

## Book Reviews

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Clifford, Geraldine J. *Those Good Gertrudes: A Social History of Women Teachers in America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins P, 2014. Print. 496 pages.

### Janelle Adsit

As of 2010, women were 84% of all U.S. teachers. To recount the circumstances that gave rise to this statistic is a formidable task, given the scope and complexity of this gendered history. In a long-anticipated collection, born of a quarter century of research, Geraldine Clifford offers a history of how instructional responsibilities have been placed in the hands of women teachers.

Clifford was the first woman to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship for research in education, and she is professor emerita at the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley. *Those Good Gertrudes* is a result of extensive research, drawing from personal testimonies of teachers and documentation from 628 collections. From a range of source materials and personal accounts, Clifford has written a "collective biography" of women teachers in the United States. National in its scope, the book also takes a comparative and international approach to changes in education policy and practice. The book offers no origin myth, showing how women have long been involved in teaching in households and religious spaces. The survey Clifford offers is capacious and full, yet, as Clifford notes on multiple occasions throughout the text, there is more beyond the book's margins. Indeed, much of her research was cut out of this 496-page book to make it suitable for publication. The book of course cannot achieve comprehensiveness, but it exhibits breadth and range in its portrait of the causes and ramifications of the shift to reliance on female educators. Clifford details the cultural shifts that moved from the view, expressed by St. Paul, that "I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over a man, but to be silent" (1 Timothy 2:11-12, qtd. in Clifford) to a widespread favoring of the woman teacher.

Acknowledging the broad strokes that a collective biography is forced to draw, Clifford seeks to convey a range of answers to the question of "what it meant to be, at once, an American and a teacher and a woman" (xi). To approach this question, Clifford makes use of statistics, reporting, and anecdotes that provide windows into women's experiences. Her inclusive method also allows space for fictional accounts drawn from novels that feature teacher-protagonists, which Clifford presents as representative of historical thinking about

female educators. Clifford synthesizes this diverse corpus of source material to tell a thoughtful and engaging story of the social and economic circumstances of women teachers in the U.S.

This history of “good Gertrudes”—a term borrowed from G. Stanley Hall’s preface to Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi’s didactic novel *Leonard and Gertrude: A Book for the People* (1781), which highlights the role of the “good Gertrudes of all stations of life, the born educators of the race” in effecting social regeneration—can help to deepen analysis of the gendered situation of writing instruction in higher education today. What historically have women teachers been thought to be, and how is this history embedded in contemporary constructions of the teacher’s role? What material conditions of classroom work have remained pervasive across time? Clifford shows how women’s widespread entrance into the classroom was contemporaneous with an ideology in which “child nurture and instruction was becoming a mother’s most exalted work—a ‘God-given’ activity. By the nineteenth century, reformers argued that females were the most desirable schoolteachers because...[teaching was] modeled upon the mother’s nurturing and instructive activities” (6). The affective labor economy of instruction is still shaped by such historically-contingent assumptions, and—as has been noted by Sivagami Subbaraman, Eileen Schell, and others—these constructions of the women teacher as motivated by a “selfless love” sustain disenfranchising labor conditions and justify under-compensation. If her work is motivated entirely by a selfless love for her students, then compensation becomes immaterial, in both senses of the word.

Conditioned by such assumptions, the female teacher has historically been a less expensive hire. Clifford recounts common justifications of the wage gap proffered at the turn of the twentieth century: “It was often repeated that women could live well on less money; that male-female wage equity was unsupportable...and that only inept men could be hired at women’s wages” (49). This history is still with us, pervading in assumptions and expectations that influence today’s hiring practices. Women are 10-15% more likely to be in contingent positions, earning 27% less than male counterparts while there (Gappa, Austin & Trice, 2007). These circumstances should be read against a long history of hiring practices in educational spheres, a history which Clifford provides. *Those Good Gertrudes* includes detailed analysis of teacher earnings, contextualized in the macrosocial and material conditions that kept women in positions of unequal pay. Knowing the situations in which previous teachers worked helps us to understand our own labor conditions and the legacies that are embedded in hiring practices. Clifford’s social and institutional analyses remind us that “an occupational choice is seldom freely made” (338), and we should continue to identify the forces at work upon those who find themselves in the teaching profession.

While focused on primary and secondary education, *Those Good Gertrudes* is also a history of college teaching. Clifford insists on not separating college history

from school history, as they are intertwined. The expectation that teachers become university educated gave women increasing access to postsecondary education. In turn, women at this time “made the education field the largest program of study in American higher education, subsidizing its geographic and curricular spread” (xiii). The growth of a female teacher pipeline also meant the growth of higher education, as it was also “pivotal in extending formal school from elites to the populace and, recently, in facilitating the ‘knowledge economy’” (xiv).

As a university teacher herself, Clifford makes explicit reference to her own positionality within this history and the personal motivations that brought her to this project. Seeking “to place in history’s fickle spotlight the taken-for-granted woman teacher” (viii), Clifford dedicates the book in appreciation to the teachers of her youth, “from Miss Marjorie M. Curtis to Miss Mary Jane O’Rourke” who took Clifford as a high-schooler to a meeting of the Future Teachers of America, even as she was “determined then not to become a teacher” (xx). In such a project, personal in nature, there is a risk of heroicizing—a risk that Clifford identifies in the introduction to the book. We should guard against painting over the fraught history of education. Educators have been imbricated in exclusionary and colonizing pedagogical practices that reinforce social hierarchies. To look back upon centuries of education is to see the devastating and violent realities of residential schools, segregation, and prejudice. While Clifford’s book does acknowledge these realities, the text does sometimes slip into an easy lauding of the teaching profession, associating teaching with a “relatively uncorrupted ethical base” (345). Because Clifford’s interest is in women’s progressive overthrow of specific patriarchal constraints, the book downplays the ways in which women teachers, as part of an education system, have reinforced hegemonies. Instead, the focus of the book is primarily directed toward women’s presence in classrooms as serving to disrupt the status quo. Clifford’s book shows that “intentionally or not, the omnipresent schoolma’am was also a self-generative subversive force against patriarchy” (ix). Teaching provided women “psychological and economic independence” that in turn shaped gender politics, enabling women to access spheres that were previously closed to them.

Providing this history, *Those Good Gertrudes* is, “[a]s it must be, ...a feminist history” (xi), or a history of feminism—of the pursuit of equal opportunity at large, enacted within the sphere of education. It is as such a useful resource for historians of the teaching profession and for any of us who wish to reshape labor practices in the academy, who wish to rethink our professional identities, who wish to acknowledge the significant history and work of the educator.

## Works Cited

Gappa, Judith M., Austin, Ann E., & Trice, Andrea G. *Rethinking Faculty Work*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007. Print.

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## About the Author

Janelle Adsit is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the English Department at Simon Fraser University. She studied rhetoric and composition at SUNY Albany and has published chapters in several collections, including *Creative Writing in the Digital Age* (Bloomsbury, 2015). She recently collaborated on an article for *Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity: Labor and Action in English Composition* (Parlor, 2015). She is currently studying the institutional history of creative writing instruction in relation to the disciplinary history of rhetoric and composition.