PUBLIC DISCOURSE, ACADEMIC INSIGHT, AND EMBRACING DIFFERENCE: HOW WE MIGHT TEACH, RESEARCH, AND LIVE


Harriet Malinowitz, in Textual Orientations, makes this comment about one of the young men who participated in the series of case studies that enrich her discussion of lesbian and gay students in the composition classroom: "The composition of the class helped him to realize, too, that even within a group that seems homogeneous in certain ways, diverse experience ends up emerging and informing the collective conversation" (213). But she might well be speaking about the community of scholars and teachers in rhetoric and composition who, within the last decade or so, have begun to realize and acknowledge how individual members who may appear

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assimilated, in fact, bring quite different life experiences and assumptions to
the scholarly conversation. This awareness has initiated arguments for
greater attention to and acknowledgment of how the community’s members
and the students whom it serves are different and therefore require research
and classroom approaches that account for and respond to these differences.
Innovative and provocative research on difference has transformed and
revitalized traditional and homogenous accounts of the field.

All four of the books that I review here make complex and eloquent
arguments for how the mainstream may benefit from difference. They detail
difference that may lie in non-traditional approaches or perspectives on
research, in classroom practices that validate non-traditional or non-
mainstream life experiences, or in making space in a classroom curriculum
where minority views and realities are acknowledged, welcomed, and
validated. These books represent forceful, articulate, and carefully supported
arguments that we as an academic community—and we as a society—must
work towards achieving some level of recognition, appreciation, and
valuation for groups that have traditionally been (and also continue to be)
marginalized, ignored, and sometimes persecuted. However, this impulse to
appreciate difference is not confined to the academy; it extends well beyond
the ivory towers, and it continues to provoke vigorous and heated public
debate as social and political figures wrestle with the implications that such
profound social changes will create in our institutions and processes. I see
these four books in this tradition, then, of engaging in the ongoing rigorous
public debate about the nature of our society. These books argue in favor of
some fundamental changes to the basic assumptions with which we all operate
in order to invigorate our egalitarian principles and move us closer to an ideal
of peaceful, prosperous, respectful, and perhaps even appreciative co-
existence.

Even if you are not a feminist, these books are well worth reading.
They will bring you up to speed in an important, dynamic, and influential
correspondence about feminism and feminist theory, its role in contemporary
society, in the academy, and in classroom—particularly composition-
classroom—practices. If you are a feminist, you will find that these books
raise important issues and perspectives that will probably enrich, expand,
critique, and demand the rethinking of at least some of your current
comfortable assumptions about feminism. At least, that was my experience
upon plunging into Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drakes’ recently published
edited collection, Third Wave Feminism: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism.
I found myself immersed in a foreign culture, a culture in which I assumed
membership. Although the oldest of the contributors to this volume was born
only a couple of years after me (each of their dates of birth is highlighted in the
contributors’ biography), contributors call themselves the “next generation”
of feminists, the “third wave,” and they focus on theorizing contemporary feminism in the context of the contradictory beliefs, opinions, and theory that make up the group. Readers like me are immediately co-opted into this exotic world of the next generation and at the same time repelled or excluded from it to the extent that we do not share the various experiences with feminism assumed for us by the writers. In their introduction, Heywood and Drake question contemporary postfeminist binaries that oppose “equity feminists” and “gender feminists” and assume that is the whole story; Heywood and Drake argue, in fact, that this binary excludes an important group: “young feminists who grew up with equity feminism, got gender feminism in college, along with poststructuralism, and are now hard at work on a feminism that strategically combines elements of these feminisms, along with black feminism, women-of-color feminism, working-class feminism, pro-sex feminism, and so on” (3). While my personal profile regarding feminist theory and practice does not necessarily fit that sketched out by Heywood and Drake, their arguments for the need to integrate diverse and sometimes isolated perspectives and theories make a lot of sense to me. Movements like feminism should be able to withstand critique and revision in order to welcome those individuals whose concerns are relevant and enriching to feminist philosophy.

The first section of Third Wave Agenda explores the contemporary culture within which third wave feminism must operate. In the first essay, “Living in McJobdom: Third Wave Feminism and Class Inequity,” Michelle Sidler provides a sobering look at the financial prospects for those young people embarking on professional careers. She compares the situation of twenty-something feminists with the lives of their mothers: “for many young women now, the choice whether or not to work is no longer an either/or proposition. . . . With stagnant wages in many fields, women often must work just to stay afloat, even if they are married to working husbands” (26). At the same time, many university graduates find it difficult to find full-time, permanent employment as they work as what Sidler calls “mcjobs” with moderate wages and poor benefits. She notes that 8.1 million Americans are employed in these temporary jobs, and she argues that this destabilization of the workforce compromises the possibility that young people of this generation will enjoy as high a standard of living as their parents did. She argues that the debts incurred to obtain the academic/technical training touted as “essential” for securing “good” jobs can delay the recent graduate from achieving financial success for many years. Sidler calls for a third wave feminist agenda that addresses the economy.

In the subsequent essays in this section, the discussion moves from the economic landscape to the historical landscape: in “We Learn America Like a Script,” Heywood and Drake offer personalized accounts of their coming to insight as feminists, while in “Reading Between the Waves,” Deborah Siegel
explores how some of the prominent third wave feminists, including Camille Paglia, Naomi Wolf, and Katie Roiphe, have invented a new feminism viable for their time and experience. Ultimately, Siegel critiques the work of these new feminists, arguing that "those speaking in the name of taking back feminism [what Paglia, Roiphe, and Wolf are doing] seem merely to be reproducing a stock antifeminist plot, one that would deliver us all back to a pre-feminist past" (66). She goes on to argue that there must be room, however, for feminists to speak, to disagree, and to be different within the movement of feminism, because she insists that "this world is emphatically not beyond the need for feminism" (75).

The next section of the book explores how third wave feminism might be represented, and the essays in this section analyze two pop-culture icons who might be viewed as representative. Leigh Shoemaker examines her adolescent infatuation with rock singer and MTV icon Henry Rollins to suggest that any sense of identification between Rollins and third wave feminism must be ironic because his philosophy represents a "fascist model for responding to fears and concerns" that "unwittingly reinscri[bes] . . . the fascism that we [feminists] are supposed to be fighting against" (117). Jennifer Reed finds in Roseanne the kind of courageous role model that third wave feminists need. In "Roseanne: A 'Killer Bitch' for Generation X," Reed shows how Roseanne constructs characters who transgress all social and gender boundaries: "the irreverence, parody, dissonance, and irony that Roseanne uses to create a new subjective space for women . . . negotiates the ambivalence inherent in the use of these strategies" (132).

In the final two sections of the book, the essayists offer more personal explorations of their experiences as third wave feminists and additional examination of the influence of music culture on this generation. This dynamic and intriguing collection of essays accomplishes several important goals: 1) it forces the reader to reflect on and attempt to theorize her or his brand of feminism to determine how it shares or differs from the accounts offered here; 2) it provides a wide-ranging and frank discussion of the new directions currently being charted in feminist theory; and finally, 3) it shows how contemporary culture has benefitted from and built upon the accomplishments of the second wave of feminism.

It is clear from the analyses of popular culture and the personal narratives combined in this collection that feminism continues to find a place in the mainstream of American culture; it is not confined to the ivory tower or the esoteric debates of feminist theorists. It continues to raise debate within public discourse about gender roles, sexuality, economic conditions, and popular culture.

If we accept the assumption embedded in Third Wave Feminism that acknowledging, engaging, and accepting difference can energize, invigorate,
and transform the status quo, then we must make space to consider the approaches to the construction of knowledge articulated in *Common Ground: Feminist Collaboration in the Academy*. In this volume, feminist academics from disciplines as diverse as German, environmental studies, composition, sociology, music, and biology recount experiences with feminist collaboration in arguing for the value and sophistication of this type of research and the knowledge it yields.

In the first essay of the collection, "'Educate, Organize, and Agitate': A Historical Overview of Feminist Collaboration in Great Britain and America, 1640-1930," Melodie Andrews offers an historical pedigree for the contemporary interest in feminist collaboration. She identifies an increase during the seventeenth century of women scholars and activists in Britain. She suggests that this group expanded and was joined by similar groups in the United States during the next two centuries as women on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean joined efforts to abolish slavery and subsequently forward the case for their own social and political rights. She notes that these political causes demanded collaborative efforts by many women of widely diverse backgrounds, and she argues that these women provided the earliest models for contemporary feminist scholarly collaboration. While Andrews makes a convincing case for feminist collaboration having developed out of these historical events, I found her focus a little narrow because she omits any discussion (despite her title) of the ongoing activism of feminists in Canada during the same period, who joined forces with both British and American women (these abolitionists and suffragists lectured on both sides of the border and the ocean) and addressed their own lack of political power several years ahead of both the U.S. and Britain. The success of Canadian women provided encouragement and strategies for their counterparts elsewhere, and the contributions of such groups should be included in accounts that purport to show how we got to where we are today.

The next two essays in this collection address the challenges of conducting collaborative research against the grain. In "Beyond Feminism: An Intercultural Challenge for Transforming the Academy," Paula Nesbitt and Linda Thomas critique mainstream feminism for slighting what they call "intercultural" considerations, "how various constituencies on the margin intellectually relate" (31), or conducting research that benefits non-mainstream groups and values their intellectual contributions within the academy. Of particular interest in this essay is Thomas's perspective on the risks she perceives in scholarly collaboration with members of the "dominant culture." She also notes the challenges that racist, patriarchal institutions (unwittingly and otherwise) present to non-tenured, minority, feminist scholars and the energy that is required to negotiate the pitfalls of contemporary academia. Based upon the presence of these obstacles, Thomas
and Nesbitt call for more faculty to engage in collaborative (or intercultural) research that will transform the academy. I have mixed feelings about Nesbitt and Thomas’s use of intercultural in this context because they have excessively narrowed the meaning of intercultural to refer primarily to race relations in the U.S. At my institution, multicultural has already undergone this transformation: while *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines “multi” as “of many” (717), meaning therefore “of many cultures,” administrators appear to define it as having to do exclusively with differences based on race; scholarly projects that define multicultural more broadly than just race-based (for example, comparing French vs. American cultures) are generally rejected as not being multicultural. Given the large body of important scholarship that exists in professional and technical writing exploring relationships between various worldwide cultures, I’d hate to see intercultural similarly constrained.

In “Writing Against the Romantic Grain,” Carol Wilson and Joel Haefner buck essentialist implications by recounting how their experience editing a collection of essays on female Romantic poets formerly spurned by canonical scholars was a feminist collaborative enterprise. This is the first essay in the collection that theorizes the collaborative process, but several of the subsequent essays follow this approach, including references to work by Belenky, *et al.* and Lunsford and Ede. In some cases these collaboration narratives cultivate well-tilled soil. Those essays that focus most heavily on what it is the writers do when they work together on a project do not offer much useful information that the reader can apply to his or her own collaborative experiences. However, there are several exceptions to this approach, among them the essay by Helen Cafferty and Jeanette Clausen (“What’s Feminist About it? Reflections on Collaboration in Editing and Writing”), who describe their experience editing a feminist journal together. Especially thought-provoking is their account of how they attempted “to negotiate the rocky ground between [their] commitment to feminist egalitarian politics and the theoretical sophistication that was increasingly becoming necessary for women doing feminist criticism to gain credibility within the profession” (92). They found a conflict arose between their need to encourage and publish junior or inexperienced feminist scholars and the call of the academy for theoretically informed and increasingly sophisticated scholarship of which neophyte feminists might not be aware. In “Collaborative Leadership: Feminist Possibility, Feminist Oxyoron,” Diane Lichtenstein and Virginia Powell raise a similar point in describing the strengths and weaknesses of co-chairing the Women’s Studies program at Beloit College: while they believed their administration was collaborative and inclusive, some members of the Women’s Studies Committee (with whom they ran the program) viewed their collaboration as collusion and their
manner as excluding. Even more important than pointing out potential contradictions in feminist philosophy, however, Lichtenstein and Powell offer an intriguing alternative model to the single-director/chair, generally considered the norm.

Another important dimension to this collection of essays is its refusal to ignore the dark side of collaboration. In particular, essays by Kimberly McCarthy and Sandra Steingraber ("Self-Connection Shared: Integrating Collaborative and Autonomous Impulses Within Feminist Projects") and by Mary Ann Leiby and Leslie Henson ("Common Ground, Difficult Terrain: Confronting Differences through Feminist Collaboration") explore the dangers of collaboration, the potential personal or institutional costs. McCarthy and Steingraber provide their experience as a model for a collaborative process that attempts to maintain the autonomy of the individuals working together. Leiby and Henson demonstrate how even individuals who outwardly appear to share many similarities can be very different and these differences require careful management, honest discussion, and sometimes extensive negotiation to achieve a successful outcome. However, these are not the only essays that address, sometimes indirectly, the hazards of collaboration within academic reward mechanisms. This volume is a fascinating and sometimes thought-provoking report on the recent proliferation of academics who are willing to risk hazards and challenges to gain the fulfillment and insight from successful collaborative projects. One curious factor, however, is that the editors' introduction and many of the essays, including those by literature scholars, largely ignore the extensive existing scholarship on collaboration in rhetoric and composition. There is one essay in the book written by a composition scholar (Sally Barr Ebest's "Going against Nature? Women's Resistance to Collaborative Learning"), and numerous references to Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede's Singular Texts/Plural Authors, but the references are removed from the context of composition research.

Readers of Composition Studies will find themselves on more familiar ground in the third volume, Situated Stories: Valuing Diversity in Composition Research edited by Emily Decker and Kathleen Geisler, which explores issues of difference in the writing classroom. According to the introduction, this collection grew directly out of the activism of feminist scholars in composition research who insisted upon viewing writing courses as more than mere service courses; Decker and Geisler argue that composition courses should be viewed as "sites for mutual negotiation, where people from all kinds of backgrounds meet head-on the dominant institutional values" (ix). This sentiment, expressed in the introduction, signals this volume's clear membership in the constituency calling (as do the writers in both Common Ground and Third Wave Agenda) for greater integration of diverse
perspectives in the university and college classroom and extending beyond to public and social discourse. Although this volume contains essays exploring the ways that personal or subjective characteristics like gender, race, class, ability, sexuality, and nationality or culture can influence the individual writer's composing process, this catalog of difference also obscures the range of other issues discussed by the writers—including questions about research methodology in composition studies and graduate student socialization, issues of evaluation of student work, and teacher and student response as a pedagogical strategy among many others. Despite the consideration of various issues of interest to the composition field at large, these essays are characterized by a somewhat more personal and narrative tone, for the most part, than the traditional academic article.

For example, in "Indiscretions: A Story of Investigating Gender and Literacy," Shirley K. Rose recounts her efforts to complete an extended research project about gender and literacy autobiographies as she collected more data, struggled to interpret the data, and then sought forums for publishing the findings of this project. The main point that she makes is how difficult it is to derive statistically significant insights from qualitative-type analyses of student literacy autobiographies because of the constant struggle to maintain and measure some kind of objective results. This essay highlights the tension in the field over descriptive studies about variables such as gender that are perceived as highly specialized and perhaps less rigorous than other subject matter one could study.

Another interesting essay in this collection is Helen Fox's "Getting It' When What Is Not Said Is the Most Important Data." She describes how international students can have difficulty excelling in American educational settings, especially in writing classes, because their own cultural practices (including writing or speaking conventions) may differ widely from those expected and assumed in the United States. Fox's case studies offer some compelling insights into how cultural assumptions shape the presentation of an argument and inhibit a given student's ability to present an argument to please an American academic. The range of samples used by Fox demonstrates that the gap can be quite large between the student's understanding of appropriate communication and the cultural expectation of the American professor. At the same time, it should be noted that there is extensive scholarship on intercultural communication, especially the concept of directness and indirectness, in business communication journals; some reference to this body of work would enable Fox to theorize her case studies more effectively than she has done in this essay.

However, my personal experience supports Fox's argument: when I began my doctoral studies at Ohio State University in 1989 I received professorial feedback requesting a clearer statement of the thesis and the main
points of my argument. It took me a while to reconcile the professor’s demands for directness with my learned style preferred by Canadian professors that the thesis of your essay not be stated clearly: the reader should be able to infer your thesis, but direct statement was considered gauche.

Other important contributions in Situated Stories include essays by Brenda Jo Brueggemann, Renee Moreno, and Constance Chapman. Brueggemann, in “They’ve Got the Power—They’re Hearing,” draws parallels between the uniqueness of the deaf students that she worked with at Gallaudet University and “many of our students [who] are bilingual, bicultural, even bicognitive” (41), and she argues that we, as teachers, must always resist the urge to “lump sum” our students, draw generalizations from a few individuals. While this point may seem obvious, Renee Moreno, in “Going for Broke: Valuing Differences in the Classroom,” and Constance Chapman in “The Morrises: A Study of One Family’s Writing,” both underscore in their case studies of elementary school-aged children that “lump summing” happens chillingly often. Both Moreno and Chapman argue that instructors who ignore the unique needs of individual students in their class generally doom the academic careers of many youngsters (often but not always) from less advantaged backgrounds who can start off enjoying school and showing high levels of academic promise, but who quickly find themselves unstimulated and turned off. Both Moreno and Chapman show us scenarios that set students up for what looks like guaranteed failure.

Obviously, the theme of how individual or personal context influences student performance in the classroom runs through many of the essays in this volume. In “The Unclaimed Self: Valuing Lesbian and Gay Diversity in the Writing Environment,” Pamela Olano argues for greater conscious reflection on what she calls the “politics of location” or “the multidimensional realities—gendered, racial, cultural, and sexual—of the students who experience [the teacher’s pedagogy].” She suggests that, consequently, writing teachers should consider how “lived experience affect[s] teaching and learning” (73), and they should try to develop a low-risk environment in the classroom so that students can write about those things they know and care about. It is clear that Olano’s advice fits well at any level of education that aims to foster the student’s interest and motivation.

Situated Stories contributes in important ways to the ongoing public conversation about the nature of contemporary society. The writers in this collection argue that the students’ individual contexts are critical in contributing to their scholastic success. Teachers should not, in fact, cannot ignore student differences; they should recognize the differences and develop curricula that fosters, even encourages difference and individual creativity. While many of us have already recognized the need for being inclusive and are, indeed, working to do this better, we might benefit from more concrete
suggestions about how to accomplish the recognition and encouragement of individual difference. Unfortunately, these writers do not provide detailed strategies or assignments that would enable our efforts. While the theory is clear and well developed, the practical applications are less pervasive.

However, Harriet Malinowitz has remedied this situation in Textual Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Students and the Making of Discourse Communities by providing models from her own teaching experience for developing lesbian and gay identity-based writing courses. In addition to the practical materials, Malinowitz also includes an impressive theoretical framework for the course work and a series of case studies that provide insight into how gay and lesbian students respond to course material that validates their existence and provides an opportunity for them to examine their identity.

In Part 1, Malinowitz describes her motivations for undertaking the research project that produced this study. She traces the subtle changes in the field of composition that paved the way for acceptance of scholarly study of identity politics in the writing classroom. In the second part, she explores how the traditional writing classroom that requires students to be self-revelatory posits a generic student with benign or at least homogeneous previous experience, and she shows how such assumptions force gay or lesbian students (and I would add many students who do not wish to reveal personal information) to abandon writing about topics that are personally significant. She also argues that contemporary school curricula generally reproduce heterosexuality in response to the demands of the mainstream. The critique that follows of the heterosexist assumptions underlying much conventional composition scholarship then paves the way for Malinowitz’s discussion of an alternate curriculum that not only acknowledges but focuses on lesbian and gay themes and that offers opportunities for students to write safely about subject matter that they find important. A later section of the book includes four fascinating case studies of student writers from the classes that Malinowitz taught in her lesbian and gay-themed writing courses. The book concludes with a series of practical and realistic suggestions for readers wanting to improve learning conditions for gay and lesbian students in their writing classes.

While the idea of a lesbian and gay identity-based writing course might strike many readers as a specialty outside their expertise, sympathy, or experience, the subject matter and Malinowitz’s treatment of it have a much wider application and interest than “lesbian and gay studies” or even “gender studies,” although the book is clearly of significance to both these groups. I came to Malinowitz’s text to learn more about how to make my writing classes a more useful place to lesbian or gay students who might enroll in them. I was particularly struck, however, by how much I had in common with the experiences recounted by Malinowitz and the students she taught and
studied. Students in my classes always assume that I am a middle-class, heterosexual, white, American female professor, but I am not. Being a Canadian who did not come to the United States until I was 31 years old, I do not necessarily share the historical background, the political assumptions, etc. of the students in my classes. I am always made uneasy about whether I should "come clean" that I'm a "foreigner" or keep quiet and "pass" as an American. If I do admit my foreign status, I am always at risk of the individual with whom I'm speaking or the class as a whole withdrawing slightly, becoming distant because I am not, after all, "like them." While this experience does not duplicate the physical harm that lesbian or gay individuals may risk in revealing their sexuality, it does involve a degree of exposure and the risk that the nature of our relationship will change for the worse. And it is a situation that I relive every quarter with different students. Other readers will no doubt find their own grounds upon which to connect with the group that Malinowitz discusses. For these reasons, I highly recommend Malinowitz's book as having much wider interest and appeal than readers not interested in lesbian and gay studies might think.

Interestingly enough, this last point brings us full circle, for it is by recognizing and acknowledging the differences among members of our rhetoric and composition community that we will begin to discover the areas in which we also share particular experiences, a process of identification that can lead to the kind of appreciation for each other that these scholars and teachers are calling for in their work in these volumes.

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