
Defining A Feminist Literacy

As feminists, we tend to look outside ourselves in search of blame for the world's being the way it is. We claim we have no voice because the patriarchy has drowned us out or gagged us with a dustcloth. We dismiss our inner voices as either internalizations of male language or as "gossip."

Yet to label as "gossip" the unfamiliar voices that somehow seep through our *gestapo*-like, traditional linguistic filter is already to have internalized patriarchal language. Not to listen to the voices because they are unfamiliar is to have internalized the patriarchal value system as well.

"Our customary literacy language is systematically gendered in ways that influence what we approve and disapprove of, making it extremely difficult for us to acknowledge certain kinds of originality" (Ostriker 3). Yet, even as feminists attempt to "make female speech prevail, to penetrate male discourse, to cause the ear of man to listen" (Ostriker 211), we continue to find our voices silenced both by the big, bad world out there — that we, of course, have nothing to do with perpetuating — and by our internalized selves that are really just slightly altered facsimiles of the outer world.

After all, if our inner voices are somehow different from our learned outer voices, why do we continue to hear only the "voices inside [us] that tell [us] to be quiet, the voices outside [us] that

drown [us] out or politely dismiss what [we] say or do not understand [us], the silence inside [us] that avoids saying anything important even to [ourselves] (Annas 4)?

Yet, if woman's voice is still silent, whether from internal or external censors, what is feminist criticism? What is feminist literary theory? What is different about the "different truths" (Gilligan 156) men and women have if we continue to privilege difference between genders, rather than traits, in order to define these truths?

Academic feminists, warns Betsy Draine, especially need to be more aware that being able to write from "'a woman's position' about 'subjects of interest to women' in language that women recognize as their own is no guarantee that [women authors] understand the first thing about women outside their class or outside their publishers' readership of white, upper-middle-class, females in Britain, Canada, and the United States" (Draine A40).

Indeed, it is interesting that silence is still a central theme of feminist theory even as feminists have begun creating their own canon, a rather ironic predicament for a movement that originally sought to "dispel the idea of a fixed literacy canon, which served to insure for so long the virtual exclusion of women from literary history" (Draine A40). In our efforts to de-canonize knowledge and overcome our past of silence, have we not merely become si-

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lencers ourselves? By making feminism another category, instead of changing the presupposed idea of categories, have we not become another exclusionary entity, inadvertently building more linguistic barriers even as we claim to be tearing them down? Is the woman in the car next to you on the freeway more concerned with phallocentrism or the price of eggs? Does she have the faintest idea what deconstructed neo-post-modern, revisionist feminism is? If she doesn't know, does that make her a literate woman or an illiterate feminist? If, by chance, she does understand, is she then co-literate, or is she now an illiterate woman and a literate feminist?

is a literary as well as a social category. It is possible to argue for taking all texts seriously as texts without arguments based on social oppression of cultural exclusion, and popular genres have therefore been studied as part of the female literary tradition...But in a context where the ground of struggle — highly contested, moreover — concerns Edith Wharton's advancement to more major status, fundamental assumptions have changed very little" (116). It is ironic, of course, that, even as Robinson admits that "conclusions about 'women's fiction' or 'female consciousness' have been drawn or jumped to from considering a body of work whose authors are all white and

the majority of data processors and burger burners are women, and that these facts of life have hardly been manufactured by female academicians seeking a marketable dissertation topic. Still, the female burger burner, more attuned to Janet Jackson than Hélène Cixous, should be able to ask the female academician, "What have you done for me lately?" and be answered a tad more specifically than, "We are stealing the language and writing the body."

The burger burner asks, "What can I be?"

Julia Kristeva answers, "A woman cannot 'be'; it is something which does not even belong in the order of being" (137).

FEMINISTS HAVE CEASED TO BE FEMINISTS

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The point is that feminists have ceased to be feminists in order to study feminism. In our zest to define ourselves, we have forgotten that it was the traditional definitions of women that ultimately led to our outrage. We have merely replaced patriarchal definitions with feminist definitions. Refusing to admit that the process of defining, rather than definitions themselves, is the true source of power. We fear that if we don't define ourselves we won't exist. The question is whether after twenty years of liberating ourselves from societally-enforced definitional confinement we have not begun to confine ourselves anew.

This becomes especially interesting when pondered alongside the much heralded crisis in literacy. If, in fact, we have begun to confine ourselves by our own definitions, have we not simultaneously begun to exclude the majority of the very sex we sought to make equally included in society? Have we not, even as Allan Bloom calls us "the latest enemy of the vitality of classic texts" (65), become just as elitist as the institutions we sought to make more equitable for everyone, regardless of gender, race or income?

As Lillian Robinson points out, "Elite'

comparatively privileged' (114), she chooses Edith Wharton as her example, rather than Leslie Silko or Toni Morrison.

I dare say that in our quest to create a "literacy" of our own, a feminist language, a feminist vision, a space where Catharine Stimpson says "women of language become richer, deeper, at once more enigmatic and more clear" (xii), we have done as much to perpetuate illiteracy as to create a new literacy. As Andrew Sledd aptly notes, "...literacy and illiteracy develop together, defining each other" (495), while Robert Pattison claims "literacy must not be treated as a constant in human affairs but as an evolving and adaptable attribute of the species" (18). As a result, Sledd contends that the much publicized crisis in literacy is actually no crisis at all, "that both the crisis and the means to resolve it have been manufactured" (495) by "a two-tiered educational system producing... a minority of over-paid engineers and managers to design technology and provide supervision for a majority of docile data processors and underpaid burger burners" (506).

Feminists, of course, would be the first to point out that the majority of over-paid engineers and managers are men, while

The single, working mother exclaims, "I feel like I'm going out of my mind."

Sonia Johnson soothes her with, "Since truth is reversed in patriarchy, to go out of our minds is to become truly sane. (vi).

Or perhaps a better example is a colleague's outrage at *Women Who Love Too Much* being placed in the feminist theory section at a bookstore. "Can you imagine?" Trash right next to important theory." No, I can't imagine. Have we become more concerned with writing the body than with protecting it from abuse?

While these conversations make light of the barriers that exist between academic and non-academic women, they show why many women, obviously with good reason, are "word-phobic and will even classify the written word as an instrument of oppression that has too often been used against them — an echo of the theme of 'words as weapons'" (Belenky, et. al. 74). Indeed, feminists must begin to realize that while we may not have manufactured a sexist society, we are, in fact, creating a two-tiered woman's society in which a minority of academically educated women have begun to tell the majority of alternatively educated women what constitutes "woman." We have done

nothing to change the Aristotelian idea that to be literate about something is to understand its definition. Even as we still complain about being silenced, we have done nothing with our words to change the concept of what constitutes literacy.

As a result, perhaps feminists should consider implementing a "dysfunctional literacy, for literacy itself guaranteed nothing" (Sledd 499). Since E.D. Hirsch has so graciously told us what every culturally literate person should know (Hirsch 146-215), perhaps feminists should consider advocating what we shouldn't know. We shouldn't know, for example, how to build a nuclear warhead. Or what constitutes "masculine" and "feminine." (After all, do masculine and feminine even exist if the major biological difference between men and women is genitalia? Will my clitoris enlarge if I am logical? Does a man's penis shrink when he cries?) In fact, perhaps that which we should most *not* know, is what we should know, for "the world is covered with signs that must be deciphered, and those signs, which reveal resemblances and affinities, are themselves no more than forms of similitude. To know must therefore be to interpret" (Foucault 32).

Any act of defining what constitutes literacy, then, is merely the definer's interpretation, which may be futile to discuss at all, "for there is no thing, literacy, only constellations of forms and degrees of literacy, shifting and turning as history rearranges the social formations in which they are embedded. Pieties about Literacy with a capital L ought to be scrutinized: Which Literacy? Whose Literacy? Literacy for what?" (Sledd 499). Indeed, such questions can just as easily be applied to feminism: Which feminism? Whose feminism? Feminism for what? Therein lies the parallel between issues of feminism and literacy, for to continue to privilege definition over interpretation is to perpetuate the domination cycle of our present culture. To continue to use the metaphor of silence to imply that women are voiceless or that the general populace is illiterate is to continue to privilege communication outside one's self, which, in effect, nullifies all inner voices, for they do not exist if they cannot be heard.

I am not suggesting that women, minorities, and non-traditionally educated people have indeed not been maliciously silenced throughout history. But I do

wonder if, like most groups that inevitably become dominating in order to overcome being dominated, feminists haven't become extremists, ignoring "the silence in women" in which "anything that falls into it has an enormous reverberation" (Duras 175). For example, as of August 28, Elizabeth Morgan's silence is still reverberating in the form of protection for her daughter. Morgan, a plastic surgeon with degrees from Harvard, Yale and Tufts (does that make her "literate?"), has spent the past year in a solitary cell at the District of Columbia Jail for refusing to divulge the whereabouts of her six-year-old daughter. Morgan hid her daughter rather than allow her ex-husband, who she claims has continually sexually molested her daughter, to have unsupervised visits with the child.

As a result, the judge holding her in contempt of court has ruled that Morgan could remain in jail until her daughter turns eighteen. While incarcerated, Morgan has published a textbook on cosmetic surgery, written several short stories, and completed a children's book (Prasso 6). Like reporters who refuse to reveal their sources, her silence, rather than her communication, is what is being "censored."

Perhaps, in our zest to be heard, we have "censored" our own silence as well. The patriarchy ran a blue light special, advertising "silence as ignorance," offering two for one voices, and we shopped until we dropped. Somewhere along our supposedly liberated hermeneutic spiral, we stopped listening and started talking. Yet, as Marguerite Duras suggests, what isn't said can be just as powerful as what is. "I know that when I write there is something inside me that stops functioning, something that becomes silent...everything shuts off — the analytic way of thinking, thinking inculcated by college, studies, reading, experience...as if I were returning to a wild country" (175). Ultimately, to deny silence is to deny one's self, which, in the end, may be the only concern about which one can be literate. If there is, indeed, a need to define literacy it is only because we have a need to define the self, for the literacy crisis "is finally a crisis of identity in which tests and television, schools and a blur of culture conspire" to create "a denial of self" (Wheeler 17).

I believe feminists have not only a unique opportunity but a moral obligation

to become more involved in the process of literacy, not to define it, but to keep it from being defined, no to limit it, but to continue to expand its boundaries. It is not enough to encourage women to write the body; we must encourage all people to write the self. "Identity — a cube of ice, unmeltable, at the center of oneself, formed from all sorts of sources — is a force that allows every writer — even students of writing — to write well" (Wheeler 16).

Women, especially, who "have always been encouraged to take their opinions from others, to depend on others' approval for their own sense of self-worth" (Hedges, Wendt 82), should be all the more conscious not only of what determines ourselves, but also of what determines the concept of self in general. It helps little to have a self, if that self is considered illiterate. It helps little if Virginia Woolf is now accepted in the canon if the person who most needs to hear her voice cannot get into the university. It helps little to advocate writing the body if that body must conform to MLA style. It helps little to encourage the development of an imaginative self if our task is "to develop the reality principle, to enforce the status quo and equip the super ego with all its niggling conventions, down to and including, if possible, those of orthodox punctuation" (Sledd 503).

Feminists need to be aware that while we are expanding what it means to be women, men such as Hirsch and Bloom are narrowing what it means to be literate. In Texas, as of 1989, all students at state-supported universities will be required to pass a competency exam in reading, writing, and mathematics before being allowed to graduate. Once again the questions proliferate: What constitutes competency? What constitutes reading? What constitutes writing? Who will construct the test and who will decide what it is supposed to validate? If the test is anything like the *College Board's Test of Standard Written English*, it will be "designed to distinguish on the basis of trivial dialect differences between the upper-middle class and working people. After all, college and its textbooks are not for everyone.... This may be good training for what life has in store, but it is not education" (Sledd 503).

It is interesting that while the body of scholarship in feminist, Afro-American,

and Native American studies has increased in recent years, so has the number of standardized placement and competency exams. While we were defining our voice, those enamored of the status quo were defining our audience. While we have been developing the self, the patriarchy has been determining who can have one.

The problem is they didn't expect us to have so many. You know how we women are — we never can make up our minds. So we have an intellectual self and a down-home mother self, a lover self, and a pseudo-self, a self created "in love and in joy, in sorrow and in despair, in response to the realities of [our] lives and as an expression of [our] dreams" (Hedges, Wendt 8). As such, "feminism has split again and again until it has become feminisms, a set of groups, each with its own ideology, identity, and agenda" (Stimpson *xiii*).

Yet, in the same way feminists have learned to live with multiple meanings, so should we be the initiators of multiple literacies. Like feminism, literacy should be "beyond restoration." Feminist practitioners "are too numerous, too dissimilar in situation, for one agreement to accommodate all the theories, ideas and perceptions by and about women in the post-modern world. The question is not how to paste and staple a consensus together again but rather how to live culturally and politically with fragmentation" (Stimpson 191).

Similarly, feminists, especially those of us in academe, should demand and implement the acceptance of fragmented literacies. Instead of trying to make the burger burner relevant to the canon, we should be finding ways to make the canon relevant to the burger burner. Instead of dutifully accepting policies for testing competency, we must actively promote diversity, recruiting from *barrios* and condos alike, challenging not only the tests themselves, but the idea that one test can somehow judge an infinite variety of people. We must pull ourselves away from our dusty bookshelves and put activism back in feminism. Ultimately "we must move from cultural explorations to explicit political practice" (Stimpson 196),

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must write our minds and or dreams, our run-on sentences, and our images that do not make sense, and do not have to. When internalized patriarchal voice starts to criticize us, we can say, "You are merely one of many." When we embrace our many voices, we embrace pluralism rather than dualism, co-existence rather than competition, a spectrum of color rather than black and white. Ultimately, when feminists embrace multiple literacies, we embrace ourselves.

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