Feminism and Composition

Issues involving feminism and women’s rights have been a matter of debate and often derision since they arose. In a society where masculinity is the ideal only when it’s a man and being feminine is seen as demeaning, a woman who takes charge is often seen through a lens of misogyny. However, it is only through women taking charge that this common belief can be changed. At one point in time, women were not allowed to be educated. Now the United States has a history of important educated women to look up to. Composition and rhetoric have not always been welcoming to women, and yet today, many major compositionists and rhetors are women, such as Mina Shaughnessy. Feminism and women’s rights has become a major part of history and feminist critical theory is no small figure in composition and rhetoric. As a pluralistic philosophy, feminism weaves throughout other matters of history to create a more analytical, more open, and more inclusive composition and rhetoric and to impact the composition pedagogy.

While feminism itself is a relatively new concept in history, the controversy over women’s equality is not. According to *The Essential Feminist Reader*, the “woman question” came into being in Western culture at least as far back as the fifteenth century. The Renaissance and Enlightenment eras helped to loosen men’s grip on the idea of exclusively male scholars and to make the idea of educating females more tolerable. Once industrial growth took off and Western society started to move away from social hierarchies and toward market and labor based
systems, the question of women’s rights and equality became more acceptable and less frowned upon (Freedman xii). By the early 1800s, well-known American suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton was already making her mark in women’s rights, including the fight for women’s right to vote. Once the Civil War came to a close and slaves were emancipated, women across the United States began to recognize that the rights of men and woman should be equal (xiii). Throughout the history of the fight for equality and human rights, nearly any movement for racial equality has called into question the matter of gender equality as well.

One of the results of the end of the Civil War was the passing of the 14th Amendment. According to *Through Women’s Eyes*, many women, particularly suffragists, felt that because of the gender neutral wording of the 14th Amendment women were or should be allowed to vote. Thus in 1872, Victoria Woodhull, an American suffragist, was the first woman to run for president in the United States, though the legitimacy of her candidacy is debated (Dubois and Dumenil 323-324). The official term for feminism in America was first coined by a particular subset of suffragists. The women who created the term feminists did so to separate themselves from “the more conventional suffragists” as their goal was not only women’s right to vote but also “moving beyond political and economic advancement to embrace female individuality, sexual freedom, and birth control” (479). This era of women and men gathering together and fighting for women’s right to vote created what history calls the First Wave of Feminism.

Similar to the 14th Amendment’s effect on women, *Through Women’s Eyes* remarks that the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s sparked a fire in the hearts of women and what is known as the Second Wave of Feminism emerged (673). A rather vital facet of this feminist reawakening is due in large part to Betty Friedan’s 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*, which questioned the strict gender roles that patriarchal society had forced onto women. Housewives
across the United States began to act outside of their typical roles, and a considerable amount
even went out into the work force. The book has been hugely critiqued, however, for its focus on
white middle-class women and exclusion of other classes, races, ethnicities, and sexualities (601-
604). Regardless of the book’s issues, *The Feminine Mystique* and Betty Friedan’s brand of
feminism paved the way for the second wave.

Once the surge in feminism tapered off some time into the 1970s, there was not much
activity until the 1990s. New feminists of the ‘90s began to critique second wave feminists for
their focus on white middle-class women and their lack of diversity or inclusion. This resulted in
another feminist boom or surge known as the Third Wave of Feminism, who, as their critiques of
earlier feminists suggest, focused much more on the equality of women of all ethnicities and
backgrounds (753). As always, there were criticisms to the third wave feminists, but Dubois and
Dumenil state, “the movement helped to generate new interest in feminist issues and to
encourage women to participate in a wide range of social justice issues, including environmental,
anti-sweatshop, and reproductive campaigns” (754). This was the era of young women and girl
power.

As is evident from this brief history of feminism, it is a pluralistic philosophy shaped by
the culture and movements of the society around it. When the first wave of feminism rolled
around, the English department itself was just getting its feet wet, let alone composition studies
and rhetoric. The second wave of the 1960s and 70s is the first time compositionists and rhetors
were enveloped in feminism and able to comment and to make use of its way of thinking. It is at
this point in time that feminist critical theory’s influence really was able to get some traction in
composition and rhetoric. In Elizabeth Tasker and Frances B. Holt-Underwood’s article entitled,
“Feminist Research Methodologies in Historic Rhetoric and Composition: An Overview of
Scholarship from the 1970s to the Present,” published in 2008, these two women take a look at over sixty different works published during or since the second wave of feminism that have had some impact on feminist theory in composition and rhetoric.

At first, Tasker and Holt-Underwood’s study of these works is more specifically concentrated on the feminist historiography of composition, which they state, “examines gendered aspects of past composition instruction, teaching materials, student writing, and composition opportunities,” (55) along with the feminist historiography of rhetoric. They compare and contrast these feminist research methods with the more conventional or traditional approaches typically used by compositionists and rhetors over roughly forty years. In their analysis, they found conflicting information where in some of their chosen works they see “researchers as participants who are often not neutral; [they] gain ethos not from objectivity but from community” (Tasker 55). On the other hand, they also came upon “works that strive to downplay emotion, subjectivity, and pluralism, and choose to elevate other factors such as the verifiability of arguments, the righting of false patriarchal perceptions, and activism for social change” (55). These differences in feminist research methods could be due to women’s need to prove their worth.

As patriarchal society up to this point had forced women into submissive roles where they must play the part of the ignorant, naïve, and overly polite housewife or daughter, it stands to reason that patriarchal society believed them to naturally act and think this way. Thus, educated women had to and still have to work that much harder to prove their point when they are not guaranteed that their audience will even see them as worthy or capable of intelligent thought. While this may seem a bit of an extreme exaggeration to some, the point stands that those who society is determined to oppress have to work that much harder to prove that the
issues they feel the need to discuss matter and that what they have to say should matter in the eyes of their oppressors.

Tasker and Holt-Underwood then move on to their chronological study of their chosen works that they believe have some merit in the feminist historiography of composition and rhetoric. They note, “scholarly publications were few in the 1970s and 1980s, increased in the early 1990s, surged in the mid to late 1990s, and continue to proliferate today” (55). This follows along with the short history of feminism as the second wave of feminism tapered off in the 1970s and a feminist reawakening in the 1990s focused on inclusion of other ethnicities and backgrounds caused the third wave. They also note that a major facet of feminist research in composition and rhetoric aims to “both broaden and question the canon of historical rhetoric and composition,” (56) and a considerable concern is “the question of whether to create a separate female history or to integrate female work into the mainstream (masculine) history of composition and rhetoric” (56). Do they create their own separate history to ensure they are given the proper attention they deserve? Or do they push “mainstream history” to be more realistic with its inclusion of women? After all, women did exist and write throughout history and excluding them almost creates a false history of sorts. This question of whether to have their own history or to work to have more of their works in “mainstream history” ties in with its pluralist tendencies, as this question is also a concern in cultural studies.

As Tasker and Holt-Underwood begin their close study of these works, they make note of three particular works from the 1970s that they believe are worth noting in feminist historiography of composition and rhetoric. One work is Sally Miller Gearhart’s “The Womanization of Rhetoric.” The two authors call attention to her radical stance on the definition of conflict or violence and her “call to develop a noncombative rhetorical model free from the
violence of persuasion” (56). This work made an impact as it is also mentioned in Susan Jarratt’s “Feminism and Composition: The Case for Conflict.” In her article, Jarratt goes into an in-depth analysis where she finds both the issues in Gearhart’s argument along with the truth beneath it. She states, “Despite Gearhart’s sometimes extreme claims…the problems troubling her are real and global. Gearhart despairs of the thoughtless destruction of humans, animals, and the earth itself – the product of centuries of male domination” (Jarratt 264). Gearhart’s article, written in 1979, speaks of an issue that Jarratt could still relate to in her article written in just 2003. The case to be made here is that despite the “extreme claims” sometimes made by feminist compositionists or feminists in general, a deeper issue can often be found and a reason behind the intensity of their claims.

Tasker and Holt-Underwood also comment on Joan Bolker’s “Teaching Griselda to Write,” which analyzes Chaucer’s “The Clerk’s Tale” in terms of the classroom and how this acts as “evidence of deeply rooted historic conditions for female silence in the Western culture” (56). These two works along with Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s “The Rhetoric of Women’s Liberation: An Oxymoron,” which calls on compositionists and rhetors to research women’s history for works important to the historiography of composition and rhetoric, fill out their chosen works for the 1970s portion of feminist research. These works were likely chosen for their impact as they set the tone for the next few decades of feminist research in composition and rhetoric to “recov[er] and revis[e]” and to call out past works and moments in history that worked to oppress women.

Another article from the 1970s—not chosen by Tasker and Holt-Underwood but still worth noting—is Mary P. Hiatt’s article, “The Feminine Style: Theory and Fact.” Published in 1978, it is a study done examining the differences and similarities between feminine and
masculine writing styles. Near the beginning of the article, Hiatt states, “Men and women, it is commonly believed, write differently. The conviction has run strong. Notably absent are any data to support the conviction” (222). Instead of evidence, she finds overgeneralized comments—typically made by men—on masculine and feminine style taken as fact, such as male authors’ style tends to be “terse, strong, rational, convincing, formidable, and logical” (222) while female authors’ style is described as “emotional, illogical, hysterical, shrill, silly, and vapid” (222). Through her study, she observes fifty books from each gender and analyzes five hundred word passages from each in terms of these generalized comments.

In a truly interesting turn of events, Hiatt’s findings rarely lined up with the commentary. While there were differences between the “masculine” and “feminine” styles, not much credibility was leant to the complaints made about the feminine style. For instance, when examining a claim that women’s writings are too wordy and long-winded, Hiatt found the opposite could be truer:

For example, close study of sentence-lengths and average sentence-lengths of all the authors reveals that the men are not terse and the women are not verbose…. A statistical analysis indicates that women use significantly more short sentences…. The men tend to write longer sentences than the women and more longer sentences than the women…. John O’Hara’s longest sentence is 116 words…. On the other hand, Ruth Macdowell’s longest sentence is 90 words. (223-224)

Similarly, in terms of the logic of the two writing styles, Hiatt found “the logic of the feminine style would thus seem to depend on reasons and extra information rather than explications and conclusions [like the masculine style]” (225). Her overall findings only found one complaint to
be absolutely true: the use of –ly adverbs in the feminine style. The overall usage of –ly adverbs in male- and female-written works was fairly similar, but a notable fact is that women used the adverb “really” over twice as much as the men (226). However, Hiatt attempts to explain the possible reasoning behind this by stating, “Its use probably reflects women’s feelings that they will not be believed, that they are not taken seriously, that they are not taken seriously or ‘really’” (226). A recurring theme in feminist research is the questioning of the research methodologies of feminist compositionists, and it rears its head quite often throughout the study of feminism in composition and rhetoric.

When Tasker and Holt-Underwood shift to the 1980s, they observe that the amount of works using feminist theory at this time were relatively few and choose to focus on only a few works. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell makes an appearance again with her book, *Man Cannot Speak for Her: Volume 1 & 2*. Her aim in this book was to “recover nineteenth-century female rhetoric” and to determine these women’s goals in their works to be “to explain what their grievances were and to justify their right to speak within a public sphere” (57). Similarly, they analyzed Elizabeth Flynn’s “Composing as a Woman,” a work meant to analyze “the historic intersections of feminism and composition studies” (57). It is imperative to note that Elizabeth Flynn felt compelled to write “Composing ‘Composing as a Woman,’” which is meant to be her defense for her research methods, adding more evidence to the speculation that women throughout history have constantly had to “justify their right to speak.” It seems women not getting the respect they deserve is a perpetual issue throughout history as it was true in the 1800s and it remained true in the 1980s when Flynn had to publish a response defending her work because people did not view it as credible.
The bulk of Tasker and Holt-Underwood’s remaining article is studying the 1990s and the early 2000s in terms of feminist historiography of composition and rhetoric. This was a time where composition and rhetoric pieces using feminist theory were not nearly as scarce as they had been in the past two decades and they have a multitude of works to choose from. Because of this, these two authors decided to break up the 1990s into the early ‘90s and the surge in the middle of the decade. In the early 1990s, Tasker and Holt-Underwood observe, “the first anthology of rhetoric to include female speakers and writers in the context of their period and in the company of male contemporaries” (57). This anthology was Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg’s *The Rhetorical Tradition*.

While they mentioned a few other works, the key pieces in the early 1990s are from the debate between Barbara Biesecker and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell in 1992 and 1993. Campbell had already begun to make her mark in feminist theory in composition with her 1973 piece, “The Rhetoric of Women’s Liberation: An Oxymoron,” and her 1989 book, *Man Cannot Speak for Her: Volume 1 & 2* so when Biesecker decided to write an article questioning the validity of feminist research methodologies, it makes sense that she called Campbell’s book into question. Biesecker’s argument was a question of why Campbell and other feminist researchers chose certain female-written works over others (58). She states, “no individual woman or set of women, however extraordinary, can speak for all” (qtd. in 58). Biesecker contended, “Feminist historical methodology…reinforces elitist hierarchies, which cause the oppressed to remain silent” (58). Her argument is admirable and there might be some grain of truth to her points. Why were these female writers chosen for Campbell’s book? But does not the same apply to male writers’ works? Campbell could not have included every single female writer in her book,
especially considering she already had two volumes. Regardless, Biesecker fired shots at the feminist compositionist community.

The response was fairly immediate. Campbell published the article titled, “Biesecker Cannot Speak for Her Either,” directly calling out Biesecker in return. In her article, Campbell claims “that Biesecker’s argument adds nothing to feminist rhetoric and only results in again silencing female voices” (58). Biesecker responded with another article, “Negotiating with Our Tradition: Reflecting Again (Without Apologies) on the Feminization of Rhetoric,” reiterating her argument that there needs to be an explanation behind feminist researchers’ choices in their recovery of female written works (58). Biesecker’s argument is not wrong. If Campbell and other feminist researchers’ of this time were including these works as important to the historiography of composition and rhetoric and worthy of the feminist canon without proper reasoning, that is a problem that should be rectified. The question that comes to mind, however, is why is this not an argument outside of feminist research? Why are feminists constantly called on to prove that their research is in fact researched and credible? Is this a problem outside of the feminist community as well or is it just feminists?

While the second wave feminists’ critiques of past feminism created a surge in history, Biesecker and Campbell’s debate calling the validity of the feminist canon into question sparked a surge in historic feminist research. With the influence of the feminist community’s critiques of the lack of diversity in feminism, inclusion of all ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds also became a concern for the recovery and revision of feminist historiography of composition and rhetoric. Catherine Hobbs’s *Nineteenth-Century Women Learn to Write* included “women in college, Native American women, and his- and hers- religion” (Tasker and Holt-Underwood 59). In 1999, Shirley Wilson Logan published her book *We Are Coming: the Persuasive Discourse of*
The Nineteenth Century Black Women, analyzing the works of female African American women. The 1995 article “Border Crossings: Intersection of Rhetoric and Feminism” was meant to focus on women’s inability to join in on rhetorical work throughout history. In Tasker and Holt-Underwood’s article, they state, “the authors discuss electronic writing as a method for including the voices of others and overcoming the power of historically dominant hegemonies” (59). This marks the introduction of technology into the world of feminist methodology as well as its aid in increasing diversity.

Another important facet of feminist historiography of composition and rhetoric during this decade was Molly Wertheimer’s Listening to Their Voices: The Rhetorical Activities of Historical Women. Tasker and Holt-Underwood note that Wertheimer’s collection was important for pointing out that at some points in history, women had not been categorized as citizens. Due to this, women could not be included in rhetorical history because the definition of rhetoric was “persuasive argumentation practiced by citizens” (qtd. in 60). Wertheimer’s work caused rhetoric itself to be completely revised as her “collection reveals females practicing rhetoric openly and covertly in the midst of patriarchy through philosophical mentoring, cloistered rituals, female preaching, mother’s manuals, letter-writing, and writing under a pseudonym” (60). She called into question the very definition of rhetoric and her efforts shaped not only feminist theory in composition and rhetoric but also the whole field of studies.

In their article published in the 1999, “Feminism in Composition: Inclusion, Metonymy, and Disruption,” two female compositionists, Joy Ritchie and Kathleen Boardman, joined together to also take a closer look into the feminist works written in composition in the 1970s and 1980s. Similar to Tasker and Holt-Underwood, Ritchie and Boardman found the number of works written from a feminist perspective extremely low in number during the 1970s. In fact,
they observe that feminism seems to be nonexistent in the published sphere of composition during this time (586). However, they remark, “we recognized that much of the creative feminist energy in composition’s history is not visible in the publications we searched: it appeared in informal conversations, in basement classrooms, and in committees on which women served” (587). They continue by rebuffing any arguments that this energy is fleeting and unimportant by pointing out “that it created a solidarity among women, influenced students and colleagues, and helped form an epistemology on which later feminist work could grow” (587). Another interesting matter they mention from this period is that those women who did contribute composition works during this time often had issues with job security (587). Ritchie and Boardman’s observations are essential in examining the history of feminism and composition as they show a side to composition that cannot be seen through the fixed connection to the past in published composition works.

In Ritchie and Boardman’s article, they look at these works throughout this time with three concepts in mind: inclusion, metonymy, and disruption (587). They point out that these three factors coincide often, such as when “a narrative aimed at including women may also function to contain feminism within narrow boundaries” (588). With these factors in mind, they also want to point out that many works during this time were “grounded in accounts of personal experience” (588), but that the reader should not take this personal experience as absolute truth. They provide Joan W. Scott’s words of wisdom stating, “When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence upon which explanation is built” (qtd. in 588). In other words, people’s perceptions are always shaped by their own experiences and are entirely subjective. Their person input is to be taken into consideration but never taken as
fact. This is very important to the feminist historiography of composition and rhetoric as it can be seen that feminist compositionists are often not entirely objective in their research methodologies.

Moving away from the introduction, Ritchie and Boardman begin to tackle the works from this time period that worked toward inclusion. This is a matter that is greatly debated for the feminist composition community as they describe it as “Correcting the long absence of women from intellectual and political landscapes, inserting perspectives into contexts dominated by patriarchy, and giving women equal status with men” (589). This matches Tasker and Holt-Underwood’s observations of the feminist objective in the feminist historiography of composition and rhetoric to ensure female writers are included.

While the arguments about the matter of inclusion has been rehashed throughout history and will likely not stop, Ritchie and Boardman shed a different light on possible criticisms. They state, “Discussions of inclusion of women as women may reinforce essentialist or biological definitions of gender, and they often neglect to theorize the discourses that keep women and minorities marginalized” (589). Another way to say this is that including women for the sake of including women might reinforce gender stereotypes. The efforts to include women thus far have also failed to actually try and prevent this exclusion of “women and minorities” from continuing in the future of composition and rhetoric.

Returning to Tasker and Holt-Underwood’s article, the remaining work underlines 21st century feminist methodology’s efforts to include diversity as well as their continued need to prove their field is needed and not obsolete. In 2000, Xin Liu Gale published an article titled, “Historical Studies and Postmodernism: Rereading Aspasia of Miletus,” arguing “that feminist rhetorical methods have moved too far from the mainstream academic strategies and therefore
cannot be trusted to be truthful” (Tasker 61). Her article called out specific feminist work and their authors went on defense. One author, Cheryl Glenn, responded, “[w]hat is missing [from Gale’s point of view] is the recognition that postmodern historiography does not attempt to do away with the notion of truth; instead, it attempts to think of truth outside the confines of a mythical objectivity” (qtd. in 61). Once again the argument arises that feminist methodology is too emotional to be objective. The feminist researchers’ rebuttal argues that objectivity is not possible, and therefore, the emotion of the researcher should be embraced rather than ignored. Perhaps the feminist argument takes into account that humans are naturally emotional beings and that to pretend otherwise is actually when one “cannot be trusted to be truthful.” This also aligns with Ritchie and Boardman’s caution to regard the personal experiences of the authors in feminist composition with a critical eye.

By September of 2000, Gale published her response in College English. In her response, she once again called on Jarratt and Glenn to “voice her strong concerns about who legitimizes the stories of history” (Tasker 62). Once again, the controversy crops up questioning the validity and value of feminist compositionists questioning the official history of composition and rhetoric. Tasker and Holt-Underwood state, “The question of who decides on and disseminates the content of the field remains open—as it should—but this debate leaves a sense of transformation in the air” (62). In this never-ending cycle, feminist compositionists have continuously had to justify their research methodologies and the choices behind the works they believe to be worth studying. Who, if not feminists, is capable of determining what should be in the feminist canon?

As can be seen, the feminist historiography of composition and rhetoric is a thorny and sometimes unpleasant adventure for the feminist researchers who choose that route. In much the
same way, female teachers face some of the same issues when bringing feminism or unconventional methods to composition and rhetorical pedagogy. In Adriana Hernández’s article, “Feminist Pedagogy: Experience and Difference in a Politics of Transformation,” she analyzes the role of female teachers and their authority in the classroom, especially when posing divergent ideas or acting outside of the traditional roles expected of them by their students. For her article, she used two female teachers as examples: Jill Eichhorn, a married and pregnant woman, and Karen Powers-Stubbs, a feminist who returned to school ten years after having children (318).

When Eichhorn entered the classroom, her students were not initially accepting of her. Despite her pregnancy, she was not following her prescribed “mother” role, and she began to introduce feminist topics to her students. However, Hernández points out that while the students were not originally well receiving of her unexpected methods, their “betrayal” turned into curiosity (319). Hernández remarks, “Jill literally embodied an authority that was a violation of a masculinized public space, but one which did not radically challenge world views (and future plans) of her students” (319). Although Eichhorn’s topics were feminist, they were not overly abrasive or devastating to her students’ way of life. In the end, she was able to morph the experience into an overall positive one.

Jill Eichhorn’s counterpart for Hernández’s study, however, had a much different experience. Empowered by her own experiences, Karen Powers-Stubbs felt much more inclination to have her students tackle feminist topics that were much more controversial and challenging to the students in a more fundamental way. Hernández explains, “While the focus of Jill’s work in the process of enacting a feminist pedagogy was on bodily experiences, the force of Karen’s attention was on language, its connection to racism, sexism, and classism” (319).
Think of Eichhorn’s class as a beginner class on feminism. It allowed the students to confront some of the milder issues involving inequality without feeling as if their way of life or their actions were being attacked. Powers-Stubbs’s class, however, could be considered a more upper-level and eye-opening class. For students who might not have even encountered feminist issues before or were not ready to be called out for any of their possibly prejudiced behavior, it probably felt like too much too soon or like a personal attack. Given that Powers-Stubbs’s focus was on how language itself affected inequality and showed deep-seated prejudices in the very core of society, it almost definitely felt pretty heavy, overwhelming, and aggressive to these students.

With this in mind, it probably is not all that surprising that the students did not react well to Powers-Stubbs’s feminist pedagogy. Hernández comments on the students’ reaction when she says, “It seems to me that Karen’s willingness to challenge and interrogate not only her own assumptions but her students’ with respect to language and power relations was very menacing to them” (319). In her efforts to awaken her students to more unconventional or radical ideas, Powers-Stubbs was not acting even remotely like the traditional mother role they knew teachers to be. Her radical lessons and topics upset them, and while her passion can be seen from outside the classroom, the students probably interpreted her as uncaring, vehement, and not at all motherly.

So taking Hernández’s study into account, what is the importance of a female teacher’s role in the classroom to feminist pedagogy? It all comes back to authority and conflict. When Powers-Stubbs acted in a much more dominating way, her authority over her students became greater. Similarly, when Susan Jarratt analyzed Gearhart’s definition of conflict and violence in her “The Case for Conflict” article, she brought into question how feminist pedagogy treated the
classroom’s power dynamics. She used Peter Elbow’s *Writing Without Teachers* as an example of what the ideal feminist classroom would look like. In this ideal scenario, there is no power imbalance. No one has any more control over the classroom than any other student. Ideally, there is no oppressor, no dictator, and no inequality.

Of course, this is all an ideal scenario, and real life has flaws and improbabilities that cause that scenario to be highly unlikely. Jarratt’s article takes a look at why this scenario would cause issues in a very different way than one might initially assume. One might think it would be improbable because of varying work ethics, scheduling issues, or other such problems. Excluding these problems from the scenario, Jarratt encounters something the reader of Elbow’s article might not have thought of: oppressors can still have the power to oppress even without being given the official power (267). For instance, an individual who has experienced inequality in some way (i.e. sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, etc.) presents their piece for the week to their group. However, other than them, their group is made up totally of straight white men. Regardless of this group’s intentions, they hold a certain amount of power in this situation. Jarratt explains, “Such inequities often make the attempt to create a harmonious and nurturing community of readers an illusory fiction—a superficial suturing of social divisions” (267). There is a systemic issue in Peter Elbow’s plans that he did not take into account in that his demand of the writer to present their work for critique without being allowed to respond in any way to their criticizers creates a power imbalance that allows the oppressor complete and total freedom to silence minorities in this classroom.

In *Writing Without Teachers*, the goal is to remove the power imbalance and put the focus back on the individual: the student. Jarratt points out that this “is a postmodern move, in the sense that the teacher was taken as the locus of Truth. But the transformative potential of
expressive pedagogy has to be evaluated in the light of the broader political implications of the theory” (266-267). In a feminist analysis of this teacher-less classroom, the attempt to erase the power imbalance created by the relationship between students and teachers is admirable, but Jarratt states, “The complexities of social differentiation and inequity in late-twentieth century capitalist society are thrown into the shadows by the bright spotlight focused on the individual” (267). This focus on the individual is attractive to most, but it excludes the bigger issues of race, gender, sexuality, etc. from the conversation. Say an individual commenting on another student’s paper is a woman who has never recognized sexism. The writer’s topic deals heavily with sexism in countries like the United States where the issues are more nuanced. Because the individual has never recognized sexism as an issue, she does not see it as one and finds the paper outrageous. She is a woman, and she has never experienced sexism. Her thoughts are “does sexism even exist?” or “why does it matter if it’s not me?” Focusing on the individual erases the bigger picture.

With these issues in mind, Jarratt then brings her audience back to a classroom with a female teacher. She states, “A female teacher who takes a position of uncritical openness toward the male student, especially if social-class differences also apply, invites the exercise of patriarchal domination to which every man in our society is acculturated” (268). In other words, in a classroom where the female teacher is trying to reduce the power imbalance between her and her students, she leaves herself open to being oppressed. The same goes for female students in classrooms who feel this oppression in the classroom and do not feel comfortable speaking out. If the female student’s male classmate(s) are verbally overpowering her but the female teacher is trying to reduce her power over the students, there is no person to intervene and to equalize the
power imbalance amongst the students (268). In this situation, the authority of the teacher is necessary in order to unbalance the power hierarchy of the male-dominated classroom.

Susan Jarratt’s contribution to the connection between feminism and composition was not simply in her article on conflict. She also co-edited one of the biggest books in feminism and composition along with Lynn Worsham: *Feminism and Composition Studies: In Other Words*. In Krista Ratcliffe’s review of this book, she discusses the variety of topics confronted in Jarratt and Worsham’s collection, such as “language function, identity, agency, collaborative writing, computers, writing program administration, writing in the disciplines, racism, and history” (314). Ratcliffe also points out that this collection stands out from the crowd in feminist composition due to its strong “theoretical focus” (314). She also points out its focus on rhetorical figures rather than historical figures (314). While the focus on historical figures is a very important contribution, Jarratt and Worsham bring the focus back to matters that are still important today. Ratcliffe uses their focus on “language and its consequences for feminism and composition studies” (314) as an example of one of the major themes throughout their collection, which is reminiscent of Karen Powers-Stubbs from Adriana Hernández’s article on feminist pedagogy. Ratcliffe then goes on to elaborate on this theme in more detail:

The theory of language underpinning this volume assumes that words and their attendant lines of reasoning must be continually critiqued to test their currency and then reaffirmed and/or refigured. The responsibility for such action falls to everyone; this responsibility should generate not a consumerist rejection of the past but an historically-grounded appreciation of where, how, and why history moves us and we move history. (314)
This is a very eloquent view on language as not only a reflection of history but also a constantly changing thing. It is the job of not only feminists but also all educated people to question and critique these facets of history. Language is so complicated and is so representative of the culture of the time that studying it divulges so much about society and society’s perceptions.

All in all, feminism is a critical theory that is perhaps undervalued. Its roots in history tie it together with other matters of human rights, connecting it to cultural studies as well. The history of feminism in composition and rhetoric is a much more recent matter as it began in the 1970s with the decline of the Second Wave of Feminism and boomed in the 1990s with the Third Wave of Feminism and a debate between two compositionists questioning the validity of feminist research methods in the feminist historiography of composition and rhetoric. This theme continues to play out even today in feminist composition. It is a matter that will likely never be solved as no one person can say who has the right to say what is in the feminist canon.

Similar to this theme of questioning the feminist methodologies, feminist compositionists and rhetors throughout history have also had to defend their right to speak. It was seen in Campbell’s *Man Cannot Speak for Her*, analyzing nineteenth-century women’s writings as well as closer to today with Gale’s article criticizing feminists’ lack of objectivity, a common criticism in feminist critical theory. Issues with women’s right to speak are also common in feminist pedagogy. As feminist teachers, they want the power imbalance between themselves and their students to be as little as possible, but doing so lessens their ability to intervene in case of conflict, leaving an opening for oppression to play out in the classroom as the dominant overpower the minorities. Feminist critical theory in composition and rhetoric’s inclusiveness has grown but so have people’s issues with it. It is an ever-changing theory that is necessary for
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its ability to question truth and ensure that no one party is being oppressed.
Works Cited


