

A THREAD OF OVERLOOKED NARRATIVES: WOMEN, HIGHER EDUCATION, AND THE UNTOLD COSTS OF ENROLLMENT

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ABSTRACT:

Almost sixty percent of all undergraduate college students in the United States today are female, about double of those enrolled in the 1950s. College campuses across the United States have made it possible for women of all cultures and backgrounds to attend, promising opportunities for upward mobility and increased social access. Women appear to dominate the campus population. But a less obvious reality exists for many women who make their way through higher education. There are layers of expectations, relational stress, and discrimination that women across America have faced through the 50s, the 70s, the 90s, the early 2000s, and today. Memoirs often tell stories that history books dismiss. The memoirs of Vivian Gornick, bell hooks, Reyna Grande, and Tara Westover reveal stories of women in higher education often hidden by grand narratives and simplistic statistics. As these memoirs show, for women, the pursuit of higher education adds opportunities for upward mobility yet robs women of relational success and continues to discriminate against minority women. These memoirs stimulate conversations that are critical for any student in higher education, especially for the sixty percent of women attending higher education institutions in the United States.

When Vivian Gornick - feminist critic and author of best-selling memoir *Fierce Attachments* - enrolled in City College of New York (CUNY) in the 1950s, women represented a dismal thirty-two percent of undergraduate students and twenty-seven percent of all graduate students (Thelin 344). Gornick was one of the privileged. She entered a CUNY school as a white female, while many Black and Latinx students found themselves barred from entrance until the 1960s when Chancellor Albert Bowker opened CUNY schools to all high school graduates ("The Creation"). However, Gornick's privilege did not extend to her financial circumstances, which led her to CUNY, the city university founded for financially disadvantaged New York residents. While her whiteness gave her some access, her status as an immigrant from a poor, enclosed Jewish community, and the fact that she was a woman, proved an impediment to her pursuit for higher learning. Her tight-knit working-class community resisted her desire to move out of the neighborhood and into the classroom. Nevertheless, she continued through higher education, trudging up the tenement steps after classes to the apartment she shared with her mother. She thrived under the attention of her professors and stimulating conversations of her classmates.

Around two decades later, bell hooks (Gloria Jean Watkins) started the pursuit of her degree in English from Stanford University. The Black community surrounding her celebrated knowledge and sought to empower Black students to learn and enter into activism. Hooks was enthralled with knowledge, but didn't want to only be a conventional teacher - a profession respected and almost expected within her community. In her important memoir, *Teaching to Transgress*, she describes her drive to write. While writing was her passion, the surrounding culture did not support this endeavor, seeking to keep her in a more traditional role of instructing the younger generations. Years later as a professor, she found herself feeling haunted and trapped in her tenured position within academia, leading her to pursue writing more intensely (hooks 1). Hooks' writing was neither hindered or fruitless, her scholarship has become central to many disciplines across the United States. While she had great success as a professor and influenced generations of women students, scholars, and activists, hooks describes a sense of being trapped by the assumptions of her community. Through her charisma and feminist activism, she inspired groups of women to become writers, professors, film makers, and teachers, keeping the stories of the past alive through written and verbal words (Wilkinson)

Reyna Grande - author of several award-winning books - attended the University of California. Born in Iguala, Mexico, she and her siblings crossed the border as young children. In her memoir, *A Dream Called Home*, she writes about the discrimination she faced and the obstacle of language within her classes in primary school. Still, the dream of higher education loomed in her mind. This dream grew, not due to the support of her father who did everything *except* encourage her to grow academically. Her father doubted Grande's abilities and actively mocked her writing pursuits (Grande).

Furthermore, nestled in the mountains of Clifton, Idaho, Tara Westover was raised in a family who not only clung to strong Mormon religious beliefs, but rejected the role of the government. In 1986, Westover sucked in her first breath without receiving a birth certificate, that tangible piece of evidence declaring her existence. Lacking any formal primary education, her only option to escape the clutches of her dominating father and abusive brother was to begin higher education and start her degree at Brigham Young University (Westover). Like Grande, Westover was from a lower economic class and a family that discouraged higher education and worked to undermine her faith in learning. These conditions threatened Westover's ability to pursue higher education, just as it did Grande.

By the turn of the decade - 2020 - fifty-eight percent of the United States undergraduate population were female. This was not a huge jump in female representations from 2009 to 2019 - a span of history where fifty-seven percent of college enrollees were female ("Undergraduate Enrollment"). But considering the percentage of women enrolled in university during Gornick's days on campus - close to thirty percent *less* than today - this is a large gain in terms of access and representation of women in higher education.

Nonetheless, the shadow of the statistics stated and the narrative of women in higher education remains. From these statistics, it appears that female students have established themselves in the scene of higher education, and there is no more need to advocate for female representation in universities and colleges across the United States. For example, sociologist Kathryn Edin argues that society must advocate for young men to pursue higher education and stay the course until graduation. There are many young men across the United States who are born into low-income neighborhoods and never find their way through the education system (Thompson). Similarly, Douglas Belkin from the *Wall Street Journal* writes, "Men dominate top positions in industry, finance, politics and entertainment. They also hold a majority of tenured faculty positions and run most U.S. college campuses. Yet female college students are running laps around their male counterparts." Since statistics show a standard of female dominance in the world of higher education, some may reject the argument that females still find opposition within academia.

The four memoirs under study in this thesis prove the need to focus on women's experience in higher education. Gornick's immigrant Jewish relatives were vocal that her role in society was outside of the classroom and present within the home, building a family. The walls of her tenement community echoed stories of female immobility. Meanwhile hooks' community praised the pursuit of growth and higher education, but with limitations. Hooks would be celebrated as a teacher, but as a writer? That was not an option. For Grande, her immediate family culture communicated resistance to higher education as a whole, believing that as an immigrant, a degree would not advance her future. The lack of support and validation of her dreams lingered consistently within her family connections. Lastly, growing up within a religious family that questioned the government and anything outside of the Mormon church, Westover found her family's opposition to her university life inescapable, and was left with questions upon graduation. She became an accomplished, educated woman without regrets of these milestones, but yet, how did she reckon with her broken family relationships? Although these women came from different religions, cultures, and racial backgrounds, every single woman found herself face-to-face with both the glitter of higher education and disapproval of those they loved. I highlight memoirs *Fierce Attachments* by Vivian Gornick, bell hook's *Teaching to Transgress*, Reyna Grande's *A Dream Called Home*, and Tara Westover's *Educated* to offer different nuances that dissect the dominant narrative of women in higher education. All four of these women have written memoirs which explain their journey to higher education, outlining the opposition that their cultural, religious, and/or familial circles placed on these endeavors.

Understanding the stories of college-educated women such as Gornick, hooks, Grande, and Westover is critical to understanding a more comprehensive view of a female's experience in higher education. In her article, "A Plea for Critical Race Theory Counterstory: Stock Story vs. Counterstory Dialogues Concerning Alejandra's "Fit" in the Academy," Professor Aja Martinez z coined the term "stock story" which represents the experiences of those who come from places of power, control or privilege without attention to those who are marginalized or of minority groups. Stock stories leave no room for other individual's realities and thus take control of the

canon of literature about education. In contrast, “counterstories” make mention of the stories that have been silenced and dismissed. Martinez writes that counterstories seek to “expose, analyze, and challenge stock stories of racial privilege and can help to strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance” (70). While this thesis doesn’t have the sole purpose of exposing racist policies that hinder minority groups from equal access and opportunities within the academic world, I acknowledge that racism and biases still seep into the classroom and environment within colleges and universities.

This thesis explores layers of barriers to women in the U.S. higher education system, with an acknowledgment of the role played by race, ethnicity, and religion. The “stock story” of education declares that women now have unhindered access to colleges and universities. A peek into a classroom will reveal what these statistics proclaim, especially in the Liberal Arts degrees. As an English Literature major, most of my classes at Lehman College have been as high as seventy-five percent female.¹ If this is the case, why spend time discussing women’s presence in higher education? Isn’t this a battle won, a victory worth celebrating?

While the “stock story” pronounces victory, a “counterstory” whispers in the corners of higher education. It is not a roar or even a trend, but present nonetheless. The counterstory explains that although the academic world boasts access for women, there are cultural, religious, and familial barriers that look women in the eye and say, “College is not for you.” Within this counterstory, culture, religion, and family braid into a rope which is difficult to unravel for women in particular.

¹ Additionally, humanities departments are underfunded compared to STEM departments. Professors within humanities departments are underpaid and compete for limited positions (Berkowitz).

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