Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic (review)

Kathryn E. Linder

Feminist Teacher, Volume 19, Number 1, 2008, pp. 74-76 (Review)

Published by University of Illinois Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/ftr.0.0024

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/255825

For content related to this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=article&id=255825
Mary Kelley’s book, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America’s Republic*, is a textual analysis that “highlights the significance of education as the key both to women’s entering civil society and to the influence they exercised as makers of public opinion” (15). Focusing specifically on the relationship between women’s placement in academies and seminaries and women’s engagement within civil society, Kelley points to the ways in which women influenced public opinion through their roles as teachers, writers, and editors. In these positions, Kelley posits, women “contributed to national discourses of religious doctrine and denominationalism, on politics and political parties, on women and domesticity, and on the nation and its potential as the world’s redeemer” (10) before they were able to establish full citizenship through voting or obtaining property or divorce rights.

By examining the relationship between educated women and civil society, Kelley challenges the well-known gendered dichotomy of public versus private and looks instead at “social roles and institutions” (5) that reside within “a national public in which citizens were secured in basic freedoms before the law” (7). Specifically, Kelley discusses how educated women were able to enter into the social spaces that marked “a public inhabited by private persons” (7) and expand their influence outside of the domestic sphere. Further, Kelley explains, educated women living in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries struggled with notions of gendered republicanism and were made to balance their commitments “to pursuing the critical thinking and the cultural production” learned in school with “the demands and distractions of their households” (252). In order to “claim a female citizenship as educators, writers, editors, and reformers who were shaping the character of civil society” (246) these women “reconfigured” (244) popular notions of womanhood in order to develop new roles for themselves in civil society.

Attempting to disguise the “radical potential” of education “as an agent in
the creation of a subjectivity that challenged” traditional gender roles, Kelley describes how women utilized rhetoric that emphasized “that women’s learning was dedicated, not to self-actualization, but to social improvement,” rather than admitting to education’s ability to “legitimate women’s engagement in the making of public opinion” (102). By staying within their traditional role as moral educators of children and the nation, women were permitted to pursue educational goals that enabled them to participate in civil society in new ways. As Kelley points out, while the number of women in academies and seminaries multiplied, more and more women learned the skills needed to engage in public life such as reading, writing, and public speaking.

Importantly, Kelley addresses the backlash that educated women experienced through the label “bluestocking” (99). Educated women who went against traditional gender norms of female submission, who did not hide their intellectual abilities, or who were perceived as pretentious were constructed as deviant. One example Kelley offers is that of Mary Wollstonecraft, “who openly displayed her learning without attending to the requisite feminine conventions” (235) and became “the symbol of defiled womanhood” (238). In contrast, Kelley points to Hannah More, a family woman who utilized her education to help others and who was constructed as entirely selfless. Through performing approved societal constructions of womanhood, educated women furthered their influence over their communities and in civil society while also expanding the positions that women could embody.

Although Kelley does discuss some of the important differences (namely race and class) that influenced women’s abilities to engage in civil society, she does not explore in depth the role of black women or working class women in her study. Although the title of her book implies an intersectional analysis, stating that she is looking at “women” in general, Kelley ultimately focuses largely on white women of middle- and upper-class status with brief glimpses of intersectional analyses distributed throughout. Notably, Kelley posits that “European and African American sites were all linked in a common understanding of civil society as composed of private citizens meeting together” (7) and articulates the “significance of class and race in defining an individual’s engagement in organized benevolence, social reform, and associations devoted to reading and writing” (9). She does not, however, sustain an intersectional analysis throughout her book, inserting only sporadic information about race and class identities.

For example, in her fourth chapter on “literary societies, reading circles, and mutual improvement associations,” Kelley devotes several paragraphs to the development of African-American women’s literary societies, but the index of her book shows that there are more passages on white women and anti-slavery (twelve) than on African Americans and anti-slavery efforts (four). Significantly, there is no index notation for working-class women. In the latter part of her book, Kelley does address, albeit minimally, the mutual construction of racial privilege and gender subordination (226), but she fails to address the ways in which expectations of womanhood constructed through gendered republicanism are also constructed through racial and class identity as well as gender roles.

Kelley’s *Learning to Stand and Speak* is a detailed analysis of the relationship
between education and women’s participation in civil society. Those interested in dominant discourses of gender and the history of education will find this book both interesting and informative. Kelley excels at offering a variety of illustrations and life stories as evidence of her findings, and her chapters on pedagogy (Chapter Three) and “the privilege of reading” (Chapter Five) are especially engaging because of her skilled interweaving of examples. Ultimately, Kelley’s book offers a significant examination of how women situated in a particular historical time period gained entrance to civil society and thus paved the way for further movement toward gaining citizenship rights for women. This book would be best utilized in a course examining the historic relationship between women’s education and women’s participation in public life, but should also be paired with texts that explore the diverse identities of women from the same time period.

KATHRYN E. LINDER


I recently took a class on feminist activism in which we examined the dichotomy between theory and practice. During the semester it became quite evident that students were overwhelmed by the social justice issues we were examining. Many students defined activism or practice as something that had to create immediate change and that could not take place within the academy. These understandings of practice resulted in feelings of hopelessness because many students did not have the time between work, school, and family obligations to participate in the activist projects we had studied. Shortly after this course ended, I read Leela Fernandes’s *Transforming Feminist Practice: Non-Violence, Social Justice and the Possibilities of a Spiritualized Feminism*. Fernandes’s book examines a form of spiritual feminism that deconstructs the false dichotomies between theory/practice, spirituality/religion, and self/other. In five compact chapters, she advocates for a synthesis of spirituality and feminism that allows one to generate alternative visions to social problems in the world.

Spirituality, for Fernandes, is a “lived spirituality” (10). Her concept of spirituality departs from the conventional forms inscribed by patriarchy, colonization, and violence. One of her primary goals is to reclaim a form of spirituality that necessitates “an understanding of self as encompassing body and mind, as well as spirit” (10). Fernandes’s theory of a spiritualized feminist activism begins with a transformation of the self, which eventually leads to enduring social transformation. Her approach to spiritual activism is not a “quick fix” solution, but rather a necessary process for lasting social change. Fernandes elucidates her approach to feminist activism by examining recent and historical world events, building on feminist writings, and reflecting on her experiences teaching women’s studies. Fernandes’s classroom experiences provide an important foundation for her book. These experiences have provided her a lens through which to see how the cycle of cynicism influences students’ abilities to