated by women, moves toward a more fulfilling, a proactive, and empowering curriculum that utilizes the unique experiences of women, rather than avoiding them. Is there a way to keep teaching as women’s work in a proactive and empowering way?

Grumet turns to essentialism again in pushing for a new curriculum founded on this knowledge of bodies that tie women to the children they teach. She writes, “These are intimate connections; they rest on enduring teacher/student relationships that involve trust. They recapitulate the mother/child intimacies of our own childhoods and our own parenting” (Grumet, 1988, p. 87). While her urging for the inclusion of female teachers’ voices in a new, transformative curriculum is necessary and essential to the vitality of curriculum theory and education as a whole, she continues to position (white) female teachers with heteronormative backgrounds as uniquely suited for the job; thus silencing the work of a multitude of cultural realities that do not revolve around a white nuclear-family ideal. Non-traditional family structures (single-parents, adoptive parents, same-sex parents, etc.) continue to challenge the nuclear family stronghold of the past as the archetype of the ideal family. Additionally, the ethnic, sexual, and religious diversity of the public school system shifts and troubles the influence of white histories and white students. Both of these shifts have a meaningful impact on the curriculum of the classroom and the embodied histories of teachers.

Referencing Nancy Chodorow's psychoanalytic work throughout her text, Grumet places fathers on the outside of parental bonding in a way that leaves little space for the voicing of their narratives. Grumet (1988) acknowledges her exclusive focus on teaching as women's work from the very beginning of her book when she writes:

The designation of teaching and nurturance as the work of women in this text is necessary in order to avoid the emulsifying and idealist standard of androgyny, which distracts us from the analysis of our experience of reproduction by stripping it of gender. (p. xix)

However, this course of action ignores the possibility of discussing male and female perspectives of teaching and nurturing children in ways that do not conflate the two, but rather point to the distinct differences of each. Gynocentrism is not necessarily the most effective response to "centuries of talk about education dominated by the history and preoccupation of male experience" (Grumet, 1988, p. xix). As feminist theory is rapidly shifting from discussions of identity politics to transnational and cross-cultural community building that oftentimes includes the efforts of men, we cannot afford to continue isolating "women" as a monolithic category of "we" particularly in the field of curriculum theory, which should always be striving for a fundamental reimagining of traditional educational philosophies and motives. Feminist theory must not dismiss the role of the father/teacher in relation to the child, because that is the group within which potential exists to reconstruct traditionally damaging scripts into holistically emancipatory practices for mother, father, and teacher alike (Gardiner, 1998; Sterba, 1998).

*Bitter Milk: Women and Teaching* continues to be relevant twenty years after its publication, despite the changing landscapes of feminist and curriculum theories and the classroom itself. Grumet and her writing in *Bitter Milk: Women and Teaching* represent the passion and fervor of second-wave feminist politics as feminism in the United States is shifting into a third-wave discourse of unity through difference. The book is thereby useful as a sort of foundation to remind readers of the work that still needs to be done and of the call to action by Grumet to uplift the female teaching experience. There are very few pieces that directly address the issues that Grumet surfaces within the challenge of classroom practice and curriculum theory to a larger extent. Specifically, the idea that motherhood directly influences teaching practices, experiences, and pedagogical methodologies in unique and profound ways – what Freedman and Springgay (2009) called a "bodied curriculum" – seems to be a subject left largely untouched. The question becomes one of either revering motherhood as an essential experience that somehow "betters" women, particularly women educators, or denying or ignoring that such an experience could even have those potential consequences, so as not to become imbedded in what could ultimately be a conversation of exclusion, of "mothers and non-mothers." As Kathleen Casey (1990) argued in her paper on motherhood and teaching:

The lack of consensus on the significance of the maternal in education is very conspicuous, both in the public forum and in academia. An examination of contemporary discourse on the subject reveals responses ranging from complete rejection (often in the form of omission) to ambivalence, celebration, and radical reconstruction, depending upon who is speaking. (Grumet, 1988, p. 301)

*Bitter Milk: Women and Teaching* is all the more compelling and important because it makes a specific argument in a subject that few scholars have explored in the literature devoted to the study of curriculum. Grumet was bold and direct in her assertions and opened the door for a conversation that few before her or since have chosen to challenge. Historically, both curriculum and feminist scholars within the U.S. have remained relatively silent on motherhood as a direct influence on women's experiences of teaching. *Bitter Milk* has served an important role in contributing to the scholarship that has practically and theoretically engaged this relationship. It seems that there is an opportunity for the continued exploration of the meaning of those experiences in ways that strive to find a new understandings that neither essentializes nor denies them.

*Bitter Milk: Women and Teaching* speaks specifically to scholars working in curriculum theory, but its broader calls for action seem to be centered squarely on the shoulders of female teachers in the public education system. The book in essence is split between the style in which it is written (verbose academic language) and the message it intends (that of female teachers, particularly those who are mothers, empowering one another to make their own space in education). This dichotomy is an excellent example of the continuous disconnect between the academy and practitioners, and what Klein (1992) referred to as "the gap" that has historically plagued the field of curriculum theory and continues to be problematic (p. 192). Despite the fact that this book was written twenty years ago, "the gap" continues to be pervasive with regard to curriculum theory's ever-present goal of making meaningful change on the ground. Some might suggest that this makes *Bitter Milk: Women and Teaching* a counter-productive model of change. I, however, would argue that it remains a relevant text that reminds those of us in the academy how far revolutionary pedagogical practices have come and how much further there is to go.

#### References

- Alcoff, L. (1988). Cultural feminism vs. post-structuralism: The identity crisis in feminist theory. *Signs*, 13, 405-436.
- Bell, J. S. (2002). Narrative inquiry: More than just telling stories. *TESOL Quarterly*, 36, 207-213.
- Casey, K. (1990). Teacher as mother: Curriculum theorizing in the life histories of contemporary women teachers. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 20, 301-320.
- Freedman, D. & Springgay, S. (2009). M/othering a bodied curriculum: Sleeping with cake and other touchable encounters. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 25, 6-24.
- Gardiner, J. K. (1998). Feminism and the future of fathering. In T. Digby (Ed.), *Men doing feminism* (pp. 255-290). New York: Routledge.
- Glenn, E. (1994). Social constructions of mothering, a thematic overview. In E. N. Glenn, L. R. Forcey, & G. Chang (Eds.), *Mothering, ideology, experience, and agency* (pp. 1-32). New York: Routledge.
- Grumet, M. (1988). *Bitter milk: Women and teaching*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Klein, F. M. (1992). A perspective on the gap between curriculum theory and practice. *Theory into Practice*, 31, 191-197.
- Kristeva, J. (1986). Stabat Mater. In J. Kristeva & T. Moi (Eds.), *The Kristeva reader* (pp. 160-186). Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

- Rich, A. (1976). *Of woman born: Motherhood as experience and institution*. New York: W.W. & Co. Inc.
- Ruddick, S. (1989). *Maternal thinking: Toward a politics of peace*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Sterba, J. P. (1998). Is feminism good for men and are men good for feminism? In T. Digby (Ed.), *Men Doing Feminism* (pp. 291-304). New York: Routledge.
- Suleiman, S. R. (1985). Writing and motherhood. In S. Garner, C. Kahane, & M. Sprengnether (Eds.), *The M(o)ther tongue: Essays in feminist psychoanalytic interpretation* (pp. 352-377). Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

