

Feminism and Cultural Studies in Composition: Locating Women and Men in College Writing Courses



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Introduction

I teach English courses (both writing and literature) at West Chester University of Pennsylvania (WCU), a public, regional state university about twenty-five miles west of Philadelphia where the majority of the students are middle-class, white, and conservative. My most challenging task as a feminist composition instructor is not teaching grammar, punctuation, or editing skills; instead, my most challenging task is to challenge students to think about and understand the powerful effects of rhetoric (spoken, written, and visual) on how humans think, speak, and interact with one another. After more than ten years of teaching college English courses, I have found that one of the most useful ways to frame my classroom discussions is to use the concept of *location*. Feminist geographers use this term (and also *space* and *place*) to discuss how gendered identity affects one's position within society, constituting a fluid, ongoing, social process that reflects power and knowledge struggles. {1} In fact, Susan Friedman argues that *location*, or the politics of identity within different spaces, is the primary concern of feminism because identities, as they develop, are narratives of formation moving through time and space. She also explains that feminism has shifted over the years from an earlier focus on "silence and invisibility" to this concern with *location* and "being and becoming" (3). Similarly, Doreen Massey describes "space-time as a configuration of social relations within which the specifically spatial may be conceived of as an inherently dynamic simultaneity. Moreover, since social relations are inevitably and everywhere imbued with power and meaning and symbolism, this view of the spatial is an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification" (3).

Besides being a fluid process inextricably linked to time and space, *location* is simultaneously physical (as constituted by one's body) and ideological (as constituted by the social beliefs about that particular body in terms of identity categories). Thus, one's physical body cannot be separated from ideas about—and meanings attached to—that body. As such, I first want students to understand that their identity categories (gender, race/ethnicity, social class, sexuality, education, age, disability, etc.) determine their *location* (physical/ideological position) in American culture, affecting their current and future access to privileges and opportunities. In addition, I want them to understand that the language they use to speak about themselves and others affects what they, and what other people, conceive of as reality. Finally, I want students to understand that the media reflects and reinforces—and sometimes even challenges—social beliefs and ideologies that may affect how people think, speak, and interact with one another. In the simplest terms, I want students to realize that *location* does matter; the place one occupies within our cultural hierarchy makes a difference in terms of how one is perceived by others, how one is represented in the media, and one's access to resources and privileges.

While I find it easier to introduce students to feminism theory by initially differentiating between sex (the biological category to which one belongs—usually *female* or *male*) and *gender* (the socially constructed meanings identified as either *feminine* or *masculine*), I subscribe to the postmodern notion that no core identity {2} exists prior to language and social influence; thus, identity is shaped by language practices and social conditioning. According to Judith Butler, identity and gender are "performative"; thus, "gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (*Gender Trouble* 25). She defines gender as the "repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (33). While arguing that human identity is constructed and that "all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat," Butler offers hope by asserting that agency "is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition" (145). This means that identifying the socially constructed nature of our performed and gendered identities provides an opportunity to subvert and challenge restrictive identities, a chance to gain agency and challenge the ideologies that influence the way we behave as females and males. Thus, while one cannot escape from a physical body, and one cannot ever completely escape from ideology, one can analyze and rethink one's *location* or physical/ideological position within culture, a position heavily invested with consequences. Thus, my major classroom goal involves teaching students (and getting them to teach me) how to consider the political effects of *location* on one's life and access to resources.

To accomplish my goal, I use a feminist cultural studies approach to composition. Because *cultural studies* and *feminism* are slippery terms that are defined in a variety of ways, I first offer my definition of each term and then explain my approach to writing instruction. I continue by offering my theoretical rationale for such an approach by addressing some of the arguments against it; then, I conclude with some brief pedagogical suggestions for incorporating it into composition courses. My primary purpose here is to persuade instructors unfamiliar with such an approach of its theoretical and pedagogical importance and implications.

What is *Feminism*?

Feminist is one of the most misunderstood words in the English language. When many Americans hear the word *feminist*, they automatically envision unattractive, butch man-haters who eschew many of our cherished cultural traditions: marriage, family, heterosexuality, monogamy, motherhood, and so on. One of the major goals of feminism is to eradicate negative and traditional stereotypes of women; thus, it's rather ironic that many people associate the term *feminist* with such a negative female stereotype. Part of the problem lies in the ongoing negative representations of feminists in the media. For example, in the early 1990s Rush Limbaugh coined the term "feminazis" and used the radio airwaves to incite mass disdain for feminists. By merging the words *feminists* and *Nazis*, Limbaugh equates feminists with one of the most feared and destructive groups in history.

Even popular mainstream publications continue to reinforce negative and damaging images of feminists. On its June 29, 1998 cover, *Time* magazine featured four disembodied faces against a black backdrop: Susan B. Anthony, Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, and Ally McBeal. Underneath McBeal's face the following question appeared in bright red letters: "Is Feminism Dead?" While the first three women are considered important forerunners of contemporary feminism, Ally McBeal (a television character played by Calista Flockhart) was the star of a popular show about the life of a slightly neurotic attorney. Using popular culture icons such as McBeal, Courtney Love, Bridget Jones, and the Spice Girls as evidence, Gina Bellafante—the author of *Time*'s featured article—contends that "much of feminism has devolved into the silly" (58). She argues that it has become a hedonistic enterprise represented by women more interested in sexual freedom, tight skirts, and proper make-up than in equal pay for equal work. In addition, Bellafante suggests that feminism at the end of the twenty-first century "seems to be an intellectual undertaking in which the complicated, often mundane issues of modern life get little attention and the narcissistic ramblings of a few media-anointed spokeswomen get far too much" (57).

What Bellafante chooses to ignore are the numerous feminist activists, theorists, academics, and others who continue to make political and social advances for women on an everyday basis. For example, she doesn't discuss the numerous shelters and support groups for battered women, the work being done to educate people about genital mutilation or female infanticide, the emotional and financial support given to women who are raped or sexually abused by their partners or family members, or any of the other worthwhile feminist projects currently being enacted. Besides ignoring the numerous feminist projects throughout the world, her main complaint seems to be that feminists (or at least the limited group that she identifies as feminists) are not doing what *she* wants them to do. Ironically, this aligns her with the narcissistic "media-appointed spokeswomen" that she derides in her article.

Although Bellafante uses a different tactic from Limbaugh to criticize feminism, the result is the same: feminism is maligned by being evaluated as either harmful or meaningless. The rhetoric employed by both Limbaugh and Bellafante, however, is not new; feminists and feminism have frequently been portrayed negatively in the media. What is disturbing about these two instances is that they illustrate how easily many people now accept damaging diatribes against feminism without even knowing what it is. Moreover, many people believe that women now receive the same treatment as men. While the plight of women has certainly improved in many parts of the world, women are subjected to many inequities on a daily basis. According to Joni Seager, women own only about one percent of the world's land, nearly sixty-six percent of all illiterate people in the world are women, and "an estimated 130 million girls and women have undergone genital mutilation; another two million each year join their ranks" (76, 74, 53). In the U.S., thirty-three percent of all women will fall victim to sexual assault, with a woman being raped nearly every minute of every day, and over fifty percent of women "will experience sexual harassment at some point during [their] academic or working life" (49, 53). Finally, for people who believe that the fight for equal wages is a thing of the past, each female worker in the U.S. earns on average only seventy-six cents for every dollar a male earns, and while this is an increase of seventeen cents from the 1970s, it is "still no cause for rejoicing" (Bellafante 58). These disturbing statistics clearly indicate that feminism is far from irrelevant, despite attempts in the media to caricature it and to portray its activists as passé. I should also mention that almost forty years have passed since Congress approved the Equal Pay Act in 1963 to ensure that women and men in the same job should be paid the same wage. How many decades will it take before females and males are paid comparable wages? Until statistics like those cited above

cease to exist, and as long as women, minorities, disabled people, the aged, the uneducated, and members of other disenfranchised groups (including working-class and non-white men) are subjected to unfair treatment, the feminist project will be and should be in existence.

Part of the solution to the problem of media misrepresentations of feminism, and of the tendency of many people either to dismiss or to deride feminism, lies in educating more people (both women and men) about unfair practices such as these and about the different ways that feminism is defined and practiced. {3} While feminism began as a political movement to gain equal rights for women, it has been expanded to include equal rights for *all* marginalized people (and includes a recognition and analysis of the ways in which men are harmed by restrictive gender roles). bell hooks in *Feminism is for Everybody* defines feminism as a “movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (1). While I agree that the elimination of sexism and sexist exploitation constitute two of the most important goals of feminisms, I choose to align myself with those who define *feminism* as follows: a movement that works to eradicate power inequities based on gender, race/ethnicity, social class, sexuality, education, age, disability, etc. I define feminism in this way because I believe that the feminist project should recognize *all* of these identity categories and the inequities and oppressions associated with each of them. This means that analyzing masculinity and males becomes just as important as analyzing femininity and females. This means that recognizing the power inequities associated with people of a different race, social class, or sexuality becomes just as important as identifying power imbalances associated with white, middle-class, heterosexuals.

Feminists definitely need more positive media press; however, in the meantime college English instructors are situated in an ideal environment in which to advance the feminist project. Because the college writing classroom is a site where instructors and students study the power of language to create, shape, or influence what we know as reality, it can serve as an ideal location to discuss feminist issues with regard to language, power, and identity. Furthermore, it offers instructors the opportunity to discuss two important concepts in feminism: socialization and gender.

Socialization and Gender

Humans are located within culture primarily by virtue of being conceived as gendered subjects. When a child is first born, the first question often asked is “Is it a boy or a girl?” While this question may appear innocuous at first, it actually has important implications for the future of that particular child. If the child is female, she will be clothed in pink and socialized to be feminine; if the child is male, he will be clothed in blue and socialized to be masculine. Thus, from the first moment when a child’s sex is identified, he or she is clothed in an identifying color (blue or pink) and enters into a lifelong training process of socialization that teaches him and her our society’s particular behavioral expectations with regard to gender. {4} So, from our first appearance in the world when our sex is determined by our genitalia, we are assigned to one of two binary biological categories—male or female—and “located” in culture as gendered participants and consumers. {5} Along with this assignment to a specific category comes a vast array of gendered expectations for our appearance and behavior. Through the course of a lifetime of socialization into the norms of our culture, we situate ourselves along a continuum of male/masculine and female/feminine behaviors. Even if we attempt to break traditional cultural stereotypes about gender by displaying characteristics traditionally identified as either masculine or feminine, we are—with few exceptions—constantly reminded by the media that males are supposed to be masculine and that females are supposed to be feminine.

Furthermore, our society has fairly rigid guidelines when it comes to delineating between proper standards for feminine and masculine behaviors. To conform to conventional standards of femininity, a female should be passive, nurturing, and compliant; to conform to conventional standards of masculinity, a male should be active, aggressive, and domineering. While traditional standards of masculinity and femininity have altered over the years, frequently females or males who stray from these conventional patterns often are labeled as somehow deviant and abnormal. For example, females who exhibit aggressive behaviors are frequently labeled “bitches”; males who display passive and nurturing tendencies are labeled as “sissies” or “wimps.” Frequently, these labels contain both sexist *and* homophobic overtones. For example, in July 2004 Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger incited public outcry with his accusation that Democratic lawmakers who failed to “have the guts” to admit that they represented special interest groups were “girlie men.” Besides insulting females by implying that being “girlie” or feminine is bad, Schwarzenegger “uses an image that is associated with gay men in an insulting way” by using a phrase from an old *Saturday Night Live* skit (“Schwarzenegger’s”). Thus, people who fail to exhibit traditional standards of “appropriate” masculine or feminine behavior often are accused of homosexuality. In addition, most females are socialized to be most concerned with their appearance, while most males are socialized to be most concerned about their actions. This occurs because females are largely defined by (and valued for) their appearance, while males are largely defined by (and valued for) their ability to successfully take action in (and achieve domination over) their environment. While these gendered expectations serve to locate people within culture and shape their own identity

and performance of that identity and the way they view other people, I believe that the composition classroom's focus on rhetorical analyses offers an ideal site for the interrogation of gender.

What is *Cultural Studies*?

Although it may be impossible to construct a singular definition of *cultural studies*, certain points of agreement and commonalities of practice distinguish the cultural studies project from other intellectual enterprises. In its most simplistic terms, cultural studies is the study of the everyday cultural beliefs, practices, and artifacts of a society. However, rather than simply replicating a form of cultural study performed by historians, anthropologists, or sociologists, cultural studies crosses multiple disciplinary borders and encompasses numerous disciplines: linguistics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, literary criticism, history, philosophy, musicology, and others. Also, the goals of cultural studies critique differ from those of other academic disciplines. Instead of simply practicing a modified form of literary criticism—by using cultural practices as texts—most cultural studies practitioners are concerned with interrogating power relations and instituting actual change. Thus, rather than being a traditional discipline, cultural studies can be seen as an intellectual exercise in critical thinking that takes as its objects of study—and seeks to interrogate—numerous diverse cultural forms: art, architecture, advertising, literature, music, film, television, theatre, dance, fashion, and so on. Cultural studies critics consider a culture—and its cultural formations—within its specific social, historical, and political context. This focus on context transforms cultural studies into both an intellectual and a pragmatic undertaking wherein a culture becomes both an “*object* of study and the *location* of political criticism and action” (Sarder and Van Loon 9). Carey Nelson, Paula Treichler, and Lawrence Grossberg contend that practitioners of cultural studies view themselves not simply as scholars providing an account of cultural change but as “politically engaged participants” (5). Being “politically engaged” means that critics study, critique, and also *participate* in cultural practices and the relationships between those practices and power imbalances within a given culture.

What Is a *Feminist Cultural Studies* Approach to Composition?

Clearly, both feminism and cultural studies are related projects in that both analyze and critique culture and consider the effects of ideologies on human interactions. As I define it, a *Feminist Cultural Studies* approach to composition teaches students how to become critical thinkers, readers, speakers, and writers who can analyze a variety of cultural “texts” (advertisements, films, literature, magazines, newspapers, television programs, videogames, websites, etc.) in terms of the intersecting cultural factors of gender, race/ethnicity, social class, sexuality, education, age, disability, etc. Even though I incorporate feminist analyses of popular culture into almost all of my courses, I am still surprised to discover that many—if not most—students initially are unaware that they have been socialized to act or perform a specific gendered role based on whether they are male or female. Most students view themselves as autonomous subjects who choose to act as they please, and they are surprised to learn that cultural beliefs about (and media representations of) gender influence what they think, say, and do—an idea that disrupts their notions of personal power and authority. However, gendered cultural expectations have ideological, social, and material effects on people's lives; therefore, as a feminist I feel compelled to incorporate these discussions into my courses.

Why Locate Feminism and Cultural Studies in a Composition Course?

Numerous critics have argued that the composition classroom is not the proper site for politically interested teachers to forward their personal agendas. However, this position ignores the political nature of *all* language and its ability to create reality (or realities). One of the most publicized incidents occurred in 1991 when Maxine Hairston, a writing teacher for twenty years and the former president of CCCC, reflected conservative opinion by opposing the teaching of “politically charged social issues” (specifically racism and sexism) in a first-year writing course at the University of Texas at Austin (B1). In her response to the situation at the University of Texas, Hairston unequivocally asserts that composition instructors should remain politically neutral in their classrooms instead of being “missionaries” who “define students as benighted beings who live in an oppressive culture from which they must be saved” (B3). Hairston's language may seem a bit excessive to describe the classroom politics of a course designed to investigate racism and sexism; however, it exemplifies the hyperbolic language often used by conservatives who have a fear of

and aversion to politically charged topics in college classrooms.

Recent trends in postmodern and poststructuralist thinking have led more and more scholars to agree that there's no such thing as a politically disinterested teacher. Richard Ohmann articulates this idea most succinctly:

The ways we teach have political consequences, or (a stronger version) enact a politics. There is no neutral pedagogy, any more than there can be politically neutral content. Those who profess to teach in the standard or natural way—to teach transparently—simply conceal from themselves and perhaps from their students the social relations (usually hierarchical) of their pedagogies; just as those who profess to teach objectively about economics or art mask the politics of their courses and of economics and art. (325)

Thus, Ohmann might suggest to Hairston that *any* composition course she taught would have political consequences, even if Hairston failed to admit and identify her course's politics. The title of this particular course at the University of Texas simply makes explicit what many socially aware teachers do in their classrooms—analyze inequities based on race and gender.

Hairston seems particularly concerned with this course because it explicitly identifies its “political” subject matter. However, it could be argued that an instructor's ideological (or political) position can be revealed as much by what topics she or he *avoids* as by what topics she or he *chooses* to foreground. For example, I know several instructors who only feature white male writers in their surveys of Great Western Literature. While these instructors would be offended if I were to suggest that they are reinforcing a racist and sexist literary canon, the politics of their course (and their beliefs about who writes “Great” literature) are made explicit by the authors they choose to avoid.

Furthermore, I believe that most teachers—whether they admit it or not—are attempting to persuade students. After all, the purpose of teaching is to help students to see, process, and synthesize new information. The problem lies in deluding oneself into thinking that keeping silent about one's beliefs suddenly makes a classroom an objective space. As Henry Giroux asserts, “educators frequently pride themselves on being professional, scientific and objective. Cultural studies challenges the ideological and political nature of such claims by arguing that teachers always work and speak within historically and socially determined relations of power” (230). Thus, there is no such thing as a disinterested teacher or a teacher without a personal agenda. While many instructors might assert that they are objective educators who hide their personal belief systems, a survey of successful students in their classes might quickly dispel this myth. Students are experts in discovering what an instructor wants and believes. Several weeks into a course many of them become quite adept at “reading” their instructor to discover what theoretical stances are acceptable, what to say and what not to say in classroom discussions, and what types of papers will be acceptable and what will be rejected. Clearly, students usually “read” us better than we read ourselves.

Some compositionists agree with Hairston that the writing classroom should simply focus on writing instruction, rather than conducting cultural critique and analyses. I've had colleagues suggest that a cultural studies approach to composition may force students to adopt the instructor's or the institution's ideological beliefs. However, if you believe as I do that all instructors attempt—either consciously or unconsciously—to persuade their students of certain positions, then the problem lies not in the subject matter (for example, feminist theory or cultural studies) but in the instructor's approach to conveying information and responding to students. Simply put, the subject matter is not the problem; it's the instructor's way of presenting that information to the class that potentially becomes problematic. Thus, I believe that the real issue is what an instructor chooses to do with his or her politics in the classroom in the way that knowledge is both revealed and constructed. Rather than using a banking model of education where knowledge and information are deposited into students' minds (and recalled for later test regurgitation), I support a Freirean-inspired form of critical pedagogy. Rather than being an authoritarian teacher who insists that students only see things *my way*, I insist that they challenge my ideas, disagree with me, and develop their own way of seeing, thinking, and being in the world. While I do not work to force students to adopt my position on issues, I do want them to be aware of a variety of stances on important issues. If instructors openly admit their position (while also admitting that *all* positions are socially constructed and open to interpretation), and if instructors make a conscious decision not to force students to adopt their beliefs, then I believe that the possibility exists for a classroom environment where important and useful cultural critique can occur and where differences in opinion can be voiced and explored. I'm not naïve enough to believe that having instructors openly admit their positions and invite students to challenge those positions will erase the power imbalance that exists between students and instructors. What I do believe is naïve is an instructor thinking that keeping his or her stance on an issue “secret” will suddenly transform the classroom into a fair and “objective” place where everyone's opinions are equal.

As for those who might think the debate has ended, a December 25, 2005 *New York Times* article by Michael Janofsky, “Professors' Politics Draw Lawmakers into the Fray,” illustrates the struggles within my state university system that have put “Pennsylvania in the middle of a national debate spurred by conservatives over whether public

universities are promoting largely liberal positions and discriminating against students who disagree with them” (Janofsky). While I’m the first to admit that a few professors silence students who have differing opinions, an event that occurred during my own education, I can’t help but believe—maybe because I’m an optimist—that most professors, especially those dedicated to academic freedom and critical thinking, listen to and support students who have different viewpoints.

In spite of the ongoing debates about whether cultural studies is a proper topic of study in the composition classroom, and in spite of Hairston’s and other critics’ refusal to admit that their classroom silence about politically charged issues reveals *their* own politics, increasing numbers of compositionists incorporate cultural studies and feminist critique into their classrooms. In fact, I believe that the composition classroom is the perfect site for such a theoretical and pedagogical focus for several reasons: (1) The writing classroom is where students learn about the power of language and the power *in* language. Here, they learn how to use discourse to accomplish various goals like persuasion and exposition. (2) Cultural studies has become an important influence on English studies by redefining the canon and highlighting how ideology works to fashion identity and define the way we think about the world. (3) Composition studies’ postmodern focus on a social epistemic analysis of rhetoric has highlighted how language socially, historically, and ideologically constructs what we know as “reality.” As Maureen Hourigan argues, “All language use is ‘interested’ and all language instruction is political” (77). Thus, the composition classroom is always already a site where discursive power relations should be critiqued (4). Joe Hardin describes one way to accomplish such a goal in his discussion of the “key challenges to critical pedagogy and the teaching of resistance” (5). As Hardin defines it, teaching resistance is a

critical activity that promotes resistance to the unconscious reification of ideological values as they are encountered in text, and as rhetorical production that is informed by a conscious understanding of the links between language and ideology, between rhetorical production and the inscription of values, and between linguistic and textual representation and power. (5)

Hardin also argues that this “ethical and necessary activity” has the potential to “offer students the power of rhetoric without endorsing a specific set of values, other than the view that language, discourse, and rhetoric are always interested and always value-laden” (5). He continues by explaining how teaching resistance can accomplish these goals “*if* it moves beyond the need to see itself as the emancipator of students and *if* it can encourage students to appropriate and use the rhetoric and conventions of academic and cultural discourses to inscribe their own values” (5). Thus, the purpose of teaching resistance or feminism or cultural studies is not to “save” students and teach them the “right” way to think; instead, the purpose is to show them how to analyze and use discourse effectively, and to consider how ideologies might affect them and others.

One of the main effects of such an approach is that students may learn to think critically about how they conceive of their own identity. Human identity is constructed through language and social relationships. Our self, our sense of humanness, and our identity are constructed through and within our relationships to other people and to language. The way that we talk about ourselves—the language that we use and the power of naming—acts to form what we call our identity. Thus, language and those cultural representations that serve rhetorically and visually to create our identity act as powerful shapers of how we, as humans, come to know our world, other people, and ourselves. For these reasons, I believe that the writing classroom provides an ideal site to read, analyze, discuss, and write about gendered (and raced and classed and so on) cultural representations and the ideologies underlying those representations. Ultimately, my goal is to encourage composition instructors to view college writing instruction as an opportunity to use cultural forms to engage students in verbal *and* visual language interpretation, analysis, and construction. By incorporating this analysis into writing classes, students may learn to critique ideological formations and potentially become empowered to rethink their *location* and refashion their own identities.

Another important reason to incorporate cultural studies (and especially popular culture) into writing classrooms is that it is a subject with which students are familiar. Students succeed when they write about subjects that engage their interest and that are familiar to them. The current generation of college students has been raised in an environment that inundates them with a multitude of media forms and images; thus, it becomes doubly important to engage them in critical analysis by reading and writing about the images that bombard them on a daily, and even hourly, basis. Today’s college classrooms are filled with culturally savvy consumers, savvy in that they carry cell phones, frequently communicate with text messaging and instant messaging, engage in Internet surfing, use pagers, and communicate with friends in other countries by email. Compared to the limited media access of previous generations, today’s students participate with some form of communication media throughout much of their waking hours. In addition to those activities mentioned above, they also watch television programs, read magazines, go to the movies, view advertisements, and listen to music. From the camcorder their parents used on the day of their birth to record images of their first movements to the digital cameras they now use to send e-pictures to their friends, the current generation has been surrounded by technology. As a group of consumers who are more technologically

knowledgeable than previous generations, they are increasingly targeted by advertisers. Thus, media critique in writing classrooms provides a perfect opportunity for them to analyze familiar and influential aspects of their everyday lives.

Now that I have addressed some of the arguments against injecting cultural studies and feminism (or any other political issue) into the college writing classroom, I want to explain the importance of using a specifically *feminist* cultural studies approach. Many cultural studies educators seek to transform students into democratic citizens who re-envision society as a space of equality for everyone, a noble project that I respect and support. However, by ignoring how patriarchy has shaped the political and social system that we call “democracy,” we ignore how gender plays a significant role in the type of “democracy” that certain people (both males and females) experience. For example, in our “democratic” society, a man has a much better chance than a woman of being elected president of the U.S. When you add in any of the other identity categories (such as race, social class, or sexuality), it becomes clear that “democracy” means different things to different people. For example, what are the chances that a black, middle-class, lesbian will be elected president? Clearly, membership in certain groups affects one’s opportunity for privileges in a democracy. And this is why I assert the importance of analyzing identity categories in effective cultural studies critique. While I’m not suggesting that every analysis must include *all* identity categories, at the very least gender analysis should be considered. By failing to consider the powerful influences of gender on *all* human behavior, we shortchange the possibilities for comprehensive critical analysis. Furthermore, by ignoring how other identity categories influence how people know, feel, and interact with one another, we limit our understanding of cultural influence.

Some feminist critics might argue that it’s unnecessary to analyze men’s situations in a patriarchal, sexist society that privileges males over females. Just because someone is a male doesn’t mean that other identity categories don’t affect his opportunities in our society. And while I agree that a certain group of men control most of the world’s power, privilege, and resources—white, heterosexual, educated, upper-middle class and upper class—an even larger group of men who do not fit into this category—non-white, uneducated, lower-class, middle-class, homosexual, and so on—do not enjoy this power. Even members of the dominant group are affected by gender expectations in that they are expected to get an education, obtain a well-paying job, support a family, and behave in an appropriately “masculine” fashion (control their emotions, behave rationally and logically, engage successfully in physical sports and activities, and so on). Members of this group who fail to conform to these standards are seen as defective, falling short of the mark, somehow less than “real” men. Thus, gender issues and expectations affect everyone and need to be an integral part of any cultural studies critique. Just as critical race theorists argue that white is also a color and that white people must acknowledge systemic racism in order for change to occur, so must feminism involve men and men’s issues, and move beyond a primary focus on the experiences of women.

As I see it, one of the most important aspects of a feminist cultural studies approach to writing instruction is a consideration of how some people enjoy more privileges than other people, especially unearned privileges. As articulated by Peggy McIntosh, unearned privileges are those cultural benefits that members of certain groups enjoy simply by virtue of belonging to that group. Thus, in our society where racist beliefs continue to circulate, I enjoy the unearned privileges attached to being a white person. These privileges are unearned because I did nothing to gain them. For example, as a white person I enjoy the unearned privilege of being able to buy a home in a neighborhood and not have my neighbors worry that property values will decline. Also, I can walk into any store and not immediately have store personnel worry that I may try to shoplift. In contrast, when I go car shopping, salespeople (more often than not, salesmen) assume that I possess little knowledge of cars and engines and address me in a manner quite different from how they might address a male customer. I admit that this example proves insignificant when compared to the racist encounters experienced by people of color on a daily basis. I offer it as a minor example of how privileges are often afforded to members of particular groups.

By incorporating a discussion of (and writing exercises about) unearned privileges in a writing classroom, I believe that instructors can work to transform students into critical thinkers *and* democratic citizens. In addition, instructors can learn to rethink how they might have access to certain privileges simply by virtue of membership in a certain group. By continuing to enjoy privileges accrued by virtue of participation in a certain group, and by ignoring the inequities that occur on a daily basis, I believe that we participate in and reinforce systems of domination and oppression. Thus, as a white, educated, middle-class, heterosexual woman, it is my job as a feminist to acknowledge the privileges that I enjoy by virtue of my membership in this group. It is my job as a feminist to discuss these issues with my students and help them to see new ways to think about themselves and others. And, it is my job as a feminist to listen to my students’ experiences and be constantly reflexive about how I reinforce (whether consciously or unconsciously) systems of power and domination. Also, whenever I see inequities occurring, it is my job as a feminist to speak out and address these unfair practices. Inequality will not be eradicated until everyone acknowledges their own participation in it, whether as subjugators, reinforcers, or silent participants. If we continue to accept the myth of the meritocracy—the idea that anyone can achieve anything in America by virtue of

hard work—we reinforce systems of domination and oppression. Simply put, certain groups of people have more privileges than others. A feminist cultural studies approach to writing instruction works to engage students with these issues and have them analyze and write organized and thoughtful prose. The primary purpose of this article has been to persuade readers of the theoretical necessity of using a feminist cultural studies approach to composition to analyze and critique *locution*; however, I would be remiss if I did not conclude with a brief discussion of pedagogical suggestions.

Some Pedagogical Suggestions

I've just finished the Fall 2005 semester in which I taught three different undergraduate writing courses: 1. *WRT204: Critical Writing: Analyzing Popular Culture* (a second-semester composition course), 2. *ENG200: Intermediate Composition; Femininity and Masculinity in Popular Culture* (a general education, writing-emphasis course), and 3. *LIT400: Rhetorics of Masculinities and Men's Studies* (a writing-emphasis senior literature seminar). While these three courses contained different student populations with a variety of abilities, my approach in all of them was similar in how I introduced students to important concepts.

After lots of false starts and attempts over many semesters, I finally feel that I've figured out a useful (and fairly effective) way to accomplish my classroom goals, though I admit that this process is ongoing and constantly under revision. We begin the semester by talking about rhetoric and its powerful effects. We talk about language use in general, and I teach students how to analyze a rhetorical situation (audience, purpose, context, and tone). Then, we move to a discussion of gender and stereotypes. We begin by making two lists on the board: 1. Masculine Stereotypes vs. 2. Feminine Stereotypes. Students generate a list in each category of traits traditionally associated with each gender and we discuss whether they think these traits are biological/and or cultural. This exercise gets them to start thinking about how some traits they may have thought of as biologically based could potentially be learned behaviors. I begin with the binary masculine/feminine so that we can later critique its numerous limitations. Then, I ask students to list as many different groups of people as they can. These student-generated lists usually include the following: Men, Women, Mothers, Fathers, Single parents, Handicapped people, Blacks, Whites, Native Americans, Hispanics, Asians, Old People, Teenagers, Children, Irish people, Italians, Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, Heterosexuals, High-Class people, Middle-class people, Low-Class people, Sorority "girls," Fraternity "boys," Northerners, Southerners, Jocks, Nerds, etc. Then, I divide students into groups, assign each group several categories, and ask them to generate a list of stereotypes based on representations they may have seen in movies, on television shows, in advertising, on websites, and so on. A few students initially feel slightly uncomfortable generating lists of stereotypes; however, I assure them that we are simply identifying media representations and are not identifying anyone or any group as actually fulfilling that stereotype. After I assure them of this, they relax and enjoy the exercise because I'm asking them about what they've seen in the media rather than for their personal opinion about a group of people. We list positive and negative stereotypes for all of the groups, and I circulate and talk to each group to see how their lists are progressing. Also, I've found that it helps to have people who belong to a certain group—say Italians, for example—list the stereotypes for their group. In fact, students usually volunteer to create the stereotypes list associated with their own group. I then use myself as an example to illustrate how ridiculous and limiting stereotypes are. As a white, middle-class, married, Southern, heterosexual, feminist, professor, and mother, I do have a husband, two children, and an SUV. I do have a Southern accent and say "ya'll" frequently, and I enjoy eating cornbread, grits, and black-eyed peas. However, I don't wear an apron and cook and clean house every day, and I also don't hate men, wear jackboots, or have a short, mannish haircut. I don't wear granny glasses or style my hair into an old-fashioned bun, and I don't speak in a high-class "professorial" tone with a pseudo-British accent. Instead, I like to wear make-up and lots of jewelry, and I care about fashion and the latest trends. I take taekwon do classes while my husband takes pottery classes, and I love to play videogames and read *Harry Potter* books with my sons. By using myself as an example, and by making fun of myself and of all of the stereotypes associated with the different groups to which I belong, I illustrate the limitations of negative media stereotypes on conceiving of oneself and of others. We then use this list of stereotypes to analyze every "text" that we consider throughout the rest of the semester, and students frequently comment that they are surprised to discover so many stereotypes in some many textual forms.

Then, I introduce students to a critical vocabulary list of terms that we will use throughout the semester. In my opinion, the most important term on this list is *ideology*, {6} so after providing a brief explanation of Louis Althusser's conception of the term, I simply define it as "commonly accepted social beliefs about what is 'good,' 'true,' or 'right.'" I ask students to list popular American ideologies, and they frequently include items such as the following: get a college degree, get a good job and makes lots of money, buy a nice car and a nice house, get married and have children, buy lots of expensive electronics, be patriotic, support President Bush, belong to a religion and go to church, be physically fit and attractive, etc. My purpose in discussing the concept of ideologies is to get them to

think about *why* they choose to believe in and support certain ideologies. Is it because someone (society, their parents, or even me) tells them to do these things? Then, we discuss how all of these ideologies reinforce how one conceives of his or her *location* in society.

After this introduction to analyzing a rhetorical situation, stereotypes, and critical vocabulary, we spend the rest of the semester reading a variety of “texts” and conducting these three types of analyses. I integrate written texts (scholarly articles, short stories, magazine and newspaper articles, and literature) with visual texts (magazine ads, television commercials, movies, television shows, video games, and cartoons). Whenever I find a magazine ad that I like, I make a transparency of it and add to my collection. Because many television commercials (especially the Super Bowl ads) are now available on the Internet for easy (and free) download, I’ve been saving them to my laptop and bringing them to class for viewing and discussion. In addition, I’ve found that showing movie trailers and videogame clips (also available for free on the Internet) offers an unparalleled opportunity to do analyses of visual rhetoric and its potential effect on audiences. For example, in the LIT400 class, we read Chuck Palahniuk’s novel, *Fight Club*, watched the movie trailer and selected scenes, and viewed the videogame trailer. Then, we talked about hypermasculinity, violence, consumerism, capitalism, identity, and reality. I also highly recommend the “Terry Tate: Office Linebacker” commercials to use in discussions of race, masculinity, violence, competition, and capitalism (“Reebok”). Students love these ads because of the outrageous humor employed and the way they offer a compelling critique of corporate America. In addition, the recent appearance of numerous female “superheroes” on both television and in the movies offers ample opportunity for discussing traditional and nontraditional femininity. I show clips from television shows featuring a female hero (*Dark Angel*, *Buffy*, *Xena*, *Witchblade*, and *Alias*) and clips from movies featuring female heroes (*Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, *Elektra*, *The Matrix*). Students also enjoy watching the opening scenes of the movies *Bad Boys*, *True Lies*, and *Maverick* to consider how male heroes are portrayed differently. Then, we discuss how these representations reinforce and smash stereotypes, and how these stereotypes might influence audiences and the way that people view themselves and others. At the end of the semester, my wish is that students leave my classes thinking about how the ideologies, stereotypes, and various media images might influence their own *location* in American culture and also the way they conceive of other people.

Conclusion

Males and females are located physically, ideologically, and rhetorically within the framework of culture and its gendered expectations; thus, location *does* matter. As this special journal issue illustrates, many compositionists have become interested in the various ways that the concept of *location* can be applied to writing theory and pedagogy. My discussion builds on the previous work of many feminists and compositionists, especially Adrienne Rich, Gesa Kirsch and Joy Ritchie, and Lisa Ede. In her 1984 groundbreaking essay, “Notes toward a Politics of Location,” Adrienne Rich calls for a recognition of the material body in theorizing. Instead of transcending one’s body, she suggests that feminists reclaim it and “reconnect our thinking and speaking with the body of this particular living human individual . . .” (213). This recognition results in a consideration of all of the elements (social, historical, political, and rhetorical) that constitute one’s location in culture at a particular time in a particular place. Building on the work of Rich and others, Kirsch and Ritchie’s 1995 essay, “Beyond the Personal: Theorizing a Politics of Location in Composition Research,” examines some of the difficulties of bringing a “politics of location” to composition research. As they persuasively argue

it is not enough to claim the personal and locate ourselves in our scholarship and research. . . .
Instead, we propose that composition researchers theorize their locations by examining their experiences as reflections of ideology and culture, by reinterpreting their own experiences through the eyes of others, and by recognizing their own split selves, their multiple and often unknowable identities.
(8)

Finally, Lisa Ede’s 2004 *Situating Composition: Composition Studies and the Politics of Location* organizes her discussion of the history, theory, and practice of writing instruction and instructors “around the spatial metaphors of *situating* composition and developing a politics of *location*,” in order to connect her discussion to “existing places,” including texts, textual practices, and her own experiences (16). In addition to considering composition’s *location*, she also considers her *location* within it as a scholar, teacher, and learner. While my discussion has focused on why and how composition instructors should use a feminist cultural studies approach to help students to realize *their* location within language, ideology, and culture, I also recognize that I am intricately involved in that process—subject to revision—as I search to locate myself in my classrooms as an effective feminist composition instructor. As such, I offer these suggestions as simply one possible way for instructors to make an analysis of *location* an integral, everyday part of classroom activities and discussions. As with any politically invested social space, the composition classroom offers an ideal site to make important advances in how people understand and

view themselves and their world. Also, we have an unparalleled opportunity to help students read, think, speak, and write about the powerful political effects of language, and to learn from them new ways to conceive of ourselves and the world. As we continue the struggle to move beyond our identity as a service course, we should search for different ways to integrate important theories of social transformation (such as feminism and cultural studies) into our writing classrooms. Then, and only then, can we truly call ourselves language experts.

Notes

1. See Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose's *Writing Women and Space: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies*, Mona Domosh and Joni Seager's *Putting Women in Place: Feminist Geographers Make Sense of the World*, Nancy Duncan's *Bodyspace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, Susan Stanford Friedman's *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*, Linda McDowell's *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies*, and Doreen Massey's *Space, Place, and Gender*. Also, I recommend Edward W. Soja's *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. ([Return to text.](#))
2. While I believe that "no core identity" exists prior to language and social influence," I do believe that biology—for example, hormones—affects females and males in different ways. However, I also believe that if females and males were socialized in exactly the same way, then we would see more differences between people than between the sexes. Thus, social influence trumps biology. ([Return to text.](#))
3. Another solution to the problem of feminism's "bad reputation" might be to create an alternative term. Because of its negative connotations in almost all walks of life—including the popular imagination and even in most areas of academia—I believe that we need a replacement for the term *feminist*. Because it begins with the letters FEM, many people—if not most—believe that it's *only* about—and for—women. While the term *feminist* (first coined in 1895) historically described a woman fighting for equal rights for women, many feminists—both female and male—now fight for equal rights for all marginalized peoples, no matter what their designation based on sex, race, class, ethnicity, age, disability, sexuality, and so on (Gamble 233). Moreover, masculinity studies has become an important addition to recent feminist work, further illustrating the need for a new term. If we really want to reach mass audiences, we need an alternative term free of negative cultural baggage. Unfortunately, I have no idea what term better describes the feminist project. Replacements such as *gender studies* or *identity studies* seem inadequate. ([Return to text.](#))
4. According to Marjorie Garber, prior to World War II "boys wore pink ('a stronger, more decided color,' according to the promotional literature of the time) while girls wore blue (understood to be 'delicate' and dainty)" (1). As Garber remarks, "Notice that it is the connotations of the colors, and not the perceptions of the genders, that has changed" (2). ([Return to text.](#))
5. While our society distinguishes between male and female, Anne Fausto-Sterling identifies five sexes. ([Return to text.](#))
6. Other important terms on this list include the following: *Rhetoric, Defamiliarization, Gender, Sex, Sexism, Gender Roles, Ideology, Socialization, Identity Categories, Patriarchy, Critical thinking, Culture, Cultural Forms or "Texts," Cultural Representations, Stereotypes, Prejudice, Discrimination, Categorical Violence, Myth of Meritocracy, Unmarked/Marked, Other, Essentialism, Social Constructionism, and Binary Thinking/Binary Oppositions*. ([Return to text.](#))

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