Laura Triviño Cabrera

# We Can Teach It!



# Feminist Critical Literacy

From Mainstream Culture to Didactic Produsage

#### Laura Triviño Cabrera

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# From Mainstream Culture to Didactic Produsage



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### Prologue

ANA GABRIELA MACEDO Universidade do Minho

In April 2016, it is now precisely six years ago, I received a formal letter from the University of Málaga introducing Laura Triviño Cabrera to me as a potential co-supervisor of her PhD dissertation on the very wide topic of 'Audiovisual Coeducation towards Citizenship. Postmodern aesthetics and the representations of gender in musical videoclips'. Laura had already written to me personally, and we had agreed she would attend my seminars within the Doctoral Program in 'Comparative Modernities. Literatures, Arts and Cultures', at Universidade do Minho. With this Doctoral Program she achieved her second PhD, as she was already a doctor in Art History. But in order to pursue her academic career at the School of Education and Didactics which had hired her, she would have to complete a second doctorate in this field. Laura was a very young woman then, seemingly shy and reserved, as she then appeared to me in our first meetings. Laura joined eagerly our seminars in Critical Theory, with a privileged focus on Postmodernism and Gender Studies; she worked non-stop, struggled in between three languages, Portuguese, Spanish and English (the latter as language of most of our bibliography), and often travelled to Málaga and Seville on the weekends, as she had part-time teaching to do. She was relentless in all this, always ready to debate a new critical essay with her Portuguese peers, eager to learn, eager to share the knowledge she was fast acquiring and adding to it her own inquisitive mind, making the best usage of her solid background in aesthetics and philosophy. Chapter after chapter I was given to read a carefully woven work intertwining gender criticism and feminist studies with post-modern aesthetics and ethics, and a close reading and critical analysis of a selected *corpus* of audiovisual narratives. All this geared towards her major questioning – education towards citizenship. Her chosen case study became, after much reflection and consideration, Beyoncé and the videoclip *Formation*. Hence the tightening of her thesis title, which was submitted just before the start of the pandemic year of 2020: *Literacidad Crítica Feminista para la Educación Ciudadana*. *El videoclip 'Formation' de Beyoncé en la formación inicial del profesorado de Ciencias Sociales*.

The book that we are now able to fully enjoy and immerse ourselves in, owes its inception to this doctoral thesis, and the enthusiasm and unbreakable stamina of its author, hence the reason for my introductory digression and my personal contentment on the success of an earlier brilliant student.

I would say that, globally speaking, Triviño's book – Feminist Critical Literacy. From Mainstream Culture to Didactic Produsage – addresses and debates in full two major questions, which I paraphrase from her text. 1- Education (i.e., the classroom) as a heterotopian space; 2- plus the good humored axiom:

TO BE OR NOT TO BE A FEMINIST TEACHER, THAT IS THE 'POST' QUESTION.

The title of the Introduction is telling in itself: 'Education as a Feminist Utopia'. Chapter by chapter the arguments, theories and conceptualizations are put forward, expanded and debated, following a firm line of thought, solidly anchored in a vast interdisciplinary bibliography. 'From post-feminism to post-machismo: Educational identities shaped in the context of post-modernism', a section in the first chapter, is crucial to open up and clarify the various angles of the contemporary educational debate as Triviño understands it. 'Mainstream Culture for committed citizen education' as second chapter offers a review of the multiple possibilities of dialogue and fruitful 'close encounter' between the so called and too often undervalued and quickly dismissed mass

culture alongside a critical feminist pedagogy. Triviño sustains that they are not at all incompatible, whereas in fact, teachers ignoring the former run the severe risk of erasing all together any empathy with their students, thus disrupting the learning process from the very beginning. The 'feminist utopia' in the classroom, she claims, goes hand in hand with the new 'Z phenotype' of teachers who can positively endorse active production of learning and critical awareness without victimization or blaming their students for their eventual 'fast culture' consumption.

Chapter three addresses in detail the various layers of what Triviño defines, on the whole, as 'Feminist critical literacy', ranging from 'Multimodality and performativity', the 'aesthetics of reception and post-structuralism' and a third binomial, 'Plural feminism and intersectional feminism'.

Chapter four is probably the most original and creative in the ensemble. It presents the researcher 'hands on', totally engaged in proving her previous arguments and conceptualization, face to face with her 'experimental object'. Thus the reason for its title: 'Implementation of feminist critical literacy. From music video to educational video'. And the experimental object is *Formation*, Beyoncé's video, which allows the teacher to strategically reach her students in their own territory, ignoring top bottom hierarchies, handling mainstream culture without prejudice, thus proving that critical pedagogy and feminist thinking are not incompatible with entertainment and fruition. It all depends on the perspective of the beholder, the engagement and the critical awareness throughout the whole learning process.

The metaphorical Conclusion of the volume evokes the magnificent French-Canadian artist Louise Bourgeois and her monumental sculpture, 'Spider' (1996), figuring female empowerment, instinct and nurturing, but also knowledge and fierceness. And, if I may add, on a personal note, it evokes in me the moving reminiscence of our (already!) distant seminars at Universidade do Minho, where Laura Triviño dutifully sat as a doctoral student, making me proud of my profession and its potential for opening up critical awareness in young minds towards global citizenship, women's rights and education as a powerful tool.

Beyond any doubt an 'Educational Arachnology' grounded on a 'feminist critical literacy' in its own right.

This is an important book, refreshing in scope and methodological strategy, fully engaged in participatory education and unflinchingly committed to change.

April 2022

# Introduction: education as a Feminist Utopia

The ultimate goal of feminist theorizing is to provoke change in ways of thinking about women, men, and the human condition, and, thereby, to stimulate social change.

Crocco (2008)

Rhiannon Firth (2013) stated that research is a utopian and pedagogical project as it transforms the researcher and transforms the research participants, intentionally or otherwise. This book explores a process known as 'Feminist Critical Literacy', the result of education research developed in R&D projects<sup>1</sup> and education innovation projects<sup>2</sup> that aims to explore education as a feminist utopia. Education and Utopia has been the subject of ongoing pedagogical reflection, so this introduction will explain

<sup>1.</sup> Cultural Produsage on social media: Industry, Popular Consumption, and Audiovisual Literacy of Spanish youth with a gender perspective, funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation (R&D FEM2017-83302-C3-3-P). Principal Investigator: Dr. Asunción Bernárdez Rodal. Multimodal Literacy and Cultural Studies: Citizen Education in a Post-Modern Society (LITMEC 2017-2019, Universidad de Málaga). Principal Investigator: Dr. Laura Triviño Cabrera.

<sup>2.</sup> Audiovisual Literacy for Performative Practice. Towards the co-education of the gaze, multi-literacies and artivism through the Teaching of Artistic Expression and the Teaching of Social Sciences (PIE 17-172, Universidad de Málaga). Principal Investigator: Dr. Laura Triviño Cabrera. Ethical-Social Literacy, Artivism, and Citizenship. Critical-creative thinking and social change for innovation in teaching. Principal Investigator: Dr. Laura Triviño Cabrera.

what we mean by 'feminist utopia' and how Feminist Critical Literacy can make it easier for us, as teachers, to project ourselves towards that place.

The term 'utopia' dates back to 1516, the abbreviated title for A little, true book, not less beneficial than enjoyable, about how things should be in a state and about the new island Utopia by Thomas More. The influence of this work ushered in the concept of 'Utopia' as a literary genre, characterised initially by a critique 16th Century English society and then developing a proposal for an ideal society located on an island located nowhere, understood as the 'non-place', based on its Greek etymology, v(no') and τόπος ('place'). Following the appearance of *Utopia*, utopian approaches abounded in the Renaissance, associated with the political and religious climate of Counter-Reformation and Protestantism (Cámara and Gómez, 2011): The City of the Sun (Tommaso Campanella, 1623), Christianopolis (Johannes Valentinus Andreae, 1619) or New Atlantis (Francis Bacon, 1626). However, far from being just a literary genre, the meaning of utopia has been a universal concept shared by different knowledge systems, historical times, and geographical spaces: Sacred History (IV Century B.C.) by Euhemerus, The Republic (IV Century B.C.) by Plato, The City of God (V Century B.C.) by Augustine of Hippo, The Ideal City (X Century) by Abu Nasr al-Farabi... Within our human condition is the homo utopicus (Ainsa, 1999). Recognising this leads to the inference that utopias are not a Western creation, as Lyman Tower Sargent (2013) states: "The term utopia originated quite late in the history of civilization and utopianism has existed in every cultural tradition. It heralds the hope for a better life" (p. 126). There is a clear distinction between utopia and utopianism or utopian thought that is essential to our research. The concept of 'utopian thought' is understood as follows:

a method of social improvement based on a creative, constant, and self-critical critique, grounded in discourse that opposes the ostensibly 'fatal'—established by the ideology of a time—and emphasises the transformative capacity of humanity. (Misseri, 2015, p. 217)

For Santa Cruz (1997), utopias are models that lead us towards the future; while utopian thought is linked to an imaginative tendency that interprets present reality and opens us up to other possible ways of living. There has always been a longing in human beings to imagine building a better society. In fact, imagination or fantasy is the inherent faculty of utopia, according to Marcuse (1968), who defines utopia as an historical concept that develops projects of social transformation deemed to be impossible. Imagining how education can be a transformative space has been, is and will always be a constant goal for teachers. Impossible? As Bertrand Russell (1984) said, hoping that the world can escape its problems cannot be dismissed as an impossible desire; it is not impossible because it cannot be achieved tomorrow, but perhaps in thousands of years. Thus, this book proposes a feminist utopia understood as a critique of the situation as it stands, the patriarchy; and, as a proposal for improvement through feminist theory. So what do we understand by patriarchy?

The most universal and enduring system of domination [...], elusive and invisible to all who exist. A system built on the domination and exploitation of women, who for millennia have been denied recognition as full human beings and as citizens (Amorós and De Miguel, 2005, p. 89)

The challenge is considerable. How can teachers take on the task of breaking away from this system, and how can they deal with the injustices and inequalities created towards women for centuries throughout the world? The solution lies in feminism, defined as a critical theory. So, the task of feminist critical theory, according to Sevla Benhabib (1990), is to reveal how the gendersex system—which organises social reality based on the symbolic constitution and socio-historical interpretation of anatomical differences between the sexes—has collaborated in the oppression and exploitation of women. Feminist theory can do this "by articulating an anticipatory-utopian critique of the norms and values of our current society and culture, so as to project new

modes of togetherness, of relating to ourselves and to nature in the future" (Benhabib, 1990, pp. 125-126).

Lise S. Sanders (2004) delves into questions such as "What is the historical relationship between feminism and utopia? And what relevance does utopia have for feminism today?" (p. 49), in an essay entitled Feminists Love a Utopia, based on the work of Kitch (2000). For some feminist theorists, therefore, the concept of 'utopia' may be the foundation for its construction because feminist research explores precisely those possible imaginary places where equality between women and men is achieved. We are facing this promise of creating a better society and, as Stuart Mill said (1869),

the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality. (pp. 59-60)

To talk about feminist theory is inevitably to talk—consciously or unconsciously—about utopias, since the feminist movement proposes the creation of real spaces of equality, but these must first be forged in 'the world of ideas'.

It is perhaps inevitable that feminist theory will cling to utopia. Where would women be free and equal but in a place that is not a place? No society known in history has granted them material or symbolic equality with men. (Santa Cruz, 1997)

We believe that the feminist utopia explored in this project is a 'eutopia', meaning a 'good place'; distinguishing itself from More's *Utopia*, since 'eu' comes from the Greek term meaning 'good' whereas 'ou' (u-) means 'absence of'. A feminist eutopia does not mean the absence of a place but rather the projection of a space whose objective is to achieve a better and fairer world for women; a place where women are visible and recognisable (Triviño, 2018b). This line of research in gender and feminist studies

is grounded in numerous preceding works such as the Book of the City of Ladies (1405), in which its author, Christine de Pisan, sets forth a whole genealogy of illustrious women, while building "the age of the New Kingdom of Femininity" (p. 169), as a counterargument to men who lay the blame for all the world's ills squarely at the feet of women.

Flora Tristan, inspired by utopian socialism—specifically by her much admired Charles Fourier (1829)—took up the cause of the emancipation of women: "the degree of civilisation attained by various human societies can be measured by the independence afforded to women" (1838, p. 47). Witnessing the situation of women encouraged the formation of one group in Cadiz, inspired by Fourier's ideals, in which women actively participated on unprecedented terms (Sánchez, 2003). Margarita López Morla—a prominent first generation fourierist—wrote A word to Spanish women, by a female compatriot (1841). Later, writers such as María José Zapata and Margarita Pérez de Celis published several newspapers daring to criticise the feminine ideal of the 'angel in the house' (Pro, 2015), which every bourgeois woman should follow in her marriage, based on the 'Sexual Contract' (Pateman, 1988) whereby men belonged to the public sphere and women to the private/domestic sphere. The group of women fourierists from Cadiz began to publish writings that called other women to break free from the fate designated for women and men for centuries, setting out utopias based on phalansteries that established women's emancipation as one of their main principles. As Flora Tristan (1843) decried in her utopia:

Thus far, women have counted for nothing in human societies. What has been the result of this? That the priest, the legislator, the philosopher, have treated her as a genuine homeland. Women (half of humanity) have been cast out of the Church, of the law, of society. For them, there has been no role in the Church, no representation in the eyes of the law, no role in the State. The priest has told her: Woman, you are temptation, sin, evil; you represent the flesh, that is, corruption, rot. [...]. Man must be your owner and have all authority over you. This is how, for the six thousand years the world

has existed, the wisest of the wise have judged the female race. (pp. 110-111)

The impossible is projected from the real to attain a possible through the unreal. Therefore, we understand feminism as a collectively shared utopian project that, in every historical period, with every historical milestone, with every space conquered... brings us closer to a better world. As Celia Amorós and Ana de Miguel explain (2005):

It transforms the world by defining and redefining reality through feminist theory and by acting on it thanks to its peculiar organisation through networks, small groups in which social interactions take place whose plurality, intensity and commitment work together to create a space of cultural creation and social change. [...]. Feminism, involved in the idea that another world is possible and necessary, has much to say in building a new society and new subjects. (p. 89)

We understand the process of 'Feminist Critical Literacy' outlined here as a plan to find a feminist utopia, specifically, in the training of teachers from all disciplines, although more oriented towards the Social and Human Sciences and Artistic Education through the use of multimodality as a pedagogical approach. Accordingly we propose the figure of the teacher as homo utopicus feminista that can be explained through the following illustration:



Figure 1. Education as a Feminist Utopia (2021). Source: Laura Triviño Cabrera.

The image contains a drawing (Triviño, 2021) in which education is presented as a space, in the form of a slate, that seeks to project itself as a 'heterotopia' (Foucault, 1967) moving towards the feminist utopia (Benhabib, 1990). This heterotopia involves exploring, within classrooms, the society in which we find ourselves—the society of spectacle (Debord, 1967)—represented by a carousel that consciously and unconsciously subjects us to homogenisation and a dichotomous world, through the unique thought that unfolds through a media culture consumed by the citizens of the neo-capitalist system. Culture as media dystopia, an emerging phenomenon that manifests itself in numerous dystopian messages that reach us through popular culture: Chained to the Rhythm by Katy Perry (2017) The Handmaid's Tale (2017), Black Mirror (2015), Divergent (2014), The Hunger Games (2008), etc. This 'audiovisual trend' is not random. It has emerged through the appearance of a society that is increasingly closer to the virtual and to fast consumption, where humanism is diluted between digital platforms and dominant technoscientific progress.

Education, shaped as a heterotopian space, would therefore break away from its consideration as a space in which just one type of literacy is taught/learned (reading and writing); in which only high culture and a Western-Eurocentric perspective can be accommodated, in the context of a patriarchal system. There is no single overarching narrative. There are plural and diverse accounts (Lyotard, 1986), in which it is necessary to agree on certain universal values that enlighten us towards just, egalitarian, and equitable societies; through the illumination of criticalcreative thinking (streetlight). The horses on the carousel are set free from their revolving platform to become real, free horses, breaking with the established mould.

We propose the classroom as a 'heterotopia'. For Foucault who coined the term—heterotopias are "absolutely other spaces" (1967). Unlike utopias, heterotopias refer to real places. The educational space, specifically the space in which we train our students to become teachers in our case, is understood as a heterotopia because it affords us an opportunity to develop a space for debate and discussion, in the interests of combating prejudices, discriminations, and exclusions, through the visibility of otherness (women, childhood, sexual orientation, minorities, etc.) and encouraging our students to develop empathic, empowering, and emancipatory competences, to build a better society.

Multimodal heterotopia aims to achieve a feminist utopia that breaks with prejudice, stereotypes derived from ignorance (for example; gender stereotypes represented in the pink and blue horses of the carousel); building an empathic and empowered space based on knowledge. To achieve this, it will be crucial to include media culture (logos: YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok) in the teaching-learning processes of History (clock), Geography (map of Europe-Africa), History of Art (Girl with balloon by Banksy) and Philosophy (owl), bringing us closer to our present history and inviting us to reflect critically so as to act creatively against the dominant order through a glocal (local-global) dimension.

To achieve this feminist utopia, we apply 'Feminist Critical Literacy', represented by the spider, alluding to Louise Bourgeois' work Maman and the feminist thought derived from it. Here is a feminist utopia projected onto the training of teachers that claims Humanism—because "feminism is humanism" (Valcárcel, 2007, p. 60)—for the 21st century, just as humanists did in centuries gone by.

Feminism is not only a theoretical problem pertaining to disciplinary knowledge but can also be understood, as Elliot (2000) said, as a "daily practical problem experienced by teachers" (p. 24). Feminist theory, as a critical theory, provides teacher training based on the formation of critical thinking and the interpretation of the relevant social problems of the world in which we live. This is how the professional development of teachers is linked to a model of teachers who, through their research, reflect on their own teaching practice and its improvement (Porlán, Rivero and Martín del Pozo, 1998; Hargreaves, 1998; Pérez, Barquin and Angulo, 1999; Blanco, 2010), as well as how to fight inequalities through the active pursuit of social justice in education (Zeichner, 2010). This teacher-researcher model takes into account conceptions, attitudes, and values because they act as cognitive lenses through which we perceive and mentally represent our world (Estepa, 2000).

If future teachers do not develop feminist cognitive lenses, they will not be prepared to teach women's experiences and gender perspectives to their own students (Crocco, 2008). This would then contribute to the endurance of an androcentric culture where there are no women's models that can serve as a stimulus or be historical references for female students (Fernández-Valencia, 2004; Subirats, 2016). A large body of research (Maher and Rathbone, 1986; Bricker-Jenkins and Hooyman, 1986; Bartky, 1999; Carillo, 2007; Cobo, 2008; Arnot, 2009; Brunet, 2016; Ortega and Pagès, 2018) examines the need to introduce feminist theory into teacher training and its importance in shaping education through equality and equity that prioritises civic competence that is the core of critical thinking.

This book explores, as one of the priorities of the feminist agenda in the 21st century, feminist education and awareness in pre-service and in-service teacher training. Although feminism is

constantly present in political discourse and social media, it is not examined sufficiently in the classroom. This situation means that students approach feminism through media culture and therefore assume a feminist identity through post-feminism, lacking the feminist knowledge necessary to teach disciplinary knowledge from the feminist perspective. There is also another problem stemming from the absence of feminist theory: ignorance leaves room for the appearance of post-machismo and the adoption of a stance against the feminist demands of social movements. In the face of this dystopian situation, accentuated by social media, we propose turning the educational space into a multimodal heterotopia, that is, introducing different ways that bring us closer to mainstream culture, moving away from the predilection for scriptocentrism.

That heterotopic space is the 'feminist classroom' that bell hooks (1984) defines as

the only place where pedagogical practices could be questioned, where it was assumed that the knowledge offered to students would give them enough power to be better researchers, to live more fully in the world beyond academic reality. The feminist classroom was the only place where students could ask critical questions about the pedagogical process. (p. 28)

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## From Mainstream Culture to Didactic Produsage

This book explores, as one of the priorities of the feminist agenda in the 21st century, feminist education and awareness in pre-service and in-service teacher training. Although feminism is constantly present in political discourse and social media, it is not examined sufficiently in the classroom. This situation means that students approach feminism through media culture, lacking the feminist knowledge necessary to teach disciplinary knowledge from the feminist perspective.

Feminist theory, as a critical theory, provides teacher training based on the formation of critical-creative thinking and the resolute interpretation of the relevant social issues of the world in which we live. We understand the process of 'Feminist Critical Literacy' outlined here as a plan to find a feminist utopia, specifically, in the training of teachers from all disciplines, although more oriented towards the Social and Human Sciences and Artistic Education through the use of multimodality as a pedagogical approach. If future teachers do not develop feminist cognitive lenses, they will not be prepared to teach women's experiences and gender perspectives to their own students. This would then contribute to the endurance of an androcentric culture where there are no women's models that can serve as a stimulus or be historical references for female students.

Our idea of Feminist Critical Literacy stems from feminist literary criticism and critical literacy. Feminist Critical Literacy is defined as the hermeneutical process of suspicion (mainstream culture) and of performative deconstruction of multimodal texts (didactic produsage), the purpose of which is to generate feminist consciousness in teachers from an intersectional perspective; through the acquisition of critical, creative, empathetic, aesthetic, and empowering competencies that contribute to the formation of a fair, equal, and equitable glocal citizenship.

Laura Triviño Cabrera. Professor at the University of Malaga. PhD in Education and Social Communication (University of Malaga), PhD in Comparative Modernities: Literatures, Arts and Cultures (University of Minho), and PhD in Art History (UNED). Principal Investigator of the Research Group on Didactics of Multimodal Humanities (GRIDHUM). Member of the Interdisciplinary Group of Feminist Research (Complutense University of Madrid); GAPS—Gender, Arts and Post–Colonial Studies (University of Minho); and Laboratoire de Recherche sur les Publics de la Culture (Université du Québec à Trois–Rivières). Among her recognitions, the following stand out: Meridiana Award 2022 for R&D initiatives (Government of Andalucia), I Prize for Innovation, Quality and Good Teaching Practices (University of Malaga), X Elisa Pérez Vera Research Award (UNED) and First Prize National Degree in Humanities from the Ministry of Education of the Government of Spain.

