facets, when used strategically, will give a necessary cut to the issues, but those same edges may also be used to shape a wedge to break the whole apart.

I pose the question of who is romancing whom as a rhetorical strategy for sharpening the edges of feminist inquiry in composition studies, and for maneuvering a dangerous situation to the limits of tolerance and safety in order to secure the greatest advantage—in global terms, the advantage for women and others living in hostile territories; in local (and immediate) terms, the edge I think feminism must secure vis-à-vis other domains of critical theory. The skill with which we use this question will be a measure (but not the only one) of contemporary feminism's brinkmanship. The dangers for feminists cannot be handled through mere diplomacy, at least not in any simple sense—although the various border-crossings in recent theoretical discourse sometimes try to reduce the sharp edges of ill will, ancient hatreds, and pure aggression to the folly of bad logic or bad manners.

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Who's Sandra Harding? Where's She Standing?

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The notion of objectivity is useful in providing a way to think about the gap that should exist between how any individual or group wants the world to be and how in fact it is.

Sandra Harding

Sandra Harding tells her JAC interviewers, "Philosophers set out to be polemical; they set out to argue with people" (198). And she certainly has succeeded. Harding has been roundly criticized, on one side by analytic philosophers, on the other by postmodernists and feminists (see The Monist and Alcott and Porter). From our standpoint as postmodern feminists (at least occasionally), it would be easy to fault Harding's work for its Enlightenment tendencies, and while that position should be critiqued, there is both a nuanced argument and conscious strategy in Harding's work that problematizes easy categorization. This resistance to classification is what makes Harding difficult to refute as well. Clearly, she is a veteran of analytic philosophy, but in her thinking across epistemologies, she makes us aware of both the limits and advantages of each position. She may be an Enlighten-
ment Neo-Marxist, overly confident in reason, progress, and human rationality, but, significantly, this is not all she is. Consequently, we are going to refuse the Harding challenge, avoid polemics and arguments, and instead, follow one of her suggestions on how to read her work. In *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*, Harding advocates that the reader see her theorizing as subscribing to the Brechtian mode of theater, that is, precisely as discourse intended to incite, discomfit, and provoke (xi). Harding asks us to read her, incited and provoked, but ultimately to be able to use her work as a catalyst for reconciling, or at least for navigating between, the empiricist and the relativist positions and then finally for “designing liberatory social relations.”

Harding's work is about the very rhetorical activity of finding discourses and interpretive strategies for understanding the other, making social progress, and imagining an emancipatory science. She wants to bridge and transform binary oppositions. She doesn’t want to make the weaker term the stronger, to deconstruct binaries and play with multiplying possibilities; rather she wants to transform the pair objectivity/subjectivity by inter-penetrating the terms, and with a new formation, “strong objectivity,” re-think the gap between what we want and the way the world is. In studying science, she forces postmodern theories of text and the subject to interact with the real, and in writing feminism, she forces a middle ground between feminist empiricisms and feminist standpoint theory, that is, scientific method and history. She does not want the demonstrably failed objectivity of empiricism or the relativism inherent in many standpoint theories; through *standpoint epistemology*, she offers, instead, an objectivity that acknowledges the effect of politics on knowledge production. At the simplest level, Harding wants the numbers, the statistics about women's lives to be recognized as real as well as the constructs of hegemonic discourses. And she wants us to take action on the very real that those numbers represent.

This is not a unique move, especially within rhetoric. Kenneth Burke, for instance, struggles in the dialectic between experience and language, the real and culture. But Harding's feminist epistemology is a strange project and the conflict in her pairing needs to be understood. Feminism works to describe and legitimate women's experience and knowledge; epistemology, especially of science, historically and traditionally, has sometimes worked to undermine knowledge claims by women and colonized cultures and to deny its own political nature. Harding accepts epistemology's God term, objectivity, and changes it to “strong objectivity,” strengthening it with feminist theory by making “objectivity” necessarily a political term, one of political position and one of political action. She seemingly accepts science's values and criteria and critiques the existing concept of objectivity as “not rigorous or objectifying enough” (“Rethinking” 51). She goes so far as to pick up the traditionally masculine value of “strength” to characterize her “objectivity,” one extended to include the examination of cultural influences and back-
ground assumptions. In this process of embracing the terrors of Enlighten-ment reason (probably not our worst nightmare), she vanquishes the En-lightenment's own big fear, relativism. In arguing that some social situations are better starting points than others for scientific knowledge, that social location has consequence for problem definition and solution and that democratic values produce less partial and less distorted beliefs, she evades relativism, a threat to the Enlightenment project, but also a threat to emancipatory projects because of its too easy acceptance of “different strokes for different folks” and the resulting failure to intervene in “business as usual.”

Her success in arguing for “strong objectivity” as one way to conceptualize objectivity is dependent on her cluster of terms, “reflexivity, objectivity, and method.” In effect, she keeps the god-term objectivity, but places it in a polytheistic religion. Reflexivity, critical self-scrutiny, defines strong objectivity and so controls method. In the JAC interview, Harding defines, “in an extremely simplistic way,” strong objectivity as “learning to see ourselves as others see us,” a definition which brings reflexivity into relationship with objectivity and method (204). Her question, “How have the conceptual frameworks that I'm using been shaped to fit the problems of white women in the West more generally?” brings the three into relationship, too, and it is a question that we should all modify to describe our own situations and use to understand how our membership in a community, dominant or not, can be a resource, not simply a hindrance (206). Reflexivity about our position and our prejudices ideally helps us to intervene in the momentum and direction of the discourses and ideologies that surround us. This reflexive first move in an objective research program is major modification of the old methodologies; by acknowledging that we change the world as we observe it, we can come to use our observations of observing, reflexivity, as a resource, not a limit to our projects.

Harding's position has been critiqued as more postmodern than femi-nist, as viable without nasty entanglements in feminism, as too concerned with established Eurocentric, scientific discourses, and as appealing to foundational innocence by her concern with realism. And we must admit that it is startling (alarming) to read a feminist referring to the “valuable,” “glorious,” and “ancient” history of objectivity (Whose 113, 160). While we would choose other terms and won't join Harding in celebrating objectivity, however defined, we appreciate Harding's strategy at work. Harding understands and acknowledges the objections to objectivity, but sees the structure of the academy and society as requiring her to continue its use. She knows, “One cannot afford to 'just say no' to objectivity” (160). After all, it is one of the “key terms that have been the jewels in the crown of Western philosophy and of philosophical thinking in every discipline” (“Starting” 208). She gives explicit reasons for her approach to the dichotomy between relativism and objectivity, saying
if you are going to stick with the dichotomy, why take the weaker side? Take the strong rhetoric . . . I think we should conduct our intellectual and political struggles on the terrains where those struggles are taking place. And for anybody who works close to the natural sciences or the law or public policy, relativism and subjectivity are not the terrain where those struggles are taking place—that's not the language that's going to help people understand how to do better than we've been doing. ("Starting" 217)

Old fashion sophistry or simple pragmatism? Neither is particularly lady-like or forthright, but they're certainly strategies known, appreciated, and used by us rhetorical types. What seems to drive Harding's decisions more than anything is a conscious attempt to be effective in intervening in existing systems of power, empiricist and postmodern. While her approach lacks purity (could one even say objectivity?), Harding's tack is compelling and even necessary, at least in part, because she consciously strategizes on multiple levels, and in multiple systems, including her writing as a site for being reflexive about enactments of power.

In positioning herself in the space between two intellectual schools, Harding undertakes a difficult task. Its difficulty, however, is compensated for by the dividends she generates. As the voice attempting to navigate this in-between space, she demands attention from both opposing viewpoints, encouraging conversations (or polemics) between these groups. So even as we question Harding's shifting standpoint, we must conclude that despite her postmodern spin on logical positivism, Harding is not A. J. Ayer in an Everready Battery bunny commercial. Sandra Harding is a Sophistic, Enlightenment, Neo-Marxist, standing in the middle of a intellectual battle-field advocating a direction for change.

Standpoint epistemology and reflexivity have many implications for rhetoric and composition, but we're going to follow up on just one of the interviewers' questions. While Harding recognizes the traditional power enough to want to go back into the patriarchal sludge and reclaim "objectivity," she is far more ambivalent when it comes to discussing the struggle against illiteracy and its relationship to powerful traditions ("Starting" 201-02). In fairness to her, this is probably because the issue is not her area of research or expertise. It is a concern she can speak on, and she acknowledges the perspectives of the cultural relativist and the cultural literati, but it is not a concern where she can describe a strategy for changing the meanings of terms. Harding understands the tensions between our "multi-language, multi-literacy culture" and the meetings and conversations that must take place in "a public civic polity." And while she optimistically thinks that European countries, such as Switzerland, might offer an alternative model, ultimately she concludes that "we need to rethink this whole issue" (202).

Compositionists are committed to rethinking the whole issue, but we evade the middle ground between valuing each literacy and recognizing the established places of discourses of power in the civic polity. Our discussions, too often, are at the extremes and too seldom ask, how does one intervene
strategically and effectively in struggle over literacy in this country? Harding's intervention in the field between relativism and empiricism can help us think about paths through our own divisions. To aid with the our thinking through divisions, we turn to Sharon Crowley’s engaging polemic, “Composition’s Ethnic of Service, the Universal Requirement, and the Discourse of Student Need.” Crowley’s article, which coincidentally follows the Harding interview, defines the divisions in the literacy struggle between the lines of a service ethic of remediation in a universal requirement, Freshman Composition, and a “vertical and diverse curricula in writing that aim at the achievement of critical, public literacy” (238). She would have us “abandon the universal requirement,” a requirement that she sees as tending “toward standardization and away from the recognition of students’ diverse abilities and desires” (238, 233). And less controversially, she would have us identify our discipline with the good word “writing” rather than “composition,” “an institutional term that is thoroughly saturated with the discourse of formal correctness” (237).

While we fully agree with Crowley that students are writers and that our goal is a vertical and diverse curricula in writing, we find the abandonment of composition, as even just a term, a bigger problem, for many of the same reasons that Harding rejects the abandonment of “jewels in the crown of Western philosophy.” Composition is a term central to the institutionalization and administration of writing in higher education; it has the advantage of history and tradition. Furthermore, it is a place where compositionists and rhetoricians are established, have economic and institutional power, and are affecting change. If our disciplinary desire is to intervene strategically and effectively in the struggle over literacy in this country, it would be very strange to throw away the term and institutional space that lets us practice and effect the literacy of large numbers of students.

Composition, however, is a term in need of appropriation; we need what might be called “strong composition,” a term that might help us re-think the gap between what we want and the way the world is. Many of us already think of composition as writing, as a cluster of radical notions, notions such as that all humans, including freshman, are writers and critical thinkers, able to develop new discourses (including disciplinary ones) and to utilize those discourses to create the changes they choose. Rather than throwing away the cluster of notions around composition, working with the very general term “writing,” and struggling to mold it to our meanings and purposes, rather than imagining a sphere outside institutions where writing is pure, our efforts might be put into conceiving a strong composition, an emancipatory and reflexive composition.

Harding discusses the “progressive and regressive tendencies” of both feminism and science; composition, too, has “progressive and regressive tendencies.” In some practices, it even has radical tendencies. Crowley does a fine job describing the regressive tendencies that affect our discipline and
our practices, but her own position as a strong, sophisticated voice of critique is evidence of the progressive, if not radical possibilities within composition theory. The Wyoming resolution, though it has not achieved wide implementation, has received wide-spread acknowledgement for its problem description, and problem description is a key step in inventing solutions, progressive and radical solutions. If composition is to be strong, we need to work on progressive and radical aspects as well as to recognize the regressive. Harding would tell us to ask ourselves, "How have the conceptual frameworks that I'm using been shaped to fit the problems of white women in the West more generally?" and to use our answers to strengthen our reflexivity, to use it as a frame for understanding how our membership in a community, dominant or not, can be a resource, not simply a hindrance (206). Harding nudges us further, asking us to "try and rethink how one's social location can nevertheless be used as a resource in spite of the fact that we're members of dominant groups," and to be the radical or progressive instructor who can critique and build discourses (and skills) is to position oneself as a resource.

The concepts of strong composition and reflexivity can help us think about whether the universal requirement of freshman writing is necessarily a regressive tendency within composition. Rather than thinking about composition in terms of student need, strong composition would encourage us to be strategic and reflexive in thinking about the requirement in terms of progressive and radical agendas. In thinking about our past experiences in first year classrooms, we find it difficult to classify them as regressive, progressive, or radical, in part because the nature of that universal requirement is so varied. Considered with specificity, composition is not a universal requirement or an essential activity. One campus has done away with freshman writing; one elite private school only requires 10% of its freshmen to take composition. On many campuses, the most advanced freshmen, 10-15%, write about "great books" or on disciplinary issues. Composition on some campuses has no set syllabus, at others it has a social-constructive syllabus, and at still others an expressive or cognitive syllabus. Some places require a semester, others a year's study. Composition is housed in English, in education, and in independent departments. Sometimes composition is an institutional term indicating "formal correctness," other times it indicates the space where discourses of power are appropriated by the marginalized, and sometimes both things happen in the same classroom. The diversity of the first-year course itself is a resource for preserving diversity and it serves to diffuse institutional pressures and disrupt the impulse to cultural literacy.

Once we acknowledge how diverse the "universal requirement" is, that it is not universal in content nor requirement, then we need to begin to be reflexive about our own agendas and our resources for the classroom and the democracy. For instance, Crowley worries that some composition classrooms may erase a student's home language. It is a valid fear, though she knows that many members of marginalized groups have to be adept at
multiple languages, "home" languages and dominant languages. Harding's position is relevant here. Rather than offering students either skills in the dominant discourse or writing in their home language, our position as women skilled in the dominant discourse allows us to teach students about their choices, including bilingualism. A marginalized student does not have to choose between keeping her home dialect and writing in the dominant discourse with its access to power; she can do both and be reflexive about what it means to do both. To arrive in college suggests that the student has already been developing a double consciousness; she has been developing the rhetorical strategies that Harding employs. Our position in the classroom can be a resource to her further development. In a "strong composition" classroom, a classroom studied and understood reflexively, the student is not passive, she looks back at us from her cultural particularity, and we must acknowledge ours, for better as well as worse.

Harding tells us, "we should conduct our intellectual and political struggles on the terrains where those struggles are taking place" (217). In the academy, the primary struggle for literacy takes place on the terrain of composition, a battleground that will be bloody for a long time to come. Composition and its institutional space, like Harding's "objectivity," provide a site to think about the gap between what we want the world to be and how it is. In thinking through our desires reflexively, in playing out a dialectic between the textual and the real, rhetorical strategy and sophistry are our disciplinary strength, a major resource for "designing liberatory social relations." How revealing that a philosopher of science reminds us of this. 

Notes
1 This paper was greatly helped by a round of talks with Dennis Lebofsky, Frank Sullivan, and Sue Wells.

Works Cited


The Monist 77 (1994).
A Note of Gratitude