

## HEQA - Vanessa Fernandez Greene

[00:00:00] **Jack Schneider:** Welcome to *HEQ&A*, the podcast of the *History of Education Quarterly*. I'm your host, *HEQ* co-editor Jack Schneider. Every few weeks, we'll dive into recent work from the journal, asking authors how their projects challenge or extend what we know about a topic, exploring what's interesting and surprising about it, and then taking a step back to consider broader implications. In the second half of the show, we turn our sights to teaching. So, if you're an educator, make sure to stick around until the end. And now let's hear from one of our authors.

[00:00:49] **Vanessa Fernandez Greene:** My name is Vanessa Fernandez Greene. I'm a professor of Spanish at Winona State University in Winona, Minnesota. And I'm the author of "Mercer's Belles and Sarmiento's Teachers: Female Pedagogues within Two Transcontinental Immigration Projects of the Nineteenth Century." My article is about two groups of men and women in the nineteenth century who traveled from the eastern United States to Washington Territory and Argentina. I examined the gender dynamics between the female teachers and the male leaders. And I also look at the projects as a type of internal educational colonialism, because their purpose was to use these women as civilizing forces to regulate the behavior of the populations where they were sent to teach.

[00:01:46] Up until now these projects have been primarily looked at from a personal interest point of view, I suppose. So Mercer, Asa Mercer's project, bringing women from the east to Washington Territory sometimes appears in newspapers as a "look at this cute story." These women were brought out to become brides to settler men who were in the territory. There was a TV show based on the premise at one point. And I believe there was also a collection of romance stories that had sort of, were tied into the theme as well. But there were very few academic articles looking at the broader implications for what this meant to bring eastern women, in theory, teachers, to the West to teach and marry the, the white settler men that were there.

[00:02:46] And it's similar with Sarmiento project, the focus has primarily been on biography of the women teachers: who they were, what their experience was like. They're still celebrated down in Argentina in the schools in, in many cases, but there hasn't been a lot of examining what this project meant for Argentina as an emerging nation in the nineteenth century. So what I do is I look at these projects as operating within a settler colonial structures and I, with the gender dynamics as well, looking at the power structure between these male leaders and these female teachers who were supposed to represent the civilizing force to these border or outside of main society, uh, at the time.

[00:03:43] The connection between the two projects had been mentioned once or twice as just in the aspect of Sarmiento who led the project to Argentina was in the United States and saw an article in Harper's Weekly about Mercer's project. There was a drawing of these women on a ship. It said there were 600 of them and they were being sent out to Washington Territory, and Sarmiento was inspired by this article. And that's about all that had been said so far in terms of the connection between the two. In reality, he was so inspired when he realized that the ship was traveling down around Patagonia and was going to spend some time in Chile, he wrote an article to be published in the Chilean newspapers, exhorting them to go and try and track these teachers, convince them to stay in South America, so that they could teach the population there.

[00:04:44] And there's actually newspaper reporter who was onboard the ship who recorded-- had a diary and published different articles. And in his diary, he describes the scene of the ship being overrun by these Chilean officers and that they were trying to convince the women to stay. And they were extremely worried that a lot of them were going to be convinced to stay in, in Chile instead of going onto Washington Territory. So just the whole scene as he recounts it, the captain, or Mercer, actually, who was the leader of the group was standing on the gangplank with his hair, waving in the wind and saying, "nobody's getting off the ship." And it's just really, uh, fun to, to imagine the scene. And also to know that at the time they didn't realize that the reason these men and women were coming on board and trying to "steal" their teachers was because of an article, that, uh, Sarmiento had written.

[00:05:43] So some other things that were really surprising and fun or go back to those entries, that journal entries of the, of the newspaper reporter and describing the dynamic between Mercer and these women who supposedly were the epitome of, of civilized behavior. And that's how they were always portrayed in the newspapers and were portrayed to the population as they were going. But we see that onboard the ship there's actually a lot of tension between Mercer and these women because they don't behave the way he thinks they should, so he tries to impose a bedtime, for example, curfew, and the women absolutely refused to, to obey his commands and he tries to get them to go to Mass on Sundays. And a lot of them were in the back kind of whispering and giggling about him while he's conducting service. So that, that is again, a lot of fun to, to read about the, the dynamic and how these women asserted their own will within the project and it's the same goes with Sarmiento.

[00:06:49] So he wanted the first groups of women to go to an area of Argentina that was considered very dangerous and remote. And once they got there and realized that was the case, they, they refused to put their lives in danger, but they didn't want to-- they wanted to respect their contract with Sarmiento. So they said, "We will, we'll be happy to teach here. We'll stay here in Buenos Aires and, we'll teach," but there was some more tension there. And he just kind of washed his hands of them and said, whatever, you know, I'm really looking for people to go out here. And so I thought that was a, quite a surprising discovery was the women who asserted their will within these projects that they were supposedly just going along with and, and, and doing what the men wanted them to do.

[00:07:41] I think the broader implications of this article are the contributions to the idea of both the United States and Latin America as settler colonial nations. There's been some recent scholarship and books, but I think it's a field that really needs to be examined more in depth than this project shows some examples of ways that we see women, especially being important instruments in the settler colonial state and seen as civilizing forces on these populations. In the case of Washington Territory, we have White settler men who are seen as kind of losing, losing touch with civilization. They're out in the wilds. They maybe having relations with, with Native women, and so the idea is we have to bring in these, these White women to put them back on track and make sure that we fulfill the, the ideals of a White colonial state.

[00:08:48] And then with Argentina, a similar idea that we have to establish an education system in a country where it had been destroyed basically because of a dictator earlier in the century. Um, how

can we make our nation modern and bring it into the, the twentieth century with education and using female teachers specifically to do that?

**Jack Schneider:** The second half of the show is dedicated to thinking about teaching. We ask authors to put on their guest lecturer hats and take students into the weeds. What should they pay attention to, methodologically speaking? What else should they be reading if they want to take a deep dive into the historiography? And where are there opportunities for further research?

[00:09:39] **Vanessa Fernandez Greene:** This project came to my attention, or I first learned about the projects of both Mercer and Sarmiento with ties to my university. So over half of the women who traveled to Argentina to teach either graduated from my university or were teachers there in the nineteenth century. So, it was first introduced to me as "here's something we don't know, nobody here knows that, nobody realizes that these women went down to Argentina and had, uh, such an important role in establishing an education system down there."

[00:10:16] So my first steps, uh, when I first learned about it 10 years ago was to just learn more about these women. And that's what mostly had been published at the time. Which wasn't much but short biographies of the people who went down and some of their experiences. And I was kind of stuck on that for a really long time, and when I had read about Sarmiento being inspired by Mercer's trip, I said, oh, here's another example. So I was quite awed by the fact that these women were traveling such long distances in a time where we would think that travel was onerous and it's not something people did because they wanted to, but only because they had to.

[00:11:02] So I started exploring more about this idea of exporting teachers to other areas. And as I was reading about Mercer's venture again, just sort of, most of the time kind of fluff pieces about, "oh, these women that were sent to"... ostensibly, they were teachers, but really everyone was talking about how they were going to become brides to them, to the men out west, and as I dug more into both of these projects, as I noticed the connection between them with the journalist's diary and found the part where it talks about these Chilean officers and then references to Sarmiento writing a letter to Chile. If I wasn't sure what my goal was, I was just interested in the topic.

[00:11:49] As I was doing that, I think because of that idea of these export teachers, we have to bring people from somewhere else, I started thinking about that idea of using education as internal colonialism in a way, because it's still within US territories or with Argentina, we have president of Argentina who wants to civilize people within his country. So I started looking up the topic of internal colonial, educational colonialism, and that led me to settler colonialism and, started to see patterns and the structures there. So it was ten years in the making.

[00:12:30] I am not a historian. I usually do literary criticism. So I think there was a learning curve for me in terms of researching historical documents. I looked into the documents we had on campus to see what I could find about the women. And I found, I did find a little bit, but a lot had been destroyed in a fire. So that was pretty frustrating when I realized that. I did several trips to Argentina. I am a Spanish teacher and actually do a lot with Argentine literature. So when I was down in Argentina, I did research at the library in Buenos Aires, and also at some of the language schools where these teachers had, had either taught or it helped found the school.

[00:13:13] Our university was actually invited down to celebrate the bicentennial of the birth of Sarmiento. And so I got to go to some of these schools where the teachers were, and just tried to do research in their archives when I could as well. And then looking at newspapers, there's a lot of, I found that there were a lot of historical newspapers online. So out west, all the, the newspapers there, I looked for newspapers here in Winona to see what they had to say, if they talked about these women and the fact that they had been in Argentina or the impact they had there. So it was a lot of time online. I went to our historical society as well.

[00:13:55] The text that was the most critical for me to start thinking about the theoretical basis of my article was Margaret Jacobs's *White Mother to a Dark Race*. She explores the role of White women in a settler colonialist state, both the American West and Ar-- in Australia and the role they had in indoctrinating Indigenous children into the colonial structure of the nation. So that was probably the key texts for me. After actually my article was submitted, I read two other books that I found extremely helpful that I highly recommend. Um, one is called *Not a Nation of Immigrants* by Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz. Her premise is that our country was essentially founded as an imperialist settler state. I think that's an essential book to read and also the *Trouble with White Women* by Kayla Schuller, which looks at a counter history of feminism. So again, the role of White women in oppressing of other races, I found extremely helpful as well.

[00:15:13] I think there are a lot of opportunities. As I said, there really haven't been a lot of critical studies on either of these projects. And so I think that there's probably lots of archives to explore that I haven't had a chance to and ways to look about the implications of these projects, as well as the gender dynamics between the men and women within them. So I think that, that getting beyond the idea of these as like interesting anecdotes as part of our, you know, Western history, for example, looking at it as a group of women who went out to find husbands, but really looking at why Mercer wanted White women of upper-class families from the East to come and civilize-- re- civilize the White settler male population, I think is something that can be explored much further.

[00:16:11] And also the dynamics between these women and the Indigenous women that were out there when they arrived, for example. With Sarmiento, there have been some, some good studies related to the women and the reasons that they went, went there (primarily financial). Looking more closely at this idea, again, of why did it have to be New England-educated women, um, going to Argentina, I think is something that could still be explored further as well.

[00:16:49] **Jack Schneider:** Check out *History of Education Quarterly* online. The journal is published by Cambridge University Press and it's carried by most academic libraries. You should also be sure to follow *HEQ* Twitter handle: @histedquarterly, which regularly sends out free read-only versions of articles, and the show's Twitter handle @HEQandA. And don't forget, subscribe to the show so you don't miss forthcoming episodes. We're available on iTunes, Stitcher, and wherever you get your podcasts. HEQ&A is produced at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. Our producer is Jennifer Berkshire and our theme music is by Ryan Shaw. I'm Jack Schneider. Thanks for joining us.