The Other City...

Where No One Reads...

As a child, she had always had a yearning to enter the other city, the unknown city beyond and within the suburbs, where nobody, middle-class folklore declared, read books or washed or cooked proper meals. She had sometimes, even as a child, wondered if it could be as fearful as its reputation. She disliked being made to feel fear of her fellow men and women. Now she lived with these people, and was no longer afraid, for they were like herself... Then she taught one or two illiterates on an illiteracy scheme. Then she started to teach two classes a week at a College of Further Education: aspiring caterers on Day Release. Cambridge visitors, visitors from outer space, childless visitors, asked her how she could bear to teach such stupid, such dull, such unambitious, such ill-read folk. She did not answer that intelligence is relative, like poverty. She did not think her students stupid, just different...

— Margaret Drabble, *The Radiant Way*

September, 1987 — headlines across the nation boldly acclaim: FIVE MILLION CANADIANS FUNCTIONALLY ILLITERATE — "The first real statistics about the state of literacy in our country," declares Peter Calamai of Southam Inc., sponsor of the nationwide Southam Literacy Survey.[1]

At last, *real facts*. A lever to use in the fight for funding, in the fight to regulate the poor, unemployment, homelessness, crime and low worker productivity, and to control immigration and education. Illiterates are our problem, 5 million of them. Not as many as the 23 million "illiterates" in the USA, but 24% of our population over 18 years of age. Think of it...staggering...1 in 4 of *us*.... No...THEM... It's they who can't read or write well enough to function... those illiterates... not us... we need to help them... And that's how it works, the separation of the illiterates from the literates, the "have nots" from the "haves," them from us... all with the "best" of intentions.

Unproblematically accepted as truth, the question is, what to do. National attention is focussed on illiteracy as never before. Social task forces, grant priorities, hearings of a Select Committee on Education, special issues of journals, news series, stories and editorials, researchers, educators, business(men), politicians... all are suddenly concerned about the rampant state of illiteracy in Canada. That there are 5 million illiterates has, almost overnight, become a lasting truth. Note a few lines from the *Toronto Star* editorial of July 18, 1988:

> *The numbers are staggering: Five million or more Canadians can't read, write or count well enough to be called literate.*
>
> *What's the cost? According to the Business Task Force on Literacy, it's more than $10 billion a year through unemployment, industrial accidents, lost productivity and training costs.*

More federal and provincial support is called for to educate the

BY KATHLEEN ROCKHILL

increasing numbers of children of refugees and immigrants being admitted into the country. Take responsibility for your policies, the feds are told. Noteworthy is the implicit racism (unintended, of course) as "the problem" gets shifted from a vast general issue to the specifics of immigrant and refugee policies; further regulation and cutbacks to end this glut of "illiterates" from entering "our" country becomes the subtext.

I am alarmed by this splurge of concern. Not because I'm against the provision of more educational programs — they are needed — but because of the way "marginal" people become scapegoats for big money interests. Business says the costs are $10 billion; "illiterates" are posed as a threat to our national interests. So Peter Calamai quotes McGill University professor Jon Bradley who, speaking of illiteracy, explains:

> *It's not as life-threatening as AIDS, nor as terrible as mass murder, nor as current as acid rain, but in the long run it could be a far more damaging threat to Canadian society.*

Calamai continues:

> *The dangers are stark: 10 per cent of Canadian adults can't understand the dosage directions on a medicine bottle; 20 per cent can't correctly select a fact from a simple newspaper article; 40 per cent can't figure out the tip on a lunch bill; more than 50 per cent have serious troubles using bus schedules; and nearly 60 per cent misinterpret the key section of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.* (p.8)

We are in the process of creating an OTHER — the disadvantaged — the illiterate — of unprecedented proportion... "the other city, the unknown city beyond and within the suburbs, where nobody, middle-class folklore declared, read books or washed or cooked proper meals." What may have been middle-class folklore is now national ideology; that ideology depends upon experts probing that the poor are incompetent, and that is why they are poor. Without literacy, they are "stalled on a long road to oblivion" (p. 40). It's sad, tragic, but "true." Here are the opening lines of the Southam Report:

> *Five million adult Canadians are marching against their will in an army of illiterates.*
>
> *But they are an army in numbers only. They have no leaders, no power, little support, few weapons and no idea where they are headed.*
>
> *Darkness and hopelessness are usually their banners.* (p. 7)

Worst of all, they won't admit they have a problem.

According to Bill Shallow, an adult educator quoted in the Report:

> *It's something like being an alcoholic. You have to get someone to admit to themselves that they can't read, that they need outside help and that outside help will make a difference.* (p.12)

I find these analogies horrendous, wiping out deeply structured personal realities. I find them particularly horrendous in the case of women, who are anything but addicted to being illiterate. Quite the contrary. Their longing for literacy, for education is strong, but squelched by the structure of their lives, a structure which leaves them highly dependent upon support from the men with whom they are in relationship. The national ideology of illiteracy currently being constructed obliterates their contradictory experiences of literacy and objectifies them as "Other," lacking the competence to do even the simplest things. Furthermore, the judgement of "illiteracy" rests upon a very suspect process of testing.

In order to determine functional illiteracy, twenty-five "representative" Canadians were selected to act as a jury.[2] From among 38 items on the Southam test, they were asked to indicate the 10 items that "ordinary adults should be able to answer correctly just to get by in today's society." (p.13) Anyone tested who missed 3 or more items is counted as illiterate. While the test as a whole consists of more items (items were adapted from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a functional literacy measure used in the USA, replete with problems), in actuality, illiteracy is determined by performance on the 10 items selected by the jury. To be literate, one must answer 8 out of 10 correctly. The assumption underlying the survey is that someone has to be able to read an item in order to perform the task (i.e., if they can't read the cough syrup instruction, they don't know how much to take; if they read it, they take the correct amount). It's not experience, but reading that counts; one must be able to read in the dominant language without help; most signifi-

WHAT MAY HAVE BEEN MIDDLE- CLASS FOLKLORE IS NOW NATIONAL IDEOLOGY; THAT IDEOLOGY DEPENDS UPON EXPERTS PROVING THAT THE POOR ARE INCOMPETENT, AND THAT IS WHY THEY ARE POOR...

cantly, reading means "proper" functioning. (I never read cough syrup directions; my mother taught me to take no more than 2 teaspoons every 4 hours; as an adult, I take what I feel I need). Literacy determines "competence." The meaning is in the words; it is not, as many theoreticians would argue, derived from context, subtext, the "spaces between the words," history or experiences. As Linda Brodkey notes:

> *Because all definitions of literacy project both a literate self and an illiterate other, the tropics of literacy stipulate the political as well as cultural terms on which the "literate" wish to live with the "illiterate" by defining what is meant by reading and writing... Functional literacy may be less a matter of decoding and comprehending such documents (since to do so requires specialized knowledge of law and economics as well as written language) and more the fact that I have ready access to the resources I need to use the documents. This is what separates the literate "us" from the illiterate "them."*[3]

I could go on and on about the Southam Survey, but I want to pause here, and note the way in which an OTHER is being constituted — not only the capriciousness of the process, but the inherent race, class and gender biases that organize its construction. Anyone who cannot respond to 8 out of 10 of those items, in English or French, is by definition, illiterate. One million, or 42% of the foreign-born (excluding those from the USA and British Isles) are, according to the Southam Survey, illiterate. The Survey "reveals" that multilingual people are highly "illiterate." The numbers of foreign-born currently being admitted into Canada with fewer years of schooling than in the past is cited as one of the reasons for the increase in illiteracy. By definition, these "foreigners" cannot function adequately — are illiterate — and are a threat to our nation.

The gender bias works much more subtly. Women make up "only" 46.5% of the "illiterate" population, whereas men make up 53.5%. The difference in performance on items is highly indicative of the experience-dependent nature of the Survey. The items women tend to miss more than men are those that involve transportation (reading maps and traffic signs, deciphering bus and airline schedules) and employment (filling out income tax and job application forms). They do better on interpretive questions that involve more reading, including what I found to be an extremely confusing question on the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. (That nearly 60% of all surveyed missed this item is seen as cause for national alarm, not an indication of fault with the item!).

Working mothers performed correctly on more items than non-working mothers: of those who worked, only 16% were deemed to be illiterate as contrasted to a 27% rate for those at home while their children were in primary school. The concern expressed in the Report about what this means for the education of the young (i.e. youth spending time with illiterate mothers) points to the gendered and class-biased nature of the text.

While these statistics have to be looked at with a high degree of skepticism, they do echo what I've noted in my research among Latino immigrants in Los Angeles, as well as that of Jenny Horsman among women in rural Nova Scotia[4] — namely, that women's "work" includes doing most of the literacy-related tasks of the household, except for those directly related to transportation and employment, areas they are often not allowed to enter. As for the higher rate of literacy among women in the work force, my guess is that this reflects the highly literacy-dependent nature of the work available to women: they must be able to read — and read well — in order to enter the clerical, secretarial, sales and service sectors of the economy where women predominate. Most other work available to women — factories and fast foods — does not pay enough to cover the costs of child care.

LITERACY AS EDUCATION FOR WOMEN POSES A THREAT TO MALE HEGEMONY IN THE FAMILY; A THREAT TO MALE DOMINANCE THAT FEW MALE EGOS CAN WITHSTAND. MEN DO NOT WANT THEIR WOMEN TO BE MORE EDUCATED...

Literacy is important to women; in their gendered construction of work in our society, literacy is more important for women than for men. But much more than literacy is required. Even using Southam's definition, reading a cough syrup label won't do anything to move you out of poverty — if that's the issue — and they say it is. Access to education that can make a difference is at stake, not literacy. For women, a decent job requires not only high school completion, but some form of further education as well.

Elsewhere, I've written that literacy is women's work, but not women's right.[5] Women can be invisibly literate, silently doing the literacy-related work of the household. But let them seek education and see the resistance and direct opposition they often meet from their male partners. To actually "capitalize" on their literacy — to turn it into "cultural capital" — can upset the asymmetrical power dynamics in the family. The need to protect the male ego at the cost of women's lives is seen as quite OK, even humorous, in our culture.

Calamai plays into this "humor" by framing the news about women's performance as follows:

> *Male egos take another battering in the war of the sexes. The Southam Survey shows women are more skilled readers.* [Italics in text].

To: All Men

From: Peter Calamai, Southam News, Ottawa
Re: Latest claims of female superiority

It looks bad this time fellows. They've come out ahead again. It sure doesn't appear to be a fluke. Women are more literate than men. (p.29)

In thinking about women and literacy/education, we have to consider how heterosexism operates, as well as the gendered construction of work. Typically, women are "kept down" by the men in their lives. The "dumb broad" may well be smarter than him, but, if she's "smart," she daren't let him know it. The risk for women in going to classes can be considerable. Men say that they want their wives home to care for the children, but many men are also threatened by the fear that they will lose control over "their women"; ownership of their minds, as well as their bodies. The threat of education to men — and women's desire for it — is harrowingly portrayed in the true story of Francine Hughes for whom the desire to continue to go to school was so strong that, when her husband beat and humiliated her, repeatedly insisting that she stop going to school, she finally murdered him.

The threat of women's learning to the male ego is comically portrayed in the film, *Educating Rita;* it's a story I've heard over my years of interviewing women, and it's a story I've lived.

From my research in literacy over the years, I've come to think of "literacy as threat/desire" for many women in heterosexual relationships, particularly where further education would mean that they had acquired more schooling than their husbands. The experience of literacy as threat/desire differs fundamentally from the experience for men, where literacy is not bound up in some dynamic of longing and repression that it is for women. This difference is born of male dominance, often in its crudest forms. While Francine Hughes' story is extreme, the dynamic it reflects is a common one: women longing to become educated, to transform their lives, and repressing that longing because of the opposition of the men they love, and the fear that taking an independent step could mean the breakup of their family. Sometimes the opposition they experience is subtle; often it takes the form of a fist. Literacy as education for women, poses a threat to male hegemony in the family; a threat to male dominance that few male egos can withstand. Men do not want their women to be more educated; they do not want their authority in the household challenged.

When I've talked about "literacy as threat/desire" (that is, the desire of women for literacy and the threat of violence, subtle or overt, posed to them by the men their lives if they actually act on it by attending programs), I've been met by women at a range of educational levels who've told me that the story reflects their own experience. While I don't want to deny that women seeking to improve their literacy are in a different situation from women seeking higher education, the divide of class does not erase — or account for — the control men demand over our bodies and minds. As long as men are threatened by the prospect of our independence — whether it be an independence of mind, body, spirit or the material independence of having our own source of income, education, as the potential conveyor of these resources (whether real or imagined), poses a threat to established patterns of male dominance. There are women in my graduate classes for whom their education is a threat to their relationships. Divorces are not uncommon, as many of us know, when the woman chooses to pursue her education; sometimes that pursuit follows a divorce when the woman decides, at last, to do something for herself.

I still hear Maria's words of longing echo — "I want to be somebody, you know" — a refrain I've heard repeatedly in various forms over the years. For women, the desire for education comes with a longing to be SOME/BODY. Why, I wonder. Are our bodies so stomped upon that we feel we are NO ONE without education? And then...? How does heterosexism play into all of this? Men so desperately needing to be "right", to "know", yes, to appear, at all cost, to be "competent" — to what extent is it at the cost of the lives of the women in his life?

To return to the original theme of this essay, the establishing of one quarter of our population as "illiterates" as OTHER, I want to find ways past this. Looking at the commonalities and differences in our situations as women is crucial. I think, too, that we have to shift our focus from literacy to education; and from functional to critical practices. Yes, reading and writing are important, especially for women who desire to "be educated" more

TO SUGGEST THAT NEARLY ONE OUT OF FOUR WOMEN IN CANADA IS ILLITERATE IS TO ENSHRINE THE DIVISIONS OF EDUCATION BY CLASS WITH A MORALITY THAT BLAMES WOMEN FOR THEIR OWN SITUATIONS.

than men do. (Il)literacy has become so overworked a concept that it's not meaningless — quite the opposite — it's laden with the ideology of non-personhood, of threat, of cost, of danger to "our" well-being. Its reference to the specific skills of reading and writing has been lost; to label 1/4 of women in Canada as illiterate is to drive a great class divide among women. While we must not lose sight of class differences, we must guard against naming material differences as differences in competence in everyday knowledge and functioning, in ability. It is also to create a city of the "other," a social, cultural and educational ghetto. The middle classes are offered college courses in English; the poor, literacy classes — if they're lucky.

To suggest that nearly one out of four women in Canada is illiterate is to enshrine the divisions of education by class with a morality that blames women for their own situations. To be labelled "illiterate" smells of irresponsibility, immorality — "they" choose to be that way — what is that? poor? to drop out of school at 16 because of pregnancy? to move from one's country of birth? to spend every hour of the day in the isolation of one's home with kids?

Choice? How much choice when we look at the material and social relations in which women are enmeshed? How does the wall established by "illiteracy" further divide us as women, creating a barrier across which it is impossible to speak or to hear one another?

In the opening passage of this essay, Alix reflects upon how, when her husband drowned and she was plunged into poverty, she came to see the women with whom she now had to live as more like herself than not; in time, she lost her fear of the "other city". How to hold the tension of sameness and difference; how to listen as well as speak? To label women as illiterate is to create an "other"; it is a form that defines difference in the terms of reference of the dominant language and practices; as such, it is to perpetuate domination, separation and fear. We have enough of that. To talk of reading, writing and education — and how to think critically, that is, through the ideological "truths" with which we are confronted day after day — is perhaps a way out of the ideological trap of (il)literacy, and the institutionalization of difference through dominance.

HOW DOES THE WALL ESTABLISHED BY "ILLITERACY" FURTHER DIVIDE US AS WOMEN, CREATING A BARRIER ACROSS WHICH IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO SPEAK OR TO HEAR ONE ANOTHER?

[1] All references to the Southam Survey are taken from "Broken Words: Why Five Million Canadians are Illiterate," the Southam Literacy Report. It is available for $2.00 by writing to Literacy, Southam Newspaper Group, Suite 900, 150 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario M5S 2Y8.

[2] This jury of peers, or "representative Canadians" as the Southam refers to them, consisted of executives in business and industry, 2 rights advocates, executive officers of various organizations, 2 nationally-acclaimed authors, other professionals, 3 literacy workers, and 3 who were listed as various forms of "workers". Literacy students were also included, but they did not count as one vote per person, as in the case of other jurors, but passed "collective" judgement which counted as one vote. Note, the jurors were not, apparently, told to assess illiteracy, but desirable functioning.

[3] Linda Brodkey, "Tropics of Literacy", *Journal of Education*, Vol. 168, No. 2, 1986, pp. 47-54.

[4] Jenny Horsman, "Something in My Mind Besides the Everyday." Ed. D. dissertation, OISE, June 1988.

[5] Kathleen Rockhill, "Literacy as Threat/Desire: Longing to be SOMEBODY," in J.S. Gaskill and A.T. McLaren (eds.), *Women and Education: A Canadian Perspective* (Calgary: Detselig, 1987).

Kathleen Rockhill teaches in the areas of feminist research theory and methodology, and feminist approaches to adult education at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education (OISE). She is interested in questions concerning the effect of gender-power relations on learning and education.