

## PUBLIC BODIES/PUBLIC POWER

*Elsbeth Probyn*

We are born into a room in which a raging conversation is in full force. We listen, watch and learn a voice with which to converse. A voice which due to factors of gender, or environment may be fainter than the rest. We begin to speak in whispers in the shadow of a guy armed with loudspeakers and worse. Occasionally whispers may swell in chorus and a lull allows them to be heard....

Angela Miles' article is important in that it gives those of us born late into the dialogues amongst feminists a sketch of how these discussions emerged. For those generations of women who were not around to cut their political teeth in the heady years of the '60's and 70's when in Shulamith Firestone's words, "the revolution was about to happen through feminism", it is essential to be reminded of the battles, the meagre spoils of which we tend to take as our 'natural' rights, as part of our gender identity. The impulse in Miles' work to assemble some of the major themes in North American feminist theory is admirable and is especially and thoroughly well done both here and in a previous collection edited by Miles and Geraldine Finn, *Feminism in Canada*.

However Miles has a political project in mind as must we all. And it is with the articulation of the central tenet of her project that I have problems. Miles' historical overview is vitally important, as is the work of those she cites, in providing us with a history of the present. To attempt to arrive at a critical understanding of what it means to experience ourselves as women we must be aware of how we come to that understanding. This process, which is in the broadest sense epistemological, must necessarily entail both an understanding of the actual way in which our gender identity is socially constructed, and

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a realization that the formulation of gender identity is to some degree grounded in our bodies. If we wish to come to terms with what it means, individually and collectively, to be a woman neither of these two forces can be over-privileged. And it is here that Angela Miles' article is most problematic.

Whilst it cannot be denied that our identity as women has been historically, and thus actually, defined by our capacity to bear children, to contain and nurture within our bodies new life, or what is flatly termed 'reproduction', this process has also always been socially appropriated and defined. The attendant values concerning the activity of having children and looking out and after them comes to be equally socially defined. Indeed, this activity is so historically layered with different social meanings and myths that it is difficult to actually pinpoint which experiences of motherhood are generated by the biological process itself and to what extent the feelings and, for Miles, values associated with reproduction are mere social interpretations.

Thus, we must question the extent to which our identity is constructed through our biological capacity to reproduce (and all the attendant emotions and values that this may entail). The task becomes one of deciphering how central is our biological reproductive capacity to those values that Miles suggests all women, in all times and places, possess. This, I think, is of key importance to the construction of a feminist theory which seeks to unravel how women come to know themselves as such, and to the formulation of a feminist project which seeks to engender change in the manner proposed by integrative feminists such as Miles. For the values that she states are inherent to woman through their function as nurturers may quite simply be the qualities possessed by all those excluded from power. If the qualities Miles attributes to women due to their mothering experience are only the characteristics of any group excluded from power, wherein will we find the force to fuel a political project for change? This all becomes even more hazardous when we consider the key historical reason for our exclusion from the realm of public power; that is, when we examine how under the sign of reproduction we have been excluded from the structure or power, incarcerated in a space in which over time we have developed and practiced those qualities which Miles wishes to say are ours by nature. This seems to me to be a tenuous basis indeed upon which to construct a political project. Can the values which come from a socially defined position of power exclusion be extended to become the motivating force of a universal feminist politics?

Also, we must inquire whether these female values which Miles considers as *a priori* to being a woman really do hold true for all women, including those who for many factors will never experience 'reproduction'. Miles' reply to this gap in practical experience is that women develop in the close single-gender mother-daughter role the same values of wholeness which they then may or may not re-experience, re-create in reproduction. This is a contentious pro-

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posals, indeed, in the light of the research of feminist psychologists such as Cathy Urwin, whose work in the field of infant development and gender identification points to an early recognition and participation in socially defined gender relations by young girls.

However, as well as considering whether Miles' values can be held by all women, we must also examine how closely these terms describe our own phenomenological experiences. For, although Hartsock is quoted as saying that "the body — its desires and needs, and its mortality... would be given a place of honour at the centre of theory", there remains little convincing exploration into what those desires and needs are, and how they might differ from those of men's. (And this is not to say that they should be defined in opposition to male desires.) The realization of what our desires are, and can be, is a difficult task, in that our sexuality has been traditionally reduced to narrowly encompass child-bearing. This is an inadequate description of our sexuality. Over and over again in historical documents we find references to "the rampant sexuality of women which threatens to undermine white manhood and empire". Discussion is needed on what our sexuality is or, might be, once emancipated of the oppressive labels of virgin, mother or whore. Victorian administrators were quite correct in assuming that our true sexuality would be threatening to order. Expressing, practicing and even discussing our bodily passions and desires as women is indeed politically subversive. True enough, articulations on this issue have been on-going in the feminist press and is a central issue in the debate between heterosexual feminism and political lesbianism, but in order to reach and involve all women articulation of our sexuality should be heard and seen in the more mainstream media.

I would stress, then, the importance of Angela Miles' work. It is self-avowedly incomplete, which is for me a positive quality. That we must aim for a deep understanding of what our experience, in the fullest sense, of ourselves constitutes in itself a political act. In order to come to an understanding of how we are, we must consider how we come to know what we know, as we both experience ourselves within social definitions and know ourselves at point-zero, that is to say, bodily. Thus, we should open up the relationship of women as object; socially constructed, and woman as an experiencing subject, in order to consider where and what our desires and passions may be. We must create a space between biology and social construction in order to consider and explore our fleshed out identities as women.

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### Notes

Miles, Angela and Finn, Geraldine, eds., *Feminism in Canada*, Montreal: Black Rose, 1982.

Urwin, Cathy, "Power Relations and the Emergence of Language" in Henriques, Julien et al eds., *Changing the Subject*, London: Methuen, 1984.