A Contributing Listener and Other Composition Wives: Reading and Writing the Feminine Metaphors in Composition Studies

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All metaphor breaks down somewhere. That is the beauty of it. Robert Frost

About a month after I arrived in Boston to begin my M.A. program, I started dating a man a couple of years older than I, who arrived in town at the same time to begin work toward his doctorate. Attending a large university in the northeast, I a post-Midwesterner, he a post-Southern Appalachian, both immersed in the academy which was swimming with "post-'s," we agreed we couldn't call ourselves "boyfriend and girlfriend." Our concern was less a concern about being politically correct—"p.c." has itself become unfashionable—and more an awareness about the complexities of constructions of gender in interpersonal relationships. "Partner" was too sterile; "significant other" wasn't right either. With a nod to National Public Radio, we decided on "contributing listener."

The struggle to define our relationship in the postmodern world certainly goes beyond what to call each other, and "contributing listener" has significance beyond our discomfort with calling each other "partner." NPR uses this term to name their financial donors, thus, perhaps euphemistically, describing the economic relationship between an individual and the institution. The connotations of the term as used by NPR indicate our efforts to characterize the financial situation of two unmarried people, in a committed relationship, living together. Settling on this term also locates us in the socioeconomic conditions of our culture. The recent accusations, made by legislators determined to cut NPR's federal support, that public radio caters primarily to the middle and upper classes are, in my opinion, accurate. Though we are now struggling on teaching assistant pay and financial aid, both Doug and I are from middle class backgrounds and learned our taste for NPR from our parents. There is an irony here though: living together before we are married is asserting ourselves against
the institution of the nuclear family, one of the foundations of middle class values. Borrowing the term from NPR as we are doing is using one middle class institution against another.

So, the term we have decided upon to characterize our relationship, "contributing listener," encompasses much of what we are together. But where do I, as an individual, locate myself in this metaphor? I can recall at least a couple of times when I wasn't "contributing." The first time Doug handed me a piece of his writing to look over I was immediately relegated to the "listener" part of our metaphor. Awestruck by the theory-speak that was still new to me, I could barely understand his prose, much less critically comment on it. It took me quite a while before I could let him read something I had written. Last summer, too, when Doug was teaching full time and I had to suffer the uncertain income (as well as the sexual harassment) of being a temporary secretary, I felt uneasy about my financial and intellectual contributions to our relationship. "All metaphor breaks down somewhere," Frost says. But locating oneself at the point at which it breaks down is an uncomfortable place to be.

I tell this story because I see a parallel between my situation and the situation in which composition studies recently finds itself. Specifically, I am in a relationship that can only tentatively define itself, and I am the product of a privileged class who is asserting herself against the values of this class. Similarly, working to legitimate the field as a significant site of intellectual activity, composition studies is tentative about how to describe its relationship to both the English department, especially literary studies, and to the university as a whole. Composition studies is also in many ways the product of a privileged class. According to Susan Miller, freshman composition historically has served as a "border checkpoint" where the "nonelect" could either increase their fluency with standard English or be weeded out (Textual Carnivals 52). Furthermore, as James Berlin argues, the poetic/rhetoric binary in most English departments today "serves the interest of a privileged managerial class while discriminating against those who are outside of this class. . . [by] refusing the political in the service of an aesthetic experience that implicitly reinforces discriminatory social divisions" (33). Although the structure of the university in the twentieth century has made the role of freshman English crucial in the effort to reproduce the ideology of the middle class, many composition theorists and teachers are working against the field's complicity in this project by developing and implementing what have been called "resistance" pedagogies which invite students to think critically about their education and about society as a whole. In effect, composition studies is a middle class institution working against another middle class institution, the university.

To extend the parallel, composition studies also seeks a variety of metaphors to characterize itself, and the writers in the field also need to be aware of where these metaphors break down. In her conclusion to "Reading the Writing Process," Lisa Ede asks, "Can we be more conscious of, and more explicit about, the models and metaphors that animate our research and the narratives that
construct us as researchers and teachers?” (41). In the same volume of essays, Susan Wall offers an answer to Ede’s request, paying particular attention to the economic metaphors used in discussions about teaching writing. Wall notes that metaphors of “ownership” are often employed to talk about elementary and secondary composition teaching, as opposed to the metaphors of “riches” used by college-level writing professors and researchers. She argues that their metaphors name “the political positions arising from their social and economic situations” (249). Wall’s essay demonstrates the significance of attending to “how we talk about what it is that we do” (239). In other words, by critically reading the metaphors that we use, we can reflect on where we locate ourselves, as individuals and as an academic discipline, in our conversations about composition studies.

I am concerned in this essay with the feminine metaphors used in composition theory and research. To describe what I see happening through the use of these metaphors, I borrow a phrase that has been employed by Elizabeth Flynn, Sue Ellen Holbrook, and Susan Miller, among others, albeit to very different ends: the feminization of composition studies (Flynn “Composing” 423; Holbrook 201; Miller, “Feminization” 39). In her essay, “Women’s Work: the Feminizing of Composition,” Holbrook uses this term to mean “the process by which the field of composition has become associated with feminine attributes and populated by the female gender” (201). I will use the term in a somewhat narrower sense to mean what happens when the language we use to talk about composition studies presumes a feminine subjectivity for the field as a whole or for the roles and practices that comprise it.

“The Feminization of Composition” is the title of Miller’s essay published in The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary. She calls the term “slippery” and points to at least two of the ways it can be applied:

“Feminization” calls to mind both positive new moves in composition to gender-balance research and teaching and negative associations with the actual “feminization” of a field that collects, like bugs in a web, women whose persistently marginalized status demands political action. But I have chosen this potentially slippery term precisely, to point a new reading of composition studies that places both the political action that we obviously need, and many new intellectual and practical movements toward gender balance in composition studies, against a prevailing negative cultural identity that “the feminization of composition studies” implies. (39)

She continues, articulating this paradox: “positive internal desires to gender-balance our field are contained by a negative, insistent external feminization in the phallocentric community where it was born” (39). Miller is making the distinction here between a feminist composition studies, which means a field whose research and classroom practices value women’s roles and experiences, and a feminine composition studies, which means a field which is coded feminine as a whole. The two concepts of a feminist and feminine composition studies are intricately related and mutually inclusive, and this is one of the reasons that I find the feminization of composition studies to be problematic. In many ways,
composition studies has been feminized, through the metaphors I will discuss in this essay and through analyses like Miller's, precisely because the majority of individual teachers and researchers that comprise the field are women.

The significant number of women in composition studies demands that women's interests and perspectives be considered, that composition studies listen to feminists' concerns about equal pay in schools and equal voice in scholarly publications and debates. At the same time, the number of women that occupy positions in composition studies can lead to conceptions of the field as a whole as being feminine. Charles Schuster describes the teaching of writing as "women's work," explaining that "for many years, this work [teaching writing] was literally done by women: spouses, part-timers, faculty adjuncts." In the next line, though, he slides from his previous feminist concerns about the poor material conditions of female teachers to a gendering of writing instruction as a whole: "the teaching of writing demands that an instructor be nurturing as well as demanding. It demands a collaborative, collegial, interactive relationship between teacher and student that is currently identified with a 'feminist' model of teaching as opposed to a 'masculinist' model" (88). He employs the term "feminist," but I understand his use of "nurturing," "collaborative," and "interactive" as describing traits that are coded feminine, but are not always necessarily feminist. Confusion about these terms is part of what Miller describes as the slippery nature of the feminization of composition studies. Historically, teaching writing may have been—and continues to be—literally "women's work." Holbrook's historical perspective in "Women's Work," a perspective shaped by the socioeconomic concept of division of labor, provides an illuminating discussion of how composition studies has come to be seen as "women's work," both literally and figuratively. But to turn unquestioningly the possessive form of "women's" into an adjective describing the field as a whole, as Schuster does, is problematic.

Theorizing "Woman"

Part of what happens in that slide from possessive to adjective is related to a crucial paradox feminist theorists have encountered since the advent of poststructuralism. Before I explore the particulars of the feminization of composition studies, I need to discuss what it means to "feminize" anything, including woman. Linda Alcoff treats these issues clearly and thoroughly in "Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory." Alcoff's approach to the paradox that seems to arise between cultural feminism, or essentialism, and post-structural feminism is informed by the works of Teresa de Lauretis and Denise Riley, among others. These authors, Alcoff argues, deal with the difficulties of theorizing "woman" without ever losing sight of the political situation of women living and working in historical time. For example, Riley addresses the problem of seeking child care reform to help working mothers without, at the same time, validating and reinforcing the traditional concept that caring for children is an expressly feminine concern. The feminism
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of de Lauretis and Riley, as well as Alcoff's own position, suggest the "possibility of a theory of the gendered subject that does not slide into essentialism" (274).

She begins her essay with the assertion that "in attempting to speak for women, feminism often seems to presuppose that it knows what women truly are, but such an assumption is foolhardy given that every source of knowledge about women has been contaminated with misogyny and sexism" (257-58). In order to talk about the oppression of women in patriarchal society or to argue for any change in the way things are, feminists must be able to define their terms, most importantly, "woman." But if all the definitions that exist have been created by patriarchy, feminists become trapped in the very discourses they would like to rewrite or escape. Alcoff talks about cultural feminism and poststructuralism as two distinct approaches feminists have postulated in order to negotiate this situation.

She names Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich as the major proponents of the former. According to Alcoff, "cultural feminism is the ideology of a female nature or female essence reappropriated by feminists themselves in an effort to revalidate undervalued female attributes" (260). In short, to answer the question of how do we define "woman" in such a way that does not rely on masculine discourse, cultural feminists posit an essential female nature. Their notion of femaleness relies heavily on biology, a way to read the female body, especially the woman's ability to bear children. But this notion incorporates assumptions about the spiritual nature of woman as well. Misogyny and sexism, then, are a result of the male's jealousy and subsequent mistreatment of femaleness. Cultural feminists affirm gender differences, celebrating what is feminine and deprecating what is masculine, focusing on what they consider to be essential, most often biological, traits of each.

According to Alcoff, there are several valid criticisms of this approach. First of all, she says, "it is well documented that the innateness of gender differences in personality and character is at this point factually and philosophically indefensible" (265). Furthermore, to appeal to an innate feminine nature is simply to echo the premise of sexism: even though in feminist discourse this essential femaleness is valorized, the belief that women are inherently different from men is the means by which patriarchy justifies the superiority of men. Finally, Alcoff notes the absence of a cultural feminist approach among women of oppressed nations and races. She argues that "the simultaneity of oppressions" these women experience demands a richer, more complex understanding of identity. A universal conception of what woman is does not enable women from oppressed cultures to adequately characterize their relationship to white feminists from a privileged class or to oppressed men (264).

If cultural feminism appropriates from patriarchy the task of defining woman, Alcoff's second group, the poststructuralists, "reject[s] the possibility of defining woman as such at all" (259). Based on the work of theorists like Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault, poststructuralists believe that "we are constructs—that is, our experience of our very subjectivity is a construct mediated
by and/or grounded on a social discourse beyond (way beyond) individual control” (268). The identity of the individual is culturally overdetermined, denying little room for agency. When poststructuralism is applied to the idea of woman, Alcoff says, what results is nominalism, or “the idea that the category ‘woman’ is a fiction and that feminist efforts must be directed toward dismantling this fiction” (269). The identity of woman as woman is a construct, and in rejecting this construct, resisting the attempts of logocentrism to “capture her” in a category, woman can undermine the forces that oppress her (269).

The danger of this stance, Alcoff argues, is that a poststructuralist feminist must work to deconstruct everything, without constructing anything; such a feminism must be negative. What results is the impossibility of grounding a feminist politics because there is no feminines subject (270-71). Alcoff says, “for the post-structuralist, race, class, and gender are constructs and, therefore, incapable of decisively validating conceptions of justice and truth because underneath there lies no natural core to build on or liberate or maximize” (273). It follows then, that there is no way to even talk about sexism or gender discrimination; ironically, the premise that “woman” is a social construct, which is meant to allow women to escape the discourse that oppresses them, can be used to silence the victims.

In light of this discussion of the paradox feminism faces, I return to my original narrative about my relationship with Doug. Because I began to date him at the same time as I began my M.A. program, many of the circumstances of the relationship became intricately involved with my experiences as a novice in academia. As a Ph.D. student, he had successfully accomplished what I was facing at the time. During the incident I mention above, when he first handed me a piece of his writing, my anxieties were probably as much my fear of failing in the academy as they were of appearing unintelligent to him. My reaction was probably due to my recognition—conscious or unconscious—of the marginalized role women often hold in academics; I felt I needed to do more to prove myself in a way that some men don’t. Also, my silence was probably a result of my sense of alienation from an unfamiliar academic discourse. Doug standing in front of me was, in my eyes, a successful individual male in academics, and his prose in my hands was a manifestation of the discourse.

I could assume an essentialist stance, and explain my situation as the result of the fact that my femaleness makes me better suited to less competitive, more open and collaborative environments, and that the academy, and the men in it, are inherently hostile to my feminine nature. I am reluctant to do this, though, not only because I disagree with the notion of a female essence, but because I want to assertively participate and successfully compete in academia, and because I don’t want to believe that Doug is inherently hostile to me. Furthermore, to subscribe to the essentialist position denies the possibility that success for me could lie in innovating and playing with what has been coded as “masculine” discourse. For instance, this essay, because it is framed by my personal narrative, resists the more traditional mode of argument that tends to devalue experience in favor of more detached reasoned analysis.²
The poststructuralist position doesn’t help me much either as I negotiate my role in my relationship and in academia. The challenges I might face in the academy because I am constructed as “woman” will not automatically disappear even if I work to resist this construct as it has been established by patriarchy. In other words, if I refuse to allow my identity to be “captured” by the category of “woman,” I will not be able to talk about the ways I have been oppressed because of this category, because of my gender. For example, in Lifting a Ton of Feathers: A Woman’s Guide to Surviving in the Academic World, Paula Caplan describes through survey results and personal anecdotes the situation of several women in academics and offers advice to female scholars on how to maneuver around the discrimination, and the ensuing self-doubt, that these women suffer. She says, “women academics not uncommonly experience both emotional insecurity and the actual insecurity of not having firm, long-lasting contracts for work” (11). In order to name the sexism and to strive to change it, in the way a book such as Lifting a Ton of Feathers does, there must be a way to point to a female subject. Neither the cultural feminists nor the poststructuralists offer a positive option.

Composition Studies as Wife, Mother, Victim
The dilemma feminists face in theorizing woman, and the difficulties I face when I try to explain my own situation, become more complicated and have far reaching implications when writers presume a feminine subjectivity for an entire academic discipline. The feminization of composition studies occurs in a variety of discourses, and it can range from a few isolated metaphors to an extended analogy that frames an entire essay. There are, however, three prominent images used to characterize the field—as the wife, the mother, or the victim (of abuse or marginalization)—that overlap in many metaphors and narratives of composition studies.

To return to an essay I cited earlier, Schuster elaborates on the metaphor he initiates with his use of the phrase “women’s work.” He argues,

If the specialty of writing represents the female principle, then literary criticism (New Criticism, Critical Theory, even Feminist Theory) is the father, the husband, the phallocentric principle. After all, most English departments are defined by literature and literary critical interests . . . . Married to these figures (and an uneasy marriage it is) are the writing faculty, dutiful wives who do much of the dirty work: teaching writing, reading myriad student essays, training TAs and lecturers, administering testing programs. That is the primary function of the composition wives: to maintain house and raise the children, in this case the thousands of undergraduates who enroll in composition classes. Thus do they conspire in their own oppression. (88)

Here, composition studies is the wife, the mother, and the victim of oppression (in which the “composition wives” conspire).

While the marriage metaphor may be useful to capture the experience of several composition programs, there are a significant number of scholars and teachers who must locate themselves at the point at which the metaphor breaks
down. For example, Schuster himself, and many of the contributors to *The Politics of Writing Instruction* (the volume in which his essay is published) probably don't do the same kind of "dirty work" that many writing teachers do, and certainly not for the same amount of pay. The fact that he has the time to write this essay is evidence to this claim. While he and his colleagues may indeed feel like the "wife" to literary studies faculty, their marriage is far more egalitarian than the relationship between the English department and part-timers, TAs, and non-tenured faculty. Furthermore, choosing a gendered metaphor does not fully represent the experience of composition teachers from minority ethnicities and cultures or from lower socioeconomic classes; these people face oppressions (related to their careers) in more palpable ways—and for other reasons—than Schuster describes. Finally, this passage positions students as the children who need to be raised by their mothering composition instructors. Not only does this not reflect the reality of many students, but it assigns a role to writing teachers—raising the children—that severely narrows the perception of what many composition courses are about. Schuster is presuming a homogeneity among writing teachers and students that simply does not exist. It is only when composition studies is understood as an abstract concept, and not as real people engaged in real activities, that this metaphor can play itself out. Many in the field simply would not recognize themselves in this passage.

In addition to assumptions about the field, his characterization betrays assumptions about gender and about relationships among genders that are equally questionable. By presuming a feminine subjectivity for composition studies, he is necessarily working from a premise of what it means to be feminine. In order to describe the marginalized situation of composition studies, he implies a single, uniformly marginalized role for women in the family and in society. He attributes the oppression of women in this metaphor to the fact that they have to do the "dirty work" of raising children and keeping house. In doing so, he subscribes to notions of ideal motherhood and wifehood; ironically, the subjects of his essay, the underpaid, underpromoted, mostly female staff of composition programs, would fall short of the ideal because of their careers outside the home. His metaphor also assumes that to be woman, or to be a feminized composition studies, is to be oppressed, and to be male, or a masculinized literary studies is to oppress. Though Schuster would probably deny such rigidity in his categories, he does not acknowledge the limits of his metaphor. He ultimately reduces the experiences of a world of women and composition scholars to the single, identifiable figures of wife and mother, and at the same time he collapses countless men and literary scholars into one oppressive male character in the English department family drama. Furthermore, Schuster's marriage metaphor is heterosexist because it implies that the only relationship in which a feminized composition studies could find itself is with a masculinized literature department. For example, he overlooks writing programs that are more "intimate" with rhetoric departments, a relationship
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that—if pushed—Schuster’s metaphor would probably have to consider homosexual. Similarly, his metaphor could be read as characterizing many academics, who enjoy and are successful in both composition and literary scholarship, as bisexuals.

Similar criticisms could be made of Maxine Hairston’s metaphor of an abusive marriage to characterize the relationship between composition studies and literary studies. In “Breaking Our Bonds and Reaffirming Our Connections,” the revised version of her 1985 address as Chair of CCC, Hairston makes complaints like Schuster’s about the low status of writing programs in English departments. She argues that like an abused wife, “the major reason we [writing programs] get discouraged is that our worst problems originate close to home... And we are having trouble solving those problems precisely because they are so immediate and daily, and because we have complex psychological bonds to the people who so frequently are our adversaries” (273). She describes composition programs as having a psychological dependency on literary criticism and urges them to break their bonds to the English departments as a matter of survival, evoking in her metaphors not only psychological bonds, but also a marriage contract. “The enemy is intimate, a member of the family,” she says, and this makes assertion and separation painful (277). She extends her metaphor to a wider context when she remarks that these struggles are “battles against a patriarchal culture whose values we absorbed early” (275).3

Hairston’s petition for change clearly echoes the position of Alcoff’s cultural feminists: “the ideology of a female nature or female essence [here the inherent nature of a feminized composition studies] reappropriated by feminists [compositionists] themselves in an effort to revalidate undervalued female attributes [the natural attributes of writing programs].” For Hairston, like Schuster, a masculinized literary studies, precisely because it is literary studies, is the enemy. The attribute of the “masculine” English department which Hairston disparages most harshly is theory. She accuses composition studies scholars of being insecure about their work, and needing to prove to their literary counterparts that “their hearts are still pure. They do that by demonstrating that they have read the scholarship of deconstruction and semiotics and take it seriously. By bringing in the magic names—Culler, Fish, Hartman, and Derrida—they signal that they have not abandoned the faith” (274). According to Hairston, composition scholars should disdain literary theory when it is used for purposes other than to bring new ideas to the practice of teaching writing. Instead, she argues, the feminized composition studies should revalidate the essence of its own field—for Hairston at the time she was writing “Breaking Our Bonds,” this is the paradigm of process pedagogy—and in doing so, like the cultural feminists, appropriate the role of defining itself in its own terms.

Ten years after Hairston wrote her address, in “Hearing Voices in English Studies” published in a recent issue of JAC, Margaret Baker Graham and Patricia Goubil-Gambrell discuss the recent paradigm shift in composition studies from process pedagogy to highly politicized postmodern inquiry. They use Hairston
to represent the former and John Trimbur as spokesperson for the latter. Graham and Goubil-Gambrell also use a marriage metaphor in their article: "In English studies as in the academy in general, there has existed an uneasy marriage between teaching (the classroom) and scholarship (the academy)" (104). This time, though, unlike Hairston's earlier piece which addresses the relationship between composition studies and the literature department, the focus is on a relationship within composition studies—between pedagogy "the mother voice" and postmodern scholarship "the father voice."

To assume that there is an identifiable essence of composition programs that one could differentiate from literary studies simply denies the roles and practices of many people in English departments, work that doesn't necessarily limit the effectiveness of writing programs, but can often enhance it. Since Hairston's address, as Graham and Goubil-Gambrell's article documents, theory has greatly contributed to this diversity, enriching the work of several composition teachers and researchers. For example, in Composition as a Human Science, Louise Wetherbee Phelps agrees that "composition has often failed to adequately [check the validity of theory] in its enthusiastic and eclectic borrowing of Theory from other fields, and practitioners sometimes pick up composition theory itself in a faddish, uncritical way" (226). But Phelps maintains that a critical and reflective application of theory could result in a fruitful dialectic between theory and practice: "I would now argue that Theory and praxis mutually discipline each other and that each has its own sphere of action not to be dominated by the other" (238). Hairston (at the time of her address) would probably agree with this, but only on the condition that the theory involved is strictly composition theory. A glance at Phelps's Works Cited makes it clear that she does not limit herself in this way. In fact, it is the theory she appropriates from other fields that provides the foundation for her argument for a writing program independent of the English department. Phelps's work illustrates the benefits of moving beyond essentialist categories—gendered or otherwise—that the metaphors of Schuster and Hairston are governed by.

Schuster and Hairston conceptualize the field in its context in the university, and their essays suggest how the relationship between composition studies and the English department is often turned into an extremely traditional family drama. The feminization of the field also occurs through metaphors which characterize the roles and practices that comprise composition studies. In Writing from the Margins, for example, Carolyn Ericksen Hill suggests that it is often novice writers who, like women, feel themselves at the margins of mainstream culture. At various points in her book, those who are marginalized become feminized. In chapter 2, she uses powerful birthing metaphors to characterize what "writing from the margins" is: the marginalized feminine figure must learn to negotiate the boundaries between herself and her readers or those with institutional authority, and through this negotiation "interactional life is born" (40). Hill's use of the feminine metaphors is deliberate. She draws heavily on her own experiences as a mother and as a woman who has felt silenced
by those in power, often men, and she recognizes her own frustration and self-
doubt in her students (see "Introduction"). She says about her birthing images
that "something new comes from intense and even chaotic interactions at the
edges of life processes. Biological birth may serve as a model for these
interactions, with its initial mating between opposites resulting in creation of
new life, but creation in all its manifestations is not gender specific" (46). Hill's
metaphors vitalize the struggles of student writers and the teachers who work
with them, and are therefore more positive characterizations of composition
than those of Schuster or Hairston, for example. Furthermore, she seems to be
more self-conscious and reflective than the other writers I have discussed about
the way she uses feminine metaphors. Yet, her language very clearly genders the
field, and can be critiqued as such.

Another significant example in Hill's book where she seems to feminize
those who are marginalized is a chapter about Ken Macrorie, Peter Elbow,
William Coles, Jr., and John Schultz, which she entitles "Four Midwives." She
rereads the work of these men in response to those who wish to "safely
marginalize . . . the field's activities during the 1970s" (103). What I find
interesting in relation to this project is the way she plays with conventional
gender roles by attributing to these rather prominent male figures in
composition studies the traditionally feminine practice of midwifery. She explains,"I
call these four men midwives because they dared to help bring into the world
of composition studies some of those parts of mind lost to us . . . These men helped
us give birth to the idea that categorizing is a deadly practice" (104-5). However,
another explanation for her metaphor is possible. Given her gendering of center
and margin throughout the book—that those with power, those in the center, are
masculine, and those on the margins are women and students—by calling these
four men "midwives," in a sense cross-dressing them, she is able to deal with their
position as both center and margin. Macrorie, Elbow, Coles, and Schultz are
established teachers and scholars with significant institutional authority due to
their publishing record and academic careers. In order to talk about them as also
marginalized in the field, she uses a metaphor that dresses them up in a feminine
role, that of midwife.

The move to feminize that which is marginalized or victimized, as we have
seen in Schuster's, Hairston's, and Hill's metaphors, is further supported by the
characterization of the writing teacher as nurturing, open, and collegial, and the
gendering of these characteristics. For example, Robert J. Connors (in a passage
that echoes Schuster's passage on "women's work") claims that "the nurturing
of younger college students through their required composition courses, while
it never became an absolutely feminine activity, was work done on a permanent
basis by many women" (77; emphasis added). Connors's use of the word
"nurturing," as opposed to, for example, "conducting" or even "facilitating" is
clearly linked to the gender of the agents of the activity. Moreover, these
characteristics which become coded feminine, like "nurturing," "mothering,"
and "open," are often set in opposition to characteristics that are read as
masculine, such as “authoritative” or “strict.” Hill, for example, describes the teacher as one who struggles to open the boundaries between her “nourishing mother role, warm and soft-edged” and her role as authority figure (52). And although Hill argues for opening the boundaries between them, she begins with the assertion that the nurturer lacks authority. Hill establishes these roles as a binary, and they become too essentialized to merge.

Similarly, when Peter Elbow removes an authority figure from the classroom in *Writing without Teachers*, he also turns to gendered language. He claims that his “believing game” is more conducive to the teacherless classroom than the “doubting game” because the believing game leaves participants open and accepting. When he compares the two games, his terms are explicitly sexual. The doubting game, he says, reinforces these character traits: “rigid, stubborn, hanging on . . . learning to be sharper, finer, more piercing, harder, tougher,” as opposed to the believing game which cultivates these traits: “flexible, yielding . . . learning to be larger, more encompassing, softer, more absorbent” (179). Furthermore, the energy that is required for the believing game “is that peculiar delicate energy required to keep something energetically open” (180). Elbow recognizes the contrast between his two games as the contrast between “male and female as our culture defines them,” and he argues that there is much to be gained in an intellectual enterprise by overcoming the one-sidedness that favors masculine traits in arguments (180).

Susan Jarratt declares *Writing without Teachers* to be “truly a revolutionary text in its feminization of the male writing teacher” (110). However, she warns about the difficulties this pedagogy poses for women in the classroom. Jarratt argues:

> Advising a female student to ‘swallow’ without reply a conventional male reaction to a woman’s experience has serious consequences. Similar problems occur when a female teacher takes a nurturing role in a class of men and women—replicating the traditional female role in our culture. A female teacher who takes a position of uncritical openness toward the male student, especially if social-class differences also apply, invites the exercise of patriarchal domination to which every man in our society is acculturated. (111)

Jarratt alludes to the fact that the situation of the teacher who is defined as “mother” becomes more troublesome when issues of race and class are accounted for, but this point deserves more consideration. When a teacher’s role is reduced to that of nurturer, his or her “position of uncritical openness” may welcome not only sexist domination, but oppression or harassment due to the teacher’s race or class. That the classroom is not apolitical should be obvious. For example, theorists who place the teacher in a nurturing position must consider what it means for a female teacher of color to “mother” a white male student. In a very real sense, this teacher is already twice exposed to discrimination because of her gender and race; to put her in a position of unconditional caretaker simply increases her vulnerability.
Breakdown and Opportunity
The feminization of the work that writing teachers do or of composition studies as a whole poses particular problems for women, like me, who are standing at the door of an academic career in composition studies. It could seem plausible that I would feel especially welcomed into a field that has been feminized, especially because of the number of women that comprise its roles of theorist and teacher. But if I already recognize the precarious position of women in the university, and have experienced intimidation in the face of a successful male academic and his strange discourse, why would I want to settle myself into a field that is itself feminized and marginalized? And if Doug focuses primarily on literary theory, our relationship would represent in miniature the English department family drama, which would find me in a particularly uninviting role.

Perhaps more disturbing, though, is that feminizing the field imposes a debilitating dichotomy on the women in it. In "The Politics of Nurturance," Margo Culley and her co-authors claim that "in our culture, the role of nurturer and intellectual have been separated not just by gender, but by function; to try to recombine them is to create confusion" (13). The feminization of composition studies seems to preclude a recombination of nurturer and intellectual by reinscribing this split in several areas: within the English department (composition studies is the nurturing mother, literary studies the intellectual father); within the field (as in Hairston's essay, which relies on a metaphor that feminizes the teaching of writing and masculinizes critical theory and argues that they be kept apart); and within the individual teacher (as in Hill's book where the nurturing role is in conflict with the intellectual authoritative role). Women entering the field, and those already participating in it, who experience the cultural separation of nurturer and intellectual at a personal level must then immerse themselves in the dichotomy that a career in composition studies—as understood through these metaphors—poses.

Why then, do writers want to presume a feminine subjectivity for the field? The process of feminization may have to do with the position in which the field recently finds itself, that is, working to emerge as a legitimate academic discipline. I return now to the dilemma that feminists face, which Alcoff describes as the choice between the limitations of the cultural feminists who posit an essential femaleness and the limitations of the poststructuralist feminists who deconstruct the notion of woman altogether. In order to talk about the real difficulties of establishing composition studies as a recognized field, writers and teachers have struggled to name exactly what composition studies is and what its relationship is to the English department and to the university. Many scholars working from a poststructuralist position have attempted to declare composition studies a meta-discipline or post-discipline, basically calling into question the very idea that composition studies should try to define itself as a discipline (see Sosnoski; Harkin). But this doesn't help compositionists say who they are or what they do—it only says who they are not.
By constructing a feminine subjectivity for the field—as the wife of the English department or the mother of the students, for example—compositionists are in the safe realm of definitions; they can claim an identity. Why must this identity be feminine, though, especially when, as illustrated in several of the examples I discuss above, there is a strong connection in these metaphors between being feminized and being marginalized or oppressed? One possible answer is that by acknowledging their marginalized position and deliberately naming it as such, compositionists can see themselves as justified, indeed celebrated, in their courageous resistance to the institutional authorities that they construct as the oppressors, especially the English department and the current structure of academic disciplines that they feel deny composition studies its rightful place. Like the cultural feminists, compositionists reappropriate the task of defining themselves, and in doing so, can position the field as inherently different from other fields, especially literary studies, and what’s more, inherently valuable and worthwhile in its own right. If writers constructed the identity of the field as a dominant, masculine figure, for instance, there would be no reason, on an abstract level, to seek to change their position in the university. Because a feminine subjectivity occludes the class, race, and gender differences within composition studies, writers who do not experience oppression on these levels can still justify their efforts to name the enemy and work against oppression as a member of the field.

Furthermore, as I have mentioned, these metaphors suggest the reality that composition studies employs a large number of women at all levels. And the metaphors capture much of what goes on in the university and in the classroom. A field that is concerned primarily with teaching requires that its teachers and theorists identify downward, with the students. In a culture whose terms have been established by a fixation on vertical hierarchies that has been coded as masculine, to identify downward is coded feminine, and the language writers use to discuss composition studies is necessarily imbricated with the codes of the culture from which it arises. So, to feminize composition studies in many ways is to name its reality, and in that naming, to participate in a language that is socially situated.

Miller sees the gendering of the field as “negative” and as occurring through “external” exigencies in the phallocentric community. She argues that much of the field’s past and present experiences result from a “defining, specifically from a gendered, cultural call to identity” (“Feminization” 39). However, I believe the field is answering the cultural call to identity not by passively assuming the gendered role, but by earnestly asserting this identity for itself. And it does so not necessarily with negative consequence. In fact, to refuse this feminine identity—both as it is constructed from outside and from within the field—may have serious implications for the feminist concerns of teachers and theorists: it would limit the ways to talk about composition studies as a group of people who share similar experiences; it would restrict the efforts of feminist pedagogies which want to recognize the powerful ways writing (and teaching writing) can
work against an oppressive patriarchy; and it would overlook the reality of what compositionists do, and the way these practices and roles are gendered in their cultural situation. Finally, to refuse this feminine identity may pessimistically affect the attempts of the field to define and subsequently to change its position as a marginalized academic discipline.

My response to Miller is closely related to Alcoff’s “concept of positionality,” which she offers as an alternative to the cultural feminists and the poststructuralists. She says,

I assert that the very subjectivity (or subjective experience of being a woman) and the very identity of women is constituted by women’s position. However, this view should not imply that the concept of “woman” is determined solely by external elements. Rather, she herself is part of the historicized, fluid movement, and she therefore actively contributes to the context within which her position can be delineated. (288)

In light of Alcoff’s “concept of positionality,” then, to feminize composition studies is to assume a subjectivity that arises out of the field’s position in the discourses which shape it, discourses which proceed from what Miller describes as the “phallocentric community where it was born” (“Feminization” 39), as well as discourses like the ones I discuss here, where the “call to identity” is made both implicitly and explicitly from within the field itself.

But it is necessary, too, to see this feminine subjectivity as momentary inasmuch as it is part of an “historicized, fluid movement.” To limit composition studies to an essentially feminine subject position is to deny the varied roles its teachers, theorists, in fact the field as a whole must play. If compositionists must identify downward with students, at the same time they must assume an authority position in the classroom and identify upward in the hierarchy of the university. Likewise, recognizing that my identity as a “contributing listener” is part of the dance of discourses which locates me in a given position, I can contribute positively to this identity, and at the same time I can speak and act as a woman for whom this metaphor breaks down. And, as I work to enter an academic discipline which has been marginalized and feminized, I can locate myself as a woman, but must also recognize myself as a member of the white, educated middle class.

When the metaphors writers use to talk about composition studies presume a feminine subjectivity for the field, writers and readers must also deliberately acknowledge where the metaphor breaks down. Recognizing that this feminine subjectivity is momentary enables compositionists to animate the places where the metaphor breaks down, to locate the field in the spaces between metaphors as well as in them. In “Enigma Variations: Reading and Writing Through Metaphor,” Louise Smith, borrowing from Paul Ricoeur and Roland Barthes, claims that the metaphor’s breakdown, the “enigma,” is what makes the metaphor “writable” (164). Accepting the invitation of writability, Smith says, keeps one “searching for other contexts to partake in the metaphoric transaction” (166). The enigma is still very much a part of the metaphor, just as those
who cannot recognize themselves as the “wife” of literary studies are still very much a part of the field of composition. Frost says, “All metaphor breaks down somewhere. That is the beauty of it.” The metaphors used to talk about composition studies as a feminine subjectivity can break down rather easily, as I have shown. But to leave it at that is to decline the “invitation of writability” and to overlook the opportunity the enigma offers to reconcile the reality the metaphor speaks with those who cannot locate themselves in the metaphor. And “that is the beauty of it.”

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Notes

1 Alcoff does note, however, that Rich’s later work departs from this position (260n).
2 Admittedly, locating ourselves in our scholarship and research opens up a wide range of questions and dilemmas as Gesa E. Kirsch and Joy S. Ritchie discuss in “Beyond the Personal: Theorizing a Politics of Location in Composition Research.”
3 Hairston makes an interesting slip in her own metaphor when she complains, “We’ve left home in many ways, but we haven’t cut the cord. We still crave love” (274). Here she turns the English department into the mother and composition studies into the child, a feminization of the former which works against her dominant analogy.
4 See also Michelle Payne’s essay, “Rend(er)ing Women’s Authority in the Writing Classroom,” for her personal account of the debilitating struggle to reconcile her commitment to student-centered pedagogies with her belief in the “value of ‘apprenticing’ students into the academy,” in light of the painful reality that, as a female teacher, she “commands from most students less authority and power than a man” (103).
5 As Elizabeth Flynn discusses in “Feminism and Scientism,” there has been a tendency of some composition scholarship to attempt to “overcome...marginalization through identification with more powerful fields” (354). Specifically, in this article Flynn is talking about identifying with the sciences and social sciences, and the negative consequences of doing so.
6 I wish to thank the anonymous readers from JAC who offered helpful critiques of this essay, and I especially want to acknowledge the invaluable perspectives Susan Wall provided on this paper and her tremendous support throughout the drafting process.

Works Cited


