



Writing the Subject

Representations of Experiential Knowledge

This research began as my effort to bring into dialogue identities I negotiate as a writer, teacher, and scholar, whose relationships I felt intuitively but could not give voice to or simply did not recognize—even, at times, experienced as in conflict. But perhaps more importantly, what led me to such a dialogue was the need to understand how gender, as a culturally prescribed role, inscribed these other roles. I also sought to understand how, through an awareness of the complexities of these inscriptions, I might better construct alternatives for transforming and relating, to each other and to the personal identities I live, what seemed such disparate and sometimes conflicting professional identities, all of which are informed by my identity as woman.

The following pages set into motion the narratives through which I know the world in these various capacities, first from the felt, phenomenal sense of lived experience, to the metanarratives of interpreting those interpretations, through those layers of interpretation that constitute the larger context of culture, with its affirming rituals and informing myths that act as a background of beliefs woven invisibly into the fabric of daily life.

This chapter presents an overview of arguments within composition, feminism, literary theory, and myth studies that inform my methodology as well as my philosophical and ideological approaches to this work. I use these arguments to establish a framework for representing and interpreting the stories that follow in subsequent chapters.

A Phenomenological Approach to Research

My research methodology is phenomenological; its aim is to constitute the complexities and richness of lived experience, serving as a mode of inquiry into cultural representations of composing, of writers and teachers

of writing and their experience, and of women. I claim this work as research despite its nontraditional generic form, which blurs narration, self-reflection, analysis, and fiction. These genres are no less modes of inquiry than are those of conventional critical or analytic discourse, although the label *research* might be more problematic than *inquiry*, since the discursive lines between "fact" and "fiction" are institutionally as well as culturally entrenched as self-evident truth. Fictions or myths are typically assigned derogatory connotations as something not only imagined but false. Although researchers in many disciplines (for instance, Clifford Geertz in anthropology, Hayden White in history, Lewis Thomas in biology, Loren Eiseley in archaeology) have explored the "fictive" or literary dimensions of their own knowledge making, "research" is still institutionally upheld as what is real or truthful, as opposed to the imagined or false. Written representations of research still fall within conventional exposition and analysis; other genres are reserved for "literary" or "expressive" modes that are perceived to fall outside of research. Thus, it is an ideological move on my part to claim this work as research in order to create new ways of relating narrative to other modes of inquiry and investigate how they might better inform each other. Such a claim is not new, as I will show in relation to M. M. Bakhtin's (1981) work on the novel as a genre, but it does present ideological challenges to current arrangements of power, prestige, and gender in English studies as well as between teacher-writer practitioners and educational researchers, arrangements in which women do most of the teaching and men most of the research about how and what teachers should teach.

It is not my intention to suggest that traditional research is merely "made up" or that it has nothing different to offer from blurred genres of narration, reflection, and analysis. Nor would I suggest that the work represented in the following pages is unproblematically "research," because it is also something Other, something that problematizes current research practices, habits, and conventions by appropriating research discourse and putting it into dialogue with these Other discourses. Blurred genres aren't simply "new" or "special" discourses; instead, they are discourses that "talk back" (Bakhtin 1981), transforming the cultural, institutional, and historical processes that give dominant discourses their authority.

Some composition researchers, including those who promote teacher research (for example, Goswami and Stillman 1987; Knoblauch and Brannon 1988; Heath 1987, 1988; Berthoff 1987; Ray 1993; Britton 1987; Boomer 1987; Martin 1987), have already argued for the value of self-reflective narrative as an appropriate genre for representing classroom

practice and the value of blurring research and narrative modes. Such views are based upon James Britton's (1982) theory of discourse in which transactional and poetic modes have their roots in expressive discourse; narrative as one facet of expressive discourse is thus fundamentally linked to the transactional modes of more traditional research as well as a bridge to poetic modes of literary discourse. Furthermore, the field of composition studies is beginning to recognize the value of narrative as a mode of knowing, by publishing expressive works such as autobiography and classroom narrative in research journals (see, for instance, Sommers 1992 and McQuade 1992), but has yet to give serious consideration to blurred genres incorporating poetic or literary modes other than autobiographical or ethnographic narratives as legitimate inquiry or to theorize their appropriate role in relation to theory and other forms of research. Furthermore, these narratives often are too readily interpreted in terms of positivistic assumptions, as if they reflected an empirical, unmediated reality (language as a "window" into reality), rather than as constructed identities and "thick descriptions" requiring interpretation rather than verification. In addition, when major journals and publishers do publish narratives, they are usually authored by established leaders in the field whose prestige consequently lends the appropriate "authority" to their (otherwise "personal") writing.

Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* (1989) is one example of the professional license granted to established "authorities" to tell their life stories. Like many teacher-researchers, Rose blurs the boundaries between autobiography/memoir, anecdote, theory, and research. Yet his story reinscribes a masculinized identity of "master teacher" that overshadows the lives of those "on the boundaries" whose cause Rose advocates, including, as Penny Dugan (1991) has pointed out, the women in Rose's life. Rose has constructed himself as a tireless, hardworking, brilliant teacher standing up alone to a corrupt, mismanaged educational system. Thus, no one in this book (nor in the book's readership) "can be gifted or energetic or self-sacrificing enough," as Lil Brannon (1993, 461) has commented, to match Rose's success as a teacher/scholar. Because of this identity of "Romantic heroic teacher" (Brannon 1993, 461), *Lives on the Boundary* is valued and believed largely to the extent that the author is already a "success." Had Rose been a female adjunct faculty member at UCLA, the story might have been much different; an "unsuccessful" teacher's life would command less attention ("unsuccessful" teachers are common; "heroic" teachers are rare), and her insights and opinions less authority. Constructing himself as "master teacher" may have facilitated Rose's move to cap-

ture a broad public audience, but unfortunately that identity undermines the discussion of real problems of the marginalized student and the solutions Rose proposes so convincingly. Rose emerges as the "hero" who, by his transcendent example, will put the educational house in order.

Rose's construction of himself as romantic hero unfortunately obscures the more "common" heroism of other teachers who have struggled without the mentoring and privileges Rose was so fortunate to receive. Given the conditions that Rosalie Naumann faced in her school, for instance, it is perhaps more remarkable that she kept teaching, and teaching so well. It would be more remarkable, in fact, if Rose *hadn't* flourished, given the support he received. Unfortunately, the "smaller" efforts of others in his life appear "common" in comparison to his achievements, and thus easier to overlook. Teaching, except by a "master" teacher, becomes a "feminized" activity, lacking in authority; research and theory by the "master" subsequently save the day. In this way, he has earned the right to tell his story, and to tell it authoritatively.

The Feminization of Practice

One of the fundamental problems facing composition today is articulating relations between theory and practice. The field's ideal is praxis: theory-based, self-reflective practice in teaching, and research methodologies sensitive to the contexts of classroom life. However, the language practices of those who are trained in research and scholarship and those whose primary obligations are classroom instruction are often quite different. These differences reflect an institutionalized hierarchy of knowledge and professional status, with researcher-scholars dominating a field constituted largely by practitioners.

Not coincidentally, the fault lines between composition research and practice also fall along gender lines. Sue Ellen Holbrook (1991) has documented this phenomenon, noting that male compositionists are more likely than their female counterparts to write and publish, particularly on "harder" research topics such as theories of communication, research processes, and language/text/structure. Men are about even with women in areas such as composing processes and writing/literature across the curriculum. Women, on the other hand, dominate in "softer," more practice-oriented modes such as teacher development, processes of thought, student development, and nonacademic subjects. Holbrook (1991) points out that although women dominate composition as a whole, men dominate as

knowledge makers. For instance, in Richard Larson's "Selected Bibliography of Scholarship on Composition and Rhetoric" 66 percent of the authors are male; in Barbara Weaver's "Bibliography of Writing Textbooks" 62 percent are male (Holbrook 1991). In addition, according to Holbrook, 65 percent of the articles accepted for *College English* were by men (61 percent of all articles were submitted by men) (Holbrook 1991, 228).

What accounts for the silence of practitioners in writing and writing instruction within composition research? Why the silence of so many women? Some practitioners respond to the dominant research discourse by expressing various degrees of alienation; the world of practice, when represented in the discourse of research, appears reduced and depleted of its richness. Some practitioners regard the language of research as oppressive and refuse to engage in it. Others perceive it as an acquisition necessary for gaining access to power. Yet others have embraced theory only to find their representations of practice appropriated or misread by the research community.

The problem of representing the world of practice is a problem shared by women in seeking to represent their subjectivities as women in a language that many perceive to be alienating, the product of domination. The dominant discourse renders their subjectivity as "feminized," a lesser "alternative" to a male-dominated culture. A feminized discourse is characterized by its partiality and particularity, in contrast to the assumed objectivity and universality of the dominant discourse. A system of binary oppositions maintains this hierarchy, making efforts to challenge or transform the status of practitioners and, in turn, most women, difficult.

Efforts at reforming the status of composition practice and, in turn, practitioners¹ have been aimed at the language by which practice is represented and through which it is interpreted institutionally, as well as within the research community, mirroring feminist arguments for rearticulating the experience of women through linguistic reform. Like some feminists, some compositionists, such as Maxine Hairston (1985) and Olivia Frey (1990), have sought to define their "difference" as practitioners and women from the dominant discourse ("critical theory," for Hairston; "argumentative discourse," for Frey) by claiming their language practices as unique (and even, at times, superior to those of the research/theory masculinist elite). Such arguments have called for valuing practitioner knowledge as a separate but equally valuable mode of knowing. Others, such as Susan Miller (1991) and Susan Jarratt (1991), have argued that, in defining "essential" differences, hegemonic institutional values are perpetuated, reinscribing the subordination of composition practice.

The arguments for better understanding and valuing a separate but equal practitioner discourse community are well represented by Stephen North (1987). North assigns practitioner discourse largely to the oral, as opposed to the written, realm—as “lore,” an ambiguous term he applies in simultaneously admiring and (perhaps inadvertently) derogatory terms. “Composition’s lore,” according to North, is “a body of knowledge very much like those accumulated among practitioners of other arts. . . not ‘scientifically’ rigorous. . . driven . . . by a pragmatic logic. . . [and] essentially experiential” (23).

North is well aware of the problems of representing experiential “lore” within written formats and criticizes other discourse communities within composition for misreading it as work by “bad Scholars or inadequate Researchers” (54–55). He clearly advocates valuing practitioner knowledge as something different from other knowledge-making within composition. North defines the limits of practitioner knowledge as being bound to a sense of “pragmatic” reality (what works and what doesn’t), apparently outside larger social, cultural, and institutional practices and regulations. Practitioner knowledge is limited to what’s local and practical; the problem, as North states it, is that we simply need to value the local and practical more than we already do.

Even as North seeks to revalue practitioner knowledge, he also chastises practitioners for misrepresenting their knowledge, trying to claim a more general and abstract authority for what North claims is essentially local and practical:

Partly because of the medium, and partly because of pressure from institutions and other communities, when practitioners report on their inquiry in writing, they tend to misrepresent both its nature and authority, moving farther and farther from their pragmatic and experiential power base. (54)

North alternately admires practitioners for their “difference” yet wants to make sure that they know their place. He claims that lore is a powerful form of inquiry yet insists that practitioners should not try to make claims beyond lore’s “essential” nature. Consequently, “lore,” within North’s definition, cannot challenge restrictive feminized inscriptions that North’s essentialism reinscribes. North doesn’t challenge how practitioners came to such a position in the first place; he only claims that the “difference” assigned by the research establishment and a public hostile to teacher-artists should be valued rather than scorned.

Practitioners, North acknowledges, are caught by the language of

dominant research communities, which subverts their own purposes. This language overgeneralizes their experience, claims too much authority for their pragmatic testing of “what works,” and misrepresents them to researchers. Like women, practitioners (most of whom are women, though North cites primarily men as writers of “lore”) must confront a language of the dominant discourse community and use it in order to represent their ways of knowing in the research and academic community. Curiously, North suggests that practitioners seek to enter the dominant discourse out of insecurity over their status and a desire to improve it; by being more self-conscious about how they use language, North contends, they have a better chance of improving their marginal status.

North tends to dismiss the power relations that necessarily inform practitioners’ use of scholarly discourse even as he acknowledges how readily practitioner knowledge can be appropriated and misread. He characterizes practitioners as victims of misrepresentation yet blames them for misusing a language that is not of their construction and that always leaves their meanings subject to appropriation and misinterpretation. Even if practitioners followed North’s advice to be more self-conscious about using scholarly discourse to represent their knowledge, that would not, in the end, solve the problem of how scholarly research excludes practitioners, largely women.

North’s argument falls into essentialist traps that feminist theorists such as Linda Alcoff (1988) have critiqued with regard to “cultural” feminism. North, like cultural feminists, believes that the status of marginalized groups can be improved simply by correction—of their own discourse as well as that of the dominant group. Practitioners and women can simply correct distortions in their images. Alcoff criticizes this approach, contending that a more “accurate” representation of women’s experience is not possible within a hegemonically constructed discourse, and even if it were, the power that groups have to correct such distortions is limited by their *access* to the institutional regulations of the dominant discourses.

Thus the cultural feminist reappraisal construes woman’s passivity as her peacefulness, her sentimentality as her proclivity to nurture, her subjectiveness as her advanced self-awareness. Cultural feminists have not challenged the defining of woman but only that definition given by men. (Alcoff 1988, 407)

North glosses issues of power (How did researchers get the power to define practitioner knowledge to begin with?) and access to institutions that

regulate that discourse. Instead, he criticizes practitioners for their linguistic distortions, in contrast to Louise Phelps (1991), who claims that the silences and "distortions" may instead represent active resistance on the part of practitioners toward the discourse of the more powerful academic "elite." While Phelps might also be guilty of reproducing essentialist images of practitioners and "practical wisdom," she does suggest that practitioners are responding to their "feminized" status with appropriate resistance and not simply out of ignorance or insecurity.

In the end, North undermines his own project to "rescue" practitioner knowledge and place it firmly among the various "knowledge-making" communities within composition studies. By defining practitioner knowledge as essentially different from formal research rather than as a product of institutional inequities, especially of those toward women, he maintains binary oppositions between theory and practice, defining each as essentially separate but equal knowledge-making communities. He opposes the concrete, local, pragmatic inquiry of practitioners to the abstract, global, speculative knowledge of researchers—a formulation that maintains the subordination of the former to the latter. North assumes that language reflects, rather than constitutes, experience; like a mirror, it sustains distortions that are, however, correctable. If representations are "clear," then interpretations will, as a matter of course, fall into line as well.

Linguistic Determinism in the Social Construction of Meaning

North, of course, is not alone in his assumption that changes or corrections to language can empower marginalized groups. However, I would argue that language's role in the construction of meaning has been over-emphasized. Although language plays an undeniably significant role in the shaping and reproduction of professional and gender hierarchies, it has been assigned too great a role in the *control* of such hierarchies. In fact, language itself, as a subject of study, has become "feminized," described as an instrument that either controls social processes or is controlled by them. In either case, language is perceived as an objective entity, a "thing" that either is dominated by or dominates social realities. Ann Berthoff (1991) observes this polarity with regard to theories of language: "Meaning [is perceived] as a two-valued relationship: it is 'thingy' and it comes from either within or without . . . [and] interpretation is

either personal opinion or group thought" (280). Gender, too, has been culturally inscribed in similarly binary terms: either women as totally controlling, "bitchy," domineering; or women as completely controlled, victimized by a male-dominated system. Thus, these binary oppositions serve to maintain the values and beliefs of the dominant culture. "Language," as Berthoff observes, becomes "a substitute for reality" in either case (280).

Because language is perceived to be the primary means of social control over meaning, the project of reformers has been to capture control over language, to re-present their knowledge and experience "differently," as if meaning were a "thing" that could be wrestled and tamed. However, as feminist linguist Deborah Cameron (1985) points out, socially constructed meanings are a result of both linguistic and "metalinguistic" forces that Cameron claims are seldom adequately addressed in the study of language. The problem of representing women's experience, Cameron comments, is less a problem of language than of women's historical *relationship* to that language. According to Cameron, discourses are not inherently gendered but, historically speaking, shaped by men to the exclusion of women. The "essential" features of discourse are less relevant to women's exclusion than is women's access to that discourse, which historically has been limited by

the institutions that regulate language use in our own society . . . [that] are deliberately oppressive to women. . . . Men control [these institutions as] . . . the prerogative of those with economic and political power to set up and regulate important social institutions. (145)

Cameron criticizes a "linguistic determinism" in the debate (characterized also by philosopher Linda Alcoff as a debate between cultural and poststructuralist feminists) over the representation of women's experience, a debate also echoed in composition studies between expressivist and social constructivist theories:

Opponents of determinism appeal to notions of common sense and to free-will, which they accuse the radicals of denying: determinists, on the other hand, accuse non-believers of navety [sic] and of clinging to an essentialist conception of human nature and experience which is inaccurate, outmoded, and irrevocably bourgeois. (169)

The binary terms of the debate over the language and representation of practice and gender differences converge in a shared assumption: language controls or is controlled by meaning. But, as Cameron points out, in the

world of practice, meaning is also subject to metalinguistic forces such as institutional power structures that regulate a group's access to and control over discourses of power. Thus, language does not guarantee communication any more than silence automatically prevents it. And it is these dimensions of discourse, the metadiscursive activities of culture and social institutions—habits, myths, rituals, practices, historical and social processes—that are vital to the interpretation and representation of the meaning of experiential knowledge.

Unfortunately, the debate over the representation of practice is grounded in a linguistic determinism that, ironically, perpetuates the subordination of practice and practitioners; because language is described as the main means by which meaning is constructed, language rather than other cultural and institutional phenomena becomes the focus of study: "Because we use language to learn about and reflect on other social phenomena, the story goes, all those social phenomena must in the end reduce to language" (Cameron 1985, 164–65). To re-present "feminized" experience requires a redefinition of what constitutes "language." Cameron claims that linguistic research practices tend to treat all language as written rather than spoken and thus overlook the metalinguistic dimensions of language use and meaning making. Paradoxically, this calls for the representation of the nonrepresentational, or metadiscursive. This site is the intersection of discourse and image, as manifested in story and myth.

The Role of Narrative in Representations of Experiential Knowledge

I return now to my earlier argument that narrative is the appropriate mode for representing and interpreting experiential knowledge. However, the type of narrative that concerns me here is not simply the telling of events or actions. What interests me are the stories that pose questions related to hermeneutical inquiry: How do we know our knowledge? By what stories do we tell ourselves what we know? How is meaning constituted within a given discourse community? How is meaning possible? The stories I wish to tell ask questions that scientific or empirical inquiries cannot, by themselves, answer—namely, questions about the nature of experience and subjectivity or identity (i.e., "difference"). As Linda Alcoff (1988) observes,

There are questions of importance to human beings that science alone cannot answer (including what science is and how it functions), and yet these are questions that we can usefully address by combining scientific data with other logical, political, moral, pragmatic, and coherence considerations. (429)

This is not to advocate a return to an ontology that posits knowledge as independent from human agency, but to claim that questions such as these are part and parcel of the inquiry of practice and identity. The questions might not have answers based upon “fact”; rather, the activity of inquiring itself becomes a fact, an event as well as an object of study, leading to interpretation rather than verification: “knowing better” (Kno-blauch and Brannon 1988) rather than “knowing more.”

For a better understanding of the uses of story as a basis of inquiry, I turn to studies of mythography (see Doty 1986), which investigate not simply the content of myth (what they are or say) but how they function (what they do and how they mean). By understanding the “mythicness” of myths and mythmaking we might better comprehend the function of storytelling in relation to other modes of inquiry. As mythologist Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty (1988) states, stories are not designed as arguments; they do not assert propositional logic or offer solutions. They do, however, “provide us with metaphors that make the arguments real to us . . . [and] help us to approach certain problems of otherness” (2). Myths, as stories, are not simply *about* events; they are events in themselves. Consequently, the value of narrative in representing experiential knowledge is its self-reflexivity: stories become the events they narrate.

Stories of practice, then, provide a means by which to inquire into the nature of inquiry, specifically the myths by which research discourses narrate their own practices. Such stories don’t merely tell about these myths; they enact them, they re-present them so as to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. Through stories practitioners simultaneously engage in the discourse by which they are inscribed and “talk back” to it, reasserting an identity closer to the “truth” of their experience.

There are, however, some less “truthful” myths in the language of reform that require some closer examination to better understand how stories might transform the interpretation of experiential knowledge. As long as the meanings of story, and in turn myth, are regarded as constituted primarily through language, then story loses its power as an instrument of interpretation and returns to its ontological status as a window to

the ineffable. Consequently, when compositionists and feminists discuss the appropriation and reinscription of alien or alienating discourses in the cause of social justice, they express a longing for a utopian control of meaning through language. Through language, cultural images and myths are regarded as revisable, vehicles for demythifying cultural values and beliefs and remythifying them toward a more egalitarian vision of experience.

But myths, as collectively authored and reproduced (or, perhaps more accurately, lacking authorship), are not subject to revision in the same ways as is an individually authored story. Myths, as Doniger O'Flaherty points out, achieve their meaning not only in the realm of discourse but in the nonverbal, visual realm. Myths acquire or lose power based upon their usefulness in interpreting experience; meaning comes from not simply what a myth says but how it functions, how it means. That is where the visual enters: a myth is as good as how well it helps one "see" or experience something, not just what it says about that something.

One can't, in fact, revise a myth, since a myth's powers come from both discursive and nondiscursive sources and its meaning is culturally and institutionally regulated rather than individually prescribed. As Doniger O'Flaherty (1988) humorously comments,

One is . . . in danger of committing the basic sin of *hubris*—masquerading as a god—if one sets out to create a myth. Of course, this is a very common sin nowadays; many people seem to think that they can create new myths. But I don't think they can. (28)

Thus, one of the least true and least useful myths of the language reform movement to reappropriate the dominant discourse is that the myths (i.e., ideologies) that stories embody can be revised in an act of individual renaming. Ironically, by emphasizing language as the primary site of meaning making, the essential subject becomes reinscribed as the primary agent of this transformation. The political and economic systems by which meanings are institutionally regulated remain unchallenged, as do the limitations on access to these systems. This is because myths, as ways of seeing, are embodied even without language. According to Doniger O'Flaherty (1988),

The myth, the core of meaning, may survive to some extent even without language; the myth can be recreated again and again, reinflated like a collapsible balloon. The story of the Trojan horse and the myth of Eden survive as myths, free-floating without words. (37–38)

This is not to deny that language has a significant role in mythic meaning making; stories, after all, are a principal vehicle by which myths are communicated. It is, however, to point out that the emphasis on language reform has diverted attention away from issues of power by which meanings are institutionally maintained and regulated. Consequently the essential subject, rather than the collective social struggle necessary to critique existing myths and posit alternatives for understanding and acting in the world, is reinscribed as the agent of transformation. I will say more in chapter 2 about specific myths that inform social constructivist theories in composition. For now, I want to note that the problem of representation, when considered in the context of how myths function, is not simply a problem of avoiding or correcting distortions of an otherwise free and accessible site of meaning, or a problem of individual acts of appropriating and reinscribing the dominant discourse. Instead, the problem of language is primarily a lack of access to discourses of power and the institutions that regulate them; as critical theorist Teresa Ebert (1992–93) states, socioeconomically marginalized groups

have been denied access to those cultural and institutional subject positions and practices—such as education (including literacy), ‘philosophy,’ and ‘theory’ itself—through which individuals are enabled to produce new concepts and to legitimate those concepts they do generate (in short, to be ‘heard’). (33)

Thus, the problem is not only to rework the language (or the story) but for groups to gain access to “subject positions” that allow the interpretive frameworks (“myths”) by which they assign meaning to their experiences to be formulated and legitimated. Such a struggle, according to Ebert, requires collective action, which essentialist subjectivity and post-structuralist deconstruction of identities oppose.

By understanding the operations of myth/ideology in culture as a collective, yet institutionally regulated, activity of making sense of and enacting meanings of experience—an activity that is both discursive and non-discursive, as a matter of both language and historically determined structures of power—then we can better understand the role of stories in enacting and reinscribing the myths that inform our inquiries about the nature of inquiry, or, in other words, the role of story to ask the unaskable, to talk back, to re-present “modes of intelligibility” (Ebert 1992–93, 14).

Dialogics and the Novel

What, then, is the power of narrative to challenge or transform its current gendered status as "other" or "different" as a mode of knowing without relying upon essentialist or deterministic definitions that maintain binary oppositions between experience and research, practice and theory, narration and proposition? As a gendered discursive practice, narrative is currently inscribed as an extension of, or complement to, existing discourses rather than as a unique mode of inquiry with its own structures, purposes, and interpretive codes. This is not to advance the "separate but equal" argument of cultural feminism, which affirms narrative "difference" without questioning the sociohistorical processes by which it has been constructed as such. However, it is to say that narratives can and do "talk back" rather than simply act as passive mirrors of the status quo, as illustrated by M. M. Bakhtin's theory of novelistic discourse.

Recognizing the marginalization of the novel as a literary form, Bakhtin, in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), argues that the novel as a genre is not simply an addition to or extension of the poetic genre that preceded it but an open-ended form that calls into question previous definitions of poetic form. Novels provide a reinterpretation of the reality represented in other genres and challenge the epic distance those genres place between authors and their subjects.

"Novelization," according to Bakhtin, occurs when one discourse represents and simultaneously speaks the discourse of another in order to bring those discourses into dialogue. Authors consequently "converse" with their subjects: "The hero [i.e., subject] is located in a zone of potential conversation with the author, in a zone of *dialogical contact*" (45, author's emphasis). Instead of simply *revealing* the subject's significance, as the hero is said to be revealed in epic poetry, novels reflect the world of contingency in which knowledge of the world is not limited by one, unified discourse but instead in its plasticity opens up to many genres, both poetic and rhetorical. Thus, the subject contributes to the construction of its (mediated, contingent) significance.

The novel represents a world of discourse that is open-ended and inexhaustible, always partial and ideologically motivated, yet full of possibilities: "Just as all there is to know about a man [sic] is not exhausted by his situation in life, so all there is to know about the world is not exhausted by a particular discourse about it" (45). The novel illustrates meaning as a product of unique and unrepeatable social, political, historical, meteorological, physiological (among other) forces—that is, "heteroglossia."

Bakhtin's view of the novel as a mode of inquiry into the languages of others is useful when considering the role of literary forms, specifically fiction, in relation to other modes of inquiry in composition research. Novels don't just passively reflect the pragmatic experience of their subjects, as North (1987) suggests of the narratives of practitioner lore, but actually reenvision that reality, probe it, "carnivalize" the received knowledge of authoritative discourse, laugh, mock, parody, and consume it in an effort to close the distance between subject and author, reader and subject, reader and author. Feminists such as Dale Bauer (1990) have found dialogical theories of discourse useful for the feminist project of using stories as powerful vehicles for reflection and action.

Novels bring widely varied discourses together within one genre. Their multivocality enacts the processes by which meanings are negotiated through interactions among various discourses, dependent upon context, and always shifting. Dialogical approaches to discourse also reclaim literary texts from their status as objects of inquiry (or, as Robert Scholes [1985] wryly notes, the modern substitute for sacred texts) and prompt rereadings of works of literature as responses to other discourses (which is what much feminist literary work continues to do; see, e.g., Patricia Yaeger's *Honey-Mad Women* [1988]) in which they are implicated. Finally, as Charles Schuster observes in "Mikhail Bakhtin as Rhetorical Theorist" (1985), a dialogical approach to rhetoric transforms the rhetorical triangle of speaker-listener-subject from the conventional rhetoric of analysis in which "subjects are actually conceived as objects" to a more dynamic view of discursive interplay:

In Bakhtin's terms, the hero [subject] is as potent a determinant in the rhetorical paradigm as speaker or listener. The hero interacts with the speaker to shape the language and determine the form. At times, the hero becomes the dominant influence in verbal and written utterance. (595)

Such a dialogic approach to the subject has implications not only for strategies of interpretation but for research methodologies as well.

Objectivist Foundations in Academic Research

Part of the project to legitimate the experiences and knowledge of practitioners within academe is to inquire into the institutional mechanisms by

which practitioners have been excluded from discursive practices of the research community. Specifically, practitioners and researchers, practice and theory, teaching/writing and scholarship/analysis, as well as research methodologies (which assume a neutral, observable reality as the basis of all knowledge) and subjective, internal, nonempirical "creative" work have been institutionalized as binary oppositions. Furthermore, discourses of inquiry in the academy often rely upon false dichotomies between the object of inquiry and the observer as well as between the production and consumption of texts. A novel, for example, is still considered *only* a story, something imagined and constructed as opposed to something real and discovered; the mode of knowing of literary works is still, within the academy, less valued than those of more analytic, supposedly more disinterested, discourses whose emphasis is on the consumption (and objectification) of such texts.

Robert Scholes (1985) has commented upon this hierarchy of discourses as part of the larger "apparatus" of English departments in which the consumption of texts regarded as "literature" is valorized over the production of "pseudo-literary" or "pseudo-non-literary" works in creative writing and composition. In addition, interpretation and, in turn, critical discourse are privileged over the literary forms they study. English studies, according to Scholes, is structured upon binary oppositions of literature/nonliterature and consumption/production of texts that he believes must be deconstructed in order to reconceptualize the purposes, forms, and directions possible for the future of the discipline (7).

Phenomenological inquiry can assist in challenging this canonical hierarchy of discourses and the sociopolitical arrangements of academe (in this case, English departments and English studies) by delineating false dichotomies between subject and object, subjective and objective forms of inquiry, thereby making the dichotomies available for analysis and revision. According to Knoblauch and Brannon (1988),

The concept of "objectivity" falsely reifies what is always profoundly human (and therefore interpretive) about our understanding [while] the concept of "subjectivity" falsely encloses consciousness, separating human understanding from the world that conditions its action even as, reciprocally, it is conditioned by that action. Human beings are not privileged observers outside of phenomenal reality but rather participants within it. (18)

Phenomenological inquiry assumes that the observer and the object of inquiry (i.e., the "subject") are joined by the instruments of inquiry—in

this case, language. Language is the "speculative instrument," as Ann Berthoff describes it, that at once constructs knowledge and acts upon the knowledge that we construct. As Knoblauch and Brannon (1988) state, "The act of seeing . . . has a *material* effect on what is observed, altering it in the very process of focusing upon it" (17, authors' emphasis). We can know the world only through the mediation of symbolic forms, and therefore we are both observers *and* participants in the phenomena we study. In turn, what we write gives form to what we know.

Inquiring into the binary oppositions that maintain the subordinate status, and control the definitions of practice and the identities of (mostly female) practitioners is one step toward transforming institutional practice. Such inquiry cannot be limited to the linguistic practices of institutions but must include inquiry into the metalinguistic practices of power and authority in institutional structures and rituals. As Carl G. Herndl (1991) observes, "[D]isciplinary discourse appropriates the experience of the research subject and represents it in our institutions" (320). Consequently, inquiring into the mechanisms by which such appropriations are possible can subsequently make them available for critique and contestation.

Researching as a Woman

The problem of representing the research subject has been tied to problems of representing the researcher's subjectivity, which in positivist research has been posited as necessarily neutral and nonexistent. Representing the narrative, "subjective" knowledge of practice and practitioners, however, requires a reevaluation of the relation of subjects to researchers as well as of researchers' own subjectivities. Within composition, the question of subjective identities has also been raised in relation to feminist concerns, challenging the binary opposition between "objective" and "subjective" methods of research.

Since Elizabeth Flynn's "Composing as a Woman" appeared in 1988, more compositionists are beginning to question the specific ways in which composition studies is gendered and to identify how women, as primary agents of instruction, are marginalized. Flynn, like educational researcher Patti Lather, sees the problem as partly one of positivist assumptions underlying most research in the field. Flynn contends that to launch an inquiry that will be regarded as research, one must, paradoxically, exclude oneself as a woman. Otherwise, one's inquiry may meet the fate of being

renamed as “merely” pedagogical, especially if one is a woman; as Flynn cites in her “Staffroom Interchange” (1990) response to “Composing as a Woman,” reviewers of her original manuscript did not consider it legitimate research, requiring instead that she add a section entitled “Pedagogical Implications,” as if to announce her work as valuable classroom practice but of little interest to the research community as research.

Flynn asks, just as Carol Gilligan (*In a Different Voice*) and Mary Belenky and colleagues (*Women's Ways of Knowing*) ask of their male predecessors, Are the models of ethical, intellectual, and writing development biased toward a male viewpoint? Lather (1991) would no doubt add, In what ways are the research methodologies themselves so biased, and how can we move into more “critical, praxis-oriented paradigm[s]”? (70).

What, in fact, is the relationship of models of composing to the “myths” of culture, of institutional arrangements of power and authority? What are the stories that inform our view of the “real world” outside of the classroom, where we know our students must go, both within and outside of academia? How do these stories affect our view of composing, the instruction we subsequently give, as well as the writing we do ourselves? And how can we, finally, act to change these stories and offer alternative views—for ourselves, our students, our field of study? Can we rewrite the history of composing to include “woman” as one who is not only composed but who composes?

To address these questions, one must adopt a research methodology that studies difference. This “difference,” however, is not grounded in either the essentialism argued by North (a “difference between”—after Teresa Ebert—feminized practitioners and masculinized researchers) or the determinism of social constructivists (in which “difference” itself is a linguistic construct signifying a “difference within” the category of practice), but rather, as Teresa Ebert (1992–93) defines it, “*difference in relation . . . within a system of exploitation and the social struggle it engenders*” (16–17; author's emphasis). It must be a methodology that doesn't, at the start, require that one check one's own difference at the entryway, suppress the multiple identities one brings to bear upon any inquiry. As I have previously argued, I don't think most composition research seriously considers those who do this; and the published research that does do this doesn't offer a clear idea of how it might contribute to other research. I agree with Flynn's assessment about lingering positivist inclinations, even in ethnographic or “naturalistic” research, as discussed by Carl Herndl (1991).

But I also think, similar to Deborah Cameron (1985), that composition focuses too much on how meaning is constructed, maintained, and

replicated through language, specifically the written word, to the exclusion of metalinguistic phenomena. The “linguistic determinism” cited by Cameron (1985) is perhaps another version of positivism. We confuse language with meaning instead of understanding meaning in broader contexts of symbolic form, including cultural and institutional forms of myth and ritual in the exercise and regulation of power and authority.

Flynn herself has since been criticized for essentialist definitions of “woman” in her research, reinscribing rather than challenging sexist concepts of gender in her observations that women write more about caring and connection in their narratives and men write more about adventure and separation (supporting Gilligan’s research on differences in moral and ethical development between genders). Although Flynn’s own research methodologies in this project may also be said to represent some lingering positivist assumptions in how she approaches the interpretation of student texts, her research is still, I believe, a landmark in its challenge to gendered research practices within composition and in creating links between practitioner knowledge and gendered identities. Similarly, Stephen North’s (1987) attempt to resituate practitioner knowledge is highly significant in its attempt to change the status of a gendered practitioner knowledge. Although the critique of Flynn’s and North’s essentialization of practice and gender by social constructivists is instructive, social constructivists have not, I think, helped the cause of practitioners, or women, in particular, any more (and in some ways they have helped less) than Flynn or North, as I will discuss in chapter 2.

Writing the Subject

How might story, then, contribute to our understanding of how cultural and institutional myths derive their power and consequently give us some clues as to how to get out of our own heads and into the heads of Others, so to speak, without doing damage? How do we represent the Other—in our classrooms, ourselves as Other, those on the margins of society?

By reflecting on the ways in which the “myths” or “ideologies” of the academy shape the ways a writer comes to know her knowledge, we can begin to know better the assumptions that prevent writing from taking place by privileging some stories of composing over others. Although there exists an abundance of composing models from empirical, philosophical, cognitive, and other research perspectives, stories of composing are distinctly lacking from a writer’s perspective. A writer’s view of her

own work is regarded as suspect, just as is a teacher's reflection on her own teaching, which is why neither are valued institutionally as real knowledge-making enterprises. As for the writer, and most particularly the woman writer, she is even more vulnerable to her text of composing being appropriated, because she has been socialized, as women in the culture generally have been, to mistrust what she knows—which models of conflict and separation reinforce.

I will tell, therefore, in the following chapters a writer's story, a woman's story, and in the telling resituate the prevailing story of master-apprentice, or, as Linda Brodkey (1987) has written, the "scene of writing" that, as Belenky and her colleagues (1986) have noted, highlights the "hero" story of education. Part of telling the woman writer's story, however, entails representing how the masculinist, "hero" story (as exemplified by Rose 1989) has inscribed her into its narrative structures, and how it is part of the web of stories that spin her and that she in turn spins.

Chapter 2 will focus on the prevailing stories of composition within social constructivism, examining the theories of Kenneth Bruffee, Patricia Bizzell, and David Bartholomae. Although their critique of the essential has been a useful perspective on much of the theory and pedagogy of expressivism, they rely upon images of romantic "hero" teachers and students recruited in the cause of social justice, reifying individual rationality and personal response as opposed to collective resistance and action.

Chapter 3 begins the woman writer's story, specifically my rereading of a draft of a short story I wrote several years ago. My rereading is through the interpretive framework of "romance" and "quest" plots noted by the feminist literary scholars Carolyn Heilbrun and Rachel Blau DuPlessis. Chapters 4 and 5 expand the writer's story to include stories of my experiences in two writing groups (a graduate fiction workshop and a self-directed student group) in which a draft of a second short story is discussed along with interpretations of the "mythic" or ideological frameworks informing the groups' talk. Chapter 6 returns to the question of representation, this time regarding representation of practitioners' power and authority. The book closes with an epilogue of reflections on the difference the experience of telling these stories has made to my own practice.

The value of a woman writer's stories is not in the "facts" that the narratives reveal but in the qualitative difference that the reading of such stories provides. Knoblauch and Brannon (1988) argue that we should

value the ways of knowing that narratives provide for the same reasons we value literature; one does not know more as stories are added,

but one does know 'better'; one's instincts and values, expectations and judgments mature. One's ability to read the world grows. Literature enhances the quality of understanding without presuming to add to its content. (28)

Narrative is a mode of knowing; the relational web of many texts complicates and enriches what we know of our experience. Instead of the reduction, isolation, and abstractions required in traditional scholarly discourse, narratives offer enlargement, inclusion, and enrichment, which are especially necessary to the development of women in the composition of themselves as knowers. Women writers are particularly vulnerable to the narratives that inscribe them; as Carolyn Heilbrun (1988) has noted in her work on women's biographies,

We can only retell and live by the stories we have read or heard. We live our lives through texts. Whatever their form or medium, these stories have formed us all; they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives. (37)

Patti Lather (1991) comments, "I conceptualize ideology as the stories a culture tells itself about itself" (2). In this sense, fictions shape our lives (and the stories we tell about our stories) in critical ways; therefore narratives of writers' talk, both within and outside the academy, deserve the serious attention we as readers of literature so willingly apply.

Note

1. By "practitioner" I refer to identities constructed through narratives of experience as opposed to abstract or propositional constructs. In this case, I refer specifically to teachers and students of writing as well as writers. But I also equate formal "practices" of teaching and writing with life "experiences" of women under the larger category of "experiential knowledge." Both require the construction of subjectivities that seek to re-create a verisimilitude of experience through narrative rather than to argue propositional "truths." In a sense, we are all "practitioners" in life, though our professional identities might sometimes amplify or obscure those practices.