

Confronting the “Essential” Problem: Reconnecting Feminist Theory and Pedagogy

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In the current flowering of feminist writing, there is considerable debate about essentialism and constructivism. One consequence of this debate has been to divide feminist theorists and feminist teachers. On one side, feminist theorists assume that feminist pedagogy is “essentialist” because it often seems to be founded on an ahistorical, uncritical celebration of a fixed female position, a stance many theorists find reductive and dangerous. On the other side, feminist teachers often assume that to “do” theory, to explore the linguistic, social, and political construction of women as gendered subjects, is to participate in an esoteric activity (at best) and an activity tainted by reliance on male methodology and philosophy (at worst). Therefore, despite the fundamental feminist assertion that knowledge cannot be separated from the knower, many feminist academicians continue to operate within a binary perspective, placing intellect against emotion, separating reason from experience, and, ultimately, setting theory against practice. As a result, important connections between feminist theory and practice are masked, and we lose sight of our common purposes.

Furthermore, we lose sight of our students. Adrienne Rich observes that “it is easier, especially for academically trained white women, to get an intellectual/political ‘fix’ on the *idea* of racism than to identify with black female experience: to explore it emotionally as part of our own” (“Disloyal” 281). I believe this split among feminists occurs, in part, because it has also been easier for academically trained feminists to get a “fix” on abstract theories of gender construction than to explore the immediate implications of these theories for the lives of women students. While we have a profusion of feminist theoretical writing and a profusion of writing about feminist teaching and learning, we have little writing that seeks to connect the two or that demonstrates what might be the impact of feminist teaching and feminist theory on the lives of students in our composition and literature classes.

To begin exploring what these connections might be and how feminist teaching and theory might influence students’ lives, I became a participant-observer in an undergraduate women’s literature class taught by my col-

league, Barbara DiBernard, a feminist teacher.¹ I was attempting to understand how students' experience in such a class might differ from their experience in other reading and writing classes, and, also, attempting to reconcile for myself some of the profound and troubling divisions I saw between the positions of feminist teachers and feminist theorists in academia.

Literary education has traditionally been justified by the claim that literature provides a mirror in which readers may examine the human experience and come to understand better their place within it. But women have been absent or invisible in that mirror. Thus, the attempt of women's literature classes has been to provide a new mirror filled with images of women and to help women arrive at a new definition of their human identity, one of presence rather than absence, of power rather than lack. In Barbara's class, I observed women taking part in literary study, in a process of reclaiming women's literature and history. But they were also examining social, political, and personal definitions of themselves as women. In short, they were exploring a central issue of current feminist theory—their own interpretation of gender construction in our culture.

The reality of the feminist classroom, as I observed and participated in it, demonstrates that the split between feminist theory and practice is artificial. In the women's literature class, the explicit agenda of feminist literary theory—to examine the symbolic and social-political structures that construct women as gendered subjects—also became the students' agenda. Although most students would shun the label "feminist" for themselves, the questions they explored in the women's literature class arose from the same basic question that academic feminists—theorists, critics, and teachers—have been exploring for two or three decades. And for these students, pursuing this problem was fraught with as much conflict as it is for feminist teachers and theorists. Carol voiced the feelings of a number of students: "I'm not sure how to absorb this way of thinking about women. I've never faced it before. I don't like all the anger and bitterness in this class. If this is what feminism is about, I'm not sure I want any part of it. It's really bothering me."

As I participated in the course, I was struck by the number of students who experienced conflicts as they read, wrote about, and discussed literature. The women in the course, aged nineteen to fifty, were frustrated and angry for a variety of reasons: at having their old myths challenged, at the contradictions that they began to see in their lives, at other women's denial and passivity, and at their own failures. But the tension that resulted in many class sessions was a version of the feminist community's longstanding debates.

The contradictions and questions that the students explored are inextricably connected to the central questions discussed by feminist theorists today. For both students and their feminist teachers, these questions arise from the problem Simone de Beauvoir articulated over forty years ago:

If we . . . admit, provisionally, that women do exist, then we must face the question: what is a woman?

. . . If I wish to define myself, I must first of all say: "I am a woman"; on this truth must be based all further discussion. A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man. (xvii)

The problem seems deceptively simple. But as the course progressed, the students became aware that asserting one's identity as a woman necessitates more than a joyous celebration of womanhood. Imbedded within de Beauvoir's question are social, economic, political, linguistic, aesthetic, epistemological, and ethical questions. Students confronted the traditions that have positioned them as women and that they had consequently accepted as universal givens not to be questioned. The literature they read led them to acknowledge the immediate contradictions in their own political and social positions as women and to examine the historical consequences of these contradictions for their mothers and foremothers.

Initially, many students articulated a narrow, fixed "essentialist" female identity, but the dialogic nature of the class continually challenged this view by highlighting contradictory images of women. The perspectives of white, black, and native American women, from the fifteenth century to the present, lesbian women, old and young, divorced and married women, childless women and women with children, poor women and privileged women—all these were articulated in the literature and, equally powerfully, in the voices of students themselves. Thus, the class became a rich source of multiple definitions of women that were continually posited, affirmed, examined, challenged, discarded, and rearticulated. The image of women that emerged in the class was not the singular, fixed, and universal image of the humanist mirror; instead, the course projected varied images in a multidimensional mirror, images that were not infinite duplications but each a variation, contradiction, or transformation of women's identity. As Amy's words suggest, the result was a changed vision of herself and the world, a vision so powerful that the old images were permanently transformed:

I really had no idea of what to expect from this class. I just needed another class. I thought it would just be another English class, but when I first glanced at the required texts, I about gagged. Before this course I never really thought much about women, their history, their art, or even how my mother or grandma or I lived our lives. It was just not there. The class helped me take on a whole different way of looking at my family, my education, even my relationship with my boyfriend—the different points of view of a lot of people. These stories and poems and books have opened up a whole new way of seeing myself and the world. I won't be able to see it in the old way again.

The process that students experienced as they recognized and reexamined multiple perspectives on women's subjectivity suggests a crucial connection between theory and practice.

I would like to examine this process through the students' experience and

view it in relation to the essentialism-constructivism debate in feminism. Using excerpts from students' journals and their comments in class discussions and interviews, I will trace their exploration of the contradictory and conflicting social-sexual identities that the class presented. I will examine their answers to the question "What is a woman?" and point to connections between questions that they wrestled with and fundamental issues that feminist theory examines. Finally, I'll argue that the power of this experience to change *what* students think and *how* they think presents us with insight for revisioning our discipline. The critical activity of examining and articulating women's positions as gendered subjects can serve as a model for education in composition and literature, an alternative to the one-dimensional critical processes that academia often promotes.

The Teacher-Midwife: Teaching from a Feminist Perspective

The first assigned reading was an article on feminist teaching that Barbara had written. Barbara believed that sharing her philosophy of teaching from the outset of the class was consistent with her desire to help them see "teaching as a political act." During the first class session, she talked about why the class was important to her:

As professors, we may like to think we're off in some ivory tower, but someone is making a decision about what to teach and what to leave out, about how we get information. That is a political decision. I realize that my college education was characterized by silences. Women's voices were not a part of the literature I read, and many women, including myself, were silent because we were not comfortable with the combative, hierarchical nature of those classes.

Barbara wanted to create a different kind of atmosphere, allowing students access to women's writing, offering them the historical and social perspective that women's literature allows, and breaking down "the hierarchical views that denigrate the ways in which many women have expressed their experience" (DiBernard 3). She also wanted students to see beyond the view of human experience that mainstream Western European tradition depicts, to understand that our experience in that tradition is not universal. Women's literature, she said, gives us access to different experiences that encompass women from other social classes, age groups, races and ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and able-bodiedness. She wanted students to reexamine their definitions of art by looking at poetry and novels, but also by thinking about women's letters, journals, and quilts as art forms. Furthermore, she wanted students to develop modes of reading and analyzing literature that would allow them to rely on their own experience and to consider multiple perspectives and methods of response. She believed that students who are not encouraged to take themselves seriously as intellectuals, to recognize their own capacity to solve problems, cannot be expected to take responsibility for bringing about change. She summarized her own role as that of

teacher-midwife: "one who helps students give birth to their own ideas, to integrate the personal and the academic, and to empower themselves as readers and critics."

The class structure reflected this philosophy. Students wrote a reading-response journal for each week's assigned reading. Barbara explained that daily work is the kind of work women are most in touch with, and that doing daily work also "keeps us in touch with our own perceptions, reactions, and responses and allows us to journey back through the course to see ourselves, our former selves, because we will be different by the end of the semester." During almost every class, students did some sort of writing connected to the reading, and they worked in small groups to share ideas and questions and to bring them to the whole class. They also participated in activities in the university and the wider community and wrote papers on these activities. Barbara asked them to learn one another's names, to listen to one another, to support and encourage one another in their work, and to be patient and tolerant of others' ideas, something that was not always easy given the questions that students began struggling with. At the beginning of the semester, Barbara told me:

I don't expect everyone to be comfortable. Some students will be upset by some of the texts. Some will be very angry, especially during the first few weeks. But I hope they'll hang on with enough trust to keep coming and reading and listening. I want them to learn information, but I want them to arrive at their own conclusions about literature and, more important, to become confident in themselves as learners and to think about their lives.

The Problem of Essence: What Is a Woman?

This question has set the agenda for feminist theory for twenty years, but it and a constellation of surrounding questions also lie at the heart of the students' experience in the class. Their responses to the question ranged from affirmation, recognition, and celebration to anger, contestation, and revision of their understanding of themselves as women. For feminist teachers and theorists, the pursuit of de Beauvoir's question has raised serious epistemological, philosophical, and political conflicts that parallel those of the women students. Before considering students' responses, I want to outline some of these theoretical questions in order to illuminate better the complexity of the conflicts that they faced.

De Beauvoir's question has pointed feminists toward an examination of the social, economic, and linguistic structures that give meaning to the biological sex differences that have traditionally defined women. As they attempt to analyze these questions, feminist theorists take philosophical perspectives that result in complicated and often indistinctly defined political and theoretical divisions. These divisions often fall under such labels as liberal, radical, cultural, socialist, Anglo-American, French, and poststructuralist feminism.² Each of these theoretical strands falls somewhere along

a continuum on which gender is defined according to essentialist or constructivist paradigms. In an attempt to define essentialism, Linda Alcoff points out that women have always been seen as “essential”—easily defined, captured, always apprehendable as the object of male definition (258). Thus, as Alcoff notes, from the beginning of the women’s movement, women have felt compelled to redefine their history, biology, psychology, literature, and epistemology as separate from the circumscribed definition that the masculine patriarchal tradition imposes. American feminists, in particular, have attempted to end the erasure and powerlessness that characterize women’s place in the social order and to affirm women, selfhood, and community. In American academic institutions, women’s studies courses have grown out of this tradition and, to the extent that such courses are perceived as subscribing to an essentialist position, they have become theoretically suspect. For as women articulate and celebrate what is intrinsically “female,” they risk coming full circle to the very psycho-biological determinism—the “essentialism”—that has circumscribed women for so long. When women make a claim for a unique and powerful female identity, they are left once again in a traditional binary, oppositional position: male versus female, power versus lack.

Central to the problem of gender definition and the essentialist-constructivist issue is the problem of language itself. Working out of a psycho-analytic tradition, French feminists connect women’s oppression to the symbolic forms in which they have been represented. Language, arising from the phallic-patriarchal order, has controlled the way that women’s biological and social position is defined. Thus, in a sense, women have had not had a language for articulating their identities apart from the language of patriarchy, a language that binds them into definitions of self that they cannot escape. Julia Kristeva points out that “as soon as the insurgent . . . speaks, it gets caught up in the discourses allowed by and submitted to the Law” (“From Ithaca” 511). Thus, the methodology and language that women use in the process of defining themselves are grounded in and tainted by the very structures that they are attempting to subvert (“Il n’y a pas” 134-35).

One theoretical solution to this dilemma, posited by radical feminists such as Mary Daly, is to create a new language, a new symbolic order separate from that offered by the male tradition. This new language, they suggest, is necessary to help women rediscover their true female essence—beneath the misdefinitions and perversions that male culture has perpetrated—and to develop a truly female culture. French feminists Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray are also linked to this essentialist position, proposing that the symbolic formations in which women have been fixed as “other” be fractured and deconstructed. Cixous proposes that female energy and imagination be celebrated, and Irigaray proposes that phallogocentric categories be displaced through a continual reconnection of the female to the female body. While these positions are essentialist, they also arise from an awareness of the role

that language and culture play in constructing women's identity; thus, they force an acknowledgement of "woman" as a political position. In this respect, Cixous and Irigaray are less aligned with essentialist theorists and more aligned with feminist theorists working from Marxist, psychoanalytic, and poststructuralist theories, theorists who hold that the "authentic self"—conceived by Western humanist tradition as existing below a veneer of ideology and cultural socialization—is merely a construct, part of the "apparatus" that the culture uses to maintain the individual in a "subjected" position, inscribed by ideology.

They argue that because human beings are constructed by the social discourse surrounding them, the concept of a special female essence is also a fiction, part of a binary system of discourse—male/female, culture/nature—to be dismantled and deconstructed. Thus, as Kristeva argues, if woman's position is a shifting social construction, then the only effective feminist position is one of negativity: "A woman cannot 'be'; it is something which does not even belong in the order of *being*. It follows that a feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists, so that we may say, 'That's not it' and 'that's still not it.'" ("Woman" 137). Kristeva rejects discussions of woman's identity and calls for discussions of "woman" as a position within language. She offers women the possibility of what Alcoff describes as "the 'free-play' of gender, of plurality and difference unhampered by predetermined gender identity" (270). But as many feminists argue, these positions do not offer women a clear direction for changing the political and social realities of their lives. The essentialist position leaves women trapped in a separate, idealistic, but ultimately powerless position as "other"; the constructivist position leaves women in an eternally fluid position of indeterminacy or in a position of negativity, constantly rejecting and deconstructing but also risking invisibility and the possibility for action and change.

This theoretical thicket might leave feminists paralyzed, but the very diversity of positions within feminism, what Paul Smith describes as the "internal heterogeneity of the feminist discourse" (138), points toward an understanding of women's identity that does not rely on binary positions of essentialism or constructivism. The strength of feminism is its ability to hold in tension an array of theoretical and practical perspectives and, thus, to arrive at a clearer understanding of the varied nature of women's positions.

While I do not intend to suggest that their positions are the same, Gayatri Spivak, Jane Gallop, and Teresa de Lauretis posit a "both/and" perspective that recognizes the complexity of women's identity. Such a perspective has allowed me to interpret more clearly the contradictory and conflict-filled experience of the students as they attempted to understand their position as women in our culture. For example, while Spivak opposes an "essential feminism," she argues that if we allow for the multiplicity of women's identities, we must acknowledge the role that women's experience

of their bodies—and especially the subjugation of women’s bodies by men—plays in shaping women’s identities. Thus, she argues that women must “take the risk of essence” in order to increase the possibility of substantive resistance (150). In short, the claim of “essence” is a beginning point of contestation, but Spivak demands a continual process of historicization, even for those who posit an identity defined by the female body; any claim of women’s identity must be analyzed in light of the multiple historical and social circumstances in which women live their lives.

In a similar vein, Gallop argues for multiple definitions, continually redefined:

Both psychoanalysis and feminism can be seen as efforts to call into question a rigid identity that cramps and binds. But both also tend to want to produce a ‘new identity,’ one that will now be adequate and authentic. . . . I do not believe in some ‘new identity’ which would be adequate and authentic. But I do not seek some sort of liberation from identity. That would lead only to another form of paralysis . . . of undifferentiation. Identity must be continually assumed and immediately called into question. (xii)

De Lauretis argues that women’s subjectivity can best be defined through a continual analysis of the contextual conditions and contradictions inherent in social life. An understanding of subjectivity lies

not in femininity as a privileged nearness to nature, the body, or the unconscious . . . not in female tradition simply understood as private, marginal, and yet intact . . . not finally in the chinks and cracks of masculinity, the fissures of male identity . . . but rather in that political, theoretical, self-analyzing practice by which the relations of the subject in social reality can be rearticulated from the historical experience of women. (*Alice* 186)

De Lauretis further describes a concept of women’s identity that is neither fixed, powerless essence nor endlessly dissolving and invisible, but multiple and changing within a social, linguistic, and political context, and that has agency because of its reflective, self-analyzing power (*Feminist* 8-9). I believe this process can be seen clearly at work in the experience of students in the women’s literature class.

Theoretical debates among academic feminists are complex and subtle (more complex and subtle, certainly, than I’ve presented them here). And because many feminists see them as peripheral to the goals of women’s literature courses, they keep these political and theoretical conflicts in the professional closet, separate from their students and classrooms. Barbara’s students were undergraduates, not feminist theorists or critics, yet the questions that emerged as they read and wrote about women’s literature have a clear resonance with the problems that feminist theorists debate in professional meetings and publications.

Pursuing these questions, students engaged in a critical examination of the nature of language and its role in constituting women and their subjectivity; they considered aesthetic questions about the nature of art and

literature; and they explored problems of racism and class, political power, and ethical responsibility. But they did not simply explore these questions on an abstract level; rather, they found themselves inevitably drawn into an examination of their own experience, the historical conditions surrounding their lives, and the dissonance inherent in them. These women began to recognize themselves as the outsider, as “other.” Confronting contradictory views of themselves was painful and difficult for many, impossible for a few, and reaffirming for others. I want to avoid suggesting that all the women had the same response to the class or that every student went through a series of stages or transformations during the semester. Although they experienced the class in a variety of ways, it allowed them, some for the first time, to see the conflict between images of themselves as women that they confront daily (that some had accepted uncritically throughout their lives) and their actual experience as students, members of families, and people who participate in a network of social relationships. For some students, the class affirmed or clarified conflicts they had already recognized as women in our culture. The analysis of those contradictions, framed in a classroom taught according to feminist pedagogy, was the central feature in the students’ experience. It demanded that they practice a new form of critical thinking and that they develop a new stance toward their own experience, toward other women, and, ultimately, toward knowledge and truth.

Denial and Resistance: Dethroning the Myth of Femininity

Adrienne Rich writes:

A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name—and therefore live—afresh. (“When We Dead” 35)

From the first week, the class focused on the way women have been trapped by the myths and “names” that culture circumscribes them in, determining even the way women think about themselves. Students read the stories of Eve and Pandora and several contemporary women poets’ revisions of these myths. Many students reacted with confusion and anger, demonstrating immediately the contradictions they experienced between the poets’ views of women and the notion of femininity they had always accepted. Here are two students’ comments:

Bev: What’s the big deal? So I’m a woman. This isn’t sexism; it’s just tradition or biology. Why are we making a big deal about women’s differences from men? We’re all human beings.

Carol: Why do we have to look at the negative aspects of womanhood? I’ve always been treated fairly, gotten what I deserved. I can’t say I’ve been discriminated against. Of

course there were times when school officials would seem more interested in the football players or would select more guys than girls for academic teams, but it was just something to live with. That's just the way things are and have always been.

Like other women in the class, Bev and Carol held the view that "male" and "female" are fixed biological and social-psychological categories that resist examination. Paradoxically, they also believed that differences between male and female held few social or political consequences for people's lives. They resisted Barbara's attempts to point out that these distinctions promote a circumscribed and negative identity for women.

In general, the readings ignited intense discussion and evoked anger, resistance, and denial. For example, several students thought Stevie Smith's "How Cruel Is the Story of Eve," and other poems about Eve and Pandora, were "trashing men" and "putting down" traditional religious beliefs. Jennifer argued in class discussion, "That's not fair to the Bible. It's the authority of my life and I choose to believe what I believe and no one can change that." And Carol wrote in her journal about the danger and discomfort of talking about such ideas:

I want to figure out why these women are so angry. Does it have any validity? Isn't there some possibility that women have been happy in some part of their lives, their history? If the object is to open our eyes to the oppression of women, then I'm not sure I want to be a part of it. Isn't it possible that men aren't always happy with their lives? They can't experience bearing a child—is that discrimination? I worry that I'll end up hating men.

Carol was not simply denying the identity that language and cultural myths had inscribed for her. She assumed a deterministic, essentialist position for women, believing that male and female roles are biological and should not be questioned. In this "common-sense" stance, Carol and others participated in the erasure of their own experience as they discounted the power of social structures to position them as females in society. They believed that their situations in academia and society were "inevitable," and they were uncomfortable with any contradiction of these beliefs.

Anger and Recognition: When We Dead Awaken

While some students denied that being a woman had consequences for them, others responded with recognition and anger. Amy wrote the following journal entry in response to these lines from Stevie Smith's poem about Eve: "He must make woman lower then / So he can be higher then."

When I read those lines, my mind began to race. Time and time again, I come across events that seem to make women lower than men. When I first came to college I was enrolled in architecture, but now I am in civil engineering. Nonetheless, people (usually male, although some narrow-minded females tend to do the same) respond with much surprise. They cannot believe that a female, the sex which is less intelligent, is an engineering major. I am supposed to be submissive, a follower, basically a shadow of all males.

Recognizing her experience in these poems, Amy acknowledged that rigidly prescribed definitions of female subjectivity had affected her life. In contrast to Carol, Amy and other women recounted with anger the circumstances of their lives. Bonnie, a business major, spoke most vehemently: "Yes, this anger has validity. I'm thirty-eight years old, and I've seen sexism and discrimination in my own life, in my mother's life. I've seen it in the way I was raised, in my first marriage, and even still in my sons. We still send the boys out to play football and the girls to the kitchen."

To encourage the students to analyze their roles as women and to ground their reading in an examination of their own history and experience, Barbara asked them to do a response writing: "A number of you have pointed out that what we're talking about here is the powerful role language has in shaping our view of ourselves. Think about your own experience. Does language matter?" Students wrote their responses to Barbara's question and then shared them with other members of the class. For an hour and a half they poured out stories—of classes in which professors told them, "Don't worry about your grade; just stay home and have babies"; of art and history classes that ignored women's contributions to their culture; of myths that led them to feel embarrassed about their bodies and religious groups that would not allow women to participate fully. They spoke of the effects of language in families with grandparents who felt that women should be in the kitchen, about construction workers and fraternity men who yelled demeaning comments at them as they walked across campus, of films that left them embarrassed to be women.

Many feminist theorists have written about the powerful, even poisonous effects that the language of patriarchy has on women. Mary summarized its effect on her life in words that echo theirs: "I feel like all my life I have been brainwashed, like something was poisoning me without my knowing it, and it makes me angry." Bonnie also acknowledged her anger: "To change, you have to have it brought before your brain or you will stay with the status quo. The anger and bitterness are necessary." As Bonnie pointed out, anger allows women to begin to be truthful about their lives and provides momentum for change.

Carolyn Heilbrun says that women have often been dishonest in examining their lives, even in their autobiographies. She continues, "And, above all other prohibitions, what has been forbidden to women is anger, together with the open admission of the desire for power and control over one's life. . . . Nostalgia . . . is likely to be a mask for unrecognized anger" (13-15). Thus, the contradictions that some students resisted and glossed over with nostalgia or denial became a point of anger and recognition.

While some women found a beginning point for registering resistance against culturally prescribed identity, Carol and others refused to accept what they saw as a negative, critical view of gender relations. But at the same

time, Carol was beginning to acknowledge the possibility of other perspectives. During the third week of class, she wrote in her journal:

I'm getting extremely frustrated with this class because I'm realizing there is no right or wrong answer here. It's all opinions. That's why I like journalism, because you just deal with facts. But I suppose if I can organize my beliefs and formulate my own opinion about this whole "woman" issue, then I will have gained a great deal from this course. Right now, I'm not sure what I think, what my religion would think.

Although Carol was uncertain about the definition of women's experience she would accept, the class was providing her with a new way of thinking about women's identity. She also recognized an epistemology radically different from the dualistic one she experienced elsewhere in her academic life. In the first few class sessions, this course suggested to her that there were multiple perspectives to take into account in answering the question "What does it mean to be a woman?" Something in this process also suggested that she possessed the capacity to formulate answers, and she seemed almost willing to claim agency for herself.

Part of Carol's struggle is an echo, albeit a naive and paradoxical one, of the debate among feminists about defining women's subjectivity. She believed woman's position is "just the way things are," a natural part of the universal order. At the same time, she also resisted the view that women's history consists entirely of tragic oppression. She was moving toward a recognition of the contradiction in her position that female experience is "naturally" determined. In the literature and voices of women in class, she saw mounting evidence that women have been frustrated and angry in the roles prescribed for them by "the natural order." Paradoxically, Carol wanted to believe that women do possess agency and the responsibility to act in the world, that they are not simply the product of biology or of the "ideological apparatus" of culture, constructed as man's other.

Taking the Risk of Essence: Celebrating Women

Simone de Beauvoir writes,

One is not born a woman; one becomes one. . . . The peculiarities that identify her as specifically a woman get their importance from the significance placed upon them. They can be surmounted . . . when they are regarded in new perspectives. (809)

It was toward these new perspectives that the readings pushed students in the next few weeks, particularly as we read *Daughters of Copper Woman*, Judy Grahn's *Common Woman* poems, and Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens."

While Carol, Amy, and other students were articulating resistance, anger, and recognition in the face of contradictions between the image of woman they had come to accept and those the course was revealing, they

needed to place women's identity in a new perspective in order to move beyond denial and anger to productive action. In *Daughters of Copper Woman*, Ann Cameron's version of stories told to her by northwest native American women, (a female mythology-history of a matrilineal culture), students experienced the affirmation that women are creative and powerful and can produce a culture that is strong and viable. Jennifer said, "For me it was like reading the Bible, in a women's form." Amy wrote, "I was envious of those women. They knew where they came from, who they were. Their roles as women were prepared for and celebrated. I wish I were part of a society of women who thought of their bodies and bodily functions as sacred and powerful." And Mary said:

Suzi in *Copper Woman* reminded me of my years of drug and alcohol dependency, the insanity of my divorce, the splitting up of my children. In all of that I thought I was crazy. But I could relate to her courage. Women all over and through time have been walked on, subservient; they have learned to be strong, to endure, to survive. We are no less.

In her journal, Carol summarized the shift of the class mood: "The discussion was so much more positive. Up until now there has been a lot of bitterness and disagreement in class. This book made us all feel better about ourselves as women."

Discussion of *Copper Woman* allowed students to continue examining women's place in our culture, but it did so by holding up the mirror of an alternative woman's culture, of strong, proud, clever, wise, and enduring women. As Patrocinio Schweickart says, "As women have come to examine women's literature, not just the traditional male canon, a different reading task emerges for us and for our students. We no longer must occupy ourselves with . . . the negative hermeneutic of ideological unmasking" (51). That is, we can also engage in the task of recovering, exploring, and articulating literature that elaborates women's point of view and celebrates their strength, endurance, and wisdom. This more affirming task, Schweickart says, allows a woman "to read without condemning herself to the position of 'other'" (51).

The celebration of women continued as students read Walker's and Grahn's affirmations of artistry and richness in women's everyday lives. Amy wrote her own "Common Woman" poem, in which she celebrated herself and her capabilities. Many students wrote about art that they had never fully appreciated—their mothers', aunts', and grandmothers' artistry. Carol wrote: "My grandmother makes quilts, and she has a love for flowers and always keeps a roomful. I think my grandma's most creative outlet is through cooking. She makes the most wonderful Czech pastries and bread. I believe cooking can be an art form, and my grandma is the Renoir of cooking!"

In the academic community, women's literature and women's studies courses have gained a negative reputation for this sort of celebratory affirmation of women, although the purpose of such celebrations is to reverse the

effects of centuries of erasure by restoring to women their history and literature and by allowing them to become participants rather than bystanders in history and culture. For some academicians, this celebration represents an uncritical, emotional, and anti-intellectual approach to literature and art. But, in some circumstances, it is equally criticized by feminist theorists because it asserts a coherent, biologically defined identity and because it fails to acknowledge the social and political contradictions in which women live.

Yet those who criticize this process have only seen it in isolation from the total intellectual and social dynamic of the course, a context that allowed for celebration and affirmation but also always demanded the reconsideration and decentering of women's identity. Having recognized themselves in the position of "other," defined and circumscribed by their culture, students needed to move away from the negative critique, to stand back from the "unmasking" of myths and language that they had first engaged in. Part of the process is to "take the risk of essence," as Spivak argues women must. The search for identity demands that woman's position as "other" be recognized. That recognition in itself takes women into an "essentialist" position. But that should be only a temporary point. The process of defining oneself as female doesn't stop with the assertion of essence. As Annette Kolodny says, the process is "female consciousness turning in upon itself attempting to grasp the deepest condition of its own unique and multiplicitous realities, in the hope, eventually, of altering the very forms through which the culture perceives, expresses, and knows itself" (159). The women's class provided an environment in which students could first take the risk of asserting an identity, a process necessary to self-definition, but it also provided that this assertion was never separated from an examination of the immediate social, historical, and political conditions in which one lays claim to a particular identity. Furthermore, it allowed the continual challenge and reexamination of those definitions and consideration of other perspectives.

Recognizing Contradictions: Anger Is Following Us Around

It was not possible to sustain affirmation and celebration for long. As students went on to read Margery Kempe's "On Female Celibacy," Anne Bradstreet's poems, and essays by Virginia Woolf and Adrienne Rich, they recognized that the contradictions inherent in these women's writing and in their own lives are always lurking in the corner at every celebration.

Reading Bradstreet, Woolf, and Kempe on the heels of *Daughters of Copper Woman* was difficult for some students because even though they tried to consider the conditions under which each author lived and wrote, some were angry and disappointed with the contradictions they saw. Kempe's mystical religious enthusiasm seemed to contradict any image of women resisting authoritarian and patriarchal institutions, despite her repudiation of the sexual responsibilities of marriage and her exhortations against

Church fathers. In Bradstreet's writing, contradictory swings between self-effacement and self-assertion also confused them. The tensions in Woolf's writing and life—her patrician, intellectual background, her radical perspective on women and society, and her eventual suicide—didn't match some students' expectations that women writers should be unambiguous exemplars of stability and strength. In one contentious class discussion, several students said they felt that Bradstreet, Woolf, and even Kempe were weak and "waffling," caving into the established religious authority and abdicating to their husbands and social norms. "They were playing it 'safe,'" Betty said. "I think Kempe really was something of a freak," Karin said. "Why didn't they just rise up and do what they wanted to do?" Betty argued.

While Barbara attempted to help them recognize the contradictions they were experiencing, it was other students who spoke about the clear representation of the reality of women's lives that they found in Bradstreet and others. They recognized that women sometimes are able to resist and subvert social structures, but also sometimes negotiate or acquiesce in order to survive. Reading these writers, they began to view women's identity as a constant movement between shifting identities as the social context makes varying demands. But they also saw how women who become critically aware of conflicts refuse to live totally within the myth of a unified femininity. Woolf, Bradstreet, and Kempe located points at which they could resist and subvert the identities in which they had been circumscribed. Bonnie and Amy spoke about the double-bind women are often placed in and the multiple identities they often assume. Both women recognized that even in their own "liberated" circumstances with access to jobs and education, they often seemed ambivalent, made compromises, and felt alienated. Amy wrote in her journal:

I feel I can tell you what's going on because it relates to what Woolf is saying about women writers and what Rich is saying about Woolf. Women are still only allowed to be a certain way. Like Woolf says, women cannot sound angry or write about their feelings. It made them bitter and angry and depressed, and I know what that's like. Last night my boyfriend said he was scared about our relationship because I had gotten an "A" on the calculus test and he hadn't. Chauvinistic! I could not believe that he could think that as a male he should automatically do better than me. I have had to deal with this all my life. What does this say about our society? It really makes me mad.

Bonnie spoke about "warping herself" to fit into male and female expectations: "Pretty soon you don't even know who you really are, because you've spent so much time sort of pulling yourself in here and then pushing yourself that way, tailoring yourself this way and that into something that's prim and proper." During class discussion, she said: "I can sympathize with Bradstreet. It isn't that easy. I feel uncomfortable when I'm the only woman out of fifty in accounting or management class. I wonder if I really ought to be there, if I'm capable of doing the work. I find myself keeping quiet a lot. I find

it's not hard to be invisible." Mary added, "I have to fight this doubt all the time, wondering if I'm smart enough. I feel sometimes in classes like my ideas are way out on a limb. Sometimes I do risks saying something, but a lot of times I realize I'm playing the academic game, and for me that means playing it by men's rules."

These women understand the untenable position they are in. On one hand, they can submit to accepted ways of thinking and speaking, give themselves over to the symbol systems of the patriarchy. The alternative, to refuse to participate, forces them back once again to the margins of language and power. Bonnie and Amy pointed out the necessity of articulating women's experience in order to establish a point of resistance. Carol wrote in her journal that week: "I remember a line from *Copper Woman*: 'Who sees the other half of Self sees truth.' That applies to what we've been discussing in this class. We need to be able to see all sides of ourselves. Is it so bad to recognize who and what we are?"

Acknowledging Diversity: Speaking the Unspoken

In one of her most famous speeches, Sojourner Truth says,

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? (253)

If reading Bradstreet and Woolf evoked the contradictions in women's experience, the writing of black, lesbian, and native American writers and the presence of these women in class intensified the increasingly complex view of women's subjectivity. These women were loud reminders that to speak of a universal woman's experience is to erase the effects of racism, economic and social deprivation, and discrimination arising from differences in women's sexual orientation.

These students' voices, coupled with reading Toni Morrison, Leslie Silko, Gertrude Stein, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and Judy Grahn, brought the diversity of women's experience to the fore. Although I noted an increasing rapport and openness in speaking of their lives, I also noted continuing tensions as a few students enunciated diverse perspectives and values. I was also aware that some perspectives were not being articulated at all, though they were simmering in the background. Roberta told me in an interview:

I was so disgusted the first few classes. I almost felt like dropping out. I had counted so much on finding a comfortable group here. But I couldn't say anything, because I realized my experience, my orientation, is so much different. I know it sounds arrogant, but I felt this class, with all these blind women in it, held nothing for me. I'm learning to deal with other people's realities even though they're in conflict with mine, without compromising myself or hiding the lesbian side of me. I struggle not to hide that side.

Although lesbian women, like Roberta, were a quiet presence in the class, their situations were tacitly evoked by the writing of lesbian writers. Students reacted less with disapproval or disgust than with a sense of strangeness and unfamiliarity. Amy wrote in her journal:

Oh yuck! I'm sorry, but for the first time this semester, I didn't like what was assigned. Stein was so hard to read and understand. On the other hand, Richardson was very good. I was confused for a bit, but finally understood at the end. It really helped me to think about what it would be like to go through that.

Carol was more ambivalent:

To be honest, I don't really know how to react to these pieces. I'm not sure I understand what's going on in Richardson's "Two Hanged Women." I am uncomfortable with this topic because I don't understand how lesbians feel. It is not for me to decide how people should run their lives or who should sleep in what bed. Although I try to be open-minded about homosexuality, I can't help but stand in disbelief. I am ignorant and I'm not completely sure I want to know. I have talked to a girl on my floor about it. Perhaps this is part of God's plan after all. I want to talk with my priest to find out more. This topic has really given me a chance to think, and this class is giving me a chance to evaluate my previous beliefs and is forcing me to see new perspectives. I like to be challenged to sort a moral question out.

Although students like Roberta may have felt that their experience had to be suppressed, from the beginning the class allowed women to challenge homogenizing pronouncements about women. In other circumstances the "blind women" that Roberta spoke about could have avoided challenges to their perspective, but this class, with its variety of social-sexual orientations, brought students face to face with alternate perspectives. By demonstrating that cherished myths about women do not hold, it challenged students like Amy and Carol to reexamine their values and assumptions about women's lives. As both of these students' journals show, the feminist classroom's focus on the lived experience of women fostered the exploration of differences in a tolerant and safe environment and, in doing so, added another set of images to the mirror in which women see themselves represented.

The most powerful challenge to the homogenizing impulse came from three black women in the class. Jennifer, Anna, and Karin reminded us over and over again that living as black women in a racist society had given them different experiences. Their responses to the writing of black women forced all of us to confront, in more than an intellectual way, what it means to be black in our culture. At the beginning of class discussion of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, several students posed the question "What is this Dick and Jane business doing in the story?" This discussion followed:

Karin: "I grew up with that in school and on television. People of color are faced with those Brady Bunch, blond and blue-eyed images every day of our lives. Black people are just not there. But people think of that as the standard."

Jennifer: "Yeah, if you're not light and bright, you're not right. That's what the blue eyes mean to Piccola."

Karin: "Yes, but even if you're light, people want you to behave in a certain way. In high school when I didn't hang out with a lot of the black kids, white people said, 'What's wrong with you? You aren't like a black.' I can't win."

Several white students countered that at least black people had the Jeffersons and Bill Cosby on television, that racism was mostly a thing of the past since black people's lives had improved drastically in the past few years. Jennifer argued, "It's just a pacifier. It's a cover-up, a big white lie. No one wants to watch Bill Cosby because he's black." Another white student asked, "What *do* you want then?" Anna answered:

I just want people to see me as a person. You can all say anything you want about how things have improved, but the fact still remains that none of you in this class would want to wake up tomorrow morning and be black, Bill Cosby or not. You would probably kill yourself. People right across there in the library will not take money from my hand because it is black.

Anna's words were more persuasive than any intellectual analysis of racism could have been. Carol wrote in her journal: "This was the first time in my life I experienced a black person's anger face to face. What Anna said stunned me. I guess, honestly, I found *The Bluest Eye* pretty horrifying, eye-opening. I never thought about the Dick and Jane mentality until now. A lot of people's lives don't fit that mold."

Confronting racism in this way allowed students to see the wider effects of oppression, to understand the anger they found baffling in some of the writers and the "negative" attitudes they saw in class. The experience was important for students like Amy and Carol, but it was also important for lesbian, black, and older women in the class as an affirmation of their experience and an opportunity to find some reconciliation with women from whom they felt separated.

The rejection of a universal "woman's" essence was vital because it contradicted the strong tendency to erase the experience of women of different race, class, and sexual orientation. But it was also important because it allowed women to speak about parts of their lives that had often been unrecognized and unspoken. In *The Cancer Journals*, Lorde says,

I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. . . . In the cause of silence, each one of us draws the face of her own fear. . . . But . . . we fear the very visibility without which we also cannot truly live. (19-21)

The class allowed women to name the unspeakable and the unspoken: racism, lesbianism, sexism, physical and mental abuse, failures in their pasts, struggles with social-sexual relationships, having one's children taken away,

or having lived with breast cancer. It also allowed them to hear the words of other women whose experiences were not their own, women they had often feared or rejected. But Lorde argues further that finding words to name and interpret one's experience is not enough. Transforming silence into language must lead to action.

Action and Responsibility: Ethics in Feminist Teaching

Though not the overt organizing themes of the course, personal responsibility and agency emerged as a crucial dimension of women's identity. The course began by reexamining the language, myths, and images that shape women's lives, but it did something many courses fail to do. As Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt point out, most educational experience divorces the study of ideas, language, and literature from the study of personal, social, political, and economic conditions in which people live. Academic life often fosters the view that intellectual activity is a solitary undertaking without social origins and political implications.

Barbara, on the other hand, presented students with a model of intellectual life that integrated her own life as a reader-scholar with life in the university, surrounding community, and wider culture. She demonstrated how women can continually examine their own experience, monitor conditions in the world, make decisions about the implications of these conditions, and act in relation to them. On the first day of class, she remarked to the students that feminist theory enabled her to bring together all the parts of her life and work. At one point she said, "I would rather think that everything I do matters rather than that nothing matters. So I have to act accordingly, even if it is in seemingly small ways." Ethical considerations and the importance of individual decisions were also a prominent theme in the readings. For example, in her poem, "A Woman Is Talking to Death," Grahn writes of women's responsibility to one another, a theme also addressed in Susan Glaspell's play *Trifles*. Morrison, in *The Bluest Eye*, speaks about the responsibility members of a community have for the lives of its people. Lorde challenges, "Because I am woman, because I am black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself, a black woman warrior poet doing my work, come to ask you, are you doing yours?" (21)

Barbara tried to create opportunities for students to connect their lives to the readings and to connect both to action, to sensitize themselves to react to what goes on around them. She began every class with announcements of events on and off campus, and she required them to attend at least two outside activities and to write reports connecting them to the reading selections. Students' growing sensitivity to these events was apparent. They began writing about outside events in their journals or referring in class discussion to something they had seen or experienced. They increasingly applied ideas from class and the readings to their own situations.

The concept of responsibility and action that students took from this

course was far from the aggressive militancy that Lorde urges women toward, and far from the vocal activism that many feminists would like to see in this “postfeminist” generation. Instead, it was a redefinition of responsibility, along the lines that Flynn and Schweickart point to. Traditionally, responsibility is linked to legal terms—accepting responsibility means not impinging on the rights of others and accepting the risk of liability that comes with authority. Flynn and Schweickart note that in female discourse “responsibility is more closely associated with responsiveness to the needs of others” (xx).

In class, students spoke and wrote most about their responsibility to support and encourage other women, to acknowledge their mothers’ and grandmothers’ accomplishments, and even to write about or speak out on issues that concerned them. One student said: “It bothers me a little, because now I’ve become so observant, so critical in a way. I can’t let things go the way I used to—like even how waiters treat me differently from my boyfriend in a restaurant or how my dad talks about blacks, or when a professor uses textbooks that are sexist.” The readings and the manner in which the course was taught clearly asserted that women are capable of critically interpreting the circumstances of their lives and that their actions do make a difference.

Critique and Transformation: Pushing at the Boundaries

In attempts to define human subjectivity, the problem of human agency is important, particularly in some versions of poststructuralist and Marxist theory. The question stated very simply is this: if human beings are constructed by the cultural and linguistic relationships, what, if anything, allows them to resist, to transform the conditions of their existence? Paul Smith says that many versions of the human subject leave us either with a deterministic definition of the individual as one who has neither agency nor autonomy or, at the other extreme, with a concept of the self that is constantly shifting, fading, and dissolving and, thus, that also has no possibility of claiming agency.

From its earliest tradition, feminist theory has assumed that although women are positioned and defined by a set of sexual and political ideologies, they nevertheless are not condemned to be pawns of these forces. Though poststructuralist feminists seem to imply a genderless “subject” in opposition to the biological “essential” subject of other feminists, theorists like de Lauretis point to a conception of the female subject that allows us to reconceive women’s identity via the constant “engagement of a self or subject in social reality” and “political, theoretical, self-analyzing practice” (*Alice* 182, 186). She stresses the idea, reinterpreted from Lacan, that human beings are structured through language, through discursive practices, but not in a totalizing way, because language is not the only source of meaning and, also, because language itself allows the potential for resistance to discursive constructions. Language makes possible a continual reflective, critical analysis of unique histories and experiences. As in the class, this process gives

people access to evidence of the nonunity, the discontinuous, in individual lives. Confronting what is contradictory and alienating in human experience allows women and men to resist definitions that society would impose. Seeing the cracks and fissures in such homogenizing definitions allows for the possibility of resisting, of reconsidering and reexamining our positions, and of claiming responsibility and action in the world.

Heilbrun urges women to return to such a critical process when she says that women must return to telling their own and other women's stories, not simply through the texts we read but also "in oral exchanges among women in groups hearing and talking to one another" (46). With de Lauretis, she concludes that women need to reclaim their life stories for these stories' potential to critique and revise women's lives (45). I believe Heilbrun is suggesting more than a return to naive consciousness-raising groups; she is asserting the importance of women's stories as an enactment of "womanness," a dramatic portrayal through women's own life stories of the diversity and contradictions in which they live. This enactment holds within it the potential for historical, critical analysis and, thus, for action. It allows women to understand that the multiplicitous realities of their existence exceed all descriptions of essence.

Women's stories had such a dramatic power in the class, a power seen most tangibly in the students' writing. Amy's final essay described how themes in women's literature allowed her to "reestablish" her views in important areas of her life: her family, death, sexuality, physical appearance, and her conception of herself as a complicated person: "Of course I have a better understanding of women authors, but I also see growth in myself and more understanding of other people." Carol's final paper focused on a theme that she defined as "the power of women and the strength women give to other women." Her essay drew on the writing of Zora Neale Hurston, Audre Lorde, Susan Glaspell, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Ann Cameron to trace transformations in women's lives as they rejected traditional definitions and attempted to reinterpret their identities, gaining power not only for themselves but also for other women. As she traced this theme, she also reexamined her own intellectual process:

Strength and power were in the characters and the writers, but they are also in the women in our class. I began to gain self-confidence because of the opportunity to listen to the views of women in class. The process was a slow one. At the beginning of the course I was frustrated and felt like I was being forced to think about things I didn't want to think about. It wasn't until later that I realized I could think any way I wanted so long as I wasn't hypocritical, blind, or unthinking. This new opinion came about as my previous beliefs were challenged and I was forced to reevaluate. For me, this may well be the greatest growing I did this semester. This ability to see reason in someone else's opinion is something I can and will carry with me for a long time to come.

Redefining Literary Education

This class provided all of us—students, teacher, and participant-

observer—with multiple images of women’s identity, a clear alternative to the false unity of the universal female essence and, also, to an endlessly dissolving, yet deterministic identity. It gave us images of ourselves as women committed to complexity, to responsibility, and to change. As a participant-observer, I came away with a sense of the inseparability of feminist theory and practice and of the importance of what, together, they offer as a model for education in both composition and literature.

Rich, Heilbrun, and others assert that feminist theory has potential for revolutionizing literary education, but this revisionary activity is highly suspect in the current debate about the nature of education in English. Some would consider Amy and Carol’s experience and the “feminist teaching” that produced it as contributors to the “demise” of literary education today. Barbara Herrnstein Smith notes that Lynne Cheney’s report, *Humanities in America*, not only decries the political and ideological turn that literature instruction has taken, but also argues for a return to an emphasis on the transmission of knowledge, information, and fact in place of the current emphasis on self-reflective processes. As Teresa Sullivan notes, women’s studies and women’s literature classes are especially suspect, both pedagogically and philosophically. Women’s literature stands outside the boundaries of canonic texts, lacks the signs of methodological rigor, and appears to indulge in unrestrained ideological indoctrination and emotional, solipsistic examination of self. Still others, as Charles Paine acknowledges, assert that the relativism inherent in “radical pedagogies” leads students to a disabling nihilism. The experience of students in the class provides a much different view of the results of “radical” feminist pedagogy.

Feminist classrooms are not simply revisionary because they break with canonical content; they are also revisionary because they demand critical rather than solipsistic modes of thought and because they assert an ethical rather than a nihilistic stance. The women’s literature course demonstrates that the diverse and multidimensional perspectives such a course makes available do not emerge simply from the literature students read or from the theoretical “correctness” of the class or its teacher; rather, they emerge from the dynamic of the entire course, from students’ reading and interaction and the critical dialogue with lived experience that interaction makes possible.

This course engaged students in intellectual processes that offer much to the ongoing debate about the nature of education in English. According to de Lauretis, the process of “collective articulation of one’s experience of sexuality and gender has produced, and continues to elaborate, a radically new mode of understanding the subject’s relations to social-historical reality.” Furthermore, de Lauretis points out, this process constitutes an “original critical instrument that women have developed . . . toward the analysis of social reality, and its critical revision” (*Alice* 186). Thus, the critical process that the students engaged in enabled them to develop and practice intellectual processes, to use “critical instruments” that can serve as models

of processes that would benefit all students, if they are to live in a pluralistic society.

Revising the *content* of the English curriculum is not enough, then, and the reform needed in the English curriculum runs much deeper than a correct theoretical stance. It requires a methodology consistent with what theory has taught us about how human beings learn, a methodology that takes into account the diverse political and social realities of our lives as well as our students' lives, a methodology that encourages a critical practice that continually turns back on itself, continually monitors, challenges, and changes itself. In a recent essay, Arthur Schlesinger writes about the perils he sees in the rise of "absolutist" thinking in the United States, of the inability of our society to identify and value contradicting and multiple perspectives, and of our tendency to settle for reductive, monolithic representations of issues and ideas.

Feminism's "internally heterogeneous" perspectives offer a remedy to this habit of mind. But feminism will be handicapped if feminists maintain a division between theory and pedagogy. Contrary to the view of feminists like Nina Baym, who suggests that feminists must operate outside the theoretical questions, and contrary to the argument that feminist theory has only to do with the critical project of reading and analyzing texts and that pedagogy is peripheral, we cannot separate theory from practice. To do so endangers the effectiveness of feminism itself by stripping away the interrelationship between the personal, political, and theoretical and by perpetuating a hierarchical dichotomy. Such a separation subverts one of the most important contributions of feminism: the model of a discipline that constantly connects intellectual activity—the study of literature, language, and ideas—to the history and experience of people's lives. This interrelationship provides intellectual practice that allows students to see that we make our own knowledge rather than simply acquire "the facts," and that we do so in a reciprocal process of rethinking and reinterpreting the "word and the world," in Paulo Freire's phrase (35). A model of education that understands the reciprocal nature of theory and practice and constantly places students' experience at its center provides a check against narrowly ideologic forms of teaching that feminists and nonfeminists alike cannot indulge in. Many of our students make little connection between themselves and feminism of any sort, and they believe, further, that reading and writing are alien to their lives. The critical processes made available in the women's literature class—a class that allowed ideas to be held up to reexamination, to contradiction, and to the multiple stories of women's lives—hold at least some promise to counter the absolutist forms of thinking that prevail in our society and to allow more students to remake their view of the world.

Notes

¹This course, Introduction to Women's Literature, was taught during the fall semester, 1988. My study was one of several participant-observation studies that my colleagues and I have conducted in the Department of English at the University of Nebraska, in an effort to understand the contexts for student learning in academic cultures. I used standard participant-observation methodology in collecting data during the course: I participated in and took field-notes at every class session, read the assigned literature and did other assignments, and read students' weekly journals and their midterm and final essays. I also interviewed eight students and the teacher three times during the semester to gain their perceptions of the course.

²These distinctions are more thoroughly outlined in Weedon.

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