The art of irreverence: reading and resistance in the feminist classroom

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The art of irreverence:
Reading and resistance in the feminist classroom

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department: English
Major: English (Rhetoric and Composition)

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

University
Ames, Iowa

1996
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INTRODUCTION:
IRONY, RESISTANCE, IR\[R\]EVERENCE, AND FEMALE
STUDENTS’ SEARCH FOR AUTHORITY IN THE CLASSROOM

You can’t write a whole paper on a character who barely talks.

When I was in high school we read Arthur Miller’s “Death of a Salesman” in English class. (This was after a smorgasbord of male-authored texts: Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter, Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying, Updike’s Rabbit, Run, and Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men.) Well, we were supposed to read “Death of a Salesman.” I did not, and we had to write a paper on it. As part of our prospectus we had to summarize the play. So I got the Cliffs Notes and wrote a summary. I got it back from Mr. Dunn. Very thorough, he wrote, but you missed Mrs. Loman in your character list.

I didn’t know Willy was married! I consulted the Cliffs Notes and read the summary again. No Mrs. Loman. I read the actual play (imagine that!) and found Mrs. Loman. Hmmm, I thought, why wasn’t she in the summary? I told Mr. Dunn that I wanted to write on Mrs. Loman. I do not know why really; I do not think it was for any particular feminist endeavor I would have articulated at the time. I just wanted to.

“Mrs. Loman!?” he asked, “What about her?”

“Well,” I said. “She seems to be the smartest one, really. She’s reasonable, at least. She tells Willy that his plants won’t grow, but at the same
time she is very supportive of him. Things like that. Willy and those sons are just so stupid. I don’t even understand why she stays with him, but she’s the perfect doting wife.”

“That’s it?” asked Mr. Dunn, who was a big fan of leit motifs, and did not appreciate the word “stupid” used to describe anything about an Arthur Miller play, “you’re going to write a whole paper on that?”

“Well...yes” I said. “I could write about how that’s all there is. Maybe if they would have paid more attention to Mrs. Loman they wouldn’t have been so unhappy. I don’t know, there’s got to be something to write about her. I don’t like Biff, Happy or Willy.”

“There’s not enough lines for you to write on her. You need lines to quote—support from the text.”

“But I think it’s weird she’s not in the play much. There are no women in it—oh, except for that woman Willy has an affair with. I can’t think of her name.”

“Well,” Mr. Dunn said, “You can’t write a whole paper on a character who barely talks.”

I took Mr. Dunn’s word for it and wrote instead on the “boxed-in” motif in “Death of a Salesman.” After all, poor Willy was trapped. Just ask Mrs. Loman; she was there fixing dinner for the trapped man.

**Irreverence/Revision**

This story brings up many questions for me as a female student and now a female teacher in the classroom. In the following pages, I will explore some of these issues and discuss ways in which feminist pedagogy within first-year composition could be improved. In the first chapter I will define
what I mean by the concept of Reverence and talk about the alternative notion of Irreverence. I will characterize the female student’s experience in the classroom, including a discussion of the narratives that exist in the classroom that are dictated by the books we hold up as authoritative in the classroom.

In Chapter Two I will discuss the fact that most composition studies feminist scholarship continues to cite the 1986 book *Women’s Ways of Knowing* and support my claim that this over-reliance is representative of the stagnation of feminist scholarship in composition studies. My point here is not to devalue the importance of *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, but to suggest that there should be an articulation of the changes that have taken place in feminist pedagogy—in composition studies and in women’s studies. I see *Women’s Ways of Knowing* as the marker of feminist theory in the classroom in the same way Mina Shaughnessey’s *Errors and Expectations* might be a marker of the realization that there are intelligent people who have great difficulties writing. We take Shaughnessy’s work as a given in many ways, and I think it is time to do the same with Belenky et al.

In the 10 years since *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, many influences—post-structuralist thought in particular—have had a profound influence on both English departments in general and feminist methodology specifically. I contend that these influences should and have changed the way we teach in a feminist classroom. For the benefit of feminism’s self-reflexiveness in composition studies, I am interested in an exercise that embarks on a Revision through the Art of Irreverence that I want to see undertaken more zealously in composition studies.
Finally, I will explicate my definition of postmodern feminism, detailing three aspects of postmodern feminism that should be incorporated into the composition classroom: anti-sexism, which works against aspects of sexism historically instituted in the classroom, looking beyond just avoiding further sexism; anti-essentialism, which acknowledges the complexity of gender categories and relishes that complexity; and, finally, resistance that seeks to legitimate the articulation of the gaps that exist between a student's subject position and the narrative the classroom may be trying inflict on them.

Each of these aspects of postmodern feminism is a part of this Art of Irreverence in that it tries to work beyond the worshipper/Truth dynamic that women are suffocated within in the classroom. Irreverence is not about disrespect, but about fearless questioning. Even this text I am writing is an act of Irreverence and resistance in that it does not adhere strictly to the rather formal conventions of traditional academic writing--linear, non-narrative, "logical" and impersonal. It does this not simply as an act of resistance for resistance's sake, but because I do not feel I could make contentions that the current-traditional epistemology should be revised to such improvements as considering experience a legitimate "proof," and not attempt to employ these ideas myself. My own learned Irreverence has enabled me to enter academic dialogues with a strong ability to critique what is being revered in my courses.
CHAPTER ONE:
REVERENCE IN THE CLASSROOM

Reverence

I think the story of Mr. Dunn and Mr. Miller is a good illustration of a particular dynamic that can take hold in the classroom, a dynamic of teacher and/or text as authority and student as blind questioner, or worse, unknowing underling—a dynamic that I will argue is especially damaging to female students. I think female students themselves are “boxed-in” to this Reverence for established motifs in “classic” works such as Miller’s “Death of a Salesman”; or as Judith Fetterley says in her groundbreaking 1978 book *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Literature*, female readers are “Forced in every way to identify with men, yet incessantly reminded of being woman” (9) and eventually, “she [the female reader] undergoes a transformation into an “it,” the dominion of personhood lost indeed” (9). Fetterley’s work is focused specifically on the female reader of literature, and I will not attempt to reiterate what she says, because she does it best, but I will say that this same sort of dynamic occurs in the composition classroom and it is my goal to discuss the importance of recognizing this and developing ways to improve on it.

So I begin with a question that cannot be answered, but must be asked, over and over again: how can a composition course teach female students to be confident, self-reflexive, critically-thinking women? This question ignores the question of whether or not a composition course can or
should teach female students to be confident, self-reflexive, critically-thinking individuals. I think it has to. I ask the question because I am a 24-year-old feminist teacher who has the energy to hope there is an “answer” to my question. It is beside the point that eventually cynicism and hopelessness may eclipse my energy and that my loftiest goal will be that my students spell my name correctly. That is, after all, what some tenured professors want to tell you--and what their eyes do tell you: sure, kid, you’re excited now, but wait until tenure is your top priority, wait until sexism in your own departmental hierarchy is what you worry about. You’ve graded 700-or-so papers? Wait until you’ve graded 4,000. Talk to me after 12 semesters of teaching. But I persist because school matters, right? It is the only way to fight ignorance, teach tolerance, reduce sexism. If you think education is expensive, try ignorance. Bumper stickers do not lie, do they? Education will make the world a kinder, gentler place. Everyone knows that.

I begin this way because it is part of the rich context that forms me and that I, in turn, negotiate and form. And if I want to teach students that it is important to understand things within a context, it is important that I understand my own. I am a 24-year-old teaching assistant at a Midwestern state university of science and technology. What political and economic circumstances are responsible for my being in front of a classroom? They are not circumstances that produce a political and economic system that fights ignorance, teaches tolerance, and reduces sexism. It is a system that has given tenure to white males disproportionately, a system with very few African-American Ph.D. candidates, and even fewer African-Americans in tenure-track positions or administrative positions of power. It is a system that creates and reinforces the status quo.
This is the first of the many paradoxes of feminism in the classroom: how do you teach female students they can have power and then show them a picture of the administrators at their university--most of them white men in their suits and ties, smiling because they hold the keys to all the doors? How can you tell a female that she can succeed in business and then look at a list of the CEO’s of Fortune 500 companies and see just one woman? As Kathleen Weiler puts it, “Feminist and antiracist teachers and administrators hold certain beliefs about justice and equality that they try to put into effect in their work. But they inherit positions in already existing, highly complex institutions” (101). Because my context is so complex, and because I know my students come from, enter, and will leave into a context riddled with inconsistencies, paradox, and frustration, I view it as my responsibility to bring my own self-reflexiveness into the classroom. To say that being a woman in the world and in the classroom requires a sense of irreverent humor is an understatement. My own educational journey has lead me to understand the power of Irreverence in the classroom--a certain amount of productive suspicion about what is being dispensed as Truth.

I also tell the story of my high school English class hoping to understand my own context. I remember it so vividly. You can’t write a whole paper on a character who barely talks. Even then, I had good questions, but it did not occur to me to resist the assumptions I was supposed to have about “Death of a Salesman.” After all, Mr. Dunn was the teacher; and he was right--there weren’t very many lines to quote. As Fetterley contends, “The major works of American fiction constitute a series of designs on the female reader, all the more potent in their effect because they are impalpable”(11). It is important to me that she says impalpable --
we cannot feel these designs; we cannot point to them for illustration; we
have no "proof," but they are there, shifting us into particular systems of
knowledge of authority. Also concerning reading and gender, Janet Wolff
says:

Just as art criticism and film criticism have demonstrated the ways in
which texts constitute their readers/viewers as male, so feminist
literary critics have identified that necessary process which has been
called the 'immasculation of the reader'--that is, the need for women,
if they are competent readers in our culture, to take on the point-of-
view of men. (69)

It was not that Mr. Dunn specifically wanted me to take the point of view of
a male, he just did not understand any other possibility--a reader of "Death
of a Salesman" talks about the salesman. Even though Willy Loman is far
from a powerful male, he still has control over the dialogue in the play, and
he had control over the discussion in our class. Mr. Dunn did not have to
listen for the lost voices; it was his luxury to let them fall. You can't write a
whole paper on a character that barely talks. Not only can you write a paper
on a character who barely talks--I think it is the paper we must write. It does
take more work, though, and it takes the work of resisting the more
"natural" narrative view of the "dominant" character. As Fetterley says,
"clearly, then, the first act of the feminist critic must be to become a
resisting, rather than an assenting reader and, by this refusal to assent, to
begin the process of exorcising the male mind that has been implanted in
us" (22). I think the "male mind" Fetterley speaks of as "implanted" is the
Reverence that relegates most female students to a classroom presence without authority and confidence.

Passivity contributes to this Reverence; it is not taught explicitly, it is measured, and it is handed to us all when female students enter the dialogue involving that which is Revered. It is telling that the dictionary offers this use of reverence: “to pray with reverence.” We do bow down at the altar of god the father and god the son. We are disciplined by the male god, and even speaking of “him” assumes a look upward. Male students are expected to have this Reverence too, but most of them, I would argue, carry theirs much more comfortably. This unchallenged awe does not weigh on them as much because many of them are the inheritors of this Reverence.

I am not suggesting that this is always what happens when we read literature by males or that we shouldn’t read literature by males, but I am suggesting that my experience forces me to understand my knowledge construction. I do not remember the “boxed-in” motif of “Death of a Salesman,” but I do remember my teacher’s comments to me and the questions I had after his comments. What Mr. Dunn intended for me to learn was not what I retained at all, and as a feminist teacher I want to be able to teach a way to learn beyond the boundaries that Reverence puts on the classroom.

This plunge into the unfamiliar is not an easy task, and it is obviously not a step that all first-year female students feel compelled to make. Many of them see no overt signs of sexism in their classrooms, and have been sold on at least one of the dominant ideology’s working myths: male/female equality--as if equality were even possible in the language (men “announcing” this equality) and axis (the male/female dichotomous split).
the world rests on. In fact, Donna Qualley points out that for many of her women students, "feminism is not a political, social, or humanistic morality, or way of life...feminism has given them permission to repackage the "American Dream" for themselves" (32). This is a decidedly non-resistant stance--repackaging the American Dream with little or no perception that it is a dream made up of a social, political, and economic apparatus that keeps them in positions that will pay them less than men. So, what does a feminist teacher do? Is it my role to correct students’ perceptions? Should it be my objective to explain to a female student that she really has no good reason to be happy?

I guess you could say women’s opportunity to “repackage the American Dream” is a good thing--or at least it is not entirely bad. I would suggest, however, that this “permission” that women feel they have been granted is just another sign of the Reverence they have cultivated for authority. I am suggesting that the necessary leap for a female student between a suspicion that the academic scale does not tip in her favor and a conscious action toward revisioning herself as a woman and a student is a dismantling of the Reverence she has developed for most things she is taught. Joy Ritchie says it nicely: “As resistance becomes a conscious activity, it also is an essential part of the process of critiquing and intervening in oppressive ideologies” (117). Irreverence, unfortunately gaining its identity only in reference to Reverence itself, allows the female student to “stay where she is,” but begin to see where she is much differently.
Resistance in Composition

The idea of "resistance" can also be used similarly in the composition classroom and, further, the composition classroom is a particularly important place to practice this. Although the dominant narrative voices of composition textbooks are less obvious than they might be in literature—for example, a narrator in a short story is a character we might get to know, whereas the "silent" authors of a textbook are not (a textbook is seemingly "unauthored"); there are nevertheless authorial narratives that guide the classroom. The composition textbook has an authorial power in that it works to define what a first-year writing student should know, how they should know it, and from whom they should learn it. It is not just that textbooks teach to "arrange your reasons in some logical order" (The St. Martin's Guide 545); it is that the very conception and definition of logical thought has been socially constructed. I would argue that the "logical," "rational," hierarchical five-paragraph essay that these textbooks value is part of an androcentric metanarrative that has defined "A's" and "B's" for many years, and sent more men than women and more whites than African-Americans on to graduate school.

Let us take another look at lines from The St. Martin's Guide to Writing, a first-year composition textbook widely used in English departments, now in its fourth edition. In my first year as a teaching assistant, I was required to use it to teach English 104, a beginning composition course. On page 257, it tells its readers, "The wording of a claim, especially its key terms, must be clear and exact." On page 461 the guide suggests, "If the judgment is vague or ambiguous, restate it so that there can be no confusion about your evaluation." This may seem like
“common sense,” but these assertions by the textbook are part of a larger narrative that tells students what thinking is--it is exact. My concern with these lines is that they seem to tell the student that there is no gray area in controversial issues--that the way “we” think is in terms of yes or no. No confusion allowed. You do not have a firm opinion or grasp of the issues? Just say it a different way. It attempts to organize thought in terms of “conciseness” and “clarity.” It tells students using the book that the job of writing is to clarify at all cost, not to explore ideas or contest and negotiate meaning and controversy.

Not only do the textbooks tell a narrative about writing, but the composition reader also tells a narrative about knowledge claims. The articles within the text tell a story about who has knowledge--male authors writing about the trade deficit with China and female authors arguing about abortion and child care. For example, in a reader currently available to first-year writing instructors edited by Andrea Lundsford, one of the most respected names in composition theory, one can deconstruct a narrative about, in this case, women’s roles in controversial topics. The reader, entitled The Presence of Others, contains a section entitled “Who We Are.” In this section, there is one article on date rape written by a male author who says that “we are in the presence here of nothing less than a brazen campaign to redefine seduction as a form of rape” (331). The second article on a “controversial issue” is about Anita Hill and the sexual harassment trial. This author, a woman, claims that “if Anita Hill says it’s going to be sunny, I would pack my galoshes and umbrella” (348). My point is not that these articles should agree with me, but that they seem to say at least these two things about women without offering any other point of view. First of all,
women lie. They lie about getting raped (it is just seduction) and they lie about being harassed (you cannot even trust Anita Hill about the weather). Secondly, the chapter speaks volumes about the roles of women in society’s arguments—*they cause problems, they do not solve them.* If women would just learn to avoid getting raped and being sexually harassed, we would not have to waste our time debating “about” them.

These may not seem like very damaging influences in the classroom, but they are, because they establish a governing dynamic between several agents in the classroom: teacher, student, the administration, parental figures, and published writers, among others. David Russell says, “The test of the oppositional pedagogy (or any other) is not what it opposes but what it proposes, not how well it deconstructs but how well it constructs” (191). In other words, unless there is active energy towards constructing an alternative dynamic—a movement toward teaching female students the Art of Irreverence—then the more traditional dynamic of powerful-male-as-dispenser-of-equality-and knowledge is formed by default.

Feminism has much theoretical complexity, and in many ways it is practice—Judith Fetterley refers to it as “itself an event and not a comment upon an event” (8). The very act of formulating a theory becomes practice for women, because formulating a feminism is a part of formulating a new epistemology, and the practice of making feminism a force in the classroom is an area that deserves time and energy. By trying to illuminate the complexity of feminism and discussing the aspects of feminism I do not see within composition studies, I hope to bring some of the texture of feminism outside composition studies to the composition field.
**Postmodern Reading**

I am interested in the concept of a resisting reader, and because of that I am interested in helping female students develop the ability to create what is not there by deconstructing what is there—a postmodern feminist pedagogical technique. Chris Weedon, in *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, describes what a postmodern feminist reading might do:

> To read for the expression of women’s experience, for example, is to locate the meaning of fiction outside itself in the life and consciousness of the author rather than in the historically placed interaction between reader and text. The author gives expression to her experience and guarantees its authenticity. This way of reading relies on the assumption of a fully self-present female subject, such as the subject of poststructuralism, whose experience is discursively produced and constantly open to redefinition. (137)

A “fully self-present female subject” is much to ask of a classroom, but there is potential for this asking; it is a potential that is not exhausted and exercised enough in the education of women students. In a later chapter, I will discuss three feminist concepts that I see contributing to a postmodern feminist classroom: anti-sexism, anti-essentialism, and resistance. All of these concepts relate to the Art of Irreverence because Irreverence involves reconsidering questions of “fact” in the classroom.

I consider my feminist pedagogy postmodern because it involves a conscious and self-reflexive re-figuring of what goes on in the classroom.
What we see in the classroom is the product of many layers of philosophical and cultural influence and that is much more interesting to me than what is in front of us. What is in front of us is racism and sexism, arguments about affirmative action, date rape, sexual harassment, welfare reform, but what is behind these arguments? What assumptions are made when we discuss rape? Perhaps there is a way to discuss the dynamics of a rape discussion instead of just a text about rape. What cultural norms and expectations have led us to have these discussions? What dynamic social forces have driven us to where we are now? Where are “we” now? Questions lead to more questions, but it is important to continue to ask in order to make change.

As I discussed earlier, reading is an invaluable source for points of resistance. Jasper Neel says that “Texts provide directions by which readers construct meaning based on their prior knowledge of the world” (90). Stuart Greene calls it “mining” texts for “certain strategies” (159), and Phillip Arrington terms it as experiencing the “hesitations, conflicts, resolutions, and renewed sources of tension” (40). All of these characterizations of what I would call Irreverent reading processes already exist in the classroom, but they would be even more valuable if they were explicitly articulated as anti-sexist, anti-essentialist or resistant. There is nothing wrong with telling students where you are trying to take them—*even their resistance to that* is a sign that they have begun to gain consciousness about their learning process.

Writing is also an especially important act of resistance, and I mention it here because I think the difference between constructing knowledge through reading and constructing knowledge through writing is
an important one to understand the development of language and meaning. Leon Satterfield says we need to make students “take responsibility for their expression” (83), and Robert Con Davis suggests that reading is itself “an instance of intervention and resistance larger than the ideological economy of resistance” (109). Hélène Cixous suggests that writing is a very important key to Irreverence also; it is “writing based on an encounter with another--be it a body, a piece of writing, a social dilemma, a moment of passion--that leads to an undoing of the hierarchies and oppositions that determine the limits of most conscious life” (Graves 146). I include all of these citations to suggest that the Art of Irreverence is not unlike the alternative methods of pedagogy being discussed in composition theory; it simply gives a name to what I see as an important articulation. These limits cannot be resolved, necessarily, by immersion in the discourse. Immersions into that discourse will only result in the adoption of its norms and rules--and most importantly, its expectations.

Questions in the classroom

There are many questions about what “works” in the writing class to promote a feeling of freedom. Is action promoted through the use of the personal narrative in journal writing as many (Elbow, Murray) have suggested, or for its “potential to promote individualized learning” (Lowenstein 139)? If traditional journal writing is too oriented around the existence of a rational, autonomous self, then is Lowenstein’s repositioning of the journal as “a mediator through which students can engage in larger academic and social conversations both within and outside the academy”(139) a satisfactory alternative? Or is the individualism promoted
through the use of such an expressivist tool, “a form of sexist ideology” (163) as David Bleich claims? Is it conservative and male--just another connection to the phallus and its “...dream of singularity, unity, coherence?” (Berg 54). If it is impossible to escape the narrative we all play parts in upholding, then how do we change it from within?

There is no one right answer, of course, but I agree with Sharyn Lowenstein’s contention that journal writing must be used in both the “public” and the “personal” realm. I do not think female students should be allowed to express their opinions only in their journals. This may seem harsh, but I think it is necessary. I have had too many female students remain silent in class only to write a furious journal about how much they disagreed with a student in class. I was always thrilled to know that they were thinking about issues after class and I was just as thrilled that they felt comfortable writing in their journals, but at the same time, I was not comfortable with what I felt I was teaching them--that the place for their opinions in the classroom was in a private dialogue with me; this seems to reinforce the dynamic of Reverence involving the “hallowed ground” of the classroom. Why do they feel comfortable only in a private domain while so many male students seem to have no second-guesses about saying almost anything? Shyness? Yes. But that doesn’t explain the female student who writes four angry journal pages about class discussion. She is not shy; she just has Reverence for the “classroom”-- a place where knowledge is dispensed to them, not created by them.

If we teach our female students to “resist” this male-promoted, individualistic discourse that holds them captive, do we do this by “arming” them with strategies to engage in the “combat” of traditional argument? Or
is argument male, too? Argument, after all, often relies on binary
oppositions involving an oversimplification into “pro” and “con” sides, and, it
could be argued, is based on a tendency towards violent conflict--whoever is
left standing is the winner. Is that violence something we want to shield
female students from by creating, what I have just discussed and what
Treblilot calls, “safe places,” or does this create “an illusory fiction...a
harmonious and nurturing community...a superficial suturing of real social
divisions,”(10) as Susan Jarratt suggests? I do not think it is possible to
ignore “argument” in the classroom, but it is possible to avoid teaching it in
very strict categories that do not allow for a complex “middle” ground.
Argument is not simply about two sides that can be mediated by the right
compromise. **Controversial issues do not arise for the sole purpose of us
arguing about them after we read about them in textbook;** they are a part of
the cultural dialogue because of real issues that affect real people. This is
the vital emphasis--the context and power considerations of the arguments
and issues that the textbook gives us in the form of newspaper editorials

Is it more important to work towards creating a classroom that would
not require resistance from female students (if that were possible) or
towards teaching them to penetrate the nearly impenetrable walls set up
around them? My point is, where do these questions and conflicts that the
rhetoric of gender issues in the classroom produces leave us, and more
importantly, our female students? These conflicts are important and valid;
in fact, they are a form of the Irreverent dialogue that I think is necessary
for women’s success in the classroom.
Female students in danger?

Although to many women it may seem that the combative vocabulary used by arguments goes against the natural tendencies women are assumed to have, there is much anger to be found in the voices of women who speak against the discourse that makes them invisible (and I think there should be). Catherine MacKinnon argues that “feminism is a critique of male dominance and of the male point of view which has forced itself upon the world, and does force itself upon the world as its way of knowing” (118). Hélène Cixous suggests that for the word “male” to acquire meaning, it had to “destroy the other terms so that a struggle for signifying supremacy is forever re-enacted” (Graves 146). Sherry Ortner, speaking of the “other” in historical or ethnographic texts, says “we attempt to push these people into the molds of our texts, [and] they push back” (378). The same could surely be said of women. Carolyn Heilbrun says, “We are rooted in our vantage points and require transplanting which, always dangerous, involves violence and the possibility of death” (Fetterley 28) [all my emphasis].

Force, destroy, push, interrogate, dangerous, death--these are the words, not necessarily of the nurturing maternal mold females have been pushed into, but of women possessed with great hostilities about their identities in the world. These words imply anger, and as Adrienne Rich points out, to women, anger in women is most often seen as destructive and “monstrous.” Rich, however, speaks of an “anger that is creative” (465) and proposes that this anger is a necessary part of our survival. Similarly, I suggest that this anger be used towards a politics of Irreverence among females—that they be taught a practice that gives them license to step out of their end of the dynamic that a profound awe for tradition and experience--
the work of white men--garners. Women are taught to temper their anger with an emotion less threatening and, too often, that anger is swallowed and silenced.

The use of these harsh words are my support for the assertion that it is imperative that we change the way we approach writing classes. I have begun a discussion of the predicament of the female student in the classroom and in the following pages it is my intention to continue and contribute to that discussion by articulating the problems I see in composition studies, and further by articulating aspects of feminism that I would like to see in composition studies.
Kathleen Weiler, in her book *Women Teaching for Change*, quotes Simone de Beauvoir in saying we must begin by “defining ourselves as women” (14). In many ways this sounds like a good idea--women defining themselves rather than being defined by a male-dominated power structure. If we think of it in the most positive of ways, it suggests everything we are taught about individual identity and self-reliance in the pursuit of power--but is it possible? As feminists such as Denise Riley, Monique Wittig and de Beauvoir have pointed out, the category “women” was created by male, heterosexual thought. The category “women” makes us linguistically, biologically and psychologically Other; it seeks to undermine “women” into a position of subjugation--“inadequate words have been taken as adequate” (Fetterley 19). However, the question of defining ourselves is the very paradox I rely on for feminism, especially postmodern feminism, to be an active force in the classroom. I do not think the process is first to ask the question “what do we do with the category women?” and then to construct a feminist philosophy from there. Instead, the philosophy is the instability (as Denise Riley would put it) of the naming and construction of women. Feminism, in its infinite forms, is about women creating and being created over and over--with no one manifestation more complete than the last. Feminism is necessarily marginal; any influence it has on the “center” may retain its name (as Daly says “the power of naming has been stolen from
us") so feminism is forced to continually refigure itself. And we do not begin there, we insert ourselves there. I insert my writing here.

**Female Students in the Classroom**

Just as the classroom is a place of potential freedom, so is it a place that reinforces the traps women face *outside* the classroom. Teresa De Lauretis, in her article “Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness,” describes the paradoxical existence of women in the classroom:

> she [the female student] is a being that is at once captive and absent in discourse, constantly spoken of but of itself inaudible and inexpressible, displayed as spectacle and still unrepresented or unrepresentable... a being whose existence and specificity are simultaneously asserted and denied, negated and controlled. (115)

If our female students are, indeed, “negated” by the dominant male-endorsed ideology that is school, then how does a teacher, especially a teacher formed by that same ideology, offer any “way out” to her female students? How do we purge female students of the ways they have been forced to read and think? What plausible course of action should we advocate as feminist teachers? It is not enough merely to vow to give female students equal attention in the classroom, use gender neutral language, or include more women writers in the reading list.

Because I am a feminist, I am interested in how feminism, in its various manifestations, makes a difference in the classroom in the way a feminist teacher constructs a pedagogy and in the way she is constructed by
the various apparatuses within which she is formulated; some of these give her power and some subjugate her power. Many different teaching stances are called “feminist” (as many feminisms as there are feminist teachers, I suppose). It could be argued, of course, that each of these feminist ways of teaching represents a positive influence in feminist pedagogy, yet the use of the word spectrum to describe feminism’s influence does not give feminism’s role in the classroom enough credit, because the “spectrum” that is talked about most in composition covers mostly a white Western feminism. The various feminist maneuvers in the classroom are more than a spectrum; some of them are opposed to one another. I think the progress that has been made in composition studies requires an assessment of this current pedagogical picture.

One Path of Composition

Many of composition studies’ founding fathers were in fact mothers (Janet Emig, Mina Shaughnessy, Maxine Hairston, Ann Berthoff, Andrea Lundsford, Nancy Sommers, Elizabeth Flynn and Linda Flower) and, therefore, as Flynn has said, composition studies has been considered “feminine” (14). This does not mean it is “feminist,” though, and I think this tendency to confuse the two within composition has made the further discussion of feminism within it difficult to some extent. Simply because a field is dominated by women does not mean that it is feminist by nature, but because both were very new to composition at various points in its history, they become interchangeable to the undiscerning eye. Women becomes feminists. I find this disheartening for various reasons, one of which is the fact that classes devote a segment of their courses to
“feminism” and then pass on, without acknowledging the complexities involved in feminism, the strong influence feminism has had on the academy, and especially not allowing for dissent among various feminists. When feminists have a dialogue about their differences it is viewed as a “catfight” of sorts with the implication that if feminists would all just learn to get along then they would get a lot further in the academy—nevermind the fact that the complexity of traditionally white male thought is the basis for academia (English departments are built on various “schools” of thought and the dialogue between these camps is what fills academic journals).

In 1986, Mary Field Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule published *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, one of the first studies that attempted to characterize specifically female ways of knowledge construction. The study attempted to characterize the various stages of a woman’s intellectual development. This book has had a crucial influence on the study of women in composition. It continues to be cited in many, if not most, feminist writings on composition. *Women’s Ways of Knowing* is 10 years old now, but it is still very prominent in feminist composition journal articles. In a review of 23 feminist articles published in *College Composition and Communication* and *College English* from 1991-1995, 13 of them cited Belenky et al. as a source. Outside composition studies, however, in decidedly “feminist” journals there is less reliance on this work. In fact, in nearly 100 articles published in *Signs* and *Feminist Studies* from 1991-1995, just two of them cited *Women’s Ways of Knowing*.

These feminist journals explore the multi-dimensional roles and capabilities of women and enrich the existence of women in the academy and culture. They seek to rewrite women. And composition studies does not.
The difference between the number of citations can also partly explained by the fact that the audience of those journals would not argue with a contention that male and female students learn differently. They would argue about what to do about it, why this is the case, how to describe these differences, but I do not think they would argue with an implication that being female is a difference that is manifested in the classroom. I would argue it is because they have gone to another stage of theoretical development, a stage I will discuss in further detail in a later.

The composition field, in contrast, both despite and because it is being influenced by leading feminists such as Susan Jarratt, Elizabeth Flynn, and Nancy Sommers, does not entertain the complexity of feminist theory that seems to exist outside composition. Despite because the above feminists’ work is vital to the composition field--each makes her own contributions to feminist composition theory as a very strong feminist, but because among those I just mentioned, I think Jarratt is the most “radical” in her theory, I would argue that it is still a white, Western feminism because it enjoys the luxury of being “without color” and assumes to be the example of feminists all over the world.

Even Adrienne Rich, whose work is considered “radical” by many in and out of composition is awarded her distance because she is a poet. She is a teacher--a wonderful feminist teacher but she is not specifically a composition teacher, and because of this, composition theorists feel comfortable dabbling into much of Rich’s work in sound bite form, without really injecting it in any more complete way. It is as if to say that a radical lesbian feminist is safe to borrow from, but her ideas are more suited to the
creative world of poets than the "nuts-and-bolts" world of first-year composition.

Most of the feminism being articulated specifically within the composition field covers what is, in fact, only a small portion of the philosophical variances in feminism. We should bring more of this larger feminism into composition studies. I certainly understand that there is not time and energy enough to do any theory complete justice, but even the action of recalling and naming this feminist diversity is enough to transform the on-going dialogue—to provide a tension that takes issue with the status quo.

Composition studies as it currently stands is not as diverse and "radical" as it should be. It has to be "radical" because the status quo is moving us in the wrong direction; keeping us "where we are" is regressing, not just cutting our losses. I see first-year composition as more than just a forum where methods of critical thinking can be practiced; it as a very important place to catch those students, especially female students that do not go on to take women's studies courses. In a women's studies course, a female student will be introduced to a lot of new ideas about feminism; it is not the point that she be transformed by these ideas, but that she have the possibilities of her thoughts widened. Most students, however, will not take those courses. I am much more concerned about the female students that begin their college careers in my first-year composition classroom.

This is not simply a call to subject students to the politics that I value; it is not that simple, and I certainly know it is not easy to do. Various forces inside and outside of English departments must be negotiated with, but I have to believe dialogue will stir something—unearth some of the
foundations. Creating a feminist classroom is not a luxury; it is a necessity. Creating a first year composition classroom that encourages critical thinking and makes students uncomfortable with their views is not a luxury either, nor is it the ill-formed dream of an idealist. It, too, is a necessity. Just because it is overtly political rather than subversively oppressive (and therefore still overtly political) does not mean that it is not valid. Perhaps it needs a better rhetoric accompanying it. I know it needs a tone more imitative of what we consider rational.

A feminist classroom is a classroom where terms like “gender” and “women” are always negotiated and contested, where what we know to be true is always questioned, and what we want to be true is always possible. These things are done in order that women may be empowered, and by their empowerment be a stronger, more confident force in the world. Here De Lauretis characterizes quite nicely what the shift to an Irreverent feminist classroom might be for female students:

a displacement and self-placement: leaving or giving up a place that is safe, that is “home” -- physically, emotionally, linguistically, epistemologically--for another place that is unknown and risky, that is not only emotionally but conceptually other; a place of discourse from which speaking and thinking are at best tentative, uncertain, unguaranteed. (138)

My high school English teacher’s point of view was guaranteed. He did not have any doubt that my writing a paper on the “boxed-in” motif in “Death of a Salesman” was “acceptable.” There were places he could go, books he
could look up, conversations he could have that would confirm that he had taught me to extract the right form of truth from a piece of canonical literature. It was not as easy, however, to make his own decisions about Mrs. Loman and her relevance in a play that is most known for its male characters. If he could not make this leap, he definitely could not let a 16-year-old female student make it. And he did not have to. He had nothing to lose by the exclusion. Female students have a lot to lose, though, and, more importantly, they have a lot to gain by using Irreverence to make that risky leap to the "unguaranteed."

In the following pages I will articulate some aspects of that feminist diversity that I do not see in current composition, in particular three aspects that I consider postmodern feminism: anti-sexism, which strives toward creating direct action toward dissolving current sexist structures, not just works towards avoiding further sexism; anti-essentialism, which involves going beyond playing to, and therefore reinforcing, the culturally-prescribed differences between men and women; and the concept of resistance, which is, again, the active construction of a stance that does not just seek to avoid traps that texts put women in, but fights for (what Patricia Hill Collins calls) "an alternate world-view" (103).
CHAPTER THREE:
POSTMODERN FEMINISM AND WHAT IT CONTRIBUTES TO THE COMPOSITION FIELD

In the first chapter I spent some time talking about the concept of a “postmodern” reading, and now I will elaborate on what I see as components of postmodern feminism. It is this type of feminism that I find most exciting and helpful, but I think it is one of the most difficult to characterize and specify. Janet Wolff says postmodernism, “...enable[s] the destabilization of patriarchal thought, and the political critique of ideologies of science and ‘objectivity’”(7). For me, postmodernism undermines assumptions about the world, and, therefore, the people and classrooms within it, too. Because of this, I imagine what Henry Giroux calls “fleeting images of freedom” (108)--moments, windows, or cracks in the foundation that undermine the cultural narrative that “tells” women as weak, irrelevant, and secondary.

Postmodernism is about addressing the many paradoxes that riddle feminism; there is no escaping the language that has defined us, but at the same time, we must dig down to find the roots of those words to change their meaning. They are rooted in the same sexist ideology that creates every institution we are a part of, but we must still try. One problem in adding postmodernism to feminism is that it necessarily dissolves the positing of a transcendent self and therefore it asks us to forget the individual voices of women. “Women,” too, is deconstructed, and in that deconstruction, loses
her identity. This is a paradox we must contend with, though, not flinch from.

Yet another paradox in trying to debunk stereotypes about the way women are and the way women teach all the while valuing the way women teach is voiced by Kathleen Weiler: “This raises the issue of how to assert value of what are defined as typically women’s qualities -- such as compassion and sensitivity -- without limiting the definition of “woman” to something innate or given” (116). And, as Janet Wolff puts it, the perennial problem of feminism (and other oppositional and critical movements) involves the question of “whether to intervene with the one-off lecture, the individual chapter or essay...thus risking dilution, incorporation...or whether to work, teach, and publish separately, aiming for the comprehensive feminist text or women’s studies program. Marginalization or ghettoization” (2).

It is because of all these paradoxes that I find a postmodern feminism most necessary. It creates chaos by dissolving hierarchies. The classroom is already (without anyone’s help) an oppressive, male-centered, male-reinforcing space, so chaos can be liberating. The classroom seeks to reinforce the images that schools have created for years. That said, simply counteracting that sexism with women writers is not enough.

I understand that this cannot be done in the way I am suggesting necessarily, but moving that line of possibility over bit by bit is a good way to bring the middle over. I want to expand what is unthinkable and too extreme in the classroom. Giroux says, “The risky nature of education is rooted in the tension that characterizes the difference between the promise and the reality of schooling” (112). There is undoubtedly tension with
change, but it is a necessary tension, and one that I find worth embracing. The following terms are part of my definition of postmodern feminism in that they seek to deconstruct the dynamic that currently exists in the classroom; they seek to actively oppose, not just avoid further damage: Anti-sexism, which works against the sexism instituted in the classroom; anti-essentialism, which treats women as the "volatile" category that they are; and resistance which seeks to legitimize tension in the classroom.

**Anti-Sexism**

The term "anti-sexist" serves as a contrast to "non-sexist," or "gender-neutral"--in the same way anti-racist pedagogy stands in contrast to a simple multi-cultural stance. "Multiculturalism" could be construed as non-productive and patronizing because it professes to "teach tolerance." Obviously there is nothing wrong with tolerance, but is this really our highest goal in the classroom--to teach someone to tolerate another human being? No. What teaching tolerance assumes is that there is a central core that deserves the right to decide what is and is not tolerable. It assumes a marginal population must ask to be accepted by that center. In that same way, many non-sexist pedagogies, or at least non-sexist moves in the classroom, involve non-gendered language and making an effort to avoid only reading male authors. Again, this teaching stance is patronizing and only enforces the imposed male-superior/female-inferior dynamic that pervades the classroom and is so damaging to female students in the classroom. Women authors do not deserve to "earn" the right to be read any more than male authors.
An “anti-sexist” strategy doesn’t try to teach assignments that may inadvertently teach tolerance, or try to construct assignments that just hope to avoid increasing elements of sexism in the classroom; it actively seeks to dismantle that hierarchy. I think current pedagogies in women’s studies classes do this; by their very nature they do not have the same dynamic that exists in the traditional classroom. This idea of anti-sexist pedagogy is definitely a part of the Irreverence that is necessary to break through the dynamic. A certain amount of Irreverence and blasphemy us necessary to encourage this anti-sexist pedagogy.

Patricia Hill Collins, a foremost voice in black feminism, proposes in her book, *Black Feminist Thought*, that a black feminist epistemology is one that values personal experience and dialogue, and contends that there should be a certain amount of personal accountability in the feminist classroom: *female students must have an opinion*. Because African-American women are constituted by an even more complex set of cultural narratives that involve race, I certainly do not want to equate the black female experience in the classroom with every female student’s experience in the classroom, especially a white female student. However, there is much value in Collins’ words; her voice is one that is not heard enough in current composition studies. Collins focuses more on the issue of being an African-American female in the classroom, but the stance she is suggesting is “anti-sexist” in that it seeks to replace oppression with something new. It is not enough to simply ignore sexist or racist comments in the classroom—you must counteract them with your voice.

Kathleen Canning proposes that “learning how to read in new ways may be a prerequisite for pursuing the history of experience as a process of
making, assigning, or contesting meanings” (379). An anti-sexist reading seeks to “contest” meaning and develop Irreverence by, for example, conducting discussion around debunking the myth that surrounds a “published article.” In discussion, I do this by asking why it was published, investigating where it was first published, its audience, speculate on why the editors included it in this anthology, and why I, as the instructor, chose this anthology for the class. These are all rather “regular” discussion topics in first-year composition, but the important emphasis for me is offering this debunking—holding out Irreverence as an option. It is critical reading, something especially vital to women readers.

**Anti-essentialism**

Essentialism is an assumption that there are innate differences between, in this case, men and women that form the essences of those genders. Essentialism leads to assumptions about the abilities and power of men and women and, therefore, assumptions about the positions and roles of men and women in society. So the prefix “anti” is an important one, because, as I said earlier, the inertia of the current classroom, with its binary divisions, debate-style argument format, is biased towards an androcentric classroom. Using the idea of “neutral” does not turn back ideas forcefully enough. The best way to illustrate what I mean by “anti-essentialist” is to give an example of a classroom maneuver that I would judge as essentialist in nature, namely that it plays to and therefore reinforces the socially-constructed tendencies of male and female students in a way that is not empowering.
What follows is an example of a "feminist" pedagogy from the journal Feminist Teacher. The stated objective of the teacher is to bring female students into a more familiar cultural context. The first description is very clearly an inclusionist move. Aileen Hall describes it in this way:

Whenever possible I have tried to describe my own research efforts in enough detail so my students can imagine themselves facing some of the same problems I have faced. For example, in a discussion of the relative costs of qualitative techniques, I described the psychic cost to the researcher of doing qualitative research on a victim population. I told them of the emotional fatigue I had experienced while doing intensive interviews with victims of marital violence. Furthermore, I used as examples several research projects completed by other female scholars on the campus, many of whom my students knew. (82)

I like Hall's description of feminist method in the classroom; it hints at a feminist epistemology--a revision of the way we are used to thinking about research to include the role of the subject position of the researcher as a factor to be considered; however, I do not like the anecdote that follows, where she goes on to explain other "feminist" techniques in the classroom:

The usual means were followed: alternating male and female pronouns in lectures, frequent references to research by and about women, and the use of the female cultural context for examples and analogies. An example of the latter might be found in the lecture on measurement of variables when students are told that under certain
conditions precision is less important than it is under other conditions. The example I use from the more familiar female cultural context is that, when one is following a cake recipe, precise measurement of baking soda is far more important to the final outcome than is precise measurement of flour or sugar. (82) [my emphasis]

Hall’s use of the word “usual” tells me that she does not see the diversity of feminist method used in the classroom, and I find her explanation of cultural context at best disheartening and at worst decidedly disempowering. Again, it is not my purpose to criticize other feminist methods, per se; I understand Hall’s goal in using the baking metaphor, but a further element to the pedagogy should be explaining how those cultural contexts are constructed. I know there are differences between men and women, but explaining to her female students about statistical measurement in terms of baking metaphors seems to tell them their knowledge domain is limited to the kitchen--their genetic predisposition toward baking homemade chocolate chip cookies is what all their knowledge invariably comes back to.

Perhaps my reading seems exaggerated. It is a precarious position, trying to find a balance between making students feel comfortable and safe and forcing them out of this comfort into the world and context you know they will face--a context filled with much tension and frustration for many of them. I know this to be true, but Hall could just as easily discussed women’s supposed aversion to statistical formulation. She could ask them, why do I feel compelled to use baking metaphors to explain this to you? What does that say about your position in the business world? A discussion
of those kinds of things--a deconstruction of her own pedagogical techniques--will offer them a clearer insight into their context in a male-dominated business and technical world.

Elizabeth Flynn, in her oft-cited essay, “Composing as a Woman,” says that “a feminist approach to composition studies would focus on difference and dominance in written language. Do males and females compose differently? Do they acquire language in different ways?” (114). Obviously, the questions Flynn poses are ones that will not be resolved any time soon; the debate over those questions has been lengthy, and it should be treated as if they have been discussed; the debate is driven by the dominant discourse that women cannot escape, yet within which they do not exist.

Beyond Flynn’s description of a feminist classroom, I posit Maggie Berg’s, which suggests that “a feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists” (63). The tension that a resistant-aware consciousness creates must be channeled and celebrated into what I have called the “Art of Irreverence.” Weiler uses the phrase “interrogating consciousness” (38) and I find that a useful term. It may sound negative, but I prefer to use its connotations of action instead of reaction. Rather than attempting to dissolve that tension, we must teach our female students to use it effectively to dislodge the superior/inferior dynamic that they unconsciously buy into when they enter school. “Thus the contradictions of everyday life and consciousness itself can become the focus of a radical pedagogy” (Weiler 42). Just as I think the discourses of students’ lives are vital to their work in the classroom, so is the frustration they feel in and out
of the classroom. As a feminist, I understand those contradictions and have worked to find them beneficial instead of silencing.

Tackling questions of essentialism is much larger than my goal here, but assumptions that are made about the way men and women think differently are carried into the classroom much further than assignments. As I mentioned earlier in Chapter Two, those assumptions create a much more general, pervasive attitude about expectations placed on females in the classroom. There may be ways that women think that do not reflect the way males think, but because those are merely results of this male-dominated classroom that I am talking about. They should not be reinforced and encouraged. If these tendencies could be freeing and empowering in the classroom it would be a different story, but for now those ways deserve to be deconstructed. I am not suggesting a classroom that is hostile to the way many female students might think; I am suggesting that a discussion of what constructs those ways is vital to encouraging strong-minded, confident, self-reflexive female students. Vital to that deconstruction is the process of resisting the often-times suffocating assumptions that much pedagogy is built on.

Resistance

Resistance is a very popular word among “liberatory” pedagogy theorists. I discussed Fetterley’s use of the term resistance earlier in the text, and now I will turn to other voices that have used and transformed the term. As I have said, resistance can mean very different things to very different people. As a white feminist, my dream of resistance might be a female student’s growing to understand the intricate cultural narrative that
“tells her.” She may develop resistance to the expectations about career choice, domains of “expertise”, or even marriage or family expectations. But for other students, “resistance” might mean opposing me—a white, middle-class teacher. This is yet another of the paradoxes that women are caught within.

Collins speaks in terms of “Domination,” which “operates by seducing, pressuring, or forcing African-American women and members of subordinated groups to replace individual and cultural ways of knowing with the dominant group’s specialized thought” (226) and “Resistance”--“rejecting the master’s images “(110). Again, I cannot emphasize strongly enough that I do not equate the experience of the black female in the classroom with the experience of every other female. I do, however, find much of Collins’ work valuable and exciting; she has an energy and an anger than I wish were exercised more in composition studies. For Collins, there are “several ways of resistance” (142) and resistance is more valuable as a community stance—it is part of a new epistemology that legitimizes new paths to knowledge and seeks to deconstruct the current hierarchies that devalue marginalized voices.

Henry Giroux’s formulation of resistance theory has similar goals as Collins, but his are decidedly more Marxist in the sense that he is more concerned with social formations that require resistance. Although Collins’ conception of African-American resistance to dominant culture and the images they impose on the black community is political, it is political born out of the personal—the political as a personal necessity. As a middle to upper-class white male, Giroux has his own set of luxuries, and they are manifested in the way he is able to spend much of his energy on more
abstract political notions. “What is highlighted here is that power is never uni-dimensional; it is exercised not only as a mode of domination, but also as an act of resistance or even as an expression of a creative mode of cultural and social production outside the immediate force of domination” (108). For Giroux, the expression of resistance has reach “outside” the personal, where for Collins, it does not.

The educational system is a fertile place for this domination to take hold for Giroux, because, “Schools produce social formations around class, gender, and racial exploitation, but at the same time the contain contradictory pluralities that generate possibilities for both mediation and the contesting of dominant ideologies and practices” (115). Giroux provides me with the hope that there is room for movement even within domination. Resistance, though, is not only resistance for its own sake; it creates something in its friction. “In other words, resistance must have a revealing function, one that contains a critique of domination and provides theoretical opportunities for self-reflection and for struggle in the interest of self-emancipation and social emancipation” (109). As I discussed earlier, I view this thesis as such an act of resistance; it involves my struggle to negotiate within the paradoxes of feminism and construct a pedagogy that has meaning in my classroom experience as a feminist teacher.

My goal is to apply some of these goals to a feminist pedagogy, such as a journal that answers questions such as “Can you find a place where you do not fit in? Describe what you think is the audience of the author--are you a part of that audience? Why or why not? Describe the audience of a movie that you went to recently. Were you a part of that audience? Have you had an experience lately where you did not laugh at a joke that someone
else did? Why do you think that is the case?” These questions, or other questions like there, should open up the students—especially females—own questions and suspicions about the classroom.

Men in the feminist classroom: the second sex?

My last paragraph contains the phrase “especially females” and I think that deserves some attention for a moment. A feminist pedagogy can work towards bettering a female student’s knowledge in the classroom without being damaging to male students in the classroom. My intention is not to ignore male students or their needs; it is my desire that they also develop the writing skills necessary for a college-level student. Lately there has been a backlash of sorts that decries the role of the male in the classroom. In the February 1996 issue of College English there were two articles on males in the classroom: Robert J. Connors writes “Teaching and Learning as a Man” and Lad Tobin’s “The Personal Narratives of Adolescent Males.”

In his article, Connors says that “Feminism has begun to provide a rich discourse about women, but the place of men in this discourse has been marginal” (139). Connors goes onto argue that male students and teachers have “confusion” about their roles in the classroom because the nature of composition has changed. Where rhetoric was “a quintessentially agonistic discipline—one concerned with contest” that has changed since women entered the field and now men are confused. Connors goes on to say, “Put most simply, masculine consciousness tacitly perceives most of life in terms of contest” (141). Although Connors is trying to be sincere and perhaps makes valuable points about the confusion of male roles in the
academy, “few men” Connors knows “are certain about whether they can be feminist.” I mention this because I think it is a good example of something that may appear to be liberatory in nature. We are talking about gender, aren’t we? But the fact of the matter is, Connors claims that men’s roles have been marginal in all this, but if it weren’t for the fact that men’s roles were so patently central to all of society and education then there would not be a need for gender studies. He is writing from a position that assumes a bird’s-eye view of “all this.” Connors says that he decided to go and look in the history books to understand his confusion. History books are also written from a male perspective, so what does he think he’s going to find—a truth that will “explain” away his confusion? He fears he is not the center of the classroom and he calls this “complex”? It is not complex at all.

I will not belabor this point, because my intention here is not to conduct a review of Connors. My point is that it is a good illustration of how males dominate the flow of thought—whether it be by the fact that they write, or by the fact that they are written about, as the other, as the outsider, as the “marginalized” that cannot believe it is not being recognized. No doubt Connors’ article will provoke responses and, once again, Connors will find himself securely in the center of dialogue. That is the dynamic that female students experience in the classroom all the time. It is the specter that hangs over them. Students need to learn to avoid taking everything they hear at face value. Female students need to learn to be suspicious of what they are told—to practice the Art of Irreverence.

A feminist pedagogy is a liberatory pedagogy. I do not consider it just valuable to females, or I would not call it valuable at all. My response to Connors is that there is a built-in reverence for all that is male: males
dispense equality, they organize the floor and what gets discussed; it should not be their power to allow conversation to turn to women's issues; it should not be the specter hanging over the classroom that guides what is important and what is alternative. Female students should not have to apologize for their anger, or preface their criticism with a contingent that says that perhaps they are wrong, or says that they should be sorry for taking time away from more important things. But that is what they feel; it is not spoken, or written down in the syllabus, or discussed, but it is the case and it occurs because if we are not given anything when we enter the classroom, we are given an understanding of our role in the classroom. We are there to learn what someone else already knows, and not just what the teacher already knows--what is already known by the world, what needs to be known, even what will be known. There is always the feeling that if women weren't there that the problems they "bring"--date rape, sexual harassment, affirmative action, etc--would not be there. And without discussion of those issues, the class would be discussing more important things--things more central to the core of what we need to know, things more central to the business at hand.

When male students leave that classroom they, too, have experienced confusion, frustration at how to write, C's even though they have gone to see the instructor. I do not deny that, but I would argue that whatever the frustrations they had about that class they consider exactly that--frustrations about that class, but they do not take them as reflective of themselves. They leave secure that their knowledge is intact; they might not believe that they learned it the way they should have, but I think they would
be more likely to attribute it to their own lack of work than to some specter that they did not show any resistance to.

On the other hand, many female students effect a separation between the way they perceive themselves as students and the way they perceive themselves as people in the world. No, it is not fair to speak of males and females in broad, general terms, but I will take the chance that what I miss in teaching the male is worth what I gain in concentrating on the females in my classroom. I can take that chance because a traditional classroom takes that chance all the time.
CONCLUSION:  
BUT NOT AN END  

There is a difference between the feminist pedagogical philosophy of Irreverence and feminist pedagogy that explains research to females in terms of baking metaphors. These differences are what I have tried to illuminate throughout this thesis. I am not saying that any of these is necessary to an effective classroom or even necessary to a feminist classroom. My goal is not to put tighter parameters on what is feminist, but to widen those parameters. I have begun with frustrations I feel as a beginning composition teacher--namely, that the exciting diversity in feminism that exists outside of composition in feminism is not expressed or manifested in either the pedagogy or the writing that goes on in the composition journals.

Breaking Reverence's hold over us can begin in the classroom; in fact, it must begin in the classroom. The Art of Irreverence can be learned in every activity of the composition classroom: reading, writing, discussion etc. I think that each student gains her Reverence by a different means--through believing the texts she reads are "right" in some way, to becoming convinced that there is a "right" way to write, and that she is not doing it. Whatever way they come to this Reverence, feminist teachers must infuse teaching the art of inverting that dynamic--the Art of Irreverence.

I would argue, however, that this feeling results from the female teacher's own uncountered Reverence towards the traditions that guide teaching. Men's agendas (the men that have traditionally populated higher
academia over the years) merely reflect a strong intellectual philosophy, so the story goes, and women's agendas are indoctrinating and oppressive—they always “take it too far.” The quiet, controlling power of the boundaries put on women demand an active dismantling of those boundaries—a conscious effort to revise our Reverence.

Irreverence does not have to suggest a classroom where more traditional views are not listened to or each student's right to speak is not respected. I am not suggesting or hoping that a pedagogy that promotes Irreverence will lead to the dissolution of the teacher's authority in the classroom. For better or worse, the teacher always has the final authority in the form of grades. I am suggesting that many students understand their position as students, but are still asked to construct perceptions from unfamiliar places and label them “right” and “wrong.” If I cannot deconstruct the world of its reliance on binary oppositional thinking and its male-endorsed Hegelian styles of argument-left, argument-right and resolution, then where do I go? If “it is impossible to disengage woman from the current symbolic system” (Berg 63), then what can I do besides simply cross my fingers and hope? I suggest that these gaps created by the current discourse on gender issues in the classroom are opportunities for direction.

The Art of Irreverence is not hatred, but a pronounced resistance to the texts and discourses that imprison women within a dynamic that doesn't benefit them. I do not think this is the stance that we ask students to take in most current first-year composition classrooms. The Art of Irreverence implies a great active leap—such as “claiming an education,” as Rich implores women to do. It is contempt ("familiarity breeds contempt" is appropriate here) but a contempt that wishes to create not destroy.
Inclusion and Revision

In closing, I will use Sonja Foss, Karen Foss, and Robert Trapp’s concepts of “inclusion” and “revision” to clarify the contrast I have set up between what I currently see in composition and what I want to see in composition. In their book *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric*, the authors discuss what they call “Challenges to the Rhetorical Tradition.” One of these “challenges” is feminism. They go on to say that there are two stages of this “challenge” to rhetorical tradition. The first stage is the Inclusion stage, in which “women’s communication is included as data in rhetorical studies” (276). They contend this stage is important because “it expands awareness of the variety and scope of rhetorical activity, makes problematic forms of rhetorical expression assumed to be universal, and provides new data...that will...fit into previously formulated rhetorical constructs” (274). I think feminism in composition studies has done these things. In the 70’s with Evelyn Fox Keller, and in the late 70’s with Carol Gilligan, gender began to be a subject of consideration in quantitative studies. *Women’s Ways of Knowing* might be considered the pinnacle of this progression, but Foss and Foss add that “when such a point is reached, the challenge moves to a second level” (274).

This second level is the Revision stage. It involves “use of the information gathered about women’s rhetorical practices to revise and reformulate traditional notions of rhetoric” (285). Although it could be argued that there are ways in which this has begun to happen--Mary Rose Williams’ construction of an alternative theory of “protest” rhetoric using the idea of the quilt, as opposed to the more “traditional” linear, combative style of argument--I would argue that composition studies’ inability to work past
Women's Ways of Knowing as a guiding reference to feminism in composition is illustrative of the fact that it has not advanced far enough.

It is not necessarily that revision is preferable over inclusion; they need each other. Not only may inclusion be just as necessary to change as revision, it may be the only thing that some feminists can hope for--inclusion may be the most luxurious goal feminists in some positions can manage--getting 4 or 5 women “included” in the list of Fortune 500 CEO’s is something to hope for, “revising” the structure of the business world according to the tendencies of women is not yet. It is part of the luxury of theory to talk about revision, but it is true that without that initial inclusion of women into the male-dominant discourse, there would not be room to discuss revising that discourse. With that said, I visualize my goals in feminism as revisionist in nature.

This over-reliance on Belenky represent the stagnation of feminism in composition studies. Women’s Ways of Knowing is valuable, but it should only be the steps to more and more writing; we should be building on, not relying on it for the foundation of our feminism. Teachers should develop their own Irreverence for established ideas that are damaging to women and women instructors. This coming away from Reverence is not easy, nor are its rewards easily seen. And further, as Kathleen Canning points out, “The process of unmasking and deconstructing concepts and boundaries also (means) that the once unitary category woman began to fracture” (371). This fracture may seem damaging to feminists, but it is indicative of the resistance not for itself, but towards Revision--to create spaces for women based on women themselves, not the molds they are assumed to fit into. The resistance that occurs among feminists--feminists who fight the seeming
metanarrative of "women's ways of knowing"—should be articulated for our students; as I said, as teachers our own Irreverence should be revealed, "concealed authorities [should be] unmasked" (Canning 373). The students' own authority should be unmasked as well, as when Adrienne Rich, in "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision" says, "We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it, not to pass on a tradition, but to break its hold over us" (465). I want my female students to understand that they can "break its hold." Here, I believe Rich evokes the energy of action and Irreverence; the call to "create" and construct our own stories in place of stories that have been hovering over us over time.

It is important for all students, but especially female students, to connect their goals in "life" with their goals in the classroom and I want to create ways to do that, so when female students come to a barrier, instead of thinking of it as a failure, to learn to remember the importance of that barrier knowing they are there—to revel in the fact that those barriers and tradition may not be letting them in, but they can feel them applying irreverent pressure.
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