

Desperately Seeking Evelyn, or,
Alternatively, Exploring Pedagogies of the Personal in
Alfred North Whitehead and Feminist Theory

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INTRODUCTION

Alfred North Whitehead concludes the *Adventures of Ideas: A Brilliant History of Mankind's Great Thoughts* by remarking, "At the heart of the nature of things, there are always the dream of youth and the harvest of tragedy."¹ A feminist educator might also choose to close their analysis of "Mankind's Great Thoughts" with the same remark. Each would regard it as an emotion-laden, poignant remark and associate it with educational ideals and practices. In some ways, those ideals and practices are radically different; in some ways not. I explore those similarities and differences as they manifest themselves in what might be called "pedagogies of the personal."

For Whitehead, this remark can only be fully understood in relation to his subtle and complex ontology of process.² For Whitehead, youth is to be understood not so much as some developmental stage of human beings but rather as a stage of life-as-ontological-process which refers to any aspect of conscious Life not as yet touched by tragedy. For Whitehead, youth implies a certain innocence, a certain absence of choices not yet having been made, choices situated in the light of an open horizon of such choices. Tragedy is the inevitable consequence of having made choices regardless of what those choices are. But choose we must since we are conscious subjects. As Whitehead sees it, each of us is "an active entity which fashions its own perspective, implanted on the world around."³ However, what is crucial for Whitehead is that, "Each tragedy [including those of tragic evil] is the disclosure of an ideal—What might have been and was not: What can be" (*AI*, 285). Committed to a Social Darwinian approach to education, Whitehead applies his optimism to situations of human conflict and evil as well. Ultimately and ideally, the full realization of this union of youth and tragedy leads to an almost platonic sense of Peace commingled with a deep awareness of how the tragic Beauty pervasive in conscious existence "attains its end in a Harmony of Harmonies" (*AI*, 295). I argue that Whitehead espouses a pedagogy of the metaphysically personal.

For a feminist educator, the phrase "the dream of youth and the harvest of tragedy" can serve as a rallying cry for a politics of pedagogy. Along with other stages in life, youth can be seen a legitimate stage for the dreaming of dreams, a stage whose deepest moral and political entitlements are such that the dreams cannot be legitimately destroyed by material practices, customs, norms, and institutions. Poverty, illiteracy, disease, violence, sexism, racism, class-bias, able-ism, colonialism, eurocentrism, and other social injustices—these are the destroyers of dreams.⁴ For feminist (and other critical) educators, these forces reap harvests of tragedy for the dreamers. Feminist educators see educational institutions contributing to those

nightmares and cite oppressive forces which can be and must be eradicated so that students are no longer stunted, traumatized, and silenced in educational settings.

EXPLORING PEDAGOGIES OF THE PERSONAL

Both Whitehead and a feminist educator might be said to advocate “Pedagogies of the Personal.” Both place primacy on the subjectivity of the learner; both emphasize the domain of the personal as a primary locus for genuine education, illumination, and the kind of insight necessary to produce wise understanding. Both view education as having transformative, liberatory potential for personal subjects.⁵

Whence their differences? I believe that they are committed to very different universes, to a different sense of the future, and to very different pedagogies of the personal. I believe that Whitehead is committed to the slogan “*The Personal is Metaphysical*” and that a feminist educator is committed to the slogan, “*The Personal is Political*.”⁶ For each, one slogan is to be understood as subsumed under the other.

For Whitehead, the universe involves an eternal process of progress toward greater civilization, toward an ultimate, though not static, “Harmony of Harmonies.” Whitehead’s “Adventure of Ideas” picks out certain ideas as pivotal in what he documents as an already given “rise of civilization”: the notion of the human soul, humanitarian ideals, aspects of freedom, cosmology, and the *central* ideas of civilization—truth, beauty, adventure, art, and peace. The “Modes of Thought” that interest Whitehead are: expression, understanding, the civilized universe, creative impulse, activity, and lucidity resulting from philosophical disclosure. It is a world in which disease, murder, poverty, HIV-infected babies, sexual and political terrorism, the persecution of sexual minorities, racist slaughter, the starvation of aboriginal peoples, and the genocide of peoples have no significant *philosophical* role to play. They count only as instances of tragic evil which are, nevertheless, ontologically valuable because of the Beauty they reveal.⁷

Feminists have to be good at what I call invisible seeing, that is, the art of seeing “what is not there.” When we engage in such invisible seeing with respect to Whitehead, we have to try to determine which ideas Whitehead leaves out, ideas which, to my mind, have *also* been pivotal in giving rise to *precisely* those social groups and periods which Whitehead identifies *as* civilized. These are powerful ideas, too, because they have been legitimised by the most powerful institutions in a given culture at a given time.⁸ Ideas which Whitehead does not include are all too familiar to those who live the daily harvests of tragedy. They include ideas such as the legitimising of altruistic imperialist colonial missions to “civilize primitive savages,” the idea of white supremacy and the “civilized” practices of apartheid and segregation, the idea of anti-Semitism and continuous “civilized persecution” supported by advocates of “ethnic cleansing,” patriarchal ideas about the legitimacy of heterosexual male authority coupled with religiously-sanctioned misogynist beliefs used to legitimise sex and gender terrorism, and the idea that “imperfect” foetuses must be aborted and poor women sterilized in the name of positive eugenics and the eradication of poverty. These, too, are ideas which have been and continue to be constitutive of what Whitehead regards as “civilization.”

They are not Ideas he cites in his “Adventures of Ideas.” But surely the Ideas of patriarchy, misogyny, racism, able-ism, heterosexism, and eurocentric colonialism function as Ideas which foreclose the possibilities for Adventures of Ideas.⁹ They make it unlikely if not impossible for girls and women, for children of color, for lesbian, gay, and transgendered students, for immigrants from non-European countries, for people with visible disabilities and for native peoples to be the kind of subject which is *presupposed* by Whitehead’s model of education, to be the kind of “active entity which fashions its own perspective, implanted on the world around.”¹⁰

Each universe generates a different politics, a different pedagogy. From a feminist perspective, Whitehead’s political detachment can be interpreted as a kind of withdrawal from the immediacy, from the concreteness of lived day-to-day political struggle and survival. It assumes a lofty perspective in which such struggles are viewed simply as moments in the greater perfection of the universe made real through the physical and spiritual adventures of actual occasions called “persons” and “societies.” While Whitehead emphasizes, in the strongest terms possible, the primacy of concrete immediacy, he does it from a distantly aloof position of philosophical disengagement, of detachment. He speaks with the voice of a philosopher who valorizes the deep structures and harmonies which permeate the superficial phenomena of flux and transient political conflicts.

Perhaps this is a kind of wisdom, and perhaps it is this vision which it is sometimes appropriate to strive for in education. As a feminist educator, I would argue that, at the very least, it does not serve girls and women and other oppressed persons and groups very well. I see Whitehead’s ontology as ideological camouflage and distortion and claim that, at best, this is a distorted utopian picture generated, uncritically, by an extraordinarily privileged theorist. Shockingly, Whitehead does not engage critically with some of the great “Adventures of Ideas” of his time—suffrage and the scientific constructions of gendered race and eugenics—both of which would raise questions about his positionality. More critical issues can be raised.

TWO PROBLEMATIC DIMENSIONS

WHITEHEAD’S ASSUMPTION OF AFFECTIVE NATURALISM

Generally, a thesis of affective naturalism involves the claim that, for each individual subject many or all of their needs, desires, values, and interests can be given in a natural, pre-cultural state. Whitehead uses the metaphor of seeing the learner as an *organism* and cautions the teacher against feeding the learner the wrong kind of food. Such central metaphors support the thesis of affective naturalism because they sustain a naturalistic picture of the learner as a (learning) organism who has needs and appetites to learn that come from within its nature. Serving as the primary catalyst in education, the needs of the learner, if properly nourished, will allow it to grow according to its own nature.

It is within this dominant metaphor, then, that Whitehead discusses curiosity as a form of interest. It is a form of motivation that comes naturally from within the child which is first manifested in the joy of discovery and, ultimately, in the seeing

of deep connections in the concrete and apparently disparate actual occasions of life and understanding their trajectories into the past and into the future.

While feminist educators can appreciate Whitehead's emphasis on curiosity and interest as central to the educational process, we do not generally subscribe to Whitehead's naturalistic approach to needs, desires, interests and forms of curiosity. Central to feminist theorizing about education is the notion of a colonized subjectivity and the correlative analysis of needs, desires, interests, and forms of curiosity arising out of and constrained by structures of privilege and oppression. Transformation of speech patterns, modes of cognition, aesthetic sensibilities, forms of curiosity, the inculcating of feelings of personal and cultural inferiority through the silencing, discounting, or demeaning labelling of all that arises out of any source other than the "dominant" cultures, and the deadening of "deviant" personal aspirations and hopes—coupled with real rewards for (limited) assimilationist success—is how colonization works in the classroom.¹¹ Because of the conjunction of race privilege, able-ist class bias, and gender dominance, those youth in our culture who feel *most* free to dream, who live the reality of *real* possibilities being open to them, those students who can most optimistically expect to experience their education in the least alienated way with a sense of present and future integrity are privileged able-bodied white boys. Anyone who is not classed, gendered, and racialized as privileged, white, and male is expected to value and appreciate the forms of curiosity and interests articulated by white middle and upper class men. And they are rewarded only when they acquire competence in relation to the study of those eurocentric and androcentric forms of curiosity and interest. All others are expected to become assimilated to this educational paradigm in order to be regarded as "educated" in North American society. For all those children and adults, "successful education" can involve a profound alienation of their entire being and identities. For them, the great Whiteheadian "Adventure of Ideas," that is, "adventures of thought, adventures of passionate feeling, adventures of aesthetic experience" are not to be.¹²

Given the voluminous amount of empirical data demonstrating the socially and politically-constructed nature of many interests, needs, desires, and forms of curiosity, a feminist educator is likely to reject Whitehead's Assumption of Affective Naturalism. Consequently, feminist educators (and therapists) maintain that the struggle for authentic curiosity and accurate assessment of one's own needs, desires, and interests is a difficult and profoundly political struggle, not an easily assumed pedagogical starting point.¹³

I do not reject Whitehead's central motivational analysis regarding the importance of authentic interest and curiosity; indeed, much of the excitement of transgressive feminist classrooms—for students *and* educators—derives from the liberation of interest and curiosity from the shackles of multiple, normally compulsory, normalization politics.¹⁴ My point is to show the extent to which political analysis is missing from Whitehead's account of the learner's subjectivity.¹⁵ I believe that Whitehead's lack of political analysis is directly and systemically related to his deep commitment to social Darwinian and platonic assumptions, assumptions related to the second problematic dimension.

WHITEHEAD'S THEORY OF GENERIC PRIVATIZED INDIVIDUALISM

I maintain that Whitehead is committed to a theory of generic, privatized individualism because of two theoretical commitments: (1) privileging the transcendent in every instance of concrete subjectivity, and (2) maintaining a sharp public/personal dualism.

To illuminate this commitment, consider Whitehead's remarks concerning a mother's love, a love which he (in a not-so-tacit androcentric way) contrasts with "the relation of parent to child." Whitehead sees a mother's love as a dangerously defective and extreme form of love in which:

all personal desire is transferred to the thing loved, as a desire for its perfections. Personal life has here evidently passed beyond itself but with explicit, definite limitation to particular realities....*There is no transcendence of personality*" (AI, 287-288, emphasis added).

Whitehead contrasts mother's love with parental (= paternal) love in which there clearly can be some transcendence because what elevates this form of relationship is that "Such love is really an intense feeling as to how the harmony of the world should be realized in particular objects" (AI, 288). Here we have a clear distinction between the defects apparently necessarily entailed in the love of a particular individual thing and the excellence of a love which sees temporally perishing actual occasions, that is, the child, as a locus of realization of the perfection of the world. For Whitehead, the second perspective clearly involves transcendence of the individual and is manifestly superior as a form of relation. I believe this example brings into sharper focus the significance of Whitehead's theory of generic individualism.

For Whitehead, *no* individual conscious subject is made up of some substantial essence continuing through time either as experienced or transcendently inferred. Rather, an individual is, at any given moment, an instance of *concrecence* which is a particular kind of fluency inherent in the constitution of a particular kind of existence. "Concrecence," Whitehead says, "is the name for the process in which the universe of many things acquires an individual unity in a determinate relegation of each item of the 'many' to its subordination in the constitution of the novel 'one.'"¹⁶

Moreover, Whitehead maintains that any given moment of our concrecent conscious life—which is only brought into existence organically through a synthesis of hierarchically-organized organic collectivities—is profoundly unintelligible outside a larger temporal framework of significance of our past and our future. We are constituted by our hopes, our aspirations, our fears, and our deeper awareness of our contingency and our perishing as we de-concrece and literally pass into new syntheses in the universe. The current concrecence which constitutes my current individual sense of identity is, for Whitehead, merely a transient one in a larger cosmology of processes of process.

Regarding human sociality, Whitehead says, "we know ourselves as creatures in a world of creatures."¹⁷ Our sense of individual intelligibility is necessarily derived from our understanding of our embodied and humanly intersubjective particularity in a history, in a race, in a sex, in a set of traditions, as aging, as abled

or disabled, as regarded as beautiful or as plain, as fascist or democrat, and all these derive, Whitehead argues, from a much larger principle of mutual bodily immanence.¹⁸ Each individual comes to be seen as a contingently concretized conscious concrescence, transient but illuminating of an ontology of process; the general functionings of the world are imbricated in each individual bodily “society.” Particularity is most accurately valued as an individuated but not personal instance of metaphysical process in synthesis. This is generic individualism. This is a conspicuously de-contextualized, apolitical theory of individual subjectivity.

Although Whitehead is a principled, self-conscious theoretical anti-dualist, in actual practice (and like virtually all the European philosophers prior to him) he displays an asymmetrical privileging of the public side of a public/personal dualism. We can see this by asking, “Who is Evelyn and where is she”? Evelyn hovers in the “Prefaces” and in the “Dedications” of Whitehead’s works. In the “Preface” to *Adventures of Ideas*, Whitehead says, “I am indebted to my wife for *many ideas fundamental to the discussion*; and also for *the great labor of revision of the successive drafts of the various chapters*” (*AI*, 8, emphasis added). In his monumental metaphysical work, *Process and Reality*, Whitehead remarks, “this work *would never have been written* without the constant encouragement and counsel which I owe to my wife.”¹⁹ *Modes of Thought* is dedicated to his children and grandchildren, people who presumably would not be in existence apart from Evelyn. Inspiring friends are named in the Dedication to *Science and the Modern World*.²⁰ Friends are named; Evelyn is not. Colleagues are named; children are not. Presumably the status of “Alfred North Whitehead’s wife” is so complete a designator that as an individual woman she does not need her own name despite the acknowledged importance of her intellectual (*many ideas fundamental to the discussion*), emotional, and moral contributions. Unidentified wives and children live on the periphery of Whitehead’s major works. Their presence is not, literally, incorporated into Whitehead’s model of human individuality and subjectivity. Ironically, Evelyn may have, all too well, exercised paradigmatic-but-deplorable “maternal love” towards Alfred’s intellectual offspring!

Let us return to that discussion. Recall that Whitehead deplored maternal love because it is not only directed to a particular individual but because it is fully absorbed by that particular individual. It has, as Whitehead puts it, “explicit, definite limitation to particular realities” and, hence, fails to incorporate an element of transcendence towards Eros, Peace, Adventure, Harmony, and Youth (*AI*, 287). For Whitehead, it would appear that individual persons—occasions of actual existence—are valued primarily for what is potentially *universal* though concretely realized in their particular concrescence. Whitehead subscribes to generic, no-name abstractly concrete fungible individuals who are, ultimately, simply concrescences existing in specific temporal vector spaces. Particular human personal subjectivities are not valued in any intrinsic way *for* their uniqueness, their particularity, their non-fungible historical and relational individuality. This is, I submit, the deep moral of Whitehead’s analysis of the defects of maternal love. And it is here that many feminist theorists part company with Whitehead.

Feminist theoretical and political writers have, from Mary Wollstonecraft into the present, produced a variety of critical analyses of the socially-defined roles and altruistic expectations surrounding motherhood. With the possible exception of Simone de Beauvoir, they have resisted the Whiteheadian analysis which devalues the particularity of the focus of maternal love.²¹ On the contrary, many place primary emphasis *on* particularity, on immediacy, on concreteness, and on human non-fungibility in the domain of intimate human relations and cite nurturing maternal practice as necessary to the development of contextualized responsible selves-in-relation.

Many feminists reject this picture of generic concrete subjectivity even while they might be sympathetic to an underlying ontology of temporal process and nonsubstantiality. For feminist theorists and feminist educators what is important, in themselves, are non-fungible situated individuals, located in specific matrices of privilege, power, oppression and resistance. These are personal human beings with diverse particularities and forms of uniqueness, with all their identifying marks, such as freckles and scars, balding heads and piercings, pregnantly rotund or emaciated due to famine. Feminists are concerned with a particular human being mourning the death of their mother, a particular human being celebrating the courageous risk of a close friend, a particular human being struggling to read words for the first time, a particular human being testifying in a particular court of law about years of incestuous assault by another, very particular person. Many feminists methodologically and normatively resist the Whiteheadian move away from unique personal particularity to the generic, though monadically individuated, anonymous actual occasion, the Whitehead person.²²

This difference is significant in at least three distinguishable ways for understanding a pedagogy of the personal. First, while Whitehead stresses the importance of working with the interests of the individual learners who are present in the educational setting, he argues that it is important that education move in the direction of developing generalized understanding leading to wisdom in relation to one's life-world. The feminist educator also stresses the importance of working with the interests of the learner but interprets these interests as arising out of conditions of privilege, oppression, and resistance, and moving in the direction of revolutionary liberation. Thus, while feminist pedagogy also requires the kind of understanding that Whitehead values, it prizes that understanding primarily for its dialectical political potential as well as its possible cosmological illumination.

Second, while both Whitehead and feminist educators support a model of an existential self coming into existence through time, Whitehead sees this as a metaphysical inevitability. Feminist educators are not so sanguine about this project having seen, for example, girls and women (even, possibly, Evelyn) being assimilated into and culturally defined by the temporal self-projects of various males in their lives—professors, employers, political leaders, fathers, husbands, and sons. As a result, feminists believe strongly in the integration of the *personal* (and not merely the individual) with the social and the political where the domain of the personal includes such intimate features as the particularities of one's own embodiment and

history, sexuality, fertility, feelings, experiences of love and despair, of torture, and of oppression. In the absence of a liberatory, transgressive politics and pedagogy located in a socially just society many feminist educators regard the prospect of anyone achieving authentic existential personal subjectivity as grim.

The third issue concerns the emotional atmosphere of the classrooms in question. For Whitehead, ideal educational settings are ones which are dominated by zest, by imagination, by a sense of wonder, by a sense of pride in the mastery of the skills of precision needed to pass on to the final stage of understanding. The perceptive teacher is there as both taskmaster (for those at the precision stage) and role model of the kind of understanding ultimately to be achieved as individual learners move through an invariable pedagogical sequence. Whitehead acknowledges that this has a certain rationalist purity.

For feminist educators, the classroom is expected to be and is often experienced as a place of pain, of joy, of support, of anger, of rejoicing—a place where oppression, vulnerability, and empowerment through collective personal and dialogic processes of learning occur.²³ A place to worship rational purity it is not.

CONCLUSION

“[T]he dream of youth and the harvest of tragedy”—a significant phrase for both Whitehead and feminist educators. Must one choose between Whitehead and feminist models of education? As feminist educator and philosopher I find feminist theories more philosophically illuminating and pedagogically responsive to the educational challenges which arise out of social injustices. But I want to stress that this is a preference and not a mutually exclusive choice. As a result of my renewed study of Whitehead, I believe that I have learned and deepened my understanding, not only of education, but of temporality and human subjectivity as well. Whereas studying Whitehead can alert feminist educators to dangers of the solipsism of particularized non-fungible immediacy, studying Whitehead also brings into sharp focus the pedagogical political mirages of transcendent quietism. Rather than forcing a choice which might result in a significant loss, I would—like Evelyn and Alfred—prefer dialectical collaboration. We can learn from each other.

1. Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Mentor Books, Macmillan, 1933), 294. This book will be cited as *AI* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. See Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1929).

3. Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1929).

4. For a moving narrative of this process see Himani Bannerji, “But Who Speaks for Us? Experience and Agency in Conventional Feminist Paradigms,” in *Unsettling Relations: The University as a Site of Feminist Struggles*, ed. H. Bannerji, L. Carty, K. Dehli, S. Heald, and K. McKenna (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1991). See also Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1999).

5. Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (New York: The Free Press, 1929), 282.

6. The second slogan is programmatically central to the political movement known as Radical Feminism. See Israel Scheffler, *The Language of Education* (Springfield, IL: Thomas, 1960) on slogans.

7. Perhaps this cosmology provided consolation for Whitehead who lost his youngest son in WW I.

8. To my mind, Foucault provides the most subtle account of the complexities of the politics of normalizing ideas.
9. For a more extensive discussion of axes of privilege and oppression, see Kathryn Pauly Morgan, "Describing the Emperor's New Clothes: Three Myths of Educational (In-)Equity" in *The Gender Question in Education*, ed. A. Diller, B. Houston, K.P. Morgan, and M. Ayim. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 107.
10. Whitehead does note that "a rule of men over women remained an established feature of highly civilized societies." He regards this as a degrading "hang-over" from barbarism and also notes that it continues to be a practice in "Near Eastern" cultures which he, presumably, regards as less civilized and more barbaric than the West. I find this xenophobic, ethnocentric, culturally myopic remark disturbing.
11. For a comprehensive collection of writings that explores this dynamic for diversely-situated persons, see *Breaking Anonymity*, ed. The Chilly Climate Collective (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1995). See also Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1997); S. DeCastell and M. Bryson, eds., *Radical In Ter Ventions: Identity, Politics and Difference/S in Educational Praxis* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997).
12. Moving accounts of gendered class alienation can be found in J. Ryan and C. Sackrey, eds., *Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working Class* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996); C.L. Barney Dews and C.L. Law, eds., *This Fine Place So Far From Home* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); and Christine Overall, *A Feminist I: Reflections from Academia* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1998).
13. For diverse Enlightenment accounts of the social and political micro-manipulation of the desires of girls and women, see the writings of Wollstonecraft, Rousseau, and John Stuart Mill.
14. See, for example, Philomena Essed, *Diversity: Gender, Color, and Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996); bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 1994); also Castell and Bryson, *Radical In Ter Ventions*.
15. Whitehead would have been familiar with the notion of a dialectically and culturally created self through his knowledge of Hegel and Marx.
16. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 243.
17. Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 147.
18. Ibid.
19. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, emphasis added, ix.
20. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The Free Press, 1925).
21. See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1953); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. (New York: Routledge, 1990); Sarah Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. (Boston: Beacon, 1989); and Joyce Trebilcot, ed., *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allenheld, 1984).
22. An exemplar of this is Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*.
23. This is not to claim that such classrooms are uncomplicated. See Elizabeth Ellsworth's classical article, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy," in *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*, ed. C. Luke and J. Gore (New York: Routledge, 1992).