Sexism in Academic Styles of Learning

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In the fifth grade, I became empowered as a student. Until then, under the tutelage of Mrs. Kessler, Miss Sturgis, Miss Stout, Mrs. Montgomery, and Mrs. Levine, I had been a good student, but nevertheless a member of the “pack.” In the fifth grade, I distinguished myself, became recognized as “the smartest kid in the class,” played first base and batted third in the class softball lineup, and understood what it was to be singled out by the teacher for special privileges and class leadership. The teacher was Mr. Becker, a twenty-seven-year-old man who introduced sports and science into the curriculum—and for the first time in school, to me.

From then on, I paid attention to sports and science. I wanted to be a baseball player and then a physicist. Since I grew up to be skinny and weak, I gave up on joining Joe DiMaggio and decided that science was the place to be. In college, though, I began to feel that solving the conservation of momentum equations for ideal billiard balls moving on an ideal table was not interesting to me; but it still took a long time for me to admit that what I really wanted to do was read, write, talk, and teach. Over many years of earning a living as an English teacher, my sense of “real knowledge” also changed. My topic in this essay comes, in part, as a result of rethinking my having gone to an all-male “science” high school and to an all-male “science” college. It comes, in part, from trying to understand just what it was about science that seemed a little threatening to me. It also comes from my having identified this threat as something like the one posed by the gangs of male teenagers in motorcycle jackets who defined the territory in my childhood neighborhood in New York City. And it comes, finally, from learning that science is sustained by a society of men, for the disproportionate benefit of men, and at the disproportionate expense of women. In exploring this topic, I will try to say how and why the dominant styles of academic learning follow the traditions of scientific learning; to claim that discourse styles and classroom styles in the academy are affected, in far too great a degree, by values of classical sexism; and to suggest that these values are so deep—so ingrained in the general culture—that it is even difficult for well-meaning men and many women to detect that this is the case, much less lead us toward change.

The Ideology of Classical Sexism

In a book that is still being written, David F. Noble, a historian of
technology at Drexel University, claims that academic culture, and science in particular, has been defined as a “world without women” at least since the twelfth century. His work concentrates on connections between the evolution of the academy and the development of the Roman Catholic Church. He shows that women in the first millennium were relatively prominent in religious monasteries, often founding them. These “coed” monasteries of the seventh and eighth centuries gave way in the eleventh century to the all-male cathedral schools, out of which came the universities as we now know them. Noble discusses the political battle in the Church throughout the first millennium, a battle between those advocating celibacy and the ascetic life for religious leaders and those advocating marriage. In about the eleventh century, the ascetic “party” gained ascendancy, and, in virulent campaigns against women, terrorized married clerics into giving up their wives and excluded all women from religious authority. Noble claims that, subsequently, the main home of science and all other intellectual life in Catholic Europe was in the celibate Church. In Protestant England of the seventeenth century, the situation was not that different. As Noble reminds us, Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton (from all the evidence available) never had female partners, and Boyle was given to practicing his science on Sunday, as a form of worship. Noble says similar attitudes about excluding women from science can be attributed to Galileo, Van Leeuwenhoek, and Gregor Mendel. In general, Noble thinks, most of the history of modern science shows that the exclusion of women and the hatred of women were defining elements of scientific culture and society.

Noble’s narrative gives important support for what feminist thinkers today are coming to believe, namely, that science and intellectual life—all cultural activity, in fact, including the arts, even from classical antiquity and before—are marked not only by the exclusion of women but also by certain styles of thought, ways of reasoning, procedures for identifying problems, conventions of dealing with opposition, and prioritizing of subject matters, all of which have been appropriated by and have contributed back to the ideology of classical sexism: the belief that men as a class are superior to women as a class, and the readiness to sustain this belief through violence against other people. We probably will not find one man among those we know who agrees that this formulation represents his ideology, and I imagine that there is not one to whom it does not apply in one sense or another. I’m not saying this to be inflammatory, but to remember that even though we did not commit gang rape, participate in lynch mobs, or send people in freight trains to their deaths, we men have benefited from the sexist ideology of those who did commit these historic crimes.

Essentialization, Objectification, and Knowledge

One way to understand the emerging feminist critique of knowledge is to describe its use of language. The term feminist, for example, does not simply
mean "the women's point of view." It could mean this, but it also means "a point of view previously considered secondary." Even though feminist has a culturally implied reference to masculine, it has a communally implied reference to the idea that more than two genders exist and more than two genders ought to exist (communally implied within the feminist community through some feminists' opposition to the polarization of gender identity). This idea presents two challenges to speech conventions: that there are more than two genders and, simultaneously, that something exists and ought to exist. The view that only two genders exist derives from the traditional (masculine-endorsed) identity of sex and gender, from the traditional (masculine-endorsed) style of dichotomy and polarization, and from the related traditional convention of either/or thinking. This style of thinking has led (masculine) scholars to presuppose, and in some cases actually to claim, that "one gender must be dominant" and, thus, to justify retrospectively the history of masculine domination (as, for example, is done by the idea of the "great chain of being," a predominant idea of the Renaissance). This style also makes it seem absurd to claim that something is the case and ought to be the case at the same time. This absurdity is created by the axiomatic role of the traditional Aristotelian law of noncontradiction: "either A or not-A," which is one of the sources for both polarization and either/or thinking. From the very beginning, the feminist critique of knowledge challenges gender categories, the way categories in general are created, and the discourse styles that articulate these categories and practices.

The nonfeminist case of what light actually is also raised these and other questions about knowledge, particularly the issue of essentialization, the practice of settling on a single, unambiguous, "true" conception of phenomena and experience. At the beginning of this century, it was discovered that light could not be essentialized—that is, one could not decide that it was one and only one thing. Rather, it was either a wave or a particle. Scientists still are not happy with having to answer the question "What is light?" with "It depends," and most are still hoping for a "solution" to this problem. However, if either/or thinking were not the axiom, one might be happy with the "depends" character of light. Science has not stopped in its tracks because of this situation, and it is plausible that one could practice science quite well on a "depends" basis.

The logic of Plato, Aristotle, and Descartes necessarily essentializes the object of study, ideally through mathematical formulation. Many cognitive psychologists and artificial intelligence specialists also essentialize their object of study in this way, on the assumption that the "mind" is other than, separable from, and scientifically comprehensible independently of the body. For example, trying to conceive of a person without the categories "mind and body" or "soul and body"—perhaps thinking of someone as "could be many things in different contexts"—not only implies ethical hypocrisy but isn't "scientific." To be scientific is to essentialize the object of knowledge, to use
language that indicates a strong boundary between the knower and the known and a strong boundary between knowledge of something and the thing “in itself.” Even thinkers such as Husserl, who accepted the fact that science could no longer objectify the “known,” nevertheless tried to subjectivize the “thing in itself” and, in this way, to establish utterly certain ground—an absolute, eternal foundation—for scientific knowledge.

Feminists adduce political grounds for rejecting the project of essentialization and objectification. In her essay, “Feminism and Science” (1982), Evelyn Fox Keller says that feminists often find “objectivity being linked with autonomy and masculinity, and in turn, the goals of science with power and domination” (238). To illustrate these links, she cites Francis Bacon, who thought that science is “leading you to Nature with all her children to bind her to your service and make her your slave” by means that do not “merely exert a gentle guidance over nature’s course; they have the power to conquer and subdue her, to shake her to her foundations” (242). Historically, in the hands of men, objectification carried with it feelings and values of conquest and violence, particularly toward women. Thus, the feminist argument is this: because the ideology of male control of and violence toward females is already active and enacted in almost all social institutions—and has been for at least 8000 years, according to Gerda Lerner—the processes of knowing and the institutions of learning also reflect this ideology. Noble’s historical perspective seems to make it clear that the practice of science (as we now know it) actually required the gathering of men together and, in a sense, “ganging up on” Nature, a female figure, to establish domination and control. What appears to be an epistemological approach—objectivity—is historically and culturally related to masculine domination of and violence toward women.

If this view seems overstated, consider this question: are there ways to talk about knowing that are not governed by the vocabulary of domination and control? Consider predictability, for example. A theory is not considered “scientific” if it does not predict the behavior of phenomena. Is there any doubt that the need to predict is governed by the need to control? In biology and the social sciences, it is the “control group” that finally authorizes the “experimental group,” and those who reject psychoanalysis as a science do so because there cannot be “control groups” in the usual sense. Hierarchical thinking provides another example. Is there any doubt that knowledge hierarchies (such as the great chain of being or the Darwinian taxonomy) are sought in order to control new phenomena, and that often the hierarchies themselves are expected to “predict” the existence of new phenomena? (Like the search for the alleged “missing link” between simians and humans?) Although hierarchies have sometimes been benign (like the periodic table), is there any doubt that hierarchies we see daily in book ratings, university ratings, and hotel ratings, for example, are governed by considerations of wealth and power? We might each ask ourselves this
question in regard to our respective gender identity: “How important are ‘pecking orders’ to me?”

**Hierarchy in the Academic Disciplines**

The question of hierarchy applies to the social organization of the sciences as well as to the task of conceptualizing data and experience. There are “hard” sciences, “soft” sciences, and the humanities. If you doubt that these disciplines are hierarchically arranged, consider which set of sciences gets the most funding and which the least. Sandra Harding takes up this question in her book, *The Science Question in Feminism* (1986):

For the Vienna Circle, the [hierarchically arranged] sciences . . . placed physics at its pinnacle, followed by the other physical sciences, then the more quantitative and “positive” social sciences (economics and behaviorist psychology were their models) leading the “softer” and qualitatively focused ones (anthropology, sociology, history). The feminist criticisms and reconstructive proposals appear also to assert a unity of science but to reverse the order of the continuum. And this thesis is asserted both as a description of what in fact is the case in the sciences and as a prescription for how the sciences should be ordered. It has been and should be moral and political beliefs that direct the development of both the intellectual and social structures of science. The problematics, concepts, theories, methodologies, interpretations of experiments, and uses have been and should be selected with moral and political goals in mind, not merely cognitive ones. (249-50)

Harding wants to see some reversals. Just as she reverses the traditional issue of “the woman question in science” to “the science question in feminism” in the title of her book, she advocates reversing today’s hierarchy in academic subjects. None of these values in question (objectivity, mathematical formulation) are themselves necessarily masculine but have only been historically appropriated by a combined masculine ideology and social arrangement. Therefore, I will not dispute the value of hierarchical thinking by itself but concentrate on the newer and subtler strain in Harding’s thought—her use of the “has been and should be” perspective on the social arrangement of the sciences (the same formulation I earlier applied to the question of the number of genders). I want to show not only that this is not an absurd principle but also that it is one covertly in use in the traditional practice of science, where it is suppressed in the service of other values.

Harding’s point is that moral and political values have created the current hierarchical arrangement of the sciences. As Noble’s work suggests, masculine interests produced the primacy of physics and other sciences most dependent on prediction, control, and detached objectivity. Harding substitutes her politics as the ground for a different objectification of things, an act that reverses the order of the hierarchy. What then is the net change in perspective that permits this “has been and should be” reasoning? It is the announcement of values—in contrast to the declaration of facts—that marks the difference between Harding and traditional thinkers. The same change
describes the application of this kind of reasoning to the issues of how many
genders there are. If gender is socially constructed and not biologically
determined, then it would be correct to say that there have always been
several genders—gay-male, lesbian, asexual, bisexual, variations of these, and
the two traditional ones. To say that there “should be” these genders is really
to say that the politics that recognizes and announces more than two genders
“should be” our politics in the future. Here, too, the net change in perspec­tive is the announcement of values, which comes as part of the change in values advocated by feminism. It is clear that the key substantive change in
how things are done by feminists is one of political disclosure. But this
disclosure changes almost everything—from the way money is spent, to the
definition of problems, to the language used to present knowledge. Nothing
in the feminist critique of science rejects mathematics, physics, or chemistry
as valuable enterprises. What it does reject is the concealed sexism that has
historically supported these enterprises. Sexism, either concealed or open,
has censored the language and thought of women. In these instances where
censorship has been removed, we can see how much other change must take
place.

**Feminist Revisions of Scientific Knowledge**

Let me now describe one example from biology and one from physics to
show how great such changes might be. Consider the biological concept of
an autonomous system—like the circulatory system or the endocrine system,
both isolated by the medical profession as “specialties” whose practitioners
refuse to be any other sort of doctor than what is named by their specialty. In
an essay published in 1989, Ruth Berman describes Barbara McClintock's
early work in cell biology, for which McClintock was finally recognized as a
Nobel laureate:

> In contrast to today's molecular biologists, far removed from living organisms other than bacteria and viruses and with little understanding of how they grow, McClintock's knowledge of the biological world is immense. She sees living systems not as linear progressions of molecular reactions enclosed in semipermeable sacs but as unique living beings in the process of constant development. Each genome, or hereditary system of the organism, is in continuous, organized interaction with the external stimuli and is itself changed in this process. The genome responds in an orderly, programmed sequence to the frequently encountered stimuli. Unanticipated shocks, however, induce a more profound and unpredictable genomic reaction, one that affects its structural organization as well as its action. But the process is not random, and the response, although complex, is incorporated and integrated with the development of the organism. (249)

Berman contrasts this conception of the “interactive” gene with the more
current view of it as mechanical:

> The machine metaphor is, in fact, at the heart of present-day biological dualism and the gene-environment dichotomy, with the fixed-in-place-before-birth gene being given
causal primacy. This biological determinist, or "hard-wired," rationale has been used since the beginning of western civilization to blame the problems of the individual on her or his inherent nature and to absolve the social system from all responsibility, denying the need for change. It serves to justify the rule of a "naturally superior" power elite—and the science that serves it. (251)

As Keller explains, the usual conception of the cell hinges on a "master molecule" (the DNA in the gene) that governs or causes the behavior of the rest of the cell. This conception is generated by the "machine metaphor" that Berman describes, a metaphor casting the master molecule in the position of a "power elite" that determines what is then understood as caused, passive, or secondary cell behavior. In addition to the "master molecule" metaphor, there is the "hard-wired" figure, probably a contribution from today's hegemony of computer science (another male-dominated discipline) over other kinds of intellectual work. McClintock's conception is nonhierarchical in that she conceives the gene (and its DNA) as one part of an interactive system, each element of which is subject to change and development from unpredictable sources. Keller writes: "No longer is a master control to be found in a single component of the cell; rather, control resides in the complex interactions of the entire system" ("Feminism" 245). Although McClintock's idea is an authentic scientific alternative, it is not just that, according to Keller: it represents a whole different approach to nature and to thinking about it, one, perhaps, in which respect for its total integrity plays a key role, and where knowing about it means letting it be our teacher rather than our slave.

In *Reflections on Gender and Science* (1985), Keller discusses the epistemological problems raised by quantum mechanics:

Experience demonstrates the failure of the classical dichotomy; subject and object are inevitably, however subtly, intertwined. So far so good. The difficulties arise in the tendency to overestimate our capacity to describe that interaction. That is, if we are unwilling to acknowledge aspects of reality not contained in the theoretical description, it is the system itself, for example, the electron, which must bend, twist, or collapse in response to our observation. Such a system cannot be a classical particle; classical particles are not "spread out," nor do they "collapse." We give up the classical picture but impose on reality the picture of our theoretical description, saying, implicitly, that the system is this peculiar object, the wave function. In short, the subject-object dichotomy is relinquished, but the attachment to a one-to-one correspondence between reality and theory is not. In these interpretations, belief in the "knowability" of nature is retained at the expense of its "objectifiability." Reality then, of necessity, takes on rather bizarre properties in this effort to make it conform to theory, leaving very few content. (146-47)

Keller describes how quantum mechanics has forced scientists to abandon belief in the "classical particle"—an electron that has some essential being or character. But what scientists have done, she argues, is what Husserl also tried to do: retain the belief in "certain knowledge" by believing that the
theoretical description must correspond to the reality—an absurdity if Keller's description is accepted. One can't give up a rigid boundary between subject and object without also giving up the exact correspondence between theory and experience. As Keller puts it, neither objectifiability nor knowability can any longer be absolute, axiomatic standards of scientific knowledge. They are not rejected, but they are no longer the only validation of the "scientifically" true.

If objectifiability and knowability are no longer rigid standards, then neither can predictability and control be considered so. All four principles come under the uncertain, unpredictable, variable regulation of affective, social, and political principles, which themselves exemplify the reduced rigidity of the first four principles. Admitting that affective, social, and political principles are and ought to be behind the initiatives of science means that human, collective choices are made about what to objectify, what to predict, what to control, and what to know. Reasons are given for such choices, and a logic of social benefits and dangers is attached to these reasons. For example, it is no longer unquestioned that gene-splicing should proceed because we should learn all we can; rather, some gene-splicing should be done because a particular constituency, say, AIDS victims, seems likely to benefit. Similarly, to proceed into space research just because it seems exciting may be quite objectionable given the needs of those that are not being met because of its costs. The desire to find an "ultimate" particle, or to determine just when the universe began, may be motivated by religious ideology and the masculine obsession with origins rather than by authentic scientific needs to know. (Would anyone like to present a gendered reading of scientists' search for the "Big Bang"?)

Sexism in the Social Sciences: A Case from Anthropology

In the social sciences, anthropology may seem exempt from this critique. Women have been prominent in this field for a long time, and its subject matter seems to be intrinsically egalitarian—the respectful disclosure of how other people live. But this exemption is historically not the case, and it is not the case today even in the most progressive contexts, including ethnography and ethnographic writing. A popular book in this area is James Clifford and George Marcus' Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography (1986). Although this work explores social and political aspects of ethnography, only one of the nine contributors is female, and one of the editors (Clifford) writes in the introduction that "feminist ethnography... has not produced either unconventional forms of writing or a developed reflection on ethnographic textuality as such" (21). In a recent issue of Signs, two feminist anthropologists and one literary scholar answer Clifford and Marcus on this and several other, more far-ranging issues. Frances Mascia-Lees, Patricia Sharpe (the literary scholar), and Colleen Ballerino Cohen note that Clifford himself uses a feminist ethnography (Marjorie Shostak’s Nisa: The
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Life and Works of a !Kung Woman) as the centerpiece of his own contribution to the volume, and they observe that Clifford "prefers to write about feminists rather than inviting them to write for themselves" (13). Also, they cite several feminist anthropologists who took up issues addressed in Writing Culture long before the authors anthologized there took them up.

However, the main point of the critique by Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, and Cohen is to raise a key political issue about ethnographic research, an issue that the male editors and authors of Writing Culture do not see or do not seem to consider germane to their work: the view that the ethnographic researcher always occupies a position of political dominance over the subjects of the research. Citing Judith Stacey, another ethnographer, Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, and Cohen point out that subjects of ethnographies are "at grave risk of manipulation and betrayal by the ethnographer" and that "the research product is ultimately that of the researcher, however modified or influenced by the informants" (21). Furthermore, the use of this product—almost always a text—pertains more to the political community of anthropologists than to the communal welfare of those being studied. The authors cite P. Steven Sangren's observation that "whatever 'authority' is created in a text has its most direct social effect not in the world of political and economic domination of the Third World by colonial and neocolonial powers, but rather in the academic institutions in which such authors participate" (16).

Those who take the academic system for granted will find it hard to cope with this criticism. After all, how much are researchers and professors actually expected to do in the real world? This is the nub of the matter. The academy is socially and politically insulated from the subjects of its study—and this is true in every subject from science to literature. Academics are not finally expected to enact their work or even to produce work for whose social, political, and practical consequences they themselves are responsible. So rigid is the boundary that insulates academic research from everything else that most academics don't even consider themselves responsible for whether their research could or should be taught. In most universities, teaching and research are separate categories, as every tenure candidate well knows.

Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, and Cohen concentrate on the issue of postmodernism and the claims by many academic social scientists and humanists that postmodern attention to language, style, and textuality represents a move toward political enlightenment. They claim, however, that academic work done in the name of postmodernism shows no change in how academic business is conducted. They write (quoting cultural critic Craig Owens): "The absence of discussions of sexual difference in writings about postmodernism, as well as the fact that few women have engaged in the modernism/postmodernism debate, suggest that postmodernism may be another masculine invention engineered to exclude women" (17). As a case in point, Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, and Cohen examine Paul Rabinow's essay in the Writing Culture volume, an essay that "appears to deal seriously with femi-
nism.” They observe, however, that by creating a new ethical position for anthropologists—“critical cosmopolitanism”—and claiming that “we are all cosmopolitans,” Rabinow concludes that “feminism is not an intellectual position he personally can hold” and thus “excludes himself from the feminist dialogue solely because he is male” (18). They then claim that Rabinow’s choice of studying “elite French male colonial officials” puts him in the position of rendering “gender differences irrelevant” and of “reinforcing the Western male as the norm.” They point out that Rabinow’s earlier work “relied exclusively on male informants, presenting women only marginally and as objects of his sexual desire, communicating through ‘the unambiguity of gesture’” (19).

I think the point here is not that Rabinow’s work is invalid, but that the elaborate verbal acrobatics he uses to justify his own work on male populations betray a concealed lack of political courage, a stubborn refusal to internalize and make his own his professed sympathy with the feminist program. His moves are characteristically academic: “I’m for the enfranchisement of women, but I won’t accept their categories of thought—because of academic freedom.” Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, and Cohen conclude with these thoughts:

Ultimately, the postmodern focus on style and form, regardless of its sophistication, directs our attention away from the fact that ethnography is more than “writing it up” . . . . Politically sensitive anthropologists should not be satisfied with exposing power relations in the ethnographic text . . . but rather should work to overcome these relations. . . . Anthropologists may be better able to overcome these power relations by framing research questions according to the desires of the oppressed group, by choosing to do work that “others” want and need, by being clear for whom they are writing, and by adopting a feminist political framework that is suspicious of relationships with “others” that do not include a close and honest scrutiny of the motivations for research. (33)

Using the postmodernist interest in textuality as their jumping-off point, the authors here describe what it would be to change the axioms of academic work: to orient this work according to the needs of the (oppressed) group that is being studied. To extend this principle is to adopt the idea of socially generous research in all fields, that is, research that self-consciously contributes to a social constituency that it can help, enable, or empower. This means examining why we are doing research to begin with, who we are actually writing for, and how we are going to learn from our students instead of enslaving them, just as scientists will learn from nature without enslaving it.

**Competition and Individualism in the Humanities**

These principles apply to us in the “English business” in the same way that they apply in the physical and social sciences. Some in language and literature disciplines (including, in part, history and philosophy) have celebrated the arrival of the “postmodern” textualist perspective as the key to
liberating the subject of writing. Just as anthropologists have become self-conscious writers, so have historians and literary critics. The academic character of these fields, however, has not changed in the senses that Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, and Cohen advocate. Justifications for these authors' suspicions of postmodernist discourse can be found in the discourse styles of the humanities and the retrograde teaching styles in the great majority of humanities classrooms. For example, in the December 1989 issue of College English, James Reither and Douglas Vipond encouragingly describe a way to have students learn to work with one another—by normal measures, theirs is a progressive essay. In an early paragraph, they observe that one reason why collaborative work in classrooms has not succeeded more fully is that the term social is being used to describe language and literacy:

Theorists have advanced so many competing notions of the social in writing and knowing that the term's ambiguity is perhaps unresolvable. . . . Calling writing a social process specifies too little about what kinds of social acts people are engaging in as they write. Saying that writing is a social process does not tell us much at all about what people do when they write or about what students might do to learn to write. Saying that writing is a social process does not specify what writers need to know in order to write. Thus, because the term social implicates too little by way of concrete activity, the generally theoretical discussion in the literature has not helped us see ways to overhaul our thinking about writing in practice or of teaching writing in practice.

We find it more helpful to think of writing (and knowing) not as social but, more specifically, as collaborative. Instead of asking, "In what ways is writing a social process?" we ask, "In what ways are writers collaborating with others when they write?"

I'm calling attention here to the habit of adversarial reasoning in scholarly work, and, also to Reither and Vipond's presupposition that the many theories about the social character of language must be "competing."

Will the history of science make as much or more sense if we do not assume that multiple theories are "competing" to become the main theory? According to Ludwik Fleck and Thomas Kuhn, we do not need the "competing theory" theory at all. Science has proceeded developmentally rather than dialectically. Both "new" scientific facts and new ways of understanding evolve through a combination of factors, including experimental data, the social arrangement of scientists, religious and political values, historical accident, and immediate needs. Why then is there both the historical illusion of competition as well as routine assumption of it in an essay about classroom writing published in 1989? Why don't Reither and Vipond just say that they would like to reflect on social views of language by considering its implication of collaboration?

Clearly, they use the idea of "competing notions" for the same reason that they present their "collaborative writing" experience in oppositional vocabulary: that is the ways scholarly work is done. In order to justify new work on a topic, graduate students are trained—some would say "forced"—to
review the literature and say why it is inadequate; new work can only be done if others have "failed to note" it. Alternatively, new work is done assuming that there is one whole truth and that various scholars are busy assembling all the pieces. Therefore, scholarship in the humanities assumes either that one worker will "win" the truth competition or that several workers will assemble the one whole truth. What is hard to find is scholarship that is clearly responsive to socially and politically grounded needs for understanding, scholarship that does not seem to be participating in either the truth or power sweepstakes. The ethics of competition and individualism are the guiding ideology of scholarship in the humanities, even work that many of us would consider politically progressive.

Where shall we look to understand why these values are so tenacious? And are we willing to say that these values, like objectivity and predictability, may be associated with the ideology of sexism?

Walter Ong is a "humanist's humanist," 1978 president of the Modern Language Association, erudite, gentle in tone and manner, and someone no one does not like. His scholarship does not read polemically, and most of those I know who have read his work, myself included, learn a great deal. Furthermore, Ong tends to look at the "big picture"; he seeks to understand language and literature both in a historical perspective and as part of people's daily experience. He is responsive to changes in society, particularly to technology, and he has been one of several leaders for those of us who have come to believe that writing (not just literature) is a deep and fascinating subject.

Just before *Orality and Literacy* was published in 1982, Ong brought out another book that is not as widely read, but one that helps to illuminate the issues I am now exploring, a book called *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness*. As well as anything in it, the opening paragraph of this work poses both its own problem and the problem in the academy and society that I think it represents:

Contest is a part of human life everywhere that human life is found. In war and in games, in work and in play, physically, intellectually, and morally, human beings match themselves with or against one another. Struggle appears inseparable from human life, and contest is a particular focus or mode of interpersonal struggle, an opposition that can be hostile but need not be, for certain kinds of contest may serve to sublimate and dissolve hostilities and to build friendship and cooperation. (15)

This statement is the premise of Ong's work. Even though he allows that there may be either hostile or friendly contest, there is always some kind of contest. "Adversativeness," he explains, "has provided a paradigm for understanding our own existence: in order to know myself, I must know that something else is not me and is (in some measure) set against me, psychologically as well as physically" (15-16). Regardless of our own dispositions, and regardless of the moral and political features of history, contest and adversa-
In his second chapter, Ong discusses biological facts and sexual identity. After allowing that "sex always works through and with a given culture" (52), he observes that "boisterousness is biologically determined ... and we know that it is connected in some special way with masculinity." He continues: "However treated, it cannot be ignored. Boys will be boys. Sexually determined behavior is always mingled with other things. But it is still sexually determined behavior" (52). Here is a more revealing taste of Ong's reasoning and the direction of his thought. We begin to see here the almost exclusive emphasis on male psychology in this work and the invocation of the familiar justification of masculine excess and violence ("boys will be boys"). And we also find a clear statement of Ong's belief in biological, sexual determinism.

With these beliefs as a prologue, Ong then sets out to show that men are biologically more contest oriented than women. To this end, he cites sources that tell how male sexual definition of the fetus "depends on the excretion of androgens by the male embryo and fetus." From this fact, Ong draws the following conclusion:

The male mammalian organism must from the start react against its environment. Thus masculinity has a certain resistance to being nurtured: for a male, being nurtured has special dangers. At its biological and historical source, the male's vocation is not acceptance but change. Again, masculinity means differentiation. (64-65)

It seems that this statement about male fetuses reacting "against" the environment is false. Why does the secretion of male hormones mean that the male fetus is reacting "against" the environment? Why doesn't Ong conclude that male embryos are developing in respect to both the female environment and the male genetic system and are being, in fact, nurtured by the female environment? Ong's biology seems no different in its politics than Aristotle's: for both, a prior ideological and social assumption about males produces the claimed biological "facts." Ong continues his biological reasoning to make what I think are other false judgments about sexual activity:

The stress situation for the male, begun in the womb, comes to a peak in the mature male with sexual intercourse itself, in which the difference between the sexes reaches its maximum and which is always a test of the male's, not the female's physical ability to perform, to achieve intromission. (67)

There are several false judgments in this passage: that intercourse is naturally or necessarily a "stress situation" for the male; that there is a "maximum" of sexual difference during intercourse; and that sexual performance is a "test" for males and not for females. Viewed without a false biological premise and in a context we might call "conciliatory" or "coopera-
"adversative," rather than "adversative," we might also reasonably judge that sex takes place when both parties are relaxed and not stressed; that intercourse follows from common desire and togetherness as much as, or more than, from difference; that either party's sexual performance is a function of the overall state of their relationship; and, in any event, that intromission is not necessarily the single goal or essential feature of sexual activity. The judgments that Ong reaches in this and in the previous cases stem from an underlying acceptance of the ideology of sexism, as well as the ideology of heterosexism.

This ideology is partially concealed by this language of "contest." But there is no doubt that the underlying biological contest that forms the basis for Ong's cultural claims about the necessity of contest is the alleged contest between men and women. Because men are "naturally" adversative, this contest can't be avoided: in the next-to-last paragraph of his treatise, Ong observes, "The entire history of consciousness can be plotted in relation to the always ongoing male-female dialectic" (208).

One of the main reasons for Ong's investigation of sexuality is his wish to illuminate the history of academic life. He is well aware that the Roman Catholic Church is one of the defining influences of today's academy and that "the Church has from the beginning been very much at home in the agonistic male world, and nowhere more than when engaged in intellectual activity" (169). Ong believes that technology—through electronic amplification, for example—has helped to put the female voice volume on a more equal footing with the male. He notes that the greater role of women in today's academy has begun to change its historically agonistic style. But not very much thought is given to these changes in his book. He is openly concerned, however, with "Christian life and worship." It is clear that he requires the biological thoughts reviewed above for his view of religious life: he needs the essentialized categories of male and female because "the Church is sexually defined" (172): Holy Mother Church and God the Father. He requires the idea of a highly differentiated male because of the masculine identity of God: "We are distanced from God as from a father.... God is male. He is not nature, Nature is feminine, Mother Nature" (175).

I think we are back to the story told by David Noble. In spite of Ong's scholarship and thoughtfulness, he remains an advocate of a way of life in the academy that depends on the privileging of men. If Ong were female, and not by vocation an advocate of the Church and its history, I very much doubt that he could possibly construe thousands of years of the masculine oppression of women as related to a biological necessity for contest. I very much expect that he would mention rape and male violence toward women at least a few times while alluding to the achievements of disputation in Church-run academies. Yes, I am consciously presenting this *ad hominem* argument. I assume that every person is a political figure (especially those of us who speak and write in public), and so my argument is also trying to say what problems appear when political self-disclosure and announced political purpose are not part
of the research agenda.

The way language and literature are studied today is still deeply dependent on competition between individuals. Unfortunately, Ong spells out attitudes that do inform academic work as much in the liberal humanities as in the sciences and social sciences. The "critical exchange" section of Critical Inquiry and the letter section in the New York Review of Books show some honest-to-goodness mutual hacking. Universities have been grudging to admit that there is more undiscovered and unread literature produced by disenfranchised people than there now exists in the so-called canon. In Washington at the MLA meeting in 1989, an old white man and an unctuous university president defended the "great books," while women, black people, and political risk-takers asked, "Who is to decide what books are 'great'?"

Hierarchy and Competition in the Classroom

A related, less discussed, but ultimately just as consequential issue is the competitive character of schooling from the fourth grade on. The tests and grades that contaminate each person's contact with texts and with other students derive from the masculine interest in games, rules, and winning. In composition studies, perhaps the most progressive of all academic disciplines in its desire to be politically responsive and responsible, only a small minority has challenged the obsession with grading and has begun to reflect on the problem of making all review processes—of students' and of teachers' work—into occasions for collective and mutual learning; only very few have raised the problem of taking the fear and "performance anxiety" (described by Ong in regard to male sexuality) out of speaking one's mind and telling the truth. Only a small minority is paying attention to language use more than to technical proficiency. And only a minuscule group—compared to the total population of writing teachers—is forcefully and selfconsciously teaching the political character of language and writing, or teaching writing, speaking, and collaborative language study as part of an agenda of socially generous research.

On this point, consider Carol Stanger's essay, "The Sexual Politics of the One-to-One Tutorial Approach and Collaborative Learning." In almost every classroom, there is what we may euphemistically call the "tutorial" assumption, in which the hierarchical relation of the teacher to the individual student is the one and only relationship in which writing is meaningful. Stanger observes that the "instructor doesn't consider his or her thirty students as a group, a class; instead they are only thirty individuals." There is no "subjective collaboration" here (a term used by Adrienne Rich eighteen years ago to say what teaching ought to be) but, rather, the compliance of the student with the instructions of the teacher. Even if the teacher is female, Stanger points out, the hierarchical structure of the relationship continues to keep the student in a compliant position, while the female teacher has unintentionally gone along with a socially masculine style.
Furthermore, as long as the teacher retains a remedial approach, her or his own subjectivity is not part of the relationship and, thus, there is no subjective collaboration in this approach either. Stanger observes that the hierarchical relation requires the use of models. The editing instructor has at his or her disposal many models that can be overtaken by the student. But she emphasizes that the models themselves are a problem: "Models express the male value of the ideal text; the ideal text is a male value because it expresses hierarchical thinking and absolute external values" (36). Models are like mathematical and physical abstractions: they either may or may not be thought of as "ideal." But as I suggested earlier, the masculine handling of science has always privileged the abstract as ideal, and this is what Stanger is referring to in writing pedagogy: either the teacher's style or writing by "experts" plays the role for the "item to be imitated" in order to reach that other ideal, "excellence." Thus, if a paper is judged disorganized because it does not seem to fit any of the models the instructor has in mind, the instructor will not entertain the possibility that the paper "was organized in a more organic, female form." Stanger reasons:

So, in the one-to-one tutorial, the instructor judges the paper against an ideal text, a composite of the male canon, and bestows authority on the essay as well as controlling its interpretation. Sensing this political reality, how would [a female student] feel empowered to revise on her own? (36)

In the majority of classrooms that presuppose the one-to-one relation, she goes on, "members of the class are not encouraged to read one another's work; all work on their own writing while they wait to see the teacher" (35). In recommending the peer group as an audience for each writer, Stanger presents collaborative learning as a solution that, at first, is to benefit female students who do not feel empowered to be independent. Ultimately, however, student collaboration becomes a classroom structure that contributes to the independence of all students.

Conclusion

From a feminist perspective, the teaching of language and literacy is always the teaching of language to the disenfranchised. The privileged are themselves disenfranchised insofar as they can speak only to themselves and understand few others; the middle class is disenfranchised by the narrow discourse of how to get ahead; the poor are disenfranchised because others will not listen or hear. Black English is "substandard"; Spanish is "not our language"; women's journals are "emotional" and "disorganized"; slave narratives are not "great literature"; children's and young people's language are "naive and undisciplined." It is nothing other than sexism when only the language of masculine interests is considered the proper subject in the study of literacy—the language of academic discourse and expository prose; the
language of corporate and military science and technology; the words, the
names, the ideas, and the priorities of the male hegemony in almost all public
contexts. Feminism has shown that all of us, privileged and unprivileged,
women and men alike, are implicated in the discourse of sexism, and that the
total scene of teaching and learning language must finally be responsive to
these political claims.

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