

Women's Studies in Focus: Sexuality and Feminist Pedagogy

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SEX AND THE FEMINIST PROFESSOR: JANE GALLOP, SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND PEDAGOGY

In *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment*, Jane Gallop (Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee and author of *Thinking Through the Body*, *The Daughter's Seduction* and *Around 1981: Academic Feminist Literary Theory*) gives her version of the events which led to her being accused of sexual harassment by two of her female graduate students. Gallop is concerned to explain the specifics of the case but what is most interesting about the book and raises it above the level of pure gossip is that Gallop's explanation contextualizes her actions and ideas in relation to the history of the women's movement, ideological shifts in accepted definitions of sexual harassment, the increasing institutional success of women's studies and theories of feminist pedagogy. It is here that Gallop is most provocative. Whatever the merits of her individual case, she does challenge complacent assumptions about current pedagogical practices particularly in relation to the place of sexuality in the university classroom.

Gallop frames her "self-defense" within a brief history of the women's movement, the birth of women's studies and feminist politics more generally. To tell her story, Gallop goes back to her undergraduate days in the 1970s to explain her understanding of sexuality, student-teacher relations, and feminism. As she writes, "In our vision of a feminist university, we imagined teachers and students not separated by some uncrossable chasm, but joined in a shared pursuit of knowledge and women's liberation. And it was this

brave if naïve vision of faculty and students pursuing new feminist relations to knowledge that I saw bodied forth in the spectacle of a feminist teacher-student affair" (18).

Gallop continues to try to live according to the ideals of this era as she explains, "Central to my commitment as a feminist teacher is the wish to transmit the experience that brought me as a young woman out of romantic paralysis and into the power of desire and knowledge, to bring the women I teach to their own power, to ignite them as feminism ignited me when I was a student" (12).

Gallop also contextualizes her views in terms of broader tensions that she argues have always existed within feminism. One component of feminism stresses that women have, historically, been oppressed while another emphasizes the potential powers of women. In her view, this is the double-sided foundation of feminism. These two tendencies can and do come into conflict with one another since the relationship between the two is not always straightforward. Gallop locates herself politically on the side of feminism as an expression of women's potential power (69-72).

The view of feminism as an expression of women's agency and power has clearly spilled over into Gallop's view of pedagogy. For her, teaching has an inescapably erotic character. She notes that teaching and passion (most famously in Plato's work) have always been intertwined. Gallop also insists that tidy, conventional boundaries cannot always contain this pedagogical passion. Consequently, Gallop *actively defends* the benefits of student-teacher liaisons.

Gallop has lived these ideas. She openly recounts the story of her brief sexual encounters with two male professors on her dissertation

committee when she was a graduate student. Gallop allows for and celebrates the real, lived reality of male-female, student-teacher relations. Her experience was that she was in a position of power and that she thoroughly revelled in her power. Her candor is refreshing and challenges the logic of an inevitable scenario of the lecherous male professor manipulating and oppressing the hapless female student. Gallop refuses to infantilize female students who engage in intense, sexual or not, relations with their teachers. She assumes that these are women who know what they want. In her own case, Gallop says that her feelings were of control, pleasure and power. The outcome of these relations was entirely positive, as she writes, "I was in an environment extremely conducive to my education, a heady atmosphere where close personal contact intensified my desire to excel. I learned and excelled; I desired and I fucked my teachers" (42).

It is important to stress that Gallop feels that these sexual experiences with her teachers and her heightened feelings of desire as she learned about women's liberation were paradigmatically political and *feminist* experiences. She was a young female student experimenting with her sexuality and engaging in the unpredictable and enthralling interplay between sex, knowledge and power. She comments, "In the general consensus that student-teacher relations demean and debase the student, an entire stretch of women's experience is being denied, consigned to silence. And it just happens to be women's experience of feeling powerful and sexy, smart and successful" (43). According to Gallop, women's studies has lost its original erotic sizzle which, for her, was an essential part of the feminist learning process. Body and mind have once again become safely separate in current feminist pedagogy.

She is also candid that her transition into the position of teacher did not deter her from engaging in sexual activity with students. She tells of her experiences with two male and two female students once she herself held an academic position. In her relationship with a male graduate student, she says that "both of us found our secret titillating: it was a perverse thrill to treat him in class just like the other students though all the while we also had this sexual relation outside of class" (44). She reassures

the reader that in each of her affairs with students "it was the student who made the first move; it was always the student who initiated sexual activity" (49). Gallop has refrained from sexual affairs with students since 1982 not because she disagrees with them on principle but because she fell madly in love.

Gallop believes that there has been a destructive expansion of the meaning of sexual harassment in universities. There has been movement away from a restricted definition of sexual harassment as a form of discrimination against women to a gender-neutral issue about sex and, from a concern with unwanted sex, to include consensual teacher-student relations. Gallop argues that the danger with this expanded definition is that sex, not harassment, has increasingly come to be seen as the problem. She says that she has been fighting against this shift since the early 1990s (before she was charged with sexual harassment). As she writes, "Telling teachers and students that we must not engage each other sexually ultimately tells us that we must limit ourselves to the confines of some restricted professional transaction, that we *should not treat each other as human beings*" (51).

She also contends that this shift to the notion that sexual harassment is based on "power differentials" is a move away from a feminist (gender-based) understanding of sexual harassment. For her, there is a dangerous tendency to give male or female teachers' acts equivalent meanings. Gallop insists that a female professor "sexualizing" the atmosphere of her classroom can be subversive but the male professor who engages in such behaviour may only be reinforcing already existing power, traditions, and norms. Moreover, she claims that "a woman is much more likely to undermine than to enhance her authority by bringing her sexuality into the professional domain" (25). A woman risks not being taken seriously if she sexualizes the workplace while a man only re-establishes his institutional position. In other words, Gallop insists that the broader context of women's oppression in society does not disappear within the classroom. This formulation, however, is more problematic than Gallop allows. Does this mean, for instance, that a female professor can never exercise arbitrary authority, discriminate or

sexually harass a student? Or that a gay male manager could never be guilty of sexual harassment? Gallop argues that the existence of oppression cancels out institutional power. I find this position entirely unpersuasive.

Gallop is well aware that many of her views are, in the current sexual climate, outrageous. She precisely sees her task as shaking up increasingly accepted truisms about sexual harassment and student-teacher sex. She wants us to remember that women's liberation was centrally about *sexual* liberation. As she writes, "the antisexual direction of the current trend makes us forget how women's liberation turned us on" (12).

To this end, Gallop is asking feminists to consider whether or not their institutional success is being won at the expense of the original radicalism and political principles of the early women's movement. Gallop openly admits that the accusation of sexual harassment against her represents her being caught in a time warp. The students who accused her accept the new definition of sexual harassment as based on "power differentials" and see Gallop as part of the establishment. Gallop thinks of herself as a subversive teacher acknowledging sexual dynamics as legitimate and empowering to women, student and teacher alike. She believes that she is engaged in a radical learning process with her students just like in the early days of the women's movement and women's studies. But the students have no sense of this. Gallop clearly articulates the huge gulf in understanding between her and her students. Gallop's passionate kiss of a favourite student at a conference party is entirely misunderstood by the observers. She thinks it's radical pedagogy in action. They think it's sexual harassment. Gallop writes, "It didn't matter that I was a woman; it didn't matter that I was a feminist; it didn't matter that the student was obviously into this public display. All those connotations were obliterated by the fact that I was a professor and she was a student" (92).

While Gallop is able to describe the distressing time warp in which she was caught and (in her view) so unjustly charged with sexual harassment, there remains a serious gap in her account. She makes no attempt to give credence to the concerns of the arguments against her. She rejects outright

the notion that "power differentials" in an abstract sense, can or should come into play in definitions of sexual harassment. However, even the feminist professor must acknowledge that her institutional position does bring with it *some* degree of power over others. To state the obvious, she grades students' papers, writes letters of reference, speaks well or ill of them to colleagues and so on. Retaliation and favouritism on the professor's part are twin dangers. In this sense, students and teachers are not entirely equals within an academic institution. For this reason, Gallop's account of her affairs with students seems far too glib. She does not appear to have abused her position in these cases but, surely, she is being obtuse to deny any possible complications might arise in student-teacher relations. The point is that not all teachers will be as fair, sensible and trustworthy as Gallop considers herself to have been. Nonetheless, one of Gallop's central points may still apply. She could argue that the problem in such situations is unfairness and poor judgement on the part of the teacher, not sex as such. However, sexual intimacy may all too easily set up the conditions in which favouritism and retaliation can occur.

In this way, then, Gallop decisively stacks the deck when she considers student-teacher relations. She is making a strong case that the general condemnation of such relations is not a mark of the maturity of feminism and women's studies but rather a sign that they have undergone a serious process of de-radicalisation. Gallop's book is a useful reminder of how unresolved and messy the questions posed by feminism are within a university context. Should we accept rigid distinctions between mental and physical lessons and not consider and accept that, in some instances, those distinctions might blur? If feminism is about sexual liberation should this knowledge be carefully confined to book learning? If women's liberation is the goal of women's studies, involving a link between theory and practice, why is sexual practice so taboo? Is this simply replicating traditional pedagogical boundaries which emphasize the distance between teacher and student? And, finally, acknowledged or not, underlying all of these debates is the assumption that the passions of the

body always threaten to overpower the capacity to reason. It is assumed that sexual relations necessarily cloud judgement. Physical intimacy between teacher and student must mean that any semblance of level-headedness and objectivity are irretrievably lost. It is the old story of the need for reason to overcome and rule passion (and the sheer anxiety that this is not possible) that Gallop is questioning. Gallop's own experience tells her that this need not be the case and that sexual intimacy may, indeed, enhance and deepen the learning process.

The Socratic tradition does indeed acknowledge the potentially powerful sexual tension between teacher and student. Plato's dialogues are brimful of male homosexual eroticism as Socrates, the adored teacher, enralls his prize pupils. But it is well worth remembering that in the Platonic dialogues, Socrates does not succumb to the physical charms of his students. In the most noted instance, Socrates resists the physical pleasures offered by the heroic and beautiful Alcibiades. It is precisely a mark of Socrates' pedagogical prowess that he resists the lure of Alcibiades' flesh in order to lead this student to the far greater satisfactions of the life of the mind. Gallop's narrative does not even raise the possibility that this road may, ultimately, be of greater value to both teacher and student and this is a great gap which lessens the impact of the "scandalous" questions that she poses. Nonetheless, Gallop's story is a provocative, useful and timely challenge to feminism to reassess its trajectory as it becomes more enmeshed in university structures.

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REFLECTIONS ON LESBIAN FEMINIST ACTIVISM IN THE CLASSROOM¹

I start from the premise that teaching about lesbians can be a form of political activism. This is true whether one teaches an entire course on lesbians or integrates lesbian material into courses that do not have lesbians as a central focus. Taking a broad view, it is clear that we in Canada live within a context of heterosexual hegemony (Kinsman, 1996). Thus, any information that challenges the presumed naturalness and normalcy of heterosexuality can be seen as subversive. To teach this information in a Canadian classroom is to disrupt the status quo and as such, is to engage in political work. For the past fifteen years or so, I have worked to introduce the subject of lesbianism into university and college courses. At times, I have done this as a guest lecturer in someone else's course, at times I have taught an entire course on Lesbian Studies, and at other times, I have worked to integrate material about lesbians into the syllabus of a traditional course that I am teaching. Mostly, but not invariably, I have done this work while coming out to my students as a lesbian. In so doing, I have engaged in what Verta Taylor and Nicole Raeburn call "high-risk political activism:" "the deployment of identity for the purposes of contesting stigmatized group representations and achieving institutional change" (1995, 268).

In earlier years, I tended to make a point of coming out. Recently, however, I have become far more circumspect in giving this information to students, rethinking my earlier taken-for-granted beliefs about the importance of declaring my lesbian identity. In large part, this has been prompted by my experience that it is not becoming easier to come out to my classes. The late Kathleen Martindale wrote that when she integrated lesbian material into courses to further an antihomophobic pedagogy, "[i]t always feels like the first time to me" (1997, 153). For me, each time I come out to a new group of students, it is as if it were for the very first time. I have learned to stand behind professorial authority to demand that students read material about lesbians and listen when I address lesbian issues. I have learned to address these topics about which I feel so passionately in a way that