

# Rethinking the Genders and Becoming in Second Language Education

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## Abstract

This chapter plays with the concept of *becoming woman* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972/1994) as a way of gaining a deeper understanding of the construction of gender within the context of second language immigration. The concept has had a productive, if controversial, relationship to the notion of the *other*, originally conceptualized in terms of gender by De Beauvoir and further developed by such feminist theorists as Irigaray and Kristeva. *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. In what follows, I re-examine the data pertaining to 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 construction of subjectivity and gender in the context of second language immigration.

## Keywords

becoming woman – gender – immigration

## 1 Introduction

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 and Guattari's works are often elusive, reading them opens up a multitude of possibilities because Deleuze 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.

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. Deleuze and Guattari (1980/2004) employ the concept of a *rhizome* to illustrate the multiplicity of experience. Rather than reducing data into 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 in my discussion of the empirical study below, I still prefer to determine findings that are grounded (Glaser & Straus, 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 (2010) in arguing that, when using Deleuze, “it is not enough to use examples from data” (p. 504). Rather, one must work with Deleuzian concepts to think through the patterns that emerge from a complete body of data.

In this sense, I agree with several of MacLure’s (2014) observations about using codes when utilizing a Deleuzian perspective. Coding, as employed in the research in our field, commonly assumes a positivistic orientation towards human “subjects” (turning them into “objects”, in fact). The researcher adopts an omnipresent stance while imposing fixed and hierarchical relationships on the data. We often start with codes that have been chosen from our pre-determined conceptual frameworks. This tends to restrict our analysis, even if we attempt to be open to the consideration of new themes and codes that “emerge” from the data. Most of us do not acknowledge these restrictions, for to do so would be to surrender our claims to scientific objectivity. So, these common approaches are suspect in the context of our dealings with real live human beings.

Like MacLure (2014), however, I still believe coding has its uses if one adopts an “active” orientation towards it. We should “recognize coding, not as a static representation or translation of a world laid out before us ..., but as an open-ended and on-going practice of *making* sense” (p. 181). So, as I describe below, I have revisited the data and coding for a previous study and learnt more about the people I was interviewing (as well as myself). My original analysis focused on how the Punjabi-speaking participants conceptualized citizenship and compared their observations to notions embedded within federal curriculum and assessment documents. My previous analysis did NOT take gender into account.

## 2      **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 molar and molecular lines of flight* between *spaces*. A state is continuity being deconstructed and reconstructed, or *deterriorialized* and *reterritorialized* into new forms of difference.

The notion of *becoming*, Deleuze and Guatarri (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 Guatarri 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 implicit as explicit.

Sotorin (2005) argues that, "*becomings* are always *molecular deterritorializations*, that are, 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.

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 Guatarri (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)

I personally find the concept of *becoming woman* to be useful 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. Given the current dominance of the term *identity* within second language education theory (Norton, 2000; Block, 2007), there are many more possibilities to explore. This is far from the end of possible *lines of flight*.

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 chapter examines this process more closely in terms of data pertaining to gender and corroborates other research (summarized in Arthur et al., 2007) pointing to the fact that there are, indeed, significant differences in the way immigration is viewed by men and women.

The Deleuzian concept of *becoming woman* provides us with further insight because it gives us a handle on how to conceptualize gender in this context. As noted above, *becoming woman* illustrates the relationship between what Deleuze and Guatarri (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 *detrterritorializations* the *molar*.

In the data discussed below, 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 Guatarri (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 my original analysis saw the positive aspects of the changes initiated by the women and (to various degrees, to be sure) support them.

I would argue that 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.

### 3 Gender and Immigration

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 chapter thinks through the concept of *becoming woman* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972/1994) in an attempt to develop a deeper understanding of how gender is constructed in this context. As noted by Goulimari (1999), Colebrook (2000), Olkowski (2000), and Driscoll (2000), Deleuzian 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 (1990/1993) and Kristeva (2002).

The empirical data to which this chapter refers pertains to a study that 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, the research revealed that there were significant gaps between the experiences of these immigrants and how national curriculum and assessment documents constructed and positioned idealized and racialized conceptions of second language learners (see Fleming, 2010). This chapter, however, reexamines this data in light of gender.

#### 4 The Empirical Study: Overview

My 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 semi-structured interviews with 25 Punjabi-speaking participants. Seven of the 25 interview participants (28%) were men.

The study's focus, as mentioned above, was on 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.

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, the majority of learners were women (57.8%) and speakers of Punjabi (72.8%). The average length of time these learners had been in Canada was 1.9 years. The vast majority of survey respondents had laboring or semi-skilled trades occupations in both Canada and their countries of origin. A total of 96.5% of the participants in my survey 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 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.

## 5 Findings Related to Gender

As is the case for most analytic frameworks in this context (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 2002), 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 significant 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 that 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 respondent said that, “in Canada we can wear every types of clothes. We can do hairstyles. We can do every hairstyle, but not in India”. Another 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 to be a priority. She noted that they both regarded with distain 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 for 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 two 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 emphasized that no disgrace normally associated with divorce would fall on her. I was curious as to 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 nomenclature) 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, seven of the 25 interview 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. A single income family, still commonplace 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* (the 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 naive. 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.

## 6 Conclusion

The possibilities that present themselves in working with Deleuzian 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 (1968/1994, 1969/1990, 1970/1988), I argue that it is not a matter of determining “stable”, “correct”, “authoritative”, or “definitive” interpretations of the concepts that 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. This process, as Margaret Atwood might say, is one of “negotiating with the dead” (2002, p. 153).

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