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UMI®
(QUESTIONS OF) SAFETY IN THE FEMINIST CLASSROOM

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
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Abstract

This thesis examines diverse views regarding the construction and facilitation of a "safe" classroom atmosphere, commonly interpreted as supportive and nonconfrontational, in graduate level classrooms that consciously adopt a feminist perspective. Drawing on the interview responses of ten women students and professors, heard against a growing body of literature in feminist pedagogy, the research problematizes existing understandings of the dynamics of feminist classrooms. Two models of classroom safety which emerged from the interviews are presented, and the consequences of these models for students' and professors' experiences in higher education are considered. Finally, a third model which may better reflect the needs and interests of a greater range of individuals is proposed.
Acknowledgements

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CHAPTER ONE

Contemplating Safety:
An Introduction

Each year, on university campuses across North America, women faculty and students gather in the classrooms of feminist studies and Women's Studies programs. Like many academic innovations, such programs began at the undergraduate level. In her recent inquiry into the third decade of women's studies in Canada, Peta Tancred found that "as of 1988, twenty-nine of the fifty-nine, or about half of all, universities or colleges in Canada offered some kind of program in Women’s Studies —minor, major or diploma—or had some special institute devoted to it" (1994: 15).\(^1\) A number of separate departments within Canadian institutions also offer some variation on a "feminist focus" of analysis within a specific discipline. Among these programs, Tancred contends that the collaborative or "derivative" Women's Studies program, which draws on already existing departments for its course offerings, is among the most "fragile" or vulnerable to current cutbacks (Tancred, 1994: 17). Having established itself as a legitimate and viable field of inquiry, however, Women's Studies has recently begun to make inroads into the graduate level of study as well. Here again a concentration in Women's Studies is possible in many departments. In addition, three universities in Canada now offer interdisciplinary master's degrees within the area. Also notable is the recent founding of

\(^1\) Tancred (1994: 15) also notes an important distinction here with regard to Francophone universities in Canada which have generally chosen to offer courses in Women's Studies without establishing a specific program of study in the area due to concerns that this may contribute to the ghettoization of the field.
Canada's first doctoral program in Women's Studies at York University in 1992. It is against this backdrop that this research project was initiated.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore one aspect of classroom life within these graduate programs of study: the environment or atmosphere unique to the feminist classroom as a result, in part, of the discussions taking place there. Ten women faculty and graduate students involved in feminist coursework lent their voices to describe their everyday experiences in the classroom. Drawing on their words, heard against a vast body of literature in feminist pedagogy, this study will contribute to and problematize existing understandings of the dynamics of the feminist classroom.

Here a word must be said about my deliberate choice of the signifier "feminist classroom" as opposed to "women's studies classroom," for example. Margrit Eichler (1990a) addresses this issue of naming in her aptly titled report "What's in a Name: Women's Studies or Feminist Studies?" Drawing on a survey of the literature in the area, as well as observations of other prominent indicators such as formal program titles and the questionnaire responses of some 892 academics involved in women's/feminist studies at Canadian universities, Eichler concludes that the most commonly used term is in fact "women's studies." and that this term is typically equated "in a non-reflective manner" with a feminist approach (40). Nevertheless, she notes, the term "feminist studies" is rarely viewed as an appropriate alternative to the former. Rather, the two terms are distinguished by a significant number of academics along several dimensions. The main distinction made is that while women's studies denotes a specific subject area, feminist studies reflects a particular perspective that one may bring to any and all subject areas.
more importantly a perspective which is self-consciously political. The distinction between the two terms is also significant insofar as it is suggestive of what may or may not be included under each rubric. In this regard Eichler writes, "The label women's studies may (and does) include non-feminist approaches, while excluding men's studies as well as some other subject areas, while a feminist perspective is applicable to all subject areas, including men's studies, while by self-definition excluding non-feminist approaches" (1990a: 54).

Throughout the thesis I refer to the spectrum of classroom sites which are approached via a feminist perspective using the general signifier of "the feminist classroom." The multiplicity of such classrooms should be inferred despite the singular form of this "umbrella" term. I take this classroom to be a site of pedagogy which foregrounds and is animated by a recognition of any of the plurality of feminist perspectives which place varied emphasis on the intersections of gender with class (e.g. Marxist feminism), race (e.g. black and anti-racist feminism), and sexuality (e.g. radical or lesbian separatist feminism) among other categories, as part of an inquiry into systems of power and domination. Thus my use of the term "feminist classroom" implicitly suggests the assumption by the professor of the self-consciously political perspective mentioned above as well as a recognition that gendered analyses may encompass the study of masculinity as well as femininity.

It is also pertinent to elucidate my use of the term "pedagogy." Gore (1993) employs a two-pronged definition of pedagogy which refers to instructional technique as well as social vision. I have found this dual approach quite helpful in my own thinking
about the feminist classroom, and I do employ this duality throughout the thesis. However, I find that Gore's use of the term "social vision" still neglects to acknowledge the potential for students to influence and shape the particular lens brought to the classroom by the teacher. For this reason, I prefer Lusted's (1986: 3) relational definition of pedagogy as "the transformation of consciousness that takes place in the intersection of three agencies—the teacher, the learner, and the knowledge they together produce."

Drawing on both of these scholars for my own purposes, I have consequently come to think about pedagogy as a transformation of consciousness which may be engendered via the vehicles of instructional technique executed in the spirit of a particular social vision.

The specific objective of this study is to interrogate discourses of safety in feminist pedagogy. A common image of the feminist classroom is one in which participants foster an atmosphere of trust and support or "safety." Although this image has largely come to be accepted as a desirable norm, this thesis explores how the varied experiences of a number of differently situated women not only affirm, but also occasionally disrupt and complicate this assumption. By comparing established images of "safe" classrooms found in the liberatory pedagogical literature with professors' and students' own expressed views and experiences of safety in education, I present some alternative constructions of safety. The result is a more variegated, nuanced understanding of the realities of classroom experience for graduate students and teachers than currently is preferred by the literature.

My inquiry into the construction and facilitation of safety in the graduate feminist classroom is framed by three interconnected questions. First, what constructions of
safety do feminist graduate professors and students maintain? Second, how do these constructions inform professors' teaching styles and the strategies they may adopt to facilitate safety in the classroom? Third, what are the consequences of these conceptualizations and strategies for the feminist classroom?

Several relevant subsidiary questions also emerged during the research process which will be addressed in this thesis. These include: What is the effect of institutional climate/context on individuals' perceptions of the viability for safe classrooms? What are some of the discourses which are mobilized toward the construction of safety? How might a more detailed understanding of the dynamics of the feminist classroom suggest new directions for theorizing in education?

Probing the general question of how constructions of safety may function for students and professors in the feminist classroom will necessarily entail an examination of the negotiation of silence and anger, among other dynamics. As the treatment of these forms of expression is constitutive of the creation and perception of safety in the classroom. This point will be elaborated upon in Chapter Two, in which I will integrate current theorizing on these dynamics in order to delineate the range of views expressed regarding safety in the classroom in the feminist and critical pedagogical literature. Also as part of this review of the literature a collection of works which are explicitly critical of the need for safe classrooms will be introduced. The review will thus serve the larger objective of the thesis, which is to open up the discussion around issues of safety, and in so doing to raise questions, reveal complexities and problematize assumptions regarding

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2 Herein the term "liberatory pedagogy" should be understood to subsume both critical and feminist pedagogy.
the construction of safety in the feminist classroom. First, however, some background in
the emergence of notions of safety and the development of feminist pedagogy is called
for.

Seeds of a Feminist Pedagogy: Critical Pedagogy and the Second Wave

In rather broad strokes, two unique social movements within and outside of the
academy are reflected in the feminist pedagogies practiced in North American institutions
today: the emergence of critical pedagogy evident during the 1970s and the women's
liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Further, a closer look at the latter
movement reveals the establishment of the consciousness-raising group and feminist
therapy as well as the re-evaluation of certain "feminine" traits to have been particularly
influential. Each of these contributing factors will be discussed in turn.

In North American universities throughout the 1970s there developed a growing
interest in the relations of power produced and reproduced within education. Paulo
Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1971) articulated a long-standing perception,
common among students and some teachers, of a dramatic power imbalance between the
two which may stifle the production of knowledge in the classroom, as students' own
knowledge and experience was excluded and thus not validated. Freire therefore
encouraged teachers to recognize students' experience as a legitimate and valuable source
of learning and the production of knowledge as a shared endeavor between and among
students and teachers. Equalizing power in this way was then a first step toward helping
students to develop agency and autonomy as the producers of a legitimate knowledge
based in their own personal experiences. The culmination of this process was marked by
the student's consciously speaking from that personal knowledge or, in Freire's words, to
"say his or her own word, to name the world (15)." Hence, within Freire's discourse of
critical pedagogy much emphasis was placed on the emancipatory effects of teachers
nurturing students toward this transformation of consciousness whereby they may "find"
or "claim" or "come to" voice. In practice this objective was seen to necessitate a
noncompetitive classroom atmosphere in which students could feel comfortable and
willing to contribute their experiences to classroom dialogue.

Women's consciousness-raising (CR) groups during the women's liberation
movement or "second wave" of feminism in North America similarly mobilized
discourses around the liberatory potential of establishing voice for women.
Consciousness-raising involved regular meetings during which group members would
speak about their experiences as women, often for the first time. This articulation of
personal experience and consequent affirmation of a woman's gender identity also came
to be known as "claiming a voice" (Wardell, 1976: 63). In this way, a Romantic notion
of an inner self, an access to "the truth which lies within," was promulgated (Fay, 1993:
13). However, the emphasis on a woman's gender identity over that of her racial or
ethnic identity, for example, frequently alienated group participants whose self-definition
did not consistently prioritize gender. Indeed, the revolutionary potential for liberation
through the acquisition of voice was often blunted as a result of this focus. In addition,
exclusionary practices among group members also hampered the goal of liberation.
Audre Lorde (1984: 130) notes that "there was usually little attempt to articulate the
genuine differences between women, such as those of race, color, age, class, and sexual
identity." Moreover, Charlotte Canning (1993: 532) finds that in these early groups difference was often viewed as "negative and divisive." Canning's experiences are further corroborated by Uttal's (1990) account of racially motivated exclusion and Henry and Derlot's (1993) account of class-based "othering" within CR-groups. Hence the consciousness-raising groups of the second wave were plagued by the limiting and ultimately debilitating frameworks of liberal feminism which fractured the women's movement as a whole by insisting upon a kind of essentialized gender primacy that often did not speak to the experiences of minority women. In addition, while claiming a voice in this manner could be empowering for those women of the majority (namely white middle class women), the extent to which the women might reveal particularly personal or painful information about themselves also produced a certain vulnerability. Therefore, many participants concluded that the learning engendered through this process of self-examination necessitated a safe and trusting environment in which women could risk self-disclosure. As in the Freirian classroom, traditional patriarchal notions of competitive learning and communication were rejected in favor of supportive listening with the goal of increased self-awareness and understanding.

As feminist therapy also began to take shape within the women's liberation movement, again primarily among white middle-class women, it too incorporated many of the principles of liberatory pedagogy and the consciousness-raising group. Indeed the feminist therapist/client dyad came to be conceived of as an exclusive consciousness-raising group of two. Here self-disclosure was an integral aspect of the dynamic learning process for therapist and client alike. In fact, feminist therapy, acting against current mainstream psychological theory regarding the role of the therapist, from its inception...
explicitly promulgated the value of therapist self-disclosure as a strategy for empowering clients (Brown and Walker, 1990). The theory which underpinned this therapeutic approach suggested that a client's sense of vulnerability may be mitigated as the therapist discloses her own vulnerabilities and means of coping. In this way too, a more egalitarian relationship between the therapist and client could be fostered, as the therapist validated the client's own experience. Thus the principles of dismantling power imbalances as a means of empowering those individuals who have traditionally been disenfranchised in this regard were being articulated within the classroom as well as the C-R group and the therapeutic relationship at this time.¹

Feminist therapy also emulated the original consciousness-raising group model insofar as it favored similarity in cultural and ethnic backgrounds (and thus de-emphasized the focus on difference) between participants in order to facilitate the validation of self (Brown and Walker, 1990). Here again, the philosophical stress on the "primacy of gender division [in society] tended to ignore the strong cultural realities of ethnicity, race, culture, and class bonds in the lives of ethnic minority group members" (Mays and Comas-Diaz, 1990: 229). It has already been noted that the validation of women's identity was accomplished in part in the C-R group through exclusionary practices among group members. While these behaviours may not have been engaged in by all C-R groups, at their most fundamental the groups certainly remained as women-only spaces. Commenting on the traditional biological construction of woman, Hantzis and Looser note that "in feminist theorizing the subject in and of danger has traditionally

¹ More recent re-evaluation of the power dynamics inherent to the therapeutic relationship, particularly a recognition of the potential for therapist exploitation of the client, has led to criticism of this therapeutic strategy.
been conceptualized as female. The subject endangering has been conceptualized as male. Feminisms theorizing safe spaces, therefore, have frequently rendered them woman-only" (1995: 227). In this way, sex, not gender, uniformity became a defining element of safety within these feminist enclaves. Hantzis and Looser extend their discussion of this matter to a consideration of its ramifications, pointedly noting that "traditional apprehensions of feminist safe spaces create a 'frightening singularity in our apprehension of plurals'—women as Woman" (228, quoting Suleri, 1992: 757). This is precisely what one saw happening in the C-R group of the second wave.

Gore (1993) further observes the women's liberation movement and the emergence of critical pedagogies as having produced two distinct streams of feminist pedagogy. These are feminist pedagogy in the context of Women's Studies and feminist pedagogy as constructed in Education, respectively. Ironically, she notes, within the former stream, theorization around pedagogy primarily concerns the micro issues or instructional techniques employed, whereas the latter stream, albeit less frequently affiliated with a specific politic, is largely concerned with the macro issues or social vision which defines the pedagogy as feminist. Gore also notes a surprising lack of communication between Women's Studies scholars and Education scholars, as evidenced by their largely independent bodies of literature. This she attributes in part to a general feminist critique of education as patriarchal.

Following the thrust of the second wave, the 1980s witnessed the publication of a body of work which was readily taken up by many feminist critics within Women's Studies. A common theme among these publications was the revaluation and reclaiming
of qualities traditionally associated with women, with a particular focus on women's capacity for caring. Carol Gilligan was among the early proponents of this view, which she espoused in her ground-breaking work on sex-related differences in moral reasoning, *In A Different Voice*. Through her research in this area she observed that whereas men and boys tend to frame moral dilemmas in the form of an equation, where the rights of one individual are found to clearly outweigh the rights of another, women and girls more often envision the circumstances in terms of a "narrative of relationships" (1982: 28). Gilligan characterized the two approaches to the problem as reflecting an ethics of justice and an ethics of care, respectively. The conclusion which Gilligan presented in this research was that the ethics of care exhibited more often by women was not to be interpreted as developmentally or intellectually inferior to the ethics of justice exhibited predominantly by men but rather reflective of the differing socialization of the two genders in society.5

The work of Mary Field Belenky and her colleagues Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger and Jill Tarule (1986) also built on this notion of women's "different voice" and was pivotal in articulating a feminist critique of higher education. In their well known book *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, the authors presented a conceptualization of the "midwife teacher", whose role is to "assist the students in giving birth to their own ideas" (217). This more egalitarian

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2 Here Lawrence Kohlberg should be acknowledged as Gilligan's mentor and predecessor in this line of research. Through an earlier study, Kohlberg (1964) devised a six-stage pattern of moral development, which he posited all boys and girls progress through invariantly. In terms of the two sexes, Kohlberg had observed that whereas males typically conform to stage four of this sequence, females typically conform to the lower stage three, implying, in effect, that females are less morally mature than males. This specific point of contention later led Gilligan to replicate this study.

5 Gilligan's research also provoked a number of criticisms. For examples see Tong, 1989.
teacher was thereby contrasted with the traditional "banker-teacher" whose focus tended toward 'his' own expertise and whose method of educating was simply to "deposit knowledge in the learner's head" (217). Midwife teachers were thus likened to Freire's "partner-teachers" in the way that they "assist[ed] in the emergence of consciousness" and "encourage[d] the students to speak in their own active voices" (218). The midwife teacher was a steward in what Belenky et al. referred to as the "connected class," which they defined as one in which "truth" was constructed "not through conflict but through consensus" (223). The overriding point that adherents of Belenky et al absorbed from this work was the assertion that women are particularly, if not uniquely, suited to a connected style of learning and knowing in which the teacher extends caring and maternal concern to her students. Similar work propounding the need for women to promote caring in education was being produced by Nona Lyons (1983) and Nel Noddings (1984) during the same period of time.

It is therefore evident that a number of forces contributed, through their interaction, to the development of the variety of feminist pedagogies currently in practice: the emergence of critical pedagogy, the women's liberation movement and its use of the consciousness-raising group (also common to many other liberation movements), the establishment of feminist therapy which also cultivated the C-R model of learning, and the affirmation of "women's ways." Certainly none of these paradigms or frameworks for learning developed in isolation. Like so many educational movements, these were the products of communities of individuals informing one another. Thus, although the printed page of the thesis constrains me to a somewhat linear presentation of ideas, it cannot be overemphasized that the development of contemporary feminist pedagogies via
these avenues was not at all linear but rather the result of the dynamic interaction of communities of knowers.

**Feminist Pedagogy: An Update**

Recent research into gender issues in education has continued to affirm a niche for, and the relevance of, the feminist perspective. In particular, research indicating women and girl’s underrepresentation in curriculum materials, the lack of validation of their experience in the classroom, and the disproportionately low amount of attention paid to them by teachers as contrasted with that accorded male students, has made evident a plethora of unmet needs often uniquely experienced by female students which can impede their active participation in the classroom (Hillyer-Davis, 1989; Luke and Gore, 1992; Spender, 1982). Specific attention to the gender issues neglected by Freire has become characteristic of feminist pedagogy, which has preserved many of Freire’s principles of equalizing power and authority in the classroom in an effort to help students come to voice. Uttal’s description of some Anglo feminist groups captures many oft-stated objectives of the feminist classroom: "The idea is that we are not going to do to one another what men have always done to us —we are not going to silence one another nor be competitive. Instead we are going to provide a space which is supportive and respectful of different opinions" (1990: 317). Uttal’s use of the pronoun "we" intimates a sense of shared responsibility for the group dynamic and resultant learning process which is commensurate with liberatory pedagogues’ aim to equalize power and responsibility among teachers and students in the classroom.
There is, however, another element often considered integral to the cultivation of the supportive atmosphere: the nurturing teacher. The combined call for nurturance and safety in the classroom has come to construct a paradigm of the feminist teacher in an egalitarian, harmonious relationship with her students (see Bunch. 1985; Culley et al., 1985; and Schniedewind, 1979). Even more recent scholarship, however, suggests that this paradigm is problematic and even perhaps wholly unrealistic.

Much of the research which has assumed this critical, questioning posture has been greatly influenced by poststructuralist theory. Poststructuralism developed as a direct reaction to and rejection of such modernist assumptions as the existence of a unitary truth and the rational, autonomous man characteristic of Enlightenment thinking. A central tenet of the poststructural inquiry is the rejection of grand theories or metanarratives which appeal to a single overarching system of power (e.g. capitalism, Marxism) in favor of the recognition of multiple truths or interpretations. Further, truth claims are evaluated in specific relation to the social/historical context in which they are made. The poststructuralist view is thus useful to an examination of the classroom as it illuminates the extent to which the relationships therein are informed by multiple oppressions as well as the hierarchical structure of the educational institution which accords formal authority to professors who may otherwise occupy relatively marginalized positions. This framework is also apropos to inquiries into the feminist classroom in particular, for it serves to reveal the frequent inaccessibility and inapplicability of the dominant (malestream) discourses to so many of the classroom participants, typically women and minorities. Within the feminist classroom, questioning of the generalizability of the white western male experience to differently situated
individuals has subsequently provoked similar questioning with regard to the universality of the experience of the white middle class woman assumed under liberal feminism. Research influenced by poststructuralism has therefore been particularly integral to my own inquiry into the construction and facilitation of safety in the classroom as it foregrounds the multiplicity of experiences which must necessarily influence one's perceptions of safety. Some of this research into a few of the key issues in feminist pedagogy will be introduced here and revisited throughout the thesis.

Poststructuralist deconstructions of the nurturant teacher paradigm and its attendant practices reveal several class and racially based embedded assumptions which in turn provoke a number of questions. First, who is this feminist teacher? Can anyone embody this role? Kathleen Martindale (1992) would say 'no,' citing an implicit bias which reflects a construction of 'good' mothering as that which adheres to a culturally-specific, middle-class conceptualization of the feminine (see also Walkerdine, 1989). Most significantly, however, Martindale (1992) observes that the nurturant teacher model conceals a binary opposition which pathologizes as repressive those behaviours which are not deemed supportive. As a result of these aspects of the model, teacher authority is veiled behind a facade of the benign and 'good.' It thus becomes evident that this conceptualization of nurturance has implications for the consequent constructions of safety which call for this nurturing teacher figure. For example, presuming the presence of this nurturing figure may preclude the experiences of a teacher who facilitates learning successfully but does not assume a 'nurturant' style. Similarly, the teacher who, despite her efforts at nurturance, is unable personally to experience safety in the classroom, is not accommodated by this limited model.
Notions about the need for safety in order for marginalized groups to come to voice may also conceal cultural assumptions. Uttal (1990) and hooks (1989) both write about growing up in cultural contexts in which women of colour had voice in certain domains, particularly the home. In this setting hooks recalls "it was the black women who preached" (5). (Similar critiques have been noted with regard to the position of Jewish women in traditional matriarchal homes.) These images are contrasted with the construction of the (universal: read white middle-class) woman brought to the fore under liberal feminism who has been historically silenced in all spheres of her life. Thus the struggle for some women of colour and ethnic minority women may be reconceptualized not as the struggle to 'have' or 'find' a voice of their own, but to be permitted to speak in that very voice and to be heard in the classroom setting. In this way the terms and forms of classroom speech, or what is considered an acceptable style of expression, become the central concern in the classroom as opposed to the concern for eliciting a voice which is somehow reflective of a core self. Here again, this reconceptualization of the central issues for women of colour in the classroom has implications for the construction of safety. To paraphrase Butler (1993), it becomes a question of which are the voices that matter. Hence, when feminist pedagogues try to construct an atmosphere of safety for students to come to voice, are they implicitly assuming a specific (e.g. racialized or class biased) voice as the goal?

Issues such as these accentuate the reality that the classroom is undeniably a site of struggle (hooks, 1990; Weiler, 1988). Therefore, one is moved to question the actual potential for a truly 'safe' classroom environment. Martindale (1992: 337), in fact, remarks that she has "always been aware of feeling unsafe." Reflecting on this she
contends, "I do not believe that any classroom can be made completely 'safe' for all students and teachers while we live and work in a sexist, racist and homophobic society" (337). Professors such as Elizabeth Ellsworth (1992) concur. In her experience teaching a course on anti-racism, participants concluded that expectations of safety in the class were ultimately a myth which diverted their attention away from the work they needed to be doing. This example raises an important point about the liberatory classroom. The fact remains that even the most purportedly liberal class such as one dealing with issues of anti-racism or feminism, in which one might presume a fairly enlightened stance (because such courses tend to draw a socially and politically 'progressive' student body, and/or more pointedly, if this is the view of the professor with whom students attempt to curry favor), can be rife with conflict. In the graduate classroom in particular, an already tense atmosphere may be heightened or exacerbated by the competitive nature of the institution which may harbor individual struggles over funding and access to faculty support and other resources. (Indeed, the interviews conducted for this project bear out this point.) In such classes often students with contrasting feminist ideologies (or a lack thereof) can experience the classroom as extremely unsafe. Thus both the structure of the institution as well as individual views and ideologies may contribute to the friction experienced by some students and professors in the classroom.

Why Study Safety?

While there appears to be a growing body of literature advocating various strategies to facilitate classroom safety, particularly in terms of establishing ground rules
for communication (see Cannon, 1990; Tatum, 1992; Thompson and Disch, 1992), this concern is contrasted with a dearth of important research problematizing the construct in the feminist classroom. The work of Ellsworth (1992), Martindale (1992) and Hillyer-Davis (1985) noted above only just begins to address this lack. In addition, although theorizing has been produced around silence, self-disclosure and anger in feminist pedagogy, there is a pressing need to integrate this theory toward a more comprehensive understanding of safety in the classroom, for all of these forms of expression contribute to the construction and perception of the safety of the environment. Moreover, with the exception of a handful of pieces, little research has directly concerned how teachers (as opposed to students) experience safety in the classroom (see Bannerji, 1991; Beck, 1985; Razack, 1993).

My objective here is to begin to address some of the gaps in the knowledge that have been noted. Drawing on existing work within feminist pedagogy, I aim to integrate current theorizing on a variety of classroom dynamics toward a more comprehensive understanding of how constructions of safety function in graduate feminist classrooms. I chose the graduate classroom over other classroom settings (in particular the undergraduate classroom) for several reasons. First and foremost, this is the milieu in which I am now located, so many of the issues around professor/student relations that impinge upon safety at this level are of current interest to me as they affect me personally. Second, graduate courses, unlike the majority of undergraduate courses in urban universities, are typically structured as seminars intended to facilitate increased involvement among and between individual students and faculty. The smaller number of classroom participants thus increases the depth to which individuals come to know one
another, and often consequently intensifies their interactions. The strong impressions formed by participants under these circumstances are particularly valuable because they create a rich soil of opinions and vivid anecdotes for consideration. Furthermore, because graduate classrooms are typically smaller and therefore somewhat more flexible, feminist professors are more able to experiment with alternative pedagogical practices to the mainstream lecture format. The consequent potential diversity of teaching styles thereby creates the potential for an equally diverse range of views regarding issues of safety in the classroom. Finally, at this level of study, fewer students are idly involved in feminist coursework out of simple curiosity, but rather maintain a commitment to the politics of feminism. Thus the level of maturity of graduate students and their concurrent clarity of and commitment to individual ideologies often creates the very tensions that make issues of safety in the feminist classroom salient.

**Looking Ahead**

In the next chapter I turn to a more comprehensive review of the literature which has informed my inquiry into the construction and facilitation of safety in the feminist classroom. Following this, Chapter Three will introduce the method of the research, outlining in specific detail the steps taken to procure the consent of ten women faculty and students to an interview regarding their experiences in the classroom. The application of a social constructionist framework for analysis of the interview data will also be explained in this chapter. The remaining chapters of the thesis will then present findings culled from the ten interviews as they relate to each individual research question.
This exploration is followed by a consideration of the limitations of the current project and the directions that this thesis suggests for future research and theorizing into questions of safety and related issues in education.
CHAPTER TWO

Consensus Among the Scholars? A Review of the Literature in Feminist Pedagogy

The literature on feminist pedagogies addresses a plethora of complex issues, not all of which can be broached here. Unfortunately, few articles directly or exclusively address the matter of safety in the feminist classroom, and it is a topic which is very rarely indexed in compilations on feminist pedagogy. There does, however, exist much research which addresses constituent aspects of safety and certain pedagogical strategies for its realization. A significant characteristic of the literature in feminist pedagogy is the lack of consensus among contributors on a number of issues. This characteristic should not be construed as a detractor, however, but rather as a reflection of an openness to multiple perspectives and, in some cases, an affirmation of difference. Moreover, the varied and occasionally contradictory nature of the research findings and assertions complements the goals of this thesis nicely. Since the foremost objective of this thesis is to open up the discussion around issues of safety, I evaluate the literature included in this review in terms of its implications for differently situated professors as well as students.

I begin with a discussion of the literature concerning the controversial roles of nurturance and authority in the classroom. While these particular issues may be of greater relevance to professors than students, it cannot be denied that a professor's attitude toward her exercise of authority or her extending of nurturance has significance for the student's experience in the classroom. In subsequent sections of this chapter I present and critique the construction of voice and silence in feminist and critical pedagogies. This section is followed by a review of the literature contesting the functions
of experience and emotions in the classroom. The final part of this chapter throws explicitly into question some of the assumptions around the viability and necessity for safety in feminist classrooms, in part by presenting some current theorizing originating mainly from the discipline of Composition Studies, which has traditionally focused its pedagogy on the structuring of an effective argument.

All of these issues are of relevance to students as well as professors. Indeed, both groups of individuals reside together in the feminist classroom as co-participants in one another's educational experiences. In light of this, I prefer to view students and professors as having commensurate influence on classroom climate. Moreover, as many of the professors interviewed reminded me, students do possess some sources of power in the classroom that should not be underestimated. Thus when I refer to "participants," I am including the professors and students and regarding them as coequals in terms of their investment in the matter under consideration.

Nurturance

The obvious incorporation of maternal imagery in Belenky et al.'s. (1986) concept of the midwife teacher hardly requires pointing out. Indeed, the nurturing teacher figure has been taken up quite prominently by many feminist pedagogues (see Bunch, 1985; Culley et al., 1985; and Schniedewind, 1979), and in some cases it has been explicitly invoked. For example, Anna Maria Puissi writes, "Teachers in some Italian primary and secondary schools have acquired the strength to overcome their 'neuter' teaching role and to set themselves up as female magisterial authorities, assuming a precise educational
responsibility towards their own kind, towards young women. This deliberate 
assumption of female authority, as mothers nurturing thought and words for other 
women, has helped to give young girls a role model of woman as neither depressed nor a 
loser" (translation 1990: 87). Puissi's remarks also point to the embeddedness of certain 
notions of authority and nurturance (despite the obvious sacrifices in translation). In 
some cases, nurturance or women's "innate" capacity for caring is reconceptualized as a 
unique gender-related strength (harking back to Gilligan and Belenky et al). constructing 
women as authorities in terms of their (presumed) unique ability to exercise a pedagogy 
of caring.

In many cases the nurturing quality of female teachers is presumed to occur 
naturally in the context of the mothering role considered inherent to teaching. Culley, et 
al. write, "As women teachers, and especially as women teachers in our Women's Studies 
classrooms. we are both our father's daughters and our daughter's mothers...As mothers, 
we are expected to nurture...." (1985: 12). Williams (1993) similarly characterizes the 
teaching role as feminine, but she is careful to say that this role is not limited to women 
only. Male teachers may also be supportive and nurturing, but as such they are still 
enacting an essentially feminine role (55). In her interviews with women teachers, 
Weiler (1988) also found many who valorized teaching qualities that they felt were 
uniquely feminine, including sensitivity, caring, nurturance and emotional 
expressiveness. However, some interviewees were ambivalent about the message that 
such teaching styles convey, particularly in terms of reinforcing stereotypes about 
women's identity and sphere (118). Maher and Tetreault (1994) encountered this unease 
among female professors as well. One subject of their interviews preferred to
characterize her teaching style as that of coaching as opposed to nurturing precisely because coaching is evocative of a masculine analogy. The authors observed, "Reflecting the ambivalence of many feminist teachers, she feared that to couch her authority in primarily female terms was perhaps to minimize it" (1994: 135).

Framing the teacher as midwife or mother, however, has been criticized as perpetuating the conflation of the duties of teaching with those of mothering, the historical origins of which can be located in the prescriptions for middle class mothers and kindergarten teachers of the early nineteenth century (Acker, 1995; Dehli, 1994). In addition, some mention has already been made in the previous chapter of the problematic class and racially based assumptions inherent to this paradigm. Two more important avenues may be pursued from this discussion. One concerns the frequency of appeals to object relations theory\(^6\), in which the teacher is posited as a mother figure, within feminist pedagogy. The other concerns the contradictions that arise as a result of the conceptualization of multiple roles for the feminist teacher, some of which are discrepant with certain notions of authority.

Feminist pedagogy literature often invokes object relations theory, further positioning the teacher as mother. For example, Culley et al. explain resistance to women assuming authority in the academy thusly: "[Object relations theorist] Dorothy Dinnerstein indicates, the rage at mother's daring to be fathers derives from a terror that women will abandon the side of life responsible for keeping the world partly safe and

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\(^6\) According to the *Penguin Dictionary of Psychology* (1985: 485), object relations refers to "the emotional bonds between oneself and another. Typically expressed in the sense of one's capacity to love and care for another as balanced against interest in and love for the self."
sane..." (1985: 18). Barbara Hillyer-Davis (1985) also perceives teachers as assuming the roles of wife and mother, present to reassure and protect students respectively. However, she notes, "The catch to these two solutions is that the proper correlative roles are those of husband and child, neither of which seems appropriate to a feminist classroom" (249). Lenskyj also finds object relations theory particularly limiting for feminist pedagogy, and in fact contrary to the feminist project in its heterosexist assumptions and its tendency toward mother-blaming. She aptly observes, "To the limited extent that it may illuminate the analysis, the mother/daughter metaphor is equally applicable to any female student in her relationship with any female instructor" (1994: 6).

As intimated above, reconciling nurturance and authority, even when conceived of in positive terms, can be particularly challenging for the feminist teacher. As Culley et al. indicate, "In our culture, the roles of nurturer and intellectual have been separated not just by gender, but by function: to try to recombine them is to create confusion" (1985: 13). Raymond (1986) refers to this quandary as the "nurturing syndrome" which prevents many women from critically evaluating each other's opinions and judgments. Friedman (1985) also found that emphasizing sensitivity toward her students sometimes prevented her from comfortably assuming the kinds of authority of intellect and autonomy she sought to encourage in them. Kathryn Morgan (1987) calls this paradox that of the "bearded mother." The essence of this contradiction as experienced by feminist teachers is the imperative to be simultaneously critical or rational (qualities historically associated with the masculine) and nurturant and supportive (qualities historically associated with the feminine). She asks, are nurturance and unconditional support compatible with
critical theorizing? While on the surface it appears difficult, if not impossible, to be unconditionally supportive yet sharply critical, Morgan notes that to abandon either quality would undermine feminist pedagogy. Regrettably, she does not offer a solution or alternative to this dilemma. Gerald Graff (1994) refers to essentially the same dilemma as experienced by male radical pedagogues as the "bully/wimp syndrome", which he finds is rooted in isolated teaching conditions in which there is a lack of institutional reinforcement for progressive teaching techniques. (In fact, the issue of institutional support figured prominently in my own interviews.) As a result, the radical teacher often has to appeal to or comply with rigid, authoritarian standards thereby creating the contradiction.

Lenskyj (1994) further observes a reliance on terminology from malestream theory within feminist pedagogy. She finds that this discourse conveys little sense of the reciprocity or mutuality of the feminist teacher/student relationship. Christine Overall (1987) concurs, finding this to be especially problematic within role model theory, which is highly individualistic. In addition, notes Lenskyj (1993: 37), role theory does not acknowledge the character of the teacher/student relationship as ongoing beyond the confines of the classroom. Role theory still permeates much feminist pedagogy literature. However, some efforts toward reframing the student/teacher relationship in terms of a more egalitarian friendship have been advanced (see Minnich, 1983; Raymond, 1986). One might also consider the implications of characterizing the teacher/student relationship as like that between colleagues.
Authority

Critical and feminist pedagogical critiques of teacher authority are mainly based in the critique of traditional patriarchal authority (exercised both within and outside of the classroom) as oppressive. From this basis many feminist pedagogues have advanced a two-pronged approach to the reconceptualization of authority within the classroom. One stream focuses predominantly on Gore's (1993) micro issues or instructional techniques, while the other examines the notion of the authority figure as expert. It should be noted that the two approaches are in no way mutually exclusive, nor do they exhaustively represent current theorizing around constructions of authority in pedagogy.

Williams (1993: 50) pointedly captures the predominant critique of teacher authority when she writes. "seeing traditional educational authoritarianism as part of the apparatus that maintains and reproduces social inequality, progressive educators consciously attempt to subvert oppressive social arrangements by putting egalitarian principles into practice in the classroom." Following Freire in this regard, some critical pedagogues have argued that the professor who de-emphasizes or divests herself of authority in the classroom conveys the message that students should maintain an active sense of responsibility for their own learning. Thus the success of the democratic classroom becomes dependent upon all its members, not only the professor, for all members are equally vital participants in producing the educational experience for one another.

In a related way, Friedman (1985) finds that this approach may also foster the realization among students that the teacher is not the only knower, and indeed the teacher
may equally learn from the students. Thus she invokes the second stream of criticism noted above, since egalitarian practices in the classroom serve to demystify the construction of the teacher as the only expert present. Feminist pedagogy also eschews the association of authority with reason or rationality when these are perceived as the monopoly of men. As Friedman (1985: 206) observes, "The woman teacher is caught in a double bind: to be 'woman,' she has no authority to think; to think, she has made herself masculine at the expense of her womanhood." In light of this conflict some pedagogues have chosen to reconceptualize authority as intellect. Viewed in this way authority can be exercised in a non-coercive manner to cultivate student autonomy. Culley (1985: 215) writes, "...it is only in accepting her authority — by this I mean the authority of her intellect, imagination, passion — that the students can accept the authority of their own like capacities." In this way, it becomes possible for the students as well as the professor to enjoy a sense of self-affirmation without the professor having to disclaim those intellectual qualities that have helped her to succeed in the institution. Maher and Tetreault (1994: 129) also observe, "Once teachers begin to view their students as also possessors of authority, the process of knowledge construction changes." Murphy, however, perceived resentment from her students for her abnegation of her authority as a knower, reflecting, "So perhaps they felt justified in rejecting me as an authority because, in asking them to teach each other, they believed I was neglecting my responsibility to teach them" (1992:7).

Perhaps the first issue raised in critique of suggestions for professors to divest themselves of authority in order to foster autonomy in their students points to the difficulty women — particularly women of colour and other marginalized groups — have
experienced, having historically been deprived of access or right to authority. Kenway and Modra (1992) thus observe that some women may harbor internalized assumptions about this lack of access to positions of authority which may also fuel feelings of ambivalence about their capacity to exercise authority. Several questions arise from this possibility. First, how can women who have never assumed traditional patriarchal authority divest themselves of this role at all? Second, why might a woman who may finally have access to a means of status and currency in her profession through the exercise of authority choose to relinquish such power? Moreover, can she afford to?

Hoodfar (1992), hooks (1989), and Bannerji (1991) all respond with a resounding "no" to this latter question. As women of color, they often find it essential to exercise authority as professors in order to subvert the misperceptions among students that members of minority groups cannot or do not assume positions of power (see Ng, 1993, 1991). Moreover, their authority may often provide a buffer against the oppressive and recalcitrant behaviors engaged in by more privileged students. Feminist professors who are not racially or ethnically marginalized may still experience negative consequences from this purportedly democratic practice. For example, Friedman (1985) and Williams (1993) note that the professor who divests herself of authority often faces a significant bind. Hesitant to assert control and possibly behave in a manner that is complicit with systems of domination, the feminist teacher may suppress her own intellectual abilities when attempting to help students work through or synthesize difficult material. Friedman writes, "In our eagerness to be non-hierarchical and supportive instead of tyrannical and ruthlessly critical, we have sometimes participated in the patriarchal denial of the mind to women" (207). Relatedly, as a consequence of her stifling her own intellectual and
professorial authority. Williams (1993) found that too often emotions came to rule the classroom in an unproductive manner. Alternatively, as a student, she recalls feeling cheated by her professor's reluctance to share knowledge for fear of dominating (see also Tompkins, 1990).

In a similar vein, some theorists have also suggested that the affirmation of students' authority of their knowledge, coupled with the call for a dismantling of traditional authority, can leave the professor unable to confront oppressive statements or behaviours by students (Ellsworth, 1992; hooks, 1989 and 1994: 187-188; Williams, 1993). Remarking on this issue, Briskin (1990: 9) writes, "An overemphasis on the principles of sharing power and validating student knowledge can take female teachers full circle: to a place where they again abdicate both expertise and authority; which is, in fact, an abdication of the role of teacher." But to assume or exercise authority can elicit backlash from students. Any of these circumstances can result in difficult and even damaging experiences for students and professors alike who may suddenly find themselves de-centered and unable to feel safe in the classroom.

Faced with these myriad quandaries, many feminist pedagogues have sought to reconceptualize authority in order to distinguish between positive and negative forms and uses. As Briskin (1990) points out, not all forms of exercising authority are necessarily anti-democratic. In this view, negative forms of authority refer almost exclusively to traditional patriarchal uses of power to coerce or dominate. By contrast, positive forms of authority are those which facilitate the liberatory project. Code (1991) draws a similar distinction between authoritative versus authoritarian behaviour: "The distinction turns
upon the competence, the informed and hence justified position of an authoritative expert, contrasted with the power of an authoritarian knower to claim credibility on the basis of privilege alone or ideological orthodoxy..." (her emphasis, p185). In practice this distinction is commonly referred to as having "authority with" as opposed to "authority over" students (Culley, 1985).

The positive constructions of authority have also garnered criticism in the literature, however, insofar as they appear to conceal the presumption of an already fully emancipated teacher, which frequently is not the case (Ellsworth, 1992; Gore, 1993). As well, it is noted that feminist professors can still implicate themselves in traditional practices of authority by actually pressuring or coercing students to share the knowledge they have gained through personal experiences (see Gore, 1993; Graff, 1994; Hillyer-Davis, 1985).

In terms of the former charge, some critics have ultimately concluded that Freire was uniquely situated when he prescribed this strategy of education for empowerment. Insofar as Freire enjoyed gender and class privilege, he could more freely divest himself of traditional conceptualizations of authority as mastery or coercive power. Many feminist pedagogues, however, do not possess class or race privilege or many of the other forms of privilege predicated through social difference (e.g. ability, heterosexuality), and certainly very few assume gender privilege. Often, therefore, the only security the feminist professor experiences in the classroom is her position of authority. Determining how to achieve the necessary balance between safety for all concerned and professorial
authority in the feminist classroom, then, is an ongoing struggle over which no consensus has been met in the literature to date.

**Voice**

The construction of voice as a metaphor for the self was already introduced in Chapter One of the thesis. As with the consciousness-raising group, poststructuralist theory reveals the extent to which the feminist classroom has also become troubled by a propensity to assume implicitly that a universal experience of gender must underlie all women's voice and sense of identity (see hooks, 1989; Qualley, 1994). In addition to this problematic assumption, Orner (1992: 86) finds that liberal constructions of voice (within both feminist and critical pedagogy) also tend to presume underlying "singular, essential, authentic and stable notions of identity". Embedded within this construction, then, is the assumption that one's expressed voice maps neatly onto one's identity or location within systems of power, the result being the conflation of voice with identity. Assumptions of singular expressions of identity further fuel essentialist notions which may alienate and impose a false authority upon individuals. This tension further feeds into problematic conceptualizations of the authenticity of personal experience as a basis for learning. This issue will be addressed in a separate section on the uses and role of experience in the classroom.

However, few people experience their identity as singular but rather occupy multiple subject positions (e.g. woman, lesbian, able-bodied, person of color). Yet given the liberal construction of voice, when asked to speak to a particular issue, a student may
be forced to subordinate one or more aspects of her identity. Still, as Ellsworth (1992: 104) correctly notes, simply pluralizing the concept of voice to acknowledge varied "voices" still "loses sight of the contradictory and partial nature of all voices". Ellsworth further points out that the literature on critical pedagogy "does not confront the ways in which any individual student's voice is already a 'teeth gritting' and often contradictory intersection of voices" (103, emphasis added). In articulating this observation Ellsworth is effectively using the term voice in a manner synonymous with theorizations of subjectivity. While any indiscriminate substitution of one term for the other should be questioned, understanding voice as perhaps a reflection of subjectivity does begin to dismantle some of the restrictive and exclusionary assumptions which mar liberatory constructions of voice. Bronwyn Davies (1993: 9) comprehends subjectivity as "constantly achieved through relation with others (both real and imagined) which are themselves made possible through discourse." In this way Davies acknowledges the extent to which any individual (and therefore any voice) produces and is continually (re)produced through social relations. Maher and Tetreault (1994) begin to realize this same idea in their pedagogy when they deliberately choose to refer to voice as something which is "fashioned" rather than "found". In this way the expressed voice or subjectivity made evident in the feminist classroom is recognized as contextually and historically specific, of the moment. Finding that subjectivities, identities or voices are made, and made possible, through discourse thus averts the essentialist pitfalls of the Romantic constructions of voice reviewed in Chapter One. It also allows for the necessary recognition that subjectivity may change or shift within the moment. But what of the adverse pedagogical implications for theorizing multiple, contradictory and possibly
unstable identities or subjectivities underlying voice? Orner (1992: 80) finds that "when we focus on the multiple voices and contradictions present in specific sites at specific historical moments, it becomes impossible to support universal calls for student voice."

Ultimately one of the most problematic aspects of the construction of voice within feminist and critical pedagogies may also be the most fundamental: the literal interpretation of the term. Teachers throughout the disciplines often share a compelling interest in students' oral participation in the classroom as a reflection of their engagement. Silent students are simply more difficult to read than vocal students, and their comfort levels are difficult to gauge. However, one cannot assume that the transformation of consciousness referred to by Lusted (1986) is not occurring merely because a student is silent. Rather, Ellsworth suggests that the assumption that student silence "indicates 'lost voice,' 'voicelessness,' or lack of social identity from which to act as a social agent betrays deep and unacceptable gender, race, and class biases" (1992: 104). Indeed, recent feminist scholarship suggests a plethora of possible meanings of silence, which will be discussed in a separate section to follow. All of this research would seem to suggest a place for yet another new construction of voice, one in which voice is seen as a gestalt, part of an historical/social context made up of many other voices that may or may not be heard in a given instance due to textual or contextual limitations.

Experience

A cardinal trait of the critical and feminist classroom, as envisioned by Freire, is the incorporation and validation of personal experience in the classroom. As noted in
Chapter One. one of the objectives of revaluing personal experience through pedagogy is to frame the student in a more egalitarian relation to the professor. This is accomplished through the validation of personal experience as a legitimate form of knowledge which the student brings to the classroom. In liberatory pedagogical terms, historically silenced students may then come to possess the authority of their experience, develop or even assert their voice, and ultimately feel empowered as a result. Incorporating personal experience into classroom discussion by relating or contrasting it to the theories or issues being studied can also prevent students from experiencing the material as disembodied or highly abstracted knowledge. However, these goals are not always met in the feminist classroom, and attempts to do so may occasion dubious consequences.

For example, one consequence of the emphasis on experience in the feminist classroom is the potential for students to present with complex emotions and conflicts that may be more appropriately resolved outside of the classroom. This is often inevitable in classes geared toward consciousness-raising where the curriculum addresses heated and frequently personal issues. In these cases some students may find themselves talking about issues which affect them deeply, yet for which they have never had a forum for discussion. The opportunity to have their experiences validated may evoke an epiphany for some students, and they may wish to begin the work of unpacking complex personal issues in the classroom. While rewarding, the effects of this happening can also be difficult for students and professors. Students sharing painful experiences may certainly find relating them difficult, and students listening may as well. The student who goes out on a limb by sharing, but who is met with silence, may be discouraged from ever speaking in the classroom again (see hooks, 1994: 149). Upon reflection she may feel
exposed and vulnerable. Listeners may feel unable to respond to this person, or they may feel obligated to self-disclose against their own inclination. Professors may feel unequipped to deal adequately with the emotions elicited by course content (see Williams, 1993). Certainly, the occurrence of a student reacting strongly to material may be lauded as a reflection of successful teaching; a student has been awakened somehow by the course. However, as occasionally happens, professors find themselves unprepared to balance the immediate needs of one student against those of a classroom. Fortunately, many professors teaching feminist classes have experience working in activist or social service type capacities, so they may be able to deal effectively with an outpouring of emotion.\textsuperscript{7} Other professors, however, who may have only recently embraced feminist pedagogy, may have never experienced such an intense classroom environment, and they may find themselves at a loss. When this happens, everybody suffers to some degree, but most importantly, the student suffers. (Skills for facilitating emotional classroom discussions and the event of a professor's unpreparedness for this were both matters raised by the women interviewed for this project. This topic will be discussed further in Chapter Five.) The frequently personal nature of discussion in the feminist classroom is highly controversial. Some students resent this tumultuous atmosphere and charge the feminist classroom with operating more like a 'therapy group.' While we must be careful not to presume intimacy in the feminist classroom, it is important to recognize that these experiences may happen in the feminist classroom precisely because other forums do not

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{7} In Eichler's (1990b) survey of 892 women involved in women's studies/feminist studies, she found that 52.2\% of respondents indicated a "a prior involvement with a women's [activist] group" while 62.8\% had become active in women's groups since beginning teaching. In addition, interestingly, 22.8\% of respondents indicated that a women's consciousness-raising group was also a motivating factor for their involvement in women's/feminist studies.
\end{footnote}
exist for some people. This raises a larger question about the relation of the feminist classroom to the institution as a whole. Is the role of Women's Studies or feminist studies in the university to emulate the traditionally "feminine" role of mediating emotional issues or subjects of study?

To return to the earlier discussion of voice for a moment, recognizing the partiality of students' voices also influences perceptions of the authenticity of experience. Notions of authenticity are especially vexing. Articulations of authentic voice are presumed to come about through one's relating of first hand experiences, personal knowledge. But what determines authenticity if the experiences being articulated are necessarily discursively constructed, as Davies (1993) suggests? The emphasis on authenticity vis-à-vis personal experience risks becoming established as merely another metanarrative. This discourse would propose that if one can only speak from the truth (a contested terrain in its own right) of her own experience, then one cannot speak for anyone but herself. However, Currie (1992) finds this view can lead to an endless loop of relativism. Like the snake biting its tail, one cannot fully appreciate any subjective position that is not her own, thus one cannot discuss any such position or reach any appreciation of it through discussion. Fuss incisively concludes, "Who we are becomes what we know: ontology shades into epistemology" (1989:113). In turn, observes Scott (1992: 27), categories of social difference such as black, white, heterosexual or homosexual become naturalized. An important question to ask in such circumstances is, who is constructing the image of the authentic individual? One needs to be cautious that the construction of the authentic Native person, for example, is not simply a mechanism
of restriction and regulation promoted by members of the dominant group (see Crosby, 1991). What is the price to be paid for deviating from this construction?

The feminist classroom is often disturbed by this dilemma in two ways. First, the classroom may reproduce hierarchies with different players at the different levels. Multiple positionings may come to imply more experience and therefore more authority. Sometimes this is manifested as the 'hierarchy of oppressions.' The lower-class minority woman becomes perceived as more able to talk about prejudices than the middle-class minority woman. The second generation Korean woman is perceived as less able to make a valuable contribution to a discussion of being Asian in Canada than the first generation Chinese woman. Experience thus provides some students a platform while sideling others. (Keep in mind, feeling sidelined is rarely associated with feeling "safe" in any setting.) In other cases the hierarchy orders who is 'truly' feminist and which views are acceptable (see Gardner, 1989; Hillyer Davis, 1985; Manicom, 1992; Weiler, 1988). Gardner et al. (1989: 66) describe a classroom situation in which the feminist majority effectively silenced the non feminist minority: "In other words, the feminist majority defined the class as their class and soon became the new caste of 'men', while the remaining 'women' sat passively, accepting their subjugation." In response to a request that students write about their perceptions of the class dynamic one woman wrote. "Even though we all talk about appreciating difference and diversity. I don't feel as if we act on it. Especially 'the feminists' in the class" (1989: 67). Hantzis and Looser (1995) characterize this dynamic as an absurd extension of the theorization of feminist safe spaces as woman-only spaces. They mimic the implicit connection drawn by the feminist majority in such a classroom:
"We" can only be "safe" (that is, can only speak "our" minds without retribution) among "ourselves." Those who disagree with "us" from a perceived-to-be-male subject position are labeled as antifeminist. Those who disagree with "us" from a perceived-to-be-female subject position are seen as pathetic—as "male-identified" women who have been duped by the patriarchal ideologies that have constructed them. (pp227-8)

The result, the authors suggest, is that "constructions of feminist safe space serve to keep out those who would endanger 'real' (i.e., consciousness-already-raised) women, 'real' feminists" (228).

In a closely related manner classes may become polarized over differences in general knowledge about or familiarity with subject matter and jargon. Those students 'in the know' then form the dominant hegemony and may use their knowledge as a source of power over other students. hooks (1994: 83) cautions, however, that the binary opposition which frames this conflict (i.e. insider/outsider) may actually conceal the extent to which the classroom is already shaped by disparities resulting from racism, class elitism and homophobia, among other forms of oppression.

Some scholars find that feminist pedagogy in fact over-values personal experience and neglectfully fails to problematize it. Critics of the consciousness-raising model suggest that experience has been decontextualized and inappropriately regarded as pure, valid knowledge. In their view, personal experience has come to constitute truth, and in turn, empirical methods of knowing have become analytically suspect. Skepticism of objectivity has been replaced by the credulous acceptance of subjectivity. Luke (1992:37) asserts, "Privileging experience as foundational to knowledge, or as a transparent window to the 'real', denies its situatedness in discourses that constitute subjectivities in the first place, and that enable articulation of experience from
discursively constructed subject positions" (see also Scott, 1992). This is particularly a problem in Women's Studies where women are at once the subjects and the objects of study. Again Fuss (1989:114) trenchantly comments, "Belief in the truth of Experience is as much an ideological production as belief in the experience of Truth."8 This belief in the truth of experience often coincides with a rejection of theory. But this is fundamentally problematic under poststructuralism, which posits that we are always theorizing and building ideologies through living and thinking about our world. Smart (1989:71) also observes, "...to reject theorizing itself —as opposed to the modes it takes— seem to be throwing the baby out with the bath water." In consequence, discourse in feminist classrooms may often seem disjointed or incoherent when students and professors fail to draw the links between the theoretical and the experiential, thus failing to meet one of the originally stated objectives.

Silence

In recent years assumptions about the need for literal, vocal voice have generated feminist scholarship on the meaning and significance of its corollary, silence. The literature regarding silence which I will review here concerns the construct or noun "silence." This is distinguished from the verb "to silence" which is used both literally and metaphorically in feminist pedagogy to refer to the actions on the part of one individual to repress another or the failure, sometimes deliberate, to acknowledge the other.9

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8 For a critique of Fuss see bell hooks (1994) "Essentialism and Experience" (pp77-92). In b. hooks Teaching to Transgress. New York: Routledge.

9 For more on this distinction see Delpit, 1988; Lewis and Simon, 1986; McLaughlin and
Lewis (1993), Orner (1992) and Walkerdine (1985) have found that in patriarchal discourse women's silence is typically regarded as deficiency or non-participation. Occasionally it has even been assumed to imply non-existence (Lewis, 1993). Within feminist discourse, the emphasis around the need to create a space for women to speak would seem to imply that silence is counterproductive and perhaps symptomatic of an oppressive or unsafe classroom environment. This may sometimes be the case. Still some students may choose never to speak out. If the classroom simply doesn't jibe with their reality outside, if it is the only environment in which they are listened to, they may be unable to experience the trust necessary to speak aloud. Alternatively, Mimi Orner (1992: 81) suggests, "There are times when it is not safe for a student to speak: when one student's socially constructed body language threatens another; when the teacher is not perceived as an ally." Magda Lewis warns, however, that "there is a level at which such propositions do not reach deep enough into the sources and political potential of women's silence and cannot, therefore, offer the necessary perspective on pedagogical interventions that we may utilize toward social change" (1993: 40).

Lewis thus reminds readers that one cannot assume that the transformation of consciousness referred to by Lusted (1986) is not occurring merely because a student is silent. In light of this standpoint, there has been increasing awareness of the need to recognize the positive or productive potential of silence (i.e. what is the silent student really telling us?). Viewed in this way silence may represent a display of dissent or resistance. A number of reasons have been cited for this type of student silence in the classroom. Konradi (1993) finds that silence may reflect an unwillingness to accept Tierney, 1993; and Wise and Fine, 1993.
others' definitions or characterizations of a group, or it may occur in reaction to the misappropriation of one's words. Alternatively, silence may also be an act of subversion, a refusal to take up "the master's tools" (Lorde, 1984: 110). In the case of silent resistance, then, is it really appropriate to consider the resisting student as lacking voice?

Racialized constructions of members of non-dominant groups, however, may preclude the use of silence as a freely chosen means of resistance by minorities (Hantzis and Looser, 1995: Maclear, 1994). For example, Maclear (1994) grapples with the aestheticizing and normalizing of silence as expressed by Asian individuals. She ultimately questions whether silence can "ever be a self-evolved form of expression for people from oppressed groups?" (11). Ellsworth would likely answer this query in the affirmative, noting that the assumption that silence expressed by certain minorities "indicates 'lost voice,' 'voicelessness,' or lack of social identity from which to act as a social agent betrays deep and unacceptable gender, race, and class biases" (1992: 104).

Some research leans toward conceptualizing speaking and silence as two parts of a whole rather than diametrically opposed. An analogy to music would seem helpful here where the silences/rests must be accorded equal value to the voices/notes which together comprise the complete (musical) expression. In this vein Orner (1992: 81) remarks, "There may be compelling conscious and unconscious reasons for not speaking — or for speaking, perhaps more loudly, with silence." However, neither Orner's interpretation nor this analogy is adequate if these conceptualizations of silence preclude the original interpretation of silence as a reflection of oppression. Is it realistic always to conceive of silence as a proactive expression or a form of resistance? These competing conceptualizations of silence as evidence of both oppression and proactive expression
create a tension which impacts on the perceived goal of safety. Is the goal to create an environment in which students feel 'safe' to be silent or 'safe' to speak out or both?

The issue of students feeling pressured to speak is less often addressed than the issue of students feeling pressured to withhold their views, but it is equally relevant to the construction of safety. Lewis (1993: 5) acknowledges the power struggles inherent to this circumstance when she writes. "Yet, being 'given' time and space [has] its own oppressive moments in that the power of control over such time and space [has] not changed....the terms of our allowable discourse [have] not changed, the granting of such 'speaking time,' as an act of charity, [has] the effect of bringing us into silence amplified even beyond our original muted state." In this circumstance the emphasis on voice as an individualized expression both unsettles the silent student and deflects attention from the integral role of the listener. Although the listener cannot simply give the speaker her voice, as Lewis suggests, isn't having voice really about being heard and acknowledged regardless of the mode of expression? Understood in this way, coming to voice becomes a process of dynamic relation between speaker and listener(s). In terms of liberatory pedagogy, a construction of voice which acknowledges the impact of social relations on transformation of consciousness opens spaces for student influence on pedagogy. This shift in the conceptualization of pedagogy as also constituting a shared endeavor between and among all participants in the classroom would then more closely approximate the dismantling of power imbalances between students and professors advocated by Freire.
Emotion in the Classroom: Pain, Anger and Self-Disclosure

Building on the recognition that classroom dynamics can engender a sense of vulnerability among students, bell hooks (1989) acknowledges that learning can be painful. She therefore espouses the need for an environment in which each individual voice is explicitly valued (1994). This goal is facilitated through reading and speaking exercises in which every student must participate and take a turn at being heard. Because hooks recognizes that some students may feel threatened by these exercises, she attempts to ease students' transitions between paradigms by preparing them for the possibility of pain and struggle, while reminding them that this does not preclude the possibility of joy as well (1994: 154). Rockhill (1987: 12) similarly addresses the pain involved in learning when she writes. "Learning has always been depicted as this wonderfully positive experience. Well, it is not always. It can be downright wrenching and move us into periods of chaos and crisis." In hooks' (1989, 1994) writing she also addresses how her views on the inevitability of some pain in learning inform her practices around safety: "Unlike the stereotypical feminist model which suggests that women best come to voice in an atmosphere of safety (one in which we are all going to be kind and nurturing), I encourage students to work at coming to voice in an atmosphere where they may be afraid or find themselves at risk" (1989: 53). This is not to say, however, that individuals and their needs in the classroom are devalued. hooks, however, is able to reconceptualize conflict and struggle as constructive forms of learning. One is reminded of the Chinese character for crisis, which is composed of a combination of the individual characters for danger and opportunity.
An additional aspect of hooks' pedagogy is the validation of anger as a source of strength and transformation. In some cases, this expression is even viewed as perhaps the only alternative to immobilizing silence (see Lorde, 1984: 44). Anger is a central issue in feminist pedagogy because the feminist classroom often directly confronts troubling social problems and inequities with an eye toward transformative action. Margo Culley (1985) therefore values the expression of anger in her classroom. Although she acknowledges that it may be difficult to hear or express, she finds it necessary "or the group will travel no further" (212). By framing the expression of anger as integral to growth in this way, Culley dismantles the traditionally inscribed boundary between knowledge and emotion. In his phenomenology of anger, Peter Lyman (1983: 59) also addresses this false dichotomy and its implications when he writes, "The rules of politeness and rationality that govern social dialogue may make it impossible to say what needs to be said by making certain topics impolite, certain tones of voice or emotions irrational, or simply defining topics as psychological and not political." Similarly, Spelman (1989) finds that silencing anger in the classroom in an effort to create safety may restrict individual agency. She suggests, "If we recognize that judgments about wrong-doing are in some sense constitutive of anger, then we begin to see that the censorship of anger is a way of short-circuiting, or censoring judgments about wrong-doing" (Bryson and de Castell. 1993: 347 quoting Spelman 1989: 272). Similarly, Uttal (1990) draws a distinction between active listening and passive hearing or supportive nods. Active listening is precisely what Uttal was seeking when she observed listeners "holding their thoughts inside because they [did not] feel it's okay to speak up and ask for clarification or disagree" (317). Here she acknowledges that an active discussion can
entail "questions, hurt feelings, taking sides, and feeling frustrated." but among her peers she finds that "disagreements and confusion are not received as invalidation of individual ideas" (319).

As the expression of anger may be experienced as a risky endeavor in the classroom, so too may self-disclosure produce vulnerability among students and professors. As intimated in the first chapter, this is one instance in which there are many parallels between the feminist therapist and the feminist teacher. Brown and Walker (1990) outline some of the problems involved in self-disclosure for the feminist therapist. problems which may arguably afflict the feminist professor as well. Among them is the difficulty they may experience in establishing personal boundaries. This issue was presented by several professors during the interviews for this project. Because the feminist community, or the graduate school community, may be quite contained, any public behaviour outside of the traditional context may be perceived as a form of disclosure. How should this sort of information be treated within the confines of the office or classroom? As well, because the disclosure is coming from a position of centrality, if not power, clients or students may invest it with particular significance. Roger Simon (1995) finds students may then form "image-texts" which may serve as a "basis for predicting whom students can communicate with and who would be likely to support their work." however inaccurately (99). Beck (1985) also notes that professors risk being judged harshly or having their competence doubted by students when they self-disclose. "Or," she adds, "you may raise expectations about how close you are willing to be to students, how much time you are willing to spend outside of class" (291). Here again she touches on the issue of personal boundaries and comfort levels.
Teachers and students are also prey to some potentially alienating misuses of self-disclosure. Beck (1985) surveyed students about their impressions of the usefulness and appropriateness of teacher self-disclosure. Interestingly, while the students were generally positive about its potential to facilitate openness and learning, they proffered many caveats about teachers' use that Brown and Walker (1990) also cite as problems for therapist self-disclosure. Many students felt that the disclosure ought to be appropriate and relevant to the subject matter at hand. In a similar vein, several respondents cautioned that a teacher should not engage in self-disclosure at great length or merely in order to satisfy her own needs. Nor should disclosure become a complete substitute for professional expertise or knowledge (see also Williams, 1993). This is not, however, to invalidate the use of personal experience as a legitimate basis for intellectual inquiry, but rather to guard against the neglect of other equally useful resources for information and learning that may look outside or beyond the self. In sum, then, the literature suggests that self-disclosure may reap positive results in terms of humanizing the classroom as well as legitimating other sources or ways of knowing that emphasize a conceptualization of knowledge as co-constitutive of traditional 'academic' information in dynamic relation with more personal internal processes. However, the literature also points to the potential of self-disclosure to jeopardize the safety of the environment as experienced by both teachers and students.
Safety Reconsidered

All of the issues that have been discussed thus far have led some educators to feel skeptical about the possibility of creating a truly safe classroom environment. Some also the question the extent to which safety should be considered a priority. Martindale (1992), Ellsworth (1992), Hillyer-Davis (1985) and Buffington (1993) have explicitly expressed skepticism in their writing. Indeed, Buffington (1993: 1) asks, "How much good are we doing our students by ignoring, trying to smooth over, very real problems and issues?" It is important to note, however, that the question was only posed rhetorically, and students were never offered an opportunity to respond within the article.

Martindale (1992) also begins to address the need for some semblance of safety for the feminist teacher in particular. Sherene Razack (1993), a professor of colour, describes an incident in her own teaching career which poignantly illustrates this point. While teaching at a summer college program on human rights, a white student "became frustrated by the silence of a black woman from South Africa when South Africa was being discussed" (63). Razack reflects on the "chaos of what then ensued" from the woman's eventual confrontation with the student of color, who tearfully defended her right to silence (64). She writes, "It became clear that the sentence, so simply expressed by a white woman, innocently inviting a woman of colour to share her experiences of racism, recalled for every person of colour in the room...that this was not in fact a safe learning environment" (64). In this instance the dynamics of racism intersected with the broader power struggles over time and space theorized by Lewis (1993). In asking the woman of color to share her experiences of racism, the white woman placed the
educational burden on the marginalized woman rather than take the responsibility for educating herself. Moreover, her strategy for eliciting the information and gaining the insight she desired necessitated a potentially painful revisiting of racist experiences for the woman of color. She also assumed control of the classroom time and space by determining the speaking time and the content of speech for the woman of color. The assumption of entitlement to knowledge ultimately reinflicted the violence of racism in the classroom. In this instance, Razack shared the pain experienced by the students of color as well as a momentary sense of having lost control in her role as professor. Similarly, a lesbian professor once recalled in conversation with me an incident in which a few students made homophobic remarks in class, unaware of her sexual orientation. Without realizing what they had done, those students had effectively de-centered the professor and her sense of authority, causing her to feel unsafe in her own classroom. In Razack’s case, she later acknowledged the learning value of the event, although she remained unconsolled. Both instances thus throw into question the viability as well as desirability of safety in the classroom. Khayatt (1992) and Adams and Emery (1994) also address related issues of safety for the lesbian teacher and the politics of teacher self-disclosure in the classroom.

Conclusion

Although this limited and somewhat arbitrary discussion of themes could not do justice to the full complexity of feminist pedagogies, it has served to illustrate the tensions and contradictions inherent to this stream of education theory. Moreover, I
believe that this characteristic of feminist pedagogical theory cannot be over-emphasized and in fact should be explored further and reaffirmed. This thesis proceeds with that intent.

An important voice missing from the above discussion of the issues, and from the literature more generally, is that of the students. By incorporating the voices of four graduate students involved in feminist coursework throughout the findings chapters which follow, I hope to address this gap and to begin to reflect the full range of views and experiences in the feminist classroom more faithfully. Throughout the subsequent chapters I interweave the issues discussed above. This blending is especially necessary since the isolated consideration of single issues cannot adequately reflect the involution of any classroom. These practices should hopefully move us toward a more comprehensive understanding of the construction and facilitation of safety in the feminist classroom.
CHAPTER THREE

**Sounding Out: Conducting and Analyzing the Interviews**

As a central aim of this thesis is to present and explore a variety of ways in which safety in the classroom is constructed by differently situated students and professors, I have felt from the inception of the project that only an inductive qualitative method of research could meaningfully capture and convey the nuances among the participants’ views and experiences. The decision to engage in open-ended interviews with ten women was thus predicated on the desire to avoid research strategies which restrict the emergence of previously unexplored and/or unexpressed perspectives. I therefore decided against quantitative methods, which tend to emphasize positivist approaches toward the collection of “hard,” measurable data often thereby preventing the analysis of a topic or experience in its maximal complexity. An inductive approach, however, does not preclude my own biases from potentially influencing the nature of the data collected. This leverage is, of course, most evident in the design of the interview schedule. I will therefore take up such questions around my own assumptions throughout the project and my efforts to preserve the integrity of the participants’ voices in the thesis.

I chose to conduct interviews as my main research technique for a number of reasons. Foremost among these justifications is the feminist commitment to creating opportunities for women to articulate or give voice to their experiences. I also felt that promoting a dialogue between myself and the participants on the issue of safety would allow the women to raise valuable points on the topic and questions about the research project that a non-interactive design such as the questionnaire or classroom observation
might well have precluded. For this reason too, I preferred the use of a flexible interview schedule composed of open-ended questions over a more strictly formulated one. In this way, participants and I could diverge somewhat from the guidelines provided by the schedule in order to explore relevant issues that I may not have considered in the initial planning stages. Despite this flexibility in design, however, the interviews did retain an element of formality insofar as they were deliberately conducted outside of the setting of which we spoke (i.e. the classroom) and guided in at least some way by the use of a preconceived schedule of questions (Bogdan and Biklen 1992: 96).

Soliciting Participants

Determining the criteria for participation entailed a number of considerations. As my objective was to explore the complexities of safety in the feminist classroom, I intended to interview only students and professors involved in feminist coursework. As outlined in Chapter One, those courses which consciously foregrounded any of a variety of critical feminist perspectives (e.g. Marxist, anti-racist, radical) were deemed "feminist." Given this structure and the literature reviewed thus far, one might assume that all of the professors leading such courses would naturally engage in feminist pedagogy. Feminist pedagogy, however, has already proven itself open to broad interpretation. so I hesitated to define and/or require the use of feminist pedagogy of participating professors in order not to constrain inappropriately their responses about safety. Indeed, some feminist professors may not consider their teaching style to be a form of feminist pedagogy at all. This potentiality should not undermine the research,
however. Rather, it suits the intent of exploring multiple pedagogical approaches to the negotiation of safety in the classroom.

The question arose, then, if pedagogy cannot serve as the signifier, then how else might I identify a feminist professor? Following the work of Hantzis and Looser (1995: 224), I chose to locate the participants vis-à-vis their enactment, i.e. "[they] 'are' not feminists; [they] 'do' feminism." Thus, for the purposes of the study, the feminist professor and the feminist classroom were operationalized as those currently affiliated with graduate level programs in feminist studies, whether these were fully independent departments within an institution, crossdisciplinary programs or interdepartmental foci. Similarly, student participants were required to be currently enrolled in and attending courses within these programs. One final criteria for participation concerned the sex of the interviewee. Only women were solicited for participation in the study. While it is certainly true that some men do teach and/or attend feminist courses, it is also often the case that their experiences of safety in the classroom are markedly different from those of their female counterparts by virtue of their location within a patriarchal society which constructs women as hierarchically subordinate to men (see Richer, 1995; Schilb, 1985; Snock, 1985). This small (and somewhat ironic) measure of control (i.e. women only) was undertaken in order better to manage the scope of the analysis. A deeper examination of the intersection of sex/gender on experiences of safety in the feminist classroom is certainly in order for future research.

Once the ethical review of the project design was endorsed by several faculty members, I proceeded to contact sixteen women at Canadian institutions of higher
education for participation in the study. At the outset several women were sent a contact letter in which I introduced myself and the nature of the project. Slightly different contact letters were devised for students and professors (see Appendix A). For example, professors were invited to explore their own personal investment in experiencing safety as a teacher, and students were assured that their participation in the study would not compromise their relationships with faculty in any way. Potential participants were asked to consent to an interview of approximately 60 to 90 minutes duration at the time and location of their convenience. They were also informed that with their permission the interviews would be taped and transcribed, and all of the women were ensured of anonymity. The contact letters were subsequently followed by a phone call to each of the women in order to confirm their receipt of the letter and to answer any questions they might have about the study. If at this point they chose to participate, then a date and place for the interview were agreed upon. In a few cases participants were located via a "snow-ball" effect. In these instances, women who had already consented to participating passed my name and telephone number along to other women whom they thought would also be interested in being interviewed. In this way, other potential interviewees were free to consider participating and/or to decline the invitation without my knowledge. Thus for those women who were referred by a friend and subsequently chose to participate, the phone call preceded the contact letter. Still, it was necessary to provide all participants with the contact letter because their consent was based upon the information contained therein.

Of the sixteen women initially contacted, ten consented to participate. Having had much experience conducting research in Psychology, I was not surprised to find a
"response rate," so to speak, of less than one hundred percent. I was, however, alternately discouraged and intrigued by the process of obtaining consent, as it served increasingly to reveal the complexity of the topic at hand. For this reason, I feel it is pertinent to share a bit about the various reasons six individuals declined participation. The most striking feature of the rate of decline was that five of the six women who declined to participate were professors. The one student who chose not to be interviewed did so because she felt her views on the topic have been adequately and accessibly expressed elsewhere. While this response was somewhat disappointing, the responses of the five professors were particularly thought provoking.

The reasons behind two professors' abstention from the study are speculative at best: they did not respond to either the contact letter or subsequent phone calls. One other woman did respond but felt unfortunately that her schedule would not permit another commitment. This may be attributed in part to my efforts to schedule interviews at the beginning of a new academic term, a hectic time for any professor. Considerably more intriguing were the responses of women who remarked quite openly that an interview on the subject of safety in the feminist classroom might not be in their best interests. In some cases these comments came from women who were marginalized both in their academic community and in the larger society. In other cases concerns about promotion and evaluation caused women to fear the consequences that might result from expressing skepticism about the potential for the feminist classroom to be a safe learning environment. In this regard, grave concerns were often expressed by both students and professors about the possibility of their being identified with comments that might be construed as negative criticism of their institution and/or feminist studies in general. In
these women felt "unsafe" about sharing their experiences of safety, or a lack thereof, in the classroom, and they feared the potential repercussions for their relationships with other students and faculty. Theirs was a silence that spoke volumes. Indeed, it caused me to reconsider the possible reasons behind other women's failure to even acknowledge my attempts at contact. However, I am hesitant to delve too deeply into the women's stories, for I believe that this would be a violation of their trust which could ultimately leave them vulnerable in the manner they originally apprehended. Still, our conversations provoked a plethora of important questions for me. For example, what investment do feminist academics maintain in upholding an image of the feminist classroom as a safe place for women to learn? How do these investments reflect the status of feminist professionals and their research in the academy? How do the dynamics of an institution influence a woman's perception of her freedom to express views from the margins? Ultimately, how do these responses throw into question existing assumptions about the construction of safety in the feminist classroom?

The final group of ten women consisted of six graduate professors and four graduate students. Although the group was small, it was not entirely homogeneous. The women came from a variety of disciplines, and they varied in terms of their career and student status. Their age range was from their mid 20s to their late 50s. Three of the women were of minority racial and ethnic backgrounds. While most of the women could be described as having been raised in a Christian tradition, this was not true of all of them. The women also differed from one another in terms of class background and sexual orientation. In addition, they occupied a variety of locations along "the continuum from 'ability' to 'disability'" (Klein, 1992: 74).
Much more could be said to portray these engaging individuals who generously shared their views and experiences with me; however, I have deliberately chosen to limit the detail with which I describe and refer to them. I do this primarily in order to preserve their anonymity. Still, even if these women had offered to reveal their identities, as some did, it is vitally important that they are not taken to be representative of all women who are similarly situated. While I approach the project through a social constructionist framework which finds that differently situated people experience the world differently and therefore many "truths" may be said to exist, it is not my intention to replace the individual with her subject position. In a later study, perhaps, with a much larger pool of participants, more data might point to commonalities among individuals of similar subject positions, but I must reiterate that the group of participants in this study is not representative of all women. Still, their individual contributions are of integral importance toward the goal of revealing the complexities and problematizing the assumptions concerning safety in the graduate level feminist classroom.

The Interviews

Interviews were conducted during the months of October and November of 1995. Prior to the actual interview I asked each woman to reflect in a general manner on one particularly positive experience and one particularly negative experience that she had had in the feminist classroom. The women's reflections were not meant to focus specifically on issues of safety but rather on any and all dynamics that they deemed important to their classroom experience. This exercise helped to generate vivid anecdotes that served as
useful examples for further exploration during the interview. As an unanticipated benefit, I also found that this simple request often helped to demystify the prospective interview and put participants at ease.

As previously noted, each woman was free to determine the time and place of her interview. Busy schedules often meant that conducting interviews in faculty or student offices was most convenient, although on a few occasions participants invited me into their homes. Almost inevitably these interviews were among the longest and most involved, as the women generally felt more relaxed in the private and familiar environment. In these instances I also enjoyed the comfort of the setting, in part because it conveyed enthusiasm for the project as well as an implicit trust reflected in the willingness to share a bit of their private life with me. Home interviews were also advantageous because very few interruptions tended to impede the flow of conversation. This was, unfortunately, not usually the case when interviews were conducted in an individual’s office. For this reason, several interviews were also conducted in spare classrooms or meeting rooms. Although these settings typically helped participants to be removed from the visible evidence of countless other distracting obligations and responsibilities, institutional rooms still seemed to impose a lack of privacy and a therefore a sense of vulnerability and the need to choose one’s words with particular care. Interestingly, however, I personally found the faculty interviews more comfortable when they were conducted outside of the individual’s office, whether in a spare classroom or the home. This alternate setting seemed to dismantle, at least partially, the power imbalance between myself and the professor which I had become accustomed to associating with the office as her private professional space.
Separate interview schedules were devised for students and professors. In each case the schedule served as a topical or thematic guide for the cultivation of emergent themes rather than as a consistent prescription (see Appendix B). Both professors and students were initially asked to describe their background in feminist coursework. Professors were then asked to share a bit about what is involved in their teaching style, how this may have evolved and whether they ever vary their approach. Occasionally a professor would direct her comments to feminist pedagogy. In these instances we would explore various interpretations of feminist pedagogy and whether she considered herself to be teaching in a manner consistent with any of those interpretations. Following these questions, both students and professors were asked for their views in three topic areas related to the literature: the negotiation of silence, anger, and self-disclosure in the classroom. These topics were broached in no particular order. Rather, the interviews were largely participant directed. Whereas professors were asked to speak about how they personally negotiated these dynamics as teachers, students were asked to reflect on both positive and negative experiences of being in classrooms where these dynamics were apparent and shaped the classroom atmosphere. These questions usually followed from more general musings on the particular conditions perceived necessary in order to raise difficult or sensitive issues in the classroom such as discussions of classism, racism or homophobia.

Oftentimes as the interviewer I deliberately chose to reserve my use of the term "safety" until the participant herself had introduced the topic. I found this technique useful as a means of gauging the extent to which the discourses of safety have become entrenched in the participants' thinking about the classroom. More importantly, however,
by not introducing particular notions of safety myself, I alleviated some of the influence I might have as researcher on the women's responses and personal construction of safety.

All of the interviews eventually closed with an invitation from me for participants to raise any questions or issues that we had not addressed together in the course of the interview and to share their own research interests and current pursuits. The reciprocal discussion of research interests often proved especially fruitful. Aside from enjoying an opportunity to learn about other women's interests, I also often learned the various reasons why the women were initially motivated to participate in my research. These discussions were particularly interesting, for they usually led me to consider the limitations of the study and subsequently to broaden the scope of my inquiry. They also made clear to me my location as one woman among a wide community of individuals attending to questions of classroom safety.

Most of the interviews were completed within 60 to 90 minutes, although three interviews continued for nearly two hours. In all cases I recorded the interviews with permission and always turned the recorder off upon request. I then personally transcribed the interviews immediately after. As I prepared the transcripts I replaced all names and institutions mentioned with pseudonyms. I also bracketed excerpts which were discussed with particular apprehension in order to draw my own attention and sensitivity to the fore when considering which excerpts to include in the findings chapters. All of the women were then provided with the transcript of their individual interview and invited to change, clarify or omit any material which they felt did not represent their views accurately or compromised their sense of well being in any way. Interestingly,
while four of the six professors did opt to make some editorial changes to their transcripts, none of the students requested such alterations. While many explanations might be advanced for this discrepancy, I interpreted it in part as a reflection of perceived issues of job security and performance evaluation that particularly harry feminist faculty in the academy (see Clark et al., 1996).

Data Analysis

Having transcribed the ten interviews, the next step in the process was to analyze the data. Needless to say the interviews contained such a rich store of valuable information that a systematic rendering of themes was essential. Following the approach to qualitative data advised by Emerson, Shaw and Fretz (1995), I began to process the material by simply reading and re-familiarizing myself with the women and their words. At this point I took some notes as to my first impressions of the individual interviews. I then proceeded with more deliberate coding of the data. I began with "open coding" (Emerson et al., 1995: 166). In this first stage of coding there was little or no emphasis on preestablished categories. Rather, the purpose was to generate as many codes as possible without concern for their integration. I performed this strategy first on a subset of three interviews. This first sweep through the interviews was then followed by a process of "selective open coding" (175) in which I coded subsequent interview transcripts somewhat more selectively based on the themes that were apparent in the first three interviews. I then engaged in a third and final sweep through all ten of the interviews using the technique of "focused coding" (190). This stage entailed a detailed,
line-by-line analysis of the transcripts in which I focused specifically and exclusively on certain themes and codes of interest that I had identified in the previous stage of analysis. In this manner I was "constantly making comparisons between incidents, identifying examples that [were] comparable on one dimension or about the same topic, or that [were] different on some dimension and hence constitute[d] contrasting cases or variations" (191).

Although I imposed some consistency on the interpretation of the data at this point, I did not view responses or anecdotes which may have seemed isolated or otherwise aberrant upon first glance as problematic since the purpose of my analysis was not to make claims about frequency or representativeness. Given that my aim in the project was to broaden the discussion of safety, no views, no matter how individualized, were deemed irrelevant. Indeed, such examples were often extremely significant insofar as they highlighted aspects of the problem often taken for granted or ignored. When faced with such examples, my analysis entailed a consideration of the conditions which may have engendered the variation in response.

Thematic Codes

Through this systematic process of coding I eventually developed fourteen codes which helped to synthesize the wealth of material generated by the women. Each of these codes represented a theme which opened spaces for me to pose new questions arising from the data. In this way, contrasting or even contradictory responses to a given interview probe could be subsumed under the same code as alternative answers to a
single larger question. For example, under the code called *anger*, I posed the following question which could be answered by drawing on the full variety of the women's comments: Under what circumstances might anger be productive/disruptive in the classroom? I recorded all of the codes in a journal followed by the questions raised under each category so that I might keep the questions in mind for the current study as well as possible future projects, most notably potential doctoral research. The final twelve major and two minor codes thus formed the foundation for subsequent analysis.

Many of the codes coincided directly with the key themes targeted throughout the literature review while others expanded upon themes or issues only tangentially addressed in the literature. In addition to the code of *anger*, other emotional aspects of learning in the feminist classroom were identified according to the themes of *self-disclosure and boundaries* and *contradictions*. The code for self-disclosure referred to comments made by interviewees regarding the appropriateness and usefulness of self-disclosure and personal experience in the classroom. Analysis of these remarks indicated that professors' and students' views on these matters were significantly influenced by their perceptions of their own emotional boundaries, particularly how comfortable one was with sharing or revealing things about herself and observing/witnessing others. The code *contradictions* was used to distinguish remarks or observations about pain experienced during learning, which is often (wrongly) assumed to be a joyful and liberating experience. This code also indicated contradictions inherent to the institution of higher education, many of which impinged upon one's perceptions of the safety of the environment.
The codes *safety* and *physical safety* were used to identify and distinguish the women's comments which directly addressed their own constructions of safety and how these may relate to or incorporate concerns about matters of physical safety. While one of my original assumptions when entering into this project was to approach issues of physical safety and the more abstract emotional or intellectual safety as distinct, the interviews made evident to me an important relation between the two in the academy which seemed to have become salient to the women as a result of such events as the Montreal massacre and the Fabricant murders at Concordia University in Montreal. Each of these two codes also subsumed personal anecdotes about feeling especially safe or unsafe in an institution or classroom. Safety issues related directly to the institution or institutional policies were identified by the code *climate/context*. This code directed my attention to the impact of the current social climate of increasing conservatism on higher education in general and, consequently, individuals' experiences in higher education.

Six additional major codes pertaining directly to the dynamics of the classroom were also developed. Since the interviews consisted of conversations with women involved in feminist coursework, reflections on feminist pedagogical theory and practice readily emerged from the data and were naturally included under the heading *feminist pedagogy*. Often interviewees would specifically contemplate notions about sharing responsibility for the classroom atmosphere between professor and students, so these comments were simply identified by the code *responsibility*. Reflections regarding the use of guidelines for communication in the classroom were subsumed under the code *preamble*. The code *airtime* was used to refer to the negotiation of a balance between silent students and those with more dominant voices. This code also addressed
reflections on the varying interpretations of silence and voice and the extent to which students were satisfied with professors' efforts to facilitate in a manner which met their individual needs in this respect. The need for a related code, responding/intervention, became readily apparent as a number of the women gave consideration to specific methods for dealing with offensive remarks in the classroom. Finally, discussion of a variety of factors which restrain students and professors from realizing their objectives or their ideals in the classroom was common to a number of interviews. In a similar fashion, many of the women asserted opinions about what can and cannot be successfully discussed in the feminist classroom. As each of these ideas points to the restrictions under which the feminist classroom operates, these comments were identified by the code limits in the classroom.

As previously noted, two minor themes also revealed themselves in the data, and codes were developed to accommodate these. The first code, which I dubbed consumerism, reflected remarks concerning the student/teacher relationship as one which entails an indirect remuneration. As well this code was applied to concerns about differing salaries and tuition fees which often impact on professors' and students' experiences and expectations in an institution. The last code, modeling, was used much more sporadically although it tapped into an issue frequently associated with feminist pedagogy, that is the feminist professor as role model.

These fourteen codes certainly did not exhaust the meaning which could be derived from the interviews, but they did capture the themes which seemed to appear with the most frequency. It goes without saying, however, that these same ten transcripts
may well be read in a different fashion by a different researcher or even by myself reviewing the data at a later date for another purpose. Indeed, because the interviews were so open-ended, they are quite revealing of the women's thoughts on a number of issues. It should also be noted that the interviews and the views expressed reflect only a snapshot in time. The same women interviewed at any other time may even reject some of their earlier comments. Still, this does not negate or even diminish the validity of their remarks or the subsequent analysis: instead it serves to illustrate the multiplicity of possible views regarding safety and related matters.

**Theoretical Framework**

Since the project was promulgated on the belief in multiple realities of classroom experience, my principal research questions were deliberately framed in such a way as to encourage the critical consideration of varied and possibly contradictory views. In order to appreciate and convey this multiplicity of perspectives throughout subsequent chapters, then, I chose to approach the analysis of the data using a social constructionist framework. At its most fundamental, social constructionism can be thought of as the theoretical orientation which to a varying extent undergirds discourse analysis, deconstruction and poststructuralism, elements of all of which have informed this thesis. Burr (1995: 2-5) draws from Gergen (1985) when she outlines four key assumptions that a social constructionist maintains:

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10 The term "constructionism" should not be confused with "constructivism," which refers to Piagetian theory and a particular kind of perceptual theory in developmental psychology.
1. A critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge or ways of understanding the world (including ourselves);

2. An acknowledgment of this knowledge as historically and culturally specific (i.e. anti-essentialist);

3. Knowledge is sustained by social processes (i.e. truth is not objective but a product of social interaction: negotiated understanding);

4. Knowledge and social action go together (i.e. descriptions or constructions of the world therefore sustain some patterns of social action and exclude others).

The incorporation of this framework should become clearer through the presentation of the findings of the research which follows.

In the next chapter, excerpts from the interviews will be presented in order to illustrate the variety of conceptualizations of classroom safety articulated by students and professors. These constructions will be analyzed in light of both the individual and the socio-historical context in which they were expressed. In Chapter Five, professors' strategies for facilitating safety in the classroom are examined in terms of how they produce, and were produced through, particular constructions of safety and perceptions of its viability. In Chapter Six I explore the consequences of the construction of safety in pedagogy including which subject positions are made available through these discourses as well as "what exclusions these positions rely upon" (Pitt, 1995: 16). Just as a range of views emerged from the interviews, the reading I offer regarding safety in the classroom is only one among many possible readings. However, it is my hope and intention to shed a discerning light on the complexities of this otherwise taken-for-granted educational objective through, necessarily, the contributions of the ten women participants in this project.
CHAPTER FOUR

Learning in the Feminist Classroom: The Turbulent Relationship between Safety and Pain

In this first of three chapters on the findings of the research, excerpts from the interviews are presented and analyzed in light of how they answer the first principal research question: What constructions of safety do graduate level feminist professors and students maintain? The findings are presented in four sections followed by a brief conclusion. In the first section students' and professors' reflections on safety and the experience of learning in the feminist classroom are shared and analyzed in terms of how safety is constructed implicitly. and the first of two alternative models is presented. In the second section, some of the contextual factors which influence participants' perceptions of safety are explored. Certain questions concerning the adequacy and inclusivity of the first model of safety are then raised and considered in the third section. In the final section, the interviews are revisited and a second possible model for constructing classroom safety is suggested.

It should be noted that I chose not to assign pseudonyms or labels to any of the speakers quoted in these next three chapters. For the most part the women are identified as simply students or professors. I felt that this approach was necessary for a number of reasons, some of which were intimated in the previous chapter. In light of the intense concerns around confidentiality expressed by many of the women contacted. I concluded that any kind of pseudonym or label could potentially compromise the women's anonymity. This harm could occur because readers could combine the information about the speaker contained within each quotation too easily and possibly arrive at an
identifiable profile of a student or professor. I also felt that it is not necessary to integrate or correlate a woman's thoughts on the variety of issues related to safety because any single individual's perspective does not correspond to a formal or organized position on these issues. I do not wish to naturalize the women's standpoints in this way. In those instances in which it is clearly relevant, I do provide more specific information about the women's identities, albeit sparingly. Certainly indications of a woman's age, sexuality, race, ethnicity or status in the institution, for example, would help to paint a more detailed and potentially informative picture. However, in light of the small number of research participants, anonymity had to be guarded carefully and the urge to generalize from the women's comments must be resisted.

Safety and the Learning Experience

Many of the women interviewed made reference to the equation of safety and comfort which they observed as pervading discussions of feminist pedagogy. For some of the interviewees, the connections drawn between safety and comfort encapsulated at least a part of their own sense of what a safe classroom should look and feel like. These connections were made in a variety of ways. One professor attributed the equation of safety with comfort to the idea that "learning should be safe in a sense which means nonconfrontational". Another professor extended her definition of comfort to encompass the students' general enjoyment of being in the classroom:

[One of my colleagues] said that she'd rather have people tackle, you know, difficult things, learn hard things. And I said I like them to have a good time....I would like them to enjoy what they're doing in my classes. I'd like them to feel good about themselves, feel good about the material.
feel they've learned something, and I don't want them to feel diminished in any way as a person, as a learner.

The most commonly expressed view, however, was that the safe classroom is one in which participants demonstrate respect for one another, or as one professor put it, where participants are able to be "critical without being destructive". Indeed, this view was shared among and between several students and professors alike, as the following comments show:

I guess it's a place where people come together to discuss an issue and they agree to abide by some basic respect for other individuals there.  
(Student)

There's another way of taking up safety that I subscribe to...I want the classroom, no matter how difficult the issues we're taking up, still to proceed in a respectful way. I don't want people becoming sadistic or malicious or manipulative or doing some negative kinds of things.  
(Professor)

Interestingly, as this last quotation illustrates, safety was often defined through describing its absence, an unsafe classroom environment. Similarly, for two other professors, feeling safe in the classroom meant not feeling "set apart" or not being "voyeured upon." In another case a professor's goal was to create an atmosphere where different voices could be heard *without* repercussion, *without* someone throwing stones at you. *without* being silenced" (emphasis added).

The effect of conceptualizing safety in terms of that which is not safe, however, is to construct, often implicitly, a model of safety which rests on the binary opposition safe/unsafe. The safe/unsafe dichotomy would seem to suggest that the two qualities cannot co-occur in the classroom. Derrida (1978) would further maintain that a dichotomy such as this necessarily implies a devaluation of the "unsafe." as this is the
subordinate term of the binary construct. Certainly implications for how the concept of “safety” is theorized and deployed in the classroom follow from constructing it in opposition to “unsafety”. The implications for pedagogical practice in particular will be taken up in the following chapter.

Although respect was absolutely integral to the classroom and enjoyment was laudable, some of the women interviewed felt that this did not preclude “pain” from entering into the learning experience. Interestingly, like “safety,” the word “pain” was used to convey a range of personal interpretations of learning experiences, but always with pejorative connotations. Thus “painful” was variously implied to be synonymous with “unsettling,” “disruptive,” “decentering,” and occasionally “emotional.” While admittedly difficult, pain was often viewed as a necessary part of learning and as a reflection of particularly transformative learning. For example, reflecting on her years of experience, one professor remarked. “I think probably the most significant learning [for the students], that I would think of as most highly significant, did not feel safe at the time at all. It felt like a threat to one’s very sense of their being, to who they were.” In these instances, although pain may have been viewed in contrast to safety, it was not predictably devalued. Thus, unlike safety, pain was not subject to a dichotomous construction and thus was not differentially valued in contrast to something that could be considered “painless.”

A professor’s willingness to view painful learning experiences favorably was not always restricted to the experiences of her students. Echoing the sentiments of hooks
(1989) and Rockhill (1987), one professor reflected on her own moments of difficulty in learning:

I think we're never going to call our own preconceptions and paradigms and so on into question if we are not challenged, and sometimes that challenge can be very painful. Certainly it has been painful for me to have to challenge mine, and I've had to challenge mine I would say mostly not because of colleagues but rather because of students. And I'm very grateful to a number of students over many many years for nudging me in directions that I might otherwise not have gone.

Still another professor extended this line of thought, explaining that she deliberately seeks moments of disruption in the classroom, moments which many students may not experience as safe at all.\textsuperscript{11}

There's a way in which you get profoundly unsettled by this material. And it's good; it's part of what I want to achieve. But part of the fall-out is that students will leave that class completely riled up. I've had many, many comments from students saying, "I can't get to sleep on that night [of class]." You know I think it's a good pedagogical effect.

In fact, contrary to what one might expect, several students agreed with this view. This student's remarks hark back to the skepticism toward safety expressed by the Composition Studies scholars reviewed in Chapter Two (see also Eichhorn, 1992: Jarratt, 1991: Ryder, 1994):

There are great moments in a feminist classroom where you see connections being made and you make them in your own head and

\textsuperscript{11}A similar, although arguably more radical, approach is taken by graduate professor Shoshana Felman through her use of testimonies to trauma and crisis in the classroom. In her book on the subject she writes, "I would venture to propose, today, that teaching in itself, teaching as such, takes place precisely only through a crisis: if teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of a (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps not truly taught: it has perhaps passed on some facts, passed on some information and some documents, with which the students or the audience —the recipients— can for instance do what people during the occurrence of the Holocaust precisely did with the information that kept coming forth but that no one could recognize, and that no one could therefore truly learn, read or put to use...I therefore think that my job as teacher, paradoxical as it may sound, was that of creating in the class the highest state of crisis that it could withstand, without 'driving the students crazy' —without compromising the students' bounds" (1992: 53).
sometimes because there is tension, because there is anger, and because sometimes you're on the receiving end of it. Sometimes you need to stretch under those conditions to learn something. And it does work. And when it works, it's really good.

Some participants felt that pain engendered by learning in the feminist classroom is not only occasionally productive but is in fact inevitable. For this reason one professor felt strongly that the conflation of safety and comfort significantly misrepresents the reality of learning in the feminist classroom. In turn, the conflictual nature of this reality precludes her being able to "actually plan for safety in the classroom” because she simply does not "think it's achievable." She concluded, "If you want to have a debate about anything, then that [safety] is again one of these false notions."

Even when acknowledging the possibility of pain in learning, some women did not feel that simply abandoning notions of, and efforts toward, safety is appropriate. As one professor remarked, "I don't think necessarily that the only way to learn difficult things is to go through that process of being diminished. And I'd rather take the risk that they [students] are not going to be as extended in their thinking, you know, if it has to be a choice.” Overall, although opinions varied as to the efficacy and inevitability of emotional learning in feminist classrooms, a concern for the negotiation and reconciliation of pain and safety emerged as a prominent theme throughout the interviews. I turn now to a consideration of some of the contextual factors which may have influenced this fairly common mode of thought.
Putting Safety into Context

Those women who did find pain or a certain lack of safety inevitable in the feminist classroom attributed it to a variety of sources, including curriculum and/or the "chilly" climate (see Chilly Collective, 1995). Students and faculty both pointed to the role of the institution in producing adverse classroom conditions. One professor noted the difficulties that arise from trying to do critical work, particularly for women and/or minority faculty, in an institution which still largely reflects the status quo.

You cannot do critical work, or people should not encourage instructors, particularly instructors who are women, who are minorities, to do critical work. And they say, you know of course, at universities they always do this. They hire people to do this kind of thing because this is the right thing to do now. They do not give people the institutional support to make it work for them.

Her remarks echo those of feminist scholar Roxana Ng, whose work addresses the contradictory subject positions assumed by women and minority professors. Ng observes that the position of such pedagogues in society, and thus often in relation to their students, is one of marginality, and this position appears to contradict the formal authority bestowed upon them by the university (1993: 45). Moreover, she notes, for those individuals engaged in critical pedagogy, student resistance to such kinds of "teaching against the grain" becomes directed not only at the critique being presented but at the embodiment of the critique by the professor (1991). An added strain on minority critical pedagogues is the tendency for the institution to reserve support for their endeavors by constraining the teaching of critical studies courses to specifically located professors. An example of this would be the implicit restriction of anti-racism curriculum to the domain of faculty of color as a consequence of the institution's failure
to encourage the incorporation of such critical approaches into more mainstream or foundational courses and/or to prevent new hirings in the area.

The more broadly defined social climate also shaped perceptions of the viability for safety in the classroom. Given the timing of the interviews in the fall of 1995, many comments were specifically directed toward the conservative governments currently in place throughout the Canadian provinces. Repeated comments were made regarding the drastic cutbacks to education and social services inflicted by the Harris government in Ontario and Alberta's Ralph Klein, among others. In general, the "whole lack of funding" was identified as a source of stress by both students and professors, causing the women to feel "pretty worn down" and to "exacerbate tensions" among them. Although these influential factors were somewhat more "hidden," the effects were palpable to one student:

There's a lot of antagonism. Some people [students and professors] have a lot more money [personally and in terms of salaries and research grants, etc.] than others. And I think that often comes out. These views get displaced in terms of these issues. And they're not separate. I mean, I shouldn't even use the term "displaced" because I don't see questions of race and racial antagonisms and class antagonisms as separate from what's going on in the province right now...

One professor's perception of "anger circulating around in classrooms at the institution, the lack of scholarships, the marking system" was subsequently corroborated by a student:

It's really competitive here. We're all competing. We're competing for grades; only so many people can get A plusses (+'s). We're competing for money. We're competing for scholarships. We're competing for so many spots. We're competing to get the professor's attention. We're competing to sound the most brilliant every time we open our mouths. In that atmosphere can we have trust and safety?
Students' unease and perceptions of an increasingly competitive school environment were further heightened by the uncertainty of employment upon completion of their programs. Unfortunately, the deleterious effects of the current social climate were not new to some of the women. One professor recognized the signs as a result of her experience at a former institution.

I know my classes worked differently when my department was under threat of closure at my previous institution... These things, you know, probably Ontario's present government's going to affect what it feels like to be in a class. You know, how much trouble people are having surviving, whether they can afford to be there. It's like hidden stuff that, but it's there.

If asked, another professor might disagree with the characterization of the effects as "hidden." In her experience, the difficult times markedly influenced the classroom dynamic.

I thought when people came to the class they're angry. It didn't just happen in the class: they bring something into the class. They bring all their anger, all the experiences they ever had, if not in this institute then in the world. And they bring that into the class and it gets fought out in the class and things become not just heated — I don't mind heated discussion. I think it's very healthy — but it's abusive.

More easily quantifiable/material factors were also identified as impacting on the individuals' experience of safety in the classroom, including level of difficulty and who composed the class. In this regard, both professors and students variously noted the size of classes as well as the racial and ethnic balance of classes as influential. These variables affect individual students differently depending on how they are situated. One professor identified two aspects of class composition which may affect how students interact in the environment.

But then to complicate it more, I tend to teach more of the introductory type courses, so you also have a kind of matching between perhaps the temperament of the instructor and how they choose...to locate themselves
in the program too. I think the size of the class, the large class... is almost contradictory, isn't it? I mean in a large class people have less chance to express themselves...but maybe they're a little more anonymous when they do so. Or they're more aggravated by being in a large class like rats stuck together in a cage or something.

Class composition can have profound implications for individual's experiences of safety. The extent to which a student finds herself affirmed and/or directly reflected by the professor as well as the course content can significantly influence her level of comfort with discussing and learning the material. For example, the manner in which a lesbian student might experience a discussion of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) could vary substantially depending on a number of factors. These include whether the professor herself is straight or lesbian, whether other students have identified as lesbian, or perhaps most importantly, whether other participants harbor homophobic beliefs. One professor found the interaction between class composition and curriculum to have a particularly strong effect when teaching about the systemic reproduction of racism to diversely situated students:

You know, there's a really overwhelming kind of material problem to teaching in this institution. I'm confining it to this institution. There is no classroom that isn't maybe 80% white. Consequently, there is a way in which the learning needs of white students are prioritized over those of students of color, even if you have the best intentions to be either egalitarian or even to favor the students of color. It actually can't be accomplished because of what goes on in the classroom. If you have 80% of your students feeling very vulnerable and insecure and worried and upset, that's going to be the teaching agenda. But the 20% or the 10% who are feeling angry are going to get displaced.

The highly "dangerous" or "political" nature of such curriculum was also identified by one student as the reason for her view that experiencing safety in the classroom simply cannot be a priority for her. Rather she finds it necessary to resign herself to anticipating some difficult, and even personally offensive, classroom discussions, reminding herself:
Okay, we're here to learn. I'll give all the students the benefit of the doubt. There's going to be this everyday racism, anti-Semitism, sexism. We're here to explore that. I won't let every single comment get to me because I'll be making those comments too probably.

She was not alone in maintaining this view. In a related manner, another student felt that safety in terms of being "protected" from difficult or "ugly" issues was not desirable to her either.

I tend to feel in general that the goal of safety should not be to protect any individuals...You have to hash through a lot of ugly stuff in order to learn how to process information so you can move forward and learn anything in fact... I don't want to be shielded from everything that's ugly.

When several of these factors converged, both students and professors occasionally concluded that creating or experiencing safety in the classroom is not a goal that they can realistically expect to meet, nor is it always desirable.

And there's a way in which they [students of colour] know that they're going to have to sit there and experience a discussion of race, which is a terrifying thing. You know, you just expect that you will hear things that will hurt you. A lot of it will be directed at you. And you know what? There's not a damn thing I can do about it. (Professor)

Well, there have been a number of instances where discussions around race have impacted me negatively in that I am part of the dominant group that's oppressive that's being discussed, and I think that that's just the way it is. That's the way the world works. And that's real life. So I've had to get used to that. (Student)

**Unsettling Assumptions**

As initially stated, in the preceding sections I deliberately chose not to identify the voices of the speakers in any specificity beyond their status as student or professor.

While this practice served to preserve anonymity, it also avoided reifying the positions of the various speakers. The views expressed by the participants in this study are not
representative of all similarly situated women. Interestingly, however, one may also observe that in the majority of excerpts thus far, with a few exceptions, the students and professors themselves refer to one another without reference to the specific ways in which they are differently located via race, class, ethnicity or sexuality. Still the discussion indicates the relevance, and indeed the necessity for, a consideration of both the personal/individual context and the larger socio-historical context in which safety is being contemplated. I would like to pursue the relevance of this kind of a reading of some of the existing perspectives on safety by drawing on a few of the interviews as examples.

Some of the disillusionment with the perceived ideal of safety may be characterized, in effect, as a poststructuralist critique of the construct. Evaluated through this frame, safety is defined as a classroom objective too often in a universal manner without acknowledgment of the difficulties inherent to any universalized construction. That is to say, the processes of inclusion and exclusion which produce the construct are not problematized. As with any totalizing gesture, generalized notions of safety are criticized for failing to take into account the specific personal and socio-historical location of the subject, or in this case, the student (see Giroux, 1992). In this view, the question of safety in the classroom is translated to ask more specifically, "safety for whom?" Who is this student one seeks to protect or to make more comfortable? This critique was raised on several occasions throughout the interviews, most notably by the students themselves. For example, one student perceived that systems of discrimination transgress the classroom walls, positioning students and their needs for safety differently.

Well, I mean it never works for everybody because everybody isn't equal sitting in the classroom. I mean, we are all equals but everybody isn't
treated as such or necessarily even perceived as such. So this is not a pursuit that applies equally to everyone I guess, and that’s where there is tension.

Another student concurred, adding the observation that one’s position within the institutional hierarchy further impacts one’s experience of safety in the classroom.

I think it [safety] is always raced, sexed, and classed. Always. Every single time. I think I said earlier on, there’s a distinction between safety for white, safety for black students, safety for men and women, male people of color, and what not. I think that’s probably why professors find it so complicated because it is so complicated. And I’d say not only is it raced, sexed or classed, but whether you’re a Ph.D. student finishing and whether you’re someone just starting.

These students are questioning how it is that any universally defined educational objective can accurately speak to the differences in the everyday lived experiences of a group of individuals from vastly different social locations, even if the full array of subject positions is not represented. How can any universally defined educational goal truly meet the needs of all students? Moreover, how can any such goal reflect and accommodate the multiplicity of subject positions a single student may occupy, at times simultaneously and even contradictorily?

Perhaps not surprisingly, the women who addressed this point directly in their comments could be construed as occupying relatively marginalized positions within the classroom, as students, people of color and working-class women. One professor spoke from her own experience as a working class woman:

There are some groups of people that have absolutely no expectation that learning will be safe. You know I’m one of those people. I come from a working-class background, and I have never ever found the learning environment safe.
She went to explain how these experiences have impacted her thoughts about safety in her own classes. Here she reflects on how the exercise of interrogating one's privilege and complicity in systems of power differently affects students in the anti-racism classroom.

My problem with safety is that the people who are not going to be safe in my [anti-racism] classroom, who feel the least safe, are who? In my experience they've tended to be the people who have never ever had to look at their subject position, which is somewhat close to center, right?

It should be made clear that this professor is not unilaterally characterizing all students from privileged positions as nonreflective or unwilling to interrogate their privilege. Nor is she suggesting that the same students who experience privilege in some regards are never marginalized in others. Rather she is pointing to the "painful" effect of curriculum which provokes students to understand themselves as dominant, even oppressive, in certain relations.

The comments from the students and the professor cited above indicate that not all participants necessarily have the same expectations or experiences of safety in the classroom. The observations reflect those of Kathleen Martindale (1992) who contends that total classroom safety cannot be achieved within a society intersected by systems of power and domination, for these classrooms are the products of that society. Consequently, some students' personal investment in feeling safe may involve something more than mere comfort. Likewise, professors may also hold complex conceptualizations of personal safety that extend beyond an interest in obtaining optimal comfort levels to include anxieties about systemic oppressions evident within the institution. In addition, multiply oppressed members of both groups may live with daily concerns for their
physical safety. All of this would suggest that the dichotomous construction of safety, where safety is implicitly contrasted with that which is unsafe, does not adequately reflect the complexity of identities in relation in the feminist classroom.

In this vein, one professor articulated the urge for safety as stemming from a drive for the "preservation of a kind of unitary self." To her, then, the unsafe moments are those in which that self is "destabilized, is threatened, is challenged". However, she is careful to point out that these instances can be very subtle. For this reason she hesitates to lapse into the dualistic characterization of classroom interactions as merely safe or unsafe.

I hate to say "unsafe moments" because that's going along with the idea that it's only unsafe when it's exploding. But those moments of difficulty, of pain, that actually spill over into the classroom are very much as I see it where identities feel like they're on the line, feel threatened in one way or another.

The unsettling of identities and its effects on safety in the feminist classroom was also observed by several other women. As with the anti-racism professor cited above, many of them saw the effects as impacting on students in positions of privilege most significantly because presumably these students rarely face challenges to their dominant positions in other classrooms or outside of the institution. One professor shared her observations of how this has happened in her classroom.

I think I have sometimes experienced that response. That is, I have experienced the criticism that this is an unsafe place as meaning things have been said in class that make me feel uncomfortable, not in the way of threatening that person's identity as a nonprivileged person but more threatening that person's position as a privileged person.
A student also shared a specific example, recalling the reactions of two young white women teachers who claimed to have felt silenced and attacked by the content of a course on anti-racism education.

They felt unsafe not because they were trying to embark on understanding more about how racism worked in the academy. They felt unsafe because they were being implicated in the process.

In a similar instance, a lesbian student was also dissatisfied by what she perceived as a related propensity among classroom participants to maintain very self-oriented views of safety. She offered this anecdote about a fellow classmate: "In a way I think the environment was unsafe for her because she didn't want to hear criticism. She didn't want to be held accountable for stuff that she said, and that's what made it unsafe for her." She suggests that the beginnings of a resolution to this problem may lie in an understanding of individual accountability. In order for this to be successful, she acknowledges, she too must interrogate her dominant position as a white woman and her contribution to the classroom atmosphere.

So I need to feel like I'm going to be held accountable for things that I've said that are problematic. And to me that would mean a safe space. I don't want to be in an environment where because everyone is white you can get away with more, or because the majority of people are straight you can get away with stuff.

These examples provoke a number of questions for the anti-oppression educator, foremost among them: Is it possible to address issues of complicity in systems of oppression with students from dominant/oppressor groups in a "safe" way? Ng finds that this is not possible. She writes, "...antisexism/racism, like other forms of anti-oppression work, is not easy, comfortable or safe. It is protracted, difficult, uncomfortable, painful and risky." and this is principally because it entails self-examination (1993: 45). One of
the difficulties that arises for the professor, then, is how to work with and through resistance from students from dominant groups without potentially neglecting the learning needs of marginalized students and/or creating a "painful" or "unsafe" situation for them.

In sum, while a dichotomous construction of the safe/unsafe classroom emerged as a strong theme throughout the interviews, it was not always accepted unquestioningly. Rather, some of the women pointed to the ways in which this model appears to rest on a neglect of the power discrepancies which inform classroom interactions. They suggested in effect that students and professors who do not usually have to confront marginality in the institution, particularly those who do not embody marginality (in terms of race, ethnicity or ability) are able to take safety in the classroom for granted by virtue of their dominant subject positions. Thus a second theme which surfaced repeatedly was a related skepticism about the potential for the classroom to be a safe space for all participants. The question then became "safety for whom and on what/whose terms?"

Both views engender consequences for how participants present and identify themselves in the classroom as well as how they understand curriculum and pedagogy to be safe or unsafe. These and other associated issues will be taken up in Chapters Five and Six of the thesis. In the next section I present suggestions toward a more functional classroom dynamic proffered during the interviews, and I explore the implications of these comments for an alternative construction of safety.
Forging a new conceptualization

In the final interview excerpt above, the student begins to grapple with ways of resolving the tensions that are present in the classroom by attending to individual accountability. Other students also suggested strategies to improve the classroom atmosphere for a wider range of participants. In this regard, the two issues to which students most commonly made reference were professorial power/authority and individual responsibility. On the issue of power, one student felt that an important step toward "safer" classrooms would entail an acknowledgment by the feminist professor of her position of authority, and therefore dominance, over classroom participants in that limited regard.

I think it [the classroom] could be more safe if there was less pretense that we're all equal and it's an egalitarian classroom "because I say it is, because I am in charge and I say that we are all equals here." If we don't pretend, it might be a little easier to make it safer.

Interestingly, this student's remarks were phrased in a way that implies a conceptualization of safety that does not rely on the traditional dichotomy but is suggestive of something more along the lines of a continuum. This is reflected in her use of the phrases "more safe" and "safer." Virtually all of the students interviewed expressed a similar view, indicating an inextricable relation between safety and power in feminist classrooms.

If we're going to try and make unequal relations of power between professors and students more equal in the classroom, then that has to be said right up front, not just in response to a crisis or as a [professor's] defensive rationalization for not doing anything in a crisis....There should be discussion about the structure if it's going to bend towards egalitarianism.
These students' comments are particularly illuminating in light of the extensive literature in feminist pedagogy concerning professorial authority. In contrast to the cacophony of professors' and other scholars' voices on this matter, these students represent a position whose voices have yet to be heard on the question of authority. Their comments reveal the extent to which the material reality of classroom interaction among students and professors seemingly prevents the realization of a fully egalitarian structure. For as one student rightly observes, the professor remains "the person who marks you, the person who gives you grades in this really competitive environment."

Students also extended their comments about power to encompass their position on relations between and among other students. This was expressed in the previous excerpt, and is reflected here again in the following quote from a student.

I think again it revolves around acknowledging power, privilege and responsibility....I left a classroom recently where I was auditing because I just did not want to be in a place where people could not acknowledge their privilege. That just seems really central to me. And it's not about prostrating yourself, it's not about guilt. It's not about white liberal guilt: it's about acknowledging structures of power.

Closely related to the issue of power in the classroom was the matter of responsibility. Given the seeming unpredictability of classroom dynamics, most of the women interviewed felt that someone should ultimately be responsible for ensuring a degree of safety, where possible. Almost all of the students felt that while all classroom participants share some responsibility for the quality of the classroom atmosphere, professors have a unique, and in some cases the lion's share, of responsibility for creating a classroom which is more or less safe.

Well, to say it [responsibility] lies solely with the professor would, for me, be inaccurate. I think other students can do it as well, but I think first and
foremost the greatest weight and validity lies with the professor. In that sense it can be the most effective.

The extent to which the professor is attributed with responsibility for the classroom is directly related by some students to her position of power.

I think professors have more of that responsibility.... I think it's like pretending that a therapist and a client have an equal relationship. I mean they don't. As much as we'd like them to, you still pay your therapist. So I think it would be really damaging to pretend that the professor has an equal amount of social responsibility.

Professors themselves generally agreed that all participants have an obligation to maintain a positive classroom atmosphere, yet they also accepted a greater share of the burden.

I certainly think that it [classroom atmosphere] is mainly my responsibility, but I would like it to be shared with the students. Maybe it's mine to get it going and the students to keep it going, you know once they feel more comfortable.

I don't really think the classroom is democratic, and it doesn't fuel my every single response because I actually feel very strongly that I have a responsibility in the classroom that is quite different from the students.

One professor was cautious about articulating the nature of her responsibility to the classroom, again throwing the dichotomous construction of safety into question.

I also feel responsibility in terms of maintaining a dynamic in the class that I guess I would say is as "non-damaging" as possible because I wouldn't want to say is as "safe" as possible.

Like Martindale (1992) and the students quoted at the beginning of this section, she was hesitant to imply that a classroom can be made entirely safe for all participants. Indeed, her comments perhaps best encapsulate the notion of safety as existing on a continuum: "I don't believe there is such a thing as a safe classroom. I think that classrooms can be
more or less confrontational and they can feel more or less comfortable." Framing classroom safety in this fashion may be more fruitful than the mainstream binarism which implies an ideal form of safety, for it may speak to the reality as well as the needs and interests of a wider variety of students and professors. In this way, students and professors do not have to work toward an undefinable or unachievable goal, but toward a goal which is determined in relation to the unique character of a specific classroom.

**Conclusion**

To the extent that it is considered viable, safety seems variously to involve respect, responsibility and an acknowledgment of power (where relinquishing power is not deemed possible). While these elements would seem to constitute a healthy classroom environment, safety was still criticized by several professors as coming into conflict with the realities of painful learning, which in and of itself is not always derided. The end result arising from the possible permutations of all of these factors is the emergence of at least two alternative constructions of safety. The first is a dichotomous or binary construction in which safety is contrasted with a lack thereof. The second is more adequately represented by a continuum model along which classrooms are evaluated as more or less safe depending on the perspective of the individual participant.

It is very important to make clear that despite certain ambivalences or skepticisms about safety in the feminist classroom, virtually all of the professors expressed concern about their students' well-being. A compromise was implied, suggesting that the aim is not to relinquish care and concern for students nor to omit difficult, sensitive or "unsafe" material from the content of courses. Indeed, many of these objectives were often viewed
as antithetical to the aim of feminist pedagogies both to consider the individual needs of the students and to address highly political issues in the classroom. In the next chapter I take up the question of professors' facilitative styles and how these were developed out of their views about the possibilities for, and construction of, safety in the feminist classroom.
CHAPTER FIVE

Signals and Strategies

The language of "space" and "safety" is not new to discussions of feminist teaching. However, I believe that it is not always clear what practices attend these abstractions. (Lewis, 1990: 484)

In response to the above assertion from Lewis, this chapter focuses predominantly on the professors and their descriptions of their teaching practice. Here the women's words are presented in conjunction with the literature in feminist pedagogy as part of an exploration of various strategies toward classroom facilitation in general and, more specifically, toward the establishment of safety in the feminist classroom. Because teaching practice is so often shaped by the expectations of students, the issue of context is revisited in the first section of the chapter in order to look at how it determines these expectations. Following this discussion, three approaches to teaching in the feminist classroom are explored in depth in subsequent sections: laying ground rules for discussion, opening spaces for a diversity of voices, and negotiating disruptions in the classroom.

Context Revisited

In the previous chapter the context in which the learning occurs was shown to greatly influence both the students' and the professors' experiences in the classroom. Context can be analyzed on a number of different levels. On a broad basis, one can look at the effects of the general social climate of the moment, as was demonstrated briefly.
The interviews I conducted revealed that the climate of progressive conservatism being witnessed across Canada had an impact on professors' and students' perceptions of the viability for classroom safety. In addition, participants' expectations of what the educational system ought to be providing for students were similarly shaped in reaction to the rampant cuts to education. Often such views were inflected with shades of consumerism.

To put it bluntly, I feel that they [students] pay us an awful lot of money to know something and to teach it, so my style tends to be quite directive. I'm sure some of my students would describe it as overbearing while others would describe it as more casual. But I'm very aware that students are supposed to go from A to B. (Professor)

I think professors have more of that responsibility [for maintaining the classroom atmosphere]. You know, like we're paying them to be there, and as far as I'm concerned they work for us. And they are my person standing at the front of the class who is going to make sure that no one is going to personally attack me. (Student)

The more local context of graduate study also informs professors' approaches in the classroom. Traditionally, the graduate classroom is organized as a seminar in which the professor's role is to lead or facilitate discussion. The style is intended to be interactive, so professors rarely lecture for the duration of the class, if at all. Rather, discussion among participants is typically geared around assigned readings, and students are expected to have read critically and to advance a critique of the material. (For more on the graduate context see Beard and Hartley, 1984 and Cox, 1994.)

Finally, the even more specific context of the feminist program of study also impacts the manner in which professors conduct their classes. In this regard, many of the professors commented about the expectations that students seem to have of them,
expectations that they may not extend to more mainstream programs or more "run-of-the-mill" teachers (see also Wiss, 1987).

When you offer feminist programs and courses people kind of expect you to transcend all of the limitations of working in patriarchal institutions, patriarchal society and everything else and sort of create something new and wonderful.

This professor also finds that students expect her, as a woman and a feminist faculty member in particular, to be more "available, accessible, nurturing, open, supportive" than her colleagues in other areas.

While many of these traits are characteristic of Belenky et al.'s (1986) "connected teacher," some of the faculty hesitated to generalize these qualities to all feminist professors. Indeed, although many of the women felt that it was fair to characterize their pedagogy as "critical", the more specific designation of "feminist pedagogy" garnered inconsistent support. One professor felt whether or not a pedagogy can be called "feminist" does not hinge upon particular tools or techniques utilized but rather refers to certain frameworks or approaches taken to material. In this way, she adhered to Eichler's (1990a) formulation of feminist studies. Other professors believed that "feminist pedagogy" implies particular types of "feminine" behavior that frequently are incompatible with some of their objectives as educators. The role of feminist pedagogue as nurturer (intimated in the last quotation) figured prominently in the professors' perceptions of popular constructions of feminist pedagogy, sometimes with difficulty. One professor struggled with the same dilemmas expressed by hooks (1989), Hoodfar (1992) and Bannerji (1991) and reviewed in Chapter Two, remarking, "It would be very
easy for me to be the mother hen, but it just doesn't work. Especially in this case because
I am a professor of color." She elaborated,

Well, feminist pedagogy has a very specific meaning in the literature, from my experience of people who use that term. It has tended to be all about nurturing. I think that's very complicated in my case. I feel that it is complicated in a specific way because of race. In any event, I think nurturing is not — it's not that I don't want to nurture, but it's not — I think that you could confuse nurturing with teaching. And so while I don't want to present myself as an ogre who is absolutely uninterested in how my students are feeling. I think mothering and nurturing and those kinds of things are sometimes — not always, but sometimes — incompatible with other goals. And there is a way in which I cannot nurture if a student is, for example, wanting reassurance that it's okay to be racist. You know, then you can't get into nurturing.

She was able to reconcile the tensions between nurturing and teaching by reformulating her conceptualization of nurturing in terms of "understanding that their [students'] personal life has an impact on their scholarship."

Whether professors called their pedagogy "feminist" or not, there was some question as to whether teaching in the feminist classroom requires unique facilitation skills. This issue was initially provoked by one student who suggested that the common validation of personal experience in feminist classrooms may in turn suggest a need for professors to maintain "some counseling experience." When I raised this issue in subsequent interviews with faculty, one professor expressed ambivalence.

I'm not sure at all that the therapeutic skill is the route to go, at least for me. I think it takes it in a different direction. And I think that for me the important thing about the academy is to... go in the direction of analysis, social analysis. It's part of this commitment I have to understanding the social, and you don't get that in therapy.

Another professor commented on the contrast between teaching in a mainstream classroom and teaching in a feminist classroom implied in the student's suggestion.

Well, I certainly think it [teaching in the feminist classroom] requires more facilitation skills, if you want to call it that, or just skills to do with
interaction, with being sensitive to classroom dynamics and trying to manage and orchestrate certain kinds of dynamics, than many other kinds of teaching. Certainly I don't remember from the years that I taught quote unquote "straight" [subject] having to face very many of these problems. Not that there weren't classroom dynamic problems occasionally and so on but not ones that were combined with really powerful emotions around personal beliefs. I don't remember encountering that until I started teaching in feminism.

In light of the potential for such "powerful" dynamics in the classroom Thompson and Disch (1992) find it necessary to distinguish between the classroom and the therapy group for students so that they will understand that it is "inappropriate to expect the level of intimacy which often evolves in a therapy group" (41). Importantly, the student who initially suggested a place for therapeutic or counseling skills in the classroom also noted that this would necessarily affect power relations between students and faculty, making a divestment of authority by the professor less viable.

**Laying Some Ground Rules**

One pedagogical technique used with increasing frequency in the feminist classroom is an appeal to ground rules established at the beginning of the semester and intended to facilitate classroom discussion among differently situated participants. Several anti-racism educators have published accounts of their successes with this approach. For example, Cannon (1990) regularly begins her courses with the presentation of a set of rules designed to encourage the acknowledgment of institutionalized oppressions and individuals' participation in them as well as the unacceptable proclivity to blame the victim of oppression. Students are asked to agree to assume that "people...always do the best they can" and to actively pursue and share
information about their own groups and those of others (131). Similarly, Thompson and Disch negotiate a set of rules for discussion with their students, defining and prohibiting the use of "insulting language" (1992: 41). Further, they write, "We assume that it is everyone's responsibility to interrupt racism and other insults, and do not believe that the burden of educating insensitive people should fall on those who are most likely to have been insulted" (41). Tatum also provides a working set of "assumptions and guidelines" to her students, whom she finds are "reassured by the climate of safety that is created" as a result (1992: 4).

Among the professors interviewed for this project, some set specific ground rules while others offered more of a preamble designed to set the tone for the semester. Overall, however, there was little consensus on the efficacy of these measures, even amongst those who applied them.

But one thing I've done for the past few years is to come into the course and try in the first session to say some things about how I think the class should proceed. So I try to say things about "I'm working on the assumption that everyone is here with a willingness to learn and a part of that willingness to learn is that there is a willingness to listen to other people in the class and to show mutual respect. That we can and should have disagreements and discussions, but in that we need to remember that we're respectful of the opposing points of view." I try to say things about "I don't take kindly to people trying to score points by impressing me, by showing that they are smarter or better prepared or whatever than someone else in the class." And try to say things about having sensitivity to the others in the class and also sensitivity with respect to questions of difference. And on the question of difference I also ask people to look around and see who seems to have an easy time of jumping into discussion and who doesn't. So if you're one of these people who can talk at the drop of hat and talk at great lengths, monitor yourself so that you're not taking up more time than other people in the class and so on. I often say that in the first time and ...it doesn't necessarily work.

Unfortunately, the conversation diverged at this point, and the professor did not go on to explain which factors, in her opinion, determine whether her comments to the class
achieve the desired effect. Another professor described her variation on the approach in which she encourages student participation in establishing how the class will operate.

I set up ground rules as to how we will behave in the classroom. We are allowed to disagree. In fact, I encourage people to have their different viewpoints, but they cannot be abusive. And there are certain things that are not permitted, that is sexism, racism, that sort of thing. And also that we have to listen even when we disagree. So I try to set down a set of ground rules and people can remake the ground rules by saying, "We want to add this" or "We disagree with this." But then we stick to this.

A third professor finds the formality of rules unnecessary. Instead she chooses a more casual style which she still finds engenders a sense of mutual concern for one another's welfare among students.

I've started doing a lot more things like I did with [that] class. People introducing themselves. I've tried to do things where they will get to know each other a little and feel responsible for each other. I think it's interesting because I don't do a kind of prepared speech which I think some of my colleagues do about how we should all respect each other and you know whatever, whatever. I haven't yet found that necessary. I just try to maybe model it or something or you know, or make sure I do something.

By contrast, a different professor concluded that the use of ground rules is ultimately futile and ironically contradicts the objective of the anti-racism and feminist classroom to interrogate discourses of oppression.

Ah, I don't [use ground rules or a preamble]. I mean, I guess some of that I think is just a token because I actually don't think you can control it. ... You can set your ground rules, but really what comes popping out is precisely what you're studying [in the anti-oppression classroom — regulated responses of white supremacy, sexism, homophobia].

In effect, she questions whether it is sensible or even possible to establish safety for the purposes of studying otherwise "unsafe" issues.

Students also shared their views on the use of these techniques as a means of establishing safety in the classroom. Interestingly, they focused less on the actual
efficacy of setting ground rules and more on the consequences of not setting any. For example, recognizing that safety may be difficult to achieve in its ideal form, one student remarked that it is still necessary to keep the lines of communication open around the issue.

I think the most important thing I think of in terms of safety in the classroom is that it’s on the table to discuss. That it’s brought up at the beginning, that it’s decided that it’s going to be an ongoing discussion. Maybe there are a few guidelines. Maybe that the whole classroom goes around individually and talks about what they mean about safety, and that periodically, like at the beginning, the middle and the end, you would continue, you would have that same discussion. I think it’s something you can never guarantee. I don’t think it’s something you can ever "have," but I think it’s something that can be discussed. And I think this lack of discussion contributes to the lack of feeling of safety. It creates actually an unsafe feeling in the classroom.

Another student expressed concern that without agreement around what is acceptable in class discussion, some of the more critical students "get set up" to assume responsibility for naming and interrupting oppressive comments. A third student was ultimately skeptical about the potential to develop "any framework a priori that might help."

Making Spaces

Although there was marked disagreement on the advisability of the preamble/ground rules technique in pedagogy, there was general consensus around the need to establish safety through the preservation or protection of spaces for different voices to be heard. Although professors commonly characterized the successful class or the class "that feels good" as one in which "everybody is speaking," they also acknowledged the varying levels of dis/comfort around speaking experienced by student participants. For some students the public act of speaking in the classroom is anxiety
provoking and/or seemingly unsafe for a variety of reasons. An appreciation of this has lead some feminist professors concerned with facilitating safety to interrogate their own investments, as teachers, in student voice and their corollary interpretations of silence.

I think like most teachers you have a compelling interest in voice. That is how you are invested in your classroom. You want to know if there's engagement or learning going on, if you're managing or doing your job well. It's really about you. So I admit I have a compelling interest, and if students or certain students are silent in a noticeable way over a long period of time, it worries me. Either they're not understanding or they're feeling very, very vulnerable and will not speak. Or they're totally bored out of their minds. Either one of these things is cause for worry.

The "compelling interest in voice" also influenced one professor to reconsider the practice of grading students based on their level of participation in classroom discussion. She decided. "I'd like them [students] to feel they could speak, but I don't want to mark them on it."

Many of the professors arrived at the same conclusion, which seemed to follow from an understanding that there is no single, overriding motivation for students to remain silent in the classroom, but there are a number of different reasons that are experienced by participants under varying circumstances. The women's comments around silence variously corroborated the findings of Lewis (1993), Lorde (1984) and Orner (1992) in particular. In turn, it was understood that different forms of silence necessitate different responses from the professor. One professor explained.

It's hard because I think that are so many...different kinds of silence. One silence is like a withdrawal that can be from anger. When I feel that happening I try to usually talk to the person to see, find out about what's going on for them. There's a withdrawal that can come from not necessarily anger, but I guess non-safety. I hate to say that [non-safety], but like not feeling comfortable to venture in.....Could be small group, it could be language, it could be not feeling academic enough, not feeling smart enough. There's lots of ways that people don't speak. Some people just love to listen. So it's very mixed. I'm trying to read people who are quiet all the time. I'm very sensitive to them. I try to make spaces for
people to talk who haven't talked but to do it in a way that doesn't mean you have to talk if you don't feel like it.

Professors also offered their strategies for identifying the various kinds of silence that students may be exhibiting. In some cases they relied on students' body language for clues, in effect reading the student like an embodied text.\(^\text{12}\)

So you have to be kind of sensitive to that [forcing a student to talk in class] at the same time as thinking, well, maybe they really would like to be participating if you approach them in the right way. So I did some of it without trying to overdo it, and tried to bring people, if I thought they were trying to get into the conversation just by the body language. I often tried to bring them in. And I'll do the same here if I have students that kind of fit that category, you know, if I think somebody's looking a little, you know, perplexed like this, you know, gesturing. I might say, "Have you got something?" Or, "Paula, what are you thinking about there?" I just try to do it gently.

...people are very rarely so calmly silent that there's no way to read it.... Plus you know their body image or whatever, and then I know that things are upsetting them.

Signals were also interpreted differently depending on the student's ethnic or cultural background. The following example encapsulates Maclear's (1994) concerns about the viability of silence as a display of resistance by Asian individuals, particularly Asian women.

And it's partly cultural. And people have done research about how like Oriental students don't seem to speak as much. It's not because they're ignorant or they don't take it in. It's partly how culturally you take up or do not take up space in the classroom. And silence is interpreted as respect for the teacher.

\(^{12}\) This raises questions around the performativity of roles and identities in the classroom. The performance of identities by students and professors is complicated and mediated by the visible signs of embodiment, e.g. race, ability. This issue as it pertains to feminist professors nurturing and assuming authority has already been touched on. For an expansive and insightful discussion of the performance of identities in the classroom I recommend the collection *Pedagogy: The Question of Impersonation* (Gallop, 1995).
Further, these kinds of information were considered in light of the curriculum presented in the class on particular occasions. The interaction between class composition and curriculum introduced in Chapter Four is apparent in this professor's remarks.

I think that it depends on what's being done, what's being talked about. ...Like we showed "Surname Viet Given Name Nam," and primarily the black women, the women of color in the class—three, four, depending on how you count—didn't speak. Well, one finally did. And I felt that that was a kind of resorting to silence as a safer place than speaking.

In this film by Trinh Minh-ha, Vietnamese-American actresses portray specific women still living in Vietnam and reconstruct their the words and memories. As these segments are juxtaposed with newsreel footage and still photos of Vietnamese culture during the war, notions of experience and historical objectivity are unsettled.

A lesbian student also shared an example of her own retreat into silence impelled by another student's persistent use of exclusionary language.

Usually when I am silent it's usually because I am tired of pointing out stuff....Like when I've heard someone talk about their husband or wife five times in a class, and I've had it with saying, "Excuse me, that's slightly heterosexist. Could you say 'partner' and be more inclusive." You know, sometimes it feels like you're a punching bag, and you've been punched one too many times and you can't be bothered to say anything.

The subtleties of these two situations were illustrated in Chapter Two using the example of the white woman who asked the woman of color to talk about racist incidents in her life. In these instances the decision around how to respond as the professor must necessarily entail a sensitivity to the politics of how classroom time and space for speaking is organized. With reference to the viewing of Trinh's film, for example, one could reflect on how the students of color might have felt if they were not a minority in the classroom. Or, would this have been a safer space for the students in this instance if
the professor were also a woman of color, which she was not in this case? What if the film had been viewed in small groups rather than as an entire class? I pose these questions rhetorically because the consequences of each of these alterations of the scenario cannot simply be predicted to follow in a linear fashion. Countless other factors could intersect to differently influence the outcome. Still, one might assume that if the professor in the first case had also been a woman of color, then her presence as a figure of authority might imbue the classroom with an air of safety for the marginalized students that cannot be experienced when the student is subordinate to the professor by virtue of both her student status and her racial or ethnic background.

Similarly, in the second example, had the professor been lesbian, then perhaps the student would not have had to assume the burden of interrupting the heterosexist assumptions throughout the class. Because sexuality is not as easily read on the body as race or ethnicity, however, then the professor might need to have publicly identified herself as lesbian to the class in order for the student to experience the atmosphere as more safe. Thus intersubjectivity between student and professor may also be a factor which influences one's perceptions of safety in the classroom. But how might this kind of self-disclosure compromise the professor's level of safety in the classroom or in the institution as a whole? Here again, her inclination might understandably be to retreat into silence (for more on this see Bensimon, 1992).

In another interpretation, several of the faculty also felt that silence does not necessarily reflect a withdrawal or retreat. Indeed, one professor emphasized that "one has to make a distinction between being silenced and silent. When somebody doesn't
In order to address the learning needs of all of her students, then, this professor regularly opens up the discussion in a manner which provides an opportunity for everyone to speak if they choose.

If somebody is very, very kind of vocal and you can tell that this becomes oppressive even to you, then you know that is oppressive to other people, really, mostly, although you can't be sure. Frequently what I do is like after the discussion has proceeded for a while and there are still people who haven't spoken. I stop the discussion and I say, "Let's go around and give people who haven't talked a chance." I mean, people don't have to talk if they don't want to, but then that gives you a chance to comment, either to contribute or to raise a different point. So I go around the room, and I do it fairly systematically now.

Disruption as Pedagogy

Despite the use of preventative ground rules and other measures, eruptions and disruptions do still occur in the classroom: hence the compulsion to construct and realize classroom safety. As was demonstrated in the previous chapter, some women are more open to these unsettling moments than others. Indeed, a few professors make pedagogical use of such moments to model certain behaviors or to put theory into practice (see Henry, 1993; Ng, 1993). For example, one common theme in the feminist pedagogy literature is the need to validate anger in the feminist classroom (hooks, 1989; Culley 1985). Culley suggests that this can be accomplished by professors' demonstrating acceptable or "healthy" expressions of the emotion. One of the professors interviewed concurred, recalling, "Last week I actually was the one who exploded, which was really interesting because it maybe provided a good opportunity to model that for people." Of course, this theory raises myriad questions around which emotions and which forms of expression are constructed as acceptable and by whom. For example, one
student appreciated her professor's willingness to cry openly in front of students because it then "gave us permission to as well." Another student, however, felt a woman's "storming out" of the classroom frustrated and upset was inappropriate. Similarly, two professors related incidents in which they hesitated to permit vocal, angry students from "capturing" or "taking the whole class hostage" and "robbing" the participants of opportunities for a more productive exchange.

Some professors who accept the occurrence of emotional eruptions still choose to try to mitigate the impact of the personal in the classroom. One strategy is to rely on the use of autobiographical and narrative texts in order to preserve some protective distance between the experiences conveyed therein and students' private lives. In this next excerpt a professor describes such an approach and why she finds it to be effective despite the continued inevitability of conflict in the classroom.

I mean, I do hide behind texts more and do think that's useful and wait for the timing of things. I'm not interested any more in having the whole class try to process everything that goes down. It gets terrible. I don't have strong enough skills to do that, but I also don't know that those skills even exist. I think that...feeling easier about the things that happen, knowing that there are going to be conflicts and the more conflict there is the more apt it is to actually mean that something is happening.

Another professor is also compelled to alleviate some of the stress caused by the incorporation of the personal into learning. However, she realizes that no single strategy can address the needs of all of her students, and this complicates her efforts to facilitate safety. She questions how a professor can respond in a manner which accommodates differently situated students when, for example, a Catholic student makes an anti-Semitic remark (perhaps unknowingly) among Jewish students in the class. Again, the comment implies a critique of universal calls for safety.
So sometimes, ah, my favorite way out is to try to ironically, and this is opposite of what is counseled in feminist pedagogy, is to take the personal out. And to take the conflict that is occurring and put it in academic terms. ... So what is your role as a teacher? And that's where my quarrel with safety and comfort comes in because there is absolutely nothing I can do that will feel good for that [offending] student.

A third professor found encouraging students to focus on the content of a remark rather than on the speaker to be a productive strategy:

Because sometimes people don't speak because they don't know whether people are going to laugh at them, whether this is a sexist or racist comment, whether they're going to offend. And if we can just sort of leave those things and just voice the opinion, then we can decide as a group whether that opinion is off the wall or, you know, there is something to be learned from that opinion. Then I think that we have made progress in the learning environment.

During our conversations, several professors described how they had also struggled over whether to address problematic statements immediately or to come back to the remark later in a more general fashion. Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages for the individual student's comfort in the classroom as well as the general atmosphere and the learning that takes place as a result.

Two professors had tried the latter approach (by deflecting the exact comment but returning to deal with the issues it raised later), and were met with varying success. One of them found that full-year courses better enable her to address the misunderstanding at the root of the problem when the students are ready, perhaps somewhat distanced from the event and more open to critique. Likening these courses to knitting, she said, "I mean, you can pick up the stitch way down the line. So there's space for that. It doesn't have to be addressed in that moment necessarily." Another professor was initially ambivalent about this technique and later rejected it altogether. She found that while
directing the focus away from the offensive remark was more comforting to the student who had made it. The comfort was usually provided at the expense of demonstrating sensitivity to the victim(s) of the remark. Here she explains the situation in greater detail using the example of what could occur when a racist remark is made in the classroom.

...So assuming I hear it, I used to usually pick it up later. So instead of directly challenging the comment in the moment. I would come back to it later and talk about it as part of a larger pattern to try to take the onus off the individual, which I don't think is terribly helpful. I mean to have it be on the individual. Because chances are any one of ten other people could have said that. The dilemma, why that was not a useful strategy, was that it was so painful for women of color in the classroom who felt obligated to immediately challenge it or assumed that I was not going to. So that strategy was useless and really damaging. And I realized in that that it was privileging the feeling of the white woman over the woman of color. I wasn't thinking about the extent of damage being done there. So I do try to find ways to address the comment in the moment.

Another professor found deflecting attention away from the offending student and focusing exclusively on the content of the remark, provided an opportunity for the class to put theory into practice.

Instead of saying "this is sexist" or "this is racist." I want people to show how this is so. Or like sometimes people also say "these things are racist" when in fact I don't think necessarily they're racist. I mean, it could be that is prejudicial. It could be an ignorant comment. So let's unpack that. So we actually take it up right there.... So we start to unpack it and then what happens... You can never generalize from individualize experience. You can respect that experience and use it as a starting point, but you do not generalize. So we can then go on actually to discuss sociological method and how you kind of bridge the micro and macro. It really offers a lot of opportunity to talk about a range of issues, not just feminist issues.

Not all disruptions were deemed appropriate for taking up as pedagogical examples. However. Indeed, many of the professors felt quite strongly that there are limits around "what can be said and not said" in the classroom, which is why some of them chose to lay ground rules. One professor felt strongly that there are also boundaries around what can and cannot be left unsaid. In one case she felt that it was imperative to correct a student's
(anti-Semitic) mis-reading of a text, but to do so in a way that did not embarrass or punish the woman for misunderstanding:

I don't know, but I don't think she took it as her being singled out. But it was something that I just don't think as a responsible educator I could have just allowed there on the table... I think these are judgment calls that are very, very difficult to make, and with a different student my having done what I did might have been experienced as persecutory or humiliating. I'm not sure. I've certainly tried to do it in such a way as not to put her on the spot, not to embarrass her or humiliate her. But it's very difficult. Even now it's difficult for me to know whether inside she didn't still feel humiliated. I just felt I didn't have in that instance the choice of not taking it on......

In this instance, she also felt clearly about the need to take personal responsibility for interrupting racism in the classroom and for maintaining an atmosphere of safety for other Jewish students.

The other part of the judgment call is to wait and see if then some student will take it up. But in this particular class I know there are at least three people of Jewish descent — maybe four — and one or two of them would probably have been quite capable of saying something similar to what I said, but I didn't want that burden to fall only on them either. It seemed to me that is once again doing something similar to expecting the representative of the racial minority always to be the spokesperson for her whole community.

Conclusion

In terms of pedagogical practice, it is on the question of limits that the two alternative constructions of safety introduced in Chapter Four reveal themselves most clearly. The efforts toward establishing ground rules, for example, are particularly consistent with a dichotomous construction of safety. In effect, the development and use of this strategy already implies a conceptualization or "a priori framework" of that which is safe and unsafe, and the intention is simply to prevent unsafe moments from occurring
in the classroom. Interestingly, the two professors whose conceptualizations of safety
most closely reflected the continuum model in Chapter Four were the same women who
resisted the use of such teaching strategies. As might be expected, they were also the
same women who most strongly valued moments of pain in learning. Still, their
acceptance of painful learning did not preclude the perception of limits entirely. Rather,
as one woman remarked, "I know there are limits in the classroom. The question is to
work them out, in a way." In the next chapter, I present findings on some of the
consequences of the two models of safety and the practices reviewed in this chapter for
the feminist classroom.
CHAPTER SIX

Where to Go from Here? Consequences and Conclusions

Imaginative engagements in the contestatory zones of vocabularies and theories, and speakers and hearers, and speech contexts potentially generate, acknowledge, and celebrate differences — though not unproblematically — constructing not "right feminists speaking right(ly)" but a plurality of feminists speaking (Hantzis and Looser, 1995: 223).

Throughout the previous chapters of this thesis I presented interview excerpts in which students and professors expressed their needs and strategies for safety in the feminist classroom. Findings from the interviews confirmed the implicit construction of at least two frameworks for classroom safety: the dichotomous model and the continuum model (introduced in Chapter Four). In this final chapter I discuss some of the consequences that arise from the imposition of these frameworks for safety in the classroom as part of an attempt to facilitate an atmosphere in which participants may contribute personal experiences to the discussion of difficult and/or controversial issues. By now it should be apparent that many of the women interviewed harbored some skepticism about the viability of the feminist classroom to be a safe space for all participants, particularly given the complex array of subject positions represented therein. While this outlook might be interpreted as unduly cynical, the women's words in this chapter should serve to substantiate and validate their concerns. The two prominent themes which characterized their concerns will be addressed in the succeeding sections. In the first section, I revisit the emotional stress that can accompany self-disclosure in the classroom. In the second section, I present findings which illustrate the potential for
the dichotomous discourse of safety to be subverted by members of dominant groups, thereby jeopardizing comfort levels in the classroom. This section is followed by a reconsideration of the alternative continuum model and suggestions for yet a third, more comprehensive model. In closing, I discuss some of the limitations of this study and make recommendations for future research pursuits in the area.

Disclosure or Exposure?

As I have demonstrated throughout the thesis, learning in the feminist classroom often relies upon the incorporation of students' and professors' personal experiences as a basis for inquiry, and in some cases this generates a sense of vulnerability among participants. During the interviews, women often attributed this vulnerability or sense of being "unsafe" to the risks of exposure and the repercussions associated with self-disclosure in the classroom.

Following Mimi Orner (1992), I too have found the work of Michel Foucault to be especially useful in examining this fear of exposure via self-disclosure among participants in the classroom. Of particular relevance is his theorization of the confession within the realms of pastoral power and disciplinary power. According to Foucault the confession is a truth-producing mechanism which serves to construct the subject. Within the domain of the pastoral powers such as the church or education, confession functions to constitute a new, more enlightened self (1988: 49). Within the penal system, however, the accused individual who confesses is thereby constructed as "criminal"
Interestingly, within higher education, the confession or self-disclosure can engender both the liberation and the condemnation of the self.

In *The History of Sexuality Volume I* Foucault (1978: 61) writes:

The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile; a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated; and, finally, a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it...

Here Foucault illustrates the potentially punitive nature of the confession or disclosure which is contrasted to the positive personal transformation which may result. The women interviewed for this project indicated that responses to a student's self-disclosure in the feminist classroom frequently are similar. If self-disclosure reflects an individual's having come to voice, then this corroborates the positive construction and realization of self. However, the act of disclosing can also generate punitive responses from the listening authority or teacher as well as from fellow students. As Foucault writes, "The acts by which [s]he punishes [her]self are indistinguishable from the acts by which [s]he reveals [her]self" (1988: 42). In this vein, one student commented on the potential consequences of an individual's move to self-disclose among classroom participants who may have had little or no prior exposure to one another.

In intimate human relationships those kinds of self-disclosure happen at a natural pace as you grow more and more to know the person; whereas in a classroom setting you can hear something that seems out of context, like a non sequitur, and feel even further removed from that person.
It is therefore evident that a comment need not be overtly prejudicial to disrupt another individual's experience of safety in the classroom. The same disclosure experienced as liberating by one student may be stifling for another. One professor described her struggles with this dilemma in the classroom:

I think there's a lot of — and I don't know how we get around this — a lot of essentializing that does go on and a lot of voyeurism in a sense. So that if the topic is, let's say, lesbian teachers, the lesbians in the room who speak to that will be voyeured upon.... That dynamic gets set in motion and it's a very discomforting one.

Concern regarding the risks of self-disclosure also emerged as a prominent theme in the interviews with professors. These risks, coupled with the move among professors to divest themselves of traditional patriarchal forms of authority, often provoked the consideration among the professors of their own personal needs for safety in the classroom. This issue was another area in which conceptualizations of limits or boundaries were invoked. Several professors clearly distinguished limits around how revealing they could be of their private lives and how involved they could become with students. Some professors were more comfortable than others with sharing personal information about themselves and therefore set more liberal boundaries. As one woman said, "I don't have much trouble. I don't think, with exposing myself. I think that's the problem. My boundaries I assume are other people's boundaries, and they're not."

Another professor finds it necessary to establish clear boundaries in her teaching in the interest of her own safety:

...I've felt I've had to learn in the last three years or so that to create a safe teaching situation for myself I have had to learn to create distancing mechanisms so that I don't take as seriously and personally certain things that happen or that get said or that go from my point of view wrong or
whatever. In that sense trying to create a much clearer boundary between myself and the students or the subject matter of the course or whatever.

Other professors concurred, although they acknowledged that the nature of teaching makes establishing boundaries not only necessary but difficult. As one professor remarked, "I often wish that there was a way to keep more of a distance because I think it would save me a little bit." Another professor stated the point even more forcefully, reflecting on the need for "some kind of professionalism, some kind of role distancing" lest she be "eaten alive." In some cases, these risks posed a seemingly insurmountable obstacle for professors. One woman's regretful conclusion on this matter also pointed to the second prominent theme in the participants' considerations of the consequences of teaching and learning in the feminist classroom which will be discussed in the following section. She reflected.

What I've learned, of course quite painfully, is that there are differences in risks to speaking and that no matter how much you try to allow for multiplicity and difference there is still a kind of regime of truth...that gets established in a classroom that always works to center some positions over others so that I don't know that there's a way to ever address safety, at least at this point in time.

**Better Safe Than Sorry?**

There are no inherently liberating or repressive [pedagogical] practices. for any practice is co-optable and any capable of becoming a source of resistance. (Gore. 1993: 57 paraphrasing Sawicki 1988: 185).
Frustration specifically with the way in which the dichotomous model of safety (i.e. safe/unsafe) can function, ironically, to silence some participants in the classroom was a second theme which frequently was expressed among students and professors. As in the professor's observation at the close of the previous section, Gore (1993) also draws on Foucault and provides a helpful model of the use of his concept *regime of truth* (1980) as an analytical tool for examining this iteration of the discourse which attends the binary model. As in Gore's project, the objective here is not to contend that the (binary) discourse of safety in feminist pedagogy is a regime of truth but rather to illustrate how it may function as a regime of truth (62). Foucault articulates his concept of the regime of truth as follows:

Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourses which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (1980: 131).

Gore modifies Foucault's concept slightly in order to conceive of the classroom as a society which contains a local politics. This approach also enables an understanding of the consequences of the mobilization of safety discourses in the feminist classroom.

Presuming that a central purpose of maintaining safety in the classroom is to facilitate a willingness among students to contribute to discussion and even at times engage in self-disclosure, then one would necessarily have to look at how constructions of safety determine what can and cannot be said in the classroom and how these utterances, or their absence, contribute to the classroom climate. Students and professors described two different ways in which the discourse which attends the dichotomous
model of safety may be invoked. However, the effect in both cases is the same: members of marginalized groups are silenced. In the first instance, safety is taken up to mean that one can "say anything"—even if the remark is deeply offensive—because it is "safe" (i.e. permissible) to speak openly in the classroom. In this way the language of safety is taken up by members of the dominant group as a means to reassert their views, often with the effect of protecting racist, homophobic or other forms of oppressive speech.

Only slightly different, the second instance is closely related, and was cited more commonly throughout the interviews. In this case, the discourse of safety which flows from the dichotomous model is appropriated by members of the dominant group as a means to prevent participants (particularly students subordinated via race, class, ethnicity or sexuality) from introducing and discussing "controversial" issues because the listener invoking the discourse claims to feel unsafe (see Ng, 1993). Again, the effect is to silence marginalized participants in the classroom. One student observed the mobilization of the discourse in this way and its silencing effect:

People that I think have a lot of safety use it to silence other people.....I mean I think there is a certain language that has been co-opted. I have heard people who have a lot of power and privilege say "I don't feel safe in this environment" when in fact that's really not what's going on there. They want somebody else to be quiet so they can take the center.

Another student shared a similar experience of how the language of safety can be co-opted.

But it [safety] is often used to silence people who are coming from an anti-oppression framework. This is me talking, and people can make
comments like "you are silencing me and you're being ageist," and I'm not allowed to call them on that because of safety.

Maia Ettinger addresses this paradox, which she refers to as the "Pocahontas Paradigm" in which "aid and comfort" are provided by the "Other" to the dominant individual (1994: 52). Drawing on her experiences as a Jewish lesbian woman, she writes:

An interesting thing often happens when people of color or queers speak up in class: everyone else feels silenced. I am tempted to define 'everyone else' as straight white people. In this case, however, race and sex categories are both over- and underinclusive. 'Everyone else' really means People Lacking an Agenda (PLAs), people whose interest in race, class, and gender is grounded in something other than the need to survive in an alien culture and/or to assess in good faith their own position in the multiple systems of subordination that constitute the culture (51).

Ettinger's work is especially useful to this project because she directly addresses the graduate level classroom, whereas most scholars focus their analysis on the undergraduate classroom. Ettinger shares the frustration and exasperation expressed by the students quoted above, writing, "What a remarkable sense of entitlement must drive their willingness to assert their experience of exclusion! If I wanted to raise my hand every time I felt excluded, I would have to glue my wrist to the top of my head" (51).

Both Ettinger and a professor interviewed for this project noted that this dynamic can ultimately result in the suppression of difference in the classroom. In turn, the professor found that classroom discussion and learning around issues of oppression is stymied:

So for example, if someone tells me that my behavior or whatever I've just said or however I've interpreted a piece feels really racist to them, where do I go with that? In my experience as a teacher, the way in which that is met is by struggles over denial, over guilt, withdrawal usually. So people wind up saying things like "Oh, I can't speak because it doesn't feel safe to speak" instead of responding with "Oh, isn't that interesting. How do you hear that as racist?" What does that mean? Like this is an amazing opportunity to learn. You've been willing to say something to me that many other people may have thought. How do you hear it? And how can
I learn from that and make my own judgment about whether it was or wasn't?

The dichotomous conceptualization of safety thus has the potential to be taken up as a regulating discourse, and, ironically, this occurs at the expense of a classroom climate which enhances many students' comfort and learning. Indeed, one student described safety as "a double edged sword that...has to be used very carefully." Although students may be feeling uncomfortable in the classroom, the absence of discussion (particularly around climate) prevents them from realizing their shared (and regrettable) experience and rectifying it. Thus when a student withholds a critical or controversial comment due to perceived risks, in a classroom otherwise presumed to be safe, then safety is merely a pretense. Relatedly, if the comment uttered in such a classroom disrupts or shatters even one individual's experience of safety, then one might conclude that the original assumption of safety was also little more than a simulacrum. Given the constraints of the binary model of safety, it is only if the comment does not rupture the experience of safety for a single student that the characterization of the classroom as a safe space might be confirmed. Under such circumstances, the binary opposition of safe/unsafe imposes a politics of voice which functions as a regime of truth in order to produce and sustain the perception or appearance of safety. Ellsworth (1992) found this to be the case in her classroom. She writes, "Things were left unsaid, or they were encoded, on the basis of speakers' conscious and unconscious assessments of the risks and costs of disclosing their understandings of themselves and of others" (105). Participants in this study also shared this experience and described its consequences for the experience of safety in the classroom.
My classes aren't confrontational, but I certainly believe there are people who experience a lack of safety but aren't speaking. I don't think that's great, but it gives the illusion of safety. And I think it does feel safe for more numbers. But there are voices that are silenced in that, and there are aspects of selves that are silenced in that. (Professor)

Well, it's very tricky because I've been in classrooms where two months afterwards I have people coming up to me saying, "Oh, my god, I was so uncomfortable. It was so awful." And then suddenly everyone discovers that they all felt awful and sick to their stomach and uncomfortable, but nobody was saying anything. And we were all pretending it was a really wonderful place. (Student)

Ellsworth similarly determined. "Acting as if our classroom were a safe space...did not make it so" (107). More pointedly, one student concluded,

I don't think that safety exists any more inside of academia than it does outside. I think it's a good goal to strive for in life to not be offensive and hurtful. But I don't think there are special rules that apply to a Women's Studies classroom. I don't think you can make something safe which is not. ... I think if you call a classroom safe which isn't, which cannot be safe, you risk damaging people a lot more.

Where to Go from Here?

I think I could rethink safety as a change that would be so deep, an invitation to difference and conflict. (Professor)

So where do these cautionary tales leave us? If the dichotomous conceptualization of safety in the classroom and related efforts to foster such an environment appear inadequate, then what alternatives are available? Exploding the utopian myth of total safety inherent to the dichotomous construction could be the first step toward realizing a pedagogy which recognizes the inequalities of risk-taking
between and among students and professors (Razack, 1993: 65). In previous chapters I have suggested that differences in classroom experience among students are perhaps more adequately reflected by a continuum model of classroom safety. Given the consequences of the dichotomous model discussed above, a return to focus on the continuum model seems fitting, if not even pressing. As has been illustrated, in the continuum model the individual is emphasized over the collectivity. In this way, the model opens spaces for dissenting views among individuals as to the relative safety of the environment. It also allows for individuals to change their perspective and to shift along the continuum of more and less safe, thus addressing fluctuations in perceptions and experiences of safety in the classroom moment by moment. Thus when a continuum model is used to frame considerations of, and efforts toward, safety in the classroom, difference is sustained rather than effaced. In addition, the possibility of fruitful (e.g. liberating or empowering) instances of conflict for the individual is realized while simultaneously recognizing a contradictory experience of conflict for another individual. Consequently, both individual difference and conflict or pain are permitted space in the classroom without summarily abandoning interests in safety.

The invitation to conflict which prefaces this section has also been taken up by some of the more skeptical Composition Studies scholars noted throughout the thesis and their colleagues. These feminist pedagogues have grappled with valuing conflict in an effort to construct the classroom as a site of praxis. Susan Jarratt (1991) finds that efforts to avoid conflict in the classroom ultimately leave people unprepared to negotiate oppressive discourses. She would prefer that students learn how to argue about issues, thereby "making the turn from the personal back out to the public" (121). Phyllis Ryder
agrees, further expressing concern that "we have not fully considered the ways that
pushing for conflict-free classrooms might hurt women students" (1994: 6). These
women are in search of a middle ground. They reject eristic arguments and ad hominem
attacks, but they do not believe that students should be spared all difficult conflicts or
confrontations. Like Ellsworth (1992) and hooks (1989) they advocate the expression of
"words spoken for survival" or "talking back."

Importantly, the objective of their pedagogy is not to reject a supportive learning
atmosphere entirely but to engage students in a manner that prepares them for the very
conflictual reality outside of the classroom. hooks (1989: 53) writes, "The goal is to
enable all students, not just an assertive few, to feel empowered in a rigorous, critical
discussion." While some students do not immediately experience this type of learning as
joyful, others "are often compelled to embrace learning as a conflictual and
uncomfortable process of unlearning that involves abandoning a safe position" (Simon.
1995: 97). As one student contended, "It's part of feminism to take the blinders off."
Helen Lenskyj perhaps best articulates the balance being sought when she writes,
"Perhaps what is needed is (relative) safety but not necessarily comfort. Teachers and
learners have a shared responsibility to contribute not only to safety and trust, but also to

The continuum model may move us closer to realizing Lenskyj's
recommendation. However, I would suggest that even this model must be built upon in
order to reflect and express the manner in which safety is necessarily a negotiated product
between or among two or more individuals in the classroom. Thus not only must
individual and contextual factors be considered, but matters of interaction and
intersubjectivity between classroom participants must also be addressed. This more
comprehensive model of safety must allow space for the individual participant to shift
and change her perceptions and experiences of safety from moment to moment (as the
continuum model does), as well as to occupy multiple and contradictory positions within
the schema of safety. This model could then arguably be applied to a variety of settings
other than the classroom. A framework for safety of this nature has yet to be articulated
beyond this fragmentary vision. My experiences in conducting research for this thesis.
however, have led me to conclude that the conceptualization of this more inclusive model
may well represent the most significant area for future research on this topic.

Closing Reflections

Throughout the body of this thesis, the use of social constructionism to frame the
words of ten women students and professors has brought to light the subjective and
partial nature of the construction and experience of safety in the feminist classroom.
While a recurring theme throughout the interviews was a feeling of ambivalence
regarding classroom safety, it would be unjust to close this project without
acknowledging some of the auspicious results of professors' efforts toward safety in the
classroom. Despite the boundaries and limitations discussed in the previous chapters,
some of the women felt that efforts to facilitate safety did indeed achieve a desirable
educational effect. Among the professors who utilized the approach of establishing
ground rules for communication in the classroom, one was particularly pleased with the
results, finding "...more and more even when people disagree, they don't become hostile to one another...and that has worked quite well." One student also reflected on her maturation throughout her education and how this growth shapes one's experiences and participation in the facilitation of safety in the classroom.

You become more and more aware of different sensitivities as you learn more about how racism works in the academy and elsewhere. You become more attuned, more sensitive. And you become more articulate at negotiating these new knowledges that you're learning and saying them in a way that might seem naive or might be grappling with anti-Semitic issues (for example), but you can say it in a way that's not hurtful.

Continued research and learning around classroom safety must be pursued in the interests of professors as well as students, for as one professor opined. "We can only work as far as our consciousness goes at that point in time so that you're always sort of at the edge, and at least I am always teaching from that edge, which also means that there is not a lot of clarity always there. So it's the cliff that you're pushing from, which doesn't enhance safety." The limitations of this study invariably point to new directions for future research in the area. The somewhat cursory exploration of professors' experiences of safety in their classrooms represents a major limitation of this study as well as an important direction for future research. While there exists a wealth of literature available concerning the chilly climate for women faculty in the academy, few articles address professors' experiences within the confines of the classroom. A related area for future consideration concerns team-teaching. How does sharing responsibilities enhance or detract from a professors' experiences of safety in the classroom? Here again, questions of intersubjectivity between instructors, and their relation to curriculum, could prove relevant.
The classroom itself represents a rapidly changing terrain. Distance education and the on-line classroom present a burgeoning context for the study of safety in education. The on-line classroom poses a plethora of challenges to the construction and facilitation of safety. Interestingly, these same challenges may enable openness and ease of discussion among participants. For example, participants in the on-line classroom frequently are perceived as disembodied. They are present as voices only, and even these voices may be introduced with pseudonyms rather than a "real" name. Race, ethnicity, sex, age, ability and sexual orientation are only a few of the categories of difference which are not readily apparent to the on-line participant. What are the implications of this kind of anonymity for individual safety?

The experiences of international students also were not explored in this thesis. A consideration of their experiences could bring issues of language and nationalism into the picture. As well, the experiences of physically challenged students and professors were not explored. Although not all of the participants were able-bodied, concerns around anonymity precluded my sharing of findings on this topic. In this case, a larger study involving a greater number of interview participants could mitigate the risks which attend the incorporation of interview excerpts and possibly enhance the depth of understanding which could be achieved.

As well, an obvious absence in this study was the incorporation of interviews with male students in the feminist classroom. To refer back to the definition of the feminist classroom posed in Chapter One, it is classroom which acknowledges that gendered analyses may encompass the study of masculinity as well as femininity. How do
differently situated men contribute to and experience the classroom atmosphere in the feminist classroom?

Finally, questions of safety certainly are not exclusive to the feminist classroom, nor are concerns about safety exclusive to feminist educators. Here again, future research could address these same questions in the context of mainstream as well as Afrocentric classrooms, in addition to classrooms at varying levels of education and within different disciplines. Beyond the classroom, one might also consider the situation of marginalized streams of research and study in general, like anti-racism and feminist studies, within graduate programs and within the broader institutional context, taking into account attendant risks for faculty around promotion and tenure, the awarding of research grants and merit pay. How might one assess the relative safety of these programs and the faculty involved in the context of an increasingly conservative and economy-driven environment?

The issues which have been discussed in this thesis are relevant to educators at all levels and in all contexts within and outside of formal educational institutions. A number of specific suggestions have been made for future research initiatives. In keeping with my originally stated objectives, it is my sincere hope that I have helped to reveal the complexities and problematize some of the assumptions regarding the construction and facilitation of safety in the feminist classroom. Most importantly, however. I hope that with the assistance of the women involved, the discussion of these issues has resonated with, and addressed the concerns of, so many women students and professors whose voices continue to go unheard.
Letter of Consent for Students

September 10, 1995

Amy Sullivan
Dept. of Sociology in Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
252 Bloor Street West
Toronto, Ont. M5V 1V6
(416) *******

Dear Student,

I am a student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) currently working on my master's thesis in the Department of Sociology in Education. The thesis is entitled "(Questions of) Safety in the Feminist Classroom". This letter is intended to invite your participation in an interview which will provide material for part of my thesis.

Briefly, the research I am conducting concerns the construction and facilitation of a trusting and supportive environment, "safety," in the graduate level feminist classroom. I am interested in giving space to a variety of perspectives on the need to maintain safety in the classroom. I am also interested in exploring the negotiation of anger and silence among students in feminist classrooms. I welcome your views as well as personal anecdotes or narratives relating to these matters.

By means of an interview of about 60 to 90 minutes, I would like to ask you some questions about your experience and your views on matters such as the ones mentioned above. The interview would take place at the time and location of your convenience. With your permission, interviews will be taped and transcribed. There is no intent to evaluate individuals at all and you may withdraw cooperation at any time. You can refuse to answer any particular questions and/or request that certain information be kept "off the record". Care will be taken that individuals cannot be identified in any reports or publications; all names of people and places will be replaced by pseudonyms or codes, or statements will be made in a generalized fashion. In this way, your participation in this project will not compromise your relationship with any faculty in any way. Raw data and transcripts will be kept in confidential, locked files at my home and will not be made available to anyone, including my supervisor.

You will be sent a transcript of the interview. If you feel that your views have not been accurately represented on tape, you may contact me so that clarification can be made. Upon completion of the thesis, I will be happy to make a copy available to you if you so wish.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am extremely grateful for your assistance and would be glad to answer any questions you may have now or later. Please indicate your consent to participate by signing the attached letter.

Sincerely,

Amy Sullivan
Letter of Consent for Professors

September 12, 1995

Amy Sullivan
Dept. of Sociology in Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
252 Bloor Street West
Toronto, Ont. M5V 1V6
(416) ---------

Dear Professor ____________,

I am a student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) currently working on my master's thesis in the Department of Sociology in Education. The thesis is entitled "Questions of Safety and in the Feminist Classroom," and it follows through on a long-standing interest of mine in feminist pedagogy. This letter is intended to invite your participation in an interview which will provide material for part of my thesis.

Briefly, the research I am conducting concerns the construction and facilitation of a trusting and supportive environment, "safety," in the graduate level feminist classroom. I am interested in giving space to a variety of perspectives on the need to maintain safety in the classroom, including strategies toward this end as well as alternative educational approaches whose primary focus is not safety. I would also like to explore the professors' personal interest and investment in experiencing safety in the classroom, for I find that this is an area which is too often taken for granted.

By means of an interview of about 60 to 90 minutes. I would like to ask you some questions about your career and your views on matters such as those mentioned above. Should you consent, the interview would take place at the time and location of your convenience. With your permission, interviews will be taped and transcribed. There is no intent to evaluate the work or views of individuals and you may withdraw cooperation at any time. You can refuse to answer any particular questions and/or request that certain information be kept "off the record". Care will be taken that individuals cannot be identified in any reports or publications; all names of people and places will be replaced by pseudonyms or codes, and references to them will be made in a generalized fashion. Raw data and transcripts will be kept in confidential, locked files at my home and will not be made available to anyone, including my supervisor.

You will be sent a transcript of the interview. If you feel that your views have not been accurately represented on tape, you may contact me so that clarification can be made. Upon completion of the thesis, I will be happy to make a copy available to you to read.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am extremely grateful for your assistance and would be glad to answer any questions you may have now or later. Please feel free to call me at any time at the above number after you have considered the project.

Sincerely,

Amy Sullivan
APPENDIX B
Interview Schedule for Students

How would you introduce yourself?

How long have you been attending this institution?

What attracted you to feminist courses?

What kinds of feminist courses have you been involved in up to now?

When you reflect upon the feminist courses that you have taken, does any course in particular stand out in your memory as having been especially effective?

Could you describe the professor's teaching style in this course and how it contributed to your positive experience?

Feminist coursework, particularly at the graduate level, often deals with issues that participants may find personally difficult or challenging, such as racism, classism, or homophobia. Let's talk a bit about such a course that you felt was successful. How did the professor broach difficult issues in this course? Feel free to relate a particular anecdote or describe a particular situation to illustrate your point.

How was anger negotiated in this course? Could you identify instances in which the expression of anger in the classroom was productive? Was disruptive?

Do you ever recall consciously being silent in this course? If so, why?

How did the professor deal with silence among students in the classroom?

Did you feel free to express yourself in this class? Were you encouraged to express yourself in a particular way? Explain.

How did this freedom or lack thereof effect the success of the course in your experience?

Thinking about a course that you felt was not successful, how did the professor handle difficult issues in this course? Again, feel free to relate a particular anecdote or describe a particular situation to illustrate your point.

How was anger negotiated in this course? Silence?

Do you feel that a particular atmosphere or particular conditions is/are necessary in order for learning to take place effectively around difficult issues?

(If appropriate) Do you feel that the conditions you just noted could be accurately described as an "atmosphere of safety"? What does that phrase mean to you?

To what extent do you feel that students are responsible for the success of a course?

Do you feel that sharing personal experience in the classroom is an effective way of learning?

Is there anything that you would like to add or anything that you feel we should have addressed regarding the graduate feminist classroom?
Interview Schedule for Professors

How would you introduce yourself?

What brought you to this institution?

How long have you been working at this institution?

Do you have any prior background in Education or teacher training?

Please describe your teaching style.

What kinds of feminist courses have you been involved in here or elsewhere?

What graduate feminist courses are you currently teaching?

(If appropriate) Would you consider your teaching style to be a form of feminist pedagogy? Is this a phrase that you feel comfortable with? Why / not?

Do you find that your teaching style may vary, or do you consistently prefer this approach/style over others? Why / not?

Feminist coursework, particularly at the graduate level, often touches on issues that participants may find personally difficult or challenging, such as racism, classism, or homophobia. Do you feel that a particular atmosphere or particular conditions is/are important/necessary in order to broach these issues with your students?

(If appropriate) Do you feel that the conditions you just noted could be accurately described as an “atmosphere of safety”? What does that phrase mean to you?

To what extent do you feel that your students are responsible for (or must participate in) the maintenance of the atmosphere you described?

Tell me about how you deal with difficult/controversial issues in your classroom. Feel free to tell a particular anecdote or describe a particular situation to illustrate your perspective.

How do you negotiate the anger that these issues may evoke among students? When/how has anger in your classroom been productive and/or disruptive?

How do you negotiate your own anger or other complex feelings when dealing with these issues and/or others that may touch you personally?

When you are dealing with issues that touch you personally in the classroom, do you share this with your students or do you prefer not to bring yourself into discussion?

What influences your decision to share information about yourself or not in the classroom?

How do you feel about self-disclosure from students in the classroom? Can it be productive / disruptive?
How do you interpret silence on the part of students? Correspondingly, how do you deal with that?

Are there any other classroom dynamics that you find particularly challenging to negotiate?

Is there anything that you would like to add or anything that you feel we should have addressed regarding the graduate feminist classroom?
REFERENCES


Murphy, K. (1992). "Feminist Pedagogy and Student Constructions of Knowledge and Female Authority." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, 43rd, Cincinnati, OH.


