

On Becoming A Woman Pedagogies of the Self

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FUTURE HISTORIANS EXAMINING THE PARTICULARS OF LATE TWENTIETH-century writing instruction doubtless will conclude that college-level literacy entailed significant practice in the assumption of alternate identities. Evidence of pseudonymous and anonymous electronic conferencing, of MOO sessions where fictive personae are required or encouraged, and of personal Web-page selves composed from multiple media will persuade these historians that writing teachers using electronic forms considered the idea of invented, multiple selves integral to literacy formation.

This essay takes you back to the early years of teaching with computer technologies—1986, 1987, and 1988—when teachers in networked classrooms using realtime conferencing software first began experimenting with what I call pedagogies of the self, teaching practices that undermine unitary concepts of self and induce students to take on alternate identities. For evidence, I turn to transcripts of online teaching archived at the University of Texas at Austin Computer Research Lab (CRL). In effect, I re-run in slow motion the magnetic tapes that have recorded the making of selves during realtime electronic conferencing, freezing frames to examine closely the range of subject positions made available to students—women students in particular—through their interactions with teachers and classmates. Electronic technologies not only alter our language practices; they provide both mechanism and impetus for reconsidering topics of long-standing interest to teachers and theorists of language, and the relationship of language to self is just such a topic. Across the centuries, theories of rhetoric have offered specialized vocabulary for figuring this relationship. Aristotelian ethos refers to the tailoring of self for persuasive purposes. Renaissance rhetoricians coined sprezzatura to signify an oscillating, contradictory self, whose artful instability constituted decorum (Lanham). Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Scottish rhetorical theorists understood self as mind; hence the study of psychology directed the teaching of rhetoric (Horner). Kenneth Burke proposed identification—self location in relation to others—as the central mechanism of persuasive rhetoric. Poststructuralists, argues Linda Brodkey, “articulate relations between a possible self and a possible reality (which includes possible others)” (238). Postmodernism conceives

the subject as multiple, competed for, and constituted in discourse. Finally, information age rhetoricians newly theorize subjectivity as a process of morphing or, to use a different metaphor, as the recombination of social identities (Balsamo; Haynes; Heath).

Whereas rhetorical theory addresses the relationship of self to language and provides a vocabulary for articulating this relationship, histories of rhetorical education (or writing instruction) examine the pedagogical procedures by which ideologies (including ideologies of the self) are transmitted to consciousness, or, alternatively, how pedagogies at the level of everyday practice constitute ideologies. In either philosophy of education, teachers are not absent from scenes of writing instruction because pedagogies, whether objectivist or epistemic, transmissive or social constructionist, are designed and implemented by teachers. I make this point because teachers using electronic conferencing technologies have frequently represented their influence on classroom discourse as negligible, celebrating their diminished presences and ceding classroom management to software applications. Eager, perhaps, that their institutionally conferred authority not undermine a student-centered model of education, they neglect conceptualizing a rhetorical authority designed neither to control knowledge nor win arguments with students, but rather to assist the development and maintenance of equitable discursive environments. I find, however, that teachers' reluctance to imbricate themselves in student discourse does not preclude their enactment of rhetorical authority.

"Rhetorical authority" implies both the use of persuasive language and an understanding of how discourse is working in a particular environment at a particular time. "Rhetoric" is a richly nuanced term, situated variously within different systems of knowledge, and historically, a "rhetorical" practice has been complex and specialized, something other than mere verbal presence among others. Indeed, Aristotle begins the *Art of Rhetoric* by making this very distinction:

[F]or all [persons] up to a certain point, endeavor to criticize or uphold an argument, to defend themselves or to accuse. Now, the majority of people do this either at random or with a familiarity arising from habit. But since both these ways are possible, it is clear that matters can be reduced to a system, for it is possible to examine the reason why some attain their end by familiarity and others by chance and such an examination all would at once admit to be the function of an art. (I, i)

Granting that success in argument is well within the reach of those who practice speaking among others regularly, and certainly not out of reach of those who rely upon fortune alone if such persons are willing to take bad fortune along with good, Aristotle argues for an analysis of the differences. Presumably, the habitually successful disputant has tacit knowledge that well might be systematized so that interactive, public reasoning (or argumentation)

becomes a discipline, that is, an art made accessible both theoretically and practically. Although Aristotle conceives success in terms of winners and losers of particular arguments, a teacher inserting herself into the electronic conference is perhaps more interested in exercising an authority that fosters equitable discussion.¹

By its innovative character, much of our teaching in interactive electronic environments, continues to fall into the category that Aristotle might refer to as “chance” teaching, and which Plato disparagingly would call “cookery,” for teachers in computer-mediated environments necessarily test the uses of electronic technologies for writing instruction on the spot, by trial and by error, risking chance outcomes. To examine the differences between electronic conferences left to chance and electronic conferences whose teachers practice a rhetorical authority, I examine conference transcripts logged early in the history of computers and writing, when all software features were innovative. Not only do these transcripts make available for analysis many examples of classroom discourse, they also provide access to numerous electronic discussions during which teachers analyze their own innovative practices. Hence a researcher has access not only to student discourse, alongside evidence of teachers’ discursive presences, but also to the conversations whereby teachers begin to newly theorize writing instruction from practice itself, to the process of transforming risky pedagogy to disciplinary art. Researching online teaching is an interpretive practice, for I have had to read over the shoulders of teachers and students, so to speak, tracing out patterns perhaps invisible to these participants, despite their active presences at the very discursive events under scrutiny. As lurker historian, I read primarily from a teacher’s perspective, with interest in outcomes but without responsibility for them, and I read at a more leisurely pace.

The scene of my investigation, then, is the online classroom; the object of inquiry, pedagogy; the human beings in question, students and teachers; the focus, women students. Focusing on women is appropriate for investigating the relationship of self to language in online environments on two counts. First, women not infrequently report that finding a satisfactory location from which to speak as women is not as simple as we would like it to be.² It follows that people who experience participation in online conferences as liberatory might wish to stop and listen closely to opposing accounts. Second, at the site whose documents comprise my research materials, gender issues pervaded classroom discourse. Gender became topical, for instance, when students read Deborah Tannen on conversation analysis, when they studied representations of women’s speech in cartoons of the 1970s, when they debated implementing non-sexist language in the classroom, and when they read Helena Viramontes in tandem with Ernest Hemingway.³ Gender became topical even when teachers did not so intend, for students frequently invited each other to a gendered social identity from which to read both print texts and the texts they were engaged in building online.

SEIZING THE DAY

Revolutions provide opportunities for the marginalized to participate in the rearrangement of the social, political, and economic hierarchies that affect their lives, and a media revolution is no exception. Our current media revolution offers opportunities to propose new social arrangements with an array of writing tools. It provides especially rich opportunities for women's activism because a gap between old and new literacy conventions has been forced, and the already legitimized concepts of "innovative" and "alternative" may be used to advantage by those who wish to wedge innovative and alternative selves into the new discourses. The proliferation of representational venues encourages women to fragment unitary conceptions of the female by representing selves in graphic and textual shapes not easily categorizable.

We need not be naive, however, in assuming unilateral correspondences between new media representations and the various civil, economic, and political arrangements that govern material lives,⁴ nor even in assuming automatic correspondences between women's new self-representations online and equity in virtual space. Faced with building opportunities galore and few guarantees of outcome, we may wish to retain issues of equity in the form of open-ended questions: How do textual or graphical representations affect social arrangements both on and off line and what accounts for the variable effects?

Discussions of equity and computers often turn to the technicalities and politics of providing access, for this is an area over which we can plot remedial action. It is more difficult to imagine how change is effected rhetorically, once physical access to virtual spaces is provided. Indeed, it seems that our metaphors mark the very limitations of our imaginations. The metaphors of space and frontier frequently employed to describe online life contribute to the mystification of social arrangements in virtual environments just as they did during westward expansion. Such metaphors propose that once provided the vehicles by which to access virtual space, women are unstoppable in their quest for self-empowerment: they need only get there and fill the space. We might begin inquiry into the space metaphor by asking women pioneers whether they would confine "ease" in occupying the spaces to matters of technical access.

Indeed this was one of the questions Gail Hawisher and Patricia Sullivan addressed when researching professional women's uses electronic media. For twenty-eight days, thirty women conversed about their occupancy of e-spaces, a term used by the researchers to designate human cultures constructed by way of networked, online activities. Some women reported that difficult physical access did indeed prevent satisfactory online presence, but others located difficulty or ease in the discursive environment itself. Of these latter, some reported complete satisfaction with their online cultures; others, some satisfaction for the chance to speak without interruption, and still others, dissatisfactions sufficient to induce them to abandon certain e-spaces in frustration and anger. Although the researchers were anxious not to allow accounts foregrounding

discontent to override those of satisfaction, they were interested in the narratives documenting perceived inequities, and so am I, not because I wish to affirm women's victimization, but, on the contrary, because I believe that close examination of the discursive mechanisms causing dis-ease may promote the discipline and art of producing equitable discourse. My investigation borrows from Joan Wallach Scott's understanding of historiographical practice:

Perhaps the most dramatic shift in my own thinking came through asking questions about *how* hierarchies such as those of gender are constructed or legitimized. The emphasis on "how" suggests a study of processes, not of origins, of multiple rather than single causes, of *rhetoric or discourse rather than ideology or consciousness*. (4; second emphasis mine)

I am less interested in dramatic episodes of flagrant, misogynist conduct, such as the infamous rape on LambdaMOO (Dibbell) than in the quotidian discursive events that de-neutralize the spaces available, enhancing or eroding their desirability as suitable locations from which to speak.

UNDER PSEUDONYM

The 1987, 1988, and 1989 records of online teaching at the University of Texas at Austin Computer Research Lab do not indicate whether teachers spoke directly to students about subjectivity. Teachers did, however, report a particular fascination with pseudonymous conferencing, a practice certainly instrumental in altering subjectivity. During a 1988 graduate seminar, for example, graduate student and faculty instructors discussed the possible effects of pseudonymity on their students' sense of the relationship of self to language as experienced during online discussion. "FORUM" (now "InterChange") refers to the realtime conferencing module of the Daedalus system. The following excerpt is taken from the middle of the conference:

Lester Faigley: Nonetheless, it is fascinating how you feel compelled to jump into the discussions in FORUM when it is so easy to sit back and listen in an oral discussion without participating. I'm going to pass out the last transcript from my E309 class. The students all took pseudonyms. I also invited JoAnn Campbell. The text we discussed is an ethnography called THE COCKTAIL WAITRESS. It's interesting that not only did everybody participate, but that everybody participated almost immediately, even though I had no idea who was doing what. I want to use this transcript as a text to analyze, particularly the week after next.

Graduate Student: Lester, let's use pseudonyms for one of our sessions. Imagine the possibilities.

*Graduate Student/
CRL Teacher:* I have had similar success in my E 309 class with pseudonymous Forums. I'm wondering why students jump in so easily, playfully. I talked to one girl in my class who said she assumed a persona

exactly opposite of the way she felt she was, and said absurd statements that contradicted her own beliefs, just to see how people reacted and to see what it felt like to say those things.

Lester Faigley:

Are you suggesting that we go with pseudonyms next time?

Graduate Student/

Lester: In a word, yes. Pseudonyms (and no-names) make for

CRL Teacher:

very different FORUMS. In such a confident and outspoken bunch as this, we might not notice it, but in my English 309 class, where there are people who are afraid of their ideas sounding stupid, the pseudonymous FORUM was a smashing success.

Graduate Student:

I think the pseudonym idea is great. I think of all shy freshman writers so reluctant to express an opinion.

These off-the-cuff messages begin the process of building theory from practice, and although not explicitly articulated as such, two distinct theories of self and language are set forth during the sequence. One theory proposes that a student writing under pseudonym “outs” a formerly hidden or inhibited self through language (“shy freshman writers . . . reluctant to express an opinion”), and the other, that pseudonymity enables the construction of selves in language (“[a student] assume[s] a persona exactly opposite of the way she felt she was”).⁵ The first theory accommodates a writer’s sense of self set free from social/discursive constraints, able to take advantage of the virtual spaces at her disposal, whereas the latter envisions pseudo-selves positioned within a social/discursive environment, regardless of space. Indeed, testing alternate personae in the company of others entails careful observation of the effects of one’s speech within a particular environment.

During the above conversation, the instructors introduce several kinds of evidence supporting continued use of pseudonymity: near universality of student participation (formerly fearful students speak out), degree of student enjoyment (students jump in playfully), and increase in students’ repertoires of possible discursive positionings (a student tries on different personae to see how the class reacts). Although the first two arguments are not specific to writing instruction, the third argument certainly is. If teachers of interactive argumentation begin with the premise, then, that pseudonymous conferencing is advantageous because it expands the range of subject positions available to students, then they would necessarily conclude that the practice of pseudonymous conferencing at Texas in the early days taught this lesson only erratically. Records indicate that some students taking on prefabricated literary personae created discursively impoverished characters. “Betsy Ross,” to use an example from a pseudonymous conference featuring women in history, was unable to imagine herself speaking outside the confines of her needle. Her remarks consisted entirely of offers to sew for others, and she devised no alternative discursive action. Not infrequently, students in pseudonymous conferences withdrew into prefabricated literary or historical worlds, articulating new selves that

were hard pressed to converse productively across spans of time and genre, as when Moby Dick and George Washington struggled to find common ground. Still others were encouraged by pseudonymity to set out information about their personal lives that would be withheld under “real” (or regularly appearing) identities. Yet apparently pseudonymity was considered by most CRL instructors a universally excellent classroom activity, and no evaluative distinctions among pseudonymous sessions were forthcoming during these years.⁶

Although large claims about the pedagogical value of pseudonymity cannot be based on fragmentary evidence, such evidence indeed can serve to frame the issues it raises. If the purpose of pseudonymous and other pedagogies of the self is to teach that identity is a construct, that subjectivities may be altered at will or by circumstance, or that language is not transparent, then the particularities do not much matter. So long as a student practices constructing, reconstructing, altering, and fictionalizing the self, the lesson is learned. If, however, teachers are invested in the shape of the discourse they wish students to produce online, in expanding the range of students’ discursive options, and in producing equitable discursive environments, they will need to examine more carefully the means that best serve these purposes. The question becomes, then, not “What are the technical means by which we can problematize student identities?” but rather, “To what ends do we do so?”

INTERROGATING THE FEMALE SUBJECT

Under certain circumstances, pseudonymous discussion may dramatize for students the argument that gender is a cultural and linguistic construct, and this lesson is known in culture studies jargon as “the interrogation of subjectivity,” an educational procedure enabling people to apprehend the social forces at work in the formation of self consciousness (Johnson). Implementing pseudonymity at Texas, however, may have served a more immediate purpose: establishing an equitable environment. For when gender became topical in sessions conducted under “real” social identities, the subjects placed under severe interrogation usually were women. Male students frequently antagonized female students by essentializing their behaviors, and it would become incumbent upon women to accept, refuse, or ignore the category “women,” or to challenge the undesirable characteristics assigned to the category before speaking from within it, before allowing their experiences as women to openly inform their arguments.⁷ Each option—to accept, refuse, ignore, or challenge—carries an array of immediate discursive consequences for the women students undergoing this form of interrogation. Indeed, the onus placed on women is striking. And to say so is by no means to fault the instructors who chose readings about women and by women in order to build women into the daily work of the language classroom. Nor should we necessarily fault male students who engaged, in many cases, not in the locker room dialectics described by Christine Boese in “A Virtual Locker Room,” but rather in the

familiar cultural practice of light, cross-gender teasing. Still, by being targeted, women students are more apt to experience the effects of a pedagogy of chance whose results are unpredictable, a matter of fortune. That is, by becoming the subjects under interrogation when gender is introduced into discussion, some women may indeed take advantage of the opportunity to become more savvy and “empowered” by practicing self-location within discourse when the going is tough. Others, however, may become silent or otherwise discursively disempowered, unable to find satisfactory locations from which to argue well.

Unpredictability of outcomes (or chance teaching) thus may be partially responsible for the election of pseudonymity as the medium of choice for interrogating gender, subjectivity, and language, at the CRL and elsewhere. Indeed, Donna Le Court and Cynthia Haynes, in separate articles, have begun theorizing feminist subjectivity in networked environments from the practices they observe and participate in. Both researchers ground some of their observations in data produced during pseudonymous conferences, and both assume the exclusionary nature of discourse, its impermeability, its easily invoked hostility to women’s presences, and the inadequacy of traditional rhetorics for theorizing procedures or providing satisfactory strategies for rhetorical action. Both invoke French feminist theory and reject expressivist rhetoric (one of the theories under consideration in the University of Texas CRL), finding expressivism an ineffective means for challenging patriarchal discourses. Whereas the tactics Haynes and Le Court advocate may resemble various expressivisms by the inclusion of emotion as part of discursive repertoire and by the relaxation of politeness and decorum, these tactics are better understood as calculative discursive moves and their authors as among Lanham’s “cynical connoisseurs of language” (146).

Haynes argues specifically for abandoning a cherished feminist practice—a politics of location that relies heavily upon space metaphors—believing this metaphor ineffective when translated to virtual environments. Advocating instead a feminist seizing of what is decidedly new in realtime virtual environments—speed and motion—and following Cixous, Haynes envisions feminist activists “flying through” but not occupying the spaces provided by programmers and/or wizards, whose likely masculinist persuasions and ideologies are merely constraining. Developed from images of motion, speed, and shape, a feminist “position,” according to Haynes, is “amphibious,” less a location than a process of making disorder.

Similarly (but following Irigaray), Le Court advocates using virtual spaces to “jam” discourse in order to create self-representations not contingent upon the dominant. Citing from pseudonymous course transcripts, Le Court provides examples of discursive episodes where both women and men purposely disappoint the expectations associated with the provision of writing spaces. Feminist action is achieved when writers accede to expectations by occupying space and speaking within conventional roles, then subvert these very roles by taking on multiple subject positions from within a single identity. Repetitious

acquiescence to a traditional role achieves, in the end, an effect of mockery. Haynes demonstrates this very technique in part three of her essay (@gender). In preparation for the development of *LinguaMOO*, Haynes interviews a wizard from PMC (*Post Modern Culture*) MOO, ostensibly to inform herself more fully about pre-programming verbs (or emotes) for MOO participants. During the course of a short interview, Haynes writes “Cynthia smiles” and “Cynthia nods” seven times and otherwise signals support by murmuring “I thought so,” “hmmm,” “yes,” and “I see” in an hilarious qua sobering parody of the friendly, supportive, space-ceding, female interviewer.⁸

Both Haynes and Le Court provide necessary visions, theories, and vocabularies—the beginnings of a new rhetoric of the self—for feminist performances in online environments. The classroom example I provide in the last section of this essay supports their work by illustrating the discursive mechanisms by which “free” space becomes bagged with properties preventing women students from successful discursive occupation of that space. I hope to justify Haynes’s and Le Court’s critique of the commonplace among computer compositionists that providing physical access to virtual space suffices and that empowered self-representation is easily accomplished. However, the assumptions underpinning my argument differ somewhat from those of both Haynes and Le Court. Rather than cast all discourse in the role of patriarchal villain and principal opponent, I conceive discourse as more pliable and responsive to manipulation, less in need of violent disruption, although by no means innocent. Such a theory of discourse enables me to assign to teachers and other participant rhetorician/rhetors some responsibility for partial and temporary remedies for exclusionary events, an assignment that requires careful readings of discursive environments and careful writing, in short—a rhetorical authority. My alliance with Haynes and Le Court may weaken at the link where their revolutionary tactics brush up against my reformist ones. But a weak link, I believe (and hope they will agree), does not preclude the alliance.

I do not, for example, privilege pseudonymity at the expense of simulating possible selves under “real” names. Because we may reasonably assume that a good portion of women’s professional and personal online work will be performed under their stable, off-line identities, certainly women will benefit from understanding and practicing self-representations under these identities. Gender erasure, argues Teresa De Lauretis, must be considered in light of its consequences:

Do[ing] away with sexual difference altogether . . . closes the door in the face of the emergent social subject, . . . a subject constituted across a multiplicity of differences in discursive and material heterogeneity. Again, then, I rewrite: If the deconstruction of gender inevitably effects its (re)construction, the question is, in which terms and in whose interest is the de-re-construction being effected? (25)

Indeed, even without pseudonyms, electronic conferencing tends to destabilize a writer’s sense of self. In realtime discourse, a range of available subject

positions becomes visible to writers, and the idea of a possible or temporary self existing among possible alternatives becomes more apparent, if the writer/reader attends closely. The apparent separation of self from body that electronic conferencing enforces, or, put another way, the appearance before one's eyes of a simulated self who then scrolls right by and must be made by its author to reappear repeatedly in ever-changing rhetorical contexts, announces to students something about the constructive power of language and something about the limitations of linguistic constructs as well. Illusions of control are swiftly undermined by the diminished likelihood of long-term gain or fixed returns on a writer's choices. Successes online are fleeting, and rewards for careful construction of ethos are strikingly ephemeral.

Constructing or assuming alternate identities, however, is not synonymous with conceptualizing the relationship between language and self. Indeed, rhetorics or textbooks designed for undergraduate writing instruction in or outside of computer classrooms seldom provide discussions of self. Barry Brummett's 1994 textbook *Rhetoric in Popular Culture* is an exception. Although not designed for online environments, it does include an explanation of how reader subjectivities form in response to a text:

The Marxist scholar Louis Althusser (1971) and others (for example, Hall 1985) have argued that texts ask those who read them to be certain kinds of subjects. To be a certain kind of subject is to take on a sort of role or character; these theorists argue that rather than having any single, stable, easily located identity, we do nothing but move from one subject position to another. In a sense, then, the power that a text has over you has a lot to do with what kinds of subject positions it encourages (or forces) you to inhabit. (98)

Unfortunately, Brummett's treatment suffers a partial loss of explanatory power when applied to online environments because it grants mobility to the reader only, who is said to take up subject positions ranging from "preferred" to "subversive," with respect to an inert text. Indeed, Brummett cautions students that "a subject position is not a character in the text itself" (98) and so marks the significant limitation of his approach for teaching in online environments, where participants indeed *are* characters in the texts they produce. Brummett positions readers as rhetorical analysts only, whereas in online environments, they are writers as well, required simultaneously to analyze and produce discourse, to be rhetoricians, rhetors, and subjects under construction by others as well.

Although the classical term *ethos* currently governs the idea of self and language in networked writing classrooms at Texas, and although students use the term with some success for both analysis and production of discourse, its presence derives not from the practice-based theories of teachers in the CRL, but rather from an off-line syllabus introduced in computer classrooms in 1991. Working from a substantial knowledge of digital text, Richard Lanham has suggested that the Renaissance term *sprezzatura* might prove useful for theorizing digital hermeneutics, but to my knowledge this term is not in use, either as

vocabulary for theorists or as tool placed at the disposal of students. Although the teacher featured in the extended example below does not provide students with conceptual tools for considering their discursive options, his rhetorical pedagogy—his discursive art—attends carefully to the reluctance that women students exhibit when asked to take up subject positions as women, and he works to provide a broader range of possibilities from which they might construct their arguments.

ATTENDING TO WOMEN'S SPACES: A PEDAGOGY OF THE SELF

Prior to the Hopwood decision, the University of Texas at Austin sponsored a summer program for minority scholarship students residing in Texas, and enrollees were mostly Latina/os and African-Americans. According to archival records for summer 1988, a first-year writing course for students in this program was designed around texts documenting the communication practices at a variety of work environments. I have selected passages from three different electronic conferences performed during this course, tracking the specific discursive events that invite women students to speak as women even as the strength of such a discursive positioning is eroded. I track women's decisions to take up the position or sidestep it and the instructor's efforts to expand the range of available subject positions to all students.

Readings assigned in preparation for the first conference were taken from Studs Terkel's *Working*, a collection of workers' narratives transcribed from oral interviews. Just prior to the following excerpt, the instructor has suggested several times to students engaged in lively discussion of some of the men's narratives that they turn to the women's texts. Finally they respond to his urging, and one student observes that possibly the most difficult aspect of one woman's job is the lying she is required to do. Anxious, perhaps, to thicken this thread of discussion on women, the instructor responds as follows

Instructor: It's interesting that both Sharon Atkins and Enid Du Bois talk about lying on the job.

And perhaps because the phrasing of this message invites the response that women lie because they are women, the instructor reframes the observation, suggesting instead that workers might lie because of working conditions:

Instructor: Can you think of other jobs that require people to lie regularly?

Together these questions lay out an analytical terrain accommodating both essentialist readings of women and cultural readings of working conditions. They extend an offer to women to occupy the category "woman" and respond from this subject position, to occupy the category "worker" and respond from that position, or to occupy both or neither. Rhetorical decisions for women are immediately complicated, however, by a message that begins the ongoing process of larding the category "woman" with additional "information":

David: I wasn't surprised by Jill Torrance [one of the narrators in *Working*] in the least. Most women, excluding UT women, aren't as materially minded as others may think

David draws the following response:

Angelica: David, did you only exclude UT women because there are women in this room with you?⁹

Previously, Angelica had hedged when the instructor offered the subject position "women," responding with a story about a female friend who regularly lied on the job. Her message to David constitutes another evasion, yet marks her interest in issues of gender and rhetoric. Rather than contest, which possibly would entail speaking as a woman, Angelica queries the rhetoric of the discussion at hand, reading for author intention, reading for the effects of writing on other writers.

When the question of women's "natural" or habitual shyness becomes topical during a subsequent discussion about computer-networked writing, once again women students must decide whether to respond as women, that is, to take up subject positions as women, or to devise other places to stand. In the ensuing discussion associating computers with freedom to speak, several participants propose that the networked machines free the women to say whatever they want, invoking the expressivist theory of networked writing ("shy freshman writers so reluctant to express an opinion"). This time, women do respond as women, yet gratuitous information about the nature of women shapes their responses. The following sequence omits messages not directly relevant to my argument.

Alejandro: David, if it were not for computers, how many of us would be expressing our opinions as openly as we are now. I feel that the personal atmosphere is much better.

Instructor: David, I think computers separate people if we were all just talking to computers. But since we are all hooked up together, we can come up with a lot more ideas as a group because we can all "talk" at once.

Gordon: It's true what Alejandro said about computers. If we didn't have these things most of us (especially the girls) would be very shy and therefore, wouldn't express their feelings like they do here. I'm not saying anything to get the girls mad, but most girls are quiet when discussion are taken about and they are called upon. What do you think females?

Katy: I have to disagree with you Gordon.

Gordon: Why Katy?

Angelica: Gordon, I personally feel exactly the same way you do. I know that if we were sitting in a classroom I would not talk as much. It is alot easier for me to talk to the class using the computer.

Mara: I agree with Gordon that this interaction with the computer and the class is a lot more beneficial than an oral discussion but I do feel that girls can be just as vocal as boys if the guys just give them a chance.

- Gabriela:* Well Gordon, most of us are not shy. At least I don't think I am. It is sort of hard to go up and talk to someone, especially a guy, without them thinking you want something or that you are interested.
- Katy:* If we (females) have a comment to make on a particular subject than we usually state [it] unless you (males) are monopolizing the whole discussion.
- Gordon:* Normally we do but we'll be nice and hear your opinions.
- Angelica:* Gordon, are you trying to say that the males have the option to let the females voice their opinions?
- Miguel:* Katy, sorry but it would be impossible for us (males) to monopolize the whole discussion, considering the computer will print responses as fast as you can type them in. And we are not saying anything out loud, so we can't drown you out.
- David:* Katy, what you did is very typical and transparent. Why play it off on the guys when it is the girls that usually don't enter discussions. Also, the people that always talk the most are girls and they stop when they are asked to do so. Women are just contrary.
- John:* Katy, you know that guys want to make their points across. So if someone says something wrong, a guy is less hesitant to disagree. Girls may want to get something across, but they feel if they interrupt someone, they better make sure they have their facts or evidence straight.
- Angelica:* Miguel, I understand what you are saying and that is true, but David is really getting on my nerves. There are so many things I want to say to him. I just wish I had the guts to tell him.

The argument as to whether women are free to choose when and how to speak, both off- and online, and/or whether they are constrained by male monopolies is about how discourse works when gender becomes a factor in its production and analysis. Here women students demonstrate their attentiveness to the constraints of discourse even as they speak. While refusing to locate gender difference in shyness or reasoning power, they argue and demonstrate that they experience discourse differently from men, in both offline and online environments. For example, before Gabriela can reason about computer-based communication, she must clarify that what may look to men like shyness might better be understood as self-protection. Katy asserts that men typically monopolize conversations, thereby calling men to male subjectivity, a position Gordon readily accepts, as does Miguel, who asserts a corollary to the "women are now free" proposal: that technology actually prevents men from monopolizing conversations. Although the women who become involved in the discussion eventually affirm the advantages of networked conversation, they resist the essentializing of all experience in networked environments. Angelica's final ironic remark about not having guts to speak assures us that for her, even in computer-mediated environments, there are strong stakes that impinge upon her discursive choices. Evidently it is less a question of spaces available, than of the quality of those spaces.

When students read John Train's "For the Adventurous Few: How to Get Rich," an essay on global free enterprise, and Ehrenreich and Fuentes' "Life on the Global Assembly Line," an essay about working conditions for third-world women, the instructor carefully positions himself outside student discussion by asking students what Ehrenreich and Fuentes would say to Train and introducing his question via a student comment. Simultaneously, he avoids direct invocation of "women" and thus eases the pressure on women to respond as women to questions about women. Angelica takes up the topic proposal and produces an argument referring to women as "they":

Instructor: Mara says that Ehrenreich and Fuentes would likely despise Train's attitude. What would Train have to say about them?

Angelica: The authors of, "Life on the Global Assembly Line" would feel very different. They felt that the women are exploited in the Third World and as far as they are concerned there are no business ethics for the women. They are practically treated like slaves in the Third World.

Several messages later, Steve names women as the primary audience for the article, thus calling women students to a possible subjectivity from which to respond:

Steve: The way Ehrenreich and Fuentes keep mentioning how the women are working for such low wages it seems to me, that this essay is addressed more to women.

The instructor follows Steve with a message on women (not reproduced here) whose length strongly supports a third-world-women discussion thread without directly calling women students to gendered subjectivity. He adroitly directs Ehrenreich and Fuentes's arguments to the Latina/o members of the class but frames his question as a question about culture, not about women:

Instructor: Ehrenreich and Fuentes make some specific claims about the culture of Mexico—that it makes it easier to exploit women. At the end they say that because a woman's reputation is so important in Hispanic culture, women will "bend over backward to be respectable" and thus cause no trouble for the employer. Do you think this claim is accurate concerning Hispanic culture?

Two men address the question first, Alejandro pointing out strengths of Latin culture (being able to take care of yourself and speaking out for what is right), and John evidently rearticulating the claims that working-class women in Latin America must either work or get married. Angelica, on the other hand, undertakes the task of guarding against broad assertions about women and their actions. She challenges essentialized representations of Latinas and confronts the growing number of restrictions becoming operative in this locally constructed environment. I cannot speak for Angelica's intentions but can assert that her words serve within this discursive environment to clear once more a space for women of Latin descent to speak without encumbrances.

Alejandro: Hispanic culture does stress the reputation of women, but they do not necessarily stay out of trouble. Another characteristic that is stressed is being able to take care of yourself which means speaking out for what is right.

John: I feel the claim is accurate because those Hispanic women have a choice of either getting married to someone or stay on the job. The thing is if you don't have a husband, then crying is the only thing that these women can do. The authors said that the men will not stay on the job after working a couple of times, so women will do it.

Angelica: In certain parts of Mexico where the women do not know any better, I think that this is true about them bending over backwards to be respectable, but it is not like this in all of Hispanic culture. I think that once these women come to a country like America they lose that claim.

The instructor interposes two more long messages, one on the politics of foreign investment in Mexico and the other on working conditions and entrepreneurship in South Africa, ending by offering all students subject positions as business executives. The geographic areas he names called students to ethnicity as well, albeit obliquely.

Instructor: . . . So what would you do if you were the executive of a company that had a factory in a country with no laws protecting its workers?

Marcos [still on the woman question and likely not having seen the instructor's new post]: Angelica , I think that Hispanic women should revert to that type of thinking. Don't you agree?

Angelica: Marcos, I do not feel that they should revert to that type of thinking. Why are you trying to make me mad?

John: I'm not going to say anything about Marcos's comment because I don't want any lady in here mad at me.

Gabriela: In my opinion most Hispanic women are very consciencous about their reputation. It is very evident in the United States. I have been to Mexico several times and it is very common to see several women that are prostitutes, and they are all mostly young.

Steve: If I had a company in South Africa I would try to change the working conditions for the blacks, but if it got to the point that it was costing the company too much, then I would have to do what ever is best for the company.

Angelica: It would be real easy to say that I would try to improve the working conditions, but in reality I would probably, to some extent, take advantage of these poor people. It all depends on what your heart and mind allow you to do. If you can live with yourself after you run over these people then you will get your profit otherwise it is better just to stay out of it.

Gabriela: A lot of difference in a person response will depend on if that person is dealing with people of his own race. If I had a company in Mexico I don't think I would exploit my own people. It is very likely that my

ancestors were probably treated like this and I do not think I could go in there and do the same.

In this first-year course composed primarily of African-American and Mexican-American students, the instructor introduces the ethnicity question with careful subtlety, via articles on the effects of third-world capitalism. The ethnic subject position is not thrust full force upon them, but is offered, nevertheless, and taken up in the above excerpts—by Latina/os and likely (although I can't be sure) by African-American men. Gendered subjectivities for women have been offered by the instructor previously and often, but most recently during this session in combination with the discussion of third-world, working class women, and when complicated by the introduction of questions of reputation and morality, the Latinas are put on the spot, for the woman position has become quite vulnerable and disempowered. Once the instructor offers "executive" as subject position, however, he has many takers.

Donna Haraway writes that women's experiences are "structured within multiple and often inharmonious agendas" (243), and this conference provides a sense of what this powerful insight might mean. When women are asked to encode their experiences within a specific classroom-produced discourse, even one designed and executed with great care for equitable practice and populated by polite, intelligent discussants, they comply, if they choose to do so, under local constructions of the category "woman." When Gabriela is offered "executive" in addition to "worker" as a subject position alongside a heavily bagged "Latina," she finds an adequate position from which to relocate morality in places other than women's psycho/sexual behaviors, which had been introduced and sustained as characteristics typical of being Latin and female. As entrepreneur and "person," she writes using a male-gendered pronoun, she is able to resituate morality within business ethics. In addition, she proposes ethnicity or roots (ancestors) as causal forces for her ethical decisions: "If I had a company in Mexico I don't think I would exploit my own people."

Perhaps even more crucial to the production of equitable discourse is the possibility that when many women are present and differ in their self-representations, then "women" as a category—represented variously—can be taken back from its reductive forms and rebuilt as a multiple. Both constrained and enabled by the shape of local conversation, the women students in this virtual classroom demonstrate some success in figuring "Latina" as a multiple construct, situated variously within different geographical, socioeconomic, and psycho-sexual arenas, but the question remains as to whether their proposal for women's diversity was influential among the discussants.¹⁰ Noteworthy as well is Mara's role. Although Mara did not participate directly in the more confrontational episodes, she did provide useful metacommentary (indeed one wishes she might have said more), naming what for Angelica and Gabriela was not easily namable if they wanted to retain their positions as public reasoners rather than fractious antagonists speaking from disempowered discursive locations.

THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

I have not discerned in the archival records examples of students either male or female creating new emotions (Haynes). I am unable to say comfortably that Gabriela or Angelica or Katy or Mara spoke their contradictory selves within a single voice (Le Court) or whether they shifted shape in ways that might be considered amphibious (Haynes). I am more comfortable saying that Gabriela, for example, was finally able to combine satisfactorily a number of the subjectivities made available to her in order to speak about a possible ethical self and possible ethnic self placed in a possible position of power. Indeed the metaphors of recombination found occasionally in the work of Ann Balsamo and Shirley Brice Heath might be usefully aligned with those of Haynes and Le Court, for still we have no adequate terminology to account for the exclusionary tendencies of discourse while attending to the making of online selves.

Gabriela, who may well have finished her coursework and graduated in 1993, is not available for commentary on my interpretation of her writing. I cannot provide her reading of the particular excerpt of online discussion I have magnified for inspection; likely she would not remember it. If by chance she were to have become a Marxist feminist in the interim and were to offer her own retrospective reading, quite possibly she would object more strongly to the economic binary—exploited and disempowered worker versus entrepreneur—than to the tainted, gendered subject positions that I am more concerned with. She might read the segment not as a provision of multiple subject positions for a woman's recombination but rather as entrapment within the false ideologies of capitalism. Still, I offer my nondefinitive reading of this excerpt as an example of teaching with some (partial) comprehension of the disadvantages for women who would speak from gendered spaces and their reluctance to do so. I offer it as example of a teacher's attempt to put rhetorical authority to good use, as an example of online teaching that leaves marginalization and inclusion neither to the spaces provided by the software nor to chance.

Teachers allotting class time to electronic conferences and committed to sponsoring equitable discursive environments find themselves awkwardly positioned with regard to their own assignments. Certainly, we should consider each session a new and untainted episode of interactive writing, but also, I argue, we should suspend naiveté about the benevolence of online discourse and acknowledge its exclusionary as well as inclusionary history. Positioned institutionally as constructivists, as instigators of student writing, and as the parties responsible for assuring its value, teachers may wish to distinguish between virtual space and discursive space, taking action to assure an ample range of discursive positions for all students. The above excerpts demonstrate the delicacy of so doing—the small turns of phrase by which the instructor carefully, gingerly, makes offers to students of possible selves. Even so, he is not able to extricate himself from his connections to these selves and from his own

responsibility for their being. He may be faulted, perhaps, for not providing an “elsewhere,” that place to stand outside oppressive discourses, or for providing sets of binaries—male-female, worker-entrepreneur—as materials for students’ self-construction. Nevertheless, there is art and sound method to his cookery.

NOTES

1. One of the early Daedalus instructor manuals addressed the issue of conferences gone awry by proposing that most difficulties arise from students’ psychological immaturity.
2. Early in the history of online writing instruction, for example, two titles appeared in the 1990 special edition of *Computers and Composition*: “Sharing Authority on a Synchronous Network: The Case for Riding the Beast.” (Marshall Kremers) and “Taking Women Professors Seriously: Female Authority in the Computerized Classroom” (E. Laurie George). Although both articles placed under careful scrutiny budding notions of virtual utopias, the grammatical discontinuity between sharing (authority) and female (authority) signals important conceptual differences. Whereas Kremers conceives authority as distributive, however difficult the process of distribution, George understands authority as a situated, cultural construct and finds practicing authority in her environment irrevocably linked to gender.
3. These examples are taken from transcripts of Daedalus InterChange sessions logged from Fall 1987 through Spring 1989.
4. Joan Landes documents the unfortunate results of revolutionary opportunity in the aftermath of the French Revolution, when subordinate positions for women were reconfigured through their idealization as keepers of virtue and the attendant excision from public life.
5. Surveying both undergraduate and graduate students in 1987 and 1988, Jerome Bump reported this very distinction in students’ perceptions of self in online environments. Although most students in his survey were pleased with the increased freedom of expression and with the reprieve from a politeness enforced by peer opinion, others conceived their activities as a role-playing, an understanding that defused accusations of insincerity (“Radical Changes” 57).
6. See Minock and Shor, “Crisscrossing Grand Canyon: Bridging the Gaps with Computer Conferencing,” for a report on uses of pseudonymity that expand discursive options for students.
7. In his ethnography of a single University of Texas course, Wayne Butler documents one woman’s inability or unwillingness to sustain a feminist perspective and concludes that her feminism was not strong enough to sustain the pressures of the discursive environment.
8. Haynes supplements her theorizing with education. She writes: “. . . I have constructed (in collaboration with Jan Rune Holmevik of Oslo, Norway) a text-based virtual reality environment called *LinguaMOO* where I train our teachers and students to pursue alternate writing activities and alternate classroom dynamics” (@gender par. 37).

9. I have provided pseudonyms for the students represented here, and their messages are lightly edited (spaces inserted, for example) for the sake of reader comprehension.
10. Gabriela has previously sent a confusing and perhaps defensive message, but one that insists upon differences within the Hispanic woman category: "In my opinion most Hispanic women are very consciencious about their reputation. It is very evident in the United States. I have been to Mexico several times and it is very common to see several women that are prostitutes, and they are all mostly young. Angelica writes, "but it is not like this in all of Hispanic culture."