

Wallin, D., & Wallace, J. (Eds). *Transforming conversations: Feminism and education in Canada since 1970*. McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP. Pages: 288. ISBN: 9780773553576

Reviewed by: Nina Bascia, OISE, University of Toronto

This edited volume is a compendium of chapters that explore the ways feminism touched the lives and institutional settings of differently located Canadian feminist educators from the 1960s (the time of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women) onward. It is, in part, a retrospective written at a time when second-wave feminists are beginning to, or already have, retired. *Transforming Conversations: Feminism and Education in Canada since 1970* is also a critique authored by a more recent generation of second-wave feminists, and a call to move forward into a greater understanding of the ways that feminism manifests itself intersectionally. The book describes a developmental arc of feminist thought starting with historical depictions of feminist educators; moving through recent life experiences of recent and current educational academics; and charting new ground as diverse women look to a future where feminist thought will consider the reality of diverse feminist experiences.

The book is profoundly feminist in its approach as well as in its content. Most of the chapters treat the authors' personal lives and career histories as impacted upon, and impacting, broader institutional practices. Editor Janice Wallace characterizes her chapter as bringing together "autoethnography and institutional ethnography" while "'telling the stories of those who are marginalized, and making good use of our own experience' (Smith, 1987, p. 1987) . . . [and] "'[making] links between [my experience] and the policies and politics of various legislative and organizational contexts'" (Reynolds & Young, 1995, p. 363). The personal is political, indeed.

The first section, "Discourses on Teaching: Speaking Up," consists of chapters written by (white, middle-class) women educators about the realities of living "marginalized" lives in educational institutions. Setting the scene for the rest of the book are two juxtaposed chapters: (1) Sharon Cook's chapter characterizing the climate for women in postsecondary contexts, which emphasizes how institutional factors mute efforts to inject feminist practices into these organizations; and (2) Rose Fine-Meyer's chapter which delineates how Toronto schoolteachers "were actively reshaping and rewriting parts of the existing history and social science curriculum" (p. 43), thus emphasizing how teachers' personal motivation(s) drove them to make inroads into curriculum policy from grass roots experimentation. Jean Hewitt's chapter, the last in this section, chronicles organized efforts to transform Ontario school board practices championed by the provincial Federation of Women Teachers of Ontario (FWTAO) (and enacted by Status of Women committees in every Ontario school board), ultimately reflecting on the extent to which feminist influence on education, in relation to the "bureaucratic structures" of schools, was successful. Collectively, these first chapters emphasize the tensions between conservative structure and human agency.

A study of feminist academics, who were among the first in what had been exclusively male bastions of graduate educational administration programs, provides the grist for the second section: "Discourses of Leadership: Speaking Out." The authors' analyses of one-on-one and focus group interviews with seven women, like Cook's earlier chapter, demonstrate that just because the numbers of women in positions of some authority in educational systems have increased, feminist ideology has not been wholly welcome. The section describes how these women introduced feminist thought into their institutions, but at personal cost. Janice Wallace's chapter is the most personally focused, as she reflects on her efforts to engender equity in the "distribution of social benefits in a profoundly inequitable social world" (p. 88). Dawn Wallin picks up where Wallace leaves us: recognizing and acknowledging the privileged position she and other

feminist faculty inhabit as “they learn to make sense of their subjective positions inherent in the hegemonic discourses surrounding educational leadership” (p. 94). Melody Viczko’s chapter is the most hopeful of the three; it utilizes actor-network theory by analyzing in depth two of the one-on-one interviews to illustrate what feminism “does,” not just what it “means” to consider “how female scholars have drawn feminism into their practice as scholars and how this entanglement has shaped the field itself” (p. 145).

“Disrupting Discourses: Speaking Back to Feminism” is the book’s third section. The three chapters each critique *white feminism* by demonstrating the ways that feminism manifests itself in the lives and work of women who are conscious of their own intersectionality. Evelyn Hamdon describes her recognition of how, as a racialized Muslim woman, her identity was marginalized and silenced by mainstream feminism. Her chapter provides a feminist orientation that is embedded in “a fundamental concern about the hierarchical arrangements of identities – that is, a feminist-inspired, intersectional and anti-oppressive practice” (p. 172). Marlene McKay draws on her own experience in coming to terms with her identity as an Indigenous feminist woman emerging from a patriarchal cultural space. In doing so, she is marking new ground by speaking of feminism to a colonized culture where such ideologies have not been made welcome. Thashika Pillay, who emigrated from South Africa to Canada as a child, illustrates how acknowledging the presence of visible minority teachers in Canadian schools can challenge the “hegemonic dominance of Euro-American knowledges in school systems when such teachers’ diverse . . . perspectives are supported and valued” (p. 212) and post-structural feminism where “the concept of ‘woman’ is problematized and complexified by issues of class, culture, ethnicity, sexuality, and other aspects of identity” (p. 214).

A chapter by Carol Harris provides a coda to the book in providing an example of what a feminist approach to arts-based adult education looks like in practice. The editors’ concluding chapter reflects the chronological structure of the book and mimics the developmental process many of the chapter authors undertook: starting with (1) feminist grassroots projects that drew from personal experiences; (2) moving through an organizing phase as women worked together to effect broader social change; (3) to times of greater immigration, social diversity, and overt conversations about social justice in education, (4) and, more broadly, recently culminating in feminist work that is anti-colonial, post-structural, and moves away from essentialized categories of gender and toward intersectional renderings of gender in relation to race, ethnicity, language, class, sexual identity, etc.

This book provides a welcome snapshot of the influence of second-wave feminist thought in Canadian education, and it describes how feminist thought established a toe-hold in conservative educational institutions – faculties of education, schools, and school boards – as well as the extent to which this feminist thinking has moved closer to the mainstream in those places. The book articulates what the editors characterize as the next steps in feminist practices: deepening and widening in recognition that feminism must be intersectional. While the volume is not a full survey of the field, its references to the germinal scholarship that has come before (c.f. Hermani Bannerji; Jill Blackmore; Judith Butler; bell hooks; Cecilia Reynolds; and Beth Young; et al.) makes it a highly useful book for anyone wanting to understand the feminist movement as enacted by female Canadian educators both individually and collectively.

References

Wallin, D., & Wallace, J. (Eds.). (2018). *Transforming Conversations: Feminism and Education in Canada Since 1970*. McGill-Queen’s Press-MQUP