

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

With tenacious persistence, my 'judges' have a field day, hammering into my aching head, that I must not speak from my subjectivity, my real subjectivity. To do so is inappropriate, anecdotal, emotional, self-disclosure, personal, bordering on egocentrism, narcissism. Even worse to speak from my chaos, to be not only non-analytical but also fuzzy, unclear, dark, bleak, confusing.

My voices are at war: one whispers insistently, "Present a proper 'popular' academic talk, laced with a brief, ideally light, account of your work; and try, just try to be humorous, not so bloody heavy for a change." And always then the counter voice, the one that screams, "No! Someplace, somewhere you must follow your heart and break out of these forms — at the very least stretch them enough to be mindful of how it is that they limit, shape and even jeopardize, a different kind of feminist work."

The key, I know, is that these voices must come together. I want to find a way to speak, to write, from the chaos of my subjectivity so that we can begin to see what we all know: that the only unusual thing about my subjectivity is that it is the one that I know best. It is through the effort to excavate and reflect critically upon my subjectivity, both in its formation and living, that I hope to deepen my understanding of how we are shaped as women in a society of systemic domination through our sexuality. I do not mean by this that academic inquiry should be focused upon our individual subjectivities, but that we must learn how to use our subjective formation more effectively, politically, educationally and in our research. For a while now I have been disturbed by the idea that we feel it quite okay to probe into other peoples' lives while we safely hide between and behind the lines of the texts we produce. Not until we begin to talk from our own dark recesses can we appreciate fully the risk for others as we, with the best of intentions, ask them to open up for us. For years I have been silenced in part by my abhorrence of narcissism — now I wonder if looking into others' lives when we do not openly subject our own to the same scrutiny is not a form of voyeuristic hiding.

When I chose the title for my talk, I did so as a description of what has been for me a central conflict in my academic life. As I actually begin to consider what I want to say and to contrast it with what I feel safe to say, I become painfully aware that this space, even this gift of a feminist space, is confined by a series of rules, expectations and power dynamics. The very fact that it

is a public forum in an academic setting where I am expected to speak to you as a feminist scholar carries a coding that we continually run up against and struggle with in our work as feminists. It is not unlike what happens to us every time we enter a feminist space within an institutional setting and expect or hope that, in some way, it will be different, special, woman-centred, at least free of the male-dominated forms that bind us. Always we are dismayed as we enter these spaces and find that they are not what we had fantasized. We thought that we, as women together, would do it differently. And while I celebrate and value profoundly the work we've done, whether we think of it as starting from the standpoint of women or as a woman-centred approach, I also think that this work has been ensconced in a certain idealism which recognizes that we are constructed socially but does not fully take into account the reality of that structuring in our politics, our education or our research. It is that structuring that sets the tone of what can happen here tonight. I refer not only to the spatial structuring — me at the podium talking to you for about an hour — but also how it is that I have the power to speak, and how I feel confined by the expectation that I perform as a feminist scholar. I do not know that I am a scholar in any conventional sense of the word — for what disturbs me most deeply about scholarship is its location in the mind, in logic, in a form of discourse which totally erases the body, the emotional, the symbolic, the multiplicities and confusions — and in all ways orders the chaos of our lived experiences so that we can no longer feel their power, their immobilizing conflicts, as we live them. And if we do speak from the belly, if we do talk our terror and despair, our hope and our fears, we do so at great risk as we make ourselves vulnerable, not only academically but also among feminists.

The expectation that I speak as a feminist both challenges and worries me. I am torn apart by the splits I experience in feminism and am deeply disturbed by our movements toward various orthodoxies. Feminism is at a point in history where it is developing sets of theoretical and political axioms. The political splits in feminism are fed by different sets of academic theories. To outline these in bold relief, we have liberal theories of difference, Marxist/socialist theories of domination through the political economics of productive and reproductive labour, and radical feminist theories of domination through sexuality. There is a potential

richness in the multiplicity of these approaches as each contributes what I believe is a vital piece of the work to be done. My concern is that these different theoretical schema are being reified into truths and taking on the characteristics of the male-defined theories we have fought. While we talk of starting from the standpoint of women, we develop categorical blinders as we argue over the prioritizing of class or sex or race. As feminism is being academicized, it is being packaged into objectively tight compartments which risk blinding us to how we *live* sexism from our varying class, race, ethnic and age locations. I have had the good fortune to have worked and lived in a number of different situations, giving me some feeling for how sex, ethnicity, and class are lived together. Our domination through our sexuality cannot be reduced to theories of production, any more than class can be reduced to theories of sexuality. We need all of these theoretical approaches — and some new ones — to move ahead. I agree with the radical feminists that sexuality is our primary site of oppression *as women*, and I think it is crucial that we learn how to develop theories of how sexual oppression is produced through the concrete, material practices of everyday life, as well as processes of social regulation and cultural production. I also think it crucial that we recognize that middle-class, North American feminists cannot speak for all women. In our hearts we must recognize this and develop a capacity to understand differences if we are to have anything to offer most of the women with whom we work.

Another way in which talking publicly of my feminism is difficult is because of the private world that feminism addresses and politicizes. I applaud this and yet am everywhere confronted by constrictions, even within feminism. To tell you my real story is to reveal the contradictions with which I struggle every day in my life. We all know that in this forum I can tell you only parts of my story and, based upon this, you will form a picture of me which will necessarily be incomplete. This becomes onehundredfold more complicated when feminism is also sexual politics — and it is to this, the sexual, as we have lived it, that becomes the most dangerous to talk about it in the public forums in which we are engaged as educators. This point is crucial, for if our sexuality is the primary site of our oppression as women, what does it mean when we cannot talk about it in our work unless it is in terms of *those women and children, out there*, who are battered and abused? Every woman in

this room knows that there are boundaries to the speakable, and that these are especially strong around issues of sexuality. If this is the primary site of our oppression, then it is a central political problem to address. My question is: How can we move toward developing academic forms which can take into account the ways in which our gendered subjectivities are constituted, which allow for the construction of new educational, political and scholarly forms, and which enable us to open up, to claim and to fight our sexual subjugation?

It is with this in mind that I offer you my story. It is obviously an edited story, breaking through some boundaries while maintaining others. It is difficult, fraught with conflict, for I do not know how far I can go, how far it is safe to go, and yet, I cannot begin to let you know what living the reality of the chaos of subjectivity in these walls means unless I can at least indicate some of the truths of my life, some of the sites of my struggle and continuing search.

I know that this chaos rages not only within me but also within you. It is a chaos that is, in all ways, shaped, moulded, defined and limited by the power relations, codes, assertions and regulations of truth and propriety in the world we inhabit. While we may resist these forms, we also welcome and even demand them, for we cannot bear the terror of chaos; we must have a sense of continuity, of predictability. Subjectivity also carries with it tones of feeling, of embodiment, of the personal, which have been tightly boxed, controlled and delegated to the private world rather than allowed, celebrated or subjected to rigorous scrutiny for purposes of transformation or confirmation.

I was heartened recently when I came across a marvelous essay by Audre Lorde entitled "Poetry is not a Luxury," in which she writes:

The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized...As we learn to bear the intimacy of scrutiny, and to flourish within it, as we learn to use the products of that scrutiny for power within our living, those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us.¹

Audre Lorde writes about poetry, but I think it relevant to academic work as well,

especially if our goal is to understand our experience, our lives, our subjugation, survival and liberation as women. She writes that, "there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt."² To repeat, by its very nature academic work is cognitive — firmly lodged in the rational mind and in the public sphere. This means that the body, the emotional, the private and the personal are systematically and sometimes tragically eliminated from the world of legitimate academic performance. I believe that this has grave consequences for the nature of academic work, continuing the invalidation of our experience, occluding and intellectualizing how we live domination as sexualized women.

Finally, I want to make all of this rambling a bit clearer by being more explicit. It is only as I have finally found the courage to refuse to walk the split that the academic world imposes upon me and the life I've lived that I've begun, however painfully and haltingly, to find my voice. In the end, I believe that we must open ourselves to who we are and to how we have actually lived our oppression, if we are to know with that dark seeing eye that has the courage to refuse, the courage to say "No" to all the mounds of intellectually developed truths, to say, "No, that doesn't feel right" or "Yes, that feels right." For me, lately this has become glaringly clear as I have begun to open up the psychological, physical and sexual abuse I have lived as a child and a woman. For years now, I have been uneasy, even disturbed by the influence of the feminist critique of psychoanalysis upon the women's movement. As you are probably aware, these theories hold that it's the early child-bonding to the mother that is crucial to gender socialization. The work of Nancy Chodorow is as important as Carol Gilligan's in helping us to frame woman's standpoint by looking at male-female differences and then naming women's experience as grounded in relationships. I agree that this is important, even vital work, yet my gut revels every time I hear that my gender identity is formed in early childhood in relation to my mother. I was beaten and sexually abused as a kid — *by my father*. Nothing, believe me, nothing, can equal the power of that fact in the formation of my gendered subjectivity.

Now, finally, as I allow myself to speak the unspeakable, to own it and consider its meaning, to listen to my body and the victimization I have lived through my body, I can begin to trust what I know. Instead of dying within my soul and dead-

ening my body, I can begin to say, "No, this does not feel right. I know it, not because I can cite eighteen theories that say otherwise; I know it because I have lived it." Still, I do not say it easily. The women's movement has opened a very crucial space through which we can begin to talk about abuse and sexuality. Yet, despite that very important work, we do not expect a feminist scholar to stand before us and tell us what it is like to have lived and reproduced sexual abuse, not to tell it in a neatly abstracted, ordered and conceptualized way which can be fed into our theories about the constitution of subjectivity but with all the power of experience.

So my palms sweat, my throat tightens, I feel absolutely vulnerable as I tell you this. And I feel like a betrayer, a betrayer to my family. I also fear that I feed into your terror and the need to marginalize me as one who has lived at the extreme. No, I say to you, all of us have suffered our different forms of sexual abuse. If we can learn how to talk about it, how to communicate about it, even how to understand it, perhaps we can come up with an epistemology as well as a politics that looks at the constitution of gender differences as sexual domination, so that we will not talk about patriarchy in the abstract, or develop theories of gender difference that minimize the raped violence of the father, that let us forget that in a sexist society, gender means sexual domination of women by men throughout our lives.

For those of you who object to this as putting sex over class, I plead with you to think about how they might be lived together. To return to my own family scene, my parents lived in middle-class respectability. In fact, in one of the maddest, most violent years of my life, our family was selected and written up in the local newspaper as "The Family of the Year." Despite this appearance of bourgeois propriety, our house was torn apart by my parents' driving desire to leave behind the working-class lives they had known — my father, from a dirt-poor, poverty-stricken home with an alcoholic father and a mother who died of tuberculosis. As for my mother, she was the daughter of recent Italian immigrants, very poor. Her route out of the working class was through education, and I believe that that created an enormous tension within our family: my father's masculinity was challenged on every front as he tried to hide his working-class reality in the face of my mother's highly educated status. Over the years, as I've listened to stories of child abuse, I've been struck by how frequently this kind of status difference appears in

families, and have wondered whether this driving ambition to be middle-class is part of the violent scenario that we live.

I want to add another facet to this story, one which concerns the importance and difficulty of bringing our subjectivities into the work we're doing. For several years I worked in the Los Angeles Hispanic immigrant community. I had funding to study literacy and how knowing English structured and was structured by people's daily lives. Through this work, I was moved deeply by the women's stories; I imagined that the connection came through my own immigrant history. In the several articles that I wrote based upon this work, gender differences were considered, but they were not focused upon. Years have passed, and this winter I went back to this work, wanting at last to write the piece about the women that I had always wanted to write. As I wrote, the incidents of violence in their lives, information that I had before passed over, suddenly became foreground for me. I looked back over the interviews that I had transcribed and was appalled not only to see the extent of violence they lived with, but also to realize that I had not considered it relevant to the 'real' questions about which I was inquiring, namely, literacy practices in their everyday lives. Years ago I had made a conscious choice to downplay the violence because I did not want to perpetuate and contribute to negative, class-biased racist stereotypes about the Mexican community. Now I ask myself: Whom am I protecting? For what? How can I not tell this story? As I worked it fell into place, and I saw that, far from being peripheral to the problem of literacy in their lives, the violence the women experienced was central. In almost all cases, the women had better literacy skills than their husbands and saw education as their hope to be "somebody." But they experience literacy in the context of their oppression as women in the family. In the power relations between themselves and their husbands, literacy is highly charged and it is experienced as both threat and desire. These women are caught. Through the years, the fighting words of Maria resonate for me:

I don't want to be a housekeeper all my life. I would like to be somebody, you know...I would like to go out to talk to people, to work, to do something interesting, to help somebody. It's terrible, because they say, "You are the woman. You have to stay in the home. You have to do dinner." You have to do everything.

I want to mention one other way in which I've begun to use my subjectivity as a basis of inquiry. For years now, I've kept a journal, more or less sporadically, sometimes with great gaps and at others writing for my life. In keeping this record, the researcher in me is very much at work, for I have the idea that insofar as I can totally record all the mad mutterings that pass through my mind, capture the bodily sensations and feelings that I live, maybe this can one day be used as data. In this, my key interest is in critical consciousness, in describing the content and process of shifts that we live; through this, I hope to understand better how our subjectivities are constituted and how we struggle with, fight against, that constitution. About a year-and-a-half ago, I vividly lived and wrote through a very dark period in my life when I finally broke the cycle of abuse that I had been locked into for nearly forty years. In going back over that material, I came to see the extent to which my head was central to how I'd reproduced my abuse. To explain briefly, had you ever asked me what I thought was crucial to the development of critical consciousness, I would have responded that it was understanding how we are socially constructed. I had an intellectual understanding of my oppression that in a very bizarre way made it possible for me to reproduce it. That is, I could understand how both my partner and I were socially constructed and how the violence we were caught in was the product of systemic sexism that had mutilated him as well as me. After a particularly violent episode, all my rational understanding went down the toilet as I shouted, "No! No more! Leave me alone! Go away!" And as I said these words, I heard the voice of a twelve-year-old girl. Despite all her skill at feminist analysis, that child — me — was still living the raped violence of her father. For the first time in my life, I believe, I let my body rule and I refused, just refused, to ignore, forgive or cover up the abuse. Part of what I have learned in all of this is that with a highly developed feminist discourse, we risk losing contact with our bodies, with the darkness and power that they potentially carry for us as primary sites of *knowing*, of naming, of consciousness, and of the refusal to be dominated.

We don't let ourselves know in part because we are terrified to see, and then to name and live by what we see. Feminism carries with it the terror of separation, aloneness, isolation. The enemy that is named is "man," and even if we know that he is also a victim of domination through

the prescriptive mandates of masculinity, he still lives out his violence through us, through our bodies, through his control over us in every aspect of our lives. Even if we have opted out of the system of compulsory heterosexuality and have come to see that our fears of separation and isolation are yet another instance of living our sexual subjugation, even if we have found the joys of connection with women, still we cannot run from the pervasiveness of our control through our sexuality. It is in the owning of the darkness, of the bleakness, of the pain and despair, that I have found glimmers of hope and joy.

This theme of the terror, the darkness, has not been welcomed — to put it mildly — in our academic work. As long as we ignore it, we are, I believe, perpetuating intellectualism at the expense of knowledge. We will have elaborate theories connecting the personal to the political, but we won't know what it means to live it in our gut. Learning has always been depicted as this wonderfully positive experience. Well, it's not always. It can be downright wrenching, and move us into long periods of chaos and crisis, especially in an area like sexuality which is in every aspect of our lives.

To paraphrase Meg Christian: "Great wisdom through painful experience — it's an inside job."³ Or, in a brilliant story by Nawal El Saadawi entitled *Woman at Point Zero*, when condemned to death Firdaus speaks the "savage and dangerous truth."⁴ The truth, she says, is always easy and simple. And in its simplicity lies a savage power. I've only arrived at some savage, primitive truths of life after years of struggle, eyes and belly split apart in the throes of death, fighting to indifference, to no longer care, to let go.

And in *Descent to the Goddess*, Sylvia Brinton Perera describes the "Eyes of Death:" these eyes obviate the patterns and ideals of habitual and collective rational consciousness, the way we see in linguistic confines,

...trapped within conceptual spaces that form the world of differentiated appearances.... This means seeing, not what might be good or bad, but what exists, before judgment which is messy and full of affect. This implies not caring first and foremost about relatedness to an outer other, not to a collective gestalt or imperative. Seeing this way — which is initially so frightening because it cannot be validated by the collective — can provide what Logos consciousness fears as mere chaos, with possibilities of a totally fresh per-

*ception, a new pattern, a creative perspective, a never-ending exploration.*⁵

At last, I am beginning to break through the split that I have felt for years between my subjectivity and the academic world in which I've had to work. It has not been an easy process; at times it's been excruciatingly painful. For years, I've torn myself apart with the belief that I do not belong in academe. Academics have criticized my work for being too journalistic, too passionate, too biased. And yet, I've never felt a part of a work I've written. I've written articles and books that I show to no one because I do not feel connected to them. When my first book came out, there was not a soul I knew with whom I felt like sharing it. Instead, to my friends, I half-heartedly apologized and expressed my dream that one day I would write a book someone would want to read. I've been going through a long period of inarticulateness, confusion, yes, of chaos. I know that I can no longer do a work to which I do not feel connected. The joy of this moment for me is that I am beginning to find that connection; I could not speak from my heart and my pain, from the truth that I know because I have lived it, until I could own who I am as a woman, and what I have lived through. This winter, the writing started. A new voice spoke through me, driving me to distraction, keeping me a raving insomniac for months, but at last I felt some of the barriers give way, and I show you that work joyfully, for it speaks a truth that I know.⁶

Now, I look back and I see that what I've experienced for so long as a personal split, and a severe sense of personal inadequacy, is anything but personal. It is produced by the very structure of academe in which we are bound. We are supposed to be dispassionate, scholarly, to talk about really serious matters, study the standpoints of other women and develop theories about how their lives are put together. I am not opposed to any of this; all I want is to argue for the legitimacy of our own voices, of using the data of our experiences, of taking oppression seriously as we live it in our daily lives, and breaking through the stultifying, rigidifying forms of academic discourse to create new forms that can let us see, feel, and know in ways that more effectively capture and communicate our experience.

Perhaps your response is: "Well, that's all very well and good but let other media, like art, do that." Yes and no. For after years in academe I've come to appreciate that I do have a way of seeing, of search-

ing, even of describing, that the artist and the journalist do not. I think we have before us a crucial project in understanding how our subjectivities are constituted, and how they change, but to be communicated, or even known, we need ways to speak or image subjectivity beyond the limits of defining/confining academic discourse. At the same time, to do an academic work, we need to be aware of the limits set by the very work in which we are engaged so that we can both stretch those limits and not act under the assumption that we are not bound by them.

I want to talk for a moment about the constitution of subjectivity and why I think it is so important. A very central work of feminism has been to show that gender is not a biological category, but a social one. Who we are as women, the meaning of our physiological constitution, has been defined by men in positions of social, cultural and political power. Femininity is not our nature but our subjugation; it can also be our strength. As we move toward naming our experience we are also working to understand how our subjective interpretation of that experience has been shaped through discursive, historical and material practices, as well as the symbolic power of ideological practices like love, caring, relationship, commitment, marriage, the family, to name some of the more prominent ones. Not only do women and men have very different ways of experiencing life, but also those differences are produced through gendered practices which subordinate women to men. The key point, however, is that our minds and bodies are the primary sites of our oppression and that the very formation of our subjectivities is political. The formation of our subjectivities is also grounded in educational practices — that is, what and how we learn, as well as epistemological practices — that is, what is considered truth or knowledge. I think that the implications of what we've learned through feminist theory and consciousness raising still need to be developed for feminist approaches to inquiry and education — for how we do academic work.

We know that knowledge is not something out there to be disseminated, and that politics is not confined to public, organized spheres of practice, but we've yet to develop academic forms which fully recognize the radical implications of the feminist critique. Consciousness-raising is the method of feminist politics, theorizing and education; it is also a way of life. Feminist practices of naming, deconstructing, reconstructing and re-

framing are crucial, and they affect us deeply because they cannot be separated from the lives we live or the institutions in which we work. I do not know *if* we can bring the method of consciousness-raising into our academic work; but I do not see how we *cannot*. I've spoken of how difficult and important I've found this in my research and writing; now I would like to turn briefly to teaching.

Since I've been at OISE I've been struggling with developing new forms of teaching in my feminist courses. On the whole, I believe they've been quite disastrous. Still, I occasionally encounter a participant who tells me, usually after some time has passed, how much she learned from the course and how it changed her life. I do not have any answers — far from it — but I do have a keen interest in educational practice, and would like to conclude by indicating some of the questions that have come for me out of my teaching work.

The particular course to which I am referring is one I teach, entitled the "Development of Critical Consciousness." The course attracts a range of women, some of whom have had little exposure to feminist theory and others, a great deal. I attempt in the course to have people bring together their personal experience with the theoretical and literary works we read. Always, participants enter that feminist space with a great deal of hope; always we get caught up in conflict and despair. I believe that this conflict erupts in a terror-sport that we always touch upon but never manage to go into. It is the fear of a dark, bleak, vision of separateness, aloneness, a life without love or with a love that is always at risk.⁷

A central axis of conflict is around power differentials; in our naivete, we expect there not to be any and yet, always they are present. To name a few, there is the power I have by virtue of my position as the instructor, the power of academic norms, structures, course expectations, and ideas about what constitutes knowledge; there is also the power of feminist discourse, the power of different political positions, discipline locations and, finally, the power of the subject-matter itself.

The power of the subject-matter is its extremely "personal" nature, which must be experienced as personal and impersonal at the same time to be effective. This challenges the fundamental premises by which most of us have lived our lives as women, and it challenges all the male-dominant conventions about what can be talked about in an academic set-

ting. Sexuality, heterosexism, male dominance, and separatism are painful, awkward, revealing and risky to talk about in the public classroom where each of us may want to trust but knows there are limits. These topics touch the core of our being, affect the fundamental structure of the way we live our lives, and are absolutely essential to our development of critical consciousness. Most of us are caught between the desire to run and the need to confront. This is related to the question of how far, how fast we can go, as well as to questions of support in this sometimes treacherous journey toward liberation.

The dilemma of support and confrontation is a key one. We need the support of the collective in order to risk, and yet we need to be able to confront our own interpretations of our experience if we are to move through our ideological formation. Trust becomes a key issue, and I believe it is the basis of the crucial difference between what can happen in a local consciousness-raising group, where we do assume it most, and a classroom where we can no more assume trust than we can ignore power differentials.

Because our oppression as women is located in silenced areas, of which sexuality is the obvious primary example, the experiential feels even more crucial, yet it is much more problematic. I wonder how we can talk about these issues that go so deeply into the core of our being without looking critically at our experience. Can this be done in a "public" forum? As I get closer to the centre of women's oppression, which I believe is through our sexuality and its control through male-defined social forms and practices, I wonder how to open us up to examine our experience critically without breaking trust, social taboos, or infringing upon our lives, uninvited. Ethical issues are a concern in yet another way: if we run from opening our experience, how can we acknowledge (by *knowing*) the incredible risks to which many women open themselves as they take the massive "political" step of attending one of our programs? (I know from my research that this risk is prevalent even in apparently "gender-neutral" programs like ESL or literacy).

Another key piece pertains to power of difference as hierarchy. It is almost impossible for us not to dichotomize differences and then to "hierarchicize" them — that is, we inevitably attach a value to one pole over the other. Some of the dichotomies that have caused difficulty in the classes I've taught are:

- Big "F"/Little "f"*
- Public/private
- Personal/theoretical (subjective/objective)
- Heterosexual/lesbian
- Emotional/rational
- Political/non-political
- Separatism/integration
- Support/confrontation

**An angry class designation: Big F's are feminists with a feminist theoretical background and strong political stance; little f's are those who are new and less clear about their position.*

These dichotomies are central to liberalism in educational practice, to liberalism as a male-defined, prevailing ideology, hence to the oppression of women. We are caught in them, and we are moving through them. This, I believe, is part of the experience of chaos. Moreover, as we move through them, we find that the hierarchicized differences are reinforced by powerful social taboos which we have internalized in the form of a normative dichotomy between right and wrong. So one pole is not only "better" than the other, but it is also attached to normative sanctions as to what is and is not morally acceptable within a classroom. As we run head-on into these taboos, my sense is that they provoke chaos, pain, anger, rage, terror and the fear of the unknown, which can become more or less intense as we integrate new ways of being. Our feminist journey almost inevitably brings us into confrontation with these dichotomies, and the ideologies of which they are a part, for they are integral to our oppression, and yet we tend to run from this confrontation which feels, somehow, unnecessary. To strip these hierarchicized dichotomies away is unavoidably threatening to our understanding of reality as we have known it. As we deconstruct and reconstruct our experience we have to learn how to understand differences in ways that do not trap us in the hierarchicized dichotomies that have been integral to our subordination.

Consciousness-raising is a way of doing science, education and politics — and it is a method that has been largely assumed, not problematized and not theorized. This is some of the work that I would like to do. We need to learn ways of thinking about how to integrate the personal and the political, the emotional and the intellectual in connection with consciousness raising. Without this, we can read texts that never touch us, that we can say apply to others, and claim that, in

some way, we have remained free of the impact of ideology and social regulation. So we might write an academic treatise on the personal as political, but not experience its meaning in our guts and our hearts.

Eighteen months later: the paralysis continues. The energetic enthusiasm that has greeted my work is not enough to blot out the nightmares of betrayal — my betrayal — never theirs. To take yet another step, to actually publish this talk, haunts me for over a year. And then, today, I take the leap.

¹Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not A Luxury," in *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, N.Y., 1984), p. 36.

²*Ibid*, p. 39.

³Meg Christian on *Meg/Chris at Carnegie Hall*. Olivia Records, Oakland, California.

⁴Nawal El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1983).

⁵Sylvia Brinton Perera, *Descent to the Goddess: A Way of Initiation for Women* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1981), pp. 32-33.

⁶Kathleen Rockhill, "Gender, Language and the Politics of Literacy," in *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1987.

Kathleen Rockhill, "Literacy as Threat/Desire: Longing To Be Somebody," in J.S. Gaskell & A.T. McLaren (eds.), *Women and Education: A Canadian Perspective* (Calgary: Detselig Publishers). Forthcoming.

Kathleen Rockhill, "Violence against Wives," November 1986. To be published by the School of Social Work, University of Toronto.

⁷The classes have gone through a radical change in the last year. The shift in my work, and my increased clarity about ways of working from the personal to confront, support and theorize, as well as the assistance of my students and friends, have begun to suggest the possibility of new forms within academe.