

Misreading and Rereading “The Love Gap”

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Invoking Jacques Lacan, James Stillwaggon has critically employed Jane Roland Martin’s “The Love Gap in the Educational Text” to argue for conserving a (“love) gap” presumed to be present in schools. His grounds are that this gap produces an emptiness, “the original lack that marks human desire,” perhaps constitutive for education’s possibility.

Stillwaggon misrepresents Martin as an advocate for “feminine” love in schools while ignoring her challenge to analyze and critique educational thought’s genderization of that adult love whose object is children’s growth and development. Henceforth I shall call the love that Martin has found missing — not necessarily in schools, as Stillwaggon asserts, but in “the educational text” that escapes his attention — “M.” His essay lacks recognition both of her essay’s gender critique of Western educational thought, in whose canon Lacan does not figure, and of Luce Irigaray’s theory of the “feminine,” a deconstructive parody of Lacan’s language and logic of male hegemony in which the male child’s “misrecognition” of his mother figures as his desire to return to the “primal home” of the placenta, “which leads [the male infant] to conflate the destroyed placenta...with the mirror in which he sees himself whole and intact.”¹ I will *not* parody Stillwaggon’s prefeminist argument as “phallocentric” or damn it for defending “the Law of the Father” that would render Jane Martin and me castrated, passive, silent, and feminine; nor will I attempt to psychoanalyze Stillwaggon’s misrecognitions.²

Stillwaggon (mute on gender tyrannies in love and education) and Martin (famously critical of them) do share basic ethical concerns to educate against racism, economic injustice, hatred, fear, and greed. Their concepts of “education” itself differ profoundly, however. His essay equates education with schooling, an essentialist notion whose narrowness Martin’s essay critiques in response to postmodern child-rearing’s pragmatic complexities. He attributes to her a singular preoccupation with schools and homes, ignoring her essay’s analysis of “cultural miseducation” produced by “multiple educational agency” encompassing many other institutions even as it deeply transforms them both:

Church, neighborhood, police and fire departments, museums, historical societies, libraries, and archives; zoos, parks, playgrounds, aquariums, and arboretums; symphony orchestras, record clubs, recording companies, ballet troops, and opera houses; banks, businesses, and the stock market; newspapers, magazines, book clubs, book stores, publishing houses, sports organizations, billboards, government agencies, the military establishment, nonprofit organizations, and environmental groups; TV, the Internet, and the media in all its multitudinous forms; and the myriad other institutions of society that pass down the culture’s stock and in the process educate young and old.³

Martin’s critique of these multiple educational agents is neither blind nor reducible to their failure to administer what Stillwaggon terms “parental nurturance” — henceforth “P.” She criticizes such agents’ miseducative cultural transmission

(of racism, sexism, war, and other violent practices of fear, hatred, and greed) as detrimental to children's growth and development. Her essay scorns idealization of unintelligent Mother Love, and she would fill "the love gap in the educational text" with carefully reasoned, critical, constructive inquiry about education's possibilities if intelligently directed by M. Contrary to Stillwaggon's inference, she does not conceive M as exclusively or even primarily a matter of P in private phallogocentric homes or as a matter of P in "feminine" form (whatever that may be) mimicked by *in loco parentis* school teachers. Rather, critiquing such prefeminist educational thought, she considers M a civic, pedagogical matter meriting philosophical attention sensitive to the far greater complexity of our postmodern context.

M is, for Martin, *all* adult citizens' concern, addressed to *all* children — not just to one's biological own, or even to one's students — to hold multiple educational agents accountable for miseducative cultural practices. Two decades ago, Nel Noddings famously designated the title concept of her book *Caring* "feminine," but Martin's recent essay does *not* deploy that essentialist gender designation for M, nor does her book *The Schoolhome* depict paradigmatic teachers endlessly, self-sacrificially engaged in caring dyads with students, such as Noddings idealized.⁴ *The Schoolhome* does depict some caring dialogues among students and teachers akin to those in Noddings's *The Challenge to Care in Schools*, but Martin does not advocate a school organized around such classroom dialogues over the subject matter of caring for self and others.⁵ She imagines schoolhomes instead as democratic communities of teachers directed by their civic M to frame an interdisciplinary and extradisciplinary multicultural curriculum aimed at students' learning to live well through collective worldly activities, such as participating in theater and newspaper production, and through collective domestic activities required to maintain their school's health, safety, functionality, comfort, and beauty. Pedagogical M does not manifest paradigmatically in Martin's essay as classroom acts of either P or Platonic censorship, but as courageous insertion of even potentially harmful texts into the curriculum and as deliberate teaching of critical thinking about, through, and beyond those texts: as a democratic practice of teaching learners (in any context) to mediate for themselves such cultural miseducation wrought via multiple educational agency.⁶ Martin argues for taking M seriously, not by genderizing it as "feminine" or privatizing it as "parental," but by analyzing and critiquing M's genderization and privatization. Of what consequence for Stillwaggon's argument is his misrecognition of Martin's argument?

Does the emptiness of desire (henceforth "ED") that Stillwaggon considers possibly constitutive for education depend upon his conservative, laissez-faire, or "negative" disposition toward "the love gap in the educational text" that Martin has theorized? I myself comprehend such ED in pragmatic rather than psychoanalytic terms: as hunger to know or find out something; deeply felt want of ability or skill; yearning to do or make something that matters, to speak and be heard, to share joy or pain. John Dewey perhaps most famously recognized such lacks/desires — children's constructive, expressive, communicative, and investigative instincts —

as educationally significant. But, undoubtedly, excessive P can stifle ED’s educative power, even for the very young.⁷

Is Stillwaggon’s concern to honor learners’ ED not itself a symptom of M as Martin has theorized it? Without multiple educational agents who have thought deeply about M in relation to education, how will children learn to respond to their felt ED? What will move them toward learning to live well rather than toward grade-grubbing or cheating, living fast or running away; addictive dieting, eating, drinking, shopping, smoking, drugging, gambling, TV-watching, or computer hacking; falling for military recruiters’ promises or for disingenuous romancers’ and gangs’ manipulations; scapegoating Others; stealing, fighting, making bombs, or wielding deadly weapons; engaging in violent, unprotected, or otherwise harmful sexual activity; feeling depressed, cutting or killing themselves? How does the original lack that marks human desire eventuate in teaching/learning aimed at living well rather than in such common forms of violence to self and others if not through educative practices thoughtfully grounded in M?

The commonness of such violence among young people in contemporary society underscores the importance of Stillwaggon’s insight into ED’s possible educational significance for young people not smothered by excessive P. For such desire, the “slippage between the subject’s primal needs and ability to express them in language” has become a taken-for-granted, easy-to-grab tool of exploitation by multiple educational agents who transmit these cultural liabilities, often by misnaming young people’s needs and desires. Thus Stillwaggon’s theoretical project seems better suited to further develop than to discredit Martin’s project of imagining democratic solutions to cultural miseducation, especially if he will abandon both his essentialist equation between education and schooling and his reductive, prefeminist misrecognition of M as “feminine love” or P.

If educators’ excessive P can stifle children’s desire to learn, can children’s ED not also be harmfully met by the injudicious *absence* of educators’ M with regard to how they are living and what they are and are not learning? Can children’s desire not flourish and mature in encounters and relationships with adults who, with thoughtful M, deliberately aim at *young people’s growing capacity and responsibility for learning on their own to love and survive despite their troubles, especially their mothers’ absence*? In myriad narrative sources I have found this definitive educational achievement motivated by M at the heart of culturally diverse child-rearing, teaching, and befriending practices of both sexes.⁸ Educational achievement so conceived requires multiple educational agents’ artful sensitivity to the play of presence and absence between children and adults, and to the risks of misdirected, exploited, denied, and otherwise abused, undirected, or misrecognized desires.⁹

Stillwaggon’s reason for misreading Martin’s essay remains mysterious, but his psychoanalytic recognition of abundant perils in parental nurturance and of possible educational value in its (judicious, not wanton) absence nonetheless makes a insightful contribution to contemporary educational thought motivated by that adult love whose object is children’s growth and development.

Thanks to Susan Franzosa, John Green, and Jane Martin for responses to this essay in draft form. Any faults are entirely mine.

1. Luce Irigaray, *The Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 35, quoted in James Palermo, *Poststructuralist Readings of the Pedagogical Encounter* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 147.
2. Psychoanalytically inspired, poststructuralist literary theorists think of every reading as a misreading; Stillwagon's misreading could be "strong" in their deconstructive sense or simply "weak." See Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982), chap. 1.
3. Jane Roland Martin, "The Love Gap in the Educational Text," in *Teaching, Learning, and Loving*, ed. Daniel Liston and Jim Garrison (New York: Routledge-Falmer, 2004), 31.
4. Jane Roland Martin, *The Schoolhome: Rethinking Schools for Changing Families* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992); and Nel Noddings, *Caring* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
5. Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992).
6. See, for example, Deanne Bogdan, *Re-educating the Imagination* (Toronto: Boynton-Cook, 1992).
7. See, for example, Alice Miller, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, trans. Ruth Ward (New York: Basic Books, 1997).
8. Susan Laird, "Befriending Girls as an Educational Life-Practice," *Philosophy of Education 2002*, ed. Scott Fletcher (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2003), 73–81.
9. See, for example, Susan Birden, *Rethinking Sexual Identity in Education* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).