

Girls Want to Walk in the Sun

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I come home in the morning light
 my mother says when are you gonna live your life right
 oh mother dear we're not the fortunate ones
 and girls they want to have fun
 oh girls just want to have fun....
 some boys take a beautiful girl
 and hide her away from the world
I want to be the one to walk in the sun... (italics added)
 (*Girls Just Want To Have Fun* by Cindi Lauper)

The purpose of this essay is to examine how girls' voices, knowledge, and experiences fail to enter the discourse of classrooms and curriculum at a critical moment when girls are eager to question their own enculturation and the structural and material forces that frame their emerging femininity and sexuality. In order to examine this I will investigate the absence of a discourse of desire in sex education classes and in reading classes for reluctant readers where romance novels are the typical literary choices of adolescent girls. I will also examine the tension between class values and beliefs as they pertain to emerging feminine identities in white working-class girls, and will describe their resistance to this construction and how it is manifested in classrooms. Finally, by analyzing the lost opportunities for teaching, I will show how feminist teachers can provide a legitimate means in classrooms for girls to voice their resistance and engage in self-critique. And I will also discuss means by which teachers may help guide girls to transform and emancipate themselves.

Unlike middle-class girls whose expectations include career in addition to family life, self-development has not typically been a goal for white working-class girls. For the past twenty years research has shown that working-class girls are more likely to adopt the ideology of romance and hold the primacy of the domestic sphere as their object of desire and only secondarily perceive themselves as wage earners.¹ Traditionally, working-class girls have framed their desire to work outside the home in terms of its usefulness (purchasing "extras" for the home or financing family vacations or recreational materials) or economic autonomy (in the sense of having their own spending money to beautify the home or themselves) or they escape here from the home through the reading of such things as romance novels.² This acceptance of cultural values and beliefs and their adoption of the cultural codes of femininity occurs despite the girls' every day observation of the disappointments, hardships, and drudgery experienced by their mothers, sisters, aunts, and girl friends. Furthermore, this typical appropriation of domesticity by working-class girls is augmented by their adoption of the feminine in dress and demeanor and their overt sexual behavior. They also often resist their schoolwork and female teachers.³ In turn, teachers, especially male teachers, may reinforce the appropriation of

cultural codes of femininity by girls by complimenting their appearance, by flirting, and through the exercise of control over girls by appealing to their emotionalism and by yielding to the manipulative strategies the girls have learned in order to survive their relationships with men.⁴ In these ways, girls and teachers interact to maintain sex stereotyping in classrooms.

While discussing concrete problems such as the sexual double-standard, the situation of divorced women, and tensions between femininity and paid work, middle-class girls typically do not use a discourse of social forces and structure when talking about gender. Talk about gender relations is problematic for them because it is intertwined with feminism. They do not perceive themselves as feminists and feminism is constructed (by most of them) as an object of disapprobation, disdain, and disgust. However, these girls do use a discourse of social structure when talking about class. For the working-class girls, discussions of the concrete problems faced by middle-class girls display an awareness of why these problems arise and how they are constituted and perpetuated structurally, materially, and socially.⁵ Gender and class relations are intertwined for them. For working-class girls, a tension exists between the appropriation of the class values of femininity and sexuality and their own voices, for their behavior is meant to be an act of resistance against the sexual attitudes of the working-class and is often shaped by the girls to their own ends to achieve power, ensure protection, and convince men that they are not threatened.⁶ Unfortunately, the power the girls achieve is framed within class values and serves to reproduce class cultural codes because the girls do not have a critical critique of the social structure, class norms, and the cultural code of femininity they enact. And since they find school unrewarding, and since schools fail to provide a legitimate avenue and location for a discourse where their voices, knowledge, and experiences are validated and critiqued, working-class girls are left on their own to politicize the personal and consequently tend to perceive their situatedness as individual and private.⁷

An important finding by Lois Weis, who conducted an ethnographic study at Freeway High, a co-ed high school in the de-industrialized rustbelt of middle America, revealed a critical change in working-class girls.⁸ In examining the effects of the loss of industry due to the closure of steel mills, Weis discovered that attitudes held by teenage girls had evolved from an identity development linked to the primacy of domesticity to that of wage earner. Witnessing the disempowerment of their fathers, uncles, and brothers coupled with the empowerment of the women in the family who had become primary wage earners, these girls came to conclude that economic independence marks their future. It is not so much that these girls hold a disregard for marriage but rather that they perceive themselves as playing an essential role as wage earner and desire autonomy prior to commitment to marriage. Furthermore, the girls perceive the primacy of wage earning as a necessity and discard the notion that through marriage "they will be taken care of." Weis goes on to say that this shift from the adoption of the Cinderella syndrome or ideology of romance occurs at a moment in time when girls are questioning male hegemony, a moment Weis calls "a critical moment of critique." Perhaps the economic shift from industrialization and the family wage to a service economy has provided an impetus

away from the conservative backlash towards family values and a valorization of the mother in the home at a critical time for working-class girls.

Most of the literature that I will discuss comes from work conducted in the 1970s and 1980s which describes girls who deny their own unhappiness in love, education, and schooling, yet speak of the silencing of their own voices and the absence of recognition of their own experiences. This silence and absence fosters a hopeful reproduction of class values that will shatter their dreams. As teachers we participate in this reproduction since as women we largely ignore how our practice as women converges with our practice as teachers. A teacher at Emma Willard School echoes this when she questioned how teachers can “... help girls learn to deal with disagreement publicly when we cannot deal with disagreement in public ourselves.”⁹

At a time when girls must come to grips with their emerging sexuality and womanhood schools fail to serve as a source of support for these internal changes. Traditionally, schools re-define sexuality in biology or health classes where reproductive anatomy, menstruation, and pregnancy complete the curriculum. While sex education may have been integrated into the school curriculum, a discourse of desire is notably absent. In a study on sex education in schools, Michelle Fine identified three prevailing discourses on sexuality: violence, victimization, and morality.¹⁰ These work to prevent the inclusion of a discourse of desire through which girls could publicly air their emerging conflicts and through dialogue come to recognize these conflicts as politically situated rather than as individual and privately located.

Briefly, the aims of the discourses of sex education are to portray the destructive outcomes of premarital, heterosexual sex, encourage abstinence through fear, and (paradoxically) deliver the message that girls are “to fear the very men who will ultimately protect them” in marriage. A succinct description of these three discourses illustrates these aims.

The first discourse, sexuality as violence, stresses rape, incest, and SDS including AIDS. It promotes the view of heterosexuality as “essentially violent and coercive” and is undergirded by the belief that a causal relationship exists between silence on sexuality and sexual activity. The most conservative proponents of this view of sexuality promote reliance on family values and an abolishment of sex education from schools. Simply put the idea is that if girls do not engage in dialogue on sexuality they are most likely to abstain.

The second discourse, sexuality as victimization, depicts heterosexuality as vulnerability. Girls are taught to defend themselves against disease, pregnancy, and “being used.” This assumes the view that to avoid victimization girls should avoid premarital sex and that protection from male victimization is available through marriage. Both of these discourses portray men as predators and women as victims and present victimization as contingent upon unmarried heterosexual involvement. It does not, however, discuss sexuality as situated within the political arrangements of race, class, and gender.

The third discourse, sexuality as individual morality, values women’s sexual decisions for premarital abstinence. Girls are taught to be chaste, modest, and to

engage in self-control and self-respectful behaviors. Clearly, each of these discourses encourages girls to deny their emerging sexual desires, and fails to offer girls a legitimate avenue to engage in a critical discourse to analyze the conflict they experience between feelings and bodily desires and the social norms that they find themselves up against.

With no legitimate avenue by which they may politicize their emerging sexuality, with no place to seek support and advice or validation of their feelings and experiences as young women, it is no wonder that some girls turn to romance novels, love stories, movies, and soap operas as ways to find meaning for their sexual longings. It is through romance that girls can respond to male sexuality as it is perceived in the three discourses of sexuality found in schools. Romance stands in opposition to boys “just being after one thing.” It stands in opposition to sex as dirty, to be avoided, and to be denied. In romance, “boys and men are not sex objects but romantic objects.” This displaces sexuality to the background or to a moment of passion where a girl’s sexuality is “understood and experienced not in terms of physical need or her own body, but in terms of romantic attachment” and being taken care of.¹¹

Furthermore, this desire for romantic attachment is consistent with Chodorow’s psychodynamic model of girls’ gender identity construction of a “self in relation to others,” and Gilligan’s model of moral development, in which the central moral conflict lies between the self and other and a search for the resolution of a dilemma in which no one is hurt.¹² The focus of judgments then is “on the dynamics of relationship and [the dissipation] of tension between selfishness and responsibility through a new understanding of the interconnections between other and self.” The reading of romance novels by adolescent girls occurs at a critical time of development in which girls experience an impasse in their struggle to act in the face of conflict. They feel pressured to choose between their own voice (which is oftentimes confused with selfishness) and friendship, and between a real self and an ideal self in relationships which are themselves authentic or idealized. At a critical time in their lives the girls’ “knowledge about the complicated nature of relationships can be at times overshadowed by a simplified and idealized model of how relationships ‘should be.’”¹³

According to *Publishers Weekly*, by 1982 romance novels netted over 200 million dollars, and represented almost half of all general interest books purchased by 1985. The first teen series, “Wildfire” published in 1980 had net sales of over 2.25 million dollars as of 1982, with most of this series sold in TAB bookclub sponsored by Scholastic books. Why girls read these books, how the books serve to legitimize their need for a discourse of desire, and how, as literature, they serve to reproduce the cultural codes of the white working class, are questions I will explore. However, before exploring these questions it is first necessary to examine the code of romance in romance novels, and their characterization of the heroine and hero, in order to understand how these depictions reinforce cultural codes of femininity.

From a representative sampling of 34 romance novels published within a forty year span (1942-1982) Linda Christian-Smith identified the codes of romance that

together involve emotion, caring, and negotiations of power and control between females and males. She identifies the dominant elements as follows:

1. Romance is a market relationship in which a fair exchange of gender codes (qualities such as fidelity, devotion, support, and prestige) must be realized for the romance to continue.
2. Romance is a heterosexual practice.
3. Romance manages sexuality while privileging nongenital forms of sexual expression.
4. Romance is a transforming experience giving meaning to girls' lives and endowing girls with prestige and importance.
5. Romance is about domination of males and the subordination of females
6. Romance is about learning to relate to males.
7. Romance is a private and personal experience¹⁴

In romance novels girls, typically beautiful girls or girls who beautify themselves, acquire status by winning the right boy. The romance provides meaning, *an identity*, to a girl whose her feminine power manifests itself through persuasion, fragility, and helplessness. The girls are situated in a set of relations where they are the ones who must compromise and change. While the boys may be seen as objects of desire, the sexual experience is problematic and does not involve genitals. The girl or heroine is not depicted as a sexual being or one who initiates sexual overtures but one who is pure and is unaware of the passion within her. It is the hero who awakens this desire *in* the romantic attachment that excludes physical needs. This displaces female sexuality to the background. Although the absence of a discourse of girls' desire might set up expectations that girls seek novels that depict free sexual expression, the romantic novel affirms the prevailing discourses on sexuality that are prevalent in sex education and the values and beliefs espoused by many working-class families.

The heroine in these novels is typically depicted as androgynous in that she is unusually intelligent, and has a fiery disposition, but is selfless, childlike in innocence, inexperienced, and pure in the sense that she is unaware of her sexual passions, which are awakened by the hero. The hero is characterized as strong, not as in physical prowess, but in courage, protectiveness, and in his ability to meet the heroine's needs and feelings. While the novels appear to challenge some gender stereotypes, (the intelligent and fiery female and sensitive male), the resolution of the conflict between the main characters is positioned personally and not politically or problematically, and the outcome typically falls within the usual gendered division of labor.¹⁵

Romance novels provide a transforming experience that brings the heroine to womanhood, endowing her life with meaning. They provide a setting in which tensions surrounding gender identity can be visualized. While the girls do not envision romance novels as accurate depictions of every day life, they see them as ideal, "the way it ought to be." They provide a utopian vision in which the individual female sense of self is compatible with being cared for by another. The romance reading permits the reader to vicariously experience the feelings of being cared for. In this way girls are able to reconstitute their own needs and provide the emotional sustenance lacking in their own lives.¹⁶ Further, since the romance novel celebrates

the personal life it obscures connections to the material world of economics, domesticity, and femininity. This gives the impression of a personal life separated from the public. Consequently, the girls whose conception of romance are shaped by them fail to question the political issues within the sexuality of romance, since it is personalized. The disputes over power are defined as personal and private disagreements clipped from the tensions that lie at the core of the social fabric. The romance reader perceives herself, then, at the heart of the problem. If she is selfless enough, good enough, caring enough, if she persists in being the perfect wife, the perfect girl friend, she will be able to draw out the tenderness and devotion of her husband or boy friend. The failure to achieve this aim beings blame on the woman or girl for her failure or inability to shape the ideal man. However, by vicariously experiencing this outcome the romance reader finds renewed hope that she may still be cared for if she does the right thing.

Like women, girls read romance novels to escape from every day problems. The young women in literature classes used the romance novels as a way to make their reading classes less dull and boring, more meaningful, and as a way to have their voices heard, and to exert some control over school. Typically, girls who read romance novels were either working class or “slow” or “reluctant” readers. When asked about school these girls replied that “nobody ever asks our opinion about nothing” and felt that “their teachers didn’t see them as intelligent or nice people.” They felt that schools and teachers were uninterested in their knowledge or their interests.¹⁷

Like women readers of romance novels, the reading of romance novels by adolescent girls, not the text itself, serves as a vehicle for declaring autonomy.¹⁸ The *reading* of romance novels by adolescent girls, not the texts themselves, serves as a vehicle for declaring autonomy and control over their schooling, finding their own meaning, having their voices heard, and instilling some vitality in their reading classes. In addition, by identifying with the smart heroine the readers were able to resist the school’s judgment about their competence as readers. Furthermore, the girls did engage in critique of the romance novels they read. While the girls did not perceive the novels to be accurate portrayals of every day life, they said the novels portrayed the world as they would like it to be (with respect to the treatment of girls by boys), for they thought that the romance in novels was ideal and different from romance in every day life. Their preference was for a heroine who was courageous and took initiative, and who was cherished and well treated by a boy who was in tune with her needs and feelings. In this way the girls are able to obtain a validating voice outside themselves that rebraids the beauty and brains dichotomy and conflicts that dominate their social reality.¹⁹ In the absence of a discourse that problematizes their thinking, the romance novels instead reinscribe the class belief that it is up to *her* to make things work. Without understanding the material forces shape the personal, girls individuate their own experiences and locate the resolution of their own conflicts within themselves. Without a legitimate avenue at a critical moment when the girls question male hegemony, they turn to other avenues that perpetuate the private, personal, and individual nature of their conflicts. And while the girls contested their teacher’s power to control what they read, their choices served to

reinforce their class values through the depictions of women and their lives in the domestic sphere present in their chosen readings. These depictions validated their own personal experiences and values imbued in the home. The romance reading did not alter the girls' perception of their present or future circumstances. And while the girls seemed to reject an image of themselves as full-time mothers and wives, that rejection was compatible with assigning more importance to the home than to self-development in their goals. It seems to me that what is problematic for girls is a conceptualization of self-development that is congruent with their desire for relatedness. And while autonomy may be crucial for the development of self, it is autonomy within interdependence and relatedness that lies at the heart of self-development for girls.

Framing self-development within relatedness and not separation raises a challenge of a feminist paradigm for teaching and education. Jane Roland Martin raises this problem when she asks, *what does it mean to be educated?*²⁰ For working-class girls who call for a discourse of desire, who are prepared to critique the role of patriarchy in their every day lives, what it means to be educated, is, at least in part, to have a voice, to not be a book, and to be prepared for the material world:

Schools should teach you to realize yourself, but they don't. They teach you to be a book. It's easy to become a book, but to become yourself you've got to be given choices and be helped to look at the choices. You've got to learn that, otherwise you're not prepared for the outside world.²¹

What lies at the heart of the problem for girls is embedded within a patriarchal philosophy of education that wants to define what it means for girls to be educated for this public. Martin tells us that in a patriarchal paradigm of education girls are placed in a double bind, since for women to be educated they "must give up their way of experiencing and looking at the world, thus alienating themselves from themselves."²²

For Martin it is not enough for feminist educators to critique the discipline, to point to the exclusion of women from subject matter, to correct classroom practices that reinforce gender stereotyping, to shatter the distortion of the female image as seen through the male lens, and to expose the denial of femininity by casting women in a masculine mold but rather it is our obligation to contest the notion that the task of education is to take the *uneducated* person as raw material to be fashioned into a finished product, the educated person. The implicit assumption here is that our children enter schools without knowledge and experience, as empty vessels or reactors to the external world. Not only does this devalue children's knowledge and their interpersonal, cultural and social experiences it also negates women's work in the reproductive sphere where this knowledge is imparted and fostered. By virtue of this assumption, what is learned in the home is not knowledge at all but rather only qualities learned in the productive sphere. However, Martin argues that it is not knowledge gained in the public sphere that permits the reproduction of society but rather those qualities or knowledge that are gained in the private sphere.

Martin's solution for a feminist education may be conceptualized as turning men's culture upside down. Although Martin frequently and eloquently transports

us to Virginia Woolf's bridge where she sadly watches the procession of men and women leave their homes to enter the public sphere, Martin does not permit us to romanticize the essentialist effort to reposition women in the home. She insists on the "remaking of man's culture" through curriculum changes that value the knowledge inherent in the private sphere and necessary to attain a gender-sensitive ideal education for boys and girls. She tells us that we must rethink our curriculum of hierarchy, that our claims to knowledge as objective reflections must be re-examined and re-designed to embrace differences, she praises a commonness that can emerge from a curriculum that promotes kinship bonds. Martin is interested in creating something new, but the shortcoming in Martin's argument emerges mostly in the model by which she suggests a curriculum built on family studies. While Martin is not suggesting a "family studies" that resembles former family or home economics courses, her model flirts with the celebration of the virtues of the private sphere, virtues which have been culturally assigned to women.

This problem returns us to working-class girls who yearn for a discourse of desire, and their appropriation of the cultural codes of femininity of their social class. For it is not enough to affirm and include the values, knowledge, and experiences of the home, for as we have seen this may lead to cultural reproduction. It is clear that these working-class girls desire a critique of their enculturation and question male hegemony. They attempt to contest it through various forms of resistance. But without a critical critique and a legitimate avenue that raises the possibility for an emancipatory discourse, girls, as we have seen, typically turn to other avenues.

This shortcoming in Martin's paradigm for a feminist philosophy of education raises the question, what does it mean to be a feminist educator? How can feminist educators help girls not be a book and help them challenge their representation in society. To do this we need to consider how resistance, as agency, sometimes serves reproduction, and how through a different reading a discourse of critical critique and a language of possibility can emerge.

When we think of resistance, we think of opposing or repelling some object, idea, or thought. But sometimes when we oppose something we do so without understanding or without sufficient knowledge of the nature of the thing we are opposing. In a sense we become reactors. Resistance can then be thought of as informal, disorganized, and apolitical. When the girls resist their teachers' selection of traditional curriculum materials and they opt instead to read romance novels, their opposition is an act of resistance of the school's socialization. The girls' view of themselves is one of an emerging identity as women with bodily desires, which differs from the school's view of them as children. However, their agency is personal and individual and lacks a formulated, political tack.²³ In the absence of a political tack, the teachers are left to either half-heartedly accept the choices the girls make, or resist the girls' actions and attempt to reinforce the official curriculum. However, if we see the role of teacher as an agent who can provide a different language in the form of a political project, we can consider the feminist teacher's task to be to provide a counter-hegemony to the school's dominant project. Unlike resistance, counter-hegemony has a political project. Counter-hegemony is "the development

of counter institutions, ideologies and cultures that provide an ethical alternative to the dominant hegemony, a lived experience of how the world can be different” and provides a “critical understanding of both the nature of domination and the type of active opposition it *should* engender (italics added).²⁴

We can explore how this can be accomplished in classrooms by briefly examining ways in which Freire’s conceptualization of dialogue intersects with Spivak’s politics of translation, and then provide methods by which the teacher can translate the reading with the girls. Such a critique can lead to transformation of the girls’ understanding of their own lives and to them transforming themselves.

Freire tells us that studying “is a difficult task that requires a systematic critical attitude and intellectual discipline acquired through practice.” Therefore, it is an act, an experience that students must engage in *regularly* to develop. He identifies two pedagogical assumptions that undergird this practice: “the reader should assume the role of a subject in the act of studying” and the “act of studying is not merely a relationship with the immediacy of the text...[but] the broader sense and attitude toward the world,” and the agent, as the doer, “conjures [up] images of both critique and possibility.”²⁵ Teachers, as translators, can provide a language of critique, a language of hope, that can enable students to analyze their own multiple identities and locations and reflect on their own possibilities.²⁶ For Freire dialogue provides possibilities for critical pedagogy.²⁷ He defines dialogue as an “encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world.” Without dialogue, he says, there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education. He identifies the essence of dialogue, the word, as having two dimensions, reflection and action, and that holds for a word to be true both of these must exist.” He says, “with true words we name the world” and once named, the world in turn reappears to the namer as a problem and requires of him or her a new naming. He maintains that the requirement of dialogue is an intense faith in humankind and a dialogue embedded in humility and hope rooted in our incompleteness, “from which [we] move out in constant search.”

This constant search that Freire describes is a search for understanding ourselves, and “making sense of ourselves is what produces identity.”²⁸ Spivak agrees that we need to use language as a means of constructing meaning of our subjectivities. But unlike Freire, she says that it is not the logic of language, the words themselves, that offer clues to meaning, but rather it is the space and silence in between and around the words, that offers meaning. She says, “it is not bodies of meaning that are transferred” but rather a search for “clues through language” which provides the means by which we come to understand the “workings of gendered agency.”

To make sense of her feelings and beliefs in this way, a girl must analyze her own narrative and learn to embrace the discomfort inherent in uncertainty. It is in the clues of language, the silences as well as the words that she can come to understand herself and connect intimately with herself and others. This intimacy is crucial for creating a space not for gaining or losing identity, but for changing identity and meaning.

In a teaching/learning context, this intimate connection with the self may expose the structural and material underpinnings of knowledge and provide both the skill and framework for girls to critique their own subjectivities. Girls may come to understand the workings of hegemonic forces of power and may develop a critical awareness of how as agents they have interacted with these forces and how their identities have been co-constructed.

Limitations of space do not allow me to develop an elaborate discussion of the many avenues that can generate the space to pursue this endeavor. However, the interests of the learner and the needs of society must inform a curriculum paradigm if we are to be successful in creating a more just and humane world.²⁹ An innovative curriculum that is inclusive of the needs, concerns, and desires of the learner along with the knowledge base necessary for their emerging critique must lie at the heart of our effort.³⁰ Practical means that validate teen knowledge and experience are a necessary part of this curriculum. Suggestions include the development of innovative, interdisciplinary and thematic lessons and projects that are designed specifically as invitations for teen talk and for individual constructions of knowledge. Teen school newsletters created for and by students designed to affirm the issues of interest and concern of teenagers are another powerful avenue. Meaningful and useful journal exchanges and writing assignments that explore the learners' belief systems can provide the opportunity for self-examination. Critical uncovering of the hidden meanings of romance novels, popular music, films, and teen magazines can serve as means of identifying cultural, social, and material influences, while biographical, historical, and fictional narratives may provide a challenge to social norms. These suggestions represent just a few opportunities that can generate the space for teens to formulate questions about the development of their own subjectivities, translate the meaning of their own lives, and struggle to create autonomous selves, educated and developed selves, but ones in relation to others.

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7. Ibid.

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