No Exit: A Play of Literacy and Gender

DON KRAEMER

Everywhere the magic of the code, the magic of an elective and selective community, fused together by the same rules of the game and the same systems of signs, is collectively reproduced, beyond economic value and on the basis of it. Everywhere this process comes to penetrate class conflicts, everywhere... it acts to the advantage of the dominant class. It is the keystone of domination.

Jean Baudrillard

Finally, I want to advance the idea that those kinds of writing produced by expository prose and academic discourse serve the traditional sex/gender system and inhibit what most of us accept to be the necessary and urgent task of reforming that system.

David Bleich

From the first epigraph, I lift "rules of the game" as the "keystone of domination." Dropped into the second epigraph, these phrases align with some of Bleich's phrases to create something like this: the rules of the academic-discourse language game, by favoring the dominant class, extend the "traditional sex/gender system." In this essay, I want to explore this claim, to explore, that is, how the general rules of academic discourse may reinforce social relations, sustaining the privileges of some even as they efface the personal or interest-group goals of others.

The Exit Essay and Images of Literacy

Let me provide some brief background on what occasions this essay on literacy, language games, and gender. The university that employs me requires that my composition students pass an essay exit-exam. If a student fails the exam (and a second-chance exam given during finals week, two weeks later), official policy forbids the instructor to pass that student, regardless of the student's performance over the semester—at the end of which awaits The Exit (Or Not). A week before they are to take the exam, students are given directions and five reading passages; teachers may not discuss the readings with the class or with individual students. When it's time to take the exam, the instructor reduces the five passages to two, and each student then has
fifty-five minutes to compose a response to one of the two eligible passages. Before a committee of exit-exam readers brands the bluebooks with “P” or “NP,” the teacher reads the exams, doing his or her own branding on the bluebook’s backside.

Last term, one of my students, Flo, failed an exam I thought she had passed. I thought Flo had passed because she had confidently handled the summary, the one of the two major tasks that most of my students fumbled. Her performance on the exam’s second task, analysis and evaluation, was much more wobbly but not, I believed, given the circumstances, incompetent. Nevertheless, my “P” was overturned by two other readers, which made me feel as much an outsider to the “in’s” of the exit exam as Flo was. Let me acknowledge that whatever I might say about the exit exam, I can also read it with appreciation. The exam readers jolted me out of a complacency I inevitably fall into, namely, the belief that I know what academic ropes my students should know.

It might be helpful to share with you the passage Flo chose and part of her response to it. Here is the passage, written by William McGowan (exam-takers are informed only of this and that the excerpt is adapted from an essay):

According to a 1988 Ford Foundation report, 25 million Americans can’t read at all and 35 million more could be considered functionally illiterate. The inability of 60 million native-born Americans to cope with the routine paperwork of life—a classified job ad, an instructional manual—is a problem with far-reaching consequences. The illiteracy crisis is particularly sharp in business and industry, especially in banking, telecommunications and data processing, where huge labor pools having competent reading skills are most in demand. Unless the private sector addresses the problem by promoting mass-literacy programs, corporate profits will slip and the vitality of American industry will eventually pale before stiffened competition from countries such as West Germany and Japan, where higher rates of literacy and productivity march hand in hand. The impact of illiteracy on the corporate bottom line is hard to calculate, but it’s generally agreed that productivity and profits suffer significantly. Every day, sales orders are botched, bank transactions bungled, messages scrambled and things by the million misfiled—all, to some extent, because of substandard reading skills. If left unarrested, rampant illiteracy will intensify the disjunction between available jobs and qualified manpower and will create an unlettered underclass that will be locked out of tomorrow’s predominantly high-technology economy. It will deepen existing social inequalities, perhaps with explosive repercussions.

Flo’s response to this piece unwittingly demonstrates a telling irony. After taking more than three bluebook-pages to reconstruct McGowan’s passage, she spends just under three pages analyzing and evaluating his position. Here are those last few pages:

I am pleased that William McGowan has taken a stand on the issue of illiteracy. Although I have always been aware of the negative aspects of a society with the presence of illiteracy, McGowan opened my eyes to some drastic, even startling, effects that illiteracy will have if the problem continues on unattended or ignored. American business and industry is risking an incredible success if the issue is not addressed immediately. I am
a supporter of McGowan's belief that the private sector must take a stand by promoting literacy skills. America can not just sit around and wait for the illiterate society to "cure" themselves. If our nation does choose to wait, a different kind of depression that involves the fall of our nation to another that is superior in rates of literacy and productivity may occur. Sure, there are some programs for illiteracy available today, but these few programs cannot possibly accommodate for the sixty million illiterate Americans in our nation. There is simply no excuse. I am thrilled that more people such as McGowan are taking a stand and addressing the issue rather than ignoring the problem in hope that it will simply fade away or solve itself. Maybe if more essays such as McGowan's are published and made available to Americans showing them the great suffering our nation is enduring due to illiteracy, then perhaps our nation will not continue to be oblivious to the issue. Until the issue is addressed, our business and industry will continue to be "caught in the crossfire" of the negligence of an illiterate society.

The irony I notice is that while Flo was demonstrating herself to be the competent reader McGowan endorses, she was also failing the exam. She was failing the exam because she failed to imagine herself as and to write as a critical reader, perhaps one who might interrupt the work McGowan wishes advanced or perhaps one who does him one better in extending his project.

Flo's unproblematic image of literacy disturbed me, but I was personally upset by being overruled and, also, by my sense of having let one of my students down. I asked several colleagues, seasoned in exit exams, to read this one exam, and their responses confirmed what I should have known—and been prudent enough to teach—all along: the exit exam is a particular kind of game, and there are a limited number of ways to play it well. Flo did not play the game well if she played it at all. By not situating herself against and within competing voices, she did not earn a place on the field of discourse. She stood at its boundaries, cheering McGowan's text and not playing it. Because she did not claim mastery over the text, she showed no command of it, even though her summary gave a faithful reconstruction of it. By way of reinforcement, one of my colleagues who read Flo's exam mentioned that when her students failed, more women than men failed in this way.

Literacy as Game: Symbolic and Synecdochic Activity

I wish to examine the idea of literacy as game and, especially, to focus on gaming's engendered connotations. About gaming in general, Ann Hall writes, "Feminists cannot turn a blind eye to the fact that play, games and sport are highly institutionalized aspects of our culture which help to maintain male hegemony." Add to this declaration the following assumption—that for women as for men, writing and reading are institutional practices governed by the same logic that determines social relations at large—and we have some of the ingredients for an empiricist feminist critique (a critique from which I will finally take a small but telling departure). This critique claims that if women disproportionately suffer the effects of our culture—which works the way it does partly because of institutionalized play, games, and sport—then in discursive performances structured like
play, games, and sport, women may also suffer disproportionately. What also follows from this critique, of course, is that what is and is not to be judged and hence rewarded in such performances predetermines that some groups (in this case, those that demonstrate a peculiar posture toward language) will receive a disproportionate share of the rewards. But even in these successful cases, this critique continues, women who win may do so at considerable cost to their selves. Insofar as being heard compels them to use a language formulated and controlled by men, women are not as free or as able as men are to say what they want.

This critique raises some questions that I would like to engage. How is the kind of literacy demanded by the exam continuous with or analogous to games, play, and sport at large? To the extent that certain gamelike aspects inhere in the exam, how do they negatively position women writers? Is there a nongame critical language available to feminist teachers and their students? To begin trying to answer these questions, I will examine the connections between academic discourse and gaming made in Myron Tuman's energetic A Preface to Literacy: An Inquiry into Pedagogy, Practice, and Progress. This examination will lead to a discussion of the exam's gamelike qualities and the way they seem to stack the deck against women's ways of being, knowing, reading, and writing.

To distinguish genuine literacy from more basic acts of language use (such as the decoding skills McGowan wants), Tuman amplifies the familiar metaphor of language as game. The following passage on literacy as game, quoted at length, contains many shibboleths of the critical thinking agenda in academic discourse, shibboleths whose "human" appeal some feminists will demystify as "masculist":

The possibility of literacy resides in the very power of texts to distance us from writers and specifically from intentions that can be communicated apart from the text. . . . As readers we meet the author in the text in much the same way that we encounter someone through the agency of a game. . . . We can learn something of an opponent's personality through observing her play even if she is a total stranger. And here the similarity with literacy is most compelling, for in such a situation we do learn the personality of the other as competitor, just as . . . the reader knows . . . the personality of the other as writer. Thus just as we never truly play a game against a friend, only an opponent, so we can never know a writer directly but only as a reader. The agency of the game or the text transforms a synecdochic relationship into a symbolic one. In a synecdochic relationship, rhetorical motives dominate; participants fully engage in the activity not for its own sake (as they should in any game) but only in order to reach some more encompassing social accord (as we might lose a game on purpose to curry a favor). Similarly, we can write with the clear intention of using the text as a means of reaching a desired social goal; our activity is purely symbolic, however, only when our social relations with others are disregarded in the performance of the new activity that establishes its own relationships between parties. The game exists only as a symbolic activity in the participants' mutual denial of what is given (namely, their existing social relation apart from the game) for the new way of being in the world that is constituted by the rules of the game itself; that is, we are only playing a game when we play to win, regardless of how we might act toward our opponent ordinarily. . . .
... This public nature of games, moreover, allows us, within the rules of the game, to forgo our normal concern for the other's well-being, for example, to avoid being solicitous, thus providing the source of psychological freedom that lies at the heart of such rule-constituted activities as games and literacy; both take place apart from our normal social obligations. (25-26)

One rapid way to unpack this loaded passage is to say that in synecdochic activity, a process of attachment, we identify with what is said, whereas in symbolic activity, a process of separation that transcends immediate social contexts and normal ways of being in the world, we reflect on what is said, interpreting the worlds that words evoke. As I understand Tuman, the rhetorical motives behind both manipulative sales pitches and mutual chitchat comprise synecdochic activity, and they do so because in "reaching a desired social goal" we effectively preserve collective identity, consolidate shared knowledge and values, and assume the presence of a directly known audience. In contrast, symbolic activity is capable of dispersing and transforming this collective identity, and it manages this feat by vigilantly critiquing what we share and cherish, by abstractly imagining what does not yet exist, by creating public texts that can engage—and make binding claims on—attentive strangers.2

In Tuman's loaded deck, then, which I have loaded in my own way, the first card I wish to mark stipulates that in the literacy game we know people abstractly, as bearers of formal properties and powers. The second card requires that just as we play the game "for its own sake," and not for the sake of whatever social favors we seek in the nongame world, so should our writing and reading detach themselves from immediate social relations and everyday responsibilities and necessities.3 That is, our reading and writing should instead concentrate on what is symbolically possible. The third and last card plays into this hand, marking what Tuman above calls the "psychological freedom that lies at the heart of such rule-constituted activities as games and literacy," in which aspiring toward what is not but should be removes us from our "normal social obligations."

Tuman's casual slight of "rhetorical motives" shouldn't sway attention from the preeminently rhetorical nature of his model. His model shares with mainstream models of critical thinking and argumentation several rhetorical assumptions about discourse. These assumptions are that discourse is rational (or can be), dialectical, and conventional: rational because it represents writers and readers as individual agents who make considered decisions in light of the evidence; dialectical because these agents are always responding to others and, at their best, fashion others as a "universal audience"—as intelligent, informed beings capable of countermoves; and conventional because the agents are "plural I's" whose writing and reading identities vary with (and within) what a given occasion, a rhetorical situation, calls for.
Gender Bias in the Literacy Game

However much we might assent to the good sense of these assumptions, any model so perfectly unified should make us nervous. And, in this case, what Tuman apparently assumes as gender neutral many feminists believe to be gender biased. Insofar as Tuman’s jaunty model of literacy uses the language of and rests upon the values of competition and individualization, it appears biased in a somewhat obvious way, for these nonsocial values are “held more by men than by women.” That is, competitive individualism “is an ideology that men regularly advocate and which favors their (our) privileged position in a sexist society” (Bleich, Double Perspective 5). But even objections to the more subtle offenses of Tuman’s model share the belief that, by displacing difference, this literate style mutes the social presence of any group, particularly of women (Bleich, “Reconceiving Literacy” 32).4

Consider the first of Tuman’s cards, the privileging of systematic abstraction. “To create and comprehend texts is always a difficult act, almost a disloyal one,” Tuman argues, because to resist the pull of the commonplace, “we are required to forsake what we share with others. The possibility of literacy, therefore, rests in part on the belief in the higher authority of some distant, nonpersonal other” (182). If this is so, then the possibility of literacy may also rest in part on being raised “male”—that is, if a heterodox sector of contemporary child-development theory is even nearly right. For example, Nancy Hartsock argues that “not only do girls learn roles with more interpersonal and relational skills, but the process of role learning itself is embodied in the concrete relation with the mother.” Boys, on the other hand, “must learn roles from rules which structure the life of an absent male figure”; they thus identify with and learn “abstract behaviors not attached to a well-known person” (168).5 A crucial component of the symbolic activity that Tuman recommends, then—the tendency to think abstractly, to abstract away from concrete persons—is said to accompany a boy’s entrance into culture, whereas a girl’s training tracks her naturally into synecdochic activity—into “the ongoing process of attachment that creates and sustains the human community,” a process Carol Gilligan has called the foundation of female self-definition (156).

Earlier in her book, In a Different Voice, Gilligan makes a similar point, one meant to account for how the second card—keeping the literacy game pure of the nongame world—handicaps women. Citing research into children’s play, Gilligan concludes that girls’ play, rather “than elaborating a system of rules for resolving disputes,” parallels synecdochic literacy by subordinating a given game’s rules—as well as the values that would continue the game—to values that end the game but preserve relationships: empathy, sensitivity, cooperation (10). These differences operate off the field as well, as is clearly evident in the case study of Jake and Amy, two eleven-year-old participants in a rights and responsibilities study, both of whom were asked to solve a moral dilemma in which “a man named Heinz considers whether
or not to steal a drug which he cannot afford to buy in order to save the life of his wife" (Gilligan 25). Jake is able to answer the question "Should Heinz steal the drug?" quickly and confidently. Amy, however, apparently constructs the same question as "Should Heinz steal the drug?" and she "seems evasive and unsure" (28). By traditional scales of cognitive and moral development, Jake wins decisively. Gilligan suggests that such absolutely abstract scales collapse cognitive health and maturity into rule-governed play. Whereas what shackles Amy is that she sees moral dilemmas less as a math problem than as a "narrative of relationships that extends over time," for Jake it is his "knowing well the rules of the game, ... his emergent capacity for formal thought, his ability to think about thinking and to reason things out in a logical way" that "frees him from dependence on authority and allows him to find solutions to problems by himself" (27-28). In contrast, girls' training, rooted in messier, more communal obligations, provides a cognitive style poorly suited for the strategic moves of symbolic literacy.

Yet women have uprooted themselves to play this game (they have had to), and they have excelled at it, at least in school. But men who play this game are dealt the third card and, thus, they purchase freedom, a "buoyancy" and "elevation" not experienced outside the game. Something about facing—rivaling—an "other" exhilarates. The public occasion of my dissertation defense may be a case in point (but not an unambiguous one). Many friends attended the defense, which went rather badly until an overtly dismissive comment from one of my readers (all were men) liberated me to perform. My energy picked up, I scored some points, and I almost had a good time; in fact, the postdefense hobnobbing was generally genial if not jocular. I say "generally" because afterwards my male comrades offered their congratulations, while many of my female comrades offered commiseration instead. (One of them, whose own dissertation defense was scheduled for the next year, left the room in tears.) For women playing this game, then, the third card may be up masculine sleeves, and the price for not plucking it is dear—loss of confidence, connection, comfort. One of the women interviewed in *Women's Ways of Knowing*, a college sophomore named Faith, tells of being similarly challenged. Yet for her the terms of the challenge were less a source of strength than of anxiety. The authors put Faith's response to this challenge into context:

Faith had not yet learned how to play the doubting game. It does not matter whether you agree with an interpretation or not; you must still try to find something wrong with it. In fact, as Elbow ... says, the more believable the interpretation, the harder you must try to doubt it. (Belenky et al. 105)

One can imagine Tuman (along with many others) replying that strenuous, sustained doubting creates knowledge, including knowledge useful to the feminist project, such as recognizing the "contingent nature of the social
world" (Tuman 167). Nor should “doubt” be unduly emphasized so as to exclude “belief.” As I understand Tuman, it is less important to doubt than to be active—antsy. For example, my student need not have competed against McGowan; she could have coached or trained him, competing on his behalf. Thoroughly engaging someone’s or some project’s assumptions, nudging them further along, can also transform reality by enriching the symbolic (and consequential) world of that position. Therefore, whether one plays a doubting or believing game, to play either well is to exceed—and to imagine the mastery needed to exceed—what is already given. This is the very model of symbolic activity.

For “doubting” and “believing,” however, we can substitute what for the subjects of Women’s Ways of Knowing is a more accurate—and pernicious—metaphor: “attacking” or “defending” a thesis. Attacking and defending imply a direct challenge, as Belenky et al. suggest:

> We do not deny that cognitive conflict can act as an impetus to growth. . . . But in our interviews only a handful of women described a powerful and positive learning experience in which a teacher aggressively challenged their notions. (227)

They conclude that the “doubting model may be peculiarly inappropriate for women” (228). For women, the “believing game” is more appropriate:

> While women frequently do experience doubting as a game, believing feels real to them, perhaps because it is founded upon genuine care and because it promises to reveal the kind of truth they value—truth that is personal, particular, and grounded in firsthand experience. (113)

I also prefer the believing game over the doubting game (although I would prefer not to construct truth as the static residue of personal, particular, and firsthand experience). Responding to someone’s text, I’m more likely to scribble in the margins, “Sounds good. Tell us more” or “What experiences led you to believe this?” than “I’m from Missouri. Show me.” There are ways of earnestly, curiously nurturing someone’s notions that are not personally confrontational, and I’ve found that most students appreciate a less rather than more confrontational rhetoric of response. Yet whether they believe that I believe them or whether they believe that I’m genuinely curious, I cannot say. I suspect they know that there is an institutional role underwriting much of my commentary (though surely other roles speak up and sneak in). My commentary urges them to keep believing and to keep writing and, no doubt, signals when it’s safe to stop. For given the grossly tilted power imbalance between a teacher who grades and a student who is graded, it’s not surprising that even the kindliest questions and encouragement carry the freight of domination (which the exit exam delivers like a load of bricks).
Revising the Game: Some Problems

The challenge for us as writing teachers is not to dodge this domination, but, rather, to put it to work. One solution coming from the feminist critique I've outlined is to decenter "masculist," ceremonial sparring. However, there are many possible ways to imagine decentering, and one way that I cannot imagine being much good is replacing symbolic activity with synecdochic activity. Nor am I satisfied with solutions urging teachers to baffle the "traditional sex/gender system" by rewarding synecdochic activity as they have traditionally rewarded symbolic activity. Both these ways of imagining resistance seem to make the same move that Tuman's way does: they imagine language, or a language, as seamless cloth—global systems kept pure by their internal logic, not local strategies that themselves are constituted by competing and contradictory moments. But one can also imagine the play of identity and the play of difference as each containing its own conflicts, what Kenneth Burke has labeled "internal fatality." The conflicts internal to the play of identity and of difference may exist because the two activities are mixed into each other. Aren't typical synecdochic activities full of abstract inferential judgments and tough choices? Aren't symbolic transgressions connected to many of a given community's values and attitudes, so that even as they are altering some relationships they are building on others? Or perhaps these internal conflicts are externally generated. That is, like our gendered identities, these conflicts exist after the fact of some particular gaze, a gaze that can only selectively consume and, by consuming, construct a given text.

Polarities like symbolic activity versus synecdochic activity, male language versus female language, game world versus nongame world—these distinctions may be necessary and productive of discourse, but they are not foundational. They don't stay in place or guarantee our politics. It is perhaps inevitable but surely mistaken to assign permanent plus and minus values to such distinctions—to insist, for example, that symbolic practice confers objective mental powers while synecdochic practice retards them. Or to say, conversely, "in" with good synecdochic cooperation, "out" with bad symbolic competition.

Even if what we choose to call synecdochic practices tighten existing bonds, affirm shared values, and celebrate the immediate, who would argue that such actions have always and everywhere happy outcomes? In Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace, Sara Ruddick talks of having witnessed "good" mothers, nurturing and responsive people, participate in racial violence outside their homes (56-57). Less dramatically, Flo's act of bonding with McGowan seems to subordinate the interests of the "illiterate" to those of corporate literacy. Such examples make persuasive Jon Elster's argument that cooperative games do not involve universal cooperation but, rather, the cooperation of some actors against others. They also suggest that whether we choose sides or are socialized into them, the effects—and hence the value—of synecdochic activity are situationally dependent.
Symbolic activity, too, gains fluidity—and flaws—when seen as dependent rather than decontextualized. It is daunting to imagine the continuous table-turning that pure literacy implies, although that activity would help keep one trim. But as with anything else, symbolic activity happens in a place, at a certain time, with peculiar people involved. For example, when we write for academics, we are doing academic work, using and reinvesting academic language—that is, we are engaging in symbolic activity. Such activity is how we preserve (and change) our guild's identity. On Tuman's terms, then, our symbolic activity has synecdochic effects, effects that do more to constitute the social relations of our profession than to transform society, insofar as our activities circulate within traditional networks. So it is not at all self-evident to me that "placing this commitment to symbolic truth" (that is, encouraging students "to pursue truth not shared by the group") at the "center of the reading and writing instruction" will work to "guarantee the integrity of the political system outside the classroom" (Tuman 164). Why, for instance, should gamelike activities, with their synecdochic pull and refereed boundaries, be privileged as transcendent (and hence social) practice? Indeed, it seems more likely that social conditions and everyday contexts situate, perhaps determine, the forms and functions of literacy (Heath and Thomas 68). The dynamics of either preservation or change, then, are too overdetermined to lie within some particular way of behaving or thinking.

Another Look at the Literacy Game

Yet in the spirit of this essay, I must take sides. Although I've been speculating on why replacing symbolic activity with synecdochic activity won't magically displace domination, there are features of symbolic activity in academic discourse that I'd like to replace. And those features do have much to do with game. To begin, in light of the modest claim that games take place within society, what then becomes of Tuman's claim that "play take[s] place apart from our normal social obligations" (26)? Whatever "normal" means here, if by "apart" is meant the periphery or the hinterlands, it seems wrong. Institutionalized sport—and how it arranges the lives of nonparticipants, even of those nonparticipants who resent it—is a central fact of our society. And one can so easily find features of play or gaming wherever one looks that it isn't even sporting to do so—except that the ease underscores the difficulty of determining game from nongame phenomena. Clearly, it's time for a second look at game.

Talk of literacy as game generates multiple connotations, not all of which are transparently reconcilable. Therefore, we select and we emphasize, and these acts shape our discourse. To talk of literacy as a game is to risk imagining it as gentlemanly conduct, two equally privileged amateurs "having a go": it's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game. Or, as the authors of Women's Ways of Knowing sum up their subjects' experience with academic discourse: "The content of the academic arguments hardly
mattered; what did matter was proving that you had mastered the form” (111). Recall that mastering forms—the systematic but fluid moves of a game—is said to be a liberating experience. One of the very reasons Belenky et al. criticize academic discourse is that what underlies the psychological freedom of gaming is the idea of undominated self-activity with others. Scant attention, however, is paid to such self-activity for others. This latter conception of game combines the individuality of symbolic activity with the collective identity of synecdochic activity, and, in doing so, it risks sliding over from playful game into related social practices—practices ranging from reformism to terrorism. In Tuman’s model, these connotations get ruled out of bounds, for in games what matters is how you play—in war all’s fair.

What counts for and restricts fairness in the traditional concept of game is its invocation of two appealing metaphors: the equal starting line and the differentiating race (Wills). At the starting line, people begin equally, equipped primarily with their capacity to reason and to persevere. As the race proceeds, the complexion (among other features) of the line changes, the most excellent or prepared or luckiest contestants edging out or zooming ahead. But these metaphors conflict unhappily with the processes by which their contestants have already been constituted prior to the game. Players come to the various games with radically diverse (or unequal) resources—with, for example, diverse energy (or fatigue), with diverse interests (or debts). A game’s goals, a referee’s attention—these reward some values and behaviors over others, thereby rendering some players less than ideally equipped for certain games.

Because being equipped is our situation—what we think with rather than of—it inescapably informs how we play our games, how we write and read our texts. And of the pieces of ideology that we can self-consciously contemplate, during textual performances we can’t contemplate them all. Trying to know our practice as we practice would overload the circuitry, break us down. (Imagine a pianist focusing on every finger as she plays Liszt.) But much of what cannot be remembered is, as Susan Wells puts it, “forgotten into the text” (518); and inasmuch as discourse activates subjectivity, much of what we didn’t know we knew is remembered by the text. What cannot be remembered, what cannot be remembered before trying to remember, what can emerge only in specific acts of writing and reading—these would include gender differences. Such acts might register, that is, the difference “gender” has made.

I do not fault the exit exam Flo failed for allowing her to rehearse some of these gender differences. I see no way to guarantee in advance the suppression of the social text, and, also, what seems like domination to me is not what the exit exam asks students to do—summarize, evaluate, critique. To eliminate such tasks may be to concede that they’re innately gender biased, leaving us with immobile, ahistorical, generic genderisms. If there is an engendered performance gap, I would not want to structure the test so that
the gap between responses narrows or disappears. I'd rather sequence assignments to see how the gap between responses can be made productive of understanding rather than an obstacle to it and, at the same time, try to reform the mechanisms that punish this gap and make inequalities of differences.

The Exit Essay as a Form of Non-Response

To lay at last my own cards on the table, I fault the context of the exam itself. As it stands, the exam organizes knowing and learning to prevent both women and men from knowing and changing. If "prevent" is too strong a word, and I think it is, then substitute "discourage." The exam is organized so that forgetfulness pays, forgetfulness of the exam's context—its own activity in students' lives, the purpose and rightness of its project. To play or contest the exam itself becomes an unreasonable risk. Would any of us prepare our students for the exam by encouraging them to act on Foucault's belief that there is "always a possibility, in a given game of truth, to discover something else and to more or less change such and such a rule and sometimes even the totality of the game" (17)? A student's eloquent refusal to perform as asked, a student's questioning of the exam's boundaries rather than, say, the boundaries of McGowan's essay—it is too likely that these will be ruled out of order. But even if such exams were rewarded rather than punished for their cleverness or nerve, these individual outcries meet with a worse fate: silence.

The structure of the exit exam is the very model of non-response. The structure doesn't include response to students' work on the exam. The structure doesn't include (nor extend) what students have been doing in the classroom—the various individual projects they have been elaborating, in diverse idioms, within the context of their peers' and instructor's responses. As discourse organized to prevent response, the exit exam reproduces the dominant communicative forms of our era, the forms of non-response. The exam tests the "relation of a solitary subject to something in the objective world that can be represented and manipulated," but it does not test, as Jürgen Habermas goes on to say, the "intersubjective relation that speaking and acting subjects take up when they come to an understanding with one another about something." When "communicative actors" meet in dialogue, they

move in the medium of a natural language, draw upon culturally transmitted interpretations, and relate simultaneously to something in the one objective world, something in their common social world, and something in each one's subjective world.

(Habermas 392)

This seems to me a rich game of relational, testable truth, in which what counts is not only what students (for example) say but also what they say to
others—to those students, to that teacher. Habermas’ description of communicative rationality not only suggests another (and more sinuous) way to imagine the relations among symbolic and synecdochic activities; it also points to the need for students to read and respond to one another’s texts. Without connected acts of trying to reach understanding about something, differences lie inert. Domination feels like business as usual.

Valuing what the classroom makes possible won’t topple sexist institutions; it does, however, let possibilities of resistance supervene, which may or may not affect how students subsequently use language elsewhere. I care, at any rate, about what my students’ language in the classroom does to or for others in the room, and I’m interested in knowing more about what my classroom language does to or for them. For example, sharing and studying her text with others might position Flo, who identified with McGowan, to see whether other people disagree with her. Other people read differently. Why? How? Reading texts like her own, she might, on another day, find herself reading differently. Reading and comparing my comments on their papers, the class can see how they performed the assignment with varying degrees of institutional approval, studying the question of what is the academy’s desire—or mine—in preferring X to Y, or chromosomally, the XY to the XX.

As they and I negotiate our way to reaching an understanding about something, I do not disguise my authority as just another reader (insofar as I abide by my charge to assign differentiated final grades). I can use what authority I do have to displace what is valued, in this case to require that my students be not merely responsible for what they say, but also responsive to what others say. I might ask them, as Patrocinio Schweickart does, “to assume responsibility for doing ‘interactive labor,’ to facilitate, to engender and cultivate the speech of the other” (308). If this one requirement favors noncompetitive behavior, so be it. If it so happens that men (and women) adapt to compete—and are determined to win—at the game of responsiveness, and if the social relations of the class seem, therefore, largely undisturbed (which has not been my experience), or if we notice (what has been my experience) painfully few gender relations changing outside the classroom, then response classrooms have at least reminded us that we are not saviors; that our classrooms are not havens in a heartless world but moments, glimpses, of different possibilities; that we can try (I go on believing) to write and read more conscientiously.10

Temple University
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Notes

1 See, for example, Harding; Juncker; Kramarae; and Spender.
2 See Dillon; Grumet; and Lanham.
3 Also see Elshtain; Cocks; and Jacoby.
4 Also see Benjamin; and Caywood and Overing.
5 Also see Chodorow.
6 See Harding; Flynn; Schweickart; and Sire.
7 As Hans-Georg Gadamer suggests, "The back and forth movement of the game has a peculiar freedom and buoyancy that determines the consciousness of the player"; also, in dialogue, something "of buoyancy, indeed of elevation ... that belongs to the nature of the game is present" (cited in Bleich, "Intersubjective Reading" 403).
8 Also see Keller and Moglen.
9 See Brodkey.
10 I would like to thank Per Maria Roble Dahlin, William Hendricks, and Francis Sullivan for their comments on an early draft of this essay.

Works Cited


