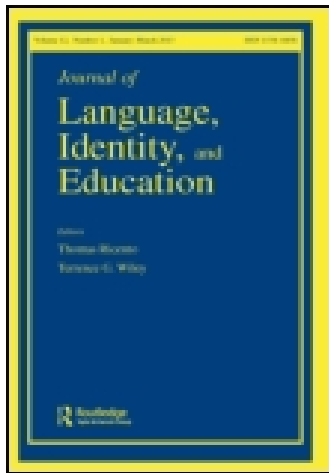


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Second Language Research, the Construction of Gendered Identity, and the Deleuzian Concept of *Becoming Woman*

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How is gendered subjectivity constructed? How does the experience of immigrating to a new country and learning a new language affect this construction? Do Deleuze and Guattari have anything to offer to Second Language Education (SLE) theory, research, and practice in this regard? This article explores how the concept of *becoming woman* works through a reexamination of the data pertaining to gender in a study of adults learning English while negotiating sites of tension, conflict, and contradiction within their experiences of immigration. I argue that *becoming woman* has significant explanatory power in conceptualizing the relationship between the two genders in the context of second language immigration.

Key words: Deleuze, becoming woman, gender, identity, second language

How is gendered subjectivity constructed? How does the experience of immigrating to a new country and learning a new language affect this construction? Do Deleuze and Guattari have anything to offer to Second Language Education (SLE) theory, research, and practice in this regard?

The experience of immigrating to a new country as a second language learner is a significant disruption and reconstruction of one's own subjectivity in ways that are unique (Nieto & Bode, 2010; Norton, 2000; Nunan & Choi, 2010). These changes occur in terms of one's identity, culture, ethnicity, race, language, national allegiance, and other subject positions. This article thinks through the concept of *becoming woman* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994) in an attempt to develop a deeper understanding of how gender is constructed in the context of second language immigration. As noted by Goulimari (1999), Colebrook (2000), Olkowski (2000), and Driscoll (2000), these concepts have had a productive, if controversial, relationship to the notion of *the other*, originally conceptualized in terms of gender by De Beauvoir (1949, 1972) and further developed by such feminist theorists as Irigaray (1990) and Kristeva & Oliver (2002).

Specifically, in this article I experiment with how this concept works through a reexamination of the data pertaining to gender in a study of adults learning English while negotiating sites of tension, conflict, and contradiction within their experiences of immigration. I argue that *becoming woman* has significant explanatory power in conceptualizing the relationship between the two genders in the context of second language immigration.

The empirical data to which this article refers pertains to a study I conducted with Punjabi-speaking adults enrolled in a government-funded immigrant English as a Second Language (ESL) program in Canada. As I note in more detail below, my research revealed that there were significant gaps between the experiences of these immigrants and how national curriculum and assessment documents construct and position idealized and racialized conceptions of second language learners (see Fleming, 2010). This article, however, reexamines this data in light of gender.

The remainder of this article starts with an outline of the Deleuzian concept I have used as my theoretical framework: *becoming woman*. This is followed by a brief overview of the original study. I then reinterpret the findings pertaining to gender with exemplary excerpts from the data. I conclude with a discussion of how Deleuze can be used to explore the relationship between the two genders within second language education research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: BECOMING WOMAN

May (2005) argues that *becoming* is a central concept within the Deleuzian oeuvre because it is explicitly set against *being* and *identity*, central notions within the tradition of Western philosophy since the Greeks (whether it be the *essential forms* of Plato or the *categories* of Aristotle). Instead of putting the focus on a linear movement from one stable state to another, *becoming* emphasizes the instability of these states and, in addition, the unpredictability of the multiple movements between them (as opposed to the linearity found within Kant's *dualism* or Hegelian *dialectics*). In Deleuzian nomenclature, these movements are *rhizomatic lines of flight* between *spaces*. A state is continuity being deconstructed and reconstructed or *detrterritorialized* and *reterritorialized* into new forms of difference.

The notion of *becoming*, Deleuze and Guattari (1980, 2004) argue, is an *immanent* concept in the sense that change and difference develops out of these states themselves and not from some *transcendent* essence or standard imposed from above. This way of thinking emphasizes that "it is experience, and not conformity to prescribed values that characterizes our ways of being" (Semetsky, 2008, p. xvii) and thus opens up the possibilities of how subjectivity is constructed beyond current structures of power and dominance. As Sotorin (2005) succinctly notes, "*Becoming* explodes the ideas about what we are and about what we can be beyond the categories that seem to contain us" (p. 99).

Becoming woman, as Deleuze and Guattari explicitly note in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972/1994), is a central notion for their concept of *becoming* because it illustrates the relationship between what they call the *molar* and the *molecular*. As Conley (2005) summarizes it, molar entities are those that are dominant and affiliated to the governing forces that pertain to the nation-state. Molecular entities are individual "micropolitical" responses to these dominant forces. The dominant forms that are implied within the doxa of the everyday are as much ideological as explicit.

Sotorin (2005) argues that, "*Becomings* are always *molecular deterritorializations*, that is, effects destabilizing dominant *molar* forms and relations" (p. 103). Not surprisingly, then, resistance to the dominant order comes from those entities and people who desire change. Opposition to change comes from those entities already in dominant positions of power. The molar and molecular are closely related to two other Deleuzian concepts: *majoritarian* and *minoritarian*

politics. Majoritarian politics are those related to axiomatic standards within a given society while minoritarian politics are related to forms of resistance to those standards.

In terms of gender, current structures and discourses of power produce dominant standards “like ‘white-man’ or ‘adult-male’ in comparison to which other qualities can be said to be *minoritarian*” (Lorraine, 2005, p. 152). As Deleuze and Guattari (1980, 2004) themselves put it,

All becoming is a becoming-minoritarian. When we say majority, we are referring not to the greater relative quantity, but to the determination of a state or standard . . . The special situation for women in relation to the man-standard accounts for the fact that becomings, being minoritarian, always pass through a becoming-woman. (p. 291)

As I demonstrate below through my reexamination of the data for this study, *becoming woman* conceptualizes how the molecular affects the molar in this context. In short, the feminine leads the masculine. The minoritarian leads the majoritarian. In other words, as the women in this study change, so, too, do the men.

THE ORIGINAL STUDY

My original study focused on the attitudes towards citizenship embedded within the immigrant experiences of adult Punjabi-speakers from India living in a Vancouver suburb and attending evening ESL classes provided by the local public school district. Based on a broad sampling of ESL learners at the site derived from a questionnaire previously administered with 114 respondents from a wide variety of language backgrounds, I conducted in-depth, semistructured interviews with 25 Punjabi-speaking participants. Seven of the 25 participants (28%) were men.

The study involved comparing how the conceptions of citizenship these participants exhibited compared to those embedded within federal curriculum and assessment documents. This aspect of the research revealed significant gaps between the experiences of these immigrants and how these documents construct and position idealized and racialized conceptions of second language learners (see Fleming, 2010).

Adult ESL programming, such as the one under study, fulfills very strategic roles in terms of identity formation and the nation state. As Wong, Duff, and Early (2001) make clear, ESL programs have an important impact on the employment, identities, and integration of immigrants. At the site under study, of the majority of 114 learners surveyed, 65 were women and 83 were speakers of Punjabi. The average length of time these learners had been in Canada was 1.9 years. The vast majority of respondents had laboring or semi-skilled trades occupations in both Canada and their countries of origin. Eighty of my participants reported encountering what they described as significant difficulties in immigrating to Canada. These included having had difficulties involving not being proficient in English (87.7% of the respondents) or difficulties with employment (65.7% of the respondents). Difficulties in terms of employment included (in order of frequency of mentions) issues related to finding work, low levels of pay, the hard physical nature of their work, and significant violations by employers of provincial standards of employment and safety.

REINTERPRETING THE FINDINGS RELATED TO GENDER

As is the case for most analytic frameworks in this context (Merriam, 2002; Creswell, 2008), I coded the data according to gender (among other variables) and compared the findings across themes in large part derived from the academic literature. However, I struggled with how to conceptualize how themes related to gender emerged out of the data. In short, the men and women in this study conceptualized citizenship differently and, although there were many similarities between the two, these differences were substantial.

The women in the study noted that they had changed significantly through their experiences of immigration. They explicitly noted that they had had subaltern positions within Indian society prior to coming to Canada and that they were now struggling to gain greater power and control over their own lives. To express it in Deleuzian terms, these women recognized the minoritarian positions that they had held and that they were resisting the restrictions placed on them by the molar “man-standard.”

All of the female respondents in this study confirmed that coming to Canada was liberating. As one simply expressed it, “Girls are free here.” This sense of freedom was related to employment, education, marriage choice, reproductive rights, dress, and freedom of access to the public sphere. Although some of the changes in custom had symbolic meanings, such as the refusal to cover one’s head in public, others were more substantial. For example, one of my participants responded to the pressure she was under to marry early and bear children as she might have done in India by saying, “No, first my career. Cause my own life, my own decision in Canada.” Another noted that, in contrast to her new life, “If I were in Punjab I would have babies earlier.” A third noted that she now had “the rights to go everywhere.”

Some of my female respondents were prepared to negotiate change with family members regarding their future marriages. One of my respondents, for example, told me that she would respect family pressures to marry within their caste but would reserve the right to choose who would become her spouse. Others were less inclined to negotiate, making it clear that they were making an autonomous and conscious choice to break completely with the traditional concept of arranged marriage for themselves and their own children.

Conscious choices to change custom continued after marriage, as well. One of my respondents, for example, told me that being in Canada meant that she and her husband didn’t regard the birth of a boy as a priority. She noted that they both regarded with disdain the negative attitude towards the birth of a daughter that was common in India. The same respondent argued that the education of girls should be the same as that of boys. This was, she emphasized, not an attitude commonly felt in India.

Language and religion were major considerations in regard to changing customs. Although the majority wished to pass the knowledge of Punjabi to the next generation, most were not adamant. Most felt that fluency in English was the first priority for the next generation and felt that it was inevitable that eventually the language would pass out of use in succeeding generations. The same attitude was not expressed in terms of religion, however. Most felt that it was much more important to preserve the morality and beliefs associated with the Sikh faith. Many echoed what one respondent told me: that “being Sikh makes a person respectable and good.”

The most important factor that contributed to this feeling of liberation for the women had to do with having jobs. One respondent was quite blunt in her assessment in this regard, saying that

“there is more freedom [in Canada] because in India girls don’t work.” This was in great contrast to what occurred in India, where, as one respondent put it, “Boys have a job, girls have no job.”

The story told by one of my participants deserves a complete telling. This young woman had come to the country to join her new husband in an arranged marriage a year and a half before our interview. She had left her own family in the Punjab, who enjoyed a very comfortable life materially, in order to start a new life with her husband. Within 2 weeks of her arrival she had her first job as a manual laborer in a greenhouse, working for minimum wage. She described the work as hard but her life with her husband’s family as good. However, within a month of my respondent’s arrival, her new husband was thrown into prison, charged, and then convicted of drug trafficking. At the time of our interview, he was still in prison and they had just recently divorced. I asked my participant why she did not choose to return to India and her family, especially in light of the way that she had emphasized that no disgrace normally associated with divorce would fall on her. I was curious about why she would remain in Canada, making minimum wage at a difficult job and living alone and relatively isolated in a basement apartment, when she could resume a comfortable life with her own family. Her answer was that in Canada she had “more freedom.” She provided me with a concrete example by saying that “in Canada we can wear every types of clothes. We can do hairstyles. We can do every hairstyle but not in India.” It is interesting to note, in this context, that this same respondent also emphasized that attended English classes represented one of the few social outlets available to her. This woman described her own experience in a manner that is highly exemplary of the unique way that coming to Canada is viewed by the women in this study.

Through the process of immigration to Canada, the women in this study were going through a process of *detrterritorialization* and *reterritorialization* (again, using Deleuzian terminology) in reference to the molar forces around them. However, as is clear in the way in which they were prepared to negotiate change in regard to marriage and reproductive rights, these women were actively engaged in bringing their men along with them in this process.

As noted above, 7 of the 25 participants were men. The men in the study described coming to Canada quite differently than the women. They rarely talked about change as being dramatically or qualitatively different from life in India. Sometimes their comments took the form of complaints about increases in working hours, the high price of housing in Canada, or what they believed were unreasonable levels of taxation. In the main, however, they focused their comments on how coming to Canada opened up significantly better economic opportunities in (to borrow from Hegel’s distinction) a quantitative but not qualitative sense.

Unlike the women, the men in this study did not highlight anything different about how they dressed or acted since coming to Canada. One respondent, for example, was adamant that immigrating to Canada had not changed his attitude towards religious observances (such as the prohibitions against cutting hair in the Sikh faith) or clothing. He usually wore Western dress in India and would continue to do so in Canada. He was going to keep his hair short in Canada just as he had in India.

Quite significantly in terms of my Deleuzian framework, the one exception to this trend was in terms of gendered family roles. It was here that the men commented on how coming to Canada was a significant qualitative change. Without exception, the men realized that things would have to change in Canada from the molar standards they were used to in India.

Given the financial reality facing these immigrants, especially in terms of housing, family priorities meant the women had to find employment. Living on a single income, still commonplace

for a family in India, was no longer possible given the price of mortgages in this community. Thus, as noted above, women in this milieu commonly found employment in greenhouses, nurseries, and in small factories. Most of the men found employment in either construction or trucking. Although gaining paid employment marked a dramatic shift for the women, the men represented working in Canada as being essentially a continuation of what they had experienced in India. They had had working-class jobs in India and now had much the same in Canada. The work might be in construction, as opposed to agriculture, but the positions they held in both countries were in laboring or semi-skilled trades.

The men in this study were keenly aware of the fact that family roles had shifted since coming to Canada as a direct result of this change of work patterns for the women. A few of the men seemed to begrudge the fact that family priorities led to the women finding jobs. However, the majority took a positive attitude towards this change that was not simply in terms of added family income. Most noted that the women in their families were happier as a result of finding gainful employment. The majority looked upon these changes as positive for all members of the family in ways that were not simply financial.

As one of my respondents noted, change was to be expected and was part and parcel of coming to a new country. As he expressed it, "In India, what Indian man thinks that this is the main problem. I am not believe it . . . I'm not believe I am stronger. I no think that." He indicated that he had abandoned the attitude that he was, as a male, superior to women. He represents his sexism as being something that he had inherited as part of his Indian culture that he was abandoning as being incompatible with whom he wanted to become in his new country.

The women in this study led the changes in family roles that the *ruptures* (to use another Deleuzian concept) created by immigration to Canada, demonstrating how minoritarian "becoming woman" affects the molar "becoming men" in this context. Again, in other words, the women lead the men in qualitative changes in family roles and relations.

Of course, one should not be naïve. I am fully aware that the attitudes that the men expressed to me in regard to the equality of women might not be seamlessly borne out in reality. Several of these women in this study, in fact, noted that despite attitudes to the contrary they were still responsible for the majority of household duties and had less authority in terms of family decision making than the men in their families. Undoubtedly, some of the men resisted this change in various ways. However, I believe that the accumulated weight of this data indicates that the changes that the women were undergoing in this context affected the men in ways that the latter felt were positive.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SECOND LANGUAGE RESEARCH

As Morgan and I have argued elsewhere (Fleming & Morgan, 2012; Morgan & Fleming, 2009), examinations of identity in second language education require consideration of how subjectivity is reconstructed through the experiences of immigration. This article examines this process more closely in terms of data pertaining to gender and corroborates other research (summarized in Arthur, Este, & Hrycak, 2007), pointing to the fact that there are, indeed, significant differences in the way immigration is viewed by men and by women.

The Deleuzian concept of *becoming woman* provides us with further insight because it gives us a handle on how to conceptualize the relationship of the two genders in this context.

As noted above, *becoming woman* illustrates the relationship between what Deleuze and Guattari (1980/2004) termed the molar and the molecular. Not surprisingly, the molar entities that are dominant in this context were the masculine, and the molecular entities were those that were feminine. These correspond to majoritarian and minoritarian politics, respectively.

As Colebrook (2000) argues, *becoming woman* “is a privileged *becoming* in so far as she short-circuits the ‘self-evident’ identity of man” (p. 12). This does not mean that the molar, or dominant entity is incapable of change. Rather, this means that the first impetus for change is the molecular. In short, the molecular destabilizes or deterritorializations the molar.

In the data discussed above, it is clear that the women conceptualized immigrating to Canada in ways that were significantly qualitative. They pointed to what they regarded as positive changes in their lives regarding work, family responsibilities, clothing, marriage, childbearing, and access to public space. The men in this study did not indicate that immigration had altered much qualitatively for them except in terms of how it changed the family roles for the women in their lives.

Deleuze and Guattari (1972, 1994) note that progressive change is driven not by the molar, but the “micropolitical” resistance shown by the molecular entities to dominant power structures. This change is, not the dramatic flipping of opposites that is implied within Hegelian dialectics, but the insidiousness of melting boundaries. The men in this study see the positive aspects of the changes initiated by the women and (to various degrees, to be sure) support them.

The interrelationship between the genders is a complex process and has not been deeply explored in second language research in terms of the construction of subjectivity or identity. As Pavlenko and Pillar (2008) note, second language education research has focused on gendered practices in terms of the identities of women, classroom interaction, access to educational resources, rates of acquisition, and representations within curricula. As I elaborate below, a Deleuzian perspective offers new possibilities in terms of how we interpret the interrelationships between these various foci.

OPENING UP POSSIBILITIES

Deleuzian texts are notoriously difficult to interpret because they often employ inconsistent and newly coined terminology or consciously pervert how this terminology has been used previously in Western philosophy. In short, working with Deleuzian texts can be exasperating. However, while Deleuze’s work is elusive, reading him opens up a multitude of possibilities because he is “an experimental thinker committed to a conception of movement in thought” (Patton, 2010, p. 10). This is the anti-fascist quality that Foucault praised in his preface to *Anti-Oedipus*. In light of this, I have found that one must engage Deleuze and Guattari texts as intensively as they experimented with their own writing.

To put it another way, the possibilities that present themselves in working with these texts only emerge as long as one avoids approaching them for the purpose of traditional forms of exegesis. It is a significant waste of time, in my experience, to engage in the ferreting out of commanding references through the minute examination of sacred or authoritative texts, so long a hallmark of traditional biblical or classical Marxist scholarship. Indeed, the struggles to fix the meaning of such texts strikes me as being little more than attempts to curtail intellectual enquiry in the

interests of the dead hand of authority. As Marx (1885/1976) noted, “The tradition of all the dead generations weight like a nightmare on the brain on the living” (p. 398).

So, taking a cue from the way in which Deleuze made use of his readings of Nietzsche, Spinoza, and Bergson. I argue that it is not a matter of determining “stable,” “correct,” “authoritative,” or “definitive” interpretations of the concepts I make use of here but rather a matter of experimenting with their explanatory power to illuminate and think things through in new ways. This is the type of *intensive reading* of Deleuze pioneered by St. Pierre (2004) in educational research. One must critically use texts (interrogate them, if you will) by pushing ourselves beyond reading them as if they are static or authoritative.

In this light, Deleuzian concepts are exciting to use in the context of empirical research because of the way in which they resist the traditional use of analytic categories that reduce phenomena to isolated or dependent variables. As referred to above, Deleuze and Guattari (1972) employ the concept of a *rhizome* to illustrate the multiplicity of experience. Rather than reducing data to manageable themes for analysis, research along these lines tends to uncover complexity (cf. Davis & Sumara, 2006) in ways that resist simplistic or linear analysis.

Nevertheless, as is shown above in my discussion of my overall methodology, I still prefer to determine findings that are grounded (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in thematically based coding and analysis. My goal is to produce convincing arguments that emerge coherently from coded data. I echo Mazzei and McCoy in arguing that when using Deleuze, “it is not enough to use examples from data” (2010, p. 504). Rather, one must work with Deleuzian concepts to think through the patterns that emerge from a complete body of data.

I personally have found *becoming woman* to be a useful concept for second language education because it broadens the possibilities for research into how subjectivity is constructed within the larger contexts of family and community. The concept situates feminine resistance to dominant power relations within a framework that opens up multiple possibilities for change. During the course of my *intensive reading* of Deleuze, I found that it was important to link this concept with those within feminist theory if I were to explore the possibilities for a deeper understanding of gender relations in this context. Of course, this is not the end of the possible *lines of flight*. Given the current dominance of the term *identity* within second language education theory (Block, 2007; Norton, 2000), there are many more possibilities to explore.

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