
With Women Writing Culture, his third book of interviews since 1991, Gary Olson is making a strong bid to become the interviewer par excellence of composition studies. Clearly, Olson is a talented inquisitor, as demonstrated by the well-received interviews he has conducted over the last decade for Journal of Advanced Composition (now JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory); in fact, most of the interviews collected in the three books first appeared in JAC. His questions consistently demonstrate comprehensive and critical reading, are well-prepared and organized, and engage the interviewees critically, challengingly, and insightfully. As a result, Olson has succeeded in legitimizing the interview as a serious mode of academic inquiry, one particularly suited for the interdisciplinary and discursive nature of composition studies.

The interview proves to be a particularly appropriate mode of inquiry in Women Writing Culture, a collection of six interviews with internationally prominent scholars on the subjects of feminisms, postmodernity, rhetoric, writing, gender, race, class, and culture. As Donna Haraway explains in the Forward, the interview’s decentered, dialectical nature challenges “foundational illusions of single, well-organized subjects” and provides instead the “lively practices of connection and communicative commerce” (xi). Such commerce suggests that scholars need to approach knowledge-making not as a linear process concluding when the subject is mastered, but rather as an open-ended, dialectical interplay between different voices and disciplines. Gary Olson and Elizabeth Hirsh respect and promote this interplay in Women Writing Culture, often resisting certainties and neat conclusions, and just as often encouraging the kind of interdisciplinary thinking that invites conversations from technoscience and psychology, to name just two, into conversations in composition. Indeed, as many of the scholars confirm, the interview as a mode of inquiry provides a useful means of resisting traditional phallocentric discourses—a way to construct different narratives differently.

In the spirit of its interdisciplinary approach, Women Writing Culture includes interviews that cover a range of issues. Feminist philosopher of science Sandra Harding discusses feminist standpoint theory and the role Western science plays in the construction of culture, reality, and “objectivity.” Cultural critic and philosopher of science Donna Haraway
converses about “cyborg writing,” academic activism, technoscience, and narrative constructions of reality (“the story-ladenness of knowledge, the story-ladenness of facts” [57]); she also contributes a brief Forward. Psychologist and theorist of women’s epistemology Mary Belenky extends the conversation by discussing the role collaboration plays in women’s ways of knowing and learning. African-American cultural critic bell hooks addresses literacy and the link between cultural consciousness/criticism and composition pedagogy, the use of the personal in scholarly writing, and the need for students to be polyvocal in order to foster cultural difference. Philosopher and exponent of “French Feminism” Luce Irigaray considers the role of women in philosophy, the ontological difference between man and woman that prompts the need for two subjects instead of one, the connection between gender and discourse, and misreadings of her work. And philosopher and cultural critic Jean-François Lyotard converses about capitalism and its relationship to masculinity, writing and its relationship to “femininity,” and the need to resist discourses of mastery. Henry A. Giroux contributes an intelligent Afterward, in which he explains what it means to be a public intellectual and the interview’s role in the making of this figure. Certainly, this is quite an eclectic collection; however, there is something that unifies Women Writing Culture that happens to be the same thing that balances the tension inherent in its title: writing. This book challenges us to question traditional notions of writing as somehow ideologically innocent and even empowering—a means of translating thought, expressing oneself. Its interviews ask us to take a closer look at what it means to teach standard academic discourses, at what is at stake when we ask students to write in a certain style, a certain genre. It also makes us aware of the role writing plays in the construction of master narratives, narratives that define our values, goals, and epistemologies, narratives that perpetuate power relationships and subject positions. As Giroux explains, “writing as a pedagogy does not merely provide a set of representations that imparts knowledge to others; it also becomes a form of cultural production in which one’s own identity is constantly being rewritten, and one’s own politics are constantly being revised critically in order to resist becoming fully adjusted to existing configurations of power” (195-6). Such an approach to writing carries important pedagogical implications that ask us to take our teaching of writing not only more seriously, but also more conscientiously.

Women Writing Culture, then, is a book about writing—what it means to write and to be written in the postmodern sense of the word. The
very title embodies this postmodern tension as it brings together what Donna Haraway calls “three impossible signifiers” (xii). As women work to write culture, culture works to write women, so that women, writing, and culture emerge as interdependent and competing forces. While the dominant culture relies on writing to construct its master narratives—narratives that circumscribe women into culturally defined roles—women must rely on the very dominant discourses that define them in order to resist these culturally prescribed roles and define themselves. Significantly, then, writing lies between women and culture, appropriated by each to define the other. The point is not to privilege one over the other, but to find ways of functioning within and teaching these discourses while preserving different discourses, those gendered, racial, and class-based discourses we and our students bring with us to the university that have traditionally been silenced. The overwhelming issue at stake in this book, then, is how to define oneself (as a feminist, a member of an ethnic or racial minority, even a member of a dominant group) within a cultural discourse that works so hard to define individuals. Mary Belenky, for example, grapples with ways to incorporate female epistemology into phallocentric classrooms while Sandra Harding explores how “feminist consciousness raising is reclaiming a history that is not to be defined by the way the dominant group defines who you are” (42-3). What emerges from these interviews is a drive towards a better understanding of writing’s role in the construction of reality, identity, ideology, and authority. What also emerges is the challenge women and other marginalized people face in having to depend on the very narratives that define them in order to tell their own stories.

The point is that we need to start investigating the sorts of connections that bell hooks explores between traditionally incongruent subjects such as imperialism and the teaching of standard academic discourse. We cannot ignore gender, race, and class nor issues posed by science, politics, and philosophy in composition studies because they are profoundly implicated in what we teach, how we teach, what our students learn, and how we evaluate their learning. Olson and Hirsh’s interviews make us aware of these implications, make us think about them by teaching us what kinds of questions we need to be asking: of ourselves, our pedagogies, our students, and our place within particular conceptual schemes such as universities, scientific communities, cultures, racial, gendered, and ethnic groups, and so on. Because writing plays such a crucial role in the creation and perpetuation of our conceptual schemes and our place within them, when
we teach it we are in many ways teaching how gender, class, race, and authority are produced, commodified, and negotiated. We are also teaching ways to challenge these constructions. *Women Writing Culture* explores both the constructions and the resistances—how the two are necessarily interdependent and mutually defining, just like women, writing, and culture.

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I was teaching Dorothy Parker’s short story, “But the One on the Right,” to my creative writing class. In the story, Parker’s character, “Mrs. Parker,” is at a dinner party, “fixed up” with a man seated on her left. Numbed by the insipid conversation of her companion on the left, Mrs. Parker fantasizes about the man on her right. As the evening progresses, her wit becomes sharper, more scathing, since she realizes that she was invited by the hostess to entertain and charm the lug on her left, laugh at his tired jokes, and look pretty, like a “painted doll.” During our class discussion regarding the character’s growing cynicism about the role women play in our culture, a male student remarked that “Mrs. Parker” seemed to be “a bitch,” and when I asked what he meant he said, “You know, a real feminist.”

Any woman, as my student suggests, who questions her prescribed social role is suspect, seen as argumentative, mean, bitter, and the most pejorative epithet of all, a *feminist*. As a woman and a writer, Dorothy Parker was a feminist, and she understood that her womanhood and her writing were inextricably bound to the phallogocentric culture from which she surfaced. Likewise, Gary A. Olsen and Elizabeth Hirsh’s *Women Writing Culture* embraces these seemingly disparate elements of feminist construction that each of the signifiers in the title suggests, and through their interviews with six prominent scholars—Sandra Harding, Donna Haraway, Mary Belenky, bell hooks, Lucy Irigaray, and Jean-François Lyotard—emerge with a text that is richly layered and surprisingly fluid, exploring feminism, rhetoric, writing, and multiculturalism in an age of commodification and technology.

The strength of this collection is that Olson and Hirsh do no gently inquire, but firmly, unabashedly, and unapologetically interrogate the