

The Chaos of Subjectivity in the Ordered Halls of Academe

by Kathleen Rockhill

With minor revisions, this is the text of a talk that I gave in the "Popular Feminism Lecture Series" at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) on April 7, 1986.

Tonight I want to raise some questions of a nature slightly different from those that have been raised so far in this series. What I want to do is to open up some issues about our practice as feminist academics. That is, I would like to reflect critically upon the structure of academe and consider some of its implications for a feminist practice. In doing this, I am concerned that my remarks not be taken as a criticism of the work that has been done; I could not begin to say what I will say without the stimulation and support of the work that has preceded me. I am in awe of the richness of the feminist scholarship at OISE: of the tremendous strides taken, the courageous stances and the acute political acumen of these feminists who have made it possible for us to be here. I have been at OISE for three years; it has been the most intellectually challenging period of my life. The opportunity to work with and learn from the feminist faculty and students with whom I come into contact has been perhaps the greatest gift of my life. I feel that I am only beginning to breathe — even to sing — after the stultifying deadness I experienced as a faculty member at UCLA and at Rutgers before it. Whereas once I despaired over my incapacity to force my restless spirit into the straight-jacket of academe, now I think it's a miracle that at least some vestiges of that spirit have

survived.

The chaos of subjectivity: this is what I have lived, in a deep splitting between my sense of self and what I saw as demanded of me in an academic world that prided itself on its intellectual excellence. Now, I would like to explore the nature of that splitting.

For months I have been in an ongoing monologue, with you as my imaginary audience, passionately pouring out my heart — lashing out, pleading, unlocking years of untold experiences — telling you all that is not said which, I believe, must be

said, if we are to understand how our subjectivities are framed and constricted, and even, for some, like me, deadened by academic forms. Then I faced the task of preparing this talk...and all those words that poured like a great torrential down-pour from my belly — to you — as I walked and I talked, in the woods, on the lakefront, in the late night confines of my raving insomnia...all those words die; I go dumb and numb. I have nightmares of losing my voice while desperately trying to communicate. All that passion dries up, gets blocked, locked in my back, con-

stricted in my throat, as I face this blank page and no longer imagine but see you before me. So I will do what I advise my students to do — go into my anxiety and begin speaking from there.

I know that I must speak to you from this position in the confines of this room at OISE, and that I am to speak to you as a feminist, a scholar, a holder of one of the few cherished feminist faculty appointments in Canada. I imagine and respect that you come wanting all that these symbols lead us to believe we have a right to, what we deserve and demand: insight, knowledge, wisdom to help us, to fortify us in our daily struggle. As I face our expectations, in the imaginary reality of this situation, what for me was once an opening, a space, at last to begin to talk to you as I feel I must — from my heart, from my body as well as my mind, from the life that I know best, the one I have lived — I freeze. I am unable, for six days I am unable to write a word.



Kathleen Rockhill at her Confirmation

