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Constructing a Male Feminist Pedagogy: Authority, Practice, and Authenticity in the Composition Classroom

WILLIAM BREEZE

Those of us who call ourselves feminists—teachers or otherwise—know well the stereotypical mainstream representations of feminism. Feminism has been blamed for a “loosening of moral values,” and for everything from sexual promiscuity to the “homosexual agenda” and high rates of divorce. These are some of the kinder epithets thrust at feminism. Pro-choice feminists are called “murderers”; lesbian feminists are denounced as “man-haters”; male feminists are considered to be emasculated and effeminate victims of the feminist movement (after all, only an “emasculated” man would embrace feminist ideas such as compassion, respect, acceptance, tolerance, and women’s equality). The success of such constructions of feminism is evident in the ways our students perceive the feminist movement—if not with outright hostility, often with sound-bite versions gleaned from the mainstream media.

To teach from a feminist perspective, then, is to face the challenge of presenting an alternative and more accurate view of feminism than students typically bring

to class. This reclamation of feminism is difficult for any teacher who does such work, but the male feminist faces particular challenges in the classroom, such as questions of authenticity and concerns over the appropriation of women’s knowledge. The following essay is a discussion of my own work of becoming a male feminist teacher in the face of conservative views of feminism as well as skepticism from female (and male) students. Here I will examine how authority (of knowledge) and authenticity (of experience) inform and impact the feminist practice of a male writing teacher. I concentrate here on a course I regularly teach at my university: English 306J, *Women and Writing*. *Women and Writing* is a junior-level course that is one of several offered to fulfill students’ composition requirement. The course is typically taken primarily by women, but there are often two or three men in the class. When I have taught *Women and Writing*, the course has been consistently experience-rich—a class where, more than any other, the challenges of feminist pedagogy and the complications of iden-

tity have been consistently at the forefront of my teaching. I am particularly interested in discussing my work in *Women and Writing* because of the lack of male-authored scholarship on feminist writing pedagogy. For instance, in Gesa E. Kirsch's *Feminism and Composition: A Critical Sourcebook*, only one section introduction was written by a man, Lance Massey, who also co-edited the text. And in *The Feminist Teacher Anthology*, a collection of essays from the first ten years of *Feminist Teacher*, only two male authors are represented among nineteen essays. *Feminism and Composition Studies: In Other Words*, edited by Susan C. Jarratt and Lynn Worsham, contains no work by a male author. Of course, there may be editorial preferences at work in the compiling of these important volumes, such as the necessary task of presenting female scholars and ideas that have otherwise been neglected by academic publishing.

What I fear has also led to this absence of male scholars is that feminism and feminist pedagogy are still too often seen as the realm of women only, particular sites for *women* to work against *male* dominance, rather than sites for a discourse that acknowledges the connection between feminist concerns and issues of race, class, and sexual orientation. In other words, the work of feminism necessitates the participation of a diverse population in order to end the oppression feminism addresses. Though my suggestion here may seem simplistic, the participation of male feminists in scholarly and research roles opens the possibility of men embracing the ideals of feminism. Of course, a charge of appropriation of the feminist movement by men could be leveled, but I would advocate an empha-

sis on participation by men in feminist scholarly work rather than a privileging of male feminist scholarship. My work with feminist composition pedagogy relies on two assumptions: first, that feminism is a movement that is, through a discourse on what are generally thought of as "women's issues," actually a vital force for dealing with inhumanity and oppression for all people. Secondly, my work assumes that there must be more scholarship that addresses issues of men's participation in the movement, both as feminists in general and as feminist teachers. The collection *Men in Feminism*, published in 1987, examines these assumptions. bell hooks, in *Feminism is for Everybody* and *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (in which she notes that "[f]eminism defined as a movement to end sexist oppression enables women and men, girls and boys, to participate equally in revolutionary struggle" [68]) also theorizes a place for men within the feminist movement. But other recent scholarship lacks the critical questioning of male feminism, especially in light of increased attacks on feminism in the media and in the political arena. What I see as a general gap in the understanding of feminism is the one between historical/theoretical feminism (what activists and scholars have done and said in all their various forms) and culturally-perceived feminism (how feminism is represented, often inaccurately, in the mainstream culture and how this misrepresentation undermines the power of the movement). The more specific gap I will deal with—one related to the misrepresentation I just mentioned—is the question of men's involvement in the feminist movement, in particular as feminist teachers. My research contends with what it means

to be a male feminist and what the implications of this are for teaching composition. I examine the kinds of issues we must contend with as male feminist teachers, especially in light of our own social and academic privilege. In other words, what must a male teacher do to be a careful and thoughtful feminist, and how can he contribute to his students' understanding of feminism? Because we cannot hope to eliminate unequal power relations by modeling unequal power relations, I suggest that the male feminist teacher must be willing to model vulnerability and tentativeness and must be willing to let go of authoritative posturing ("authoritative" in both the sense of a person in power and of a creator of art, knowledge, and experience).

But modeling vulnerability and tentativeness, as well as letting go of authoritative posturing, is a complex process for the male feminist teacher who emphasizes appeals to experience. In my teaching, I have found that students often view feminism from a particular perspective that promotes the conservative view of feminism I describe above and prohibits (or is suspicious of) the possibility of a man embracing feminism. Thus, the male feminist teacher may often face difficulty from students who feel he cannot, or should not, speak about women's issues, as well as students who believe a man cannot be a feminist. My own classroom failure to distinguish between speaking as a woman and speaking as a feminist—to adequately divest students of the assumptions I just mentioned—has led to a deep consideration of the ethical role of the male feminist and the complexity of drawing on the experiences of others in order to promote a feminist discourse.

Male Authority in the Composition Classroom

The Women and Writing course offered by my university has a reputation as a feminist course among students, and most come to class with preconceived notions of what the class will be and who will be teaching it. Typically, students are quite surprised that a man is teaching the course and equally surprised that a man would want to. The male feminist teacher is a problematic identity position. The man filling such a position is at once acting as an institutional authority on course content (or "knowledge") while being at the same time an outsider to that content and often an object of its critique. In the Women and Writing courses I have taught, I typically lead a feminist discussion before eighteen to twenty women and zero to two men. The authoritative nature of teaching suggests this may be problematic; as David Morgan points out, "[w]hen people make various statements about the world, they are simultaneously laying claim to the ownership of that knowledge, of their right to deploy or to use it on the occasion when it is being used" (103). The knowledge of feminism is, first and foremost, knowledge derived from women's experiences. The male feminist teacher can easily be suspected of trying to appropriate that knowledge for his own scholarly agenda. Jennifer Gore examines the problem of appropriation in *The Struggle for Pedagogies: Critical and Feminist Discourses as Regimes of Truth*. She suggests that although "'feminist' pedagogy is no doubt a strategic move away from those discourses that largely neglect gender oppression," the choice to name one's pedagogy "feminist" "should be made

reflexively, and with awareness of how the competitive impulse of academic culture can take precedence over espoused political commitments” (8). As a male teacher, then, it is necessary to recognize the ways in which one’s work with feminist pedagogy is closely tied to one’s competitive roles as teacher, researcher, and writer.

If three or more generations of *female* feminist teachers have only begun to scratch the surface of a deeply-imbedded and widely-accepted misogyny, might the male feminist teacher simply be a reiteration of the myth those feminists sought to dispel: that men are more capable than women of doing the work of the public sphere? Derek Stanovsky, in “Speaking as, Speaking for and Speaking with: The Pitfalls and Possibilities of Men Teaching Feminism,” examines “the possibility and/or desirability of men teaching feminism” by exploring “the tensions and pedagogical possibilities unique to a classroom setting where feminism in one of its many forms is the topic, the audience is primarily, or even exclusively, women, and the instructor is a man” (10). He does so by examining the three speech situations of his title: speaking as, speaking for, and speaking with. Stanovsky notes that his goal is “to uncover the specific pitfalls and possibilities that emerge when men engage in teaching feminism by looking closely at each of these contexts,” showing “how these problems and possibilities differ from those faced by women teaching feminism as well as how they are similar” (10). Of course, Stanovsky understands, as do other scholars such as Audre Lorde (*Sister Outsider*) and bell hooks (*Teaching to Transgress*), that the teaching of feminism by *anyone* must contend with differences in class, race, gender, and sexual orientation. For his work, as with my own,

the principal concerns are the issues that arise for male teachers of feminisms, feminist issues, and feminist texts.

By categorizing three possible discourse acts in which the teacher can engage—speaking as, speaking for, and speaking with—Stanovsky complicates the role of the male teacher within a more general feminist discourse. “Speaking as” suggests the teacher shares a common identity with his students within a specific discourse. Of course, this can hardly apply for the male instructor of female students. Although the male teacher may be able to “speak as” a man (also problematic) along with the men in his class, he cannot, and should not attempt to, speak as a woman. The dilemma of the male feminist teacher is one of ethos—where his authority lies in the feminist classroom. Often, one’s position of authority in the classroom comes from one’s ability to “speak as.” As a male teacher I can be expected to possess a great deal of authority when speaking to subjects that are seen as the realm of men or those seen as ideologically neutral. However, I can clearly not “speak as” a woman or as a member of a race or ethnicity to which I do not belong. Setting aside the problematic assumption that I can even “speak as” a white man, a position that assumes all white men are essentially the same, I am left with the question of how to negotiate my identity as it relates to the subject matter of the classroom.

Stanovsky examines another, still problematic, place from which the male feminist instructor might teach: the position of “speaking for.” In this speaking position the male instructor can transcend his gender in order to “speak for” women and feminist issues. Stanovsky suggests that, in “speaking for,” “[t]he assumption seems to be that if one’s own interests

are relevantly similar to those of the rest of the group, then these shared interests will enable one to more or less adequately represent and articulate the interests of other members of the group" (12). Thus, male or female, a person with an interest in feminist issues can speak for other group members with the same interests. In the classroom, the male instructor would be able to speak for the students, even when those students are all female (which, as I have mentioned, is sometimes the case in *Women and Writing*). In such a position the male teacher would "speak for" women, women's issues, and women's knowledge. Although I am concentrating here on the male teacher in the feminist classroom, it is fair to say that no individual with a particular identity can, or should, "speak for" those in the group with other identities.

"Speaking for" infantilizes the object of the discourse and suggests that greater authority lies with the teacher regardless of that teacher's identity. This can be just one more way for men to subsume the important intellectual work being done by women. I have worried at times that my own teaching of *Women and Writing* has kept the course out of the hands of the women in my department who could be teaching it. I have worried that my role as a male feminist teacher may appear a novelty. It is a tricky space: it is important for men to teach feminism, but in teaching feminism the male teacher may be keeping the female teacher from doing so as well. The discourse on the subject must take on a different dimension in which all the complications and contradictions are continually examined. In other words, the seeming paradox of a male feminist teacher must be open to inquiry; in fact, students must be *encouraged* to voice

the expectations and concerns they have toward their male teacher. Furthermore, the feminist classroom must be a place in which all members come to understand that no one of them can ideally "speak for" the others. In such a feminist space, room is made for both male students and teachers who have a sincere interest in embracing and furthering feminist inquiry.

The previous two speaking positions I have examined imply an authoritative hierarchy in which the teacher assumes the role of authentic and authoritative feminist. However, such a stance reinscribes the very discourses and practices feminism hopes to end. Although it is possible for a man to "speak as" a feminist, much care must be taken in that speech act to emphasize a participatory rather than an authoritative voice. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary that feminist pedagogy be non-hierarchical—that it not reinforce positions of authority and authenticity, especially when the teacher is a man. Stanovsky suggests that the act of "speaking with" is the ideal discourse position for the male feminist. Only here can the male teacher or student hope to get beyond typical positions of male authority, joining *with* women rather than attempting to speak *as* or *for* women. By "speaking with" his female students, the male teacher can begin to overcome the risk of appropriating women's knowledge and experiences by admitting to his participatory, rather than authoritative, role in examining that knowledge and those experiences.

Male Feminist Practice in the Composition Classroom

Explorations of personal experiences and their connection to larger societal phe-

nomenon are key components of feminist pedagogy. By understanding their own subject positions and then negotiating larger social discourses, students are asked to develop a critical framework for interpreting the world around them. Feminist pedagogy, according to Carolyn M. Shrewsbury, “strives to help student and teacher learn to think in new ways, especially ways that enhance the integrity and the wholeness of the person and person’s connections with others” (167). Shrewsbury’s definition clearly opens up classroom possibilities, leaving room for men (teachers *and* students) to become part of feminist pedagogies and to bear witness to experiences of their female students and peers. However, Carmen Luke points out a problem faced by the male feminist teacher in such a classroom: “[t]o expect that women students in the university, for instance, will readily reveal their personal cultural histories to a male academic, even when given equal opportunity and encouragement to ‘speak,’ grossly underestimates the sexual politics that structure classroom encounters” (37). Luke’s point here is crucial for male teachers; her concerns are real and her distrust of male teachers “giving” female students an opportunity to speak is understandable. Indeed, such issues arise in my classes, as demonstrated in my discussion of one student, Lisa, below. The challenge is to enact a transformative feminist pedagogy in which women and men alike confront the politics that Luke rightly abhors.

But explorations of personal experiences can be problematic. Although many students may feel comfortable dealing with personal experience in the classroom—and many of mine have shared much more than I had ever expected—some may at least question the male

instructor’s intentions when he assigns readings or writing that require a great deal of personal revelation. In such a case, maintaining the “speaking with” position is imperative. Failing to do so can result in awkward situations (at best) or in situations in which students have no basis for understanding why they are asked to do certain writing. For example, in one of the Women and Writing courses I taught, I assigned Eve Ensler’s *Vagina Monologues* as one of the texts for the course.¹ The course itself centered on five texts that offered the possibility for us to examine a number of (sometimes overlapping) themes. Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* revolves around a series of complex themes including colonialism, slavery, national and ethnic identity, and marriage and female mobility within restrictive cultural norms, all while retelling the story of *Jane Eyre*’s Bertha Mason. Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* looks at ethnic and national identity, gender expectations (including the pressure to marry and bear children), women’s health, and the negative consequences of colonization. Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body* examines gender stereotypes, normative sexuality, and women’s health. Riverbend’s *Baghdad Burning*, the print version of her blog (<http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/>), focuses on her experiences in Iraq during the Iraq War, offering a perspective on the war and subsequent occupation from the point-of-view of a young Iraqi woman. And, as I’ve noted, course texts included Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues*, a performance piece that deals with a large number of issues including sexuality, rape, incest, body image, and women’s health. The course writing assignments encouraged students to write in several genres on a large number of feminist

themes. Formal assignments encouraged students to write in more traditional academic forms while daily journals and informal writings offered students opportunities for personal reflection, exploratory response, and—with daily response journals—a great deal of collaborative writing. The purpose of these journals was three-fold: the journals allowed students to freely write their reactions to the texts, to read and respond to the ideas of their classmates, and to work through preliminary analyses of texts for the two formal papers. Through this process of reading and responding—both in writing and in class discussions—I expected students to further develop their critical and analytical writing abilities while contending with multiple views of feminism. Though my analysis later in this essay might suggest I focus on a “woman-as-victim” model of feminism, my approach and the texts I choose encourage recognizing not only that part of feminism that addresses violence and abuse but also broader feminist views often absent from mainstream depictions of feminism. Thus, the class also focuses on aspects of feminism such as those concerned with environmental and health issues, contemporary political action, and general issues that cut across gender lines. Although my personal impetus for embracing feminism (described in detail below) is based on my experiences with violence and abuse, my classroom goal is to encourage a wide-ranging view of the role feminism can play in our lives.

This was not the first time I had taught *The Vagina Monologues*. I had had great success in previous courses where students had enjoyed the book and had talked freely about its sometimes uncomfortable content. The vagina, of course, figures prominently in the text, though the

overarching theme might be more accurately described as a look into the lives of women. Thus, the book deals with being a woman through narratives centered on the vagina—from positive narratives such as those from women who have claimed their sexuality for themselves, to much darker narratives that focus on rape, abuse, and female genital mutilation. I took for granted, then, that my current class would deal with the text as openly as the previous class had, and I pushed the students even further than in the past by asking them to write their own vagina monologue. I had expected that students might engage the assignment in creative ways and from their own comfort level. In other words, I did not expect students to mimic the actual narratives in Enslar’s text. However, I failed to explain this distinction and I failed to “speak with” students about my reasons for assigning the writing.

Most students, including the men in the class, engaged the assignment with cautious openness, but when I began reading the collected papers that night I came to one I had not expected. We were halfway through the quarter at this point, and the class had gotten comfortable enough to allow their personalities to emerge. Lisa² had clearly been engaged in the course, and she contributed a great deal to discussions. She frequently took an almost antagonistic stance toward feminism. Interestingly, these kinds of stances typically come from very conservative students who feel threatened or challenged by the ideals of feminism. Lisa, I knew, described herself as liberal and opposed the feminist movement for very different reasons: she did not feel she should categorize herself or place herself within the woman-as-victim framework that she felt feminism encouraged. This resis-

tance to self-categorization was apparent early in the class when she responded to the entrance questionnaire on student identity. The first question students were asked to answer was “How do you define yourself socially (class, gender, race, sexual orientation) and politically (liberal, conservative, other)?” While most students responded willingly and thoroughly, Lisa simply wrote, “I don’t like to really label myself. But if pushed, I would say, I’m a ‘middle class’ ‘liberal’ female.” Not only did Lisa feel forced to describe herself (“if pushed”), but she also cloaked her answers in the quotation marks that indicate that the content within the marks may simply be a mirage. Lisa carried these attitudes into class discussion, not with hostility, but as a matter-of-fact aspect of her personal views. I should not have been surprised, then, by Lisa’s vagina monologue:

I can tell you right off the bat that I will not be writing about my vagina. There is nothing about my vagina that I want you to know. I can appreciate the idea that it’s supposed to be liberating but I’m pretty well liberated. My vagina is not a separate entity that deserves its own monologue any more than any part of me, for example, my pinky toe. The vagina is just one part of many, that serves a purpose like any part of me that serves a purpose. I don’t feel the need to give my vagina a voice. I have my own voice, all of me, that includes my hair, my eyes, my small intestines, my vagina, my pinky toe. I am not defined by my vagina. In other words, my vagina has no monologue, but I do. Me, the person, not the body part. By the way, this does not mean that I am afraid of my vagina, or that I’m not a strong, confident woman. I’m okay and

comfortable with who I am, which is why I don’t need a “vagina monologue” to liberate me. I mean, when you ask for a vagina monologue, what is it that you really want to know?

Looking back on Lisa’s response, what I find most interesting now is not what I had focused on at the time. I now see that, for a person who insists she “will not be writing about [her] vagina,” Lisa does a great deal of writing about her vagina. In fact, Lisa’s response was quite different from everyone else’s because she took a valid approach: she critiqued the idea that someone can be encapsulated in one aspect of herself. At the time, however, I was struck by the last sentence of Lisa’s monologue: “I mean, when you ask for a vagina monologue, what is it that you really want to know?”

I felt that Lisa might be implying that I had prurient reasons for asking students to write these monologues, and I was deeply troubled that I could have unintentionally made even a single student distrust my motives. Reflecting now, however, I realize that in this moment I had failed to “speak with” my students, leaving them to speculate about how the assignment fit with the course, and worse, how it connected to me, the teacher. I did not do the preliminary work necessary to show students a number of rhetorical possibilities for the assignment nor, more importantly, did I begin by positioning myself in the assignment and its content. In other words, I had not considered the implications my own position of power had for the assignment. My only effective solution was to address the assignment myself—to write my own vagina monologue that I could share with the class in the hope of expanding the idea of what it means to

engage in a feminist discourse. In other words, I had to make it clear that I was speaking with them, rather than for them. I wrote my own monologue and shared it with my students in the next class session:

Because she has a vagina my sister has suffered nearly thirty years of violence. Because she has a vagina, she has been beaten more times than she has been kissed. Because she has a vagina, she has come to visit with the rough, round scars of cigarette burns marking her thighs. The scars tell a horror story she keeps to herself. Because she has a vagina, she has borne the familiar traces of life with tyrants: swollen and disfigured lips, bruised eyes, bruised arms, bruised cheeks, bruised stomach, bruised breasts, broken legs and arms. Because she has a vagina, she has languished as the legal system has made excuses for why it is okay for a husband to beat a wife. She has watched as her son becomes his father—in the space of time most of us become dreamers, lovers, and scholars and fall into the arms of someone who nurtures, not tortures. Because she has a vagina, she has learned how vast shame can grow within the mind of the abused.

Because she has a vagina, my mother was raped as a child by trusted uncles. Because she has a vagina, she was swept up at the age of fourteen and tossed quickly into her role as faithful wife and mother. Because she has a vagina, she kept her mouth shut and did what she was told.

Maybe we're a much more "liberated" lot. Maybe we can say of my sister that she chose her life and could have changed it. And the same for my mother, perhaps. Or my grandmother who lived life at the end of a drunken fist. Maybe. But I doubt we can if we're honest.

Because I don't have a vagina, I take a stance. Call it intellectual. Call it emotional. Call it self-serving. Call it too political or too controversial. Call it, if you want, just plain weird. I teach a book about vaginas. But, of course, it's a bit bigger than that, isn't it? I teach a book about women. Women who have stories that show the best and worst we have to offer as human beings. I do not teach a book about vaginas or the women who talk about them because it is sexy or titillating. Or because it is comfortable. It is never comfortable. It is, above all else, frightening. The kind of frightening you feel in the pit of your stomach and that threatens to come roaring up through your throat. And perhaps there is no better reason to teach it.

Lisa's reaction to the original writing prompt was not explicitly shared by other students in the class—but I would wager many felt their own hesitations regarding the prompt. After all, there is usually little preparation in a student's academic life for reading a text like *The Vagina Monologues* with a group of people they barely know, let alone responding to it in a frank and open manner. However progressive our students may be, there is no denying the kind of discomfort Ensler's text can elicit (which, from my point of view, is one of the text's biggest virtues). Combine my absence of preparation with my male gender and it is clear that I was not in the ethical position to make the female students in the classroom comfortable with the feminist discourse that arises from *The Vagina Monologues*—a discourse of frank openness about female sexuality as well as male oppression. The men in the class were simply confused as to how they could write a monologue on a body part

they did not possess. The assignment, then, was poorly explained and not supported by an established ethical position. It was not until I asked the class to read my own monologue that I earned the right to “speak with” them on the subject. Until I fully engaged the feminist discourse I had asked of them, I was, at best, a confusing instructor and, at worst, a sexual predator. My ethical position in relation to my gender identity—that I was a concerned male teacher who wished to, as hooks suggests, “assume responsibility” for ending sexism (*Feminist Theory* 73)—had not been made clear, and when it was, the class no longer stayed silent; the subsequent conversation on *The Vagina Monologues* took on a number of important topics—including Lisa’s position that a woman is not merely defined by one particular body part.

But even though my own vagina monologue affected the class in positive ways, bringing to the forefront my own reasons for calling myself a “feminist” and for bringing feminist issues to the writing class, even in the writing of my experience I confront the complex ways that my roles as man, son, brother, teacher, and confessor can be interpreted. In my monologue I am certainly speaking as my mother’s son. I also claim here the role of brother. Both of these roles are grounded in my view of myself as a man and as outside of, but witness to, the experiences of my mother and sister. My awareness of, and concern for, the violence and sexism they face, as well as my desire to change such violence and sexism, can be seen as a return to the “speaking for” role that I had hoped to resist. My ethical position is once again complicated as I attempt to “speak with” students while “speaking for” victims of domestic violence and rape—victims who

themselves have no voice in either the dialogue or in the class. But here, I would suggest, I have begun to “speak as” a feminist and “speak with” Ensler’s and my students’ feminist texts. My monologue, however, makes this “speaking with” possible only because I make no claims of feeling the experiences of the women in my life in such a way that I am cast as an authority. Rather, I am an observer who, despite feeling pain for their suffering, can only relay their experiences through my own limited, though sympathetic, view. Thus, I can model feminism as participant rather than authority. “Speaking as” a feminist, then, leads to my ability to “speak with” other feminists (Ensler, some of my students, all those who inform my views) without appropriating feminism as my own. More specifically, in my monologue and the work I do with my class I am modeling resistance to typical masculine positions of power and authority. Students (including the men in the class) then become free to also “speak as” feminists “with” other feminists in the class and the assigned feminist texts.

I must accept, however, that my monologue can be viewed as relying on the woman-as-victim model of feminism that Lisa had resisted. The monologue does offer only a negative depiction of the lives of the female family members I discuss. This depiction could fairly lead to accusations that I myself subscribe to views that feminism is only necessary to discuss issues of violence and abuse. However, my monologue was not written to be a holistic view of feminism, but rather a confession of the origins of my feminist concerns. Like the students bell hooks discusses in “Feminist Thinking” who “talked about witnessing male abuse of women in families and communities and

seeing the struggle to end sexism as the only organized way to make changes,” my monologue functioned to indicate why I feel it necessary to promote a feminist perspective in my class (115). It is fair to say, then, that all three speaking positions that Stanovsky outlines and that I have discussed here can be interpreted differently from various perspectives. In other words, although some have read my monologue as an act of “speaking for,” others have read the same piece of writing as I had originally intended, as “speaking with.” However, both perspectives are valid and emphasize that, regardless of a speaker’s intention, his or her audience plays a crucial role in analyzing his or her speaking position.

It may be useful, then, to add “speaking from” and “speaking through” to the possible positions a male feminist teacher (or any teacher *and* student, for that matter) might inhabit. While still considering the speaker-oriented model Stanovsky presents, the speaker can also emphasize the role of feminist subject matter in determining his or her place in the discussion. “Speaking from” and “speaking through,” then, focus on subject matter rather than subject position, and draw attention to experiences with, and investments in, feminist discourse. This is not to suggest that we can, or want to, separate the subject from the Subject. Rather, I am suggesting that in light of differing views of how “speaking as, for, and with” are interpreted, attention must then be paid to the complicated ways in which we are all connected to the work of feminism. For instance, in “speaking from” his own experiences in a sexist culture, the male instructor can more easily admit his own complicity while also suggesting a possibility for moving toward non-sexist

views and behavior. Furthermore, when “speaking from,” the male instructor is able to reveal the ways in which sexism and violence affects the lives of women and men alike. “Speaking through” is the act of engaging a feminist discourse from multiple perspectives and from differing levels of experience. “Speaking through” feminism allows for multiple participants and varied viewpoints in feminist discussions, thus allowing all students—male and female, feminist and nonfeminist—to talk “through” the issues at hand and contribute to a greater understanding of feminism. So, for example, although I did not intend in my vagina monologue to “speak for” the women in my family, I did want to show that I (a *man*) had a vested interest in seeing feminist ideals promoted. This “speaking through” does not put me in a place of authority, but rather reveals me as one more person bound up in a culture of sexism and violence—one my students often feel does not exist or is not explicitly connected to their own experiences.

Male Feminist Authenticity in the Composition Classroom

When I began teaching *Women and Writing* I had fully expected that being male might impede the work of the class. I expected a number of reactions from the female students on a spectrum from comfortable to antagonistic, but also a general view that male feminists simply don’t exist. I have found, however, that constructing my role as a participant in a feminist discourse rather than an authority has helped me challenge students’ views of what feminism really is and has contributed to my own ongoing development as a feminist. Teaching always involves acting out a particular identity—what some call

a persona or a role—as a central feature of one’s pedagogy. Of course, a teacher does not have full control over how students will respond to his or her identity, but for the most part we are very aware of how our identities connect with our students and our subject matter. In my Women and Writing class I portray myself as an emerging and evolving feminist—an identity most of my students have never encountered in a male teacher. Revealing this aspect of myself by speaking *as* a feminist *with* the students in my class led to a greater degree of participation by students. I found that both male and female students—self-identified feminists and nonfeminists—engaged feminist texts in the class more critically.

Furthermore, students in Women and Writing, in their own texts, were willing to work through this evolving critical understanding of feminism. For instance, Lisa used her final paper for the class to examine her view of the successes and failures of assigned texts in terms of the texts’ representations of strong female identities:

Female identity issues have been a major vein running through our class this quarter. We have read five books that have been written by women, and discussed each of them at length. The books include *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *My Year of Meats*, *The Vagina Monologues*, *Written on the Body*, and *Baghdad Burning*. As a strong believer in the virtues of being a woman, I have found that most of the books lack what I consider to be a strong feminist voice. In that, I mean that they don’t convey a sense of women being equal to men in both mind and spirit, which is so desperately needed if we are to further the cause of women’s liberation and equality. The two books that I consider to be

the most effective at examining female identity in a positive way are *My Year of Meats*, and *Baghdad Burning*, and the least effective are *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and *The Vagina Monologues*. *Written on the Body* shall remain, for the purposes of this paper, neutral.

Ultimately, Lisa judges course texts on whether or not female identity is portrayed positively or negatively. Although my choice of readings was meant to represent a broad identity spectrum (with texts by white, Creole, Asian-American, Iraqi, and lesbian women) Lisa reads the texts through a more general lens concerned with the portrayal of positive female characters rather than victims. Although I would argue that Antoinette of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a positive reclamation of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, Lisa analyzes the texts from her own evolving feminist position, claiming:

While Jean Rhys made a valid attempt to give Jane Eyre’s [sic] Bertha a voice, and while the book is successful in offering up a portrait of women as significant beings with valid emotions and ideas, there is still an element of portraying women as weak. Annette and Antoinette both become the victims of their husband’s [sic] character flaws, and although the laws of that time period restricted their options, they certainly could have done more to stand up for themselves and avoid the madness that they eventually succumbed to.

Lisa’s analysis here is very much connected to her own assertion of herself as a strong, independent woman. Though she is careful to note cultural differences (“the laws of that time period restricted their options”) she still feels a feminist text must provide a positive alternative to a cul-

ture of misogyny. And of *The Vagina Monologues*, Lisa still maintains a skeptical stance: “*Vagina Monologues* on the other hand, focuses on so many stories that show women in roles of weakness, that I have a hard time considering it a successful feminist text.” Again, I cannot agree with Lisa’s assessment but I am happy that the class, and my modeling of the evolving feminist, provided a space for Lisa to explore her ideas and to take a stance quite opposed to my own and to authors (Rhys and Ensler) often regarded as feminist writers. Much as I am finding my way as a feminist teacher by engaging critically with feminist texts and issues, Lisa, too, indicates her own development through critical, textual analysis of feminism.

My intention in this essay is to suggest two things: that feminism has a crucial part to play in the political and social lives of our students, and that stereotypical depictions of feminism can be overcome in the composition classroom when particular attention is paid to the role the instructor’s identity plays in the classroom discourse. Specifically, it is crucial that the male feminist teacher make conspicuous the speaking position he inhabits in relation to the subject matter of the course and of feminism—thus revealing his own complicated relationship to issues of sexism, violence, and misogyny. Students too often carry assumptions of who is a true authority, who holds power, and how authority and power should be manifested in the classroom. I believe these student assumptions work against feminist goals and reiterate traditional power dynamics (especially in a time of increasing anti-feminist sentiment). The concerns of the feminist movement are still very real—from issues of violence toward women (and I

would argue, violence in general) to equality in the workplace—feminist teaching holds the possibility of more accurately guiding student understanding of the movement and its goals, thus reasserting the movement’s positive and necessary social goals in the face of conservative backlash. Second, I believe that feminist pedagogy encourages both female and male students to reevaluate their perspectives on gender relations within their own social spheres and draws attention to how they may be implicated in violent or sexist acts that demean themselves and others. An example here is the way the men in my classes begin reading *The Vagina Monologues* with skepticism but often end by observing their own acts of sexism as well as those they see in various contexts (television, movies, the local bar scene). The hope, then, is that this greater awareness results in more self-reflective conduct and even greater political engagement. As Cohee et al. suggest, feminist pedagogy is “oriented toward social transformation, consciousness-raising, and social activism, that is, the translation of thought into action” (3). Third, I believe that feminist teaching can lead to a broader view of authoritative knowledge within the academy. In other words, we might begin to incorporate nontraditional forms of knowledge-making and understanding—what Amie A. MacDonald calls the “epistemic influence of experiential learning” (112).

In the writing class, appealing to non-traditional forms of knowledge-making means not privileging agonistic writing genres or objectivity over subjectivity and personal experience. But MacDonald adds an important warning when she states: “I can no longer ground my pedagogy in the fundamental claims about the epistemic

privilege of oppressed people, since these claims cannot contend with the range and inherent complexity of people's identities" (112). Furthermore, such claims leave little possibility for "non-oppressed" people (such as a male teacher teaching about feminism) to engage in a critical discourse about oppression. As I have suggested in this essay, providing a space for privileging personal experience requires a nuanced approach to claiming particular identities and speaking positions. Too frequently we rely on easy binaries of "oppressed" and "oppressor" that reveal little of the complicated relationship any of us has with the issues we address. Thus, for instance, the original failure of my vagina monologue assignment was due, in part, to my failure to discuss my own relationship to the issues I hoped students would address. Students were left to imagine that, as a man, I might have only negative motives for such a writing assignment. But, when I began effectively modeling "speaking as" a feminist and "speaking with" the students in my class, as well as "speaking from" and "through" my own experiences as a witness to sexism and violence, both the female and male students became much more willing to discuss the relationship of feminism to their own lives in profound ways, and much more likely to view feminism as a positive and important movement.

NOTES

1. Enslar's work is not without its critics. For instance, in "'Taking Back the Campus': Right-Wing Feminism as the 'Middle Ground,'" Courtney Bailey examines "right-wing feminism's" backlash against the play. And Kim Q. Hall, in "Queerness, Disability, and *The Vagina Monologues*," looks at the way the play "reinscribes [. . .] systems of patriarchy, compulsory

heterosexuality, and ableism." Bailey's and Hall's essays are joined by a number of other critiques from conservative news and political journals. Others have addressed the play from a pedagogical standpoint. In "Why Would a Professor Have You Read That Book: *The Vagina Monologues* as a Teaching Text," Linda Chen looks at the pros and cons of teaching the text in her women's studies class. Chen illustrates several "concerns" she had had: the comfort level of the class early in the semester before students became familiar with one another; issues of safety and tolerance in the class; and the cultural background of the students in her class. Although Chen does not critique the play itself, as do Hall and Bailey, she does acknowledge the pedagogical consciousness needed when teaching the text.

2. Lisa's writing here is part of a larger qualitative project. I have replaced real names with pseudonyms, and students in the study granted permission for their work to be used in both my research and publications.

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