Re-Membering and Re-Picturing Activist Mothers: The Canadian Woman’s Christian Temperance Union and the Audiovisual Rhetoric of “Home Protection”

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Abstract: My study of the audiovisual rhetoric of the Canadian Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) re-evaluates (re-members) mothers as activists and their use of symbols to reshape civil society in the areas of substance abuse, family violence, and social-economic-political justice for women. Memory work constitutes theoretical framework and research method.

My study, which re-members and re-pictures the activist mothers of the Canadian Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and their educational artistry, is inspired by Byatt’s (1994) short story “Art Work.” This story is an elaborate metaphor of what counts as art and creativity, and challenges the normative criteria of order and disorder in acknowledging art as art—and by extension, challenges the normative criteria of skills and technical-rationality in acknowledging adult education as adult education. Many of the contradictions and ironies of WCTU artwork are embodied in Byatt’s characters. Debbie is too busy as editor of a women’s magazine to pursue her own art work. She covers a story of an art exhibition and learns from the promotional brochure that Mrs. Brown, her housecleaner, is the artist Sheba Brown who “gets her materials from everywhere – skips, jumble sales, cast-offs, going through other people’s rubbish, cleaning up after school fêtes” (pp. 83-84). In my study, WCTU mothers as educators and activists get their materials from everywhere. Tisdell (2000) calls women adult educators to a re-membering of social change, by which she means “a reevaluation process of reworking and reshaping of... childhood symbols and traditions and reshaping them to be more relevant to an adult spirituality” (p. 317). This study is a re-membering of our mothers and foremothers as audiovisual educators and social change agents who “do everything” and get their symbols from everywhere.

The early WCTU was a larger social movement in absolute numbers than Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) today. Unlike MADD, the WCTU’s “Do Everything” policy was manifested in their diverse Departments of Work. The well-known departments in the early 20th century relate to prohibition and women’s suffrage. I grew up in a WCTU community and family in southern Ontario; my mother, grandmothers, and aunts were actively involved until well into the 1960s. As a child, I became intimately acquainted with the Departments of Work that related to the Little White Ribboners (mothers’ pledge for infants), elocution medal contests for youth, and the quizzes for scientific temperance instruction in the public school system. In this paper, I shall illustrate WCTU activism and adult education assuming audiovisual forms. Spinosa, Flores, and Dreyfus (1999) call the transformative kind of speaking that manifests in groups such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) [and by extension the WCTU] “interpretive and not

1The graphics and list of references that support this research article are available on Dorothy Lander’s homepage: http://www.stfx.ca/people/dlander
persuasive. . . . It allows some practice, thing, or identity to appear as worthy of consideration by a mixed community. . . composed of a wider range of interests than those of a group of professionals or technicians” (p. 99). Spinosa et al. claim interpretive speaking as the highest form of political discourse. “It forces the speakers to: (1) remain true to the concrete experiences of their subworlds, (2) acknowledge and respect the different experiences in other subworlds, and (3) seek opportunities for cross-appropriating practices from other subworlds” (p. 99).

Although the WCTU is diminished in size from its peak numbers of more than 10,000 at the turn of the 20th century, its continuing work of agitating for abstinence is activism constituted explicitly out of mothers’ concern for their children. Elizabeth (Betty) Wolfe, age 69, the current Canadian WCTU president, echoes the “Do Everything” conviction for today’s membership of less than 300. Her interpretive speaking remains true to concrete experience and seeks opportunities for cross-appropriating to the subworld of information technology: “It isn’t just alcohol and drugs and cigarettes. It’s pornography, and especially on the Internet now. All of this is available to them (children) and it’s a concern. I don’t know if we’ll ever overcome the problem of alcohol, but we can work toward it” (Landon, 2000, p. F2). My 90-year-old mother numbers among the membership of 300 and continues to read The Canadian White Ribbon Tidings faithfully. The white ribbon is the WCTU’s predominant visual image of the homeplace and stands for purity, patriotism, and peace and is tied to the political and religious slogan of “home protection.” My earliest temperance artifact (1947) also centers on the white ribbon. My mother pledges on my Little White Ribboner’s Certificate that she “will not give or allow [me] to take Intoxicating Drinks.” The bold statements on this certificate make the verbal-visual connection between the white ribbon and homeplaces: “Nations are gathered out of Nurseries. The Hope of the Race is the Child.”

I have begun to develop an oral history of the WCTU experience with my brothers, sister, cousins, friends, and neighbours. As I read and re-read the transcripts, I am struck by our vivid sensory recollections of our temperance foremothers’ appeal to the audiovisual in the “work” (see Lander, 2000a, b). Serendipitously, the political and religious banners of the WCTU between 1877 and 1932 (Harker & Allen, 1999) were being exhibited at the Museum of Textiles in Toronto in the summer of 1999 just as I was beginning my oral history of the WCTU.

Homeplace Women as Audiovisual Educators

The confluence of word and image in our mothers’ temperance activism became a common theme of my oral history and of the exhibit of WCTU banners. The WCTU qualifies as a “public homeplace” in Belenky’s (1996) sense of organizations that emphasize the values and images associated with mother-work, home, and domesticity in public life; public homeplaces are organized around metaphors and rhetoric of care, concern, and connection. “On the deepest level, the homeplace women think of all human beings as belonging to a single family” (p. 410). Gouthro’s (2000) secular conception of global civil society echoes the slogan of the WCTU “For God and Home and Every Land,” which was adopted in the early twentieth century. “The common, global concerns that women and men also may share, in wanting their families to be safe, their homes free of violence, their children to have hope, resources, and opportunities for the future” (Gouthro, p. 69).
My study de-romanticizes the audiovisual symbols of WCTU mothers and homeplace women. I explicate the patriarchal bias in the WCTU's rhetoric of domination that depends on persuasion and a conscious intent to change others, to eliminate male vice, and thus, to dominate others (Foss & Griffin, 1992, p. 335). Letitia Youmans was the first president of the Dominion WCTU (later the Canadian WCTU) and the rhetoric of domination over male vice pours forth in Youmans' (1893) autobiography but so too does the invitational rhetoric of inherent value in the context of interconnection (Foss & Griffin, 1995). “At the request of [her] sisters in the work, [Youmans]. . .recalls the story of her life” (p. v):

The term prohibition, when applied to the liquor traffic, was obnoxious, so much so that I would announce my subject as “home protection,” assuring my audience that I had not come to advocate woman’s rights, but to remonstrate against woman’s wrongs; to claim for every wife the right to have a sober husband, and every mother to have a sober son, and a comfortable home for herself and children. (p. 207)

Belenky’s (1996) romantic image of homeplace women eschews the masculinist metaphors of war. She also avoids explicitly attaching the metaphors of advocacy and activism to homeplace women. “The metaphors, verbs, and adjectives the homeplace women actually use. . .almost always suggest activities that foster growth, development, and connection” (p. 411). My study of WCTU audiovisual education provides exemplars of the contradictory rhetoric that WCTU mothers use; war and advocacy metaphors co-exist with metaphors of home and hearth. This is interpretive speaking that seeks opportunities for cross-appropriating practices from the subworld of war and the military. Frances Willard (1893), who was Letitia Youmans’ contemporary with the American WCTU, addressed the World’s Woman’s Christian Temperance Union in 1893 beginning “Beloved Comrades of the White Ribbon Army.” In 1999, six WCTU mothers of my mother’s generation, including my mother, responded with applause to a WCTU mother who recited from heart her winning poem from the 1940s, “There are Two Armies,” but also with deep sighs that indicated that alcohol as “the foe” was still a viable metaphor.

I can trace the strong audiovisual elements that attended the 1999 oral history among my generation and the process of negotiating our way from remembering our temperance foremothers as out-of-touch old women to remembering their work as feminist education and activism. Our visual touchstone was of older women drinking tea together in the parlour. The WCTU fostered this image themselves, judging from the October 1967 cover of The Canadian White Ribbon Tidings. Cook (1997) provides some balance for this stereotypical image of the WCTU “as a group of aging women rather irrelevantly railing against mainstream and its mores” (p. 656). Note the “fight” metaphor in Cook’s description of homeplace women as activists:

This inaccurate and demeaning interpretation trivializes the historical significance of the WCTU and the many causes it fought. . . . The WCTU white ribbon campaign has in the 1990’s been appropriated by men as a public symbol condemning male violence against women – an ironic, but not unwelcome, gesture to those who remember the original meaning of the white ribbon: personal purity for women who would in turn purify and reshape their society. (pp. 656-657)
The WCTU encouraged its members to wear their white ribbon badge as a symbol of membership and all the WCTU stood for. They also encouraged WCTU to dress for public occasions in a way that did not masculinize them (Mattingly, 1998, p. 66).

Audiovisual rhetoric as memory work (see Rider, 1990) enables the exchange of ideas across generations. I can trace new understanding and insights that emerged in the process of remembering our WCTU mothers’ symbols. I shall also explicate the invitational rhetoric that emerges in the audience responses to the WCTU banners in the Museum of Textiles guest book. The WCTU banners were displayed in the Museum of Civilization in Hull, Quebec in 2000 and advance stories in *The Ottawa Citizen* constituted invitational rhetoric. Here Landon (2000) underscores the confluence of word and image in the rhetoric of homeplace women by featuring three colour reproductions of the banners and repeating the slogan of an 1888 banner in the headline: “For God and Home and Native Land.” This invokes Shlain’s (1998) plans of action that combine the focused, step-by-step “masculine” logic of the left brain and the holistic, “feminine” logic of the right brain. De Vries (1999) also describes the banners in *The Anglican Journal*: “The starkness of these words is softened through elaborate needlework of flowers and curlicues interwoven with letters. . . .The visual design elements add another level of meaning...White and yellow colours predominate, symbolizing purity and the suffragette movement respectively” (p. 17).

The 1890 “Workers for God” WCTU banner is reproduced on the front cover of the catalogue, *Gather Beneath the Banner*, for the Museum of Textiles (Harker & Allen, 1999). I re-present it here as an exemplar of homeplace women and of contradictory feminist visual rhetoric. The rhetoric of domination over male vice is exemplified by the sword in the mother’s hand ready to strike the serpent in the grass. Contradictorily, the violent metaphor of the sword holds true to Belenky’s (1996) metaphors that homeplace women use, such as “nurturing” and “caring.” The rhetoric of inherent value and the value of home protection is exemplified in the mother’s hand shielding her child from danger. Shlain (1998) develops his thesis that the divisions between right and left brain accord with the primary perceptual modes of women and men. “The left hand controlled by the right brain, is more protective than the right….Shielding, holding, and toting are maternal functions necessitated by the helplessness of human infants….The dominant right hand is the agent of action. It throws the spear....These two mirror-image strategies, gather/nurture and hunt/kill, are combined in each of us” (pp. 26-27). This banner exemplifies the visual rhetoric of mothering, particularly the “dual aspect” activity of childrearing that Fraser (1989) elaborates in order to include both symbolic and material reproduction. The rhetoric of domination inheres in a modernist capitalist organization that would separate childrearing practices as symbolic reproduction practices from the material reproduction practices of producing food and objects (Fraser, p. 115). The visual rhetoric of the Workers for God banner addresses audience and spectators on the complexities of childrearing practices.

**Re-membering and Re-picturing White Ribbon Rhetoric**

The verbal rhetoric of the white ribbon takes up Hart’s (1997) valuing of motherwork and the mothers-as-activists challenge to the market-oriented orientation to production as profit that
thrive on divisions and separations. Compare this to the rhetoric of inherent value in the context of interaction: “the wearer of the white ribbon badge prays daily for the welfare of all mankind” (The Canadian White Ribbon Tidings, May 1962). In taking up Hart’s challenge, I analyse the audiovisual rhetoric in my 1999 oral history of the WCTU and the responses to the WCTU banners in the Museum of Textiles guest book. The artifacts highlight the contradictions of feminist rhetoric and the engagement of both inherent value and domination.

Ironically, memory is perhaps the least remembered of the five Aristotelian canons of rhetoric that also include style, arrangement, delivery, and invention. Following Rider (1990), I propose to bring back memory to the canons of rhetoric and redefine memory in the context of the feminist rhetoric of my oral history and the banner exhibition. Neuroscientists and cognitive linguists lend support to using the visual and the verbal to reinforce one another in lifelong learning. Meaning making forges the link between learning and memory (see Heath, 2000). Feminist rhetoric depends on the linking of metaphor to memory. Metaphor is an image and it does not matter if it is a speech or a poem or woman’s dress or a WCTU banner. “It’s still a stirring of the memory and it’s letting two memories – both speaker and listener, reader and writer, [artist and spectator] – share for a minute” (Rider, p. 7). Metaphor connects to activism as a “phenomenon of use. . .an interactive phenomenon, in the sense that it is an utterance which a speaker [and an artist] intends his hearer [and spectator] to amplify and adjust” (Haack, 1998, p. 77). Nasstrom’s (1999) analysis of memory work and women’s activism in the context of the civil rights movement in Georgia validates my analysis of the oral history with my WCTU family, friends and neighbours, which began in the summer of 1999. Our collective memories of the past legitimate action in the present. We “become historical actors who intervene between the past and the present, continually reframing the movement” (p. 134). I begin with the WCTU banners as exemplars of stirring of memory and the amplifying and adjusting of metaphors.

The rhetoric of inherent value in the context of interaction embodies this woman’s response to the banner exhibition. Note how she amplifies and adjusts the metaphors of the banners with her own visual image of “cold, cold water.”

I didn’t know the White Ribbon had been used previously to Montreal Massacre Remembrance. This exhibition is an example of what women do best in getting their message across, collaboration, creativity and network organization – excellent exhibit. “Cold, Cold Water is the Drink for Me!”

Listen to this woman as spectator and historical actor who intervenes between the past and the present – “then” and “today” - in her longing to connect to the art work: “Difficulty in keeping my eyes and hands off. The intricate work of needle, art, paint & message is presented then yet is still today an issue in many ways. Thank you.”

This next spectator becomes a “spect-actor” in Boal’s (1992) Invisible Theatre where active spectators unknowingly are both audience and actors. The WCTU artwork becomes “the agent provocateur. . .mingling with the public. . .using theatre to stimulate debate, getting people to question issues in a pubic forum” (pp. xx-xxi). In the process, the spect-actors change the script. “So glad these banners have been “found” and brought to the light of day! Has the W.C.T.U. ever considered amalgamation with M.A.D.D. (Mothers Against Drunk Driving)?
Strength in numbers!” The WCTU banners legitimate action at a personal level for this next spectator’s own family. Her response redefines memory work as rhetoric that carries the past forward to the present and an imagining of a different future: “A moving exhibit – the passion these women had are felt through their works still. This exhibit has inspired me to create my own banner for my family, with the beliefs we hold to be important. Thank you for the life changing collection.”

Not all spectators amplified and adjusted the visual metaphors in such glowing phrases. This spectator responds to the WCTU’s patriarchal bias and their rhetoric of domination. His closing remark is telling of a response at a bodily level: “Thanks for letting me get that off my chest.”

To think how strong the church and state are that they have the power to influence our morals, our sense of what is right and wrong. Too bad these temperance ladies fell into the trap of believing that they were the pious ones and that their moralistic values and gender would keep everyone in line (their children and husbands). Instead it subordinated their positions and made them repressed.

The responses to the visual rhetoric of the WCTU banners gives me pause as I re-read the transcripts of my oral history in my home community. A 50-year-old dairy farmer’s total recall of his temperance elocution poem from some 35 years earlier supports Rider’s (1990) claim that feminist rhetoric depends on memory. I present his re-membering in support of my hunch that the visual rhetoric that the WCTU favours acts as a retrieval cue in the selectivity of memory. The dairy farmer clearly remembered his mother’s work (and images) in helping him prepare for his recitation, a tragic saga of drinking and driving: “Mother being inventive as she was, she got a Spic and Span can and we put a set of Meccano wheels on it….And I can remember holding up this thing, it was to represent a car, it was an old tin can.” Like Byatt’s (1994) Mrs. Brown, whose artwork teemed with vitality, this WCTU mother and audiovisual educator “gets her materials from everywhere”–the kitchen and the toy closet. The canon of visual rhetoric that the dairy farmer validates is invention: “Mother being inventive as she was. . .”. Initially he does not validate memory in the canon of feminist rhetoric and its link to women’s activism (see Nasstrom, 1999). Rather he remembers the WCTU’s rhetoric of domination:

I don’t remember much of an education program involved in the speaking that we did….I just remember yeah, being pushed into these, everybody did it and that was sort of it….I don’t ever remember, you know, anything going along with those to sort of say, “Well, this is why you should be doing those little speeches” or “This is why we advocate…” I don’t remember that.

The response from my sister June (age 58), a mother herself, supports my theorizing on memory work as a negotiation of a shared past to create a her-story of the present: “Well, maybe it was better without a long sermon because those speeches had all the message right in them.”

I have a hunch that activist mothers’ use of contradictory rhetoric is necessary to support motherwork and the “dual activity” of childrearing for civil society, which “comprises language
teaching and initiation into social mores – but also feeding, bathing, and protection from physical harm” (Fraser, 1989, p. 116). I close this paper by inviting you to engage with the values implicit in my re-membering of my own mother’s work, the “home protection” of temperance activism. I hope to persuade you that WCTU mothers as activists in civil society de-naturalize the ascendancy of production of profit over production for life (Hart, 1992). I re-member my mother’s use of audiovisual rhetoric to accompany my brother David’s recitation of “The Cider Mill.” I can remember only the last line of this poem, which was “This is the best way to make cider!” at which point David bit into an apple with gusto. My mother insisted it must be a well-polished red MacIntosh for the visual effect and even more for its juicy sound effects. As you can see and hear and taste, mothers as audiovisual educators and activists get their symbols from everywhere.

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