

# Jane Tompkins and the Politics of Writing, Scholarship, and Pedagogy

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Jane Tompkins is intensely “aware of the extent to which *writing* for people in our profession is a kind of ego activity,” and she likens this egoism to the kind of “performance model” of *teaching* she so roundly decries in her well-known “Pedagogy of the Distressed.” In contrast, Tompkins sees writing as “a mode of self-refinement and self-development which is an end in itself.” That is, she has “come to understand writing as a way that people like us have of taking care of ourselves.” Not only is writing “almost like a grooming activity, or something that you do in the mode of self-care, like getting a massage or working out,” but it’s also a form of “self-discovery.” Consequently, Tompkins is very serious about writing, both her own scholarly writing and the teaching of composition.

To assist in her own writing, Tompkins relies heavily on an Elbow-style writing group composed of two or three of her colleagues who provide “continual ‘real world’ feedback.” In the interview recorded below, Tompkins says, “This writing group has been an essential aid in pushing me forward in the directions I need to go as a writer, and it has been a continual source of support in the process of composition.” This is why she recommends writing groups “as a way not just to write but to exist in the academy.” Similarly, Tompkins is enthusiastic about the field of rhetoric and composition and finds “enormously valuable” the “theoretical and practical writing about teaching rhetoric and composition that has been turned out in the last ten or fifteen years.” In fact, she believes that “the most interesting thinking and ideas in higher education about classroom teaching come from the field of rhetoric and composition.”

The fact that Tompkins has thought extensively about pedagogy over the last several years is reflected in this interview. She discusses legitimizing “personal response, private experience, as a source of knowledge,” “coercing” students into taking responsibility for their own learning, and constructing “radical” or alternative kinds of classroom arrangements. Despite the apparent success of her experiments with radical pedagogy, Tompkins plans to move back toward a somewhat more traditional pedagogy so as to avoid the intensity, the “precariousness,” the “conflict and supercharged stuff”

that characterized her recent alternative classes: "What I'm going to strive for next fall is to create a situation in which there will be a greater degree of safety for the students and for me . . . because I think the safety itself is freeing in a way that this constant vertigo . . . is not." Nevertheless, she remains optimistic that "teaching reform is in the air and here to stay."

Tompkins discusses several other issues pertinent to composition, English studies, and academic life in general. Retreating from her previous rejection of reader-response criticism, she claims to have "come back around to believing in reader response as a great pedagogical approach to literary study" because she is "so interested in students now." Reader response is an important "way to put students at the center of the study of literature." And Tompkins characterizes right wing attempts to halt the expansion of the canon as "largely ineffectual" because the "demographics are against it": "I don't see people pulling back from assigning fiction by ethnic, black, or women writers on account of what Dinesh D'Souza and Lynne Cheney say." In addition, she elaborates on the "very painful and almost crippling" divide between "the scholarly and the personal" perpetuated by the patriarchal academy, and she says that women need to "heal" themselves and to "heal that division." She blames her anger at "the male critical establishment" and her "sense of injured merit, deprivation and resentment" for causing her to buy into the atmosphere of "extreme status-consciousness and the desire to scramble up the ladder that is so palpable at professional conferences." But before such destructive competitiveness will cease, argues Tompkins, "The culture of the institution is what needs to change."

Agreeing with Noam Chomsky that the move away from patriarchy is "an evolutionary development," Tompkins argues that "we're attaining a much more flexible, sophisticated, and subtle understanding of gender and sex." This increased understanding is due both to the woman's movement *and*, she is careful to point out, to the men's movement. Says Tompkins, "I tend to think that the men's movement is a natural evolutionary outgrowth of the women's movement, that if the women's movement is going to succeed at all it is absolutely necessary for there to be a change in the way men conceive of themselves along the lines now being laid out in the men's movement. . . ."

Jane Tompkins' strong commitment to writing, to teaching, to students and their personal development makes her an important ally to those of us in rhetoric and composition. She has struggled with many of the same questions about composition, pedagogy, teacher authority, collaborative writing groups, and survival on the margins of the academy. Tompkins says that she feels "indebted" to compositionists, "especially for their pedagogical experimentation and insight." Perhaps her own experimentation and insight will be of use to us in our continued search for more effective pedagogies.

Q. Clearly, you pay a good deal of attention to your writing. Especially in your most recent work, you've been attempting to subvert traditional ways of writing scholarship. In contrast to the typical sterile, voiceless academic prose, your scholarly writing is warm, inviting, and intensely personal. Do you think of yourself as a writer?

A. Yes I do, but only very recently have I thought of myself that way. It's a great pleasure to think that I *can* think of myself as a writer because, like most people who go into literature, I suppose I admired writers excessively and looked up to them. Although I didn't realize while I was in graduate school and for the first twenty years of teaching that I really aspired to be a writer more than a critic, now that I've made this crossover, I'm absolutely delighted. Let me say, though, that I think it's a false dichotomy: a scholar/critic versus a writer. It's a dichotomy we've been sold in some way by the tradition we work in, and it's not useful to us anymore. One sign that it's no longer useful is the quantity of autobiographical writing that is appearing—not just from women, but from men as well. And men respond to this kind of writing just as much as women do. (Well, maybe not as many men do, but many men respond very positively to it, and some are practicing it.) So, now that I think of myself as a writer, I want to encourage everybody who goes to graduate school and engages in the kind of writing that we do in graduate school to think of themselves that way, too, because I think it can only enhance the reach and quality of the work that gets done.

Q. Would you describe your writing process? Do you use a word processor? Are you a continual reviser?

A. Well, once I used to write longhand, and then I used a typewriter, and then (actually fairly early on) I switched to the computer. I was a very slow writer, extremely slow, and I felt that the technology of the computer would allow me to revise better. I was a compulsive reviser, though much less so now than say twelve years ago. I got a computer in 1981, and I got it precisely because I revised so much and therefore had to be constantly retyping. I was looking for something that would relieve me of that. What I found was what everyone told me I would find: that the benefit is not simply in the ease with which you can revise, but rather in what it does to your process of composition. That is, the initial writing itself is freed up by the things the computer makes easy. Whether it's just because of the difference in the writing technology or because (probably more likely) I've had a considerable degree of success (my writing has met with a lot of positive response), I write much more easily now, and sometimes I don't have to revise much at all. So, the *kind* of writer I am has changed with the change in my status and in my self-confidence. My book *West of Everything* was put forward by Oxford for a Pulitzer Prize in the category of nonfiction. I found this out a few weeks ago, and damned if I haven't been able to stop myself from writing since then. I think it's one of maybe hundreds

of nominations, but anyway Oxford picked it for *its* submission. I guess what I'm saying is that your writing process, in my experience, is very much a function of your psychological, technological, and other circumstances.

I'm just beginning to change my notion of the role writing has in my life now, and I can't predict exactly how it's going to turn out in the end, but in a sense it's parallel to the change that's taken place in my teaching. Just as I've tried to step back from what I call the "performance model" of *teaching*, where your ego is very much at stake, to a different mode where presumably your ego is not so much on the line (although, in fact, it still is), I've become more aware of the extent to which *writing* for people in our profession is a kind of ego activity. I'm not in the least degree free from that myself, but the recognition that that's the case makes me question somewhat the role that writing has played for me. It may be that I will write less in the future and try to change the arena of my activities from writing to what you might call *action*—that is, doing things. I've been smitten with Natalie Goldberg's books, *Writing Down the Bones* and *Wild Mind*, and in so far as I understand it, writing for her is what she calls "a practice" akin to the practice of meditation. (She's a Zen Buddhist and her whole understanding of what writing is comes out of her Zen background.) In that way of thinking, writing becomes a mode of self-refinement and self-development which is an end in itself, and so the product or performance dimensions of it become secondary or perhaps not important at all. I think all of us in our profession use writing in that way whether we know it or not.

I don't know whether Goldberg talks about this since I haven't read everything in those books, but I've recently come to understand writing as a way that people like us have of taking care of ourselves. When we can't get to our writing, we feel deprived and we feel hungry for it, not just because we're afraid we won't get our articles written so that we won't get our job or our promotion (although certainly those fears apply), but because there's a need that we have to perform this activity *for ourselves*. It's almost like a grooming activity, or something that you do in the mode of self-care, like getting a massage or working out. It's a form of attention that seems to be directed outward toward an object outside of yourself, but somehow the effect strangely is to have attended to yourself in some way. That's the way I'm coming to understand it. To that degree, I don't know that I'll be able to give up writing very easily.

I also see writing as a form of self-development and self-discovery, as a way you can come to know yourself and learn about yourself, or just as a mode of learning pure and simple. In that regard, my sort of proof text is a line from Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*: "The motorcycle you're working on is the motorcycle of yourself." When Pirsig talks in an extended passage in that novel about something he calls "gumptionology," which is the science of what it takes to fix a motorcycle, I read that as being about writing and have always so read it. That approach

to writing—that is, you think you’re working on the motorcycle and you’re really working on yourself—is one that I’ve recently come to.

Q. Many scholars insist on having colleagues read their work before submitting it for publication. It seems that one advantage you may have being in Duke’s English department is the careful reading of any number of prominent scholars. Do you share drafts of your work with your colleagues?

A. I have a writing group that has been in existence for five years now, and those are my “main men,” so to speak (they’re all women), the people to whom I show my work and from whom I get the feedback that helps me write. This writing group has been an essential aid in pushing me forward in the directions I need to go as a writer, and it has been a continual source of support in the process of composition—a process that otherwise is extremely lonely.

Q. So, you get together to read and respond to each other’s drafts?

A. Our format has changed over the years: we expanded from three to four, and that meant some changes; then, because the group was bigger, it wasn’t working out so well and we changed again. We meet every two or three weeks at the house of one or another of us. Right now we’re in a mode in which we don’t read anything in advance; we just bring our work to group. Only two people are on in any given day so that there’s enough time to be given to each person’s work. Right now we’re supposed to keep the meeting to two hours—one person gets an hour and then the other person gets an hour—but it’s usually prefaced by a half an hour of conversation in which we try to catch up with one another, find out what’s going on in each other’s lives, talk department gossip, or say whatever we need to get off our chests. In the very beginning of the group, which I formed as a result of reading Peter Elbow’s *Writing with Power*, we had some protocols about the kinds of feedback that were or weren’t appropriate to give, and now and then we review this. Basically, people ask for the kind of feedback they want to have on a given day, and they can also ask specific questions that they want us to answer. For all the members, the group has been a mainstay and a wonderful help, but this isn’t to say that the group hasn’t had a lot of problems and that we don’t have to stop from time to time and talk about what’s been going on among us and what our gripes are and what we’d really like to be getting out of it. We’re about to do that again when we all get back from vacation.

Q. So there’s continual attention paid to the social dynamics of the group as well as to the writing that’s brought into the session.

A. That’s only slightly overstated. That is, we have slowly learned that it is necessary to pay attention to those dynamics, that they won’t just take care of themselves, that things build up under the surface and we have to talk them out and deal with them one way or another. I think we’re getting to the point where we can anticipate them a little better. I strongly recom-

mend writing groups as a way not just to write but to exist in the academy. It gives you a kind of base of support that is both personal and institutional, as well as continual “real world” feedback for what you’re doing. Also, the earlier you can show something to somebody, the better off you are as far as I’m concerned. We show each other the absolute raw stuff as it comes out, and that’s the best way to do it.

Q. As someone who has obviously done a considerable amount of thinking about teaching and writing, what are your thoughts about the future of rhetoric and composition as a discipline?

A. I’m afraid I don’t have too many thoughts per se about that, since I have not been trained in the field of rhetoric and composition. I’ve taught composition for about fifteen years, but I did it in a “seat of the pants” way. I received no training in it and just did it the best I could. My views are of a person who isn’t particularly well informed. I’m very glad that the field of rhetoric and composition has come into its own, which I think it has in the last five or ten years, that it’s now recognized as a legitimate territory of knowledge. I think that it’s enormously valuable to have the kinds of theoretical and practical writing about teaching rhetoric and composition that has been turned out in the last ten or fifteen years as a resource for people who do that day to day. And in my fairly recent experience in getting to know what’s going on in pedagogy across the country, I have found that the most interesting thinking and ideas in higher education about classroom teaching come from the field of rhetoric and composition. In my mind, there’s no doubt about that. I feel indebted to people who have been working in that field, especially for their pedagogical experimentation and insight.

Q. In criticizing your own education you write, “It took massive doses of repressive cynicism and academic cool administered continuously throughout graduate school to dampen my ardor for big subjects, moral commitment, and quasi-religious enthusiasm about literature. But I learned to hide my feelings about what I read, especially from myself, and to transmute the energy into work that was acceptable.” How do we construct a pedagogy in which “feelings” and emotions play a major role? And, then, how do we justify it to critics?

A. It may sound surprising, but I’ve never really thought about it in those terms. I did teach the course several years ago when I was beginning the experimentation on emotion that I write about in “Pedagogy of the Distressed.” It was a feminist theory course on the subject of emotion. I have never taught a more traumatic course in my entire life. I’ve tried some pretty radical things since then, but nothing was as traumatic as that course. It was a double whammy in the sense that it was a women’s studies course. From what I understand in talking to my colleagues in women’s studies, often women’s studies courses operate as a kind of escape valve for people’s emotions which are unable to be expressed in other places in the

university, and so they all get dumped into this one available outlet. So there was that going on; plus there was the open invitation I issued at the beginning of the semester for people to express their feelings; plus there was a certain chemistry in that particular group of people that produced a lot of conflict and supercharged stuff. All of those things added up to a pretty traumatic experience, although it was one from which I benefited enormously—and so, I think, did many other members of the class. While I'm not eager to rush out to greet such an experience again, I have to admit that it was not one that I want to put down because it was difficult.

How do you construct a pedagogy that allows for emotions? So far, I don't have any methods at all; in fact, I don't even announce it as a goal in my courses. But I do think it's important. I guess the way I attempt to incorporate emotions is to have personal experience count for a lot; personal response to literature (or whatever the subject matter) is to be central to any consideration of it. As soon as you have legitimized personal response, private experience, as a source of knowledge about a text, it seems to me you've also legitimized feeling or emotions, since at least for me the two are almost identical, although I'm sure they're not for everyone. I guess my answer, then, is not to remain within the established orbit of possible sources of knowledge about a given text but always to open that up to the experience of the individuals who happen to be in the room.

- Q. And presumably such a pedagogy, given what you've written in "Pedagogy of the Distressed," would be much more student-centered and one in which you allow students the opportunity to take intellectual risks.
- A. It's not so much the opportunity to take intellectual risks as it is that students are in effect being coerced into taking responsibility for their own learning. I prefer the word *responsibility*; they're forced by me because I step back and won't do it myself. The last experimental course I taught on the undergraduate level, which was last fall, was the most radical one that I've done because I did not provide the students with a syllabus. I did provide them with initial readings. We read a book and a couple of essays and discussed them in the first couple of weeks, but after that I just turned the course over to the students and said, "It's yours. We can read what you want; we can do what you want." This, too, was a somewhat traumatic course, though not like the emotions course was. There was a lot of fear involved for me. Every single day for about seven weeks (and that's a long time) my heart was in my throat when I walked into that class because I did not know what was going to happen, whether it was going to be a good or bad day, whether the experiment was working or not. It wasn't clear to me for the first seven weeks of the course whether it was working. Now, with *that* degree of precariousness (and the students felt it as well) come certain constraints. What I'm going to strive for next fall is to create a situation in which there will be a greater degree of safety for the students and for me, which I suppose means within certain limits a greater degree of predict-

ability because I think the safety itself is freeing in a way that this constant vertigo, which was very exciting and wonderful in its way, is not.

- Q. You say something like that in “Facing Yourself,” that school should be a “safe” place like home: “Slowly, I’ve come to think school should be a different kind of place from what it’s been, at least from the way it was for me. More like the way home was supposed to be. A safe place, somewhere where you belong, where you can grow and express yourself freely, and where people matter more than information and ideas.”
- A. Yes—if home *were* safe. That’s the irony of this. In thinking about school, I tended to use home as the contrast, but in working on the book I’m now working on—which is about pedagogy, a section of which is devoted to my own early experiences in school—what I finally had to do in order to explain what was going on for me at school was to take myself home to see what was happening there. And lo and behold, I was terrified when I was at home, too. In many respects, home was a lot safer than school, but there were ways in which it wasn’t safe or a good place for me either. So that’s a construct I had been using that I now see has holes in it.
- Q. In “Pedagogy of the Distressed” you criticize what you call the “performance model” of education that dominates our classrooms. In reaction to this traditional method of teaching, you advocate a type of liberatory learning based in part on Paulo Freire’s radical pedagogy. You write, “I went from teaching as performance to teaching as a maternal or coaching activity because I wanted to remove myself from center stage and get out of the students’ way, to pay more attention to them and less to myself.” Does this mean that you view liberatory learning as a “feminist” or at least “female” pedagogy?
- A. No, not in any essentialist way. I think that women may be more comfortable doing it or may gravitate toward it more readily than men, but I don’t want to cordon it off and label it feminist or female because I don’t want men to have any sense that it’s off limits for them. The chapter called “Connected Teaching” in *Women’s Ways of Knowing* has been extremely important for me and very validating; in fact, that whole book has been validating, and I feel very indebted to the work that those four women did. In many ways, the kind of teaching I do is, you might say, historically feminist, or by circumstances feminist. And it’s probably because I *am* a woman that I’m doing it, but I don’t see it at all as the province of women. In fact, I’ve found that many men are very interested in it, are already doing it in certain ways, have thought a lot about it, have written about it.
- Q. You also discuss in “Pedagogy of the Distressed” the “antipedagogical indoctrination” that is so much a part of graduate education and the “fear of pedagogy” that predominates in the academy. Given the increasing attention scholars and educators are paying to student-centered approaches, do you believe this attitude is changing?
- A. There certainly is a movement in higher education now that you might call



a student-centered pedagogy movement (that's so ill phrased). I've been going to the meetings of a group called the Association of General and Liberal Studies; these are people interested in "general education." General education refers to the broad-based background in the liberal arts that students have traditionally gotten in their first two years of college or university. The people who attend this meeting are interested in various forms of liberatory pedagogy, especially teaching that goes under the name of "collaborative learning," "cooperative learning," the "decentered classroom," and various "non-authoritarian modes of learning." I find it extremely inspiring and invigorating to associate with these people, none of whom are at the top-ranked universities in this country and many of whom are administrators. Whether it constitutes an across-the-board movement is hard to say, but Harvard, Stanford, and such places now have elaborate centers for teaching and learning, and it's gotten to be the trend these days for upscale universities to institute teaching/learning centers and to have a variety of instruments that their faculty can use to upgrade and in various ways improve or fiddle around with their teaching. What this will amount to in reality, in actual change in classroom practice, I do not know. At the AGLS meeting I attended two years ago, the dean of a small college in Colorado talked about the fact that at her school she had sponsored innumerable activities directed toward changing classroom styles to less hierarchical modes, but when she walked the halls of the classroom buildings and looked into the classrooms, in room after room the students were sitting in their seats and the teacher was standing up in front of the class lecturing or writing on the blackboard. The physics of it hadn't changed. Although I could be wrong about this, I suspect that in most cases the physics of it still hasn't changed; the phenomenology is still pretty much the same. But having said that, teaching reform is in the air and here to stay; its course is yet to be run. It will be interesting to see what happens. I'm optimistic.

Q. In developing your own forms of student-centered pedagogy, you were influenced heavily by Freire. Some critics have claimed that Freire's writings and pedagogy are sexist and male oriented (though Freire does make an attempt in *JAC* to refute such charges by declaring his "camaraderie" with women and the women's movement). Do you see Freire's model as sexist? Do you believe there is a need to develop a distinctly female-oriented radical pedagogy?

A. Well, Freire can be criticized for a number of things in addition to sexism. For example, he uses high theoretical Marxist jargon, which is exclusionary; and he doesn't really admit the existence of his own revolutionary agenda, which is the whole motivation for everything he's doing. So, *there* are two "biggies" right there; plus, it is true that his language is sexist. But still and all, his notion that in order for people to be empowered education needs to be a practice of freedom is an incredibly powerful insight and has

been enormously useful to me and to thousands of people. I'm very thankful to Freire and therefore loathe to criticize him for whatever his limitations might be. The answer to the second question, whether we need a radical pedagogy for women, has to depend on the circumstances in which you teach. As soon as I started to think and write about teaching, I became aware that teaching is always in a situation; it's always taking place in a certain time and place, with these people and not those people, under these conditions and so forth. Your pedagogy has to be accommodated or adapted to where you are. So I would say that a specifically feminist pedagogy would by all means be called for. For example, there's a project in North Carolina called "Motherread" which is helping pregnant mothers who are in high school become literate. It seems to me that if you don't have a feminist pedagogy for *that* you're really out to lunch. So I would say, yes, depending on the circumstances there may be a need for a specifically feminist approach.

Q. It strikes me that you frequently do what few scholars have the courage to do: to continually expose yourself in print, to make yourself vulnerable, to reveal your most private thoughts and fears. Could you elaborate on the role scholarship plays in your life and the reasons you incorporate such personal matters into your work? Do you consider this a feminist approach?

A. I have so mixed up the scholarly and the personal that I'm hardly willing to recognize the distinction anymore. I've gotten to the point where I can say that scholarship has no role in my life, and my life has no role in my scholarship. I really don't even want to carve the pie up in those pieces; it's not useful to me to do that. That's kind of an agenda, of course, as well—an agenda, again, that's specific to a time and place. It's something I've gotten caught up in in reaction to a certain history, and if I were differently situated, I might want to keep a rigid separation between my private life and my work because of some other chronology. But right now, for me and for a lot of women, the divide, the separation, has been very painful and almost crippling, and so now we're trying to heal ourselves, heal that division so that we don't feel that in our professional lives we have to somehow twist ourselves out of shape. Is it feminist? It's *de facto* feminist. That is, it's primarily women (at least in the last few years in this country) in our discipline who have done this sort of thing. But I think that the basic impulse is one that men can participate in and appreciate too. Although (because of the way women were socialized in this culture) it was more natural and inevitable that women would do this first and in greater numbers, there's nothing essentially female about it.

Q. In *New Literary History* you argue that we need to "speak personally in a professional context," especially in critical articles, because "to adhere to the conventions is to uphold a male standard of rationality that militates against women being recognized as culturally legitimate sources of knowl-

edge.” Given how academic power structures work, however, isn’t such personal-oriented scholarship only possible for people such as yourself who have gained substantial stature in the field?

- A. I’ve had people ask me that question a lot. In order for it to be legitimate for anybody, *somebody* has to do it. It’s *safe* for me to do it because I do have a certain level of stature and so I’m *able* to. I hope to be making it safe and legitimate for other people to do it as well. When I’m asked that question, it always seems that there’s a certain resentment or hostility behind it which I find it difficult to take responsibility for. Would people rather that I didn’t do it? That’s what’s always behind this question.
- Q. Noam Chomsky commented in *JAC* that “for cultural reasons, the move away from patriarchy is a step upwards, not just a change. It’s a step toward understanding our true nature.” Do you agree that the “move away from patriarchy” is occurring and, also, that such a move is “evolutionary”?
- A. Yes, there is a movement away from patriarchy; that’s pretty clear. Is it evolutionary? The term *evolution* is one that has a lot of baggage connected with it; there are different kinds of evolution that people talk about. He means it in a Darwinian way? I think it’s *better* for us now to move away from patriarchal structures because of the kind of world we now live in. The historical circumstances that obtain for people in the sorts of societies that people like you and I inhabit seem to me to require some of the skills and attitudes toward life that have been, at least in the recent past, identified more with women than with men. I think that maybe, yes, quite in a Darwinian (that is to say a survivalistic) sense, it *is* an evolutionary development.
- Q. Recently in *JAC*, Stanley Fish commented that “feminists who rely in their arguments on a distinction between male and female epistemology are wrong” because “there could not be such a distinction between ways of knowing.” Do you agree?
- A. I don’t really think much about epistemology anymore. My thinking is not at that level. The question is what’s behind a question like that? What are the real-world consequences of it? How does it play out in terms of what you do in the classroom or how you teach people to write or what sorts of models you give them? I think it’s true that because women are socialized differently from infancy they find themselves much more comfortable in certain kinds of learning situations than in others. If you want to call that a difference in epistemology, I don’t really care, but I think that in a *practical* sense it’s true. I’ve experienced it myself; I’ve seen it. Belenky and her coauthors have pretty well proved that experientially women function somewhat differently from men (or *many* women function differently from *many* men) in certain kinds of learning situations. There’s a huge amount of crossover, and you can’t generalize, and some men are more like women in that respect, and vice versa; but yes, I think that there are differences in optimal learning environments for some men and some women.

Q. In “Saving Our Lives” you describe a women’s studies meeting during which there was “a largely hostile discussion of the new men’s movement.” You report that you were “amazed at the glibness, almost blitheness, with which women were willing to dismiss men’s pain in tacit favor of their own oppression.” You then talk about “the terrible price men have had to pay for having a certain model of masculinity put before them.” Certainly, it seems healthy to point out that both men and women are socialized into prescribed gender roles and suffer their own kinds of pain, but how do you answer the feminist response that at this point in time it is essential that women privilege and come to terms with their own pain, since this is exactly what has been suppressed for so long?

A. What I have to say about men’s pain and the need to recognize it is not meant to preclude or in any way come before women’s recognition of their own considerable distress and suffering, so the two are not mutually exclusive in any sense. I think the question arises from a feeling that social agendas may revert to former priorities if too much attention is paid to the men’s movement. That’s my sense of where these criticisms are coming from. I have a fairly optimistic reading of the men’s movement. I tend to think that the men’s movement is a natural evolutionary outgrowth of the women’s movement, that if the women’s movement is going to succeed at all it is absolutely necessary for there to be a change in the way men conceive of themselves along lines now being laid out in the men’s movement, and that the welfare of women in large part is dependent upon the success of that development because we don’t live in separate worlds; we’re all part of the same social fabric. So, I don’t think it’s a correct analysis of the situation to say that if people pay attention to the men’s movement the clock will be turned back thirty years. I could be wrong; it could be that the retrograde elements of the men’s movement will become more and more prominent and will succeed in a more permanent than temporary backlash, but that’s not my sense of the way it’s going. I believe we’re attaining a much more flexible, sophisticated, and subtle understanding of gender and sex than we had twenty-five or thirty years ago, and that’s all to the good.

Q. Twelve years ago, you argued in *Reader-Response Criticism* that while reader-response critics defined their work as a radical departure from the values and principles of New Criticism, a close analysis demonstrates that they had not revolutionized critical theory “but merely transposed formalist principles into a new key.” In retrospect, what do you believe is the contribution of reader-response criticism?

A. I’m coming back around actually. In a sense, I left reader-response criticism behind in 1980 when I published that book—I was going on to other things—but I’ve come back around to believing in reader response as a great pedagogical approach to literary study because I’m so interested in students now. What’s happened is that the focus of my attention in the

classroom has moved away from the subject matter to the students, and *they're* really what I see when I walk into the room. Reader-response criticism is a way to put students at the center of the study of literature, so I think its "contribution" is similar to that of feminist criticism, in that it legitimized a certain kind of personal response to literature (or whatever the subject matter might be) and so had a kind of integrative effect or performed a unifying function in terms of making a connection between peoples' lives and what went on inside classrooms in colleges and universities.

- Q. Some years ago you wrote, "What is most striking about reader-response criticism and its close relative, deconstructive criticism, is their failure to break out of the mold into which critical writing was cast by the formalist identification of criticism with explication." Do you still believe that deconstructive criticism has failed to escape this formalist mold?
- A. I wouldn't go along with that statement anymore. At least in some of its manifestations, deconstructive criticism has broken out of that mode. The example I'm thinking of, though, might not be accepted by anybody as deconstructive criticism: Hélène Cixous' *The Laugh of the Medusa*. I take that to be written in a deconstructive mode, or in a mode of discourse that was enabled by the writings of people like Derrida and Lacan. In effect, Derrida's writing freed language up in so dramatic a way from the conventions that had governed writing about literature that the eruptive and uncontrollable energy of the prose, and also of deconstruction's sense of language itself as sort of ceaselessly reproducing itself with a difference, made for kinds of writing that went beyond explication and crossed the line over into writing in the Barthesian sense, which is self-creation so to speak.
- Q. Some critics have argued that deconstruction has outlived its usefulness.
- A. I don't think that the insights of poststructuralism have yet been fully absorbed, even in the literary academy much less the culture at large. I think it's still alive and has a lot of work to do of the kind it has been doing for the last twenty-five or thirty years. Of course, history marches on. First you put down your right foot; then you put down your left foot. Has the right foot outlived its usefulness? Sure things are going to change, and deconstruction in its original form will no longer be able to cut any ice at a certain point, but it isn't for all of that something we should condescend to.
- Q. In *West of Everything* you demonstrate that the western is an "answer" to the domestic novel, "the antithesis of the cult of domesticity that dominated American Victorian culture." In such novels, "the viewpoint women represent is introduced *in order* to be swept aside, crushed or dramatically invalidated," and women are in fact used to "legitimize the violence men practice in order to protect them." Why have you devoted so much of your professional energy to a genre that expresses such male violence and misogyny?

A. People have asked me that question before. They've asked, "What's a nice girl like you doing working on westerns." It's not an easy question to answer. First, it seemed a logical next step after having studied the major popular fictional forms of the nineteenth century, which are the women's novels. I think the major popular fictional form of the twentieth century has been these men's things in various forms of adventure stories—stories about gangsters, detectives, spies, science fiction heroes, and so forth—of which the western is kind of the key one. There is sort of a natural historical move from the one to the other. Another reason is that I think that the book for me was an attempt to come to terms with my own attitudes toward men. What happened in the end was that I recognized the extent to which I had, so to speak, become a man or had introjected the cultural imperatives that control male conduct in our society and that I'd done so in order to succeed or function in the academy. So what the book was in a way—not as I was doing it, but in retrospect—was an attempt on my part to recognize what I had done to myself or what I had become, an attempt to understand that and also to sympathize with it. That's why when I write about the western it's both with love and hate: I don't have a single attitude toward it.

Q. In *Sensational Designs* and much of your other work on American fiction, you attempt to open the canon, to "move the study of American literature away from the small group of master texts that have dominated critical discussion for the last thirty years." Do you believe recent attempts to open the canon are headed for success despite vocal attacks by the right wing?

A. It already has succeeded. The canon is radically different from what it was twenty years ago, and people everywhere are teaching all kinds of texts that wouldn't have been thought of previously. I think it's a *fait accompli*. The pressure from the right wing has been largely ineffectual, it seems to me—though not completely, as witnessed by what happened at the University of Texas. I don't see people pulling back from assigning fiction by ethnic, black, or women writers on account of what Dinesh D'Souza and Lynne Cheney say. To the extent that such pressure influences opinion and, therefore, has an effect on where funding goes and those sorts of things, I do think it is something to think about, but I think the demographics are against it. The racial and ethnic composition of the student body in colleges and universities is fact number one; the racial, ethnic, and gender composition of the professoriate is fact number two. These demographic trends are not reversing themselves; they're moving further in the same direction. The canon or the curriculum has followed demography, and it probably will continue to do so.

Q. You have frequently criticized the values and workings of the academic world. For example, in "Report from a Conference" you characterize our typical professional conferences as being pervaded by a "high-perfor-

mance, dog-eat-dog atmosphere” in which “the who’s in who’s out game is being played with such ferocity that when you get on an elevator, you can cut the status consciousness with a knife.” And in “Fighting Words: Unlearning to Write the Critical Essay,” you claim that academics often engage in out-and-out violence: “ritual execution,” “bloodlust,” and intellectual “assassination.” What is it about the academic environment that fosters this behavior? What realistic changes can we make?

- A. Well, speaking for myself, I was most moved to behave in this way—which I certainly have done and haven’t completely ceased doing—by a sense of injured merit, deprivation and resentment, a feeling that I had not received my just desserts. That made me angry and made me want to lash out at the establishment, which in my case took the form of attacking the male critical establishment that had controlled the canon and our approaches to it. So, generally speaking, I think it’s out of a sense of personal injury of some kind that people engage in vicious polemical fights with one another, and it’s also related to the extreme status-consciousness and desire to scramble up the ladder that is so palpable at professional conventions. Solving this problem would virtually mean bringing about some kind of utopian society because the university doesn’t operate in a vacuum; it’s an extension of a very competitive, success-, status-, and money-oriented world. In a sense, we’re no different from the business world in that respect, though the currency is somewhat different. One way that I’m working on right now to alter this somewhat has to do with the culture of the university as an institution and the kinds of values that individual universities foster or discourage by the ways in which they conduct their own internal business. It seems to me that the departments that I’ve visited that have been some of the happiest places to work have not been at all privileged monetarily and have had virtually no professional visibility; nevertheless, a lot of the people in these departments got along with one another very well, respected themselves professionally and personally, and had a sense of reward and fulfillment in their daily work. How can that be? It seems to me from the cases I’ve observed that it was because the institution itself was attending to its own needs, to the things that would make its personnel feel good about themselves. There was a lot of attention given to the way faculty members would interact with one another on a daily basis, and the administration had a good sense of what departments needed and what kinds of encouragement they deserved to have. I’m back to metaphors of housekeeping and domesticity and sort of maternal attention to the maintenance and procedural aspects of life, but I do feel that universities, in particular, because their eyes are supposed to be firmly focused on the distant frontiers of truth, neglect the kind of social, psychological, and even in certain cases physical upkeep that makes the capacity to go searching for truth possible in the first place. What I’m saying is that more of a spirit of collectivity, a commitment not simply to

finding the latest truth in your subfield but to the people you work with in your department and to the institution as an alma mater for the students who are coming through—a much more local focus for people’s energies, drives and ambitions than a focus on becoming nationally known for this or that discovery or contribution—might help to defuse and make less tempting or desirable that kind of combat and grasping after visibility that seems to characterize the profession so much of late. The culture of the institution is what needs to change.

- Q. In one of your typical moments of stunning honesty you write, “I learned what epistemology I know from my husband. I think of it as more his game than mine. It’s a game I enjoy playing but which I no longer need or want to play. I want to declare my independence of it, of him. (Part of what is going on here has to do with a need I have to make sure I’m not being absorbed in someone else’s personality.) What I am breaking away from is both my conformity to the conventions of a male professional practice and my intellectual dependence on my husband.” Do you believe that marriage has changed the critical acceptance of your work?
- A. That’s hard for me to answer because some people don’t know I’m married to Stanley Fish, so they aren’t influenced by that. Some people do, and it’s very difficult for me to know how that fact has influenced their reception of my work since it’s not the kind of thing that people tell me. Certainly, in professional/social situations the fact that I’m married to Stanley influences people’s behavior toward me all the time, and how they behave toward me depends often on which side of the fence they’re on. If they’re more interested in the kind of work *he* does, they’ll often pay more attention to him; or if they’re traditionally oriented toward the man as the more important member of a couple, they’ll pay more attention to him; or if they want his favor, and he’s an extremely powerful person in the profession, they’ll pay more attention to him because they want to be in good with him. Those things are obvious and happen all the time, though less so now than they did in the past when we first got together. So, if the reception of my work in the world is a mirror of the way in which people react toward us as a couple in social situations, extrapolating from that, then I would say it probably has influenced them quite a bit. But how that gets processed in each case would depend very much on the circumstances of the person who is reading it.
- Q. Do you believe that this danger of being absorbed into your spouse’s personality is unique to your situation, or is it a more general problem that all academic women face, or is it even more general and a problem that all academics, men and women, face when they’re both in the academy together?
- A. I no longer feel that way; that’s not an issue for me. At the time that I wrote it, the very fact that I *could* write it meant that it was just about to become no longer an issue for me. I finally had to say it, and it felt really good to



say it. Having said it, I never had to worry about it again. In fact, I don't worry about it at all. How people feel about themselves is one thing; how other people see them is another. Whereas I got rid of that some six years ago, I'm sure most people still see me, if they see me at all, totally in Stanley's shadow. Those are two somewhat different things, how I feel and how I'm seen. As far as academic couples in general are concerned, sure it's a problem because this is a new phenomenon. We're not used to having men and women in couples have separate professional identities. Culturally, we're just now developing the sensorium or the cognitive apparatus for apprehending that, and I think that it's coming. It exists now in some quarters, and as the phenomenon becomes increasingly more common, people will be able more and more to see members of a professional couple as separate and not see one person as somehow influenced by the profile of another. I feel that sort of thing is in the process of being elaborated and is evolving right now.

Q. Are there any misunderstandings or criticisms of your work that you would like to take issue with or elaborate on right now?

A. In reviews of *West of Everything*, a couple of reviewers have taken exception to the two animal rights chapters in the book, the horses chapter and the cattle chapter. In fact, one review said, "You know the book is taking a turn for the worse when she asks the question, 'Why doesn't Roy Rogers eat Trigger?'" In other words, the sort of pro-animal rights stand I take in the chapters on horses and especially cattle is seen by a lot of people as a kind of kooky, flaky, idiosyncratic (I don't know what their vocabulary would be) aspect of my work, but generally people like the book and so are willing to bracket it and say, "Oh well, she has that quirk." But they still see it as a quirk. I don't see my position on that issue as in some way a special case that has to be forgiven, or as isolated from the rest of what I'm writing about in the book. In fact, I discuss it in the book as very much an extension of my understanding of the models of human pain, suffering, and self-mortification that characterize the western. So a sensitivity to and an awareness of pain and suffering within one's self becomes extended to an awareness of it in other people and indeed in other beings, and animals are simply there next to us or are in our lives as possible objects for that kind of attention. Also (and this doesn't really come through in the book), for me an awareness of what our relation to animals is inseparable from a kind of environmental consciousness that I and so many people now have, especially more and more children. I think of this new attitude toward the welfare or rights of animals as being part and parcel of an increased consciousness about what our relationship to the physical environment (which we're interdependent with and which is alive just as we are) needs to be.