CHAPTER 23.

MAKING THE POLITICAL PERSONAL AGAIN: STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING STUDENT RESISTANCE TO FEMINIST INTERVENTION

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The author proposes that mentoring students who resist identifying as feminists even when they agree with the movement's tenets requires strategies that promote recognition of the diversity of women's lived experiences and contemplation about what motivated their responses to the opportunities granted or denied them by the cultural practices of their time. This literature class case study draws from the work of Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy (RCL) scholars to present a framework for introducing students to the need for feminist interventions prior to involving them in community activism.

Students often possess misconceptions about feminism and resist identifying as feminists even when they agree with the movement's tenets. Mentoring these students requires strategies that promote recognition of the diversity of women's lived experiences and contemplation about what motivated women's responses to the opportunities granted or denied them by the cultural practices of their time. The following class case study presents my decision to highlight exclusionary practices and subsequent feminist interventions to introduce the concept of activism to students for whom social action may seem irrelevant. I propose that in order to develop feminist rhetors and future activists and align feminism with community engagement beyond academic borders, feminist pedagogues must help students recognize the need for social action, the responsibility of the self to her community, and the consequences of failing to engage. This proposal is grounded in the belief that one's course design can function as an early feminist intervention, one that debunks myths surrounding feminism and encourages

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students to cultivate the kind of critical engagement that leads feminists to effect change, thus welcoming students into the feminist community.

ON WELCOMING STUDENTS INTO THE (FEMINIST) FOLD: A REFLECTIVE OVERVIEW

I first taught Confronting HIStory: Narratives of Female Identity and Experience, a sophomore-level special topics literature course (developed with the support of a grant from my university President's Commission on the Status of Women) in Spring 2014. I teach at a large, comprehensive doctoral-granting institution in the Southeast with a substantial population of first-generation college students, and this class is the third and final general education English course required of all students, following two first-year composition courses. Students can choose from the standard course, The Experience of Literature, or from a diverse list of special topics sections. Though students enrolling in Confronting HIStory were aware of its theme, their reasons for choosing it varied; some did so because they like history, others because of the title's reference to female identity, still others simply because the meeting time was convenient. The class consisted of twenty-one women and four men; fourteen of the students identify as European American, ten as African American, and one as Latino. Students ranged in age from twenty to thirty-three and represented fifteen different majors. Four were new transfer students, and twelve were first-generation college students.

I was particularly aware of the four males in the class; in keeping with feminist ideals, I wanted our class to attend to issues of inequality affecting all groups denied power by the patriarchal order that structures our lives: this was not just a class about women's struggles for equality. Together, we would explore racial injustice, heteronormativity, and various other issues of concern to students. I was motivated to create this course because the readings had been meaningful to me personally, because I believed that many students would benefit from exposure to a different account of feminism than they had encountered previously, and because I wanted students' reflections on their own life experiences to prompt the recognition that social change is not just part of our nation's history but remains necessary even now. My impression of today's students is that they, admittedly much like my own generation, are on the whole less civically engaged than their predecessors. I don't mean to imply that this is true of all university students, and I acknowledge that a variety of factors contribute, including the changing nature of activism thanks to Web 2.0 technologies, as well as what the Pew Research Center's (2014) report on "Millennials in Adulthood" characterizes as "the timeless confidence of youth." I suppose this trait could just as easily

lead to meaningful social action as complacency, and yet, significantly, another Pew Research Center report on Millennials from 2010 characterizes Millennials' "satisfaction over the state of the nation" as a "generation gap," for though "in recent decades the young have always tended to be a bit more upbeat than their elders on this key measure . . . the gap is wider now than it has been in at least twenty years. Some 41% of Millennials say they are satisfied with the way things are going in the country, compared with just 26% of those ages 30 and older." One might wonder what accounts for this; perhaps the young people of today feel less need for revolution because of the advances made by previous generations, but worth noting is that the Pew Research Center's (2013) report on "Civic Engagement in the Digital Era" asserts that "Education and income, more so than age, influence people's political involvement," with those from less educated and less wealthy classes playing less of a role in political life online.

Those who are less learned and less well off may have neither the time nor the inclination to engage in political activism; as a result, their concerns may remain unaddressed, further marginalizing them. The university where I teach has a large population of first-generation college students, many of whom are students of color from low socio-economic backgrounds who work long hours in addition to taking classes. That was certainly the case for students in the Spring 2014 course, nearly half of whom were themselves first-generation students. Instructors at our university tend to view this sophomore-level literature course as our last chance to help students cultivate a love of literature—a worthy goal, to be sure, but because of my desire to encourage students to take part in ongoing cultural debates, I also wanted the course to present literary texts as contributions to important cultural conversations, and so I set out to design a course that would motivate students to reflect on their own experiences and consider how they, like the historical figures and fictional characters we would encounter, could use writing to interrogate and challenge existing beliefs and practices (see Appendix A for the course syllabus).

As a feminist Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy (RCL) scholar, I considered this course design (see Table 23.1) an important opportunity to mentor students in recognizing that the political is indeed personal, influencing their lives and futures, and thus must be engaged. I recognize in this pedagogy an impetus similar to that espoused by Royster and Kirsch (2012) when they explain that the new analytical model they present in *Feminist Rhetorical Practices* is not an attempt to limit avenues of inquiry or pedagogical approaches but rather to "embrace a set of values and perspectives . . . that honors the particular traditions of the subjects of study [or, in my case, students], respects their communities, amplifies their voices, and clarifies their visions, thus bringing evidence of our rhetorical past more dynamically into the present and creating the potential, even with contemporary

research subjects, for a more dialectical and reciprocal intellectual engagement" (p. 14). This course design sought to connect with students in meaningful ways by helping them recognize the value feminist principles and writing hold for their own lives, thus promoting dialogue and increased engagement.

Table 23.1. Course structure

Unit 1: Recognizing Erasures and Silences called attention to the ways women have been silenced or excluded from full participation in the societal power structures that influence their lives. Among other texts, this unit featured Butler's (1979/2003) science-fiction novel ***Kindred***, in which Dana, an African American woman living in 1970s California is transported to the antebellum South and charged with saving the life of a slave owner who will become her ancestor. As she moves between these two different worlds, Dana experiences life as a slave and comes to understand history's lasting impact, a theme we discussed throughout the semester. This unit concluded with consideration of how one's subject position influences the options available to her and reflection on the difficulties associated with challenging patriarchal power structures.
Unit 2: Understanding Feminism as an Unspoken Presence began with a screening of Episode 1 of the (2013) documentary film ***Makers: Women Who Make America***, a text that reveals the presence of feminist ideals even during a historical moment when women were largely relegated to the domestic realm. The film portrays the birth of second-wave feminism through the personal accounts of individual women resisting established societal practices excluding them from the professional arena. Naslund's (2003) ***Four Spirits*** is set in 1960s Alabama during the Civil Rights Movement; its main character, European American college student Stella Silver, is a fictional counterpart to many of the women profiled in *Makers,* as she, like her African American contemporaries who also factor prominently in the novel, must find her way in a changing and often dangerous world. Lee's (2010) documentary ***4 Little Girls*** further brought this tumultuous time in history to life for students. The second unit encouraged students to consider not only what is gained but also what can be lost in the struggle for equality.
Unit 3: Striving for Inclusion and Equality for Women continued to draw from *Makers* but highlighted existing threats to equality as depicted in Atwood's (1985/1999) dystopian novel ***The Handmaid's Tale*** as well as in recent news stories surrounding reproductive justice.
Unit 4: Disrupting and Critiquing Hegemonic Narratives found us exploring narratives that challenge the patriarchal order, such as Mullen's poetry collection ***Muse & Drudge***, which confronts cultural narratives about African American women, femininity, and beauty, and Bechdel's (2006/2007) graphic novel ***Fun Home: a Tragicomic***, which traces the author's relationship with her gay father and her growing self-awareness through references to her childhood diary entries. These texts explicitly address the silences and erasures that we considered initially, and they illustrate how one text can respond to others, calling accepted narratives into question while allowing for other, more nuanced, understandings of identity.

THEORIZING THE COURSE AS A FEMINIST INTERVENTION

When considering how to structure the course, I turned to Ritchie and Boardman's (1999) critical historical survey of feminism in composition. I acknowledge that using Ritchie and Boardman's exploration of feminism's presence in the discipline of composition to frame a literature course may seem odd, but as a compositionist teaching a literature course, I recognized that the course texts I had chosen functioned similarly to the publications and personal accounts Ritchie and Boardman cite, as each in its own way "sought inclusion and equality for women," illustrated feminism as a "'subterranean' unspoken presence," and resulted in "disruption and critique of hegemonic narratives" (p. 587), what has elsewhere been described as the three Rs: rescue, recovery, and (re)inscription (Royster and Kirsch, p. 132). From the beginning, I envisioned the course as much a feminist intervention as a literature course, thanks to its inquiry-based, reflective nature.

A primary course objective was to introduce students to accounts of how others have found our world wanting and have endeavored to improve it; I wanted to provide students with literary and historical examples of this so that they could begin to recognize how they can use feminist principles to intervene in their own lives. As a result, I knew I needed to be especially thoughtful about how I approached course themes, and I felt an obligation to introduce students to concepts associated with feminist rhetorical work, including the notion that writing is, as Micciche (2010) asserts, "essential to feminist projects, particularly for those that critique oppressive practices and discourses, articulate strategies for change and collective action, identify and describe how rituals of the ordinary are, in actuality, problems, and generally depict the expansive multiplicity of women's and others' realities" (p. 173). Given my audience of undergraduate students either unfamiliar with—or, perhaps more often, possessing misconceptions about—the history and purposes of feminist movements, I felt it necessary to add one additional category to our course outline: "recognizing silences and erasures" so that students would understand *why* the historical figures and fictional characters we would encounter considered social action necessary. This framework gradually introduced students to feminist principles, first through attending to the inequalities motivating women to pursue social change and then by considering what was involved in their efforts to challenge accepted practices that marginalized them and others.

ADOPTING PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES THAT ALLOW FOR AND NEGOTIATE RESISTANCE

Early on, I identified collaboration as a crucial course component, knowing that

collaboration fosters community while exposing students to different perspectives and conveying that they are both responsible for and capable of contributing to the class's shared knowledge (Daniels and Bizar, 1998, p. 11). Establishing a supportive classroom community was particularly essential given the personal nature of students' final projects, discussed in detail in the following section. For the Collaborative Connection Presentation, teams created a critical analysis or public response to a historical event, recent news story, or issue of importance to women (students either selected topics from a list I provided or proposed their own). The research students conducted for these projects educated them about injustices that persist to this day while exposing them to the work of contemporary change agents. This project allowed students to understand feminism as a collective endeavor, as they worked together to craft responses to issues of interest to them, much in the way that feminist activists do when determining how best to respond to oppressive social practices and public policies.

The most effective presentations had a clear purpose and addressed a specific audience, such as the group that set out to persuade a toy company whose products and marketing were based on gender stereotypes that this practice failed to take children's diverse interests into account and could inhibit the company's sales. Where these presentations fell flat in some cases was in connecting with an audience, often because the audience or purpose were ill defined even after the groups received feedback on their presentation proposals. The group working with the topic "reproductive rights" not only called for an end to legal abortion, they included disturbingly graphic images to support their position. This example illustrates both the challenges associated with helping students recognize the value of feminist methods of inquiry and of overcoming what is, in many cases, students' limited experience using writing to solve real-world problems by addressing authentic, context-specific audiences (rather than writing for one's teacher or for a test evaluator to meet a school requirement).

I confess that I found this presentation troubling for a variety of reasons. Even now, I remain conflicted about how I handled this situation. As a result, I believe this example warrants extended consideration here for what it illustrates about mentoring students who resist feminist principles. My discomfort with this presentation resulted in part from the concern that even after nearly an entire semester discussing feminist principles, this group's interpretation of the assignment promoted misconceptions about feminism. I was similarly frustrated by the group's apparent lack of concern for their audience's personal relationship to the topic and how viewers might react to what some would characterize as disturbing images and offensive statements. Looking back, I'm fairly certain I filled the uncomfortable silence that followed this presentation by making suggestions for what the group could have done differently. Instead, I should have given

the class more time to gather their thoughts before responding; I should have allowed the community that had developed over the course of the semester to let the group see the presentation from their perspective(s). I should have embraced the silence, no matter how uncomfortable it may have been, so that I, too, could have seen this presentation through eyes other than my own.

Upon further reflection, I realize that the group's argument that abortion should be illegal could be considered a feminist interruption within my planned intervention. It made me pause and reconsider this assignment; it made me ask myself whether there is room within this classroom for students to make an argument against legal abortion; it made me wonder what characterizes the best response to this kind of resistance. It also leaves me convinced that students need more mentoring, more support, and more practice contributing to the ongoing cultural conversations that affect their lives. To that end, in the future, I would reframe this topic as "reproductive justice" and would model my own connection project for the class using this topic in an effort to help students understand the complexities of communicating with diverse audiences about divisive issues. Additionally, I would schedule more time for peer feedback throughout the composing process, including dress rehearsals, so presenters could gauge how effectively their text, images, and oral comments are connecting with the intended audience, achieving their stated purpose, and responding to the exigencies informing their project. I would allow students more practice addressing an audience of their peers, for, as this example illustrates, that is also an important part of the mentoring that students receive in the feminist classroom.

Yet another possible course revision that could make this project more meaningful, further reinforcing the idea that social change is still necessary would be designating the course an Experiential Learning section requiring a beyond-the-classroom experience. The connection project could grow out of students' work conducting primary research into the following organizations, among others:

- The June Anderson Women's Center;
- MT Lambda LGBT+ student organization;
- Great Books in Middle Tennessee Prisons program;
- Local domestic violence shelters.

This change would allow students to see firsthand how existing inequalities affect life in the local university and community context, encouraging a better understanding of how these practices are the product of systemic, not individual, problems. This sort of primary research would also help students understand that activism grows out of relationships, much as the students cited in Bower's course design do. Such a realization could make activism more meaningful for

students, potentially resulting in it becoming, as it does for Bowers' students, "simply part of how they live in the world."

MAKING THE POLITICAL PERSONAL BY VALUING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AND INVITING CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The most successful aspect of the class came when students were given the opportunity to link class themes to their own life experiences. Through this practice, teaching as a form of feminist mentoring effectively repaired the broken relationship between the political and the personal, helping students recognize the value of political action. Ritchie and Boardman propose that "narratives of experience should be encountered not as uncontested truth but as catalysts for further analysis of the conditions that shape experience" (p. 588). The (Re) Writing Your History Creative Project (Appendix B) invited students to examine their own experiences as evidence of the need for critical intervention in today's world. Students composed narratives representative of their own experiences in the genre of their choice, along with a composer's commentary—inspired in part by Shipka's (2005) "heads-up statement"—explaining the rationale informing their genre/design choices while also making explicit the class themes and cultural beliefs, values, and practices their project addressed.

By writing about their own experiences not in isolation but in conversation with course themes and texts, students recognized experience as valuable, using it to support both their assessments of the past and their proposals for how the future could be different—and better. In a fitting and inspiring end to the semester, students shared their creative projects with the classmates who had served as their intellectual and emotional support system throughout the writing process. A number of them had written letters: to single mothers, thanking them for their sacrifices; to employers, calling attention to gender discrimination in the workplace; one even wrote to herself, promising to finish college and thus make the women who preceded her in the quest for gender equality proud. Two wrote and illustrated comic books, one on escaping an abusive relationship and another on rediscovering her self-confidence through neo-burlesque. Several composed poems: on how families reinforce societal expectations for masculinity; on the policing of female sexuality; on how being born a black male is the equivalent of two automatic strikes. One student, in an effort to protect her decision to work outside the home, created a marriage contract outlining her expectations for herself and her future partner. Yet another presented a speech modeled after Truth's (1851) "Ain't I a Woman?" in which she commented on how others' expectations for her to comply with traditional gender roles have served as obstacles to her own personal life goals.

This project confirmed the importance of having students read literary works not in isolation but by considering their relevance to their own lives. As Gallagher (2015) argues, "If we teach students to think only inside the four corners of the text, we are telling them what not to think. And when we tell students what they cannot think, oppression and hegemony occur" (51). Not only were students' presentations incredibly moving, they demonstrated that writing, as a feminist intervention, could effectively disrupt the influence of societal structures in their own lives that had hurt them or held them back. Inviting students to engage in this critical self-reflection allowed them both to reconsider their previous associations with the nature and purpose of contemporary feminism and to recognize aspects of their own lives that would benefit from revisions to current cultural beliefs, values, and/or practices. These projects confirmed that writing *can* change the world. Whether by traveling back through time to address a past injustice or by charting a course for one's future self that is more expansive than the well-traveled paths of patriarchy, these students conducted critical analyses and envisioned alternate outcomes.

By completing this creative project, they engaged in play of the sort Micciche describes as "involving performance, critical engagement with texts, considerable rhetorical skills, audience awareness, capacity to negotiate voice and tone, and an understanding of social relations—pragmatic, rhetorical knowledge, in other words." Micciche does not stop there; importantly, she continues, "In addition, though, play entails wonder, curiosity, idealism, hyperbole, and imaginative leaps—an expansive horizon that purposefully exceeds predetermined limits" (p. 182). This is some serious play. It allows students to look critically at the power structures that define, order, and limit our lives. Encouraging curiosity and leaps of imagination may not seem like radical pedagogy, but it is one very significant way feminist rhetors can mentor students and encourage future social action. Whether or not any of these students now consider themselves feminists I do not know, but I am quite certain that they possess a better understanding of feminist action, the need for social change, and the role writing can play in promoting change than they did prior to this class. In that regard, this course succeeded in meeting its objective of introducing students to accounts of what brought others to write the world they want to live in into being, so that students could recognize how to use writing and feminist principles to effect change in their own lives.

PURPOSEFULLY EXCEEDING THE LIMITS OF THE PAST BY FOREGROUNDING RHETORIC AND READING

Raymond (2008) asks, "What happens when a literature course gets delivered through writing pedagogy?" (476). The Confronting HIStory course owed

much to the field of (RCL), and were I to teach the course again, I would draw even more heavily from my own RCL expertise, explicitly introducing rhetorical principles from the beginning so students would approach each text we read with questions about exigencies, audience, and purpose, questions every writer must learn to address. Inviting students to ask these questions recasts course readings as mentor texts students can model their own writings from; ultimately, they will consider how to use the knowledge they gain from course texts to make their own lives better. By promoting this kind of critical intervention in their own lives, I hope to convey to students that they, like the feminist activists we studied, possess the ability to use writing to improve the world, both now and in the future.

To that end, in future iterations of the course I would, following Fredlund's example of having students analyze activist rhetoric before creating their own, incorporate additional reading instruction so that students could more thoroughly consider the choices writers make when working toward social change. This would involve, among other practices, coupling nonfiction texts, such as suffragettes' speeches or those from the Civil Rights Era, with the directive to "read like a writer" in the way Bunn (2011) describes when he suggests "trying to figure out how the text you are reading was constructed so that you learn how to 'build' one for yourself" (p. 74). As a feminist rhetor and composition instructor, I consider the practice of introducing students to the concept of writing as social action an essential form of mentoring. Helping students recognize that our world is still in need of change is not enough; we must also provide them with a flexible rhetorical education that will allow them to address the needs of a future we cannot yet even imagine. After all, helping students recognize that our world is still in need of change will not accomplish much if we do not also help them acquire the tools needed to build a better world.

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APPENDIX A: ABBREVIATED COURSE SYLLABUS

English 2020: Confronting HIStory: Stories of Female Identity & Experience
Students will read a variety of texts situated in different eras and cultural settings, thus encouraging contemplation of the significance of specific moments in (and even outside of) history for female identity. By representing women of different eras, races, classes, and sexual orientations, assigned texts will promote recognition of the diversity of women's lived experiences along with contemplation about what motivates women's responses to the opportunities granted or denied them by accepted practices of their time and place. Additionally, students will encounter diverse genres, including nonfiction accounts, historical novels, and poetry collec-

tions, as well as science fiction novels, graphic novels, and films. A course drawing from such diverse genres and perspectives has potential to engage students in considering not only the importance of history in our lives but also the value of challenging accepted practices that reify patriarchal power structures.

Required Texts:

- Atwood, Margaret. The Handmaid's Tale, 1985 (novel)
- Bechdel, Alison. Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic, 2007 (graphic memoir)
- Butler, Octavia. Kindred, 1979 (science fiction novel)
- 4 Little Girls (documentary film to be screened in class)
- Makers: Women Who Make America (documentary film to be screened in class)
- Naslund, Sena Jeter. Four Spirits, 2003 (novel)

Please note: some of the texts we read may contain content you consider explicit; though you are required to complete all assigned readings and complete informal written responses, you always have a choice in what you write about for major projects.

Overview of Student Work:

Participation—15%

Reflects written and oral participation in informal responses and class discussion, preparation for class, and completion of project drafts.

Short Analysis Essay—20%

Students will conduct a close textual analysis of one course text (3-4 pages).

Comparison Essay—25%

Students will conduct a sustained analysis of two course texts (5-6 pages).

Collaborative Connection Presentation—20%

Students will work in groups to conduct a critical analysis/public response to a historical event, recent news story, on issue of importance to women (a list of approved topics will be provided by the instructor). The presentation must draw connections between the event and course themes and/or texts.

(Re)Writing Your History Creative Project—20%

Students will compose narratives representative of their own experiences in the genre of their choice by creating their own short stories, scripts, graphic stories, poems, etc., to be submitted along with their own composer's commentary that makes explicit the class themes and cultural beliefs, values, and practices their project addresses.

APPENDIX B: (RE)WRITING YOUR HISTORY CREATIVE PROJECT

Brief Description

For this final project of the semester, you are to work individually to compose narratives representative of your own experiences pertaining to course themes. Your narrative will be composed in the genre of your choice: short story, script for a short play, graphic story, poem, etc.

Just as writers such as Harryette Mullen and Alison Bechdel employ elements of autobiography to challenge dominant cultural narratives, with this assignment you have the opportunity to use your own life experiences to speak back to cultural narratives you find troubling, restrictive, or even oppressive. In the act of writing about your personal history, you may very well revise history by calling attention to problems that exist in our society and then by envisioning how your experience could have been different. Your work also has the opportunity to affect the future by challenging dominant ideologies and practices meant to preserve patriarchy, keep women or those labeled "other" in line and out of sight, etc. Regardless of the experience and genre you choose, your project should reveal your knowledge of course themes and your ability to link them to your own life experiences.

Questions for Consideration

These are intended to help you generate topic ideas; you are not meant to answer every question in your project.

- Did a certain character's experiences resonate with you? Why? What from your life resembles something we read about?
- When was a time you were silenced or excluded from full participation in the societal power structures that influence your life?
- How does your subject position influence the options available to you?
- Have you ever tried to challenge patriarchal power structures?
- Have you ever felt as though you were losing something in your search for equality?
- What are your thoughts on cultural beliefs and practices that seem to dictate how you should perform gender, enact your sexuality, etc.?
- How do you think our understanding of what it is to be a man or woman in today's world needs to be complicated or expanded?
- How do you understand your place in the world? Do others see it the same as you do?
- What identities would you like to be available to you that may not be at present? What is preventing this from becoming a reality?

Composer's Commentary

In addition to the project itself, you will be required to complete a 1-page Composer's Commentary that introduces your project to its intended audience; explains how it addresses course themes as well as cultural beliefs, values, and practices; introduces the rationale informing your genre/design choices; and articulates your goals for the project so that reader/viewers will understand what you want them to take away from this text.