

Spring 2000

My Mother's Legacy: Trying to Make a Difference through Teaching and Research

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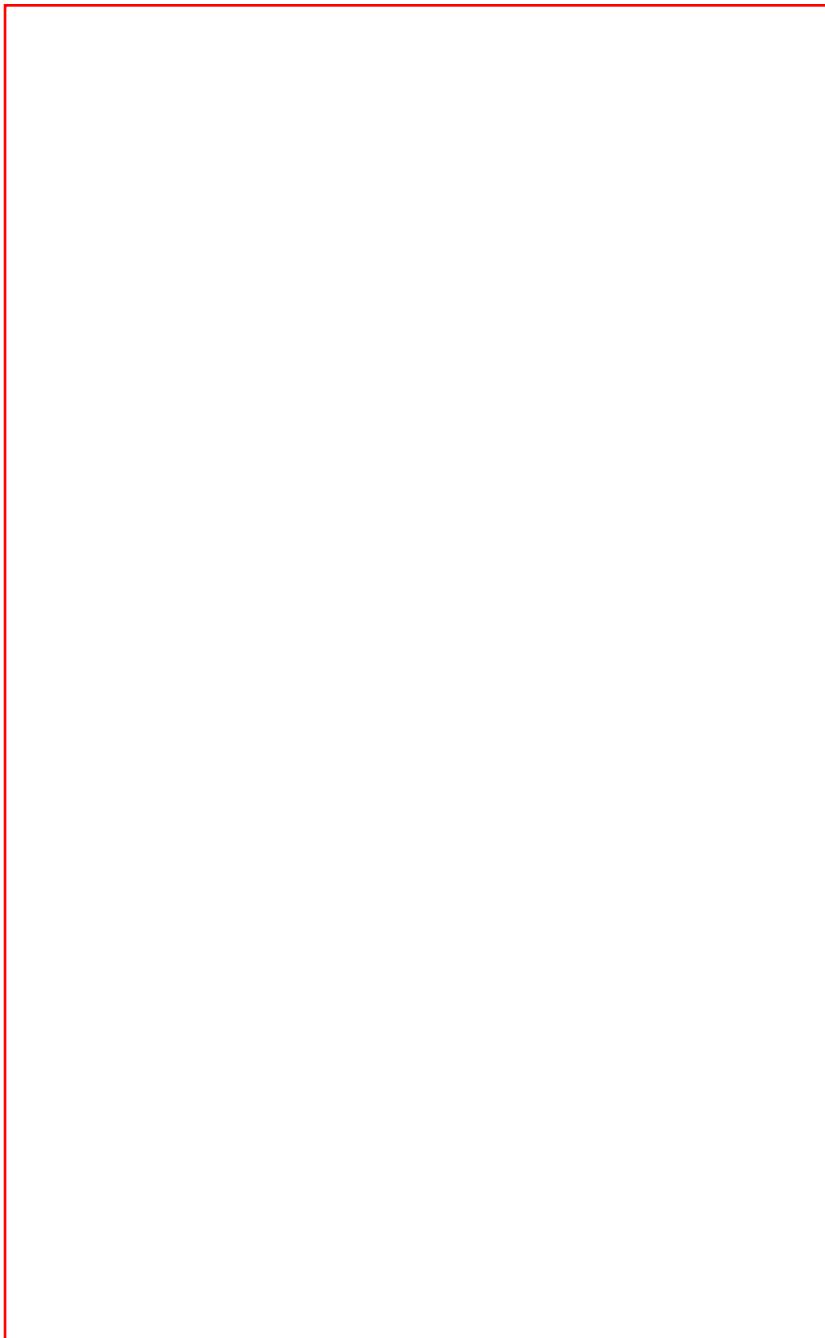


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Recommended Citation

Edelstein, M. (2000). My Mother's Legacy: Trying to Make a Difference through Teaching and Research. *Explore* 3(3), 10-18.

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Asked to write about how I became interested in social justice research, I realized that the question had two parts for me: how I got interested in social justice and how I got interested in research. To answer these questions, I found myself thinking back to my early adolescence, and to my mother. I remember a day when I was about 12 and saw a TV news report on poverty and hunger in some 49 underdeveloped part of the world. When it was over, I flung myself across my mother's bed, crying. My mother came into the room and asked me why I was crying. I said something like "Mommy, it just isn't fair that so many people are suffering and starving, while others are rich." She comforted me by saying that we should try to do whatever we can to make the world a better place, even if we can't cure every world problem.

My mother had gone to Michigan State Normal College and had gotten a teaching credential. She married right after her graduation, and moved with my father, a chemist, to a Detroit suburb, Royal Oak.

She found herself unable to get a teaching job there since Royal Oak schools would not hire Jews. (I still have a copy of the angry letter my father wrote to the school superintendent.) Shortly thereafter, I was born, and within a year, my parents moved out to Los Angeles. Two years later, my father died, and my mother went back to teaching, first as a substitute teacher while she took graduate courses on special education and I went to preschool. From about the time I started first grade until shortly before she died when I was fifteen, my mother was a special education teacher at an elementary school in Venice, a lively, multiracial, but economically depressed area near our home in Mar Vista.

My mother taught students who had been placed in special classes for the "retarded" after taking "intelligence" tests. She would often talk about her students, many of whom she slowly discovered were **not** "retarded" but were from poor, non-English-speaking, often immigrant households and thus did not do well on English-language tests. She was able to help many students out of the "retarded track" into regular classes. I often accompanied my mother to "parent- teacher nights" at her school, and every time, some students and their parents would come up to tell me, often in broken English (mixed with Swedish or Spanish), how much they liked my mother and how much she had helped them. I saw a similarity between many of these parents and my grandparents, who had been driven, by pogroms and prejudice, to emigrate from Latvia to the United States during the great wave of Eastern European immigration in the early decades of the 20th century.

I always felt proud of my mother for having helped so many students to succeed. From her, her students, and her students' families, I learned about the importance of education and about the difference a caring and thoughtful teacher could make to people's lives. I also saw how my mother's own educational research-both text-based and experimental-helped her to help her students. Even though I sometimes considered other careers, I think I always knew that I, too, wanted to be a teacher.

I suppose a lot of children become more socially and politically conscious as they become adolescents; this was especially true for those of us whose adolescence began with JFK's assassination and the period of national self-analysis and self- doubt it ushered in. In my racially and socioeconomically diverse junior high school on the edge of Venice, I saw how cliques, gangs, and stereotypes formed among the students, often on racial and/or class lines. I sometimes caught myself accepting these stereotypes and prejudices, which I then struggled against.

In junior high, I read and was inspired by John Howard Griffin's book *Black Like Me*, about his quest to understand how it might feel to be a "Minority" in the racially divided U.S. by "becoming" (albeit temporarily, artificially, and voluntarily) "black." Some of the same racial tensions and racism had also been illuminated for me by one of my favorite novels (and films) at that time, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. When I encountered works like these, I tried to understand how it must feel to be a person of color in a racist society. Even in elementary school, I had some sense of what it was like to be outside the ethnic/racial and economic norms, as a dark-haired, dark-eyed, Jewish child among blond-haired and blue- eyed WASPS; as almost the only child who had to answer "and what does your father do?" with "I don't have a father" or "My father's dead;" and who had a single working mother surviving (barely) on a public school teacher's salary.

Although my awareness of racial problems in the U.S. had increased, I was nonetheless stunned and

horrified when I learned, in my 7th grade social studies class, about apartheid when we studied South Africa (where I knew I had some relatives with whom my grandmother corresponded). I decided to write a research paper on the system of apartheid and its effects. My paper was a highly critical analysis and impassioned denunciation of apartheid; as I recall, my teacher praised it but thought the paper should have been more objective. It was probably the first school project I had really cared deeply about.

In the eighth grade, my best friend Karen and I decided to do our required research project on the John Birch Society, the right-wing "Patriotic" organization. We read whatever we could find on the organization, and actually tried to infiltrate it. I can't remember now whether we actually ever went to a meeting, but we gave our report and wrote our papers to show that the Birch Society was a threat to democracy and racial harmony in the U.S.

My awareness of social problems was heightened when, in the summer of 1965, a major race-related riot broke out in Watts, a part of Los Angeles that at that time I had never visited. I found that I was much more sympathetic towards the rioters than were many of my peers or the adults I knew; I could understand some of the rioters' rage and frustration, given the poverty and lack of opportunity in places like Watts even after more than a decade of the Civil Rights movement. Wanting to do something, I decided to participate in a new tutoring program run by the EON (Economic Opportunity Program) in Venice. My tutee, Tisa, was a young African-American girl who lived in the poorest part of Venice and needed help with her reading and writing skills. We worked together for about a year, either at the library or at her house, where I would often chat with her mother and sisters, sometimes about race and recent events. I found the tutoring and talk very rewarding.

So I cared about social problems and I had written some rudimentary research papers on them for school. Surprisingly, it was my 10th grade honors biology teacher who really taught me how to write a clear and well-organized paper. She taught us about the research process and about the conventions of research papers. She had us all do experiments of our own choosing that would be enriched by actual literature reviews. The Surgeon General had recently announced that smoking caused cancer, and I blamed my mother's now-metastasizing breast cancer on her years of smoking, so I decided to do a lab experiment trying to give mice cancer by painting tar from my mother's cigarette filters on their shaved skin. (Having also refused to dissect a frog at the price of having to clean out rat cages, and rapidly growing very fond of these mice, I actually hoped the experiment would fail.) My teacher took us on a field trip to one of the libraries at nearby UCIA, and showed us how to find journal articles. Although they were sometimes incomprehensible, I remember my excitement and feeling of accomplishment when I did understand at least parts of the articles. My mice did not develop cancer (fortunately for them), so I decided to write my paper as a meta-analysis of my experimental process and its flaws (and made the point-well accepted by researchers later-that cancer was not just one disease with one cause).

My high school years occurred during a time of major social and cultural change. Like many other high school students in the 1960s, I started getting involved in the anti-war movement and going to demonstrations. During my senior year, I was in an honors program that allowed me to take regular college courses at UCLA for part of each school day. Particularly memorable was an American History class taught by Charles Hamilton, co-author, with Stokely Carmichael (as he was then called), of a book

on the Black Power Movement; he focused the class on issues of race and racism.

Having had my political consciousness raised, I decided, when it came time to go to College, that only university I would apply for and attend was U.C. Berkeley (famous for student activism, and near the then-enticing world of Haight- Ashbury). In my freshman year, I took a sociology course on racial stratification in the U.S., in which we read books like Tally@ Corner and Eldridge Cleaver's Soul on Ice. Long before the recent 'autobiographical turn" in scholarly writing in many humanities and social sciences disciplines, I wrote a term paper for this class in which I used texts like Cleaver's to analyze a horrifying experience in which a white friend and I were picked up hitchhiking and she was raped (while I talked my way out of being raped) by two African-American men who told us that since hippies like us believed in free love, they could not understand why we objected to having sex with them. As I had found before, writing could be a way to understand experience; in this case, it was also part of the healing process.

Although most of my courses at Berkeley were giant lecture classes and I had to camp on campus overnight in order to register, I did manage to take some wonderful classes, including one on Native American literature with N. Scott Momaday and one on Southeast Asian literature (which wound up being totally reconceived in mid-quarter, after major student protests against the U.S. invasion of Cambodia, as a student-led course on Southeast Asian politics). Still, after my freshman year, I decided that I wanted to attend a smaller school in which I might actually get to know my professors, where always-unavailable prerequisites did not keep me from taking courses I really wanted, where undergraduates were really valued. Having been a humanities major at Berkeley, I transferred to U.C. Santa Barbara for a year as a religious studies major, and then to small, progressive, residential Goddard College in Vermont, where there were no majors and we got narrative evaluations rather than grades. I became interested in writing, particularly poetry, and took courses in Chinese philosophy, Zen and existentialism, Finnegans Wake (offered every trimester), and French symbolist poetry. Mean- while, I was becoming much more aware of gender issues, in part because of my own experiences as a woman in academe and also because of what I was realizing was the androcentrism-the focus on (usually white) male thinkers and writers- in most of the courses I had taken at all four universities.

After completing my B.A., I took a year or so off to work and pay back student loans. My job at the Jewish Community Relations Council in San Francisco made me more aware of issues of anti-Semitism and more familiar with the Holocaust (which I had barely studied in school), as I worked on a new Holocaust guide we were distributing to local schools. But I knew I wanted to go on to graduate school. Since I couldn't decide between philosophy, religious studies, and literature, I applied to interdisciplinary graduate programs, and was happy to be accepted for the M.A. program called "General Studies in the Humanities' at the University of Chicago. I was interested then in the "big questions': "What is the meaning of life? How do we know what we know? What is reality? Mat is truth?" I discovered literary and critical theory, which speculated about such big questions and brought together many of my intellectual interests. Although my academic work did not seem clearly connected to social and political concerns, I was quite interested in issues of racial and gender justice in my life outside of academe. Living in a mostly African-American neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago gave some of these issues real immediacy.

After my MA. from Chicago, and more time out to work (at an academic research institute at U.C. Berkeley) and pay back more loans, I decided to get a Ph.D. in English in hopes of some day becoming a professor. Wanting an inter- disciplinary and flexible program-as well as a teaching assistantship to pay for my education-I decided to go to SUN-Y at Buffalo, whose English department was one of the strongest in the country, especially in literary/critical theory.

As soon as I began to teach for the first time-as a "teaching assistant" but with sole responsibility for all aspects of my courses-at Buffalo, I realized both how much I liked teaching and how much influence a teacher could have not only on the academic skills and knowledge of students but also on their views of the world and of themselves. (Sometimes now, after a difficult day of teaching, I think such a belief is overly optimistic, but I still can't give it up.) Like many universities then, Buffalo threw its TA.'s into the composition classroom with only a short orientation program to prepare us. Our first day as students there was also our first day as teachers. We did all take a teaching practicum during our first year, and there I began to read work on composition theory and on pedagogy as well as discuss day-to-day classroom issues with my peers and teacher. Like many of my peers, I thought of teaching writing as one way to encourage students to think critically about their lives and world and to encourage them (even if only subtly) to try to make the world a better place.

During my four years of teaching at Buffalo, I felt as though my interests in social justice were being served much more in the classroom than in my own reading and research, which focused on literature and on literary theory - even though I could articulate how even my most theoretical interests in language and epistemology were *somehow* connected to "real-life" issues. I was teaching my students reading, writing, and thinking skills that they would need in all aspects of their lives; meanwhile, I was finishing a dissertation on the rhetoric of prefaces to novels, from *Don Quixote* to *Lolita*.

My first full-time teaching job was at Youngstown State University, an open-admission university in a dying steel town. Some of my students were men laid off from the steel mills; for them, and for the returning women students who had not been able to go to college before they had their families, education was a means to restore or gain economic security, although many of them also discovered a genuine interest in literature and the aesthetic, social, political, ethical issues it raises. Not all our more traditional undergraduates were as eager to learn as most of these "non-traditional" adult students, whom I particularly enjoyed having in classes. Although the job was tenure-track, the teaching load was heavy and the town depressing, and I missed California, so I accepted a non- tenure-track position in UCLA's Writing Program. There I continued to believe that teaching students to write, read, and think-about texts, about life, about society-was my most important "social justice" mission. I also continued my literary and theoretical research, and in an effort to connect my research and teaching, read more widely in composition theory and in pedagogical theory; I was especially excited to discover new work by feminist theorists as well as by "classic writers" on liberatory pedagogy, like Paolo Freire; my reading reinforced my sense that teaching could be a way to contribute to a more just and peaceful world.

Happy at UCLA but wanting a tenure-track position more connected to my primary areas of training and interest-literary/critical theory and 20th century literature-I applied for a position in literary theory in the

Santa Clara University (SCU) Department of English. Since I was not Catholic, and since I had once had an on-campus interview at another Jesuit college at which I was told "my, my, you're remarkably logical for a woman," I had some concerns about my "fit" with SCU (which, even though I was an almost-native Californian I had never heard of before then). But after meeting colleagues, students, and administrators, reading and hearing about the strong social justice orientation, and seeing the beautiful campus, I felt that I would be right at home here. I have been teaching at SCU since 1987, and have indeed found a wonderful sense of community and shared values. Even my occasional experiences of feeling like a minority, or like the "other," as a Jew at a Jesuit university, have, I think, made me more aware of the situation of other "others" in society.

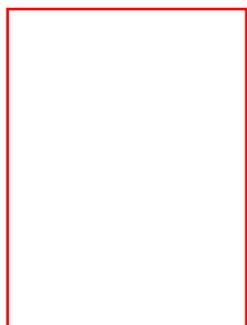
I still think of my teaching as making more direct contributions to social justice than my research, and my teaching has in many ways led my research more into social justice issues. A number of years ago, two of my students in an upper-division course on contemporary critical theory became interested in the work of the French psychoanalytic feminist theorist Julia Kristeva, and so I read more of her work in order to help them with their term papers. I wound up publishing two essays on Kristeva's work on psychoanalysis, gender, and ethics. My long-time academic and personal interests in issues of both gender and racial (in)equality were linked when I decided to develop a new course on feminist theory. Diane Jonte-Pace (Religious Studies) and I undertook a collaborative curriculum development project, thanks to an Irvine Grant, on "integrating diversity into the women's studies curriculum"; we focused on work by women of color in feminist theology and in feminist theory. A couple of years later, I was a leader of the summer Curriculum Integration Workshop for what was then the Women's Studies Program (now the Program for the Study of Women and Gender), helping colleagues learn more about feminist theory and integrate more work by and about women (including women of color) into existing courses or develop new Women's Studies courses.

In the Faculty Critical Theory Reading Group, which I founded in 1988 and have been co-directing with Professor Jonte-Pace for many years, we have sometimes read recent theoretical work dealing with issues of gender, race, and/or other political and cultural issues. One contemporary theorist I had read on my own and then suggested we read for the Theory Group (and later for the Ethics Center's Racism Study Group, which started several years ago and in which I occasionally participate) was bell hooks, a prolific African-American feminist theorist and cultural critic who, has written more than 20 books now.

I found bell hooks's critical analyses of white supremacist culture, consumerism, and the politics of feminism very powerful; they have often made me see films, videos, and cultural phenomena in new ways. A few years ago I realized that, although hooks was beginning to be mentioned frequently in feminist scholarship, and had even begun to be visible in public discussions of race that had been dominated by white and black male scholars, no one had yet published an article on her work. I wound up reading just about everything she had written, and then published an essay on the implications of her work for future discussions of feminism and postmodernism, and the need for these to keep race as well as gender in the foreground. Her work has made me much more aware of what I call the "blancocentrism"--or normative whiteness--of much scholarly work and most curricula. I had been noticing for decades how often women writers and scholars were marginalized in scholarly work (and courses designed) by men; after starting to read hooks and other women writers of color, I saw that their work was also often marginalized by white scholars.

My current research focuses on the relations between feminism, postmodernism, ethics, and politics. My interests in social justice, race, gender, and ethics (which I see as intimately related) have been shaping and becoming more visible in my teaching over the years-and vice versa. Literary and theoretical work by white women and writers of color figures prominently in many of my courses. Even when I teach courses or periods in which there is little such work (e.g., in the classical period), my students and I often discuss views of race, ethnicity, social status, and gender as these are shaped by and also shape their historical and cultural moments. Sometimes my students or new anthologies I choose for courses have brought new writers to my attention that I later include in another course. And some of these writers and the secondary literature on them work their way into my research. In my composition courses, I have chosen anthologies that address issues of multiculturalism, diversity, gender, American identity, and cultural politics that are especially important as we begin a new millennium.

Although, like most faculty teaching undergraduates in the College of Arts and Sciences, I rarely get to teach courses directly related to my research interests, I still find that my teaching shapes my research and vice versa. My experiences, colleagues, and students here have enabled me to forge a stronger link between my teaching and my research than I had before coming to SCU. I do occasionally remind myself that most of my scholarly work, like most other scholars'----even if on ethics, politics, race, or gender-will not in itself change the world. After all, how many, and what kinds of-people read scholarly books and articles? (In optimistic moments, I hope that perhaps some of my scholarship may affect how other scholars and teachers think about some of these issues and thus teach about them.) Even teaching that tries to help students become more socially conscious, more self-aware, more empathetic, more compassionate, and wiser may not always succeed, and even if it does, it may have only indirect effects, the results of which faculty may rarely see. Yet, as with many things, there can be a cumulative effect of social-justice-oriented teaching and research, even in humanities fields that do not readily or obviously lend themselves to direct social or political "application." Like Plato who thought literature was so powerful that he wanted to ban poets from his ideal republic, I believe literature can have significant effects on its readers- aesthetic, affective, intellectual, ethical. Like poets from Horace to Sir Philip Sidney, I believe literature can instruct and improve its readers as well as delight them. Reading, teaching, talking, and writing about literature and language can provide new ways of seeing, feeling, imagining, and thinking. I hope that in my teaching as well as my research I am contributing a little toward making the world a better-more just, humane, loving, peaceful-place. I hope my mother would be proud of me as I still am of her.



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