

Stanovsky, D. (1997) "Speaking As, Speaking For and Speaking With: The Pitfalls and Possibilities of Men Teaching Feminism." **Feminist Teacher**, vol. 11, no. 1: 10-19, Spring/Summer 1997. Published by University of Illinois Press for the Feminist Teacher Editorial Collective (ISSN: 1934-6034). Permission to archive granted to author.

Speaking As, Speaking For and Speaking With: The Pitfalls and Possibilities of Men Teaching Feminism

By Derek Stanovsky

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the possibilities and implications of certain poststructuralist feminisms for the practice of feminist teaching. It is also, in part, a reflection on the author's experiences in the college classroom as a man occupying the vexed position of male-feminist whose job is to teach about, write about, and speak about feminist philosophies. The issues at stake revolve around the possibility and/or desirability of men teaching feminism. The aim of the paper is to explore the tensions, dynamics, and pedagogical possibilities unique to a classroom setting where feminism in one of its many forms is the topic, the audience is primarily, or even exclusively, women and the instructor is a man.

ARTICLE

This paper occupies a precarious position at the intersection between theory and pedagogy. It is, in part, an exploration of the possibilities and implications of certain poststructuralist feminisms for the practice of feminist teaching. It is also, in part, a reflection on my own experiences in the college classroom as a man occupying the vexed position of male-feminist whose job is to teach about, write about, and speak about feminist philosophies. The issues at stake revolve around the possibility and/or desirability of men teaching feminism. My aim is to explore the tensions and pedagogical possibilities unique to a classroom setting where feminism in one of its many forms is the topic, the audience is primarily, or even exclusively, women and the instructor is a man. This situation is fairly new in academia, but as Women's Studies programs proliferate and more men along with more women receive feminist training it is one which is certain to increase. Given this, it is necessary to understand the new dynamics introduced into the feminist classroom by the presence of male instructors.

I will approach these issues by examining three speech situations: those of "speaking as," "speaking for," and "speaking with." My goal is to uncover the specific pitfalls and possibilities that emerge when men engage in teaching feminism by looking closely at each of these contexts. Further, I wish to show how these problems and possibilities differ from those faced by women teaching feminism as well as how they are similar. I will draw on the work of several feminist theorists in this project including that of bell hooks, Maria Lugones, Elizabeth Spelman, Trinh Minh-Ha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Their writings, aimed at understanding the complexities introduced by ethnicity, race, class and sexual orientation within feminism, are also helpful in understanding the complications of sexual identity introduced into the classroom by men as feminist teachers.

Speaking As, For and With

Often the act of "speaking as" is treated as something unproblematic and easily accomplished. One might "speak as" the member of a particular group, and to accomplish this all that seems to be required is that one in fact be a member of the group in question. For instance, most days I "speak as" a philosophy teacher in an uncontroversial and unselfconscious way. In a similar fashion one is able to "speak as" a member of many different kinds of groups and not just as a member of a profession. For example, one can "speak as" a member of a culture, a nation, a religion, a race, a class, or a gender. I phrase it in this somewhat awkward way as a question of "speaking as," instead of simply asking "Who is speaking?" because I want to stress that the identity of a speaker can shift at different times, in different contexts, with different audiences, with different subject matter, and so on, that **[End Page 10]** it is even possible for one speaker to occupy several different, overlapping and even conflicting speaking positions at one and the same time, and all of these possibilities matter. To simply ask "Who is speaking?" tends to invite a simple, univocal answer that implies a single, fixed, individual identity as the source of all speech.

The question of what one "speaks as" is important because it is intimately connected with the interests of the speaking subject. In philosophy classes, we often warn our students against *ad hominem* arguments and may identify a good speaker as one whose personal biases are kept at bay and who takes up an impartial, objective and disinterested stance towards her or his material. This stance might even be identified as "universality" and be something which is actively sought after and cultivated. To call attention to the position from which someone is speaking, particularly someone who is making a good faith effort at "being objective," is often perceived as rude and inappropriate. However, there is something plausible about the suggestion that it matters very much who is doing the speaking because with that comes information about why they might be speaking.

This is important because it remains true that no matter how hard one strives to achieve complete "objectivity," one still has to speak from somewhere, from some position or

other. The "view from nowhere," as Thomas Nagel has termed it, is never a real possibility. If a speaker does have a concrete, specific location out of which she or he is speaking, then what can be made of the attempt to distance oneself from that position by claiming a kind of neutrality or universality? One thing that such an attempt always does, at least to some degree, is to obscure the connections (the interests) that exist between speakers and their speech. These interests are crucial when the topic is feminism and they become even more crucial when considering the situation of men teaching feminism. It is difficult to imagine a context where the interests of a speaker matter more than when men speak on feminism. If feminism teaches anything, it teaches that men have a vested interest in maintaining and hiding male privilege. Allowing those interests to remain submerged behind an assumed objectivity does damage to one of the central insights of feminism, and in the case of men teaching feminism it also creates a fatal performative contradiction in the classroom.

Happily, the likelihood of maintaining the position of disinterested, objective, male feminist teacher for any length of time in a feminist classroom is very small. The apparent contradiction embodied in the subject position of a male feminist teacher becomes obvious to most students almost from the first moment of class, though some may be too polite to mention it. This is where the issue of "speaking as" makes itself felt most immediately. No matter what other position a man may occupy in the classroom and "speak as," clearly there is one identity he cannot ever occupy. He cannot "speak as" a woman. He may be taken to "speak as" a man, a teacher, a scholar, or something even worse, but he will never be mistaken to be "speaking as" a woman. This is in sharp contrast to the situation of women instructors teaching feminism. Students are unlikely to experience any sense of dissonance when women feminists speak about feminism. One reason for this may be an implicit assumption that the teacher is able to "speak as" a woman and so speak from a position where her own interests are in line with the interests expressed by the material. This basic **[End Page 11]** asymmetry in the speaking positions of women and men in the feminist classroom generates a number of tensions.

For instance, being able to "speak as" is often taken to be a prerequisite for being able to "speak for." That is, membership in a particular group or class can come to be viewed as a necessary, and sometimes even sufficient, condition for "speaking for" other members of that group. The assumption seems to be that if one's own interests are relevantly similar to those of the rest of the group, then these shared interests will enable one to more or less adequately represent and articulate the interests of other members of that group. I have in mind here situations where someone makes claims like "speaking as an x, (where x may be woman, African-American, lesbian, worker, etc.) I can tell you that ...," or "you are not x, so you cannot speak for ...," or even "I am not x, so therefore I could not possibly speak for" This view certainly calls into question the propriety, and perhaps even the possibility, of men teaching feminism. Since a man cannot "speak as" a woman, it may be that he will be unable to "speak for" women as well, and the effectiveness of a feminist teacher who cannot legitimately represent the interests of women is severely limited.

Gayatri Spivak has pointed out how such a view can serve as an evasion of responsibility. If one holds that one cannot speak because one is not a member of a particular group, then the burden of speaking for, or even understanding, that group has been lifted from oneself and placed on others. The position, "I am not x, so I cannot speak for x" can become an excuse for "not doing your homework" (*Post-Colonial* 62). In the context of individuals in a more privileged position denying their ability to adequately understand and articulate the views of those with less privilege, it becomes yet another mechanism for asserting that privilege by shifting the burden for educating oneself onto others. As bell hooks notes, this may reestablish a context in which an historically subordinate group must once again "serve" their masters, this time as educators (118). For men's relation to feminism, it can become an excuse not to engage with feminist writings, inside the classroom or out, by claiming that the identity of being a man precludes one from being able to be knowledgeable about feminism. This effectively transforms the teaching of feminism into another variety of "women's work" and absolves men from the responsibility of having to understand and teach feminism.

This situation of a "speaking as" grounding a "speaking for" has come to be viewed with increasing suspicion, particularly in feminist circles, however. The worry is that those interests which vary from those of the speaker will be silenced and become lost, and that any "speaking as" will simultaneously work to obscure the multitude of differences that exist within any group. Within feminism, this argument has taken the form of substantial critiques by African-American, Hispanic, lesbian, working class women, etc., that their interests have been the ones that have been obscured by predominantly straight, white, middle-class women who have done the largest share of "speaking as" and "speaking for" women.

The solution to this problem does not seem to be to simply redefine one's groups more inclusively. The problem reemerges at whatever level one tries to reestablish group identity and unity. Within every sub-group there are differences which become obscured when the emphasis is placed on their similarities. For instance, differences **[End Page 12]** in class and sexual orientation tend to be obscured when the focus is shifted to that of race. Similarly, concerns about race and ethnicity tend to become marginalized when issues of class or sexual orientation take center stage. The danger here is that one's group constantly dwindles, tending downward towards a group of one. This is a problem. The ability to "speak for" others seems to be a crucial requirement for any political movement. In the case of feminist politics, the need to "speak for" women and to represent their interests as a group seems to be necessary, desirable and unavoidable. But how can one negotiate the conflict that occurs when the expression of commonalties seems to necessitate the obscuring of differences?

One solution to this difficulty which has been voiced within feminism has been that what one ought to strive for is a "speaking with," rather than simply a "speaking for." Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman have argued persuasively for just such a view; their co-authored paper is at once an eloquent exposition of the idea as well as a practical performance. "Speaking with" holds out the possibility of recovering the diversity of women's voices. By attending to the variety of women's lived experiences and seeking

out those voices which have most often been silenced, one can begin to address the problems of exclusion. This is also a strategy which holds out some promise for men teaching in the feminist classroom. This is because "speaking with" does not require that one also be able to "speak as" or "for" women. In fact, the reason for advocating "speaking with" as an alternative paradigm is precisely because the ground provided by "speaking as" was too narrow to capture the diversity of women's voices. Given this, men may also be able to make effective use of this strategy in the classroom by engaging in dialogue and "speaking with" women scholars, activists, students and authors.

This can be put into practice in a variety of ways. One avenue for "speaking with" that should not be overlooked is the dialogue already opened between the authors read in a class and the participants in that class. These readings provide a ready source of discussions with some of feminism's most important, articulate and powerful voices. It is also a resource that is equally available to both women and men teaching feminism. Another resource can be found in the students themselves. Typically, women students tend to be in the majority in Women's Studies classrooms and can be a valuable source of insights into the variety of women's experiences, perceptions and struggles. Both women and men teaching feminism should take seriously the need to provide women students with the opportunity and the safe environment necessary to express their views, concerns and experiences. Male instructors may have a greater difficulty achieving this goal, since their very presence in the classroom can have a chilling effect on some types of exchanges. This difficulty is not an insurmountable one, but does require special care and attention to classroom dynamics. Finally, there is the possibility of inviting women scholars and activists to visit the classroom and share both their professional and personal insights into feminist issues. Again, this is an option open equally to women and men teaching feminism and one which is potentially very valuable to both.

There are still difficulties, however. How does one choose whom to "speak with"? Who will be the source of information on the experience of the sought after cultural outsiders? In short, the problem becomes who will "speak as" the voice of the **[End Page 13]** marginal group in question and so "speak for" the interests of that group? Indeed, Lugones reflects on this question in the Spanish language prologue to her article with Spelman about the danger of "speaking for" all Hispanic women, thus reducing and falsifying the complexity of their lived experiences in just the way that she takes mainstream feminist theory to obscure and falsify her own experiences. She advocates another round of "speaking with" as a possible solution; this time with those within her own community instead of those outside it. But here the same set of problems encountered in the case of "speaking for" reemerge. The difficulties have simply been displaced and carried back into a speaking situation which is undeniably richer and more complex. This may improve the situation, but it does not solve it. Whenever one voice represents many voices, there is always the risk of misrepresentation, and this is true no matter whose voice does the representing. Such concerns are addressed in the writings and films of Trinh Minh-Ha. Trinh, a Vietnamese woman educated in France, writing in English and filming women in Senegal, reflects on the difficulties inherent in

such a project. Acknowledging the difficulties in speaking either "as" a third world woman herself, "for" women in Senegal, or even "with" Senegalese women, she opts instead to "just speak nearby" (96). In the classroom, this means that both women and men as instructors face the problem of potentially misrepresenting, excluding and silencing at least some women, and both face the task of how best to deal with this problem.

This suggests that all of the possibilities discussed above as ways of creating dialogues within the classroom also carry with them the potential to cause serious problems of their own. For example, the selection of texts for a class is never a neutral event. Choosing to read one article will mean that others go unread. Selecting which readings will be included in a course and which excluded already imposes a number of constraints on the range of voices that will be heard. Even before this choice of texts there is already a process of selection and exclusion in operation through the editorial decisions of journals and publishers, the privileging of first world, English language writings over third world and non-Western texts, etc., so that even if one somehow managed to include all the published writing available in a course, one would still fail to capture the full range of feminist thought and practice.

Similarly, the voices of women students in a course may be a source of some kinds of diversity, e.g. sexual orientation. These same students are unlikely to be diverse with regard to race, class, ethnicity, or age, however. All too many college classrooms, including Women's Studies classrooms, are occupied predominantly by young, white, middle-class students. Again, this means that relying on the voices of the students to capture the variety of women's experiences will almost certainly not overcome the exclusions already at work that have included some women in college and excluded others. Additionally, in those cases where students of diverse backgrounds are present, it may place too heavy a burden on individual students to ask them to take on the role of publicly representing a minority viewpoint by "speaking as" a member of a doubly oppressed group such as African-American women, or working class women. Typically, students are still developing the tools they need to express/create such identities and learning such skills is likely to be one of their reasons for taking the course. One also runs the risk of exploiting such **[End Page 14]** students by shifting the burden of understanding off of the instructor and other students in the class and onto the backs of the minority members in the class.

Finally, relying on invited women scholars and activists to fill the void of minority voices also comes perilously close to "not doing your homework" and shifting the burden for understanding and articulating diverse points of view onto those minority voices. This is additionally exploitative if these women are expected to provide guest appearances without pay as an educational service to those with more privilege, and there is no certainty that incorporating such speakers will solve all of the problems of inclusiveness. Control over which speakers to invite still rests with the instructor and meeting in an academic environment lacking in the very diversity which it is hoped the speaker will remedy is not the terrain most conducive to a free and open dialogue. It should also be kept in mind that the speaker may not be able to represent all of the voices of her own

community. There will still be exclusions which take place simply because every voice is a particular voice and no one voice can be guaranteed to represent other voices with complete fidelity. All of these issues combine to make any instance of "speaking with" at least potentially problematic in practice.

Poststructurally Speaking

It is at this juncture that poststructuralist feminism can make a contribution. Going back to the first case of "speaking as," a poststructuralist intervention can help untangle these problems (or perhaps finish tying the knot, depending on one's view of poststructuralism). At the beginning of this paper I wrote that it is often assumed that the act of "speaking as" is something which can be easily and unproblematically accomplished, but suppose this is not true. What then? The discussion above was based implicitly on essentialist notions of what it would mean to "speak as" something. Poststructuralism takes a critical stance towards such essentialist assumptions.

An essentialist answer to the question of how one "speaks as" a woman or a man would locate the source for this possibility in some real, existing, unifying feature, experience, or characteristic which is both unique and natural to women or men. This common characteristic or set of characteristics would then serve as a foundation which would insure that members of the group did indeed share common interests, common insights and common problems as women or as men and so would be able to speak out of this shared authentic experience, background and consciousness as women or as men.

Poststructuralism argues instead that there is no such essential feminine or masculine nature, and that any attempt to assert such a nature will necessarily work to exclude certain marginal groups and individuals. The speaking subject is at best seen as a kind of fictional convenience which emerges under certain circumstances but which can in principle provide no stable foundation for a theory or for a politics. This is what concerns many feminists about poststructuralism. Poststructuralism, by taking away the ground for a specifically feminine subject, may also take away the ground for any specifically feminist theory or politics. How can you have feminism, a theory and practice of women, without women? **[End Page 15]**

One response from poststructuralist feminists has been to advocate some form of "strategic essentialism." Strategic essentialism recognizes the necessity of occupying some subject position or other at the same time as it recognizes the limitations which are built into every subject position. That is, at the same time as a particular subject position enables certain actions and certain speech, it also precludes and excludes others. Gayatri Spivak has called this situation an "enabling double bind," something which is necessary for action but which also limits those actions ("Feminism" 214). As has already been said, every speaker speaks from some location or other. Given this, it does not seem to do much good to simply note the fact that these positions are all merely contingent fictions founded on nothing substantial because, nevertheless, they

are contingent fictions which have a great deal of power and persistence. What do we do with these subject positions if they are things which are both necessary as well as limiting? What strategic essentialism advocates is that we self-consciously reflect on the position occupied by each speaking subject, including ourselves, in each context we encounter and attempt to gauge what interests and effects those positions carry, what possibilities they enable, as well as what positions and possibilities they exclude and marginalize.

One way to accomplish this goal that has been suggested is that one might actively seek to highlight and foreground the position from which one speaks, rather than try to distance and abstract oneself from that position. In this way it is hoped that the damages that result from the exclusions and marginalizations that have been necessary in constituting that position will be minimized by calling attention to the specifics of that subject position. In the classroom, this may mean inviting students to treat the teacher as text and engage in the same kind of interpretation, analysis and critique of the instructor as they do with written texts for the course. This is a situation familiar to many women who face students suspicious of women instructors in general. It is likely to be unfamiliar to most male instructors, who usually enjoy the privilege of having their gender treated as unremarkable by students. This scrutiny of the position from which instructors speak can be a salutary practice for both students and instructors. The idea here is to try and facilitate the process of recognizing how and where exclusions, falsifications, and marginalizations creep in whenever one claims an identity from which to "speak as," so that the differences between the speaker and others of her or his group will be easier, rather than harder, to recuperate.

Applying this to feminism, what strategic essentialism recognizes is both the necessity of there being a subject position named "woman" as well as the inadequacy of such a position to the task which it sets itself. Assuming such an essentializing identity as "woman" cannot help but do violence to the actual diversity of women which exists, but at the same time presupposing such an identity and acting within it is a necessary precondition for feminist thought and feminist practice. In order to minimize this damage, one should stress the specificities of one's own position within the group as a way of highlighting the limitations which these specificities (of race, class, sexual orientation, etc.) all impose. What this amounts to is a state of permanent revolution and persistent critique and auto-critique. There is never a final step at which one stops because in principle one can never get it right, or **[End Page 16]** perhaps more precisely, the mechanisms by which one gets anything right are also the same mechanisms through which oppression and exclusion operate as well. Given that sexual identity is not an identity which is in any simple sense optional, this constant vigilance is also a practical requirement. One does not just choose to be a woman or a man, one is required to take up one of these roles and to act within it. What one does within that role is then something which needs constant attention since neither option carries with it any guarantee of political suitability.

"Speaking as" a woman, or "speaking as" a man become extremely vexed endeavors on this view. They are necessary for progressive politics, and yet also sources of

oppression and exclusion. They are real in their effects and yet precarious, unsubstantial, untenable, and ultimately unfounded, and if the case of "speaking as" is this complicated, then the situations of "speaking for" and "speaking with" can only be more so. To "speak for" someone requires a further leap in that it requires that one assume that two or more individuals share the same unsubstantial and illegitimate subject positions such that one may speak for the others. Again, there is nothing that guarantees that this will be possible and much that suggests it will be impossible, yet it is surely something which is indispensable. Certainly for feminism the requirement that someone be able to "speak for" women seems unavoidable. At the same time, it will never work perfectly. It can at best be an approximation which will require continual revision. For similar reasons, the situation of "speaking with" also becomes an extremely vexed endeavor. Along with all the other complications is the added difficulty that the context of the exchange emerges as a significant factor. Who initiates the conversation, who may terminate it, whose language it takes place in, why the dialogue is sought, etc. all further serve to complicate and problematize the endeavor.

It is impossible to list any set of teaching strategies that will solve all of these problems all of the time. There is no one position which allows one to speak "as," "for" or "with" others that will always be safe (and certainly refusing to speak at all is no solution). There is no combination of correct texts, correct students, correct guest speakers and correct personal identity which can guarantee that one will never marginalize or exclude others. There is always a risk. In fact, it is this risk of occupying an exclusionary identity that also makes possible the progressive and positive moments of teaching feminism. It is the voicing of these differing subject positions that provides the power of feminism. In practice, perhaps the the best one can hope for is to cultivate an awareness that exclusions and marginalizations can happen in any setting, even in the most progressive feminist classroom, and strive to provide space for the ongoing business of change, critique and struggle.

Given these difficulties, what does it mean to "speak as" a man in a feminist classroom? There are some unique possibilities, as well as problems, which emerge. One of these possibilities is that the subject position "man" is uniquely well suited to distancing certain essentialist notions of femininity. If an appropriate strategy is to foreground one's own speaking position in order to avoid naturalizing that position and the exclusions which it entails, then occupying the subject position of "man" might be a very effective means of doing this in feminist contexts. "Speaking as" a man in such a context highlights one's subject position quite starkly and **[End Page 17]** unmistakably. One runs a very low risk of being taken as speaking out of some natural, biological, or experiential essence that gives one privileged access to an understanding of "women" and women's oppression, and the interests embedded in such a position are equally unlikely to go unnoticed and unquestioned. Any such position that problematizes essentialist assumptions in this way has at least the possibility of being used to good effect.

On the other hand, there are some new and serious problems which also come along with this subject position. For instance, one of the assumptions which feminism tries to combat is that only men's lives, experiences, speech, ideas, etc. are valuable. When I, a

man, speak in class on feminism, I lend credence to the idea that feminism is valuable through one of the very mechanisms which feminism seeks to contest. Consider the following unsound syllogism:

I, a man, speak on feminism.

All and only those things which men speak about are important.

Therefore, feminism is important.

This is a difficult bind to avoid, and one which women speaking on feminism do not run into at all. This true conclusion relies on an egregiously wrong and suppressed major premise. This is perhaps one of the most stark examples of the asymmetry introduced by men teaching feminism. Although this difficulty can be negotiated in various ways, I do not think it can be avoided altogether.

For instance, it is possible to shamelessly exploit this implicit syllogism by employing all the cultural authority men carry with them into the classroom and use that authority as a means to motivate students to take feminism seriously. (You will take this course seriously, because you have been trained to take male authority seriously.) Alternatively, this difficulty can be openly acknowledged and challenged. One can call attention to the faulty premise and invite criticism and subversion of such illegitimate male authority. (Note that this does not necessarily entail that one escapes from the syllogism. Acceptance of male authority may still underlie student acceptance of the critique of male authority.) Both of these options hold out potential benefits as well as potential disasters. In the first case, students may learn feminism well, but at the price of internalizing still further the unquestioned acceptance of male authority. In the second case, students may learn to actively resist male authority, but at the same time actively resist other feminist ideas since their immediate source is an already suspect male teacher. Furthermore, the more difficult, challenging and radical the brand of feminism being taught, the more likely students may be to try to reject the teachings by rejecting the teacher.

Although there are clearly problems specific to men teaching feminism, ultimately, the problems which men face in speaking in feminist contexts seem to differ from those of women in degree, and not necessarily in kind. In neither case is there an unproblematic identity which can be relied on to ground feminist theory and practice in every situation. In fact, in the case of men, the absence of such an identity is so immediately apparent that not even the illusion of such an identity can be maintained. Both women and men in their approach to feminism must rely on the **[End Page 18]** same messy and always tentative methods, such as that of "speaking with" others who occupy differing but equally unfounded and exclusionary subject positions in an effort to stave off the constrictions and narrowness of vision that one's own position induces. Men engaging in feminist dialogue certainly have more and more serious obstacles standing in the way of that dialogue, but again these seem to be difficulties similar to those faced by women engaged in feminist discourse who wish to move beyond the restricted interests and perspectives of their own class, race, and/or sexual orientation. Men have the additional

variable of sexual identity to attend to as well. This does not make the project impossible, only less likely.

References

hooks, bell. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston: South End Press, 1989.

Lugones, Maria C. and Elizabeth V. Spelman. "Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for 'The Woman's Voice'," *Women's Studies International Forum*. 6 (1983): 573-81.

Nagel, Thomas. *The View from Nowhere*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Feminism and Deconstruction, Again: Negotiating with Unacknowledged Masculinism." *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Teresa Brennan. New York: Routledge, 1989.

----- . *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*. Ed. Sarah Harasym. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Trinh T. Minh-Ha. *Framer Framed*. New York: Routledge, 1992.