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**THE RHETORIC OF "EXPERIENCE":
EXPLORATIONS IN "EXPERIENCE" AS A KEY TERM IN FEMINIST
DISCOURSE**

by

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**The Rhetoric of “Experience”:
Explorations in “Experience” as a Key Term in Feminist Discourse**

This dissertation seeks to lay the groundwork for a theory of feminist rhetoric that recognizes the central and contradictory role of “experience” as a key term in feminist discourse. Following Kenneth Burke’s example, it proposes to add “experience” as a key term to the “standard lore” of rhetoric. While “persuasion” and “identification” still play a primary role, they do not adequately represent the rhetorical strategies of feminist discourse. “Identification” is a term which emphasizes the need to create unity. Feminism, as this dissertation argues, requires a term that can function equally well to create division and unity. “Experience” meets this requirement, for it offers the means by which women can distinguish their differences from others and the means by which women can identify similarities with others.

Chapter One examines the changing place of “experience” in feminist terministic screens. It specifically looks at the poststructuralist challenge to the use of “experience” in feminist discourse. Chapter Two examines the substance of “experience” in early discourses. The first section of the chapter begins with an account of the devaluation of the term in the discourses of Plato and Aristotle; it then analyses the medieval notions of the terms and the use of “experience” in Chaucer’s “Wife of Bath.” The second section investigates the corresponding use of “experience” in the arguments of John Locke and Mary Wollstonecraft. It illustrates how Wollstonecraft uses the principles set out by Locke in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* to argue for the rights of women in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The third section brings John Dewey’s *Art as Experience* together with Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas* to explicate Woolf’s use of “experience.” Chapter Three looks at the use of “experience” in defining moments of feminist literary criticism and the debates that follow. The debates center on Barbara Smith’s essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” and the Canadian text “Language in Her Eye.” Chapter Four examines the bringing together of theory and practice in the use of metaphor as experience in the work of Hélène Cixous.

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Dedication

To My Family
especially

Leaverd

For always being there to provide encouragement and support (financial and otherwise)
well before it was needed.

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For always believing that time did not matter as long as I finished and enjoyed life in the
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Just for calling me up every once in a while to ask me “how’s it going” and sharing her
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For the ever so rare phone calls that were always accompanied with an offer of assistance.

Table of Contents

Introduction

"Experience" as a Key Term in Feminist Rhetoric 1

Chapter One

Clashing Frameworks: Questioning the Centrality of "Experience" in Contemporary Feminist Theory 19

Chapter Two

The Substance of "Experience" 48
 Chaucer and the Authority of Experience 56
 Mary Wollstonecraft and the Rhetoric of Lockean Understanding 67
 John Dewey, Virginia Woolf and the Rhetoric of Art as Experience 87

Chapter Three

Same Difference: Manifestations of "Experience" in Contemporary Feminist Discourse 111
 The Role of Critical Theory 113
 Three Critical Moments 117
 After the Critical Moment: The Smith Debate 125
 The *Language in Her Eye* Debate 143

Chapter Four

Experience as Metaphor: Hélène Cixous's Rhetoric of Metaphor in "The Laugh of the Medusa" and "Castration and Decapitation" 164
 The Critics on Cixous's Rhetoric of Metaphor 166
 Metaphor as the Grounds for Rationalism 182
 Metaphor as Experience 191

Conclusion.....211

Works Cited.....220

Introduction

“Experience”¹ as a Key Term in Feminist Rhetoric

Rhetoric, since Aristotle, more often than not, is presented to us as a catalogue of persuasive techniques represented through specific terms such as “ethos,” “logos,” “pathos,” “analogy,” “example,” “illustration,” “part and whole,” “scene,” “act,” “agent,” and “agency.” The terms are as numerous and varied as those who construct and reproduce them, signifying strategies which are employed in a variety of situations according to diverse motives, and which function to persuade others to maintain or change attitudes, beliefs, and/or behaviors. As Kenneth Burke aptly states, “[w]e *must* use terministic screens, since we can’t say anything without the use of terms . . .” (*On Symbols* 121). The power of the terms, however, creates a double-bind as Burke also notes:

Not only does the nature of our terms affect the nature of our observations, in the sense that the terms direct the *attention* to one field rather than to another. Also, *many of the “observations” are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made.* In brief, much that we take as observations about “reality” may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms. (*On Symbols* 116)

If we accept Burke’s premise, we must recognize that the terms of rhetoric also direct our attention and control our observations about reality. Key terms maintain existing power

¹ The term “experience” is never separate from its meaning, but at times I wish to emphasize the term rather than the term’s meaning (what it refers to). To do this, I use quotation marks when the term “experience” is being emphasized. When there are no quotation marks, the meaning of the term is being foregrounded.

structures by blinding us to those structures and by preventing us from seeing other possibilities that might undermine or challenge the established systems. The terministic screens of rhetoric, until very recently, have been constructed by men who, like Burke, benefit from the power structures of a patriarchal society. When attempting to wield the terms of rhetoric, feminists have had to confront a double bind. Selected to reflect certain aspects of society, the terms continually spin out the possibilities of patriarchy and deflect our attention away from the oppression that arises with the resulting delimited possibilities.

Key terms are particularly potent because they determine the nature of the terministic screens that direct our field of vision and ultimately our understanding². Titular and original in nature, they appear to generate all other terms within their given field (*Motives* 21). Although key terms often appear static and monolithic, they are inevitably changeable and inconsistent. Marking the strategic location where ambiguity arises, they constitute the ultimate sight of transformation. Not surprisingly, for feminists, who seek to alter existing ways of seeing and understanding, the key terms of rhetoric become the principal sites of contestation. They are, however, rarely, if ever, replaced. Instead, they can be transformed so that new distinctions and terms can be generated within the domain of existing key terms; alternatively, new key terms may be created to coexist alongside established key terms which, in turn, alter the pre-existing terms.

²Burke's discussion of logology provides a succinct synopsis of this phenomenon. As he notes, "The 'logological' or 'terministic' counterpart of 'Believe' in the formula would be: *Pick some particular nomenclature, some one terministic screen.* And for 'That you may understand,' the counterpart would be *'That you may proceed to track down the kinds of observation implicit in the terminology you have chosen, whether your choice of terms was deliberate or spontaneous.'*" (*Language as Symbolic Action* 47)

A master of terministic screens, Kenneth Burke chooses the latter option when positing “identification” as a key term for rhetoric. He recognizes that “persuasion” has traditionally been the key term for rhetoric, but he insists that “Our treatment , in terms of identification, is decidedly not meant as a substitute for the sound traditional approach. Rather, as we try to show it is but an accessory to the standard lore” (*Rhetoric*, xiv). Burke’s use of the pronouns ‘our’ and ‘we’ and the term ‘accessory’ is very instructive. The plural pronouns implicate the reader in the act of shifting key terms and, in fact, take for granted the identification of the reader with the author, thereby embedding Burke’s theoretical perspective into the language of the text. The term ‘accessory,’ on one level, implies a minor attachment or decorative addition such as a man’s necktie: hence, Burke feigns to pose no serious challenge to the rhetorical tradition. On another level, however, the term suggests an accompaniment or accomplice of equal worth (such as an accessory to a crime) and assumes for Burke’s theory a place within the established rhetorical tradition.

Burke’s strategy was obviously effective. Today, his theory is indispensable to an understanding of communication. Highly generative, his work provides one of the more flexible and well used methodologies in contemporary rhetoric.³ Indeed, many

³Even while attempting to point out the limits of Burke’s theory, critics cannot help but praise him. For example, in a forum specifically designed to outline the “Limits to the Burkeian System” (Chesebro 356), Bernard Brock notes that “Burke has become the most popular rhetorical theorist in the field” (347); Celeste Michelle Condit concedes that “Kenneth Burke has offered us one of the most important corpora of works of the twentieth century,”(349) and James W. Chesebro begins his conclusion by stating:

From the beginning of the 1980s, Burke has been increasingly cast as a recognized major social critic of the twentieth century. . . . The balance of

feminists have also found Burke's theory insightful. However, like the nineteenth century sentence described by Virginia Woolf as reflecting the "weight, the pace, the stride of a man's mind" (*A Room* 73), Burke's theory often becomes a rather clumsy and awkward tool when applied to feminist tasks. One primary source of this awkwardness may lie in Burke's chosen key term: identification. When Burke argues for "identification" rather than "persuasion" as the key term of rhetoric, he suggests that rhetoric functions primarily by "describing the ways in which members of a group promote social cohesion by acting rhetorically upon themselves and one another" (*Rhetoric* xiv). Accordingly, consubstantiality and identification form the foundation for 'acting together.' While Burke recognizes that division constitutes a counterpart to identification, he clearly subsumes or backgrounds division. In other words, his theory assumes that division and conflict form the initial state of being; the necessity of rhetoric arises from this state, for rhetoric functions to create unity and cooperation in "the state of Babel after the Fall" (*Rhetoric* 23). According to Burke, then, "Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity" (*Rhetoric* 22).

Like most contemporary rhetoricians, Burke assumes a universal tone. His approach and attitude suggest that he intends his theory to apply to all people, at all times, and for all situations. But his basic assumption concerning the relationship between division and identification is highly problematic for understanding feminist discourse. Identification and its associative term, consubstantiality, cannot act as the primary key terms in feminist rhetoric. While it is generally recognized that women need to act together to form a feminist movement, it is important to realize that the initial state

the 1990s may well be a period in which Burke is celebrated as a profound social critic and thinker of our age. (365)

from which feminists work is not one of division but rather one of all-consuming identification. Feminist theories continually reiterate this point. For example, Marilyn Frye points out that woman within patriarchy is socialized so that “All of the will and resources she would draw upon to survive are . . . channeled to the service of his [man’s] interests” (64). In other words, “her [woman’s] substance is organized toward his [man’s] ‘transcendence’”(Frye 66). Simone de Beauvoir describes a similar phenomenon in her work *The Second Sex*:

Women lack concrete means for organizing themselves into a unit . . .

They have no past, no history, no religion of their own; and they have no such solidarity of work and interest as that of the proletariat. . . . They live dispersed among males, attached through residence, housework, economic and social standing to certain men. (xxii)

While it may be tempting to argue that feminists need this “concrete means for organizing themselves” and, if we follow Burke’s notion of rhetoric, we might look for the ways in which feminists become consubstantial despite their differences, but in so doing, we miss the point. De Beauvoir argues that woman has become the permanent Other to man as Subject (xix), and she seeks to break this interrelationship and to have woman “regain her place in Humanity” (297) by renouncing her role as Other and asserting herself as Subject.

To break a social relationship in which women are subservient to men constitutes the primary goal of most feminist rhetoric. Feminists work not to create unity and cooperation in “the state of Babel after the Fall,” but rather to create division in the state of Patriarchy before its Fall. Feminists endeavor to tear down the phallogocentric tower which insists on singular meaning and universal truth and replace it with a plurality of meaning and a concept of truth which incorporates multiplicity. To achieve its goal, a feminist theory of rhetoric can develop a key term that directs attention to a process in which division and identification occur simultaneously while assuming that the pre-

existent state of being consists of a disadvantageous unity in which women are bound to men enabling men to exploit the energy and resources of women, while denying women the choices necessary for fulfillment, self-actualization, and even, in some cases, survival. A feminist theory of rhetoric also needs to take into account the divisions and identifications within feminism. Feminists become consubstantial through the strategies and acts of liberation they endorse and practice. In this context, consubstantiality becomes a by-product of the acts of division or, more accurately, the acts of difference, and the attributes which distinguish different types of feminisms are really points about how, and to what degree, women should separate from or challenge the dominant social structure of patriarchy. If a spectrum were created, liberal feminism with its desire to work for change within existing social structures would occupy one end and radical feminism with its call for complete separation from existing social structures would occupy the other.

For feminists the choice is not as simple as Burke seems to assert with his insistence that there are only two kinds of terms: “terms that put things together, and terms that take things apart” (*On Symbols* 120). In choosing the terms “identification” and “consubstantiality,” he opts for terms that emphasize continuity. However, as A. T. Nuyen notes, “identification is the standard tool of totalization employed by any totalizing structure, political or otherwise”(79-80). As Virginia Woolf suggests in *Three Guineas*, the masculinist structure often uses uniforms and rituals such as those found in the army or in the court to mark identity. Burke does not problematize the totalizing nature of his key term, and this totalization forms another major point of discomfort for feminist critics.

In “Kenneth Burke’s Appendicitis: a Feminist’s Case for Complaint,” Lynn Worsham takes issue with the “phallic authority of universal ‘man’” which appears throughout Burke’s texts (74). According to Worsham, Burke characterizes human beings as “bodies-that-learn-language” and identifies the body as the locus of difference (82).

But Worsham argues that Burke's undifferentiated body is inevitably a gendered body. Moreover, his representation of the body follows a circular logic which reduces difference to sameness and universalizes and totalizes by substituting the part for the whole (e.g. the phallus for the whole of sexuality and then for the whole of human experience or, in Burke's case, the "substitution of symbol for body, one that specifically silences the specificity of the feminine body"(86)). In other words, Burke's theory is blind to the gendered body on which its terministic screen is constructed. As a result, the key term of his theory spins out the possibilities of a particular body--the masculine body--entrapping feminists within a patriarchal field. Worsham suggests that feminists can, to some extent, counter the phallogentrism of Burke's hermeneutic by using figures other than synecdoche (one of Burke's master tropes) to "read and write and speak--imperfectly, transgressively, anti-logically" (86)⁴.

Similarly, in "Rhetorical Criticism as Ethical Action: Cherchez la Femme," Janice Norton also centers her feminist discomfort with Burke's theory in his notion of the body. Norton revisits the question of "identification," "consubstantiality," and the "body" in Burke's work. Focusing on the concept of body, Norton argues that Burke fails to escape the standard ideology of the rhetorical tradition. Like many before and after him, he constructs the body as sexually undifferentiated (32). By doing so, "Burke seals 'woman' ever tighter into the body of 'man,' . . . such that her sexual specificity cannot be interrogated within a Burkeian model, and her identity is always--already shared with 'man'" (Norton 37). According to Norton, Burke's choice of an un-sexed

⁴For other figures she suggests those "that are not recognized as the master tropes or proper figures: catechresis, of course, but also anoiconemeton (a disease of proper arrangement); enallage (a disruption in the consistency of gender, the transvestite trope, as it were); pleonasm (the trope of hysteria perhaps, for it corrupts plain speech by excess); and other so-called barbarian figures" (86).

body blocks any serious inquiries into the effects of sexual difference on his theory of 'identification' (36). In the end, Norton turns away from the Burkeian tradition and asks that we create an alternative "theory of rhetoric that takes sexual difference seriously" (42).

While for Norton and Worsham, Burke truly has become an accessory to and accomplice in the rhetorical tradition and its ongoing phallogentric terministic screen, feminists are not the only ones to take issue with Burke's tendency to universalize. Both Celeste Michelle Condit and James W. Chesebro identify this as a major limitation to Burkeian theory. Condit notes that Burke likes to play with both universalism and particularism, but his definition of man directs our attention more toward universals (349). Chesebro identifies what he labels a 'monocentric bias' as the primary limitation of Burke's work. Chesebro argues that "Burke has made identifiable choices as he has described human communication, which constitute biases in his system. The first of these choices is Burke's quest to find one universal way of characterizing human communication" (357). Other choices that Burke makes, such as his reliance on dualisms and his acceptance of hierarchy, also contribute to the awkwardness of his theory for feminists.

However, Burke's understanding and insights into human communication and language are too valuable to be discarded by feminists. Rather than completely casting out the theoretical tools of rhetoric Burke has provided, feminists need to redesign them so that they fit feminist discourse and function more adequately in a feminist context. Feminists may retain many of the general concepts but make different choices about how to describe them. To begin, they may construct a different terministic screen, thereby

altering the reflection, selection, and deflection of reality.⁵ The construction of an alternative terministic screen starts with the selection of the key term. I seek to begin that process here by borrowing Burke's 'accessory' strategy. I am not suggesting feminists replace the term "identification" or, for that matter, the term "persuasion." Instead, I suggest that feminists create an alternative term. To start this process of re-construction, feminists need to determine what they want the key term to reflect. The answer to this question will naturally determine their selection of the key term. To some extent, the previous examination of Burke's theory has already provided some answers: feminists do not want universalizing terms. A feminist key term must also provide ample opportunity for difference. Feminists have learned well the lessons of their past⁶, and they have come to recognize their positions in systems of hierarchies. Acknowledging and valuing difference, particularly in terms of race, class, or sexual orientation, is one means by which feminists seek to avoid repeating cycles of oppression. Valuing difference also means accepting a variety of divergent approaches, both practical and theoretical, within feminism itself. Feminism, after all, is a philosophy constructed on the negative. Feminist theory focuses more on what should *not* be (inequality, patriarchy, hierarchy, discrimination, and oppression), and in the process, suggests values (choice, multiplicity, difference, equality) that must be enacted to change the present system. Such values need

⁵The reference is to Burke's now well known line: "Even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality" (*On Symbols* 115).

⁶Second wave feminists found themselves confronted with the charge of racism, classism, and heterosexism when they left many of their own assumptions unquestioned and attempted to apply their principles to all women. See chapter three for more specific examples of these charges.

to be reflected in any feminist theory of rhetoric and primarily in the key term of that rhetoric. To do so, the key term must accommodate division, contradiction, and even conflict, and must also be able to bring about continuity. In other words, the term must be able both to take things apart and to put things together. The key term of a feminist rhetoric needs to escape the snare of dualism and its binary oppositions, offering a both/and model rather than the either/or perplex so prevalent in language theory. Hilary Rose reminds us this is not a new project for feminists:

A major feminist project of the 1980s was to locate a distinctively feminist epistemology from within women's experiences rather than from exclusively within women's biologies, yet to do so in a way which refuses the Cartesian dichotomy and so admits bodily along with other differences. (Rose, 218)

What is new is that this notion should be brought into developing a key term for feminist rhetoric.

I contend that the key term for a feminist rhetoric is "experience." Although the term is fraught with difficulties, I argue that it works in many ways to fulfil the functions and values required by feminists as well as those needed, generally, by a key term. The prevalence of the term in feminist discourse clearly points to its significance and recommends it as a key term. In fact, the vast majority of feminist texts use "experience" in one form or another suggesting that notions of "experience" have played a central role in the development of feminist philosophy and theory. Even as many recent theorists attempt to dissociate feminism from the term "experience," they find themselves unable to banish it completely. In "A Genealogy of Experience," for example, Elizabeth Bellamy and Artemis Leontis, after constructing a case for the elimination of "experience" from feminist discourse, concede:

The easiest and the most predictable move would be to argue for an elimination of the vocabulary of "experience"

from political discourse altogether as a concept too
 burdened with outdated (i.e., “modernist”) preoccupations
 with selfhood, “interests,” etc., to be useful any longer.
 But appeals to “experience” will undoubtedly persist—and
 this persistence may not be altogether undesirable. (178)

Another significant example of this difficulty with “experience” appears in Joan Scott’s essay “Experience.” She admits that

experience is not a word we can do without, although it is
 tempting, given its usage to essentialize identity and reify the
 subject, to abandon it altogether. . . . Given the ubiquity of the
 term, it seems to me more useful to work with it, to analyze its
 operations and to redefine its meaning. (37)

The work of theorists in feminist rhetoric suggests that “experience” acts a central and substantial term. In their discussion of the feminist challenge to rhetoric, Sonja K. Foss, Karen A. Foss, and Robert Trapp identify three primary assumptions that characterize the feminist perspective. Here, the term, “experience,” plays a defining role. The first assumption, for example, states that “gender has been constructed so that women’s experiences are subordinate to those of men” (275), while the second assumption insists that “women’s perceptions, meanings, and experiences” should be valued (276). Foss, Foss, and Trapp conclude that:

In their revision of rhetorical constructs and theories to incorporate women’s experiences, feminists provide the greatest challenge to the rhetorical tradition as they clarify the masculine orientation of rhetorical theories and construct alternative and more comprehensive ones--theories that acknowledge women’s ways of constructing and using rhetoric (287).

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell has also played a significant role in the recovery and development of American feminist rhetoric. Her project points to the centrality of the

term “experience” in the actual practice of rhetoric. Outlining the nature of a feminine style in rhetoric, Campbell notes that “the discourse will be personal in tone . . . relying heavily on personal experience, anecdotes, and other examples,” and “efforts will be made to create identification with experiences of the audience and those described by the speaker” (13).

In conjunction with the term’s prevalence and centrality, “experience” possesses a titular quality due partly to its long philosophical history as well as its currency in everyday parlance. The term’s monolithic facade hides its highly ambiguous, volatile, and transformative nature. Moreover, the substance of “experience” contains many key oppositional dualities such as rational/irrational, reason/emotion, knowledge/intuition, and social/personal. Often the term functions as a bridge between the dualities or, more importantly, as a site where the terms in the dualities may shift places. However, “experience’s” most useful trait is its ambiguity.

“Experience” constitutes what Chaim Perelman refers to as an ambiguous or confused notion. That is to say, like the terms “freedom” and “justice,” “experience” presents a concept or notion we all feel that we are familiar with and understand. Yet, if asked to define the term, we would soon discover that a variety of contradictory meanings are possible. Moving quickly from the concrete into the abstract, the term becomes fixed only when placed within a given formalized context. Thus, a woman who is asked to describe her experience by a women’s discussion group will produce a very different answer than when she is asked to describe her experience by a potential employer. The term becomes more vague when we consider its usage in different philosophies: Plato’s and Aristotle’s use of the term differs substantially from John Locke’s, which differs from John Dewey’s, which differs again from Joan W. Scott’s, and so on. The term’s substance, the history of its meaning, contributes to its power, providing the ground on which we can shift the field of the term, reconstruct it, or even, at times, make it appear univocal.

The strongest feature of “experience” as an ambiguous notion is its plasticity. This feature enables feminists to reach agreement and consubstantiality while maintaining diversity and difference, for the ambiguity of the meaning allows for enough common ground to achieve accord between individuals while leaving them free to make their own interpretations of the term in relation to their own ideologies or perspectives. As Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca state, “when their system of reference is not indicated and cannot be supplied in a univocal way or even when they are integrated into widely differing ideological systems, ambiguous notions do make possible the crystallization of a global effort of goodwill” (134). Of course, while the plasticity of the term makes the term useful, it also makes the term highly problematic. When a theorist such as Marilyn Frye says that “one of the great powers of feminism is that it goes so far in making the experiences and lives of women intelligible” (xi), we do not dispute or express difficulties with the term, but when a term transforms into action, it must be temporarily ossified. The evolution of a notion, after all, “presents only fragmentary aspects, formulations and approximations of a single concept that react upon one another. Each time, the speaker will have to emphasize certain aspects, to make them present, at the expense of others” (Perelman 137-8).

When “experience” as a key term is put into practice, it produces contestable results. Such is the case, for example, in Susan David Bernstein’s essay “Confessing Feminist Theory: What’s “I” Got to Do with It,” where she notes that the use of personal experience by a well known feminist critic, Jane Tompkins, achieves unintended results:

In Tompkins’s rendition, the author’s personal “experience” becomes the new uncontested authority that displaces any accounting for its discursive, cultural, and ideological positioning. Knowledge of the reader, which replaces knowledge of the text, issues precisely from the transmission of “their own experience” and “my own experience” as if representation were

a matter of forthright transcription with confessional “I” as transcendent purveyor of a truth of self. . . . Tompkins rehearses a retreat into sameness—“a reader like me”—and an aversion to difference. (129)

Elements such as “uncontested authority” and “purveyor of a truth of self” are not essential to the term “experience” but are simply part of a particular ossification of the term. While any given understanding of “experience” can be problematic for feminists who work from differing frameworks, a given understanding is essential for those working within a particular perspective. “Experience” is significant because it allows for the ossification of a terministic screen and for the undermining and even deconstruction of such screens.

Exploring the central and often contradictory role of “experience” as a key term in feminist rhetoric is the primary goal of this dissertation. In other words, I wish to position this work in what Foss, Foss, and Trapp refer to as the “second stage of the feminist challenge” to rhetorical theory. The work offers a revisioning of rhetoric’s key term. Its purpose is not to develop a new theory but to illustrate the prevalence of “experience” and the role it plays in discourses accepted as feminist. A richer understanding of the term can be reached by examining the rhetorical function of “experience” and by illustrating how “experience” operates as a key term in feminist rhetoric.

Chapter One provides an overview of the theory surrounding “experience,” examining the use of experience by various feminists in the construction of co-existing and sometimes conflicting terministic screens. Poststructuralists pose the strongest challenge to the use of “experience” in feminist discourse, but this challenge takes place against a background of feminist theorizing that treats “experience” as central to a feminist construction of knowledge. Feminists such as Foss and Foss view experience as essential evidence in feminist research and scholarship. Others, such as Maria Lazreg, Nancy Tuana, and Lynn Hankinson Nelson seek to alter the existing frameworks of rationalism

and empiricism to make those frameworks conducive to feminist objectives.

Poststructuralists such as Joan Scott and Chris Weedon bring into play the previously unquestioned notion of the subject, arguing that experience is so tied into the humanist framework that it cannot function adequately to bring about social change. With its emphasis on language and its view of experience and subjectivity as constructed through language, the poststructural framework provides important critiques of feminist theories. When poststructuralists insist on privileging their framework over others, they fail to recognize the changing nature of the other frameworks or the rhetorical functions “experience” performs in reconfiguring frameworks. In the end, they are unable to reject the term “experience.” Instead, they either reconstruct the term so that it is compatible with their framework or attempt to displace it by making it a secondary term in their terministic screen.

Chapters Two to Four analyze various discourses that exploit and debate the term “experience.” Chapter Two examines the development of “experience” in relation to the terms “woman” and “rhetoric.” The chapter begins with an account of the devaluation of the three terms in the discourses of Plato and Aristotle. Those discourses influence medieval notions of the terms and, particularly, the use of “experience” in Chaucer’s tale and prologue of the “Wife of Bath” in the *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer’s text exploits two notions of “experience’s” relationship to knowledge. How a critic interprets the work depends on the critic’s conceptualization of experience and knowledge. A critic who views experience from a platonic perspective will generally understand it as an inferior form of knowledge to that sanctioned by authority. In this case, the Wife of Bath will be viewed as a character who demonstrates excess and folly and embodies the misogynist stereotype of women. A critic who views experience as a source of knowledge superior or equal to knowledge based on authority will interpret the “Wife of Bath” as a criticism of church doctrines and anti-feminist dictates which attempted to control women’s behavior while leaving their own corruption unquestioned. Hence, “experience” becomes

devalued when a notion of knowledge as authority is in play, and access to knowledge becomes restricted. If only those who have authority have access to knowledge, knowledge becomes the domain of an elite few. Chaucer's text shows how the authority of experience challenges this construction of knowledge.

The second section of the Chapter Two moves to the period of the Enlightenment to investigate the corresponding use of "experience" in the arguments of John Locke and Mary Wollstonecraft. "Experience" is central to Locke's philosophy. No longer an inferior form of knowledge, experience becomes the source of true knowledge and reason. While knowledge based in authority is accessible only to a few, knowledge based on the authority of experience becomes accessible to all. The gatekeeper in this case becomes reason. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft uses the principles set out in Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* to argue for the rights of women. In her text, Wollstonecraft rejects rhetoric and disassociates it from women linking it to men and their 'wrong reasoning.' She then attempts to link women to reason—a dominant term in Locke's philosophy—in order to make her claim for women's rights. Her appeals to reason give her goals a conservative appearance, but her use of the Lockean connection between experience and reason and her appeal to experience suggests a more radical intent. The third section of Chapter Two brings together John Dewey's *Art as Experience* with Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* to explicate Woolf's use of "experience." Although Dewey's work was published after those of Woolf, I would argue that Woolf works with a similar notion of "experience" and, through her art, anticipates Dewey's philosophical development of the term. Woolf places experience at the root of art and knowledge. Experience provides the material for invention and provokes the questioning of custom and authority when they inhibit individual or cultural development and the process of communication. Woolf uses her construction of experience and knowledge to develop a rhetorical strategy that attempts to collapse the binaries that feed into and maintain authority and hierarchy. Her implicit

argument that women need to have access to fully lived experience to create art forms the basis of her claim for women's equal rights.

Chapter Three continues the examination of the deployment of "experience" by looking at defining moments of feminist literary criticism (the moments at which a new critical identity is asserted). The defining moments show how "experience" is used to establish both difference and consubstantiality within feminist practice of literary criticism. Here, we see how "experience" is used to establish a group's identity and how it links into our notions of literature. This chapter also examines the debates that arise from these moments: the first debate centers on Barbara Smith's essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." Although the work is generally recognized as a founding work of Black feminist criticism, critics have charged that Smith's use of "experience" makes the work essentialist and exclusionary. Most of the critiques come from a poststructuralist perspective and equate the use of "experience" with an absolute notion of sameness. When "experience" is used as common ground it appears monolithic and static, but this appearance is needed to create a sense of unity and identification in the group. The term "experience" must be ossified to be rhetorically effective in this situation. The critics who reject this use of the term fail to see its rhetorical function. They also do not see that appeals to experience not only locate commonalities (the grounds for consubstantiality) but also identify differences and produce plurality. The same is true for the second debate, which centers on the Canadian text, *Language in Her Eye*. A collection of essays that explores the relationship between feminism and writing, this text also invokes a poststructuralist critical response. Here, however, the prescriptive demands of theory become more apparent. Demands that feminists must use a particular theory blind those who make the demands to the rhetorical context of the texts they challenge. Such demands do not recognize the importance of consubstantiality and its role in allowing for difference.

Chapter four examines the bringing together of theory and practice in the use of experience-as-metaphor in the work of Hélène Cixous. It begins with an overview of the critical analyses that identify metaphor as a major component in Cixous's rhetoric. While many critics recognize Cixous's use of metaphor, few agree on what metaphor actually does. To clarify how metaphor functions in Cixous's work, the chapter turns to the theory of Ernesto Grassi to postulate the connection between metaphor and rational discourse. His primary argument places metaphor as prior to rational discourse: it becomes the ground upon which rationalism is built. Grassi also suggests that metaphor may form the bridge between imaginative language and rational language, but he does not elaborate on how metaphor acts as the bridge. The theory of Lakoff and Johnson offers just such an explanation. Their theory provides a model for how experience, through metaphor, shapes language and for how language, in turn, shapes our understanding of the world and determines our behavior. Together these two theories illuminate the role of metaphor in Cixous's "Laugh of the Medusa" and "Castration and Decapitation." Cixous adds to these theories of metaphor by introducing the notion of the gendered body. By so doing, she suggests how women can change language to incorporate women's experience and in the process change social and cultural discursive power structures which determine the meaning of experience.

Chapter One

Clashing Frameworks: Questioning the Centrality of “Experience” in Contemporary Feminist Theory

Foregrounding “experience” as a key term for feminist rhetoric does not ignore or overlook the controversy that surrounds the term within feminist theory. “Experience” has fallen out of favor with many contemporary feminists partly because the terministic screens to which “experience” has been linked are seen as perpetuating patriarchy, and partly because “experience” has proven treacherous since it is easily co-opted to invoke terministic screens that inhibit or work in opposition to feminist objectives. Today feminists continually work to change terministic screens by rejecting, reconfiguring, and/or displacing the term “experience.” The feminist struggle with the term reveals the term’s malleability and problematic nature, but, more importantly, it reveals how indispensable “experience” is to feminism.

While many mainstream feminists view experience as central to a feminist development of knowledge, they must grapple with notions of authority and hierarchy that typically accompany the deployment of the term. While some suggest centering experience as a means of creating alternative epistemologies, others work within traditionally non-feminist terministic screens to restructure and rearrange the interconnection of terms. Still other feminists working with newly established frameworks reject the claim that women’s experience can function as a source of true knowledge or evidence. The primary criticism leveled at “experience” is the charge that the term carries with it assumptions about knowledge, reality, and subjectivity that make it untenable from a feminist perspective. I will argue, however, that terministic screens are alterable and that it is advantageous, if not essential, that feminists have access to and exploit as many terministic screens as possible.

“Experience” in feminist challenges to the mainstream is given shape through both theory and practice. While theory and practice work together, many contemporary feminists give theory precedence because it deals directly with the structures that control perception and determine the allocation of power. According to Alison Jaggar, systematic theories that integrate very specific notions of experience and value with concepts of reality and modes of understanding to form explanations about the human world constitute frameworks¹ (Jaggar, xv). In the twentieth century, feminists have altered and created numerous frameworks in their attempt to theorize about and change the existing structures of social power.² Many feminist frameworks still rely heavily on “experience” as a key term in the constitution of and access to knowledge: liberal feminism, for example, is a direct descendent of Mary Wollstonecraft’s work. It makes use of similar notions of experience, reason, and knowledge with some variations on woman as an individual subject. Marxist feminism restructures the frameworks developed by Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx to incorporate women’s experiences of capitalism and patriarchy—particularly women’s experience of motherhood (Hartsock 237). Radical feminists seek to create a separate framework based on women’s experience and perspective, arguing that the phallogocentric terministic screens discount or exclude women’s perceptions (Frye 166).

Obviously, the scope of this chapter (and this study) does not permit an analysis of all the terministic screens of the various feminist frameworks. This chapter examines

¹ I consider the terms “frameworks” and “terministic screens” interchangeable.

²Feminist frameworks include liberal feminism, marxist feminism, socialist feminism, radical feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, anarcha feminism, ecological feminism, phenomenological feminism, poststructural feminism, postmodern feminism, black feminism, lesbian feminism, and post-colonial feminism—to name many but not all of the possibilities and variations.

the challenging and questioning of the term “experience” carried out primarily by poststructuralist feminists. Yet, challenges and interrogations can only be conducted against a background in which the term, if not highly revered, is central to the established theories and practices of feminists. Poststructural feminists tend to present other theories in terms of a linear evolutionary progression with theories developing and then dying out as they fail to adapt to the changing environment of gender struggles.³ Such, however, is not always the case. Terministic screens constitute ways of seeing the world and organizing social structures. They are, therefore, as various and differing as those whose interests they reflect, and they play a key role in the struggle for power within society. Terministic screens do not exist as singular sequential entities. They operate side by side and function simultaneously with other screens. Lorraine Code provides an example of how terministic screens coexist and function together. She argues that two differing constructions of knowledge are used in the determination of expert status to

³As part of their critique of “experience,” Bellamy and Leontis, for example, classify anything hinting at modernist tendencies as outdated (e.g., “. . . a concept too burdened with outdated (i.e., ‘modernist’) preoccupations with selfhood, ‘interests,’ etc., to be useful and longer” (Bellamy and Leontis 178)). In addition, they place the different feminist frameworks on a linear time-line suggesting in the process a privileged evolutionary position for postmodern feminism: “it may be argued that one of the paths from modernity to postmodernity has been via the poststructuralist critique of epistemology” (Bellamy and Leontis 164). They also refer to feminisms as opposing “camps,” describing them as hostile and unable to communicate with each other: “poststructuralism features a major problem with the privileging of experience that renders dialogue virtually impossible between post-structuralist and mainstream feminists whose ideas remain antithetical to the ‘nominalism’ of post-structuralism and who seek stable ground for their categories of analysis” (Bellamy and Leontis 167).

create a double standard detrimental to women. Through her discussion of the Grange Inquiry,⁴ Code illustrates how “experience” functions simultaneously through Empiricist and Aristotelian epistemologies to create a hierarchical distinction between possible knowers or experts. Quoting Alice Baumgart, Code notes that during the inquiry lawyers asked male doctors questions about “what they knew,” but they questioned female nurses in terms of their “experience” (222). In this inquiry, experience was construed as inferior to knowledge, and Code notes that such a distinction between knowledge and experience limits the cognitive status and credibility granted to professional women while maintaining that granted to professional men. In this case, the nurses are not seen as possessing expert knowledge even though they have professional training and the most contact hours with patients. The doctors, on the other hand, are deemed because of their status and training to possess expert knowledge.

Typically, Code points out, the empiricist methodology--the accumulation of sensory experience as data--is highly valued and deemed the source of knowledge in contemporary understanding (241). In this case, the nurses’ experience should be regarded as credible knowledge, but it is not. Instead, an Aristotelian terministic screen is brought into play with its emphasis on authority, knowledge that “transcends experience,” and its ranking of rational powers which stipulates that women lack deliberative authority (Code 246-7). Overlaid onto the empiricist screen, the Aristotelian construction of knowledge reifies the standard dichotomies of traditional masculinist philosophies. Knowledge/experience is aligned with the binaries of mind/body, reason/emotion, public/private, and male/female, the lefthand terms signifying the more highly valued attributes while the right-hand terms mark the denigrated traits (Code 242). A division of experience into two categories results. On the one hand, experience,

⁴The 1984 Grange Inquiry into infant deaths from cardiac arrest at Toronto’s Hospital for Sick Children (Code, 222).

although originally abstracted from sensory perception, becomes theoretical in nature. In this case “an expert *applies* established knowledge” learned from an authoritative source (i.e., textbooks) (Code 243). On the other hand, experience derives from practice and is accumulated through first-hand encounters. Although theoretical knowledge emerges from and must, at some point, be tested in practice, it nonetheless falls on the left-hand side of the dichotomy and becomes, in the process, a more valued form of knowing. This distinction between types of experience (theoretical and practical) means that the gender of the knower becomes epistemologically significant:

These facts attest to certain truths about the politics that inform the theory/practice dichotomy in ordinary appeals to knowledge: experience, within the middle-class professions, gains credibility for its possessors according to a gender-linked double standard. With women, it is *just* experience: women do not qualify as experts on its basis, and it is discounted as merely subjective. But men’s experience carries a tacit assumption that it is not just experience; it is objective experience, informed by theory. (Code 245)

For many contemporary feminists, however, the use of experience as evidence remains a necessary part of their methodology. Foss and Foss, for example, emphasize the importance of personal experience to feminist scholarship when they equate experience with truth⁵ (39). Their framework constitutes one of the primary terministic screens used by feminists. Foss and Foss argue that the use of personal experience as data functions both as a subversive act and as an act of empowerment since it takes women’s perspectives seriously enabling them to gain trust in their own knowledge

⁵A quotation from a commencement address at Bryn Mawr by Ursula Le Guin is used to epitomize the relationship between experience and feminist scholarship: “Offer your experience as your truth” (qtd in Foss, *Personal*, 39).

claims (Foss and Foss 42). Through that trust, the evidence of experience facilitates women “claiming their cognitive competence and authority, their knowledgeability, and their right to know” (Code 218; Foss and Foss 42).

The benefits of using personal experience as evidence, according to Foss and Foss, are three-fold: experience-as-evidence generates a multiplicity of truth and ensures that diversity and difference are not compromised; it produces both knowledge (“information about other’s lives” (41)) and understanding (“a capacity for insight, empathy, and attentive caring” (41)); and it “contributes to the improvement of participants’ lives by encouraging them to discover their own truths” (42). But this view of experience also requires the implementation of two distinct categories of experience: experiential expertise and presentational expertise. Accordingly, the experiential expertise belongs to the participants and involves all personal experience--“the consciousness that emerges from personal participation in events” (Foss and Foss 39). Foss and Foss stipulate that each individual has experiential expertise because she is an expert on her life (40).

Presentational expertise belongs to the researcher by virtue of her education and training and involves analyzing and organizing accounts, locating theories, materials and funding, and accessing publication outlets (Foss and Foss 40). Although presentational expertise closely resembles the theoretical experience outlined by Code, Foss and Foss carefully downplay the notion of authority embedded in the notion of the trained expert. Instead, they insist that one form of experience is not superior to the other, invoking the image of the midwife rather than the doctor as a metaphor for the researcher. The image of midwife focuses on coaching and assisting rather than on recording and examining. Foss and Foss’s concept of experience attempts to bridge the need for data upon which to build knowledge with the feminist rejection of authority, absolutes, and universals. Clearly, they are unwilling to dispense with ‘authority’ altogether. Personal accounts may be valued equally, but the researcher still has the authority to decide which accounts are the most relevant and are worthy of study: “As feminists analyze, theorize about, and

report their data, linking personal experiences to larger patterns, they necessarily sort and organize the personal accounts in particular ways and feature some participants over others” (Foss and Foss 40).

Because of the tendency to use experience to establish authority and universals, experience-as-evidence has become a strongly contested point in feminist theory. Take, for example, the work of Marnia Lazreg. She offers an example of how feminists work to alter traditionally non-feminist terministic screens to make the screens more conducive to feminist goals. In “Women’s Experience and Feminist Epistemology: a Critical Neo-rationalist Approach,” Lazreg examines experience as it exists in various feminist frameworks, and she rejects those uses. Lazreg situates her critique of experience in the feminist questioning of the objectivity of science, arguing that such a concept of experience assumes that women share common and universal characteristics. In this particular construction, experience becomes a critical tool for examining and challenging the established theories and methods of both the social and natural sciences (Lazreg 46). This form of feminist critique notes the omission of women from previous studies and from the development of methodology. It claims, as a result, that knowledge from such sources presents a distorted view of women, for it neglects feelings, emotions, subjectivity, the domestic domain, and the gendered body. According to Lazreg, such a feminist critique depends on an ontological claim “that women’s experience is a source of true knowledge as well as the substance of the world to be known” (52). In making such a claim, feminists fail to examine the empiricist and positivist tradition from which such a use arises. As a consequence, Lazreg suggests, this feminist critique commits the same sins as the frameworks it challenges. In other words, according to Lazreg, it opposes objectivity to subjectivity thereby reifying rather than eliminating the dichotomy: the critique becomes monolithic by presenting experience as the only valid way of knowing, inevitably founding feminist epistemology on an essentialized notion of ‘female nature,’ a concept many feminists had sought to dispel because it lends itself so easily to abuse:

most significantly, it “confines women to the realm of the experienceable” thus relegating anything which cannot be experienced to the unknowable (Lazreg 53).

Lazreg asserts that this approach is but a moment in the development of feminist thought (Lazreg 58), a moment whose time has come, for its reliance on experience has led to stagnation and uncertainty (Lazreg 45). Lazreg proposes an alternative that she believes will overcome the major weaknesses of this feminist approach. Her alternative moves the term “experience” back into the realm of science and rationalism through an approach she labels ‘neo-rationalist.’ Lazreg brings together the modified rationalism of Gaston Bachelard and the materialistic realism of Roy Bhaskar to create an alternative concept of knowledge. According to Lazreg, “knowledge of women must be scientific without necessarily being positivistic” (55). She defines knowledge as “a social product . . . [which] constitutes a ‘material cause’ of cognitive acts” and includes “antecedent knowledge, facts, and theories” (Lazreg 51). Not analyzable “in terms of individual experience,” knowledge must be analyzed “in terms of the *social* category of experience” (“This means that ‘my experience includes *the experience of other.*’”)(Lazreg 51). Such an approach, Lazreg contends, will be less exclusive, for it will include men as a ‘constitutive component’ and integrate how both men and women envision and interpret reality (52); it will also, Lazreg implies, address the issue of the social character of knowledge (51), yield access to knowledge of social structures, deal with “the woman question” as a historically evolving process (54), and free itself from the body (52).

Rejecting the “discursive/deconstructionist approach to social reality” (54), Lazreg insists on maintaining a notion of truth independent of individual experience and more closely connected, via a rationalist perspective, with reason. Culturally bound, this reason takes us beyond immediate experience into “scientific experience” which is “a rectification of knowledge, a broadening of the frameworks of knowledge” (57). In addition to rehabilitating rationalist notions of science, knowledge, and truth, Lazreg also brings into play the notion of objectivity. She states that “the choice is not between

science and experience, objectivity and subjectivity. The point is to realize that objectivity is an ever-receding goal and to strive to reach it is an unending historical process” (Lazreg 59). Lazreg, however, clearly repudiates feminist notions of subjectivity: she asserts that knowledge cannot be grounded in the female subject and insists on a distinction between body and subject. She claims that, “the establishment of a subjectivist epistemology based on the body may only end where it began: in the body” (Lazreg 58).

How Lazreg avoids reinforcing established systems of knowledge, or how her work avoids a contaminated epistemology is not always clear. She relies heavily on a notion of “cultural-bound rationalism” in order to distinguish her form of rationalism from the “one that feminists have rejected” (Lazreg 57). Lazreg implies that this moderate relativism safeguards against an Aristotelian “imperial affirmation of a consensus of all human beings” (57). However, she contradicts this when she insists that objectivity is the goal, and the real task is to “capture what is *human* in women and men” (59). In fact, the terministic screen she invokes, with its knowledge that transcends experience, its objectivity, and its independent truth, resembles closely the Aristotelian/Lockean combination that Code identifies in her uncovering of a gender-linked double standard. The one alteration that Lazreg makes is a move away from experience as particular and individual to experience as social and communal.

Not all challenges to the feminist use of “experience” are as conservative as that of Lazreg. Many feminists work with different epistemological terministic screens to alter the interconnection of terms by rearranging, transforming, or displacing them. For example, in her review essay “The Radical Future of Feminist Empiricism,” Nancy Tuana, acknowledges the clashes between different feminist theories and argues for a radical “feminist transformation of empiricism” (101). Tuana turns to Lynn Hankinson Nelson for a “neo-Quinean feminist empiricism” which promises to bridge the differences between the main feminist frameworks (100). According to Tuana, feminist empiricism,

as it exists, has become a justificatory strategy: it maintains the tenets of scientific empiricism while insisting that uncovering sexist and androcentric bias will improve the practice of science by removing prejudices (Tuana 101). Tuana argues that feminist empiricists do question the role of the researcher, but she also states that feminist empiricists accept the importance of objectivity as a central premise of their epistemology. Quoting Hekman, Tuana contends, feminist empiricism's goal is to "achieve the objectivity that men failed to attain" (101). Other feminist critics have targeted this acceptance of improved objectivity as a major flaw in the empiricist framework, and they argue that empiricism fails to recognize the "inextricable connection between science and politics" (102). In this case, objectivity is an illusion, a masculinist concept used to subjugate women. Tuana argues that Nelson's reconstruction of empiricism answers the criticisms leveled at the framework. To alter empiricism, Nelson adopts aspects of W. V. Quine's theory, including his principles of holism and epistemological naturalism and the dissolution of boundaries:

According to Quine, all statements have empirical content, that is, are subject to revision, but no statement has empirical content in isolation. It is the network of all our theories that has empirical content. Quine subscribes to holism because of his belief that our various theories—science, commonsense, philosophy—are fundamentally interrelated. . . . Furthermore, in his support of epistemological naturalism, Quine argues that empiricism is a theory of evidence, not of justification. Empiricism, for Quine, offers explanations for how our beliefs have been arrived at that are consistent with our experiences. Such an epistemology does not provide a foundation for science but is itself a part of science. (Tuana, 106-7)

Tuana suggests that the most potent aspect of Quine's theory that Nelson makes use of is its ability to displace primary dualisms such as

analytic/synthetic,⁶ observation/theory,⁷ discovery/justification,⁸
 knowledge as passively discovered/knowledge as socially constructed,⁹ and

⁶ A dichotomy that arises from the logical positivists' notion that theories could be understood as sets of sentences. It was an attempt to rid science of anything not induced directly from sensory evidence; instead, the "meaning of a sentence . . . was its method of verification" (Nelson 44). For mathematical and logical sentences "truth or falsity was a matter of the meanings of their terms and not a matter of fact (analytical sentences)," for other sentences (synthetic) truth or falsity was based on matters of fact (Nelson 45). This approach to sentences apparently banishes metaphysical and ethical statements from science (Nelson 44). Quine argues that such a distinction is false. He insists that "all sentences both organize and share empirical content" thereby collapsing the analytic/synthetic dichotomy and making all sentences (theories) subject to revision (Nelson 91).

⁷ "Quine's arguments suggest that science can lead to *better* metaphysics, provided we give up several myths: that objects are 'discovered' and subsequently theorized about, rather than posited in the process of theorizing; that we can separate what we talk about (the objects) from our ways of talking about them; that ontology is more than a way of bridging our experiences; and because objects are "posits" and different theories may incorporate different ontological commitments, theories cannot be compared, and/or do not reflect--or face--experience." (Nelson 107)

⁸ A product of "postlogical positivist empiricism" that originated with Hans Reichenbach, this distinction creates two "contexts" for science: the "context of discovery (the ways in which theories are generated)" and the "context of justification (the ways in which theories are tested)" (Nelson 34). According to Sandra Harding, this is a key origin of the androcentric bias of empiricism which "insists that its methodological norms are meant to apply only to the "context of justification" . . . not to the "context of discovery" where

standards of evidence/theory.¹⁰ Nelson, through Quine, constructs a terministic screen for empiricism that differs substantially from that critiqued by poststructural feminists. In addition to the changes that arise from the displacement of the dichotomies, Nelson makes several other significant changes. In her terministic screen, groups or epistemological communities function as “knowers” not individuals: “focusing on individuals in epistemology is inappropriate” (Nelson 256). Thus the gender of who theorizes becomes important: “science is a process *with subjects*, and . . . it bears the signatures of those subjects, or--more correctly--of their experiences, including their experiences of sex/gender and politics” (Nelson 39). Nelson, however, rejects the notion of a

problems are identified and defined. Thus a powerful source of social bias appears completely to escape the controls of science’s methodological norms” (Harding qtd. in Nelson 263).

⁹ Nelson states, “and finally, on the view of science I am urging, neither theories nor objects are “discovered.” The former are constructed, the latter posited within that process, and the process is subject to the constraints imposed by experience. Knowledge, I will urge, is social in every sense, is constructed by us, and it is constrained by our experiences.” (Nelson 39-40)

¹⁰ Quine rejects a distinction between “the objects we talk about and the way we talk about them” (Nelson 102). While Quine recognizes that our notions of reality and evidence are “acquired through our dealings with . . . objects,” he argues that physical objects are “just posits”: “when we recognize that our evidence for physical objects is that they help us to organize our experience and to predict future experiences, we recognize *the nature of evidence for all objects and theories*” (Nelson, 104). According to Nelson, the implications of this theory is that “the standards of evidence are not “pretheoretic” but emerge *within* theorizing” (105).

privileged standpoint. Instead, she emphasizes that the standards of evidence (such as objectivity) are determined by epistemological communities. Experience remains central and still constitutes the source of knowledge, but it is not foundational. Nelson stresses that sensory experiences are themselves shaped and mediated: they are made coherent by theory which is embedded in language which is by nature public (Nelson 22).

Changes to terministic screens are not always as extensive as those put forward by Nelson. They tend to be more along the lines of those offered by Lazreg with changes revolving around one or two primary terms within a given terministic screen. But in all cases, what needs to be noted is that change, whether singular or multiple, can occur within any given terministic screen. Nelson, working within the framework of empiricism, has removed two main points of criticism: the posited individual and the notion that experience provides unmediated knowledge of transparent objects. Such changes, whether they involve one term or many, reverberate throughout the discursive system and can potentially destabilize that system. Paradigm shifts do not occur in a single instance: they transpire over time, but they can begin with the changing of a single term. Feminists who reject “experience” as a central term for feminism do not always recognize its transformative power. Nor do they acknowledge the necessity of different theories. They seek to establish one theory that works for all feminists rather than allowing for different theories for different feminists.

Bellamy and Leontis seek to establish the postmodern framework as the feminist terministic screen. In their essay “A Genealogy of Experience: From Epistemology to Politics,” they challenge the use of the term “experience” and attempt to expose the term’s “displaced and fragmented heterogeneity” (Bellamy and Leontis 164). They endeavor to critique the “given” status of experience and its “revival” in feminism as part of their own “intervention” (Bellamy and Leontis 163). Their suggestion that

“‘experience’ finds itself precariously situated on the threshold of the postmodern divide” is significant, for it points to the persistent presence and value of the term in feminist frameworks. The reconfiguring of the term, however, proves highly problematic. According to Bellamy and Leontis, experience relies on belief. Those who use the term avoid the question of how our knowledge is constructed, and as a result, fail “to show that there is anything *intrinsically* true about experience and its claims to know” (168). Through such a definition, Bellamy and Leontis attempt to render invalid a feminist theory that relies on the authority of experience to establish the validity of its knowledge. Bellamy and Leontis go so far as to reduce feminist appeals to experience as a special form of “essentializing Cartesianism (‘I suffer, I am angry, therefore I am’)” (170). They strongly express one of the most common allegations brought against the use of “experience,” by critiquing its essentializing (i.e., reductive) impulses:

For it seems to be the case that, despite its recent endorsements of multiplicity, heterogeneity and plurality, the project of documenting women’s changing ‘experiences’ from their own perspectives proves to be a reductive one, whose single-minded purpose is to record cultural variations on the recurring theme of rights trampled, power denied, entitlements lost, voices unheard, and/or to celebrate individual cases in which women achieve some equality with men. (176)

Bellamy and Leontis go on to suggest that poststructuralism and feminism alter the debate surrounding “experience” by questioning what constitutes the subject of knowledge. Here, experience is divided into two distinct forms. According to Bellamy and Leontis, feminism posits a female subject “whose very existence puts a wedge between the male subject and the object of knowing” (167) by offering experience as “the evidence of difference” (167). In this case, experience is foundational and forms “a new kind of epistemology” based on gender difference (Bellamy and Leontis 167). According to Bellamy and Leontis, poststructural feminists reject any such stable basis for knowledge.

They argue that no experiencing subject exists “because the experience of the subject is never identical to itself--hence, it is impossible for the subject to ‘speak’ its own experience” (Bellamy and Leontis 167). In addition, Bellamy and Leontis postulate that the poststructural position disables experience as an epistemology because experience is revealed to be “self-validating -- without goal or method” (168).

Bellamy and Leontis clearly favor the poststructural notion of experience. In their view, experience depends on language, for it is not a unified concept but “a network or grid of separate but competing discursive ‘regimes’” (Bellamy and Leontis 168). Embedded in discursive fields, experience is “always already ideological” and functions as a means for creating the illusion of the Cartesian subject by providing “satisfying, unified images of selfhood, which idealize his/her [the subject’s] situation and conditions of existence and make these images appear natural, unmediated and direct” (Bellamy and Leontis 173). Bellamy and Leontis argue that as such experience cannot act as a foundation for stable categories of knowledge. When used for such a purpose, it becomes reductive, essentializing, and ultimately ineffectual. Their strongest critique, however, is their claim that experience does not act as the means to move from the individual or personal to the collective that is necessary for political action. They contend that privileging experience only reveals reluctance and inhibits rather than promotes pragmatic goals (Bellamy and Leontis 171). When used to invoke the collective, experience “flattens out” differences in the nature of women’s oppression (Bellamy and Leontis-172). Bellamy and Leontis propose to transform “experience” “from a holdover of liberal essentialism into a genuinely *postmodern* politics” (178). By so doing, they attempt to account for incompatible experiences and conflicting discourses that make up the conditions for experience (Bellamy and Leontis 178). Using the Marxist theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, they construct experience-as-antagonism: “A relation wherein the limits of every objectivity are shown” and where final suture is impossible (Bellamy and Leontis 179). Instead of looking to experience to determine the political,

feminists would look first to the political as the location for the “various points of struggle wherein categories of the experiencing ‘woman’ are produced” (Bellamy and Leontis 179).

In the end, Bellamy and Leontis reconfigure the term “experience” so that it fits within their own framework. They insist that other feminist frameworks are incapable of functioning politically. In other words, despite their ‘endorsements of multiplicity, heterogeneity and plurality,’ their project of documenting the genealogy of experience also proves to be reductive as they exercise the single-minded purpose of privileging their terministic screen. Bellamy and Leontis seem to comprehend, in part, the contradictory nature of their conclusion, for they turn to rhetoric in the last paragraphs of their essay as a means of both justifying their use of the term “experience” and covering over their positioning strategy:

The difficult task of linking experience and politics will be accomplished not through theory but, perhaps, through rhetoric: in the realm of the political, there are certain rhetorical situations in which appeals to experience may be persuasive . . . which is why we would not argue for the expulsion of “experience” from discourse. . . . Thus we argue that attention to the rhetorical standing of experience is the only way out of certain impasses in the theorizing of experience. (180)

Rhetoric, however, is not simply a matter of persuasion or populist appeal.⁷ Rhetoric is also theory: “the process of systematically investigating and explaining symbolic acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding rhetorical processes” (Foss 6). As any theory, it too selects, reflects, and deflects our view, constructing its own field for directing attention. Rhetoric does not stand outside of theory and cannot provide ready solutions to theoretical impasses. It can, however, reveal the strategies and motives at work within and between theories, so we can see that Bellamy and Leontis have not simply explicated

the discursive formation of “experience”: they have altered and shifted the term into a postmodern framework while devaluing other feminist frameworks.

The most formidable critique of “experience” comes out of poststructural feminism. Two of poststructuralism’s strongest proponents and critics of experience are Joan Scott and Chris Weedon. In her well-known essay, “Experience,” Joan Scott also argues against the use of experience-as-evidence. She too contends that experience does not guard difference but naturalizes it thereby reproducing rather than contesting given ideological systems such as patriarchy. Scott begins her essay with an interpretation of a work by Samuel Delany, *The Motion of Light and Water*. The work, being autobiographical, provides ideal fodder for Scott’s critique of experience: autobiography is, of course, a genre which depends almost completely on recounting personal experience to construct its narrative and communicate its message. In her first critique, Scott notes that Delany uses a “metaphor of visibility” to transmit his ideas to others. Scott identifies the problematic nature of the basic underlying assumption of this metaphor: “Knowledge is gained through vision; vision is a direct, unmediated apprehension of a world of transparent objects” (23). This assumption about the nature of knowledge and experience represents one of the basic tenets of Western epistemic thought. Since Descartes, Bacon, and Locke, we have been influenced by the notion that experience and the sense data it produces form the primary source of our knowledge:

This new epoch [the Cartesian age] had a mighty and revolutionary generative idea: the dichotomy of all reality into *inner experience and outer world*, subject and object, and private reality and public truth. The very language of what is now traditional epistemology betrays this basic notion; when we speak of the “given,” of “sense-data,” “the phenomenon,” or “other selves,” we take for granted the immediacy of an internal experience and the continuity of the external world. (Langer 22)

Scott's critique questions the effectiveness of many of the assumptions inherent in a framework that uses experience as evidence, particularly the notion of the 'immediacy of internal experience and the continuity of the external world'. Theorists who challenge conventional knowledge by inserting and multiplying stories and subjects which provide "evidence for a world of alternative values and practices" have used, according to Scott, "conventional historical understandings of evidence" (24). In so doing, they have remained within the "epistemological frame of orthodox history" (Scott 24). In other words, the success of such acts is limited, if not undermined, by their use of experience as evidence, for they cannot effectively challenge a Western conceptualization of epistemology. Ultimately, such theorists conform to, rather than change or challenge the dominant social and symbolic systems. The problem, as Scott sees it, is one of focus (or how our attention is directed). When scholars use experience as the foundation of knowledge, they fail to examine the construction of experience, subjectivity, and "one's vision." But Scott's own focus automatically invokes a particular framework. Restated, her complaint suggests that scholars do not examine notions of knowledge and language according to a poststructuralist framework. In her words, "the project of making experience visible precludes analysis of the workings of this system and of its historicity; instead it reproduces its terms . . . [to avoid this] we need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experience" (Scott 25). Scott points out that the term "experience" is generally used to establish authority, and as such it performs a foundationalist function. She seeks to historicize "experience" by examining various deployments of the term. She begins with Raymond Williams's *Keywords* and the historical overview it offers.

According to Williams, the term "experience" has been defined as knowledge gathered from past events and as a specific kind of consciousness sometimes differentiated from reason; it has been linked with experiment denoting knowledge derived from observation, and later came to refer to "real" things external to the individual

(Williams 126-7). Scott charges that these definitions posit the prior existence of a subject who is then perceived as the origin of knowledge: they present notions of knowledge as universal and accessible without questioning the role of the researcher in the production of those notions (28). Scott notes that feminist theorists who have used experience to challenge conventional claims of objectivity fall prey to the temptation to use experience as a foundation for knowledge. According to Scott, their argument then becomes essentialist because it links experience and reality in order to authorize new knowledge concerning women. By making this link, feminist theory universalizes women's identity. Identity may unify individuals, but its reification fails to account for how systems of domination construct experience, and it closes down inquiries into how female subjectivity is created (Scott 31).

Scott postulates that essentialism can be avoided only if the discursivity of experience is recognized. "Experience," Scott writes, "is a linguistic event" (34). In Scott's framework, "language" is a scenic term: "the site of history's enactment" (34). An analysis through language becomes "the production of . . . knowledge itself" (Scott 37). Such an approach, Scott claims, refuses to reproduce naturalized categories and recognizes all forms of analysis as contested, contextual and contingent (36). The project, according to Scott, is not the reproduction and transmission of knowledge derived from experience, but an examination of the production of knowledge itself: "Experience is not the origin of our explanation, but that which we must explain" (Scott 37, 38). Scott's analysis affords some important and useful insights into the uses of the term "experience." However, from a rhetorical perspective, certain aspects of her approach prove problematic. Overall, Scott's analysis acts more as a critique of other frameworks than it does as an examination of the term "experience." Undeniably, "experience" is used to establish authority, and it is often used referentially, but these uses of "experience" take place within given frameworks that maintain the meaning of the term through

associations with other key terms. In other words, the term functions within a given context.

An empiricist framework, such as the one that Scott discusses at the beginning of her essay, would accept that “knowledge is gained through vision.” After all, empiricism defines knowledge as ideas arising from sense perception. In particular constructions of this framework, reality would have a concrete existence external to the individual, and the individual and self would also be stable entities. However, to state, as Scott does, that the “evidence of experience . . . reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems” is misleading (Scott 25). Certain approaches, especially those offered by feminists, may retain certain terms within a framework, but they radically change others. As Scott herself notes, an approach that focuses on experience can create a “crisis for orthodox history, by multiplying not only stories, but also subjects, and by insisting that histories are written from fundamentally different . . . perspectives . . . no one of which is complete or completely ‘true’” (24). In the empiricist terministic screens, the term “truth” undergoes a dramatic alteration with this particular use of “experience”: no longer unified and universal, truth becomes diverse, multiple, and relative. Clearly, in the restructuring of terministic screens such as that done by Lazreg or Nelson, resistance is not, as Scott claims, located outside the discursive construction; it is not decontextualized, but rather heavily contextualized within its given frame. The form resistance takes (altering the terms of a framework) does, however, fall outside of Scott’s discursive framework.

In applying a poststructuralist approach, Scott uncovers many of the hidden associations or assumptions behind the term “experience,” an analytical act which is always useful. However, Scott makes her framework prescriptive when she accuses others of not asking the right questions: “Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one’s vision is structured—about language (or discourse) and history” (Scott 25). In other words, we must analyze “experience” according to a poststructural framework. But the

types of questions we ask are dependent on the framework we use, for they direct our attention. If we are to analyze language and “the production of knowledge,” rather than merely reproduce and transmit knowledge (Scott 37), we must do so by looking at how terms function within their given frameworks; we must examine the associated terms; and we must analyze the ways in which terms are used, abused, and changed. I agree with Scott that we need to “take all categories of analysis as contextual, contested, and contingent,” (36) but to ask about the constructed nature of experience insists on a given definition of that analytic category (i.e., that it is constructed). By telling us the nature of the category, Scott implies that there are certain elements that are not contestable. Instead of imposing such closure, we should leave the category open and examine how it is defined, how it functions over time in different frameworks or terministic screens, and what effects it produces.

By using poststructuralism prescriptively, Scott may change the focus and philosophy of “doing” history, but she does not succeed in historicizing “experience” “by situating and contextualizing that language . . . by which experience is represented” (36). Inevitably, her analysis, from a rhetorical perspective, remains incomplete; it overlooks the complex nature of the discursive event that is “experience” by overlooking and discrediting the frameworks within which it exists; at critical analytical moments, because her analysis fails to recognize terministic associations, it decontextualizes the term.

The most thorough explication of “experience” in differing feminist frameworks from a poststructuralist perspective is found in the work of Chris Weedon. In *Feminist Practice & Poststructuralist Theory*, Weedon focuses on the importance of experience to feminism in general. She discusses the construction of “experience” within a liberal humanist framework, the feminist acceptance of the humanist principles, and the implications of the humanist framework to feminist goals. While performing this analysis, she not only explicates poststructuralism for her reader but also, like Scott, represents the framework of poststructuralism as the only politically adequate alternative

for feminism. Weedon, however, does not pretend to reject the term “experience” only to concede in the end that the term *may* be useful. She recognizes from the beginning of her work the central role that “experience” plays in feminism. Her challenge is not a rejection or a reconfiguration of the term but rather a displacement. The significance of “experience” to contemporary feminisms is found in the “politics of the personal, in which women’s subjectivities and experiences of everyday life become the site of the redefinition of patriarchal meanings and values and of resistance to them” (Weedon 5-6).

Such a politics, Weedon suggests, is characterized by several unexamined assumptions about essentialism and subjectivity that render women’s attempts at political change ineffectual. First, feminists share with liberal humanists the assumption of an essence of human nature. The essential attribute can be a particular notion of rationality which becomes the foundation upon which to base demands for equality, or it can be altered, as in the case of some feminisms, to a notion of gendered identity where women’s nature and identity is rendered distinct from that of men (Weedon 80). Arising from this assumption is a second more significant one--the understanding that human subjectivity is fixed with the individual acting as the agent of change and the source of self-knowledge and knowledge of the world (Weedon 84). According to this view, language reflects meaning derived from and mediated through experience to produce true knowledge (Weedon 83).

Weedon argues that these assumptions render feminists ineffectual politically in a number of ways. Feminism’s goal is to alter the existing power relations between men and women. Each type of feminism offers different perspectives and, as a result, different long-term strategies for change:

Whether acknowledged or not, every form of feminist politics, and there are many, implies a particular way of understanding patriarchy and the possibilities of change. Theory, in this sense, is often implicit. Feminist perspectives on patriarchy will involve assumptions about sex, gender,

femininity, masculinity, lesbianism, identity and change. The ways in which we understand these things will be derived from a range of sources and forms of knowledge production which may well be far from coherent.

(4-5)

Despite her recognition of the plurality of feminist theory, Weedon goes on to contend that feminists are unlikely to succeed in “radically transforming patriarchal structures and practices” (131) because the assumptions that underlie their frameworks inevitably render change impossible. For example, the notion of the humanist subject with free will “guaranteed by individual rational consciousness” reduces oppression to a “subjective psychological state -- feeling oppressed” because it discounts structural and institutional oppression of women (Weedon 84). Within this framework, women function as “rational sovereign” subjects who freely choose their life options (84). Given such a notion of free will, oppression is theoretically not possible. More significantly, the emphasis on experience has, Weedon postulates, mis-located the real site of change. Traditionally, feminists have assumed that experience is prior to language, and because it is grounded in the individual subject, it is authentic, belonging to women not to men and the patriarchal power structures. Accordingly, experience is what we think or feel in a particular situation and express through language (Weedon 85). It motivates change. Weedon, however, argues that the real site of change is language, and experience, or at least the meaning of experience, is one of language’s offspring.

As Scott previously stated, language, in the poststructural framework, is a scenic term. Because meaning is formed in language, Weedon tells us, it functions as the place where forms of social organization are defined and contested (21). It is not an expression of the individual, but the site where notions of self are constructed. In Weedon’s words, “language . . . constitutes social reality for us” (22). Most significantly, it organizes and gives meaning to experience since it is through language that we “learn to give voice-- meaning--to our experience” (Weedon 33). According to poststructuralism, language

exists prior to meaningful experience, but it is not universal since many different languages exist, and different discursive fields within any given language. Knowledge, social practices, forms of subjectivity, and the power relations between them take shape through various discourses (Weedon 108). These discourses act as ‘tactical components’ in the competition for power. A discourse gains authority and social power when it obtains a secure institutional location (Weedon 110), for it is institutions that organize social structures and processes (Weedon 35).

According to Weedon, experience has no inherent meaning outside of language (34). Given this, experience becomes plural and contradictory. Constituted in discourse, it becomes the “crucial site of political struggle” (79) because it has the power to constitute individual subjects according to the dominant assumptions about subjectivity and knowledge. In Weedon’s framework, experience still basically consists of interaction with the environment, but it remains meaningless until we learn to give voice to our experience and understand it through the acquisition of language. Weedon argues, in fact, that interest groups invest a substantial amount of time, effort, and resources in maintaining certain views of the world that are upheld through discursive fields (79). By controlling which discursive fields dominate institutions, interest groups can control the ways of understanding situations and, as a consequence, determine how individuals will experience and respond to given situations. Thus, how feminists give expression to women’s subjectivity has serious implications in terms of social power structures.

In her terministic screen, Weedon displaces “experience” by privileging “language.” “Language” as the key and central term requires a specific range of actions from feminists if they seek to effectively achieve their goals. According to Weedon, feminists must account for competing subjective realities and resistance to change; they must address women’s experience by revealing where it originates and how it relates to social practices, conditions, and power relations; and they must understand the multiplicity of power relations to effectively identify and exploit points of resistance.

Weedon's framework clearly puts other feminist frameworks--that do not center language or see either experience or subjectivity¹¹ as linguistic constructs--at a disadvantage.

According to the demands of a poststructural terministic screen, more traditional feminist approaches will be incapable of adequately producing change.

In Weedon's account, feminist poststructuralism appears to have all the advantages. It offers explanations of where experience comes from and how experience is constituted (Weedon 41); it understands how discourses are mobilized to create or maintain power relations (Weedon 135); it recognizes the disunity and conflict inherent in a subjectivity that is formed through language and can therefore theorize subjectivity as a means of control and change (Weedon 21); and it can explain how people oppress each other. According to Weedon, "feminism insists that we work to change . . . power/knowledge relations. Since power is exercised through the constitution of subjectivity within discourse and the production of social agents, it is important to understand the hierarchical network and the contradictions and weak points in the

¹¹ Defined as the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual including both the sense of self and the ways of understanding relations with the world, subjectivity is also constituted through language and, therefore, subject to change (Weedon 32-33).

Weedon asserts that this conceptualization of the subject and subjectivity marks the main break from the humanist framework. No longer fixed, subjectivity becomes historically and culturally contingent, existing and changing according to a wide range of discursive fields (Weedon 33). The push to fix identity in femininity, for example, is a struggle over power. Concepts such as reason and logic and discourses such as that of science are frequently used to temporarily fix meaning and to give social power structures a natural quality. Each discursive field offers individuals a number of subject positions, and the choice of any subjectivity will exclude other possible subject positions and will determine how experience will be interpreted and acted upon.

discursive field” (Weedon 168). Given such a view of power/knowledge relations, feminist poststructuralism would, of course, be ideally situated to carry out the required process of change, for it has defined that process via its own terministic screen.

While Weedon concedes that some of the questions that feminists ask will not be compatible with a poststructural perspective but require other discursive fields, she nonetheless evaluates different feminist frameworks according to the poststructural screen. In her discussion of feminist criticism, she often describes the practice of other feminists as essentialist (Weedon 153, 156) and reductive in that “they render differences and contradictions invisible” (Weedon 157). Ironically, she implements the same type of erasure when she argues that feminists need to break with traditional liberal humanist notions if they are ever to effectively fight for change. The liberal humanist framework is part of the difference and contradiction that makes up feminism. Moreover, there are many feminists, as Weedon herself notes, who do not accept the emphasis on theory inherent in poststructuralism.

Indeed, I would argue that Weedon, like Scott, has not recognized the rhetorical nature of the different frameworks. Her use of Foucault’s¹² definition of power as a

¹²It should be noted that poststructural feminist theory is heavily indebted to Foucaultian theory relying, as it does, on Foucault’s explication of the relationship between power and knowledge. Foucault saw power and knowledge as inseparable. Together, they produce regimes of truth, which means that truth itself is never outside of power or distinct from it. Foucault also points out that power is not a matter of laws and restrictions but exists in “the complex network of disciplinary systems and prescriptive technologies” (Diamond and Quinby xi). Foucault’s theory of subjectivity is also of primary significance to poststructural feminism. Foucault argued that the subject is a product of “disciplinary practices and rationalizing discourses” (Diamond and Quinby xii). As a result, there can be no “unchanging or universal selfhood” (Diamond and Quinby xiii). In addition, Irene Diamond and Lee

“multiplicity of force relations” puts too much emphasis on force and not enough on persuasion. Terministic screens constitute rhetorical strategies whose effectiveness must be measured in terms of their own context. Poststructuralism may provide significant insight into power/knowledge relations and provide direction on how to change systems. But the general population outside of academia still operates according to a liberal humanist framework. For them, the notions of subjectivity and experience put forward by poststructuralists will have little, if any, bearing on their lives. To influence the attitudes of liberal humanists, one must work within or with the liberal humanist frame. Feminists have, in fact, achieved change by altering and working with this framework. Much of the discourse of early feminists working for women’s rights and suffrage relies upon and exploits this framework.¹³ The emphasis on experience by Foss and Foss acknowledges the empowering function of experience. And Lazreg, Tuana, and Nelson illustrate that feminists can change terministic screens to make them workable for feminism. Together, their work also shows that feminists differ on what feminism strives to do and how feminism can achieve its goals.

Quinby point out that “Foucault’s methodology is valuable not only as it pertains to discourse’s relation to power/knowledge and practices of self, but also because of the way in which its epistemological tenets acknowledge uncertainty and indeterminacy. For Foucault, explanation is necessarily partial, blending with interpretation’s capacity to illuminate, clarify, and decipher. He warns against the seduction of totalizing theory, which appears to resolve all differences and contradictions through unified and cohesive explanation” (xiii).

¹³ See, for example, the essays in volume two of Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s *Man Cannot Speak for Her*. Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s “The Solitude of Self” provides a particularly striking illustration.

The point is not to discredit poststructuralism: it too can be a highly effective rhetorical strategy. As Scott and Weedon indicate, this framework offers an important way of analyzing power, subjects, language, and knowledge. By recognizing that discursive fields--terministic screens--are not permanent and fixed, however, feminists can see how such screens change over time and are contestable and contingent. By so doing, feminists may recognize the rhetorical effect of implementing any given screen. While poststructuralism can play a crucial role in this process of recognition, it would be as foolhardy for feminists to reduce feminism to one terministic screen as it would be for them to completely abandon rational discourse.

Poststructuralism is but one screen among many. All terministic screens act as potential sites for change. Some may be more misogynistic than others, but feminists need to play a role in as many of these screens as possible. That is not to say that all feminists must accept all screens as equally valid. Individual feminists will choose screens that best reflect or constitute the world according to their needs, interests, and beliefs. Feminists need to recognize these screens as part of the landscape of difference. Ranking screens in a hierarchy or calling for their elimination only reduces the possibilities for change and repeats old patterns of suppression. It is counterproductive to dismiss a framework as outdated or essentialist as long as that framework operates within the social structures of power. As Diana Fuss states: "The question we should be asking is not 'is this text essentialist (and therefore 'bad')?' but rather, 'if this text is essentialist, *what motivates its deployment?*'"(Fuss xi).

Feminists should question the frameworks they work with and, in the process, consider the primary question, what motivates the deployment of the terministic screen

(framework) and/or term? When feminists lose sight of the value of difference in the deployment of screens, they introduce unnecessary points of conflict. The following chapters look at specific deployments of the term “experience” in what are generally accepted as feminist texts and examine the debates that ensue.

Chapter Two

The Substance of “Experience”

To establish “experience” as the key term of feminist rhetoric, we must first return to the substance of the term and examine the role “experience” plays in discourses that are concerned with gender power structures and the rights of women. The account that follows is by necessity, as is the evolution of any notion, fragmentary and incomplete. I seek to analyze the operations of the term “experience” through specific historical examples. Each example centers on a discourse that is generally recognized as significant to feminism by feminists. Each discourse is, of course, influenced by its context. While it is not feasible within the scope of this chapter to take all contextual factors into account, I have selected related discourses to illuminate the function of “experience” in each given work. Chaucer’s “Wife of Bath” is necessarily premised by Plato and Aristotle, for these two philosophers first establish and reify the division between authoritative knowledge and experience that comes to characterize the dominant epistemology of the medieval period and which the fictional Wife’s discourse challenges. John Locke precedes Mary Wollstonecraft because his philosophy acts as both the ground of and counterpoint to Wollstonecraft’s rhetorical use of “experience.” Virginia Woolf works with a conceptualization of experience that was not well established in her time. John Dewey offers the closest articulation of this concept of experience, and through his work, we gain a retrospective insight into the rhetorical function of the term in Woolf’s essays.

In addition to juxtaposing traditional philosophy and feminist discourses, I am also interested in establishing the connection between terms. Since I focus on the use of “experience” in feminist rhetoric, I am naturally concerned with the intersection of the terms “experience,” “woman,” and “rhetoric.” The classical interconnection of these terms illustrates how terms gain or lose value according to their associations and positions within terministic screens. The relationship between the three terms is most significant in

Chaucer's Wife of Bath's discourse. In this text, the three terms work together to subvert the medieval power structures governing women. In Wollstonecraft's discourse, rhetoric functions as a scapegoat: the means by which Wollstonecraft disassociates "woman" from a devalued position and associates "woman" with the power of "reason" through "experience." By the time we get to Woolf, the casting out of "rhetoric" is almost complete. Woolf uses the term, "rhetoric," to refer to persuasive speech that is empty of meaning. She works with the term "experience" to expose the differences between men and women while opening up new avenues for identification between them. How Chaucer, Wollstonecraft, and Woolf practice rhetoric and the role "experience" plays in that practice forms the central concern of this chapter.

It is necessary, however, to begin with a definition of the term. "Experience", as it is popularly used today, often denotes how individuals are affected by events. At times, "experience" is offered "as the necessary (immediate and authentic) ground for all (subsequent) reasoning and analysis." At other times, it is seen as "the product of social conditions or of systems of belief or of fundamental systems of perception" (Williams 128). When used in a confessional mode, experience can operate as a source of authentic truth. Most often, however, it is viewed as a subjective and personal phenomenon that is not suitable for the production of objective knowledge. In defining "experience", Raymond Williams claims that the term's original association with experimentation (i.e., with the notion of observation as proof or evidence that forms the ground for knowledge) is obsolete in the modern context (126). While this is true in relation to the English language, we nonetheless should note, as Burke points out, that what stands under or behind a term, its substance, reveals the most about a term's function and its potential for transformation. A term rarely ever completely loses its past denotations. And, at rhetorically convenient moments, old definitions can be revived and brought back into play. In other words, an examination of the substance of "experience" reveals the term's potential for transformation and also its rhetorical function.

Observation as a source of knowledge is firmly grounded in the origins of “experience.” The term originates from the Latin verb *experiri*¹ that means to try or to test. In its early form, “experience” constituted proof or evidence and referred to the act of investigation carried out by testing and trial: a notion that still forms the basis for the scientific methodology today. “Experiment”, “expert”, and “expertise” (*experior*, *experts*, *expertus*) come from the same Latin root. (This connection is also found in the Greek word for “experience”, *peira*, which also means to make proof of by trial or test, to have an experience, or to experiment). Originally, the two terms “experiment” and “experience” are strongly bound together if not interchangeable. Raymond Williams argues that the two terms remained interchangeable up until the late eighteenth century when a division between “experiment” and “experience” begins to form (116). However, the empiricist, John Dewey, sees a division between the two terms and a devaluation of one occurring much earlier. In outlining a history of “experience,” Dewey postulates three historic conceptions of the term. The first, and perhaps the most significant, is that formulated by the classical Greeks. Dewey identifies Plato as having advocated a devalued notion of “experience” by his placing it in opposition to reason, understanding, and rational comprehension. The result is a distinction between the kind of knowledge gained from experience and the kind that transcends experience to become authoritative. “Experience,” in this rendering of the term, becomes closely associated with habit and custom (*empeiria*—practice without knowledge of principles) rather than to make trial or proof of (*peira*). Accordingly, experience can produce only opinion and not true knowledge. Plato plays with the morphology of experience (*empeiria*—*empeirion*, *empeiros*, *empeiria*; *peira*—*apeira*) in *Gorgias* when he has Polus attempt to demonstrate his expertise in rhetoric with a sophistic eulogy on the arts:

There are many arts among mankind that have been discovered
experimentally, as the result of experiences: for experience conducts the

¹ Taken from *The Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology*

course of our life according to art, but inexperience according to chance. Of these several arts various men partake in various ways, and the best men of the best. (Plat. Gorg. 448c)

In this passage, Plato cleverly denigrates both “experience” and “rhetoric,” for Polus has given a circular definition that says nothing. In the process, Polus has demonstrated, particularly through his use of “experience,” a lack of true knowledge, and has provided an example of what Plato will conclude rhetoric to be: an act of concealment. Polus may have the experience and habit of a rhetor, but his material has no real content.

According to Dewey, Aristotle continues to oppose experience to reason, placing his notion of experience within a hierarchical progression of knowledge. Experience becomes a form of non-scientific knowledge based on the notion of “kind.” These empirical classifications or “kinds” could produce specific repeatable actions (habits) and could be passed on through language and education as in the training and development of arts and crafts: in this rendering “Experience consists of standardized ways of action and a standardized body of beliefs, expectations, materials, and techniques” (Dewey, *Survey* 71). Linked with matter and limited to practical activity, experience is perceived as a lower form of knowledge, one connected to mundane things (Dewey, *Survey* 74). It becomes, as Burke might say, a defining negative for reason.² Reason, in contrast, constitutes an activity of pure intellect dealing with perfect forms, ideas, or ideals (Dewey, *Survey* 74). and therefore free from the mundane. The association of experience with practice places it within the realm of the changeable and the contingent, while reason concerns itself with universal and necessary truths. Perceived as immutable and eternal, reason garners a greater value than experience. Dewey summarizes the negative construction of “experience” in classical philosophy:

²“[T]o define a thing in terms of its context, we must define it in terms of what it is not” (Burke, *Grammar* 25).

There is the contrast of empirical knowledge (strictly speaking, of belief and opinion rather than knowledge) with science. There is the restricted and dependent nature of practise in contrast with the free character of rational thought. And there is the metaphysical basis for these defects of experience: the fact that sense and bodily action are confined to the realm of phenomena while reason in its inherent nature is akin to ultimate reality. (Survey 74)

“Woman” and “rhetoric” as terms are connected with “experience” when the term is defined as a product of the senses and bodily action. The early connection between the three terms works to relegate them to an inferior status. Denoting a lesser being, “woman” becomes a term that, through association, increases the devaluation of the other terms. This is particularly true of the terms “woman” and “rhetoric.” Women historically have been enjoined to silence by learned (and not so learned) men. Since such injunctions discouraged if not forbade women from speaking (publicly or otherwise), it is heavily ironic that rhetoric itself should often be depicted, with all its faults, as a woman.³ Since the practice of rhetoric did not bring together the elements of this composite personification, we can assume that other motives lie behind its existence. One of the motives for this association derives from tradition, for the arts were often depicted as

³Hesiod refers to persuasion as a goddess (Hes. wd 59). John A. Alford notes that Lucian’s *The Double Indictment* (c.165 A.D.) depicts Oratory as a “loud, boisterous woman” who is immoral and adulterous. Alan of Lille in *Anticlaudianus* depicts rhetoric as one of the seven sisters of the liberal arts. Martianus Capella in *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* provides one of the most well known depictions of rhetoric as a female.

female.⁴ However, another motive also appears to have originated with a desire to devalue rhetoric. This, of course, assumes that woman is a negative and devalued construct: to dress up rhetoric as a woman helps to reduce it to the ridiculous or, in a more positive light, to a pleasant but inessential helpmeet. The linking of “rhetoric” and “woman” emerges from a particular constellation of terms with its attendant definitions and connections.

For example, while surprisingly egalitarian in his notions regarding the training of women for military functions, Plato assigns women not only an inferior social position but also an inferior character, suggesting that women prefer concealment and have less virtue than men:

Just that part of the human race which is by nature prone to secrecy and stealth on account of their weakness -- I mean the female sex -- has been left without regulation. . . for the neglect of regulations about women may not only be regarded as neglect of half the entire matter, but in proportion as woman's nature is inferior to that of men in capacity of virtue, the consequence of such neglect is more than twice as important. (Plat. Laws 780e)

Aristotle extends this view when he defines woman as merely an inferior male: classified as weaker and colder by nature, the female character is viewed “as being a sort of natural deficiency” (Aristot. Gen. An. 775a15). Although woman has some deliberative faculty, Aristotle tells us, she is “without authority” and her excellence of character is determined by her kind (Aristot. Pol. 1260a14). Thus, Aristotle concludes, “all classes must be

⁴The *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* states, for example, that the “muses are represented as young women with faces smiling, grave, or thoughtful, according to their function” (119).

deemed to have their special attributes; as the poet says of women/ Silence is a woman's glory/ but this is not equally the glory of man" (Aristot. Pol. 1260a30).

The feminization of rhetoric in classical and medieval philosophy not only devalues it, but also permits its separation from a concept of true or transcendent knowledge. In his early work, Plato distinguishes between two types of persuasion: that performed in learning which concerns itself with knowledge and the other performed in public affairs which concerns itself with belief. Plato refers to this second form of persuasion as rhetoric. In *Gorgias*, Plato clearly characterizes rhetoric as an inferior form of discourse, defining it as a habit "of producing gratification and pleasure," a mere "semblance of a branch of politics" (Plat. Gorg. 462e). He describes rhetoric as a "base" activity consisting of nothing more than flattery and going so far as to label it irrational (Plat. Gorg. 463b).

In other words, Plato condemns rhetoric and assigns value to persuasion only when he has incorporated it into dialectic. Rhetoric, which deals with probability and belief, is nothing more than a form of concealment, and in this way its nature is similar to that of woman. This comparison is most apparent when Plato describes rhetoric as flattery and then personifies flattery as female:

The art of flattery which, I do not say with knowledge, but by speculation, divides herself into four parts, and then, insinuating herself into each of those branches, pretends to be that into which she crept, and cares nothing for what is best, but dangles what is most pleasant for the moment as bait for folly . . . (Plat. Gorg. 464d).

Having reduced rhetoric to flattery, Plato then relates rhetoric to other imitative arts such as cookery, self-adornment, and sophistry, while opposing it to the higher arts of justice, medicine, gymnastics, and legislation. Rhetoric, Plato tells us, "has no account to give of the real nature of things" (Plat. Gorg. 465).

In *Phaedrus*, Plato describes the ideal form of persuasion as that which proceeds from dialectic: “The processes of division and bringing together” (Plat. *Phaedrus*. 266b). This type of persuasion is found in learning and concerns itself with a universal and essential truth. In Plato’s conception, truth is a divinely granted, “colorless, formless, and intangible truly existing essence, with which all true knowledge is concerned” (Plat. *Phaedrus*. 247c). It proceeds from ungenerated, indestructible beginnings or first principles (Plat. *Phaedrus*. 254d), and is revealed through reason, but only those with souls that follow after God can recollect the truth (Plat. *Phaedrus*. 248c). Plato constructs a hierarchy of souls (those with the potential of knowing the truth) in which the philosopher is at the top followed in descending order by lawful kings, politicians or men of business, hard working gymnasts, prophets, poets or other imitative artists, craftsman, sophists or demagogues, and lastly tyrants (Plat. *Phaedrus*. 248d). Women and slaves are not even ranked, and only those at the top of the hierarchy can see and know truth. According to Plato, true knowledge does not concern itself with probabilities or with the favor of the audience but seeks instead, like the true lover, to better the object of its discourse.

Rhetoric receives a more favorable account in Aristotle’s works. Although he maintains the division between rhetoric and dialectic, Aristotle does not define one as the ideal of the other. Instead, he sees them as performing different but useful functions. According to Aristotle, “rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (Aristot. *Rh*. 1355^b 26). He views rhetoric as an important means of self-defense, a way to “see clearly what the facts are” (Aristot. *Rh*. 1355^a32). Aristotle still, however, insists that scientific demonstration (the source of the facts) is the only means for arriving at true knowledge. Dialectic deals with probable knowledge (belief), and rhetoric is assigned the role of communicating knowledge to a general or popular audience: “The duty of rhetoric is to deal with such matters as we deliberate upon without arts or systems to guide us, in the hearing of persons who cannot

take in at a glance a complicated argument, or follow a long chain of reasoning” (Aristot. Rh. 1357^a2).

According to such classical notions, true knowledge comes from reason or a close relationship with ideal forms; both of which are dependent on one’s position in a hierarchy of being. In other words, true knowledge is founded on authority. Therefore, the terms “experience,” “woman,” and “rhetoric” constitute inferior forms: associated with appearance and the apparent, they are viewed as changeable and misleading, producing not truth and unity but opinion and plurality.

Chaucer and the Authority of Experience

In the medieval period, the problems and challenges posed by “experience,” “rhetoric,” and their relationship to “woman,” are foregrounded in the literary works of Geoffrey Chaucer, particularly in his prologue and tale of the *Wife of Bath* in *The Canterbury Tales*. As an author, Chaucer demonstrates an understanding of the authority that books and writing possessed. In his time, writing (and reading) was a male domain that excluded women. And yet, according to Margaret Hallissy, much medieval writing focussed on women, specifically directing men on how they should instruct women regarding speech, dress, and behavior. Chaucer’s writings, however, recognized the tension that existed between what was written and what actually occurred in the everyday practice—the tension between knowledge based on authority and knowledge based on experience. Hallissy observes that

the *House of Fame* narrator also distinguishes between that which ‘men may ofte in bokes rede’ and that which men may ‘al day sen . . . in dede,’ . . . what is written and what happens in life, authority and experience. . . .

The issue of books as instruments of authoritative discourse (things ‘written’) as set against life itself (things ‘assayed’ or ‘preven’) is a recurrent one in Chaucer’s work, and important in the characterization of women. (186)

According to Hallissy, Chaucer's *Wife of Bath* and, indeed, all of *The Canterbury Tales*, are unusual in that the narrator is not looking for answers in books. He is a naive, inexperienced character who spends his time observing people and events and most significantly, listening. In Chaucer's presentation, the change in the way the narrator and reader come to know, affords an unusual opening for the voice of the Wife of Bath: "On the subject of women, written words are flawed because, as the Wife says, men wrote the books. Women know themselves but cannot teach. Those with authority have no experience, and those with experience, no authority" (Hallissy 187).

Chaucer's narrative strategy is a bold one. It foregrounds the dichotomy between authority and experience, and, more importantly, it gives Alisoun the opportunity to speak and to be heard (Hallissy 187).

The Wife, in fact, begins her prologue by directly challenging the established rule of who can know and who has authority: "Experience, though noon auctoritee/Were in this world, is right ynough for me/To speke of wo that is in mariage"(III (D) 1-3). By putting forward such a statement, the Wife of Bath claims knowledge gleaned from her past experience. Marriage, in essence, is one of her crafts, and after five husbands, she is an expert artisan. Alisoun pits her knowledge from experience against that designated by the church and deportment books as true knowledge (that emanating from authority). In a context in which truth and knowledge are seen as products of hierarchical authority and in which the ability to stipulate what is truth and knowledge depends on one's position--the higher the position, the more authority--the Wife is rendered powerless to name the truth, for she holds no position within this hierarchy, and she is subject to it. She, however, uses the one form of knowledge available to her to question authority and challenge its truth: experience.

Alisoun's exordium⁵ is concerned with texts and authority. To bring the "mind of the auditor into proper condition to receive" (Cicero I. xiv. 19-xv.20) her speech, Alisoun does not immediately introduce a narrative of her own experience, but rather offers her own interpretation of the well-known authoritative texts by men such as St. Paul and St. Jerome: "Men may devyne and glosen, up and down, But wel I woot, expres, withoute lye" (III (D) 26-27). Men have always had the power to interpret texts, and Alisoun boldly usurps this role by insisting on her own power to know and on her own access to truth. For the first half of her prologue, Alisoun reiterates "wel I woot" (III (D) 1-79), and counters established arguments with her own interpretations. She makes a brilliant double move, violating the established hierarchy by presuming to know but also following a practice encouraged by St. Augustine himself. In his introduction to *On Christian Doctrine*, St. Augustine states that he does not want to expound his understanding of the text, but rather he wants to teach others how to read the text:

So the person who knows how to read, on finding a book, does not require another reader to explain what is written in it; and in the same way the person who has assimilated the rules that I am trying to teach, on finding a difficulty in the text, will not need another interpreter to reveal what is obscure, because he comprehends certain rules . . . And so by following up various clues he can unerringly arrive at the hidden meaning for himself or at least avoid falling into incongruous misconceptions (11). -

Alisoun practices this form of self-sufficient interpretation, recommended by Augustine, to reveal hidden meaning. She follows Augustine's rule of using an indisputable or literal passage to remove the uncertainty of ambiguous ones (Augustine, 71). She takes the

⁵I am referring here to the first part of the Wife of Bath's Prologue up until she is interrupted by the pardoner (III (D) 1-184).

Alisoun's use of the exordium also demonstrates her awareness of the difficulty she faces in being heard by the other pilgrims. She knows that as a widow married five times her credibility is suspect. According to the authoritative texts, widows were to remain loyal to their dead husbands and embrace celibacy:

Ideally, all the virtues practiced by any woman are to be practiced the more fervently by a widow, since she 'maintained her reputation by her modesty, her chastity, and by her acceptance of the authorities of others.' But in reality, the conduct book writers found continuing occasion to remind widows of their responsibilities to behave as exemplars of sorrow, to devote themselves to religious duties, to weep and to pray, to fast, and to give alms. Certain activities were clearly unsuitable to widows: 'wandering' and its concomitant speech excesses, violations of clothing customs and remarriage. (Hallissy, 140)

Clearly, Alisoun has not followed the prescribed path, so her exordium takes the form of an insinuation. She discusses those arguments from authority that weigh most strongly against her, and she questions references from authority to bring into doubt the convictions held by her audience. In the first part of her prologue, for example, she addresses the issue of how many times a woman can be married. She constantly emphasizes that she knows the scriptures well and uses them to defend her right to remarry: "I woot wel Abraham was an hooly man / And Jacob eek, as ferforth as I kan;/ And ech of hem hadde wyves mo than two" (III (D) 55-57). The Wife also reiterates the source of her own first hand knowledge:

Diverse scoles maken parfyt clerkes,
And diverse practyk in many sondrey werkes
Maketh the werkman parfyt sekirly;
Of fyve husbondes scoleiying am I. (II. 44a-44f. 76)

By using the analogy of the clerks, Alisoun suggests not only that her knowledge is of equivalent value since she too is a product of “scolei yng” and “practyk,” but also that her practice, i.e. experience, has made her an expert wife. Alisoun, however, no more conforms to the ideal of medieval wifehood, as professed by authorities, than she does to that of widowhood. The traditional medieval view, sanctioned by church fathers and by common law, stipulated that “wives should be humble, obedient, and submissive to their husbands in all things” (Carruthers, 209). Alisoun is never humble or obedient and instead requires the submission of her husbands.

However, according to Mary Carruthers, in a social and economic way Alisoun does become the expert wife. As Carruthers notes, Alisoun’s first and most significant word is “experience.” Her experience encompasses her five marriages, her occupation, her travel, and her social class (Carruthers 209). As a member of the middle-class, Alisoun can retain possession and control over property even in marriage (Carruthers 210). She can also inherit the property of her husband through jointure.⁷ Alisoun’s denial of sexual favours to her husbands until after they “yeven al hi lond,” is, as Carruthers indicates, informed by the standards of her class: “Alisoun’s behavior is simply shrewd business” (211). Despite the lessons of the authoritative texts, in practice widows were considered excellent matches especially if they had property that was unencumbered by children (Carruthers 213). Many of the department books addressed to daughters or young wives often assumed that a young woman would remarry (Carruthers 214), and parents often sold the “right to marry their children” (Carruthers 212). The practices of the medieval period strongly suggest that “marriage is contracted for money, and the acquisition of money is equivalent to the attainment of honor, respect, and independence” (Carruthers 214). Alisoun gains considerable wealth and, as a result, independence and freedom to the

⁷Jointure occurred when the “husband agreed to hold his land in joint tenancy with his wife, which meant that she would inherit all of it when he died” (Patterson 149).

point where she then has the ability to marry not as a career move but for pleasure and love. Her only mistake is having given too generously to her last husband who then attempts to wield traditional masculine authority:

Jankyn provides the wife her most painful encounter with traditional authority, and the terms of her ultimate success in her marriage to him express the full complexity of the truth of her experience. Jankyn believes in “auctoritee,” being too young to know that “maistrye” derives not from arbitrary schema, however ancient, but from skill and knowledge which are acquired through experience. (Carruthers 215)

Indeed, the Wife’s skill and knowledge, based as they are in experience, are not limited to marriage. Alisoun is also a successful cloth-maker, a “person who oversaw the whole process of cloth manufacture” (Carruthers 210). The fact that Alisoun is from “beside Bathe” indicates that she is from one of the richest cloth producing areas, and her extensive travels may reflect the success of her business. Laura Hodges observes that the Wife’s clothes signify more than “excessive personal adornment” (361). While Hodges recognizes that the Wife’s clothes serve a satirical function in that they point out her pride and sexual nature, she also notes that the depictions of Alisoun’s dress emphasize her status as an experienced cloth-maker and traveler.⁸ In addition, Alisoun is not just an

⁸According to Hodges, the Wife’s Sunday apparel constitutes an acceptable display of wealth. The naive narrator describes Alisoun’s coverchiefs as weighting ten pounds, but Hodges argues that the veil headdress was made from an elaborate weaving technique which produced a “fluted or goffered appearance, and additional weight” but also gave the illusion of being much heavier than it was (363). Alisoun’s coverchiefs, therefore, “demonstrates her knowledge of fine quality in fabric and familiarity with the special weaving techniques” (363). Her scarlet red hose perform a similar purpose, for scarlet was a “fine, costly, woolen fabric” (Hodges 364), and red was one of the most costly dyes, one frequently reserved for the upper

expert traveler and weaver, she is also an eloquent weaver of words. By speaking, Alisoun mounts her strongest challenge to authority. The deportment and courtesy books and the teachings of the church fathers all stipulated that women should be silent. To speak was to demonstrate loose morals whereas to remain silent was to show the “proper subjection” and “acceptance of authority” (Hallissy, 60-1). Moreover, women’s speech was considered trivial, nothing more than noise (Hallissy, 61; Root, 261). Authorities, such as St. Paul, stipulated that women were not to teach or preach, yet the Wife does both as she presents her prologue and tale. Knowing that her audience is educated in the all-pervasive rules of conduct (Hallissy, 7), Alisoun attempts to ease their resistance by adding a gentle disclaimer: “As taketh not agrief of that I seye; / For myn intente is nat but for to pleye” (III (D) 191-192). Through the disclaimer, Alisoun disassociates herself from conscious intent and plays into her audience’s expectations regarding women.

In the previous section of the prologue, however, Alisoun’s tone is serious when she disputes the assigned uses of the “membres . . . of generacion” (III (D) 116), and when she argues that the body is her domain. If authorities could argue that man was to be the head and woman the body, then the Wife will take them at their word: “Upon his flessh, whil that I am his wyf. / I have the power durynge al my lyf / Upon his propre body, and noght he” (III (D) 157-9):

classes. The Wife’s travel outfit, however, is highly practical. As Hodges indicates, the broad hat Alisoun wears would be “a standard pilgrim hat . . . humble in origin and protective in purpose”(365). The wimple is also a garment of humble origins which was generally “worn by nuns, widows, and elderly ladies” (Hodges 366) and designed to protect against the dust of the road. The foot-mantle reiterates the Wife’s knowledge of travel: “Thus there is no social pretense in the Wife’s hat, wimple, and foot-mantle; here is only the experienced traveler” (Hodges 366-367).

By foregrounding the body and the organs of generation, she claims as her own the traditional ontological and exegetical space of representation available to women, but she will not consent to the subjection that this space implies. Men may 'gloss' the body, she will make it speak. (Root, 259)

In a similar vein, John Alford argues that the Wife of Bath is an embodiment of Rhetoric itself, a personification derived from several rhetorical texts that would have been well known in the Medieval period, the most significant being *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury* by Martianus Capella. Alisoun does indeed manifest all the features generally assigned to such representations of rhetoric: she dresses elaborately (rhetoric as a dressing up of words, a form of ornamentation); she is full figured (prone to excess as is figurative language); she is outgoing, loves pleasure, and talks a great deal about herself. Alford notes that "experience" is the Wife's first word, "the domain proper to rhetoric" (123). Alford, however, accepts Plato's notion of rhetoric as being based on experience and leading "merely to belief" (Alford 110). In doing so, he empties Alisoun's words of content: "Her speech is oddly deficient -- full of eloquence but lacking in wisdom, rich in invention but poor in judgement" (Alford 122). Alford tells us that the Wife's end is persuasion not knowledge. He fails to recognize that the Wife, as a woman, does not have access to "knowledge" in a system which links knowledge to authority via hierarchy. Since the Wife cannot speak from authority (i.e. a position of power), she must use persuasion, and her experience constitutes her knowledge.

Root takes a more positive stance toward the Wife, arguing that the medieval confessional practice opens a space for Alisoun to speak. While he concedes that confession is a technique of power and control utilized by the church, he also notes that in the confessional practice, "experience in itself now constitutes an authority of a different order" which makes it useful for the individual who confesses (Root 256). Alisoun speaks her confession outside of institutionalized authority, making public her

“Privetee” and “naked the sin” (Root 255). But not all of the sin belongs to her alone. Alisoun’s self-history is ironic: the words she speaks are not always her own for she appropriates them from the authoritative texts which attempt to control her behavior. Alisoun turns the tables, using the chiding of authority to chide her husbands into submission and to gain mastery over them. She becomes, in Hallissy’s terms, the archwife:

The Wife of Bath is armed with the allied weapons of knowledge and rhetoric, which the medieval educational system traditionally offered to men only. So equipped, the Wife cannot be dismissed merely as a shrew... Her sense of entitlement, her assumption that her words have authority, that her will shall prevail, sets her apart from all other women.

The antithesis of the ideal wife, the will-less Grisilde, the Wife teaches the lesson that men must acknowledge and respect women’s will. (161)

Alisoun’s words, then, are anything but empty eloquence. She teaches a powerful lesson, and completes her instruction with a romantic tale that glosses over the harder realistic lessons of her prologue. Alisoun’s tale mimics the deportment-book virtues, only it tells a story of the wickedness of men (Carruthers, 218). Alisoun, in other words, paints her own lion (Carruthers, 209). In the process, however, she reiterates her differing notion of knowledge, that knowledge comes not from authority alone but from experience: “The ‘truth’ of any picture often has more to do with the prejudices and predilections of the painter than with the ‘reality’ of the subject” (Carruthers, 209). In Alisoun’s constellation of terms, truth becomes more subjective and changeable (Hallissy, 174). Experience and rhetoric become important tools in Alisoun’s struggle as a woman for the right to know and to make known: they are essential to her challenge to absolute authority.

In addition to recounting the Wife’s experience, Chaucer also reveals the unstable and changing nature of the term “experience.” He opposes knowledge based on authority

to the authority of experience. If the reader accepts a classical or Platonic notion of experience as mere belief rather than knowledge, then the Wife speaks only of the mundane, offering fleeting pleasure instead of truth. If, however, the reader accepts experience as forming a viable foundation for knowledge, then the Wife becomes an expert whose experiments and experience have plenty to teach her audience. Chaucer, indeed, appears to exploit both these notions of experience and knowledge to produce an ambiguous and lively character. His fictional exploration of the “experience” marks the beginning of a shift in the general constellation of terms and, in particular, the status of “experience.”

Mary Wollstonecraft and the Rhetoric of Lockean Understanding

In the Enlightenment, Dewey argues, the second historical conception of experience receives its fullest articulation in the theory and work of John Locke. According to Dewey, “reason” had come to be perceived as dogmatic, signifying conventional and traditional doctrines. Locke would change this by insisting on the significance of the individual. Once considered secondary to notions of truth and knowledge, the individual becomes a valued term exemplifying not only freedom but also intellectual and political advancement, in contrast to the stifling strictures of a reason based on convention and authority. The individual would be the root of true knowledge because the individual would be the source of experience and be responsible for thinking through ideas and precepts. As Locke indicates in his address to the Earl of Pembroke, “if thou wilt make use of thy own thoughts . . . It is to them, if they are thy own, that I refer myself: but if they are taken upon trust from others, it is no great matter what they are; they are not following truth, but some meaner consideration; and it is not worth while to be concerned what he says or thinks, who thinks only as he is directed by another” (Locke I. 8). For Locke, all the materials of reason and knowledge are derived from experience (II.I.2 122). Locke defines experience as observation proceeding from the senses. He places experience in opposition to innate ideas which he sees as loaded with

“unfounded tradition and arbitrarily exercised authority” (Dewey, 76). Locke believes that ideas classified as innate, which by definition were beyond criticism, were not innate but picked up through socialization. Locke rejects the notion of *a priori* knowledge in favor of the mind as “a white paper void of characters” (II.I.1 121).

He distinguishes between two forms of experience: sensation, the perceptions conveyed to the mind by the five senses; and reflection, the perceptions of the operation of our own mind within us (II.I.3-4 123). Experience in the form of sensation and reflection furnishes the mind with simple ideas. Once the mind is stocked with simple ideas, the understanding “has the power to repeat, compare, and unite them, even to an almost infinite variety, and so can make at pleasure new complex ideas” (II.II.1 145). Knowledge, then, is the “perception of the connexion (sic) of and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our ideas” (IV.I.1 167).⁹ Locke’s use of “experience” clearly increases the value of the term. The new status of experience as the root of true knowledge at first appears to do little to alter the value of the terms “woman” and “rhetoric.” These terms still remain linked and are still devalued in Locke’s philosophy. As a frequently quoted passage illustrates:

⁹According to Dewey, Locke maintains the classical notion that experience could not produce universal knowledge. Tied into the individual, it can only produce particular knowledge. Locke concludes that there could be “no exact science of natural phenomena, but only probability sufficient for the conduct of life” (Dewey 77). Dewey notes, however, that Locke was not a pure sensationalist. Locke postulates that “morals and mathematics may be true sciences” (Dewey 77) because the relations between the ideas are derived from observation made by the mind and thus free from having to agree with external ‘archetypes’ (Dewey 78). He regards these relations as the “workmanship of understanding” and as being the essence of scientific knowledge.

It is evident how much men love to deceive and be deceived, since rhetoric, that powerful instrument of error and deceit, has its established professors, is publicly taught, and has always been had in great reputation: and I doubt not but it will be thought great boldness, if not brutality, in me to have said thus much against it. Eloquence, like the fair sex, has too prevailing beauties in it to suffer itself ever to be spoken against. And it is in vain to find fault with those arts of deceiving, wherein men find pleasure to be deceived.¹⁰ (III.X.34 147)

¹⁰Rhetoric's greatest weakness arises from the nature of words. Locke views words as signs for internal concepts (or ideas) used for conveying thoughts from one man's mind to another or for recording thoughts. Because of the vastness of the world around us, each sign is used to comprehend several particular things: "for the multiplication of words would have perplexed their use, had every particular thing need of a distinct name to be signified by" (III.I.3 4). Being linked to ideas, words are also linked to experience. As such their reference depends on individuals, for ideas are always particular to the individual. Words mark ideas but they do so arbitrarily: "words, in their primary or immediate signification, stand for nothing but *the ideas in the mind of him that uses them*, how imperfectly soever or carelessly those ideas are collected from the things which they are supposed to represent" (Locke III.II.2 9). People, of course, assume "their words to be marks of the ideas in the minds also of other men, with whom they communicate;" they also assume that words stand "for the reality of things" rather than just ideas of things (Locke III.II.2-5 10-11). Such assumptions combined with the nature of words makes communicating understanding very problematic. Language by its very nature is imperfect: "it is easy to perceive what imperfection there is in language, and how the very nature of words makes it almost unavoidable for many of them to be doubtful and uncertain in their significations" (Locke III.IX.1 104).

Locke's insistence that reflection follow from sensory experience, John Patton argues, limits the possibility of persuasion. Persuasion deals with general attitudes, firmly held beliefs, and questions of value (Patton 18-19). Locke's notion of sensation and reflection, Patton suggests, confines the rhetorical act to mere presentation of empirical data since there is nothing outside of knowledge based on sensory information. The result is a rhetoric with severely limited substance for invention (Patton 29), and which tends towards description and classification at the expense of the argumentative process (Patton 19). For Patton, Locke's approach renders rhetoric vapid:

Locke's epistemology of experience, then, results in a considerably weakened rhetorical perspective because it admits no place for deliberation about moral implications, a task requiring the observer to journey past the bounds of sense-data alone into an area where judgements are founded on values and general assumptions about the nature of man and society. (20)

Patton, however, concedes that Locke criticizes rhetoric but does not attempt to do away with it altogether. While Patton emphasizes that Locke argues for a "reformed practice of rhetoric based squarely on experience" (15), Jerry Weedon examines how Locke's conceptualization of reason affects rhetoric. He also recognizes the limits that Locke's philosophy places on rhetoric. Weedon argues that Locke defines reason according to two processes: conviction, in which reason refers "to a power of the mind to make accurate perceptions of agreements and disagreements among its ideas," and persuasion, in which reason is "used to denote man's innate capacity to harmonize all the elements involved in volitional acts" (J.L. Weedon 379). Each of these has various implications for rhetoric.

Locke's notion of conviction would eliminate from rhetoric the concept of metaphor, for metaphor produces associations of ideas that are not based on the reasoning process. Evidence from opinion, since it frequently relies on the authority of another, would be limited to cases where the witness makes "direct observations pertaining to

material substance” (J.L.Weedon 384). Arrangement would also suffer because it would have to accord with reason. In other words, discourse would have to be arranged such that “the mind can see all relations at once and experience the unity of their interconnectedness instantly” (J.L.Weedon 384). Conviction, with its notion that “man is rational because his intellectual, affective, and moral instincts are potentially harmonious,” would limit rhetoric by requiring “perfect demonstrability” and the “authority of nature” (J. L. Weedon 385). The resulting persuasive strategy would depend on “lines of arguments with fundamental moral and political axioms” (J.L. Weedon 386). In addition, the requirement that one must “speak things as they are” and use reason would seriously constrict invention and identification, making failure to achieve persuasion a fault of the audience rather than a responsibility of the rhetor:

If persuasion, founded on these cornerstones, is insufficient, then something is wrong with the hearer and remedial measures are in order. Once reason is cured of its defects, every form of immorality will vanish, and along with it every principle of rhetoric but the authentic exercise of reason. (J. L. Weedon 387)

While Locke may not, Weedon notes, create an anti-rhetoric, he certainly puts it under strictures which severely confine its practice.

Although Locke spoke sharply against rhetoric, his writings did have a profound and often positive influence on its development.¹¹ The same might also be said regarding

¹¹ What are seen as limitations by one group of scholars are deemed by another to be advantageous. Wilbur Howell, for example, places Locke as one of the major contributors to the new rhetoric: a rhetoric that concerned itself with the standards of scientific and scholarly proof (Howell 443) and which emphasized plain style. While Howell would agree that Locke wanted to eliminate figurative language (490), to use only arguments based on

his views of women. Locke often describes women in negative and censorious ways, yet his philosophy would play an influential role in arguments for the rights of women. As shown in a previous quotation, Locke not only characterizes rhetoric as deceit but also as feminine. In fact, Catherine Peaden argues that Locke's 'new rhetoric' sets up an opposition between a feminine rhetoric and a masculine scientific discourse in order to valorize philosophy and gain control over language (81):

In this fashion, Locke's *Essay* is constructed on universal principles which are, in the final analysis, male. Woman remains bracketed, relegated to the origins. When woman does appear in the *Essay*, her image echoes that of the "seductress" Rhetoric. Locke repeatedly insinuates these images, in allusions to women as promiscuous, women as deceitful, women as adulteresses, of women as untrustworthy in regard to child-rearing, constructing a curiously negative Imaginary. (Peaden 84)

William Walker's work supports Peaden's observation regarding Locke's negative images of women. In Locke's *Essay*, Walker argues, women are depicted as the source of error: they introduce unnatural associations into the masculine mind (the female maid impresses the notion of goblins and spirits onto the child's mind) (Walker 252); they are responsible not only for monstrosities of the mind but also for natural monstrosities (women are said to have been impregnated by baboons) (Walker 253); and as a thing of beauty woman openly deceives to give pleasure (similar to the role played by figurative language) (Walker 259). As Walker notes, "when Locke describes how women influence boys and men, he generally defines her [sic] as a root of error which must be revealed, expunged, resisted as far as possible" (260).

factual and non-artistic proof (494), and to emphasize exposition over persuasion (496), he characterizes these as contributions rather than limitations.

Walker, however, also argues that Locke presents an alternative feminine image when he personifies truth as female, making her an object of desire for the male mind. The strongest image of truth as female occurs early in Locke's *Essay* in the epistle dedicatory:

But there being nothing more to be desired for Truth, than a fair unprejudiced hearing, no body is more likely to procure me that, than your Lordship, who are allowed to have got so intimate an Acquaintance with her, in her more retired recesses. (Locke I 3-4)

Walker emphasizes the erotic depiction of truth in which woman becomes the "center of male reception, entertainment, and embraces" (266). Peaden argues, however, that the characterization of truth as a woman courted still maintains that metaphor of control that governs both woman and language in Locke's text. In addition, Peaden suggests that Locke has simply created another binary with truth as the pure woman and rhetoric as the corrupt (Peaden 85). Such a binary, however, does not hold. Truth may be an image of desire, but this image is no more than that of the mistress. The mistress is, generally, not perceived as the ideal pure woman. Indeed, truth as mistress is a figure that both appeals to male desire and maintains the negative male stereotype of woman as object.

The influence of Locke's works in western culture cannot be denied. But given the attitude towards women expressed in his text, the role his philosophy plays in feminist discourse may appear surprising:

While Locke's texts contain much that has been important to feminism -- for example, ideas of non-essentialism, tolerance, an inchoate social constructivism, and less severe child-rearing practices--they formed part of a shift in discursive practice that figuratively and literally subordinated women over the next two centuries. (Peaden 75)

However, Peaden concedes in a footnote that the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft may be "used to deconstruct my linkage of Locke to a controlling discourse" (88). In fact,

Wollstonecraft's essay, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, does afford an opportunity to examine how Locke's principles and practices influenced an Enlightenment discourse on the rights of women.

A Vindication emulates many of the ideas put forward by Locke. In her introduction, Wollstonecraft assures her audience that "the dictates of experience and reflection will be felt" even when she expresses her conviction with "energetic emotions" (8). She uses a standard rhetorical ploy when she dissociates herself from 'deceitful' rhetoric to align herself with the proponents of reason:

I shall disdain to cull my phrases or polish my style;--I aim at being useful, and sincerity will render me unaffected; for wishing rather to persuade by force of my arguments, than dazzle by the elegance of my language, I shall not waste my time in rounding periods, or in fabricating the turgid bombast of artificial feelings, which coming from the head, never reach the heart.--I shall be employed about things, not words! (8-9)

Wollstonecraft's rejection of rhetoric, her insistence on "simple unadorned truth," and her strong emphasis on reason, clearly appeals to an audience familiar with Locke's philosophy. Indeed, Wollstonecraft seems to emulate Locke not only in his attitude towards rhetoric but also in his attitude towards women: her depiction of women often appears as negative as Locke's, if not more so. In *A Vindication*, women are depicted as sexually promiscuous, vain, childish, cunning, deceitful, frivolous, licentious, adulterous, wasteful, and unfit for child-rearing. Susan Gubar goes so far as to label Wollstonecraft's work a form of feminist misogyny in which the "demands for female liberation" take the form of "an attack not on men but on women" (Gubar 463). Gubar suggests that this feminist misogyny arises from a tension between what Wollstonecraft "thought she should have been and what she feared she was" (461). The tension in turn produces disparities and contradictions between her works (Gubar 460-61).

Wollstonecraft, however, was an astute rhetor, and, as Jamie Barlowe points out, she used rhetorical strategies that were suited to the dialogue she was engaged in and to the genre she was using (119). Barlowe's work effectively illustrates how Wollstonecraft used or reshaped different genres to fit her political purpose (126). According to Barlowe, in *A Vindication*, Wollstonecraft addresses an audience "of so-called enlightened men, assuming their desire to live up to the terms of their own philosophical and political systems," and uses the philosophical system to communicate with the men on their terms; in her novels, she subverts the expectations of the genre of sentimentalism to "reflect larger political ends"; and in her letters, she argues "for her personal rights" (Barlowe 122, 126, 128). In other words, there are few real disparities between Wollstonecraft's ideals and practices in her works. In labeling Wollstonecraft's work misogynist, Gubar and other critics overlook the rhetorical motivation and context of the work.

As an example of Wollstonecraft's internalized misogyny, Gubar cites her constant appeals in *A Vindication* to a male audience: "Rarely, in other words, does she present herself as a woman speaking to women" (Gubar 457). Why Gubar and others should find fault with this is difficult to understand given the context of the work. Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication* in response to "men such as Burke, Rousseau, Paine, and Talleyrand" (Barlowe 117), and she hoped that the work would "influence the deliberations of the National Assembly" (Furniss 177; Barlowe 121). Given women, as Wollstonecraft argues, were poorly educated, her primary audience would have been educated, middle-class males, an audience that was politically capable of making the social changes Wollstonecraft sought.

As indicated in the earlier quotation concerning rhetoric, Wollstonecraft accepted the enlightenment notion of rhetoric developed by Wilkins, Boyle, Sprat, Glanvill, and

most significantly Locke¹² that emphasized experience as the source of knowledge, plain style, perspicuity and right reasoning. As also indicated earlier, the focus on experience limits certain aspects of rhetoric. One aspect that is significantly affected is that of identification. As Patton suggests, if communication is based on ideas which are founded on experience then common experience becomes the one means of identification: "If the experience of the speaker, then, is fundamentally different from the experience of the audience, the Lockean approach would not allow for the possibility of genuine communication" (21). Wollstonecraft's intended audience clearly poses problems in terms of identification. Wollstonecraft states from the beginning that she is a woman (7) and that she pleads for her sex not her self (1). Since men's and women's experiences will differ substantially, Wollstonecraft cannot appeal to "women's experience" and expect her audience to identify with this experience. Instead, she speaks "'as a philosopher,' and 'as a moralist'" (Wollstonecraft 33). The common ground that she seeks with her audience is philosophical. Wollstonecraft establishes identification on the principles of a Lockean philosophy that emphasizes reason, reflection, and experience as sources of knowledge. As a common ground, the philosophy is advantageous because it does away with innate ideas that are by definition unquestionable. By emphasizing reason¹³ based on

¹²See Howell for a detailed account of the development of the "new rhetoric" in the Enlightenment.

¹³According to Locke, reason is essential for enlarging our knowledge and regulating our assent (IV.XVII 387). It "consists in a perception of the agreement or disagreement of our own ideas, and the knowledge of the existence of all things without us" (IV.XVII 386). The emphasis on "our own ideas" highlights the significance that Locke placed on the particular which functioned as the basis of all knowledge. As the source of the particular, individuals had to be responsible for applying reason and expanding their own knowledge. As previously stated, Locke rejects blind acceptance of authority and of principles: "The way to improve

experience and rejecting authority, Locke's philosophy opens up a space for Wollstonecraft to speak. Following Locke, Wollstonecraft believes that it is reason that "raises man above brute creation" (7). She defines reason as "the simple power of improvement . . . [and] of discerning truth," and states, "every individual is in this respect a world in itself. More or less may be conspicuous in one being than another; but the nature of reason must be the same in all" (Wollstonecraft 53). In Wollstonecraft's discourse reason measures, validates, and justifies all things. One is not bound by duty which is not founded on reason (Wollstonecraft 3); nor is one required to follow rules not constructed via reason (Wollstonecraft 32); reason provides the "sober light" (Wollstonecraft 35); only it can demand homage (Wollstonecraft 36); its practice allows individuals to become virtuous (Wollstonecraft 20), and it is the only means to obtain knowledge: "The power of generalizing ideas, of drawing comprehensive conclusions from individual observations, is the only acquirement, for an immortal being, that really deserves the name of knowledge" (Wollstonecraft 54).

When Wollstonecraft appeals to her audience for agreement, she invokes epithets of reason in phrases such as "the wise will consider" (40), "rational men will excuse me" (9), "is it not more rational to expect," or images of knowing as seeing such as the "philosophic eye" (7), and the "eye of reason" (33). Reason in Wollstonecraft's discourse forms the basis upon which she seeks to build identification and argue for the rights of women. Its denial means slavery, imprisonment, and oppression for women, whereas its practice means liberation:

our knowledge is not, I am sure, blindly, and with an implicit faith, to receive and swallow principles" (IV.XII 346). Every individual is capable of reason and understanding, as Locke demonstrates through the story of the country gentle-woman who does not need syllogisms to connect a series of ideas together to reach a conclusion about the weather (IV.XVII 392). Reason, in Locke's discourse, is highly dependent on experience.

For if it be allowed that women were destined by Providence to acquire human virtues, and by the exercise of their understandings, the stability of character which is the firmest ground to rest our future hopes upon, they must be permitted to turn to the fountain of light, and not forced to shape their course by the twinkling of a mere satellite. (Wollstonecraft 19)

Wollstonecraft also follows Locke in rejecting principles based on authority or prescription. On the issue of women, precepts and prescriptions based on an unreasoned authority abound in the eighteenth century. In fact, Wollstonecraft identifies writings and teachings by “men of genius” as one of the main producers of such prescriptions, and, as such, these works become one of the primary causes of women’s degradation (6).

Wollstonecraft constantly challenges these unreasoned maxims by demanding proof and by appealing to reason:

That the society is formed in the wisest manner, whose constitution is founded on the nature of man, strikes, in the abstract, every thinking being so forcibly, that it looks like presumption to endeavor to bring forward proofs; though proof must be brought, or the strong hold of prescription will never be forced by reason; yet to urge prescription as an argument to justify the depriving men (or women) of their natural rights, is one of the absurd sophisms which daily insult common sense. (12)

To comprehend her view of women, we must understand the role that “reason” plays in Wollstonecraft’s rhetoric. Indeed, Wollstonecraft pays her highest compliment to women when she insists on treating women “like rational creatures” (8). A closer examination of Wollstonecraft’s depiction of women reveals that she did not believe women to be *by nature* ‘sexually promiscuous, vain, childish, cunning, deceitful, frivolous, licentious, adulterous, wasteful, and unfit for child-rearing.’ Although these are frequently the terms she uses to describe women, the verbs and grammatical constructions that accompany these terms indicate outside forces at work. When Wollstonecraft writes of

women, she often uses passive constructions. Women “are not allowed to have sufficient strength of mind” (Wollstonecraft 18); they are “rendered . . . more artificial,” (Wollstonecraft 21) “made cyphers,” (Wollstonecraft 23) “degraded by being made subservient to love and lust” (Wollstonecraft 26); they “have been insulated,” “have been stripped,” and “have been decked” (Wollstonecraft 36). In other words, women are not born as such but are made through socialization. The passive construction constitutes a standard rhetorical strategy in the laying of blame. When the blame falls on the audience and the author does not wish to alienate the audience through direct accusation, passive constructions leave those at fault unnamed. In other words, Wollstonecraft does not, as Gubar suggests, define the “feminine principle” when she describes the negative attributes of women. Wollstonecraft makes it clear that “education gives the *appearance* of weakness in women” (22 *italics mine*). Women have simply adapted to the conditions forced on them by men. For man, according to Wollstonecraft, keeps woman in the dark, denies her reason, and then instructs her “to be the toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ear whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused” (33). When raised in such educational systems, Wollstonecraft argues, woman acts only as she ought (48).

Wollstonecraft goes even further to suggest that under similar conditions man would behave no differently. Her description of military men provides the strongest illustration of this point. Like women, military men are “sent into the world too early before their minds have been stored with knowledge or fortified by principles. The consequences are similar . . . Soldiers, as well as women, practice the minor virtues with punctilious politeness” (22-23). Wollstonecraft reiterates this premise throughout her work, noting that women “act as men are observed to act” when they gain status by unjustly obtaining power (44), and they will “act like men when subjected to fear” (47). The only point of superiority Wollstonecraft allows men is that of physical strength. Any other argument for superiority must be subjected to proof. Proof consists of observation, reflection, and, their foundation, experience.

Gubar also argues that Wollstonecraft represents women as a disease which “threatens--like a virus--to contaminate and destroy men and their culture” (Gubar 456). Gubar quotes a passage from Wollstonecraft which she supposes illustrates this view of women as contagion. But the passage, taken from the introduction, refers not to women but to the rich and great (the aristocracy) who are often depicted by Wollstonecraft as corrupt.¹⁴ The contagion that Wollstonecraft refers to is related to class not gender as the line following those quoted by Gubar indicates: “As a class of mankind they have the strongest claim to pity; the education of the rich tends to render them vain and helpless” (8).

Gubar quotes a second passage to substantiate the claim that Wollstonecraft sees women as a contagious disease: “Here in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, as in the next sentences I quote, femininity feels like a malady.” She then quotes Wollstonecraft as follows:

Women’s senses are *inflamed*, and their understandings neglected, consequently they become the *prey* of their senses, delicately termed sensibility, and are *blown about* by every momentary *gust* of feeling. Civilized women are, therefore, . . . *weakened* by false refinement . . . Ever *restless* and *anxious*, their *over exercised* sensibility not only renders them

¹⁴Gubar’s passage reads, “The feminine principle, so defined, threatens--like a virus--to contaminate and destroy men and their culture. For as Wollstonecraft explains: “Weak, artificial beings, raised above the common wants and affections of their race, in a premature unnatural manner, undermine the very foundation of virtue and spread corruption through the whole mass of society” (456). But the Wollstonecraft passage begins: “Perhaps the seeds of false refinement, immorality, and vanity, have ever been shed by the great” (8). And the passage ends with the line quoted above. It is clear that the passage from Wollstonecraft’s text refers to the rich upper-class not to women.

uncomfortable themselves but *troublesome* . . . to others . . . (Gubar's emphasis 456; Wollstonecraft 61)

Emphasizing words such as “inflamed,” “uncomfortable,” and “weakened,” Gubar argues that in *A Vindication* women are like a “virus,” an “illness,” and “like gangrene contaminating the healthy” (457). While I will not dispute that Wollstonecraft uses the language of illness and infection in reference to women, I question Gubar's conclusion that Wollstonecraft denigrates the feminine. I would agree that there is a metaphor of disease operating in Wollstonecraft's text and that women are depicted as infected. But women are not the virus—the cause of the disease. In reaching this conclusion, Gubar has made a false diagnosis. To understand the infection that plagues women in Wollstonecraft's text, we must examine her rhetoric for the image of the male that also appears there. Men in *A Vindication* are frequently depicted as noxious agents poisoning, intoxicating, and tainting women. For example, men intoxicate women with adoration or homage (7, 20); they taint women's minds with sensualist demands. “The poisoned source of female vices and follies,” Wollstonecraft tells us, “has been the sensual homage paid to beauty” by men (46).

Wollstonecraft does not, as Gubar implies, argue for female liberation by attacking women rather than men. If we examine Wollstonecraft's rhetorical strategies, we see that she holds men responsible for women's degradation, and she places the onus for change upon them. Like the fictional Wife of Bath, it may appear that Wollstonecraft confesses the wickedness of women, but she tells instead of the wickedness of men. Indeed, like the Wife of Bath, Wollstonecraft follows the philosophies, teachings, and practices of learned men, but she uses these to dramatically turn the tables. In her text, rhetoric is associated with the practice of men, and men are both the source of error and the originators of monstrosity.

Whereas Locke depicts deceitful rhetoric as feminine, in Wollstonecraft's text rhetoric is clearly associated with the masculine through its practice. Wollstonecraft

warns that the men who write to instruct women use “sinister methods to persuade”; their arguments are “dictated by gross appetite, which satiety had rendered fastidious” (64). She censures Rousseau for his “eloquent periods” and “voluptuous reveries” (24). According to Wollstonecraft, Dr. Fordyce¹⁵ produces more disreputable work as he not only “spins out Rousseau’s eloquence” and gives way to “sentimental rant,” but also resorts to “florid appeals” and “lover like phrases of pumped-up passion.” Dr Fordyce’s words are deemed idle and empty, amounting to nothing but “delusive flattery that leads to vanity and folly” (95-97). While several women writers also meet with Wollstonecraft’s disapproval, they are criticized not for their rhetoric but for their general lack of understanding (they imitate or rely on the work of men). The one writer who does receive praise is Catherine Macaulay, author of *Letter on Education*, who, according to Wollstonecraft, writes with a clear strong style that reveals no sex (107).

Whereas women are the agents of “unnatural association” and the producers of “human monstrosity” in Locke’s *Essay*, in Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication*, men become the agents of unnatural association and form the monstrosities of civilization. In Locke’s work, the maids are responsible for subjecting tender minds to the fearful apprehensions of goblins and other spectres. In Wollstonecraft’s work, men introduce the “bugbear” of the masculine to keep women fearful of becoming ridiculous and unadorable so that they will eschew reason and the attainment of talents and virtues which “ennoble the human character” (7,9). In *A Vindication*, men become monsters when they attempt to gain absolute power over others. Those most susceptible to this transformation are men born to wealth and power. These men, according to Wollstonecraft, become despots who resort to “covert corruption” to maintain power. In the process, they become “luxurious monsters” who “like gangrene” spread contagion (17). They wish to enthrall the few so

¹⁵James Fordyce (1720-1796) author of *Sermons to Young Women* (1765) (ed. Candace Ward; Wollstonecraft94).

that as “monsters” they can “tyrannize over thousands of their fellow creatures” (36). Men born to power and riches become “bloated monsters who have lost all traces of humanity” (44). But men, regardless of class and learning, who resort to reason based on partial experience to justify prejudice and to deny women the ability to use their faculties, are by analogy equally monstrous. They maintain vice which is a “native deformity” (12) and degrade women in the process.

If woman is for Locke the “root of error which must be revealed, expunged, resisted” (Walker 260), for Wollstonecraft, men epitomize wrong reasoning--the ultimate error. Wollstonecraft frequently demonstrates right reasoning by going back to first principles and subjecting those principles to proof.¹⁶ Throughout the text, Wollstonecraft represents herself as always following the dictates of reason, opposing her practice to the men who presume to instruct women on proper behavior and who inevitably resort to wrong reasoning.

Wrong reasoning is the use of pseudo-reason (a reason based on partial experience) or authority to support prejudices which cannot withstand the demand for proof and, therefore, the application of reason. Rousseau is most guilty of this sin against reason. “Misled by his respect for the goodness of God,” he bases his arguments on false hypotheses (Wollstonecraft 13); then to support his views, he “stigmatizes, as vicious,

¹⁶ One such demonstration of right reasoning takes place early in the text when Wollstonecraft acknowledges an intermediate idea through her discussion of the physical differences between men and women:

I would not lead my readers to suppose that I mean violently to agitate the contested question respecting the equality or inferiority of the sex; but as the subject lies in my way, and I cannot pass it over without subjecting the main tendency of my reasoning to misconstruction, I shall stop a moment to deliver, in a few words, my opinion. (7)

every effort of genius” (Wollstonecraft 14). Rousseau does not see things as they are and fails to trace the origin of such things (i.e., vice and evil) to their cause. He allows his imagination to run wild (Wollstonecraft 38), and he makes “reason give way to his desire of singularity, and truth to a favorite paradox” (Wollstonecraft 38). He is also, in Wollstonecraft’s view, unable to control his “inflammable senses,” allowing “his ruling appetite” to disturb “the operations of reason” (83). He commits the greatest sin against reason by suggesting that women should subject themselves “to authority independent of reason” (Wollstonecraft 83). In essence, Rousseau is blind because he is unable to see through the “foggy atmosphere” (Wollstonecraft 17) of his sensibilities. As Wollstonecraft tells us, “all of Rousseau’s errors in reasoning arose from sensibility . . . When he should have reasoned he became impassioned, and reflection inflamed his imagination instead of enlightening his understanding” (92).

In Wollstonecraft’s view, Rousseau is not alone in his fall from reason. Wollstonecraft notes that Milton too comes under the sway of his senses and, as a result, introduces contradiction and inconsistency into his work.¹⁷ Dr. Gregory¹⁸ also falls prey to error when he uses the term “nature” to support his advice. Wollstonecraft argues that both he and Rousseau use the term in an indefinite way and suggests they occasionally use it to invoke innate principles: “If they told us that in a pre-existent state the soul was

¹⁷Wollstonecraft notes as an example that at one point in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Milton depicts Eve as being inferior and obedient to Adam. However, in another part of his work he suggests that Adam requires a mate of equal abilities so that together they can share rational delight (Wollstonecraft 19-20).

¹⁸“John Gregory (1724-1773) outlined his plan [for the education of women] in *A Father’s Legacy to His Daughters* (1774), which remained one of the most popular works on female education into the nineteenth century” (ed. Candace Ward, Wollstonecraft 21).

fond of dress, and brought this inclination with it into a new body, I should listen to them with a half smile, as I often do when I hear a rant about innate elegance” (27).

Wollstonecraft, true to Lockean philosophy, rejects this notion of innate ideas: “[A fondness for dress] is not natural; but arises, like false ambition in men, from love of power” (27).

Wollstonecraft contends that many of the generally accepted opinions regarding women are also founded on false reasoning. She cites the example of “Moses’s poetical story,” arguing that the literal interpretations of the story cannot be based on “serious thought.” Such interpretations rely on wrong reasoning so that man can “subjugate his companion . . . for his convenience or pleasure” (Wollstonecraft 25-26). Other practices and precepts, such as the belief that physical exercise makes women unfeminine or men ungentlemanly (Wollstonecraft 37), and the notion propagated by naturalists that women mature earlier than men (Wollstonecraft 70), constitute, in Wollstonecraft’s view, “vulgar error” which has been granted a “degree of credit” that gives “force to false conclusion” (37). Like the naturalist, men “reason on false ground” because they are “led astray by the male prejudice, which deems beauty the perfection of woman” (Wollstonecraft 70). In fact, for Wollstonecraft it is the “homage of passion” which inevitably leads to “the warped reason of man” (45).

Through the “graces of rhetoric” (Wollstonecraft 34) which lose truth in a “mist of words” (Wollstonecraft 12), the unnatural association of ideas, and the practice of wrong reasoning, men have denied woman her legitimate rights. They have, in Wollstonecraft’s words, stood “between her and reason”(53) preventing the “cultivation of female understanding” (54). As a result, men have rendered women insignificant objects, artificial, and weak; made them ridiculous, wanton, and useless; enfeebled their minds (6); and robbed the whole sex of dignity (Wollstonecraft 53). By degrading women, men have degraded themselves, for slavery degrades both the “master and the abject dependent” (Wollstonecraft 3). Man, therefore, has not just committed a crime against woman but

against all of humanity, for, Wollstonecraft asserts, “till women are more rationally educated, the progress of human virtue and improvement in knowledge must receive continual checks” (39). Clearly, in Wollstonecraft’s rhetoric it is not women who contaminate “men and their culture” as Gubar argues, but it is men themselves who are both the poison and the cure. The condition of woman is a symptom.

While contemporary feminist critics have argued that Wollstonecraft “accepts too heartily the economic, sexual, and philosophic terms of her culture” (Yaeger, 79), I would argue that it is because of those terms, grounded as they are in “experience,” that Wollstonecraft can speak as she does. Basing knowledge on experience means that every individual has access to the building blocks of knowledge. With the development and proper application of reason, each individual becomes a knowing subject: an expert. Access to positions of authority and giving way to traditional precepts are not required for access to knowledge. “Experience,” in Wollstonecraft’s discourse, reiterates the principles of Locke’s philosophy, but it also becomes the ground upon which Wollstonecraft constructs her most radical statement regarding women. At its most basic, in Wollstonecraft’s text, experience functions as proof which gives rise to reason (35, 64, 69, 174, 191). As a part of the process of obtaining knowledge, experience is also represented as a venerable guide--it *shows*, it *teaches*, it *leads* to inferences and conclusions, and it *brings* home truth (48, 139, 154, 196).

“Experience” takes its most radical form in Wollstonecraft’s conceptualization of education. Education is an extended process that begins with knowledge acquired from observation. Ideally, children would be encouraged to slowly sharpen the senses to develop such knowledge. Once their temperament has formed and they have learned to regulate their passions, they can begin to “set the understanding to work before the body arrives at maturity; so that man may only have to proceed, not to begin, the important task of learning to think and reason” (Wollstonecraft 20). Wollstonecraft emphasizes the need to let learning develop according to the acquisition of experience -- slowly over time

(Wollstonecraft 108). She argues strongly against attempting to force knowledge on youth too soon: “I mean to reason with those worldly-wise instructors, who, instead of cultivating the judgement, instill prejudices, and render hard the heart that gradual experience would only have cooled” (108). She stipulates that education should not teach precepts but, instead, should try to develop the faculties that enable individuals to generate knowledge on their own. To obtain knowledge, then, individuals must have the material upon which knowledge is based: experience. Wollstonecraft contends that “it is almost as absurd to attempt to make a youth wise by the experience of another, as to expect the body to grow strong by the exercise which is only talked of, or seen” (116).

This use of “experience” has profound ramifications for her discussion of women’s rights. Throughout her essay, Wollstonecraft argues vehemently that women must be allowed and encouraged to develop their ability to reason. Her argument though radical in this one respect tends to remain conservative in that the primary justification for such a change is the claim that women would become better and more loyal companions to men and better mothers. But in discussing experience, Wollstonecraft appears to belie this conservatism when she stipulates that:

The world cannot be seen by an unmoved spectator, we must mix in the throng, and feel as men feel before we can judge of their feelings. If we mean, in short, to live in the world to grow wiser and better, and not merely to enjoy the good things of life, we must attain a knowledge of others at the same time that we become acquainted with ourselves. (114)

The implication is relatively simple. Women must become creatures of reason. To exercise this right they must have access to the working substance of reason: they must have all experiences opened to them. They must, in Wollstonecraft’s words, “mix in the throng.” So while reason may free women from the shackles of ignorance, it is access to experience that offers complete liberation.

Locke's philosophy attempts to bring the term "experience" into the same terministic screen as "truth" and "knowledge" while leaving the less desirable terms, "woman" and "rhetoric," behind, but it does not succeed completely. Because experience, unlike authority, cannot be limited to a select few, grounding knowledge in experience, as Lockean philosophy does, opens the field to all individuals. Reason becomes the only factor that can limit access to knowledge, but being reflection this too is dependent on experience. Wollstonecraft recognized the implications and the power of such a philosophic system and its construction of "experience," and she uses it to attempt an equivalent shift for the term, "woman," endeavoring, by maintaining its link to "experience," to move it into the same terministic screen as "truth" and "knowledge." In this shifting constellation of terms, "rhetoric" becomes the means for disassociating the term "woman" from the negative attributes used to assign it an inferior status. By the Modernist period, the term "rhetoric" will be reduced to a notion of persuasive language empty of meaning, while its practice, since "all language is rhetorical" (Nietzsche 885), continues. Many of the rights for which Wollstonecraft argued would come to fruition in the modernist period, if they were not already a matter of course. Her most radical claim, that women should have full access to all the experiences that life could offer, was yet to be won.

John Dewey, Virginia Woolf and the Rhetoric of Art as Experience

Dewey argues that a third concept of experience was being developed at the time he was writing (1930s). He postulated that this third conceptualization would align itself more with science by dealing with "the prevalence of experimental habits . . . and using ideas" (*Survey* 83) and would thereby reconcile practical science with aesthetic contemplation (Kaplan ix). He himself formulated a complex theory of experience analyzing it as a part of education, as a methodology, and as art. Dewey confessed that his ideas were broadly influenced by the ideas of the time that were surfacing in English, German, and French writings (*Art* 7). His philosophy coalesces, responds to, and goes

beyond these ideas. Of most interest for the purpose of this chapter is his work *Art as Experience*.

A contemporary of Dewey, Virginia Woolf appears to make use of a similar notion of art in her essay *A Room of One's Own* published in 1929¹⁹. Indeed, I would argue that Dewey's philosophy, although produced after Woolf's work, provides an important tool for understanding the rhetorical strategies that Woolf brings into play in her now classic lecture. Dewey was familiar with the work of Clive Bell and Roger Frye, both of whom were members of the Bloomsbury circle with strong connections to Woolf and both of whom wrote on the nature of art. Like Dewey, Woolf would have been working with ideas that were "in the air" at that time. Her longer fictional works strongly suggest that she too did not fully accept the notion of art for art's sake that dominated the modern period and created sharp distinctions between high and low art. She uses the more didactic *Three Guineas* to develop the political implications of the connection between art and experience.

Dewey surmises that the sources of art were in everyday experiences (*Art* 11). One cannot, Dewey claims, "remain a cold spectator" (*Art* 11). One becomes involved with the immediate environment, and if one is engaged, interested, and finds satisfaction in her/his handiwork (no matter what it is), then s/he, as Dewey says, is "artistically engaged" (*Art* 11). For Dewey, experience is intimately connected with the world around us:

Life goes on in an environment; not merely *in* it but because of it, through interaction with it. No creature lives merely under its skin; its subcutaneous organs are means of connection with what lies beyond its

¹⁹ It should be noted that Woolf also made use of this notion in her novels. *Orlando* is of particular interest because it was published a year before *A Room of One's Own* and plays with many of the same ideas concerning the nature of art and life.

bodily frame, and to which, in order to live, it must adjust itself, by accommodation and defense but also by conquest. (*Art 19*)

When imbalance ensues between the individual and the environment, discomfort arises signaled usually through the emotions. If one overcomes oppositions and conflicts that produce the imbalance, one expands his or her life and grows as an individual.²⁰ If growth is desirable, then stability is not in and of itself always a good thing. In fact, stability tends to be temporary since interaction with the environment involves constant change:

All interactions that effect stability and order in the whirling flux of change are rhythms. There is ebb and flow, systole and diastole: ordered change. . . . The proportionate interception of changes establishes an order that is spatially, not merely temporally patterned: like the waves of the sea . . .
(*Art 22*)

This change, “a combination of movement and culmination, of breaks and re-unions,” makes aesthetic experience and its product, art, possible (*Art 22*). Experience, as Dewey tells us, “is the result, sign, and reward of that interaction of organism and the environment” (*Art 28*). When experience is fully developed and complete, it transforms interaction into participation and communication (*Art 28*). Art constitutes this communication.²¹ Art comes out of the “very processes of living,” and through form, art

²⁰Maintaining balance and stability not only falls to the individual but also results from a sharing of the ordered relations of a given environment (*Art 20*). As Dewey stipulates, culture also arises from interacting with the environment.

²¹Not all experience, however, leads to the aesthetic. Dewey is careful to note that you can have experience without having *an* experience (*Art 47*). He characterizes such experience as being “slack and discursive”: it can occur as an ongoing succession without a specific beginning or end, or it can occur as static and limited following a mechanical connection (*Art 47*). This second type of experience is often taken as the norm in a capitalist society which

makes clear the organization of time and space that is prefigured in a developing life-experience (*Art* 30).

Dewey argues that conditions that prevent experience from becoming complete or full inhibit the production of art. Such conditions include the impairment of the sense-organs or the application of binaries such as the “oppositions of mind and body, soul and matter, spirit and flesh” (*Art* 28). Other factors that narrow or dull life-experience equally inhibit the birth of art. The degree of completeness of an experience is what distinguishes art from other forms of experience. In addition, Dewey postulates that the difference between science and art is a matter of emphasis. The artist focuses on the process by which union and balance are achieved attempting to capture for “living consciousness an experience that is unified and whole” (*Art* 21). The scientist focuses on the problem that arises from imbalance seeking to solve the problem only to move on to the next. Dewey suggests that the distinctions between the activities of the artist and scientist are not as marked as popularly believed: “The odd notion that an artist does not think and a scientific inquirer does nothing else is the result of converting a difference of tempo and emphasis into a difference in kind” (*Art* 21). In addition, Dewey stipulates that science and art relate differently to the concept of knowledge. Science acts as a mode of knowledge rendering “things more intelligible by reduction to conceptual form” (*Art* 295). Aesthetic experience, art, is not a mode of knowledge, but rather transforms knowledge into something more by merging it with non-intellectual elements (*Art* 294).-

Dewey views experience as a “heightened vitality” which involves active interaction: “At its height it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events,” and it is not a matter of “one’s own private feelings and sensations” (*Art* 25). Dewey argues art, prior to the modernist call for art for art’s sake, was

relegates art to museums and galleries thereby separating it from the common life and placing on it an elevated cultural and monetary status (*Art* 13-14).

communal and played an important role in the organization of the community: he maintains that art is also a “remaking of the experience of the community in the direction of greater order and unity” (*Art* 87). Community, for Dewey, cannot exist except as a composition of individuals (*Art* 208). Most significantly, Dewey contends that a community of experience materializes when language is capable of breaking “down physical isolation and external contact” (*Art* 338). If art, as Dewey states, constitutes communication then it, of all the available languages, is the most universal. Art as language can connect us to other cultures and other individuals by enabling us to place ourselves in “modes of apprehending nature that are at first strange to us” and by re-orienting our own experience (*Art* 337). It has the power to dissolve barriers and melt prejudices more effectively than reason “because it enters directly into attitude” (*Art* 337), and it functions as a communication process that generates participation and “makes common what had been isolated and singular” (*Art* 248). Within this notion of art as communication, Dewey gives to literature a privileged position:

The expressions that constitute art are communication in its pure and undefiled form. Art breaks through barriers that divide human beings, which are impermeable in ordinary association. This force of art, common to all the arts, is most fully manifested in literature. Its medium is already formed by communication, something that can hardly be asserted of any other art. (*Art* 249)

Woolf also places experience at the very root of art. Woolf, however, rarely, uses the term “experience” as emphatically as Dewey. Her emphasis falls on “life” and a connection to “reality,”²² both of which, I suggest, are directly related to “experience.”

²² Woolf’s definition of reality is highly experiential:

What is meant by ‘reality’? It would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable -- now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper

Like Dewey, Woolf argues that art comes out of a fully lived experience, as she argues in *A Room of One's Own*: "I am asking you to live in the presence of reality, an invigorating life, it would appear, whether one can impart it or not" (*A Room* 118). When experience is thwarted by external conditions, when one cannot live in the presence of reality, art cannot be created. Woolf also suggests that binary oppositions are detrimental to the development of aesthetic experience. Woolf, however, goes beyond the mind/body, soul/matter, spirit/flesh of Dewey's oppositions to include that of male/female:

Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the art of creation can be accomplished. Some marriage of opposites has to be consummated. The whole of the mind must lie wide open if we are to get the sense that the writer is communicating his experience with perfect fullness. (*A Room* 112-13)

Through her notion of the androgynous mind, Woolf attempts to reconcile the gender binary. She argues that the strict division of the sexes interferes with the unity of the mind (*A Room* 104) that affects both men and women. Female artists, Woolf tells us, falter in their attempt to create art when they must react to negative conditions around them, whether it be a longing for more practical experience and the social intercourse with one's kind (as in the case of Charlotte Brontë (*A Room* 76)), a protest against the lot of women (as in the case of Margaret of Newcastle), or a deference for the opinion of others (as in the case of Dorothy Osborne and George Eliot (*A Room* 68, 77)). Male artists also fail to produce art when they, too, become overly conscious of their sex and create to

in the street, now a daffodil in the sun. It lights up a group in a room and stamps some casual saying. It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and makes the silent world more real than the world of speech -- and then there it is again in an omnibus in the uproar of Piccadilly. . . . But whatever it touches, it fixes and makes permanent. (*A Room* 118)

protest rather than to communicate life. The androgynous mind, according to Woolf, is not a sexless mind. Instead, it combines male and female with one predominating over the other, depending on the gender of the individual (*A Room* 106). While Woolf suggests that it is important to write as a woman or as a man, she claims that it is fatal to write only as one or the other. For the mind to become creative and incandescent, unity must be achieved (*A Room* 106).

A Room of One's Own was written as two lectures to be given at a women's college. As part of her rhetorical strategy, Woolf eschews the conventional lecture format and opts, instead, to present her ideas and "opinion" in the guise of fiction. Such a strategy exemplifies the notion that art not only comes out of experience but also is *an* experience. It transforms interaction into participation and communication (*Art* 28). A traditional lecture disseminates factual information (knowledge) in an authoritative manner, involving a speaker who addresses a passive audience, providing them with the "nugget of pure truth" (*A Room* 7). Fiction, however, requires participation. In using fiction, Woolf intends that her audience will play a more active and imaginative role in the production of meaning:

When a subject is highly controversial . . . one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. One can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker. Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact. . . . Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them; it is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping. (*A Room* 8)

Woolf strategically structures the text so that the audience must follow the speaker and, at least imaginatively, experience what she experiences. The strategy allows Woolf to communicate knowledge and, at the same time, go beyond it by combining it with

aesthetic elements. This process will have a more immediate and persuasive effect because it appeals directly to attitude and “occasions a wider and fuller experience” resulting in an expansion of “sympathies, imagination, and sense” (Dewey, *Art* 337).

By bringing together the aesthetic and intellectual (in Dewey’s terms) or fiction and fact (in Woolf’s terms), Woolf attempts to reconcile another binary opposition. Fact and fiction constantly work together in Woolf’s essay to create a broader understanding of the issue of women and writing. Fiction, however, predominates in *A Room of One’s Own*, as the female does in the “womanly-man” text. The story of Shakespeare’s fictional sister offers an apt illustration of how Woolf meshes together fiction and fact. Woolf poses a question often asked of women: if women are capable of creating art, why had they not produced outstanding works of art like those by Shakespeare (*A Room* 52)? Woolf answers this question by juxtaposing the social history of the conditions under which women lived in the Elizabethan period (provided by Professor Trevelyan) along side biographical information available on Shakespeare’s life. She then melds the two lines of inquiry together to create a fictional account of what would have happened had Shakespeare been born a woman. Woolf shows that a woman born in the sixteenth century could not have produced great works of art such as those written by Shakespeare. The social conditions of the time would have prevented any woman from garnering the experience necessary to create: “All the conditions of her life, all her own instincts, were hostile to the state of mind which is needed to set free whatever is in the brain” (*A Room* 57).

According to Woolf, the state of mind necessary to beget superb art is one of incandescence: “All desire to protest, to preach, to proclaim an injury, to pay off a score, to make the world the witness of some grievance . . . [must be] fired out . . . and consumed” (*A Room* 63). As Dewey reasons, art originates from fully developed and complete experience that is itself a result of active interaction with the environment (*Art* 28). When an individual, due to external conditions, is unable to live fully (“to mix in the

throng”), art is not possible. Individuals live fully when they grow, and they grow by responding to change and overcoming the resultant oppositions, crises, and imbalances. The artist, after all, is concerned with the process by which unity is achieved. Woolf shows through the juxtaposition of fiction and fact that the social conditions under which women lived have stunted their growth as intellectual beings and have made it difficult if not impossible for them to experience life fully and, therefore, to create art.

To facilitate the consummation of fiction and fact, Woolf uses comparison as the primary mode of argument and arrangement. In her work, however, comparison does not act as a means of measurement or evaluation, functions that Perelman suggests are inherent in this mode of argument (Perelman 242). Instead, the comparisons illustrate, without being didactic or remonstrative, the disparity that exists in given situations; they suggest, in the process, the cause for women’s lack of artistic production. Woolf’s strategy consists of “laying together many varieties of error” (*A Room* 113). The comparisons also contribute to audience participation, since the audience must make additions and deductions throughout the essay: the audience must, in other words, experience the text (*A Room* 113). Some comparisons are implicit in nature: the reader must fill in the contrasting scenario. Others more directly lay images and facts side by side.

The first chapter in *A Room of One’s Own*, for example, presents a sequence of events experienced by the fictional narrator. The events illustrate, through comparison, the disparity between male and female encounters with the environment. The disparity in these encounters reveals the detrimental effects certain conditions have on women’s aesthetic and intellectual abilities. The first two are largely implicit comparisons; they depend on the reader to imagine a similar scenario with a male protagonist. The third is more direct and relies on a juxtaposition of scenes. The first fictional account opens with the narrator sitting by a river at Oxbridge (an amalgamation of Oxford and Cambridge) contemplating the subject of her speech. Woolf represents the act of invention through a

fishing metaphor: thought lowers a line beneath the reflective surface, until an idea tugs at the line. Once caught, the idea creates such excitement that the narrator does not pay attention to what she is doing. As she contemplates the resulting “tumult of ideas,” she is interrupted by a man, a beadle, who enforces the rule that a woman is not allowed to walk on the grass (*A Room* 9-10). Although a seemingly minor incident, the implications which arise from it are profound. Such rules of convention which attempt to restrict the freedom of one sex but not the other (Fellows and Scholars are allowed to walk where they like) interrupt the artist’s process of invention: “The only charge I could bring against the Fellows and Scholars of whatever the college might happen to be was that in protection of their turf, which has been rolled for 300 years in succession they had sent my little fish into hiding” (*A Room* 10). A similar pattern ensues when the narrator, once again lost in thought, attempts to enter the library and is blocked by a man who again insists on convention: “ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction” (*A Room* 12). Women, unlike men, do not possess the “liberty to settle down upon whatever meditation was in harmony with the moment” (*A Room* 10). The Oxbridge environment designed to facilitate the contemplations and intellectual pursuits of men excludes women and, in the process, hampers their intellectual pursuits.

Woolf’s direct comparisons provide a much sharper perspective on the disparity between the environments of men and women, and often reveal the conflict and tension which characterizes such division: “These two pictures, disjointed and disconnected and nonsensical as they were, were for ever coming together and combating each other” (*A Room* 24). Through the juxtaposition of a lunch at the male university, Oxbridge, with a dinner at the female college, Fernham, we see how material conditions affect the artist’s experience of life and her ability to contemplate that experience. At Oxbridge, the lunch is elaborate and sumptuous consisting of rich dishes made from the finest and freshest ingredients (*A Room* 15). At Fernham, the dinner is plain and austere consisting of “a

plain gravy soup” followed by “beef with its attendant greens and potatoes -- a homely trinity, suggesting the rumps of cattle in a muddy market, and sprouts curled and yellowed at the edge” (22) with prunes and custard for desert. At Oxbridge the fine wine flows freely, but at Fernham there is only a jug of water.

The effects of the meals on the intellect are equally different. The luncheon produces a “subtle and subterranean glow” lit “half-way down the spine, which is the seat of the soul” and which, leaving the individual free from external concerns, grudges, and grievances, leads to uninhibited “rational intercourse” and contemplation: “No need to be anybody but oneself. We are all going to heaven and Vandyck is of the company -- in other words, how good life seemed” (*A Room* 15). After the dinner at Fernham, however, the conversation flags, and the “lamp of the spine does not light”: the narrator concludes, “a good dinner is of great importance to good talk. One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well. . . . We are all *probably* going to heaven, and Vandyck is, we *hope*, to meet us around the next corner” (*A Room* 23). The emphasis Woolf places on the qualifying and indefinite terms, “probably” and “hope”, draws attention to the incompleteness of the experience. The sense of fully lived experience so prevalent in one image seems almost completely absent in the other. Woolf, however, does not hold up one as ideal and the other as regrettable. In the recounting of the first scene, Woolf makes it clear that balance has not been achieved: tension and a lack exists (*A Room* 16). Without a reconciliation of the masculine and the feminine, the experience encapsulated in the Oxbridge scene, although more conducive to contemplation and the free flow of thought, remains incomplete.

We should not mistakenly believe that for Woolf a good meal is all that is needed for the production of art. The good meal stands in for a whole array of material and aesthetic concerns. Thus, the chapter ends with the narrator inquiring into the causes for the differences between the two universities: why had women not provided the financial support for their daughters as the men had historically done for their sons? The answer

reveals the complexity of the differing situations, for economic conditions cannot be held solely accountable: they connect into other conditions produced by social convention and tradition.

Woolf structures her essay as an exploration into the disparities that stunt the creative impulses in women. Woolf moves through a series of imbalances created between women and the environment at different historical periods formulating, in the process, the required conditions for producing art and suggesting how women might overcome the imbalances. The first chapter reveals the effect of economics and social convention on women. The second focuses on the effect of prescription and opinion enforced by authority on women's ability to think freely. The third and fourth chapters examine the lack of a tradition and the social conditions women have contended with throughout history and the effects these conditions had on women's ability to produce art. The fifth deals with the narrator's own time period and reflects on what the emerging art of women might be like when conditions for women change to become more conducive to the production of art. The last chapter provides a summary of all that has come before and directly names what is necessary to enable women to create great art. They must think of things as they are, be themselves, and write what they wish regardless of opinion and convention. To do this, they must have the material means for creating the conditions necessary for garnering the experience required to produce art:

Intellectual freedom depends upon material things. Poetry depends upon intellectual freedom. And women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time. Women have had less intellectual freedom than the sons of Athenian slaves. Women, then, have not had a dog's chance of writing poetry. That is why I have laid so much stress on money and a room of one's own. . . . By hook or by crook, I hope you will possess yourselves of money enough to travel and to idle, to contemplate the future or the past of the world, to dream over books

and loiter at street corners and let the line of thought dip deep into the stream. (*A Room* 117)

Ultimately, Woolf's essay deals with more than the rights of women or even with the conditions necessary for art. In essence, *A Room of One's Own* centers on the act of invention. By joining together fiction and fact, the aesthetic and the intellectual, Woolf tells her audience what is required to produce any work of thought whether it is art, history, criticism, philosophy, or science (*A Room* 118). The narrator's material for her speech comes from imagination, contemplation, and research, but mostly it emerges from a combination of these mixed with experience. The sources for the *loci communes* in the essay are the writer's everyday experiences, walking across a university lawn, eating lunch and dinner, visiting the British Museum, paying for lunch in a cafe with a ten-shilling note, or looking out a window watching a man and a woman getting into a cab. As Woolf states at the beginning of her essay, "I pondered it [the subject of the speech], and made it work in and out of my daily life" (*A Room* 8). To create a work of value, aesthetic or intellectual, women, then, must look to the "world of reality" (*A Room* 123). They must live fully and have open to them all varieties of experience without which no one, man or woman, can create exceptional intellectual or artistic work.

While *A Room of One's Own* deals with the relation between the aesthetic and experience, Woolf's *Three Guineas* deals with the role of experience in the non-aesthetic. Written almost ten years after *A Room of One's Own*, *Three Guineas* forms a counterpart to the earlier essay. It uses many of the same rhetorical strategies but differs in several important ways. While fact and fiction still work together, in *Three Guineas* fact predominates. The audience for each text also differs. While in *A Room of One's Own* the audience is clearly female,²³ in *Three Guineas* the audience is constructed primarily as an

²³*A Room of One's Own* was originally written as a lecture for a women's college.

The "you" of the text is constructed as female -- "Are there no men present? Do you

older male: “You, then, who ask the question, are a little grey on the temples . . . And without wishing to flatter you, your prosperity - wife, children, house - has been deserved” (*TG* 5-6). However, the fictional frame²⁴ allows Woolf occasionally to shift the audience to female.

Three Guineas also has a seemingly different purpose. Where *A Room of One's Own* examined the conditions that make great aesthetic and intellectual works possible, *Three Guineas* looks at the conditions that make peace possible. Although the goals differ, the conclusions are very similar. Like its predecessor, *Three Guineas* emphasizes the need for independence and material well being for women. It suggests that women must earn enough to acquire educations and professions that will allow them to exercise disinterested influence; women must write what they want not what others command them to write; they must eschew fame and praise; and they must remain free from unreal loyalties. Similar conclusions can be reached by each essay because, for Woolf, art and peace share an essential characteristic. Like Dewey, Woolf believes that art could break through the barriers that separate human beings from one another. In *Three Guineas* she represents this belief through the voices of poets “assuring us of a unity that rubs out

promise me that behind that red curtain over there the figure of Sir Charles Biron is not concealed? We are all women you assure me?” (*A Room* 88-89).

²⁴The fictional frame consists of a series of letters to which the narrator replies. The first and most significant is a request from a man for assistance in preventing war. It asks the narrator to sign a letter to the newspaper, to join a society for the prevention of war, and to donate money. The second is a request from a woman for a donation to rebuild a women's college, and the third is also a request from a woman for a donation for “a society to help the daughters of educated men obtain employment in the professions” (*TG* 48). Woolf shifts her discourse, occasionally, to address the women in the last two letters.

divisions as if they were chalk marks only” (TG 163). Both art and peace are characterized by “the capacity of the human spirit to over flow boundaries and make unity out of multiplicity” (TG 163). On the question of how art achieves such a unity, however, Woolf’s view differs substantially from that of Dewey’s. Dewey argues that art achieves a melting of barriers partly because it functions as an extension of the rites and ceremonies of men (*Art* 275). Woolf views the rites and ceremonies of men as a source of division and conflict. She argues that educated men, in the public realm, use rites and ceremonies to establish rank and superiority over other people. Such acts and customs create competition and jealousy which “share in encouraging a disposition towards war” (TG 26).

A difference of views between men and women forms the basis of Woolf’s discussion in *Three Guineas*. Like its predecessor, *Three Guineas* uses comparison as its primary mode of argumentation. However, because the comparisons rely on fact, they perform a different function. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf uses comparison not only to reveal the disparity between men’s and women’s experience in society, but also to expose the hypocrisy behind engrained assumptions of consubstantiality and division that run through patriarchy. In other words, she shows how what is accepted as similar (shared experience) is, in fact, different (not shared), and how what is taken as different is, in fact, similar.

In the first chapter, Woolf draws attention to a mistaken assumption about consubstantiality by addressing the appeal made to educated women in the letter requesting support for the prevention of war. The fictional letter assumes the audience, being from the same class, will share the same values, concerns, and experiences, and the audience will want to protect the cultural and intellectual freedom of England just as its male writer does. By once again comparing the conditions under which educated men live with those under which women from the same class live, Woolf shows that the similarities needed to establish common ground between the two are superficial. And she

reveals how the experiences of the two groups put them at odds with one another. Woolf, for example, notes that being of the same class, they will speak with the same accent, use knives and forks in the same way, have maids to do housework, and can talk together at dinner over a variety of topics (*TG* 6). But the differences go deeper: women of the educated class do not possess the same rights and freedoms as their male counterparts. Most of the resources for education are allocated to males, with only a pittance going to women. While men have full access to the professions, women are granted only limited access and, then, are paid a fraction of what the men receive. Through the law, men inherit and acquire property and wealth while the women have only a dependent status. Under the shadow of such discrimination, Woolf argues that the two groups will not experience the world in the same way: “and the result is that though we look at the same things, we see them differently” (*TG* 7). Through an explication of facts, Woolf illustrates that educated men have used both opinion and force to deny women rights. She uses an implicit comparison when she describes women’s struggle for rights as battles (74). The war metaphor implicates the very men who seek the prevention of war in its instigation, and it constructs these men not as peace loving but as just the opposite. They become “possessive” and “jealous”; they “encamp” to prevent the entrance of women into education and the professions, and by so doing they ‘waste’ the strength, time, and money of women (*TG* 76-77): “nothing would induce the authorities encamped within the sacred gates to allow the women to enter. -They said that God was on their side, Nature was on their side, Law was on their side, and Property was on their side. . . . As usual it was asked, ought we to attack now, or is it wiser to wait? Who are our friends and who are our enemies” (*TG* 76).

This transformation, where educated men become consubstantial with the very thing they declare they are different from, becomes most apparent in Woolf’s more direct comparisons. In these comparisons, Woolf juxtaposes the statements and actions regarding women by the freedom-defending men of England with those by the German

and Italian dictators, Hitler and Mussolini²⁵. The close similarities suggest that the differences between the two are only superficial, while at a deeper level the two are, in fact, consubstantial. After comparing a newspaper quotation concerning the status of women by an English male to one of Hitler's, Woolf asks, "But where is the difference? Are they not both saying the same thing" (*TG* 62). In their attempts to deny women rights, the men become consubstantial with their 'enemy of freedom'. Indeed, in Woolf's text the issue of consubstantiality becomes of primary importance. The fictional letter's final request, to join a society, constitutes an appeal for identification that Woolf rejects. The differences are too great, and, according to her, they are too desirable because women's differences make possible an alternative, less destructive, approach to life. To identify with men or patriarchal society would require that women follow the same patterns and become like men:

It seems both wrong for us rationally and impossible for us emotionally to . . . join your society. For by so doing we should merge our identity in yours; follow and repeat and score still deeper the old worn ruts in which society, like a gramophone whose needle has stuck, is grinding out with intolerable unanimity 'Three hundred millions spent upon arms.' We should not give effect to a view which our own experience of 'society' should have helped us to envisage. (*TG* 121-2)

²⁵"Let us quote again: 'Homes are the real places of the women who are now compelling men to be idle. It is time the government insisted upon employers giving work to more men, thus enabling them to marry the women they cannot now approach.' Place beside it another quotation: 'There are two worlds in the life of the nation, the world of men and the world of women. Nature has done well to entrust the man with the care of his family and the nation. The woman's world is her family, her husband, her children, and her home.' One is written in English, the other in German." (*TG* 62)

Woolf does allow her audience an alternative means of identification. Rather than having the women identify with men, men are asked to identify with the society of women, an option presented through comparison. And here, too, men face the possibility of becoming consubstantial with something they view as different from themselves: feminists. Moreover, the point of consubstantiality for men and women actually becomes their beliefs about dictatorship. For, instead of carrying out this role themselves, Woolf's male audience now finds itself experiencing dictatorship and tyranny: "You are feeling in your own persons what your mothers felt when they were shut out, when they were shut up, because they were women" (*TG* 118). Woolf suggests that this experience offers the opportunity for identification since the men and women are now fighting for the same thing: freedom from tyranny and the right to intellectual liberty. Hence, the feminism to which men have been so adamantly opposed becomes "the advanced guard of your own movement" (*TG* 118). Given that it was a time of war and given the strong emotions that Woolf identified in her audience, it was unlikely that her audience, at the time, would have accepted this avenue for consubstantiality. Many of her critics, in fact, rejected the connection Woolf made between the issue of women's rights and Fascism:

Criticism of *Three Guineas*, which has shown marked symptoms of alarm, used words like 'silly' (Maynard Keynes), 'odd' (Quentin Bell), 'muddled... neither sober nor rational' (Nigel Nicolson) and 'self-indulgent--preposterous--ill informed--irresponsible' (Queenie Leavis, in full spate)... The idea that the position of women in England, rather than the threat of Fascism in Europe, could be a major topic in 1938 was considered frivolous. (Lee xv-xvi)

Identification, however, becomes possible through a more subtle and, therefore, persuasive means: form.

The predominance of fact in *Three Guineas*, and the structure that ensues, offers form as another point of consubstantiality. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf suggests

that since women's creative powers differ from those of men, so too would their writing (95). In other words, women's texts may take on forms that differ from the traditionally more masculine ones. *A Room of One's Own* presents what could be deemed "woman-manly" writing. *Three Guineas*, on the other hand, is more "man-womanly," as it follows a more traditional essay or lecture pattern. Throughout *Three Guineas*, Woolf repeats a rhetorical pattern based on a standard model of reasoning: a request is made; the request poses a problem and raises questions; the questions are then explored by examining existing opinion based on authority; this often produces misleading conclusions; the questionable conclusions are then examined in relation to fact or reality; and another conclusion is reached. A constant appeal to facts in *Three Guineas* forms the cornerstone of this approach that relies heavily upon proof. Facts are taken from history, biography, reference books, and newspapers and are presented through quotations, examples, and statistics. Woolf continually admonishes her readers to "face facts," "return to facts," and "consider facts." If educated men value objectivity and reason, then Woolf speaks to her audience in their language and in a form most familiar to them. In this discourse, experience is offered as another means of proof or verification.

The term "experience" appears more often in *Three Guineas* than it does in *A Room of One's Own* where "life" and "reality" invoke it. In *Three Guineas*, when its use applies to the male audience, "experience" appeals to "common knowledge" to invoke consent. Thus, Woolf prompts her audience with phrases such as "you will admit from your own experience" (TG 20), and "you know from your own experience" (TG 72). When applied to women, the term, although performing a similar function, at first highlights a disparity. For women, experience constitutes only a constricted source of knowledge, for it is "So narrow, so circumscribed" that an "answer based upon our experience . . . is not an answer of any value" (TG 9). However, near the end of *Three Guineas*, after Woolf has revealed the hypocrisy of patriarchy, experience as it relates to women becomes a source for an alternative "common knowledge": "the educated man's

daughter can testify from her own experience” (*TG* 146), and it is from that testimony that a new view of society can be envisaged (*TG* 122).

However, the fictional framework of *Three Guineas* ensures that the intimate connection of experience to ‘everyday’ reality is not lost. Descriptions of women’s lives and the narrator’s actions (responding to a letter received in the mail, and looking at pictures in the newspaper) bring experience to the forefront. In her discussion of the differences between middle-class men and women, for example, Woolf illustrates how everyday items reflect one’s view of the world: “so magically does it [Arthur’s Education Fund] change the landscape that the noble courts and quadrangles of Oxford and Cambridge often appear to educated men’s daughters like petticoats with holes in them, cold legs of mutton, and the boat train starting abroad while the guard slams the door in their faces” (*TG* 8). Woolf’s use of facts also remains closely tied to ‘everyday’ experience: the sources that Woolf favors are biography, daily newspapers, and history.

In Woolf’s feminist terministic screen, the term “experience” takes a central position while the other two terms, “woman” and “rhetoric,” once again undergo transformation. Clearly, Woolf’s discourse cannot do without the term “woman.” But, unlike Wollstonecraft, Woolf is not concerned with recalibrating the term. She attempts to combine it with the term “man” not as an oppositional binary but as a metamorphic, hermaphroditic term marked by difference but not defining difference. The term “rhetoric”, however, seems to undergo displacement. It becomes a form of persuasion that does not communicate rather than one that deceives.²⁶ Although Woolf is attempting to persuade her audience, she frequently reiterates that there is no need for rhetoric, as though it were not a part of the persuasive process.

²⁶As the following lines indicate: “to attend a meeting where pacific opinions are more or less rhetorically reiterated to people who already believe in them is also easy” (*TG* 14); “This would seem . . . a simple matter, and one that needs neither argument nor rhetoric” (103).

But clearly, the four primary texts discussed here need rhetoric and make use of rhetoric to argue for the rights of women. To conclude, “experience” plays a central role in both the arguments and the rhetorical strategies of each author. For Chaucer’s fictional Wife of Bath, “experience” refers to knowledge and skills gathered through past events (i.e. the trials and tribulations of marriage), but it is not the ‘standardized ways of action’ or ‘body of beliefs’ identified by Aristotle. The Wife’s actions and beliefs are anything but standardized. Instead, her experience and her rhetoric contest knowledge based on authority alone and insist “that authority make itself accountable to the realities of experience” (Carruthers 209). Her challenge is persuasive because the Wife demonstrates expertise. Through her experience, the character exhibits knowledge of ecclesiastical writings and of the deportment and courtesy books and demonstrates a familiarity with interpretive practices. More significantly, the Wife’s knowledge is not limited to the abstract. She possesses hands-on experience in marriage, trade, and travel. Her success in these ventures lends weight to her claim to know. The proof of her experience is more immediate to her audience because it is not based on authority, nor is it a matter of a single trial or test. The Wife’s experience comes out of practice and it is tried and tested many times.

For Wollstonecraft, “experience” refers to ‘observations proceeding from the senses’ and forms the material for reason and knowledge. Reason as a form of reflection (the perception of the operations of our mind) is itself a kind of experience, but it is a ‘kind’ that is essential for accessing knowledge. Wollstonecraft focuses her rhetorical strategies on claiming reason as part of a woman’s domain. She does this by appealing not to “women’s experience” but rather to the experience of her audience as ‘men of reason.’ If these men are to remain true to the principles of their accepted philosophy, they must reject arguments that claim that women are innately inferior or innately incapable of reason. They must permit such assumptions to be subject to proof as Wollstonecraft does. She does not deny what men might observe about the character of

women, but she seeks the cause and locates the reason for women's condition in men's failure to follow the dictates of right reason. Women lack reason because men have given into their own desires to be deceived and their own passions. They have subjugated women so that they might have playthings for their own pleasure. To live true to their principles, men must grant women the right to develop the faculty of reason. And to develop that faculty, Wollstonecraft argues, women must have the ultimate right: they must have access to all experience.

For Woolf, "experience" refers to a heightened (fully lived) interaction with the environment. Like Wollstonecraft, Woolf seeks to claim as woman's right the access to all experience which is essential not for creating modes of knowledge but for communicating knowledge.²⁷ Art constitutes such an act of communication. Woolf, unlike Wollstonecraft, argues for access to knowledge and the aesthetic by appealing to

²⁷ With "experience" at the center and "man" and "woman" combined, Woolf's terministic screen also alters our conceptualization of knowledge. At first Woolf's notion of knowledge appears to match Locke's. Her emphasis on seeing 'things as they are' and on experience as the source for knowledge invokes some of Locke's main premises. But Woolf's construction of knowledge differs. Knowledge, for Woolf, is not a product. Instead, it appears to be a process which combines modes of knowledge (fact) with aesthetic elements (art) to produce communication. In other words, knowledge is a process of communication which leads to understanding by appealing not simply to our reason but also to our attitudes. A process which contains invention, proof, fact, and fiction. Such a notion of knowledge breaks down the division of knowledge into ranked kinds (knowledge from experience vs knowledge from ideal forms or authority) and undermines the binary opposition of subjectivity and objectivity.

women's experience. Her appeal marks and exposes the differences between men and women. Woolf questions assumptions about women's lack of artistic ability and their consubstantiality with men. Woolf seeks to break women's identification with men by pointing out that although women may share the same class status, they do not share the benefits or the rights of that class. Whereas Wollstonecraft argued that men have denied women reason, Woolf argues that men deny women experience. Men use economic and social convention, tradition, and authority to keep from women the material well being necessary for fully lived experience and intellectual freedom. In other words, men create disparities between women and their environment so women must struggle with the mundane and are unable to live independently and to interact freely with the world around them. In appealing to women's experience, Woolf suggests that the oppression women face is systemic. While she argues that women must have the same rights as men, she does not argue that women should be the same as men. In breaking women's identification with men, Woolf also attempts to break their (and men's) identification with a particular system (patriarchy). This system relies on hierarchy and binaries such as male/female and fact/fiction to maintain and enforce power structures. Such a system, Woolf suggests in *Three Guineas*, will always be exploitative and, ultimately, destructive. Woolf's final argument is that women use their different experience to create alternative values and, eventually, an alternative society.

The texts of Chaucer, Wollstonecraft, and Woolf, reveal the connection between the terms "experience," "woman" and "rhetoric," and the effect these terms have when associated or disassociated with other terms such as "man," "knowledge," "truth," and "reality." How terms are arranged in any given terministic screen affects how individuals will perceive their world and the degree of power they will be granted, because the arrangement and selection of terms determines how knowledge will be constructed and who will have access to it. In their attempts to challenge or change the social systems around them, the three authors inevitably resort to "experience" as the site of

transformation. In the changing constellation of terms, the link between “experience” and “woman,” and the casting out of the term “rhetoric,” but not its practice, has proved valuable in changing the relationship between women and knowledge and, thereby, changing the relationship between women and power in society. Given that the rhetoric of “experience” has played such a powerful role in the discourses of liberation, it is surprising that in the contemporary period many feminist theorists seek to cast this term out. The next chapter examines the struggle between contemporary feminists as they seek to establish feminist theories of criticism and as they attempt to put those theories into practice. It examines the nature of the critical moment (the point at which a group forms its own critical theory), and the role “experience” plays in that moment. It also looks at the debates that ensue after the critical moment is enacted.

Chapter Three
Same Difference:
Manifestations of “Experience” in Contemporary Feminist Discourse

“Experience,” as we have seen in chapter one, has become a bone of contention among feminist theorists. Some feminists work with the term “experience” and view it as central to the feminist enterprise. Other feminists appear to cast out the term while moving it into a new terministic screen that constitutes their preferred theoretical framework. Literary criticism, working as it does from theory, is not immune to this clashing of frameworks, but within literary critical discourse the struggle over the value of “experience” occurs at a different and equally crucial point: this is the point where gender, race, and class intersect, literary history emerges, and a literary canon is articulated.

Within the formation of a literary history, the positioning of experience goes beyond a question of theory and becomes, for many, a question of survival. Experience, its expression in language, its reification in the discursive practices of a culture, constitutes the very basis for existence in terms of a group’s history and identity: “Stories structure the meanings by which a culture lives,” and translate private experience into public and shared experience (Cohen and Shires 1). Speaking of Native literature, for example, Jeannette Armstrong writes: “There is indeed a canon of literature that is there, that has always been there, and will continue to be there. It is central and integral to our survival as a people. It is central and integral in terms of our resistance to the continuing onslaught of colonization, which erodes our communities and damages our people” (33). In a similar vein, Barbara Christian writes about her studies of black women writers:

The sustenance I received during those years of writing *Black Women Novelists* came not from the academic/literary world but from small groups of women in bookstores, Y’s, in my classes and writer’s groups for whom

this literature was not so much an object of study but was, as it is for me, life-saving. ("What Do We Think" 64)

The articulation of experience in terms of the construction of a literary history occurs in its strongest manifestation at the 'critical moment' of canon formation. The term "critical," here refers to both the act of criticism and the degree of necessity and significance of that act. In this chapter, I examine the role of "experience" at the critical moment--the point at which a literary theory arises, for this is the point at which the principles for articulating, understanding, and examining a new canon are formed. But this analysis would be incomplete without an examination of the "fallout" that occurs when "experience" is brought into play as a foundational precursor to a literary history and as a mode of feminist theorizing.

At the critical moment, "experience" takes on a titular function: it becomes the ground on which a new group identity is defined, established, and named; it becomes the means by which the group distinguishes itself from others. At this moment, "experience" also takes on a both/and quality, operating both as a site of difference and a site of sameness. Generally, at the critical moment, the new group (or its proponents) will emphasize division and difference in the attempt to separate themselves from the discursive and cultural images and practices of the dominant social group. Those who seek to challenge, or add to the "new critical theory" that arises from the critical moment emphasize sameness, characterizing it as a negative and problematic component which must be altered and even eliminated

The Role of Critical Theory

Creating a “new”¹ canon is not simply a matter of getting books published (although this is obviously an essential, and often difficult, first step). Preservation is also necessary for the establishment of a canon. The process that deems a book worthy of preservation is complex and requires an institutionalized reification and reproduction of literary works. Here, literary criticism comes into play. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith points out, assigning value to a literary work requires a broad range of “forms of practice” which in turn are dependent on context and intended audience. Of these “forms of practice,” academic criticism functions as one of the most significant in the dissemination, evaluation, and preservation of literary texts: it constitutes an essential agent in canon formation. As Herrnstein Smith notes, academic interest in a work makes “it more likely both that the work will be experienced at all and also that it will be experienced as valuable” (29). Or as Barbara Smith states, “for books to be real and remembered they have to be talked about” (*Brave* 159).

Critical theories may not only determine how we will experience a text but also determine if and how we will see and respond to the experiences, discursive or otherwise, represented in the text. Culture consists of “webs of significance which we ourselves have made and in which we are suspended,” as such it functions, as Clifford Geertz tells us, as “a set of control mechanisms . . . for the governing of behavior” (Geertz, 44). Literary criticism is one of these control mechanisms. It not only governs our behavior toward a text, determining what patterns of meaning we will look for and find, but it also controls our behavior by legitimating or delegitimizing, by making visible or invisible, by making meaningful or meaningless, the myriad experiences articulated in a text.

¹The literatures, of which I speak, are never really “new,” as they tend to have a long history. What is new is that they speak of themselves as canons and demand their place next to or within the canon of the dominant group.

To understand how criticism assigns value and the source of that value, we must understand the role of literature in our lives. As Burke recognizes, literature is “equipment for living” (*Philosophy*, 293). Accordingly, literature constitutes strategies for dealing with situations in a given social structure (*Philosophy*, 297). In *Counter-statement*, Burke argues that experience arises from the interaction between an organism and its environment. While there is no one-to-one correlation between a situation and an experience (e.g., lack of physical support does not always produce fear: it can produce exhilaration (150)), the adjustment an organism makes as a result of experience will depend on the environmental conditions. Given certain conditions, some experiences will be more relevant than others. Over time, selections of what is relevant experience become patterns of experience. And once patterns exist, they become creative: they are transferred and applied to other environmental situations (152). Once established, patterns tend to remake the world in their own image. A particular plot, for example, becomes a symbol that is a “verbal parallel” to a pattern of experience. When a symbol is invoked so are certain patterns of experience.² Burke goes on to suggest that a symbol has the most power when it accords closely to the reader’s pattern of experience, but he also notes that through the authority granted to them, symbols may force patterns on to readers. Burke’s argument highlights the close connection between experience and literature. We translate the product of our interaction with environment into plots that become symbols that, in turn, help us to select how we will respond to certain environmental conditions. But what happens when the dominant social discursive practices do not recognize certain patterns of experience? What happens when appeals to a given set of symbols ask that a particular group interpret its situation according to a

² Of course, Burke recognizes the complexity of symbols and acknowledges here too that there is no one-to-one correlation between a symbol and a pattern of experience. Different symbols can be used for the same pattern.

pattern of experience foreign to that group? To change the symbols that direct individuals on how they might respond to situations in their environment, a group must access the mechanisms by which symbols are selected and reified.

In rhetorical terms, theories of criticism function as terministic screens. Through a particular choice of terminology, theories of criticism reflect, select, and deflect notions of reality by selecting and reifying certain symbols. As noted in the introduction, “much that we take as observations about ‘reality’ may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms” (Burke, *On Symbols* 116). We can restate this to say that many of our observations about literature may be but a spinning out of the possibilities implicit in the terms that make up the critical framework. The recognition of this ability of criticism to direct our attention and to colour the reality (whether constructed or reflected) encompassing and encompassed by literary texts has been a key motivating factor in the development of alternative literary criticism. Literature comes out of experience and, in turn, patterns and gives meaning to our experience. Controlling what is defined as “Literature” allows for the validation or negation of experience and determines which patterns of experience will be normalized.

Barbara Smith begins her pivotal 1977 article “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” by noting that “all segments of the literary world . . . do not know, or at least act as if they do not know, that Black women writers and Black lesbian writers exist” (157). Smith proceeds to analyze numerous examples of how critics have “misunderstood” and, as a result, “destroyed” books by black women. She concludes the first part of her essay: “A convincing case for Black feminist criticism can obviously be built solely upon the basis of the negativity of what already exists” (163). She chooses, however, to emphasize the positive and affirm the potential of criticism: “It is far more gratifying, however, to demonstrate its necessity by showing how it [black feminist criticism] can serve to reveal for the first time the profound subtleties of this particular body of literature” (Brave, 163). Similarly, Adrienne Rich begins the 1982 foreword to

her 1980 essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence": "[The essay] was written in part to challenge the erasure of lesbian existence from so much of scholarly feminist literature, an erasure which I felt (and feel) to be not just anti-lesbian, but anti-feminist in its consequences" (*Forward* 227).

More recently, Native women writers have expressed their recognition of the erasing and distorting power of critical perspectives. In "Native Literature: Seeking a Critical Center," Kimberly M. Blaeser writes that "The insistence on reading Native literature by way of Western literary theory clearly violates its integrity and performs a new act of colonization and conquest" (55). In "Post Halfbreed: Indigenous Writers as Authors of Their Own Realities," Janice Acoose comments on how writing by non-Indigenous writers has perpetuated negative stereotypical images of Native women: "Many . . . contemporary Indigenous writers challenge Non-Indigenous writers' ways of seeing and subsequently writing about Indigenous women. Contemporary Indigenous writers positively and knowledgeably construct aspects of their cultures that have been previously misrepresented by outsiders who knew little about the cultures about which they wrote" (31).

By identifying the biased selection, skewed deflection, and distorted reflection of existing critical theory, those who seek to establish an alternative canon begin the process of creating their own critical theories. They take control over the discursive construction of their identity and reality by selecting symbols which emphasize or accord closely with their own patterns of experience. The refusal to accept the theories of others, and the subsequent notions of reality these theories entail, constitutes the first step in the articulation of a criticism of one's own. This first step is the critical moment of canon formation.

Three Critical Moments

Although each of the three critical moments of canon formation I examine manifest themselves differently, together they share some commonalities: each is a rhetorical act of definition; each moves to a hortative strategy by stating principles that will direct the criticism and the selection process it produces; and each relies on “experience” as its central term. The act of definition, and here I turn once again to Burke, involves designating “what some thing or agent intrinsically is” (*Grammar*, 21) and identifying a thing’s or agent’s sub-stance: that which “stands beneath or supports the person or thing” (*Grammar*, 22). To accomplish this, definitions must also refer to that which a thing or agent is not, to something outside of the thing or agent. In Burke’s words, “to *define*, or *determine* a thing, is to mark its boundaries, hence to use terms that possess, implicitly at least, contextual reference” (*Grammar*, 24).

For black women’s writing the critical moment is generally acknowledged to have occurred in the 1970s. It begins with Alice Walker’s essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” (1974), but reaches its fruition with the work of Barbara Smith. Alice Walker “posits a theory of black female creativity and defines a tradition of black women’s art in which she can locate her own” (Wall, 5). Walker identifies the intrinsic nature of black women’s creativity as being “spiritual, intense, deep, and unconscious” (2374). The substance of this creativity and tradition is heavily experiential, presented to us in detailed descriptions of black women’s responses to the conditions and environment under slavery and oppression. Walker effectively presents the portrait of the artist as a young black woman. The story characterizes creativity as an inherited gift and tells of a pattern of experience that up until the 1970s was not recognized or expressed in the stories told by the dominant white culture. The patterns of experience reflect not the experience of expressing creativity but the experience of possessing talent that is thwarted, oppressed, and prevented from developing in typical ways. Walker suggests that black women in the eighteenth century did not have “proper channels” open for the

expression of their art. No symbols (plots) suggested how they might even begin. Instead, what was available to black women were the symbols of the dominant discourse: “Matriarchs,” “Superwomen,” “Mean and Evil Bitches,” “Castraters,” and “Sapphire’s Mama” (2318). They did not have open to them symbols that represented them as painters, sculptors, or writers.

Walker’s essay tells the story and highlights the pattern of experience prevalent among black women in early America--those who had to wait for “the unknown thing that was in them . . . to be made known” (2316). But Walker also tells of a less prevalent pattern of experience--black women expressing themselves in the material they had available. Walker also presents her own experiences of discovering the artistic expressions of black women in alternative forms such as a quilt made by an anonymous black woman and seen in the Smithsonian by Walker and the flower garden created by Walker’s mother. Walker’s essay is significant for what it identifies as having been made invisible and unknown--black women’s creativity.

The critical moment for black women’s writing, however, really comes into being with Barbara Smith’s “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism.” Smith acknowledges Walker’s work but attempts to go beyond it by identifying patterns of experience to create a criticism which will select and value the symbols that accord most closely with black women’s experience. Smith’s article focuses not so much on “what is” but more on what Burke calls a hortative “thou shall” strategy. Smith directs black feminist critics on what they can do to ensure the valuation of black women’s writing (163-164). She suggests, for example, that the black feminist critic explore how sexual and racial politics, and black and female identity, are inextricable elements in black women’s writing. The critic will assume that there is a black women’s literary tradition, and she will recognize the common approaches manifested in black women’s writing. But as Smith exhorts, she also indicates what she considers intrinsic to black women’s writing--the material that will give meaning to and pattern black women’s experience: it is by and about black women; it

encompasses the politics of sex, race, and class; and it provides essential insights into black female experience. Black women's writing is not necessarily black literature, a category often used in terms of a black male tradition which does not recognize the implications of sexual politics, nor is it simply women's literature, for this category often refers to the work of white women authors while ignoring the implications of racial politics.

Smith's substance for her definition also comes largely from appeals to experience. With reference to Alice Walker's essay, she appeals to the historical experiences of black women in America. She appeals to the experience of women writers and scholars when contending with the bias of reviewers or colleagues who deem black women's writing insignificant. She also appeals to her own experience as a reader of black women's literature, expressing her anger at the lack of space and time given to black women's writing by mainstream publications. Most significantly, she records and articulates the effect black women's writing can have on her life:

I finally want to express how much easier both my waking and my sleeping hours would be if there were one book in existence that would tell me something specific about my life . . . Just one work to reflect the reality that I and the Black women whom I love are trying to create. (173)

Smith assigns to black feminist critics the task of ensuring a reflection of black women's experience will occur and enable the spinning out of possibilities for black women's reality.

For lesbian writing the critical moment occurs in 1980 with Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality," followed in 1981 with Bonnie Zimmerman's "What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism." In her article, Zimmerman not only documents a developing history of lesbian criticism, but she also "poses a set of questions which has informed and still challenges much of lesbian and feminist inquiry" (Olano 176). The act of defining a lesbian criticism begins not with the

delineation of the principles of criticism but rather with a definition of lesbianism. Such a starting point emphasizes the need to make visible and thus real something that has been denied or distorted by the dominant discourses. Lesbian existence has been, as Adrienne Rich notes, the “most violently erased fact of female experience” (653). Rich’s first task, then, is to make visible lesbian existence. Her strategy is unique in that she begins not with a statement of what lesbianism intrinsically is, but with a definition of the defining negative of lesbianism: heterosexuality. Using Kathleen Gough’s definition of the characteristics of male power, Rich defines heterosexuality as a political institution that seeks to control women. Compulsory heterosexuality normalizes violence, submission, and misogyny while characterizing “sensuality between women” as “queer” or “sick” (Rich 641). One of the primary means for enforcing compulsory heterosexuality is to render invisible “lesbian possibility” (Rich 647).

Cognizant of the power of the dominant discourse of heterosexuality, Rich challenges it by revealing the way its terministic screen selects patterns of experience that distort reality and limit the possibilities available. Once she has opened her audience’s eyes to that which is hidden about heterosexuality, she moves on to create an inclusive definition of lesbian existence. Lesbian existence is a “profoundly *female* experience” (Rich 650); it is “the breaking of taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life” (Rich 649); it is a continuum of woman-identified experience including within its scope a sharing of a rich inner life as well as (but not always) a sharing of a sexual experience with another woman (Rich 648). While Rich includes, potentially, all women within the scope of her definition, she also draws some clear boundaries. Lesbianism, she asserts, is not the female version of male homosexuality: it is distinct from the male tradition. Lesbianism is also not part of a feminism that assumes that most women are innately heterosexual. Part of its sub-stance is a long, albeit hidden, history of women who have had to lead a double life in order to survive. It becomes criticism’s role, therefore, to bring to the forefront the artistic expressions of lesbian experience. It is also

criticism's role to address the academic institution so that women may "begin to perceive a history of female resistance which has never fully understood itself because it has been so fragmented, miscalled, erased" (Rich 659-60), an erasure Zimmerman's work makes visible.

Zimmerman's essay, "What has never been," continues Rich's process of making visible lesbian possibilities and defining an alternative critical approach. Unlike Smith's article, however, her essay is not a call for a new criticism. Instead, "What has never been" strategically functions as a recognition of the existence of an ongoing lesbian criticism. Zimmerman, like Rich, understands the power to shape reality possessed by the dominant discourses. She calls this power "the perceptual screen of heterosexism" (35), and like Rich, notes the importance of defining lesbianism as a first step in countering the effect of this perceptual screen. Zimmerman, however, rejects Rich's definition as too broad, arguing that Rich's "position is reductive and of mixed value to those who are developing lesbian criticism and theory and who may need limited and precise definitions" (38). But Zimmerman also rejects the more exclusive definitions, choosing, instead, a middle ground: "The critic must first define the term 'lesbian.' . . Her definition . . . will [then] influence the texts she identifies as lesbian" (Zimmerman 41). Zimmerman goes on to suggest that the primary defining feature of lesbian criticism is the unique perspective it possesses, a perspective that comes from being on the margins of patriarchal society and which takes into consideration the influence of sexual and emotional orientation on literary expression.

Having identified this point of view, Zimmerman moves to a more hortative rhetorical strategy: that is to say, she focuses less on what lesbian criticism is and more on what it should do. Zimmerman asserts, for example, that a lesbian critic should unmask heterosexist assumptions, develop a unique lesbian feminist perspective, establish a lesbian literary tradition, identify the codes and strategies for literary survival adopted by women who are silenced by a homophobic and misogynistic society, address

the exclusion of lesbian literature from the traditional and feminist canon, and integrate the lesbian analytical perspective into traditional and feminist theories. Such a critical approach has the power, Zimmerman claims, to “establish a sense of historical continuity and community.” It can alter “our awareness of what is possible” (43).

If the 70s belonged to black feminist criticism, and the 80s to lesbian criticism, then certainly the 90s promise to bring in to being the critical moment for Native women writers. The process is clearly underway with many critical works appearing by Native women and about Native writing. It is, however, too early to pinpoint any one fundamental text, and it may, in fact, not be possible to do so with Native writing, since there appears, at this time, to be multiple voices working together to create the critical principles for Native literature. Jeannette Armstrong’s *Looking at the Words of Our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature* (1993), is one of the most recent anthologies of Native critical writing, and it offers an important glimpse at the ongoing formation of the critical moment for Native women’s writing. The connection between literature, criticism, and life reaches its strongest manifestation in the articulation of a Native women’s canon. Native women face both an erasure or denial of their experience and a co-opting of their experience and their identity by a white, European, colonizing culture. From the governments which, as Kateri Damm notes, “constructed and imposed labels and definitions of ‘Indian’ identity in an effort to limit and control treaty and aboriginal rights” (*Says Who* 11) to the stereotypes and misrepresentations imposed by the media, and cultural myths of the colonizing society, Native women have had to contend more with false and negative representations than with their absence. As Damm states: “‘Who we are’ has been constructed and defined by Others to the extent that at times we too no longer know who we are” (11). In addition, Native women face a displacement of their tribal identity by a dominant society which erases the diversity of First Nation cultures with broad categories such as “Indian” or, ironically, “Native women.” According to Damm, “one, solitary label distorts the multiplicity by suggesting that there is a cohesive,

unitary basis of commonality among those so labeled” (13). There are over fifty First Nations in Canada alone, each with its own culture and traditions. While blood is one way to define Nateness, it is not always sufficient in and of itself. Indeed, Damm herself does not attempt to provide a fixed definition. Instead, she leaves it open to change and difference: “As we continue to refine these definitions, to redefine ourselves, the question of what Native or Indigenous literature is, will necessarily be refined as well” (16). While it may not be possible to define Native literature by saying what it intrinsically is, it is possible to indicate some defining boundaries by what it is not. It is clearly not that which is appropriated by white writers and then presented as Native. As Lee Maracle argues,

To continue appropriating our stories and misusing them in the name of ‘freedom of imagination’ is just so much racism. . . . The fact is that a white person appropriating our stories because they lack imagination or knowledge of their own is still telling a European story. Use whatever you like to ground your story, intellectual Canada, but be honest. It is your story—it is not about me. (*Native Myths* 186).

While there is a clear distinction made between indigenous and non-indigenous writers, women Native writers tend not to draw a line between a male indigenous tradition and a female indigenous tradition. They value highly the existence of works by and about Native women which deal specifically with Native women’s experience, but see these works as part of a larger Native tradition. The substance of the tradition, that which supports it and stands beneath it, is the perseverance and vitality of Indigenous cultures, languages, and mythologies. Janice Acoose summarizes this in “Post Halfbreed”:

“Indigenous peoples in Canada tenaciously clung to our cultures, our way of seeing, being, and doing. Despite 400 years of cultural invasions, Indigenous cultures have survived and are very much alive, in one way, through mythology” (35). From these explorations in defining Native literature, a distinctly Native criticism begins to emerge.

Like the black and lesbian critics, Native women are aware of the power of the dominant discourses to control reality. As Damm notes, “control is enforced through the functions of society which transmit culture” (*Dispelling*, 106). To control one’s own reality and to give meaning to and pattern one’s own experience, one must control one’s own stories

Kimberly Blaeser identifies the role that criticism plays in the control of stories. She considers literary theory, the act of interpretation, and canonization the means for changing and remaking Native American stories, a remaking which often transforms them into what the colonizing society desires. Blaeser calls for the development of a distinctively Native criticism. This tribal-centered criticism “seeks a critical voice and method from the culturally-centered text outward toward the frontier of ‘border’ studies, rather than an external critical voice and method which seeks to penetrate, appropriate, colonize or conquer the cultural center, and thereby, change the stories or remake the literary meaning” (53). Blaeser also strategically acknowledges the work of other Native critics in the development of such a critical approach. In other words, she makes it clear that Native criticism has its own history and tradition. What she offers is an extension, but one that nonetheless calls for a certain approach.

Conceding the use of Euro-American literary theory by Native critics, Blaeser cautions that while such a use may offer up information about a text, it still functions as a form of colonization with “authority emanating from the mainstream critical center to the marginalized Native texts” (56). Blaeser insists that the critical tools for analyzing Native texts can be found within the texts themselves, and she warns against an oppositional practice which relies on the defining negative of Euro-American literary theory. Comparing Native literature to that of the Western tradition, she argues, only reinforces the status of that tradition as a master template. She asserts that a Native criticism must frame its own theory without invoking an external, enshrined, linear aesthetic (Blaeser 58). She notes that experiments in Native critical discourse have recognized “the differences between Native and non-Native perspectives and the complexity of the

literary voice that arises from convergence of these different perspectives” (Blaeser 58). And they have sought “to enrich the understanding of Native literature by drawing their interpretation from the same multicultural experience which informed the creation of the text” (Blaeser 58). She suggests that contemporary Native texts “contain the critical contexts needed for their own interpretation” (Blaeser 60). The dialogue between Native texts affords the “language and organizing principles necessary for the construction of a critical center” (Blaeser 59-60). She seeks to render Native literature independent of the colonizing tradition. To do so, however, Blaeser recognizes that one must create a critical voice that is also distinct from that of the dominant and, in this case, colonizing culture. As she states, “one way to safeguard that integrity [of the Native American story] is by asserting a critical voice that comes from within that tribal story itself” (Blaeser 61).

After the Critical Moment: The Smith Debate

Critical moments act as focal points by drawing attention to the experiences neglected and even negated by a dominant culture and its webs of discourse. They form both a foundation and a sounding board for future criticism. Most significantly, the critical moment reconstructs the terministic screen by which literature is selected, given value, and preserved. Literature, in turn, gives relevance to certain patterns of experience making them transferable and lending them authority. Central to the critical moment, the term, “experience,” functions both as a point of separation, whereby a group and its literature asserts its distinctiveness from the dominant literary tradition(s) and critical practices, and as a point of consubstantiality, whereby a group establishes the principles of identification which make it a group with a shared history and common goals, interests, and motives. Although the dichotomy of division and identification is common to any rhetorical situation, it is rarely contained within one term. The incorporation of the dichotomy exploits both the advantageous and the problematic nature of “experience.”

We get a better understanding of the role of “experience” in the critical moment if we think of it as being analogous to a prism. As is commonly known, a prism can

function as a dispersive device: it separates “the constituent frequency components in a polychromatic light beam”(Hecht, 129). When a ray of white light passes through a prism, the various waves of light are deflected from their original direction. This separates the light into various colours. At the critical moment, “experience” functions in a similar way to a prism. Rhetorically, it acts as a dispersive device taking what appears to be a univocal and universal criticism and separating it to reveal more distinctive, previously invisible parts. In the 1960s, for example, feminist criticism originally sought to alter a criticism where “it had always been taken for granted that the representative reader, writer, and critic of Western literature is male” (Showalter, 3). By altering the critical terministic screens, feminists sought to create a deflection which would reveal “that women readers and critics bring different perceptions and expectations to their literary experience, and . . . that women have also told the important stories of our culture” (Showalter, 3). Each critical moment thereafter creates a further deflection to reveal another distinct identity or group. Marking the impetus behind the development of black feminist criticism, Deborah E. McDowell, for example, notes:

These early theorists and practitioners of feminist literary criticism were largely white females who, wittingly or not, perpetrated against the Black woman writer the exclusive practices they so vehemently decried in white male scholars. Seeing the experiences of white women, particularly white middle-class women, as normative, white scholars proceeded blindly to exclude the work of Black women writers from literary anthologies and critical studies. (186)

The pattern of the critical moment, as previously shown, is repeated with lesbian and Native writers.

But in this deflection the problematical aspects of “experience” emerge. When polychromatic light, a light which contains all colours but appears as white, passes through a prism it breaks down, for the most part, into monochromatic light, a light that

generally contains only one colour. Similarly, the critical discourse, that which Chris Weedon terms a liberal-humanist tradition, supposedly contains all of the different perspectives that exist within Western culture. However, it inevitably presents and reproduces patterns that reflect norms and values that belong to one group -- privileged, white, males. In other words, difference, diversity, and multiplicity are not represented as such but are instead reduced to a single perspective. Each critical moment reveals difference, diversity, and multiplicity by bringing to light a perspective hidden or made invisible by traditional criticism--like the multiple colours that appear after light has passed through a prism. Paradoxically, however, each critical moment in and of itself does not represent difference, diversity or multiplicity. Each attempts to present only a single perspective.

As a result of this paradoxical nature, the critical approaches that arise find themselves subject to a number of charges. The first is that the criticism is not specific enough in defining this single perspective: the definition is too inclusive. The second charge accuses the new criticism with being too exclusive, and of being too concerned with sameness at the expense of difference. This second charge usually takes one of two forms: in one version of this charge, the previous pattern of dispersion is repeated, and a critic or a critical approach is generally characterized as reducing the diverse experiences of a group to common, monolithic qualities or essential features--the term "reductive" frequently flags this argument; in a second version of this argument, the critic or critical approach is characterized as shutting out diversity by limiting, through notions of experience, who can perform the criticism. In this argument, only women can do feminist criticism, only certain black women can do black feminist criticism, only lesbians can do lesbian criticism, and only Native women can do Native feminist criticism. These charges, however, rarely appear separately. Instead, arguments tend to waver between the two sometimes producing contradictory effects.

While Smith's work is credited as one of the first to establish black feminist criticism, it has faced a series of charges and interpretations, many of which take issue with Smith's emphasis on experience. The ensuing debate eventually pits theory against experience and highlights what appears to be the inevitable fallout as to what could be considered the necessary use of experience. While Deborah McDowell, in "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism," acknowledges that Smith's work is a "groundbreaking piece of scholarship," she criticizes the work for lacking "precision and detail" (188). She objects to Smith's comment that black women writers would share common approaches to creating literature because they share common experiences (McDowell 189). McDowell questions whether the specific examples that Smith cites are unique to black women's writing, and she postulates that they may appear in the work of black male writers as well. McDowell suggests that Smith has not gone far enough in separating black women's writing from other categories of literature, failing to identify experiences which are common only to black women: "A distinction must be made before one can effectively articulate the basis of a Black feminist aesthetic" (189). McDowell's questioning of Smith's assertion that black women writers use a "specifically Black female language," however, moves between a desire for greater distinctions and a rejection of all-encompassing, reductive categories. McDowell contends that black feminists must clearly demonstrate that actual differences exist between the language of black females and that of black males. But her comment that "'the ways in which men and women internalize and manipulate language' are undeniably sex-related," implies that a discrimination is acknowledged as existing (McDowell 189). For McDowell, however, such information or common knowledge is not sufficient: a black feminist theory must be based on precision. Therefore, it requires more examples and more specific details to identify authentic differences. McDowell, however, does not provide specific examples of her own, but only raises questions that "must be addressed

with precision if current feminist terminology is to function beyond mere critical jargon” (189).

McDowell views Smith’s notion of a black female language as too “monolithic.” Making distinctions between the language use of “Black female high school dropouts, welfare mothers, college graduates, and Ph.D.s” (189), McDowell implies that these differences would be excluded or made invisible by Smith’s category of black female language. McDowell also takes particular issue with Smith’s notion of what constitutes a highly “innovative” critical approach. Smith had argued that “Black feminist criticism applied to a particular work can overturn previous assumptions about it and expose for the first time its actual dimensions” (Smith, 164). Smith continues by providing an example of this “innovative” criticism, applying Bertha Harris’s definition of lesbian literature to Toni Morrison’s *Sula* to produce a critical analysis which highlights the text’s lesbian qualities and illustrates “how a Black feminist critical perspective at least allows consideration of this level of the novel’s meaning” (Smith, 170). Smith considers black lesbianism and black feminism strongly linked categories and does not separate the two.

McDowell, on the other hand, considers Smith’s definition of lesbianism too inclusive. She complains: “This definition of lesbianism is vague and imprecise; it subsumes far more Black women writers, particularly contemporary ones, than not into the canon of lesbian writers” (190). Whereas McDowell seems concerned about including many different types of black women in the conceptualization of black female language, she is adamant that a proper distinction be made between black feminist critics who write from a lesbian perspective and those who do not. Again McDowell claims that Smith’s definition is so broad it could include a “few Black male writers” within its scope (190). The claim is meant as the ultimate negation of the adequacy of a definition that seeks to delimit a feminist and, particularly, a lesbian criticism. A definition that includes males is not a sufficient dispersive device. As McDowell states, “until they can offer a

definition which is not vacuous, their attempts to distinguish Black lesbian writers from those who are not will be hindered” (McDowell, 190). It seems of little significance to McDowell that Smith was not attempting to make such a distinction. McDowell, on one hand, demands that difference be accounted for within the category of black feminist criticism. On the other hand, however, she wants to place difference outside of the boundaries of black feminist criticism.

While McDowell emphasizes the lack of precision and detail in Smith’s work, she does not attempt to rectify the omission by incorporating detail and precision into her own essay. In fact, McDowell produces a definition of black feminist criticism that Hazel Carby characterizes as “mystifying” (Carby, 12). McDowell’s demand for greater and greater distinctions contradicts the incredibly broad definition she offers:

I use the term here simply to refer to Black female critics who analyze the works of Black female writers from a feminist or political perspective.

But the term can also apply to any criticism written by a Black woman regardless of her subject or perspective -- a book written by a male from a feminist or political perspective, a book written by a Black woman or about Black women authors in general, or any writings by women. (24)

As Carby points out, such a definition could include within its scope “an antifeminist celebration of a racist tract . . . as long as it was written by a Black woman” (Carby, 13).

McDowell’s critique of Smith’s work includes other contradictions between her stated intent and her actual practice. In her rejection of Smith’s definition of lesbianism, for example, McDowell warns against yoking political ideology with aesthetic judgement (190). In reference to Smith’s work, she states, “I suspect that ‘innovative’ analysis is pressed to the service of an individual political persuasion” (190). She goes on to question the political efficacy, or even feasibility, of black feminist criticism’s ability to produce social change. Short of denying that black feminist criticism can function in any political fashion, McDowell qualifies her statement:

I should say that I am not arguing a defeatist position with respect to the social and political uses to which feminist criticism can be put. Just as it is both possible and useful to translate ideological positions into aesthetic ones, it must likewise be possible and useful to translate aesthetic positions into machinery for social change. (191)

McDowell, however, takes Smith to task for the same rhetorical strategy of qualification: “Smith vacillates between arguing forthrightly for the validity of her interpretation and recanting or overqualifying it in a way that undercuts her own credibility” (189).

Throughout her essay McDowell calls upon others to use more detail and precision which translates into a call to make sharper distinctions. However, at the end of her essay, she moves to broader and more open boundaries, arguing for a criticism that will examine the “extent to which their [black feminist’s] criticism intersects with that of white feminist critics” (191). And she argues against a separatist position suggesting that black feminist critics must eventually explore the parallels between black women’s writing and that of black men.

McDowell uses the critical moment that Smith establishes in ways that allow her to position herself in a newly developing field of criticism. She identifies weaknesses in Smith’s approach, but she does not set out to strengthen the weaknesses. Instead, she poses a series of questions that will help others find the solutions. The direction she takes seems to be the reverse of Smith’s attempt to create a new category of criticism. McDowell works within that category but recommends a move to a more general, broader, and, we could say, polychromatic, position. She too turns to a hortative strategy in suggesting further principles—principles that, ironically, bear a close resemblance to those originally articulated by Smith:

Black feminist criticism ought to move from this issue to consider the specific language of Black women’s literature, to describe the ways Black women writers employ literary devices in a distinct way, and to compare

the way Black women writers create their own mythic structures. If they focus on these and other pertinent issues, Black feminist critics will have laid the cornerstone for a sound, thorough articulation of the Black feminist aesthetic. (196-7)

McDowell establishes a pattern of critique that is picked up and followed by others. Her attempt to reverse the prism effect of the critical moment by moving to a more inclusive approach sets the stage for more vehement critiques of Smith's work. These critiques bring the role of "experience" more and more into question.

In the introduction to *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Hazel Carby also presents a critical analysis of Smith's "manifesto for black feminist critics" (Carby, 8). While taking issue with McDowell's definition of black feminist criticism, Carby agrees, nevertheless, with many of McDowell's points, most significantly, McDowell's warning against linking the political with aesthetic judgements, her questioning of the existence of a monolithic black female language, and her problematizing of the "oversimplification and obscuring of the issue of lesbianism" (Carby 12). Carby adds to the critique by identifying the "major problems" with Smith's essay as the "assertion of the existence of an essential black female experience and an exclusive black female language in which this experience is embodied" (9). Her arguments again focus on the need for greater distinctions. Carby also cites Smith's insistence on an "identifiable literary tradition" and the "establishment of precedents and insights" as faulty principles. These require the critic to look for commonalities and, more detrimentally, require the reproduction of prevailing paradigms, which permeate bourgeois humanistic scholarship maintaining "hierarchical ranking and deep seated racism" (Corel West qtd in Carby 15). The establishment of a tradition, according to Carby, recreates the pattern of exclusion practised by white male tradition and its "universals."

At no point in her essay, however, does Smith suggest that her notion of black female language is monolithic. Smith clearly intends her essay as a precursory work in

which she lays down the principles for others to build on and develop. She does not extensively outline a notion of black female language. In fact, she refers to four black women writers and notes that they use a “specifically Black female language to express their own and their characters’ thoughts” (Smith, 164). While it is possible to interpret “Black female language” as a monolithic category, it is also possible to interpret this as a category containing difference. After all, Smith refers to four women artists each of whom expresses herself and her characters in a very different style. Categories by nature require commonalities, but this does not automatically render them monolithic. Inevitably, categories can lead us to see as many differences as we see commonalities. But in her questioning of Smith’s work, Carby brings to the forefront what she sees as the source of error—namely, Smith’s use of experience. Carby views the use of experience as essentialist and ahistorical: it reduces “the experience of all black women to a common denominator” (10). Carby links this use of experience to a particular construction of reality, arguing that “Smith’s essay assumes a very simple one-to-one correspondence between fiction and reality, and her model of a black feminist critical perspective is undermined as a political practice by being dependent on those who are biologically black and female” (Carby 9). Carby acknowledges that “Smith’s essay was an important statement that made visible intense repression of the black female and lesbian voice” (9). Smith, however, could not make visible a repression of the black female voice without referring to and depending on a biological category (black female). Carby creates a catch 22 situation: that which makes Smith’s work significant, in her view, also becomes its main flaw. Carby’s analysis appears to implicitly link experience and biology, and she reduces it to that which is “common.” The term denotes a sameness across time and individuals.

Smith does not insist on “common” or “essential” black female experience. Rather, she argues that “Black women writers manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature as a direct result of the specific *political, social, and economic*

experience they have been *obliged* to share” (*italics mine* 164). Smith uses “experience” in conjunction with relational, contextual terms, “political, social, and economic,” which suggest that “experience” is understood as interaction with the environment. The distinction is a fine one but needs to be made. Smith is not stating that all black women experience the same thing because they are biologically black and female. She suggests the environmental conditions have been forced on these women because of these identifiable biological traits. A shared environment, as Burke tells us, produces similar relevant responses. Of course, not all responses will be identical: difference still remains highly possible. Carby herself argues that:

No language or experience is divorced from the shared context in which different groups that share a language express their differing group interests. Language is accented differently by competing groups, and therefore the terrain of language is a terrain of power relations. This struggle within and over language reveals the nature of the structure of social relations and the hierarchy of power, not the nature of one particular group. (16-17)

Although Carby uses this argument to dispute Smith’s work, it could easily be claimed that Smith identifies a shared context for a specific group and simply suggests that this group develops or accents language accordingly. But before that group can accent language it must have an identity and a sense of consubstantiality. Given that Smith acknowledges the significance of context, it is difficult to see her use of “experience” as “ahistorical.” Nor is Smith’s use of reality limited to a one-to-one correspondence. Smith’s use of the term suggests that she views reality as being dependent on language and discursive practices. For example, she puts “real world” in quotation marks and suggests that different groups (white, male) have different realities. At the end of her essay, she asks for, “just one work to reflect the reality that I and the black women whom I love are trying to create” (1730). Clearly, when she uses both

“reflect” and “create” to refer to reality, Smith expresses a more complex conceptualization of reality than a mere one-to-one correspondence that generally does not allow for the “creation” of reality.

Carby, however, seems intent on equating “experience” with an uncompromising and absolute notion of sameness. She seems unable to accept the possibility that “appeals to experience need not be essentialist and ahistorical, because the experience of Afro-American women is unmistakably polyvalent” (Wall, 10). As Barbara Christian notes, Carby could not create the work she does without accepting the categories and principles that she seems to decry:

Yet Carby’s approach, as she articulates it, does not seem to allow for other emphases within the arena of black feminist criticism, and the work she can now do is possible because others pursued different orientations from her own. . . . Nor could Carby be doing the work she is doing unless a space for it was created by a powerful contemporary Afro-American women’s literature which in part comes out of the very paradigm she denies. (71-72)

The pattern of critique exemplified by McDowell and Carby finds its most blatant expression in Deborah Chay’s article “Rereading Barbara Smith: Black Feminist Criticism and the Category of Experience.” Following her predecessors, Chay criticizes Smith’s work for making universal and monolithic claims in terms of black women (644), and for not being able to distinguish differences appropriately. Like Carby, Chay sees the greatest weakness of Smith’s work as her “debilitating reliance on experience” (639). According to Chay:

Hypostasizing experience to secure her claims for black women, Smith is prevented from making the distinctions among categories such as “black *men*” and “white *feminists*” which might otherwise allow her to pursue her

analysis and critique of black women's social conditions in a less deterministic fashion. (638-9)

"Experience," however, is exactly the term that enables Smith to make distinctions between "black men" and "white feminists." Smith calls upon her experience as a reader and as a critic to point out that there is a difference between what she and other black women encounter and what black men and white feminists encounter. In fact, Smith spends the first quarter of her essay documenting, through example, how reviewers and critics (white and black men and white women) have made black women invisible and how they have devalued black women's texts.

Chay argues that Smith "(over)determines" the cultural practice of black women by basing black feminist criticism on the development and experience of identity. Chay surmises that, as a result, Smith has stipulated that "no one but a black woman can do black feminist criticism, then, and black women must do black feminist criticism in order to 'experience' themselves as—or be—black women, feminists, lesbians" (637). Indeed, Smith, as do all other critics at the critical moment, suggests that only black women can *create* a black feminist criticism. But the need for the critical moment arises from the need to alter discursive practices that are oppressive. If the prevailing discourse has misrepresented, made invisible, or negatively constructed a particular group's identity, to expect those who practice and create this discourse to change of their own accord is naive at best. A group's identity comes from a history and a tradition that must be reflected in discursive practices formulated by that group. As Carby notes, "the terrain of language is a terrain of power relations" (17); to refuse to take control of that terrain is to give power over you to someone else. However, in objecting to Smith's implied stipulation, Chay introduces a contradiction into her own position. Earlier, she had argued that Smith can not make distinctions; now, she faults Smith for making a distinction that clearly requires a strong notion of the defining negative. Is it really a question of (over)determining cultural practice? Or is it rather a question of necessity? The critical moment requires the

use of “experience” to draw the lines of consubstantiality and difference. Hence, the critical moment functions as a rhetorical strategy, enacting the discursive act of identity construction for a very specific purpose at a particular time.

Chay, McDowell, and Carby fail to recognize that “exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world” (Joan Scott qtd in Chay, 638) is not enough. Certainly, ‘exploring how difference is established’ is important to our understanding, but to create change, one must work discursively to constitute subjects (even if they are constructs and historically situated) and that requires a very different rhetorical approach than an examination of the “how” of discursivity permits. In practice, “experience” functions to establish historical contexts and operates to break the rules of the prevailing discourses. One cannot name or define a group in relative terms. The act of naming requires, if only for a moment, the fixing of properties and characteristics of a group or thing in relation to other groups or things.

The difference between theory and practice becomes most apparent in Barbara Smith’s response to Chay’s article. In her response, Smith once again speaks from her experience, positioning herself as the speaking and knowing subject of the text through the use of the “I” pronoun. She also grounds the essay in details of her life: “[the day I received the essay] I was already dealing with enough stress, including the fact that one of my dearest friends was dying of breast cancer, and I decided that reading your essay was one negative experience I could spare myself” (653). Stating that Chay’s assumptions are erroneous, Smith concludes that Chay has not comprehended the “why” and “what” of the original essay. Smith thereby shifts the argument away from the “how” (653):

I did not write “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” as an intellectual exercise. I wrote it to express my perceptions about the state of Black women’s literature and the dearth of useful criticism about this literature in 1977. I wanted to challenge and inspire people who totally exclude Black

women from their literary work as well as from their actual lives to change. I also wanted to encourage Black women to delve into this literature, to take joy in its existence, and to begin to examine its sexual politics as well as its racial politics in an explicitly feminist way. My ultimate goal was Black woman's liberation, i.e. more freedom, more respect, more choices and less invisibility, less violence, and less abuse for living breathing Black female human beings. (653-654)

Once Smith has established the "why" and "what" of her essay, she focuses on a major aspect of the essay's context that has been overlooked or ignored by her critics. Smith indicates that she did not write the essay for an academic audience but for a "lesbian feminist literary magazine," one which sought to diversify the content of works being published by actively seeking the work of "lesbians, women of color, and working class women" (Smith 654). Smith indicates that she wrote the article outside of the paradigms of academic theory, and she implies that the use of such theory by critics is suspect in that it functions as capital which the critic garners to position herself in an academic market:

Since I do not depend upon academic institutions for my livelihood, I have not been required to convert to the new scholasticism nor have I been forced to believe that obscurantist academic theory is the only legitimate and intellectually valid method a critic can use to analyze literature. (654)

Smith also answers the charge of essentialism by referring to experience through both hypothetical and concrete examples. She does not deny the use of experience, but rather she indicates the influence of context on one's view of experience. She suggests that racism and identity in everyday life are not a matter of theory. According to Smith, to view identity as an intellectual construct is to be apolitical and ultimately ineffectual:

Arguments against so-called 'essentialism' and relying upon 'the evidence of experience' are profoundly apolitical, because they view identity as an

intellectual construct with insignificant political or material consequences within a white supremacist, misogynist, capitalist and patriarchal *state*.

(655)

Smith does not reject the possibilities of theory but insists by implication that it must be tied into practice: it must emerge from and feed back into our experience. Only then does it become transformative.

Barbara Christian's critical works exemplify how theory and practice can be brought together. In her introduction to *Black Feminist Criticism*, she constructs a personalized narrative that both reveals her context and her bias. The introduction is experiential in nature, focusing on a conversation between the critic and her young daughter. In classifying her explanations according to the theoretical paradigms that influence them, Christian demonstrates an understanding and integration of theory. She sets up a two layered dialogue that on the surface explains to her daughter what a black feminist literary critic does. Relatively simple and straightforward, the language for this layer of the dialogue is obviously intended for someone who is not familiar with the discourse of critical theory. She also expresses what she thinks but does not say to her daughter, and this constructs a second layer of dialogue with the reader-as-critic. This second dialogue makes use of critical language and employs the reader-as-critic's understanding of critical theory:

I pause, trying to be as clear as possible to Najuma in my distinction of what I am doing.

"Right now," I say, "I'm listening to the voice, the many voices created by Alice Walker in this book and looking at the way she's using words to make these voices seem alive, so you believe them." (Aha, I think, formalist criticism, expressive criticism, operative criticism.) My daughter does not know these referents. (*Black*, xi)

Through this double layer of dialogue, Christian demonstrates an acute awareness of audience. Like Smith, she notes that the seeds for a black women's literature and criticism were sown outside of the institutions of academia. According to Christian, when many scholars were still very resistant to the idea of studying black women novelists, "ordinary" black women were the ones who read and discussed the work of black women writers "with an intensity unheard of in the academic world" (*But What*, 64). Christian thinks and writes from her identity, for she carefully situates herself as a critic and makes her position and bias clear. She does not hide behind objective language, but instead speaks as the "I" of her texts. She is also careful to avoid monolithic, ahistorical accounts, and she indicates, through the subtitle of one of her essays, that the history of black feminist criticism she recounts is "My Version of a Little Bit of History." She discusses the primary stages and key works of black feminist criticism, as do other critics, but she does not objectify that history. Instead, she includes her own history as a critic and recounts black women's literary history as she, a black woman critic in a given period, encountered and experienced it.

Instead of seeking to establish a position for herself in the academic market by opposing or challenging Smith's work, Christian builds on Smith's work, using her experience to answer back to other black women: "When we speak and answer back we validate our experiences. We say we *are* important, if only to ourselves" (*Black*, xii). Christian enacts the principles outlined by Smith. She recognizes a black women's literary tradition, explores the intersection of gender, race, politics, and identity, and makes use of common approaches manifested through black women's writing: "I used call and response, jazz riffs, techniques found in writers like Hughes and Hurston, as well as the anecdote, a device I had found so effective in the essays of Jordan and Walker" (*But What*, 68). Christian, however, is not anti-theory. She agrees with McDowell's emphasis "on clear definitions and methodologies," viewing it as a sign "of increasing emphasis on theory surfacing in the academic world" (*But What*, 66). While Christian does not reject

theory, she does caution against falling into the trap of theoretical discourse, suggesting that the black feminist critic must always consider her audience: “As the race for theory began to accelerate in 1984, I became concerned that that dialogue was drying up as critics rushed to construct theories in languages that many writers abhorred and which few readers understood or enjoyed or could use” (*But What*, 68).

Christian goes on to question Carby’s insistence that feminist criticism is reduced to experiential relationships which make it essentialist and ahistorical (*But What*, 71). She points out that the essentialist argument was also used to oppose the “inclusion of gender as central” to analysis (72). In other words, essentialism does not automatically constitute an infallible argument: it entails the bias and motives of those who bring it into play. Christian, however, does not deny the importance of questioning the assumptions about black women’s writings and shared experience. Criticism, for her, constitutes an “evolving process” (*Black*, xi), and “a resistance to art as artifact, to ideas as fixed, and a commitment to openendedness, possibility, fluidity--to change” (*But What*, 68). As Christian observes, black feminist criticism has moved into, and now seems centered in, the academic institutions (73). The interstices between experience and theory arise from this move which, in turn, produces static divisions between women. The term “experience” is related to a discourse associated with “ordinary” women and everyday life, whereas theory speaks primarily to those ensconced in the academic institutions. The gap that ensues between experience and theory also brings with it an associated dichotomy between action and intellectualism: those who rely on experience are concerned with creating change and those who rely on theory are characterized as apolitical and, therefore, static. Christian suggests that questions for further exploration and development in black feminist criticism must center on the implications of the criticism’s institutionalization and the gap it produces.

One of the primary questions Christian asks helps to elucidate the fissure between Chay’s critique and Smith’s response:

Does our emphasis on definitions and theories mean that we will close ourselves to those, the many, who know or care little about the intense debates that take so much of our time in universities? Can we conceive of our literary critical activities as related to the activism necessary to substantively change black women's lives? (*But What*, 73)

Christian clearly concerns herself with building bridges, using Smith's work and the work of other black feminist critics to develop further a black critical approach. She implicitly recognizes the rhetorical necessity of Smith's work, noting, "the articulation of a theory is a gathering place, sometimes a point of rest as a process rushes on, insisting that you follow" (*Black*, xi). Christian's notion of the articulation of theory as "a gathering place" brings us back to Smith's claim that she does theorize. In fact, Christian helps to clarify how Smith's work functions as "a gathering place" or "point of rest": it is a moment of stasis where things must be defined and named into existence. Certainly, such a critical moment appears to fix and perhaps essentialise black women and black feminist criticism, but it does so momentarily and strategically so that a more fluid process may begin. Critics can get caught up in the frameworks of theory. Relying too much on the charge of essentialism as an infallible critique, they fail to see that they have made monolithic and ahistorical what is but a single moment of critical development.

"Experience" is not in and of itself essentialist. It plays a both/and role that can focus our attention on commonalities and sameness. But it can also mark differences, highlighting in the process points of division. Remembering that "experience" is situated between consubstantiality and difference, we can recognize that, even though contemporary feminism gives precedents to difference, it needs both. Valuing difference helps feminists avoid repeating patterns of oppression and domination, but feminists also need to share common ground so that they may act collectively to resist and change existing patterns of oppression and domination.

The Language in Her Eye Debate

Disagreements about practice and theory are inevitable, especially since the many diverse groups within feminism work according to different time frames. Since the critical moments seem to occur almost a decade apart, the problems that one group is working through may not always be the problems that are of immediate interest to another group. The level of privilege granted each group also varies and again affects how each will view a given situation. As Susan Swan writes, “I *do* think it’s true that the struggle to free ourselves from restrictions men have placed on us throughout Western culture is no longer a central subject for many white middle-class women writers” (260). But to use the word “group” is itself problematic. While “white feminist”, “black feminist”, “lesbian”, and “Native women” (more refinements are possible such as black lesbian, or Native lesbian, or middle-class white etc.) all operate as categories by which we name a group of feminists with common interests, the notion of a group is often a convenient fiction. Women may know each other as friends or colleagues, may even work in a feminist organization, and may even meet at a conference such as the International Feminist Book Fair, but there is no given group of individuals that constitutes any one category. Women writers and critics often work separately from one another, producing work individually. And any one woman could identify with a number of categories simultaneously or individually, depending on the context.

When an issue arises, how a woman classifies herself can determine how she will respond to the issue. But when is an issue of interest only to a particular group within feminism and when is an issue of interest to all feminists? Failure to classify an issue as common to all can lead to charges of indifference or collusion with patriarchy. But a demand that all respond to an issue that belongs to the particular can produce, in its turn, charges of dogmatism or attempting to control behavior through prescription. Because experience plays a key role in how a woman will define or classify herself, it can often be found at the heart of disputes regarding the nature of a particular issue. Such is the case

with a debate that occurs in and over a collection of essays entitled *Language in Her Eye* (1990). The anthology includes essays written by Canadian women writing in English. The editors, Libby Scheier, Sarah Sheard, and Eleanor Wachtel, state that they wanted to respond to a debate taking place in the Canadian writing community regarding “the relationship of feminism to writing” (13). They sought to answer three main questions: “[1] Was there evidence of a distinctly female or feminist point of view? [2] What influence were the various currents of feminist literary theory wielding on both readers and writers? [3] Could a writer authentically take on a voice other than that of her own race, class, gender, and sexual orientation?” (13) The three questions address the main issues that have come out of the critical moment: essentialism, the role of theory, and the appropriation of voice. However, according to a footnote at the end of Paulette Jiles’ essay, the questions the editors actually posed to the contributors were slightly different and include the following: “Do you consider yourself a feminist? Do you think feminism has had an effect on the writing and publishing climate in Canada? Do you . . . have a specific female or feminist point of view? How do you feel about writing in which the author takes a viewpoint other than his/her own? Do considerations of race, class, or sexual orientation affect how you write? Are you familiar with the various currents of feminist theory?” (160-63)

The answers produced by most of the writers in the anthology tend to touch on the issues inherent in the editors’ original questions, but the issues are not always addressed directly. Instead, the writers who respond to the questions³ rely heavily on personal “I” narratives. After all, the questions they received emphasize how “you” think, feel, and are affected. The questions do not indicate that the writers are to respond

³Of the 44 contributions eight were selected from previous works. While closely related to the topic, these essays were not written to directly answer the questions posed. Their works were selected by the editors to fit into the themes suggested by the questions.

to a specific incident or debate. However, the writers received these questions shortly after a particular debate concerning the property of stories and who has a right to tell certain stories was prevalent in the Canadian media. The debate dealt with Native stories and stories by “women of colour.” At this time a number of Native writers had taken issue with white Canadians who used Native scenes, characters, and mythologies to recount stories that were supposedly about Natives. Lee Maracle draws attention to the case of Darlene Barry Quaife, who wrote about “Native” spirituality in *Bone Bird*. Quaife’s depiction and use of Native spirituality was highly questionable to Natives. When questioned about her sources, Quaife confessed that she had misrepresented them. As Maracle reports:

She admitted that she had lied and used us [Natives] as cover; when challenged, she squirmed, squeaking censorship to unnamed persons and the Women’s Press. The truth is that creeping around libraries full of nonsensical anthropocentric drivel, imbuing these findings with falsehood in the name of imagination, then peddling the nonsense as “Indian Mythology” is literary dishonesty. (“Native Myths,” 185)

W.P. Kinsella’s Hobbema stories and the film, “Where the Spirit Lives,” were also challenged for their depictions of Native life. What the debate highlighted was not only the “theft” of Native material and stories, but also the lack of access to publishing opportunities and support available to Native writers in comparison with white writers:

Canadians all too often use Native stories, symbols and history to sell things . . . But why hasn’t Basil Johnston’s *Indian School Days* become a best-seller? Why hasn’t *Half Breed* by Marie Campbell been reprinted? (Why, for that matter, has Ms. Campbell, as one of Canada’s “celebrated” authors, never received a writer’s grant?) (Keeshig-Tobias, *Stop Stealing* 546)

Native writers voiced a strong belief in the power of stories to preserve, heal, and liberate a culture: stories are a valuable source of knowledge. Their assertion was reminiscent of the early claim by second-wave feminists that images of women in literature, stories by and about women, and other female role models, could alter the way women saw and lived their lives.⁴ The Native claim is best articulated by Keeshig-Tobias when she states, “Native stories deal with the experiences of our (*Native*) humanity, experiences we have laughed, cried, sweated, and shit for. Experiences we have learned from. Stories, fiction and non-fiction, are not just entertainment” (*The Magic* 176).

The debate over Native stories and material was accompanied by another debate concerning the publication or non-publication of stories by the Women’s Press in Toronto. The Women’s Press had rejected short stories from three white writers because they had “used the voice of and characters from cultures and races other than their own” (Nourbese Philip, 2009). The Press also rejected one of these stories because it had made use of magic realism, a style that the Press claimed was of Latin American origin. The Women’s Press went on to issue policy guidelines that indicated that it would “avoid publishing manuscripts in which the protagonist’s experience in the world, by virtue of race or ethnicity, is substantially removed from that of the writer” (rpt. in Nourbese Philip, 2009). With this action, the issue quickly turned from one of racism to one of censorship and freedom of imagination. As Nourbese Philip points out, such a turn in the debate ensured that the issue of racism in the publishing industry would be placed on the back burner:

⁴ Leona Gome expresses a similar sentiment in *Language in Her Eye*. After suggesting that women writers can create male characters, she writes, “‘Should we bother?’ As a reader, I love books that give me women’s voices, women by women, something I’ve felt deprived of throughout many years of reading both for fun and education” (125).

All the available energy in the writing community went into discussing, arguing and debating whether white women writers, or white writers in general, ought or ought not to be using the voice of the Other. There was no discussion about how to enable more Black women to get into print, or how to help those small publishing houses committed to publishing work of Black authors, or any of the many tasks that must be undertaken to make the writing and publishing world truly non-racist. (213)

These debates formed the context for the anthology, *Language in Her Eye*, and constituted the impetus for some of the questions that the editors posed to the writers. In answering the questions, the majority of writers combined “I” stories with responses to other questions regarding theory and point of view. The “I” stories situate the writer by using her own experience to describe her position in regards to feminism. Although she begins with the “we” pronoun, Margaret Atwood frequently shifts to the “I” to recount her experience as a reader reading Canadian women authors, as a writer who did not experience sexism in the publishing industry, and as a woman who although aware of feminism was not actively involved. Dionne Brand begins her essay: “I am writing this in Cuba. Playas del Este. It is January” (45). She tells of writing the essay as she reflects back on the situation in Canada and on the process of making a film about black women highlighting racism and sexism in Canada, while also recounting her personal experience with heterosexism. Rhea Tregebov also moves between the “we” and “I” as she discusses the similarities and differences in society’s reaction to Jews and women.

These three examples provide only a small glimpse at the type of experiential stories recounted in the collection. The narratives of experience reveal the broad range of diversity and difference that exists among the women writers. As writers, they are journalists, poets, novelists, and academics. While some come from very privileged backgrounds, others come from middle-class, working-class, and poor-working class backgrounds. Although Canadian, many come from various ethnic backgrounds, including

Ukrainian, Dutch, Italian, Bengali, Trinidadian, African, Asian, Mennonite, and Jewish. Native writers, black writers, white writers, lesbian writers, and heterosexual writers are included in the text. While some have experienced sexism and/or racism and some are survivors of sexual abuse, others recount no such experiences.

The use of personal experience by many of the writers to situate themselves also helps to reveal points of consubstantiality. All of the writers classified themselves as feminists, and most would agree with a general statement like that made by Edith Iglauer: "I feel very strongly about giving women an equal chance in jobs, equal treatment and equal pay" (152). But when it comes to more specific issues, such as the question of the role of theory in feminism or the role of politics in art, the points at which the writers agreed were never universal. Some writers, for example, are ambivalent about the role of theory. Margaret Atwood expresses the view of a number of writers when she comments that "Theory is a positive force when it vitalizes and enables, but a negative one when it is used to amputate and repress, to create a batch of self-righteous rules and regulations, to foster nail-biting self-consciousness to the point of total block" (24-25). Roo Borson underlines this when she reiterates, "I'm riveted by the raw details of others' experience and more often than not disappointed by the rhetoric of theory" (44). Others such as Paulette Jiles and Anne Cameron express much stronger reservations about the use of theory:

Theory, like jet travel, is a limited tool with limited applications; it is not oracular, divine. If overused it tends to destroy the ozone layer. *But*: think of the advantages! It doesn't require consensus to arrive at, or input from the Common People, it can be applied to people without their knowledge or agreement, and it can be arrived at without Experience, and each theory goes down in flames every ten years or so taking with it its passengers and some innocent bystanders. (Jiles, 162)

Still other writers within the collection, such as Barbara Godard, Linda Hutcheon, Erin Mouré, Gail Scott, Aritha Van Herk, and Betsy Warland, incorporate theory into their writing. For these women, theory is indispensable, but they do not always agree on how theory functions in feminist writing. A number of writers describe theory as an active revolutionary agent for feminism. As Godard describes it, “feminist theory has explored difference, problematizing language and the text by shifting attention to the ways in which meaning is produced” (112-3). In Godard’s description, theory, not feminists, carries out the action. Libby Scheier repeats this idea giving to theory agency that verges on that of liberator. She suggests that the “project of deconstructing traditional notions of canon” is responsible for opening the canon “to the previously marginalized voices of women and oppressed racial groups” (237).

For writers like Elspeth Cameron, feminists must take the role of agent and develop methodologies that reflect feminist ideals and “redress some of the biases of the androcentric and phallogentric scholarship” (73-74). She goes on to emphasize a connection between scholarship and experience: “Research starts from people’s experience of and within everyday life” (77). But while some of the writers in the anthology agree with this perspective, others, such as Warland and Mouré, warn against demands for accessibility that are linked to the notion of everyday life. They link notions of accessibility to the value systems of the dominant oppressive language. According to Mouré,

There are views of writing that tend to accuse writing-that-displaces of being academic, of being inaccessible to our women’s, or most women’s experience. But. Literal meanings of the ‘accessible’ just place women, and working-class people, as the lowest common denominator in the reproduction of the social order. It’s the cannon-fodder mentality. What is ‘accessible’ is what can be read by agreed-upon methods. Who agrees? The class for whom ‘reading’ and ‘the book’ has the greatest value: the

white, middle-class, the patriarchal order and those who have internalized it. (206)

Other points of differing consubstantiality also occur. A number of writers suggest that politics and art must be separate. They insist that they are feminists and writers, but never feminist writers. Others argue that if a writer is a feminist then her work will naturally reflect her feminism. Still others insist that being a feminist has enabled them to become writers but question whether feminism materializes in their work. Many writers agree that a writer can write from whichever perspective her art demands, but some insist that how this is done is what must be questioned. Margaret Hollingsworth states that myths, culture, and stories cannot be owned (143). After showing how many women have written from other perspectives and voices, Atwood grants an advantage to writing from within a group:

I'll add that in my opinion the best writing about a group is most likely to come from within that group -- not because those outside it are more likely to vilify it, but because they are likely, these days and out of well-meaning liberalism, to simplify and sentimentalize it, or to get the textures and vocabulary and symbolism wrong. (23)

Mouré goes much further and argues that, in fact, a writer does traduce the "other" group. She argues that we "create them in our own image, out of our own class and cultural background, our own values and processes. . . . Perpetuating our own Law.-Our own privilege. Thus placing these women we speak of in a double silence" (204-5).

Many of the writers who argue for freedom of imagination do not address the issue of racism that accompanies these notions of representation. Most of the contributors assumed that taking another viewpoint meant writing from a male perspective. And they also assumed that the question regarding considerations of race, class, or sexual orientation, asked them to position themselves accordingly. As a result, many recount in their personal narratives how their ethnicity, class, or sexual orientation

affected their lives as writers, not how others might be affected. Atwood, however, does bring to the fore the standard argument used to explain why blacks and Natives are not published. The argument claims that publishers need to sell books to succeed and for that they need an audience. Without an audience, they cannot publish the works of special groups (19). Keeshig-Tobias counters such an argument by pointing out that there is a demand worldwide for Native writing. She contends that white writers writing about Native culture will get their books published while Native writers are told by publishers that their work “is ‘Indian,’ ‘too Indian,’ or ‘not Indian enough’” (174).

Maracle seems to concur when she points out that publishers are rarely the focus of censorship debates since they are granted the right to choose (183). Nourbese Philip’s essay appears to best summarize the debate from the perspective of Native women and women of colour⁵:

Artistic freedom appears to be alive and well in Canada for some; these writers, however, pay not the slightest heed to the fact that the wider context includes many who, because of racism, cannot fully exercise that artistic freedom. In Canada, that wider context is in fact very narrowly drawn around those artistic freedoms of white writers. (219)

Of the 44 writers represented in the collection, only nine speak to the issue of racism in the publishing industry. Many more speak for freedom of imagination. In general, the only universal point of agreement is that all classify themselves in one way or another as feminists. Most points of consubstantiality are not universal but are shared amongst smaller sub-groups of the writers published in the anthology.

⁵It should be noted that Maracle’s, Mouré’s, and Nourbese Philip’s essays were originally written for another work and were reprinted in this anthology. Thus, they were selected by the editors to address specific issues and provide a specific context: they would not have been written to directly address the questions posed by the editors.

Given contemporary feminism's penchant for valuing difference, the overall effect of the anthology would not at first seem problematic. After all, through personal narratives the writers show how the personal becomes political; they reveal the infinite difference that characterizes feminism; and they expose the multiple and differing sites (though not universal) for consubstantiality. The lack of universal agreement should not create difficulties, at least, according to poststructuralist or postmodern feminism, since universality has been deemed the means by which subjugation is carried out. But the anthology proved to be anything but unproblematic. Its publication was followed by a series of articles in the journal *A Room of One's Own*, which contested the intent and practice of the anthology. The debate over *Language in Her Eye* begins with Margaret Christakos' article, "Axioms to Grind."

Christakos attacks the anthology for its white solipsism, arguing that the majority of questions asked by the editors privilege "a critique of gender oppression" which "exhorts" the contributors to use "a discourse of sexual difference" (Christakos 64). Christakos makes it clear that such an approach is, for her, not relevant to the nineties. She asserts that to be effective, feminism must become "integrative feminism." Integrative feminism requires that feminists be committed (at least imaginatively) to "theory as a site where a multiplicity of bodies can be seen," and it calls for a framework "rooted in a critique of how power systems, like master narratives, are organized in Western Capitalism around systematic intersections of race, class, *and* gender hierarchies" (Christakos 58-59). Christakos claims that the editors' request for a "personal response" enables the white writers to avoid the issues of race and class:

It is no surprise that only a small minority of white women writing in *Language in Her Eye* have bothered to move beyond indirect or direct slugging of what is often contemptuously cited as the prescriptive revocations of white artistic license by unreasonable and self-righteous anti-racist fanaticism. (Christakos 73)

In addition, she contends that the use of neutral terms such as “women writers” is an act of erasure. It depends on a contradistinction with a white male standard, so that its use negates the existence of non-white writers and non-white experience. In other words, “women writers” without further qualifying markers always refers to white women. Christakos suggests that the white writers’ failure to attend to the issue of racism signifies their bond with the “ideology of white privilege over any other expression of commitment to freedom for all individuals” (65).

Christakos clearly divides the contributors into two camps: good feminists directly address issues of racism and classism, and “enact a criticality of the conduct of white power in language and in our literature” or, at the very least, bravely “personify the darker precepts of self-loathing inculcated into, and meant to sustain, white femininity” (79, 78). The bad feminists, in addition to privileging the discourse of gender difference, do not (or refuse to) speak theoretically about their writing; they leave discussions of race to women of colour; they use terms such as “writer” or “women writers” without naming which writer or which women (i.e., black female writers); or they refer to a universal notion of womanhood usually through the categorical “we” (Christakos 72-79).

Janice Kulyk Keefer, whom Christakos specifically charges with “white solipsism,” responds to many of Christakos’ claims, and draws attention to the weaknesses in Christakos’ arguments including her prescriptive utopianism, her tendency to universalize, her generalizations about “race anonymity,” her failure to see herself as someone who co-ops the voice of others, and, most importantly, her creation of binaries. As Kulyk Keefer asks:

What is to be gained by setting up a hierarchy of virtue and pitting an Atwood (“bitter and desperate doublespeak,” “cloaked defensiveness”) against a Nourbese Philip (“convincing, direct and honest,” “clear imperative”). Is this really going to assist white readers and writers in achieving Christakos’ professed aim of “solidarity with women of colour”?

. . . Christakos' response to *Language* is in many ways an exercise in "back to the binaries", with the Goodies (the six women of colour plus assorted whites such as Betsy Warland and Erin Mouré) vs the Baddies, led by Atwood. (106)

Kulyk Keefer's essay is one of three that are included as responses to Christakos' essay in the same volume of the journal *Room of One's Own*, but it is the only one that directly challenges and strongly disagrees with Christakos.

Susan Rudy Dorscht's essay agrees with Christakos' critique of *Language in Her Eye*, and goes so far as to borrow Christakos' approach to criticize Sharon Thesen's work. Dorscht, as a white woman, learns through Christakos to question her own white solipsism. She makes a conscious effort to note when she universalized "woman," and "when clearly the experiences and assumptions ascribed to her were those of white, middle-class, heterosexual women" (111). Once enlightened, Dorscht questions Sharon Thesen's essay which argues against theory.⁶ Dorscht points out that Thesen does not indicate the racial identity inherent in her use of "women." Dorscht goes on to challenge Thesen's critique of theory by bringing into play Thesen's solipsistic use of the term "writer":

Thesen's arguments against theory are particularly troubling because they are made so unself-consciously. What goes without saying in Thesen's argument is that writers are white, (white) women writers live in the "dark shadow" cast by the (dark monster), "Literary Theory," and white women writers don't need to understand the assumptions in which we/they are drenched. (112)

⁶The Thesen essay was not one of those included in *Language in Her Eye*. It was an unrelated article published in a newspaper.

Dorscht goes on to argue against the opposition of theory to practice which she sees as Thesen's main thrust. Dorscht contends that theory and experience must be brought together if we wish to change practice. When Dorscht insists on a connection between theory and practice and thereby prescribes theory. Returning to Christakos, Dorscht equates Christakos' bad feminists with those who deny theory. Like Christakos, Dorscht suggests that a failure to theorize results in the complicitous "silencing of women"⁷ (115).

Julia Emberley, like Dorscht, responds favorably to Christakos' work calling it an "excellent example of ethical criticism" (88). Emberley, however, is not as wholehearted as Dorscht in her acceptance of Christakos' critique. She warns against assuming women no longer have to struggle with oppression based on gender difference. Since women must still resist such oppression, they still need a feminism based on gender (Emberley 90). Rather than an integrative feminism, she argues for one that is historically and culturally constituted (Emberley 90). Most important, Emberley cautions against confusing the symbolic forms used to mediate experience with the reality of experience that women face (91). Emberley argues that the "self-naming of experience," the "I" narrative, is important, but it must be able to move into a "we" position to make social change possible:

The personal narrative is itself a mediated form that not only allows the subject position "I" to operate in a field of utterances, it also substantiates the validity of this "I" slot -- who claims it and who becomes it. In opposition to the "I" slot is the "we" slot. . . . If we cannot constitute a "we", is the possibility of social change within our grasp? (91-92)

Emberley acknowledges Christakos' use of the personal narrative to "record her unlearning of class and racial privilege" (92); nevertheless, she points out that Christakos' narrative, being too particular, is unable to become a "collective experience" (92).

⁷Dorscht here fails to identify the racial identity behind her use of the term "women."

Emberley discloses a very significant feature of Christakos' essay: at no point does Christakos establish consubstantiality (or solidarity) to formulate a collective known as feminism. I would argue that the written accounts of experience formulate the crux of the debate over *Language in Her Eye*. Christakos accepts some "I" narratives as legitimate and others as solipsistic. But what makes such narratives legitimate? Why are the texts of Judith Thompson, Ann Ireland, Erica Ritter, Betsy Warland, Daphne Marlatt, Rhea Tregebov, and Erin Mouré more acceptable than the texts of other white writers? Warland, Mouré, and Marlatt clearly work within and through theory. As Christakos indicates, Warland's work consists of "language-conscious explorations," Mouré "theorizes language," and, while Marlatt also theorizes language, her most redeeming feature is her recognition of the "multiple nature of the real" (79). Christakos clearly privileges theory as a site of multiplicity and as the framework for critiquing power systems (58). For her, theory appears to be the only way out of white solipsism:

I would like to see anthologies that *enter* from an interrogative perspective which foregrounds the problematic of how privilege has gone unnamed within white feminism, and which recognizes that the connection of a political engagement to theory and writing never happens from arbitrary categorizing of *Language in Her Eye*-women-who-belong-with-women-who-belong-of-course-to-feminism constructions of false relevance and axiomatic silencing. (79)

The six "women of colour" writers included in the anthology are not required to use theory (although some do) because they directly address the issues of race and class. But what of the white women writers Christakos deems worthy of redemption (they are considered good feminist despite the fact that they do not deal directly with racial issues or use theory): Judith Thompson, Ann Ireland, Erica Ritter, and Rhea Tregebov. What is this expression of "inculcated self-loathing" of white femininity that sets them apart? How do these essays differ from those Christakos rejects as solipsistic? After all,

Atwood's essay also recounts the process of "inculcated self-loathing" that goes with white femininity:

Things we heard from men: Put a paper bag over their heads and they're all the same. She's just mad because she's a woman. Nothing wrong with her a good screw won't fix. . . . We were told that there were certain 'right,' 'normal' ways to be women, and other ways that were wrong. The right ways were limited in number. The wrong ways were endless. (15)

Ann Ireland's story, although clearly different in details, communicates the same process of feminizations: "'Hey Ireland, you a girl or what?'. . . I tried. Beginning with the outside clues; clothes, hair, gestures ...there were lots of rules to this feminine life but I'd learn!" (158). Christakos indicates that as a "white middle-class woman," she can relate to Ireland's story because it presents a version of "our specific colonization?" (79) She asserts that the essay names gender "in relation to whiteness as a condition, a construction, an epistemic narrative" (79). Why then can she not relate to Atwood's text as a white middle-class woman? Is Atwood's not equally a version of "our specific colonization." Clearly, for Christakos, it is not. Atwood errs when she brings into play "a categorical 'we'" which she uses, according to Christakos, "to refer to an imagined homogeneity of 'women' being socialized into codes of femininity of the pre-feminist fifties" (75). In other words, the key to the other white writers' salvation (if they did not use theory) is their use of the particular. Ann Ireland never goes beyond "I," and Thompson never goes beyond her "I" and "she" narrative. They do not attempt to move into the realm of the collective. As Christakos says of Rhea Tregebov, she "writes from her own specificity"⁸ (79).

⁸ Tregebov does use "woman" and "we" as categorical terms in her essay: "Within the patriarchy, femaleness is perceived in so distorted a fashion that we cannot act simply as women, but are compelled to act as female impersonators" (269). Christakos appears to

As Emberley has indicated, Christakos' focus on the particular inhibits the formation of a collective, or, in Christakos' own terms, a solidarity. In other words, Christakos' use of "experience," her "I" narrative, does not offer a means for creating consubstantiality: it can only articulate difference. This is why Christakos must insist on theory as the source of white women's potential liberation from solipsism, and their "solidarity with the dispossessed women of Canada" (77). This is also the reason, as Dorscht recognizes, that theory and "experience" must be connected, with "theory" being the privileged term. Christakos does not acknowledge the use of "I" narratives by feminists as inevitably connected to theory. According to Susan David Bernstein, the intrusive "I" is a rhetorical event that "carries the capacity to accentuate and overturn convention of authority, particularly the pretense of objectivity as an ideological cover for masculine privilege. Along with this challenge to discursive authority and the motivated interests that inscribe it, the confessional mode of contests redesigns what constitutes legitimate 'truth'" (121). Connecting these personal narratives to theory and using them in feminist discourse does not automatically equate with political action. Such confessional approaches may "furnish a strategy to explore the discursive and social constructions of subject positioning," but they can also, when they become mandatory or

assume that Tregebov's use of "Jew" specifies the "woman" and "we" as Jewish. I would argue, however, that Tregebov's use of the term "woman" is meant to refer to all women not just Jewish women. By comparing the oppression of women and Jews, Tregebov makes visible what may otherwise be invisible. She is also able to collapse the terms so that women can identify with (or at least come to an understanding of) what it is like be discriminated against as a Jew: "As women and Jews we share a common posture; tenuous, ambiguous position in a social structure which is emphatically not our own and yet which we know and understand intimately, profoundly" (271).

function by “interpolating a subject into a particular identity,” reify the discursive power structures they originally contested (Bernstein 123,122).

I claim that *Language in Her Eye*, because it contains a multiplicity of “I” narratives which do not act as a “universalizing source of knowledge” (122), succeeds in presenting a plurality of meaning. It achieves this, however, via its one point of consubstantiality, the notion gender difference equals feminism. As stated earlier, on all other points, the “I” narratives continually undermine a notion of universal identification. To persuade individuals to act, you must first persuade them to identify with a common interest. Christakos tries to do just this by shifting the site of consubstantiality. But she cannot rely on the collectivization of individual experience recommended by Elspeth Cameron because the writers she challenges use this strategy. Nor does she attempt to enact Marlatt’s notion of “the multiple nature of reality” (Christakos, 79). Marlatt, in her essay, advocates the use of “i”(sic), but contends that we must learn to move between the “i” and “we” positions without implementing hegemony:

Becoming aware of this dialogue on the (many) fringes, listening to other women’s words / realities, is to engage in a delicate balance between recognition of difference and recognition of shared ground. The balance between i and we, neither capitalized not capitalizing on the other. (192)

Instead, Christakos implements her own “I” narrative. But her narrative of experience does not attempt to move into the “we.” Her narrative, as a result, becomes what Bernstein refers to as “exhibitionist confession,” a form of “I” narrative which “uses personal disclosure as rhetorical striptease to entice readers with juicy tidbits that flaunt the mutuality of body and mind underwriting the audacious ‘I’” (125). This mode of confession reinforces the hegemonic subject position of the author: “The author’s personal experience becomes the new uncontested authority” (129). Christakos establishes herself as an authentic subject whose experience reflects the learning process that liberates her from white solipsism. Once liberated, she is free to speak on behalf of

the other. And she attempts to wield her authority to enforce her theoretical framework by relying on guilt or shame (if you don't conform you are guilty of white solipsism or collusion with patriarchy, both of which equate with racism). As Kulyk Keefer suggests, Christakos does more to create divisions than she does to create solidarity.

Christakos also overlooks the fact that many Native women writers reject theory as another form of colonization. While some Native women writers do theorize, like Christian, they are careful to warn against using theory according to the institutions of academe:

Among European scholars there is an alienated notion which maintains that theory is separate from story, and thus a different set of words are required to "prove an idea" than to show one. . . . By presenting theory in a language no one can grasp, the speaker (or writer) retains authority over thought. By demanding that all thoughts (theory) be presented in this manner in order to be considered theory (thought), the presenter retains the power to make decisions *on behalf of others*. (Maracle, *Give Back*, 87-89)

Christakos' attempt to establish the more abstract terrain of theory as common ground amounts to basing identification on belief—feminists must share the same theoretical framework for them to reach common ground. But feminists tend to reject hegemonic, prescriptive belief systems. It would seem that consubstantiality must be experiential for feminists. As we have observed in the critical moment and the debates that follow, "experience" inevitably betrays difference for sameness and sameness for difference. "Experience" can create consubstantiality along certain lines of difference (class, race, and gender), but when feminists try to cross or bridge those lines, establishing common ground through experience becomes more difficult and tenuous.

"Experience" in the development of feminist literary criticism is tied closely to identity. Establishing, preserving, or controlling how one's identity is constructed

constitutes a matter of survival for groups such as black women, Native women, and lesbians. “Experience” at the ‘critical moment’ functions to establish both consubstantiality and division by delineating the attributes of a specific group. In other words, “experience” works to define the qualities the group shares, while indicating their difference from others. In this process of identity formation, literature becomes a means for mapping experience. As such, it has the power to give meaning to experience, to validate and value experience, and to render certain experiences invisible. To take control of literary criticism or theory is to take control of the stories and to begin the process of drawing one’s own map.

The three critical moments identified in this chapter share a common pattern of development: each begins with the recognition that texts designated as literature reflect the values and interests of the dominant groups within society; each responds by creating a definition of what constitutes its given category of criticism (i.e., black feminist literature, lesbian literature, or Native women’s literature); each also creates a set of principles for developing the new critical approach. The duality of the critical moment (its use of “experience” to create both division and identification) inevitably produces debates about the practice of criticism and the role of experience in that practice.

In the debate over Smith’s “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” a number of feminist critics take issue with Smith’s use of experience and the principles she establishes. The main arguments take two basic forms. In one, Smith has not been specific enough in defining the attributes of the group (black women): her definitions could apply to black men or even white women. In the second, Smith has been too exclusive: her definition excludes black men and even black women from differing social backgrounds. The poststructural readings of Smith’s text view her use of experience as essentialist, producing a reductive sameness. These readings do not account for how Smith names difference or how she often constructs experience as polyvalent. Most significantly, they do not recognize the rhetorical function of “experience” in Smith’s text.

Written for a specific audience at a given time, Smith's text attempts to meet the needs of that audience. It operates, as Christian notes, as a gathering place and a resting point, a temporary pause in the process of change. Christian's work demonstrates that if we recognize the rhetorical function of these moments, we can build upon them rather than expend energy trying to give primacy to one approach over another.

The *Language in Her Eye* debate demonstrates what happens when experience informs critical practice. In many ways, the practice of invoking "experience" appears to meet the demands of feminism. It allows for difference, creates a multiplicity of voices, and appears to break down hierarchies. For those who take issue with this use of "experience," the problems arise from the simultaneous occurrence of division and identification. When an individual writer expresses her experience, the feminist reader assumes that the writer is inviting her to recognize the experience as shared. If the experience is shared, identification takes place. If, however, the experience is not shared, the reader may feel excluded and division occurs. The strongest critique of *Language in Her Eyes*, articulated by Christakos, accuses the majority of writers included in the anthology of 'white solipsism': the writers render other women's experiences invisible because they assume that their experience applies to all women when it does not.

In making this charge, however, Christakos invokes her own experience to establish her source of knowledge. She thereby uses experience to claim for herself a privileged position, but she also rejects experience as a means for consubstantiality, and turns to theory to establish common ground. But theory requires expert knowledge; it limits the frameworks by which feminists can view and interact with the world; and it limits the critical practices of feminism. Christakos fails to recognize that theory cannot liberate women: theory is merely one of the frameworks that directs our attention. Christakos appears to reject the both/and possibilities of experience. For her experience is only a totalizing sameness. She does not see how it allows for movement between the particular and the general. As Marlatt indicates, feminism is a balancing of the

‘recognition of difference and a recognition of shared ground.’ In refusing to allow for the use of a collective experience, Christakos unwittingly invokes experience to establish her own authority. While she may demonstrate that she does not use the term “woman” without qualifying it, the results of her actions, as Kulyk Keefer pointed out, are the same as those she rejects.

“Experience” offers the means by which feminists can balance difference and consubstantiality, for it produces and allows for both. “Experience” bridges the particular and general. Certainly, the use of “experience” can produce essentialism; it can operate in favor of authority and hierarchy, but understanding how “experience” functions helps feminists both to exploit the term’s potential and to avoid its disadvantages. Despite all the attempts to denigrate “experience,” and to give preference to theory, critics inevitably refer back to experience as theory’s point of origin. The dichotomy, theory/experience, often requires a privileging of one term over the other. The apparent incompatibility between the terms has led feminists to reject theory, as Jiles does, or to reject experience, as Christakos does. But feminists are still working to break free of the dichotomy and to bridge the two terms. Hélène Cixous offers feminists a model by which the opposition between theory and experience can be collapsed. The next chapter examines how experience-as-metaphor offers an alternative to rationalism. It looks at how metaphor comes out of our experience of constructing language while being constructed by language. Understanding the relationship between experience and metaphor may assist feminists in using language to change social reality. Cixous’s theory of *écriture féminine* helps to illustrate the connection between experience and metaphor, and how the connection can work for feminism.

Chapter Four
Experience as Metaphor:
Hélène Cixous's Rhetoric of Metaphor in "The Laugh of the Medusa"
and "Castration and Decapitation"

As we have seen, the charge of essentialism seems to accompany a rhetorical appeal to "experience." Implicit in this connection is an understanding or assumption that "experience" names the essence or, in Burke's terms, substance. Why is this such a problem? For those who reject essentialism, to fix or to name is to make something reductive and, even, to declare it a universal quality, thereby excluding those who do not possess or share the essence. Even when the term "experience" is not actually invoked, the cry of essentialism follows close on the heels of any rhetorical strategy that brings "experience" into play.

The debate surrounding the texts of Hélène Cixous¹ demonstrates this type of response. But to discount the power of Cixous's work is to seriously misconstrue the

¹Cixous's work is heavily indebted to both Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of language and Jacques Derrida's theory of *différance*. The Imaginary and Symbolic Order are of primary importance in Lacan's work. Accordingly, the Imaginary corresponds to the pre-Oedipal phase in which the child believes itself to be one with the mother. In this phase the child does not experience a sense of difference or lack only identity and presence (Moi 99). The entrance into language constitutes the Oedipal phase. Here, the implementation of the Law of the Father separates the child from the mother. Experiencing a sense of loss or lack, the child then desires the mother and so must repress this desire. This primary repression opens up the unconscious requiring an acceptance of the phallus as the representation of the Law of the Father: "All human culture and all life in society is dominated by the Symbolic Order, and thus the phallus as the sign of lack" (Moi 100). Cixous also uses Derrida's notion

transformative powers of the rhetoric of “experience.” A number of academic feminists, Leslie Rabine, Katherine Binhammer, Domna Stanton, Diane Griffin Crowder, and Barbara Biesecker, have become interested in Cixous’s theory for the rhetorical structures and techniques, especially that of metaphor, she appears to recommend through her work. In this chapter, I will look at some of the rhetorical strategies apparent in Cixous’s use of metaphor that manifest themselves in the English translation,² beginning with the critical

of *différance* which postulates the free play of the signifier and defines writing as an “endless displacement of meaning which both governs language and places it for ever beyond the reach of a stable self-authenticating knowledge” (107). On one level, Cixous’s use of *différance* lends to her text an “anti-essentialist and anti-biologistic” slant (Moi 110), but on another level, Cixous undermines this anti-essentialism by linking *écriture féminine* to the mother and the feminine libido both of which are closely associated with the Imaginary. With the feminine libido linked to female sexual organs and the feminine located in the unconscious or Imaginary (Weedon 68), Cixous’s theories at times appear essentialist. According to Chris Weedon, Cixous fails to escape “the dual problems of women’s continuing marginalization . . . and the reduction of women’s subjectivity to sexuality” (72-3). For a more detailed explanation see Weedon’s text or Tori Moi’s *Sexual/Textual Politics*.

² It should be noted that I have not used the original French version, but come to an understanding of Cixous’s theory through the English translations. As one of her translators notes, meaning does not move in a one-to-one correlation between languages:

The difficulties of translating a writer like Hélène Cixous are immense. No translation is ever faithful, since the translating language will inevitably erase, add to or alter the meanings of the original, a process that becomes especially significant in the case of a writer like Cixous who actively incorporates the possibilities generated by language into her text. The translator is forced to obliterate, invent, distort, producing a version of the original which, except

analysis of Cixous's application of metaphor. While critics identify metaphor as primary to Cixous's rhetoric, they do not analyze how metaphor functions in Cixous's discourse to create change in language and in social structures. To begin such an analysis, I turn to Ernesto Grassi to establish a relationship between metaphor and rationalism, where metaphor becomes part of a semantic (rhetorical) language similar to the *écriture féminine* developed by Cixous. While Grassi reconstructs the role of metaphor in the formation of meaning and knowledge, he does not delineate the relationship between metaphor and experience. The theory of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson fills this gap by making the connection between experience, metaphor, and social structure more explicit.

The Critics on Cixous's Rhetoric of Metaphor

Critical views of Cixous's work rarely agree on the role or function of metaphor in her texts. While critics generally identify the maternal metaphor as primary to Cixous's writing, they all define the maternal metaphor differently. Moreover, many focus on whether or not Cixous's use of metaphor complies with feminist goals. For some it meets those goals and functions as a strong point in Cixous's theory; for others it undermines those goals and constitutes the main flaw of her theory. Of those who deem metaphor a weakness, some claim it is ineffective because it does not deal with the literal (or everyday life) while others contend that it is ineffective because it is too literal.

In "Écriture Féminine as Metaphor," Leslie Rabine acknowledges that Cixous's practice of metaphor poses a challenge to patriarchal language, but she does not endorse the practice because of the contradictions it contains. According to Rabine, the rhetorical

for the recourse of an occasional note, renders all such transactions invisible.

(Sellers, 3)

English translations may, therefore, produce different manifestations of rhetorical structures. I have used English translations that are broadly accepted within the discipline. And my interpretation of the role of metaphor is based on these texts.

device predominantly employed by Cixous is that of the “maternal metaphor” which denotes “a linguistic operation different from that of paternal metaphor as substitution” (20). Rabine notes that the “term ‘maternal metaphor’ will not here denote the use of the Mother as a substitutive figure for female difference and absence” (20). In the rhetoric developed by Cixous, Rabine argues, the maternal metaphor works as a condensation in which “the two terms of the metaphor alternate with each other in the same signifier, and this makes them both different and the same, both separate and united, both absent and present” (Rabine 36). Such a metaphor “disrupts the unity of the symbolic order” and exposes the “heavy logic” which insists on one meaning per term. The best known example of this form of maternal metaphor occurs through the Cixous’s use of the French verb ‘voler’ which plays on the meanings ‘to fly’ and ‘to steal’: “It’s no accident that *voler* has a double meaning, that it plays on each of them and thus throws off the agents of sense” (Cixous, *Medusa*, 887). In this metaphor, women’s writing is both stealing and flying. The metaphors layer over each other and their meanings interact complicating each other rather than covering over one meaning with another. Rabine gives another example of the maternal metaphor-as-condensation in her reference to *Souffles*:

One passage in *Souffles* plays on the signifiers *fils* (threads and son). The passage seems to start out as narrative, but since *fils* is a condensation, it defies any attempt to establish representation (as well as translation). The son and the threads become entangled, to the point that “the fathers cheat in order to break the son/threads and make the text disappear.” The writer responds: “In me revolt is added to an unhappiness which is woven from a new fury: I spin/run away [filer, to spin, but also to go at great speed], fuming, to confront the fathers: ‘you’re the bad mother.’”

Rabine recognizes that the metaphors of son as text and women’s text as weaving are both paternal. They become maternal, however, through the terms with multiple meanings which layer the metaphors together revealing their contradictions: “The force which

unleashes the feminine ‘language of a thousand languages’ and disrupts the stable signifieds of our symbolic order is a different, a feminine, kind of metaphor: ‘The mother too is a metaphor’” (36). The paternal metaphor as substitution belongs to a tradition which uses metaphor and language as clothing--a “falseness hiding another falseness” (31). In the paternal metaphor one term covers over another and hides it. Meanings take over rather than interact. As a “metaphor of metaphor as clothing” (31), the paternal metaphor constitutes a mastery of language that excludes and oppresses those who lack or who are denied the required language skills and knowledge to achieve such mastery. The oppressed become, in a sense, the hidden term. Rabine states that the substitution “always comes back to signify the father” (35) and the “‘ultimate object’--the phallus” (36), while it displaces the feminine (i.e., the mother), or, as Jacqueline Rose states, “the prohibition of the father takes the place originally figured by the absence of the mother” (38-39)

Rabine’s purpose, however, is not to simply delineate Cixous’s feminine rhetoric. Rather, she seeks to investigate “a set of impasses” or “contradictions” which emerge in Cixous’s texts (21). To do this, Rabine acknowledges the problems that *écriture féminine* sets out to counteract or overcome, and it is in resolving these problems that the contradictions arise. First, and the most generally acknowledged problem, is the exclusion of women from language (Rabine 21). *Ecriture féminine*, or the “invention of a new language” (Cixous qtd. in Rabine 21³), strives to transform the structures of patriarchal language but with the understanding that it must work within a language and a theory which generally excludes woman or uses woman as an object (Rabine 27). As Rabine notes, “this contradiction is not only Cixous’s and is not easily resolved in favor of either of its terms. An understanding of theoretical concepts and schemas involves complicity

³This is Rabine’s translation. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen translate this as “the invention of a *new insurgent* writing” (Cixous, “Laugh” 880).

with the hierarchical power inherent in their use, but in order to challenge this power feminists need knowledge of this theory”(Rabine 32). Rabine implies that working within terministic screens not completely constructed by feminists is contradictory. Since no terministic screen could be completely feminist in nature, it would seem that all feminist screens and the feminists who work within them are subject to this dilemma.

A second contradiction which Rabine identifies comes out of Cixous’s notion of reality: Cixous’s approach is deconstructive; it assumes that “what we consider reality, both inner and outer, are fictions, narrative structures . . . phallogentric plots that encode experience and determine our interpersonal relations” (Rabine, 38). While the fictional status of reality makes it possible for a theorist or writer to deconstruct confining representations, according to Rabine, it does little for the woman confronted with discrimination, poverty, or an abusive husband (38). Rabine concludes, “the realm of social oppression and action and the realm of writing exclude each other. Each leads to the other, but they do not share the same boundaries” (38-39). A third contradiction, Rabine identifies, appears when the maternal metaphor is brought into play. The multiple meanings of each term eventually give way to separate substitutive chains: “They cannot help but signal the inevitable return of representation and conceptualization, the reimposition of the law of meaning” (Rabine 41). In investigating these contradictions, however, Rabine introduces one of her own. By unraveling it, we may begin to go beyond the contradictions Rabine identifies in Cixous’s work. Rabine inweaves her own contradiction when she acknowledges that Cixous seeks to challenge male discourse “but not through opposition” (27). Rabine concedes that:

To oppose phallogentric symbolic systems would only, according to Cixous, perpetuate their own fundamental structure, that of metaphysical opposition. The structure of dualist, hierarchical opposition, which shapes thought and language and on which meaning depends, works

unerringly to exclude feminine difference and make woman a mirror image of man. (27)

Rabine's definition of the maternal metaphor seems to be built on just such an opposition. It may be different from the paternal, but its difference becomes a mirror opposite. The paternal metaphor substitutes the same for difference (Rabine 37): the maternal metaphor frees difference through condensation. The paternal represses the feminine: the maternal incorporates the "bodily signifiers of feminine erotic drives." The paternal demands continuity: the maternal disrupts. The paternal revolves around fetishism ("an oscillation between refusing to recognize that women do not have a penis and seeing them as castrated" (Rabine 29-30)): the maternal revolves around "exiting from language based on fetishism" or a "recognition of difference" (Rabine 29,30).

In the English translation of Cixous, however, maternal metaphors, as Rabine identifies them, are presented in the original to clearly indicate the condensation. "*Voler*," for example, is presented as "to fly" with a footnote stating, "also, 'to steal.'" Both meanings of the verb *voler* are played on" (Cixous, *Medusa*, 887). There seem to be few equivalents in English, or at least none that has been recognized within feminist discourse. In English, feminists play with words by altering structure as in *dis/ease*, for example. They also reclaim words such as "hag" that have been used in negative ways against women by transforming the word's definition. Rarely, however, do they use words in a similar fashion to Cixous who brings very different meanings into play simultaneously to function as an extended metaphor. The point here is not to provide a comparison of the nature of the two languages. It is simply to suggest that for English speaking feminists the maternal metaphor might operate differently as a primary rhetorical strategy. In addition, Cixous's rhetorical strategy may not be limited to a particular type of metaphor, but it may be an exploitation of the nature of metaphor and the role it plays in language. If so, then the second and third contradictions Rabine highlights may contain their own resolutions. Metaphor is not an oppositional form but a pre-existing component of

language that brings into play strategies that can create alternatives to phallogentric discourse. In this case, the breaking down of metaphor into different substitutive chains will have limited significance because metaphor will ultimately structure those “chains.” Altering metaphor more effectively alters language and makes different ways of acting possible. In other words, women who face discrimination, poverty, and abuse may understand and articulate their experiences differently when they use a language structured by metaphors which empower them.

Katherine Binhammer, in “Metaphor or Metonymy? The Question of Essentialism in Cixous,” attempts to resolve a confusion that arises in translation from the relationship between “female,” “feminine,” and “woman”: “the triad of female, feminine, and woman is not active in French in the same way that it is in English” (78). Arguing against the charge of essentialism applied to Cixous’s work, Binhammer suggests that the charge results from a too literal reading of Cixous, a reading which collapses feminine into female. Binhammer notes that to read the feminine as female is impossible in many of Cixous’s texts. In *Readings with Clarice Lispector*, Cixous clearly defines a male character as being “the most feminine of all characters” (Cixous *Readings* 69; Binhammer 68). Binhammer notes that “the feminine is divorced from any relation to female and functions metaphorically, to signify particular characteristics that Martin [the male character] has that the female characters do not” (68). The use of the term “feminine” is not intended as a direct link to the biological body. Instead, Binhammer argues, a metaphorical reading of feminine and masculine focuses on “cultural inscriptions rather than anatomical bodies” (72). Binhammer suggests that feminine metaphorically represents a feminine “libidinal economy that rejects narrative” whereas masculine represents an economy that “inscribes linearity” (70). To identify a character as the most feminine is to identify, metaphorically, the character as one who operates by a feminine economy.

As Binhammer points out, Cixous suggests that the metaphorization of masculine and feminine produces a whole system of signs which become a part of a cultural system:

The (political) economy of the masculine and the feminine is organized by different demands and constraints, which as they become socialized and metaphorized, produce signs, relations of power, relationships of production and reproduction, a whole huge system of cultural inscription that is legible as masculine or feminine. (Cixous, *Newly* 80-81; Binhammer, 72)

Binhammer argues, however, that the metaphorical relationship between feminine and female does not always hold the two terms apart: feminine does occasionally slip into “female” as biological and, thus, into the literal realm. She finds the opposition between “metaphor” and “literal” problematic, for the metaphorical and the literal, in the case of Cixous, both arise out of experience. The maternal metaphor⁴ with its emphasis on giving birth is dictated by women’s experience (Binhammer, 73). However, it is the origin of the metaphor in experience that ties it into anatomical difference and, as Binhammer believes, deadens it (73). Borrowing a reference from Cixous, Binhammer suggests that what is needed for understanding the nature of Cixous’s text is a “metaphor that is not a metaphor” (76). And this Binhammer believes is found in metonymy. She defines metonymy not as opposite to metaphor but as a trope in which “the combinatory chain relating the two terms to each other must be determined within a specific historical and social context” (76). As Binhammer states,

The metonymic field is based on contiguity and combination rather than on identity and similarity. This difference allows us to escape the either/or established by traditional articulations of the essentialist problem—i.e.,

⁴ Here, in Binhammer’s text, the “maternal metaphor” refers to a particular metaphor, that of giving birth, rather than a specific type of metaphor based on condensation.

either one reads the relation of feminine to female literally, therefore, biologically and anatomically, or one reads it metaphorically and thus having no relation to women. (74-75)

By selecting metonymy over metaphor, Binhammer addresses criticisms of Cixous's work put forward by Domna Stanton and Diane Griffin Crowder.

Domna Stanton criticizes Cixous's use of metaphor but also suggests that metonymy is a more valuable trope. According to Stanton, the three French theorists Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva seek to "explore *la différence féminine* and . . . to subvert a phallocratic system predicated on the perpetuation of the same" (156). Their chosen means for carrying out this radical act is metaphor, which Stanton initially defines as "the optimal tool for transporting meaning beyond the known" (157). With this definition in hand, Stanton declares that the three French theorists fail in their attempt to escape the "phallocentric scenes and semes" (159). She argues "female difference or the female as principal metaphor for difference" is a part of contemporary theories of modernity, and, as such, it is merely a "replaying of the age-old scene" (Stanton 157). In addition to implicating the connection between female and difference in patriarchal discourse, Stanton seeks to challenge the French feminists' claim to difference. Stanton "probes" the French feminist discourse "for traces of the same" which would contradict the quest for difference and place the efforts of the three French feminists within the phallocentric system and mark their failure. As part of this process, Stanton puts metaphor as a rhetorical strategy on trial to determine whether or not it can function adequately as a trope of difference. Her main focus is "woman as/is mother," which she defines as an extended metaphor that encompasses the preoccupation with female difference (158). This constitutes another version of the maternal metaphor, but one that differs dramatically from that proposed by Rabine. Stanton suggests that within a symbolic context, mother represents the feminine creative force including the "experiences

of women's bodies," "the ultimate love for another," and "another 'syntax,' and other 'grammar' of culture" (159).

As Stanton notes, for Cixous "the mother" is a metaphor (159), and Cixous views metaphor as "both desirable and efficacious" because of its "capacity to transform existing meanings, [and] ultimately, the system of significance" (159). *Mother* represents women's relationship to their text and to other women: in the symbolic, women give birth to other women without the father. Metaphor is a central component of Cixous's writing, and Stanton charges Cixous with failing to question metaphoricity itself. To successfully condemn metaphor, however, Stanton redefines it by turning to the work of Jacques Derrida:

As the trope of similitude, metaphor affirms the verb to be . . . and thus has an ontological function, what Derrida describes as a hidden essence: 'metaphor is able to display properties, to relate to each other properties on the basis of their resemblance, without ever directly fully or properly stating the essence, without itself making visible the truth of the thing itself.' (160)

The use of such a definition is not only limited and somewhat Aristotelian but also logically fallacious, for it inevitably begs the question. Stanton finds her "trace of the same" by using a definition that makes metaphor into another name for the same and by abandoning the notion of metaphor as process (a transforming or carrying over of meaning). As she herself states "the trope of similitude itself could be regarded as metonymy for the philosophy of sameness" (160). She compounds this by adding a Lacanian notion of metaphor arguing that "the very function of metaphor is to provide a missing term, to say what lacks, is absent" (161). Cixous, however, clearly rejects this aspect of Lacanian theory, particularly his notion of lack:

Lacan preserves it [the figure of Phallic monosexuality] in the sanctuary of the phallus . . . 'Sheltered' from castration's lack. Their 'symbolic' exists,

it holds power — we, the sowers of disorder, know it only too well. But we are in no way obliged to deposit our lives in their banks of lack, to consider the constitution of the subject in terms of a drama manglingly restaged, to reinstate again and again the religion of the father. (“Laugh”, 884)

Rabine also points out that Lacan’s conceptualization of metaphor and its use differs from Cixous’s and constitutes, in fact, the paternal metaphor: “Metaphor as substitution is here what Lacanians call the paternal metaphor. . . . In spite of Lacan’s insistence on metaphoric substitution as the constant slippage of signified under the signifier, metaphor as substitution always comes back to signify the father, and more specifically the father’s ‘sheaf’ of fecundity” (Rabine 35).

Diane Crowder’s critique of Cixous’s theory of writing shares with Stanton this notion of the metaphor as substitution. She compares the work of Monique Wittig with that of Hélène Cixous. Noting that each uses metaphor differently, Crowder favours Wittig and remains “skeptical of Cixous’s goal of refining ‘difference’ while eliminating ‘opposition,’” and she suggests that we “must resist the allure of neo-femininity” offered by Cixous’s text⁵ (143-44). According to Crowder, Wittig “refuses metaphorization of the body” because she views it as a means of suppressing women. For Wittig, Crowder claims, metaphor covers over the female body, eliminating it from the text while treating it with contempt (Crowder, 122). Wittig equates the transformative process of metaphor

⁵According to Crowder “Cixous’s strategy for women is to adopt many of the traits stereotypically attributed to women in male discourse. Flowing, formless language, irrationality, the unconscious, maternal nurturance, rejection of power, and being closer to the body are prized in her theory of “woman’s writing.” Crowder argues that the differences Cixous defines resemble too closely “male descriptions of women.” She, thus, calls Cixous’s an appeal to “neo-femininity.” (143-4)

with the process by which patriarchy makes 'woman' invisible to 'man.' As Crowder states:

It is consistent with Wittig's insistence upon concrete political reality that her writing, though rich in symbols and similes, goes far toward banishing metaphor. . . . metaphor is always in some sense a denial of the word that is replaced by another. But metaphor disguises this absence with the presence of the substituted term. Because Wittig's writing is political, she consistently marks the absent term, calling it to our attention to force us into an evaluation of the ideological implications of 'absence' from discourse and language. (128)

Crowder suggests that Wittig shuns metaphor because it is a patriarchal tool of suppression. Wittig's conceptualization of metaphor matches the more classical view of rhetoric -- as a form of dress or ornamentation it hides and deceives and therefore must be cast out. On the other hand, Crowder notes that metaphor is a favored technique of Cixous's. Cixous uses this technique to "break down semantic hierarchy and reason" (142). Crowder, like Binhammer, argues that Cixous's metaphors constantly slide into the biological; by so doing, they become, for Crowder, inevitably reduced to the literal such that the maternal becomes a sign for womanhood (136-7). In Crowder's view, the difference that such a use of metaphor identifies for women resembles too "closely male descriptions of women" (144), and she defines this as an essentialist trap (137). According to Crowder, Cixous reifies rather than escapes patriarchy. Crowder favors the use of concrete language, as exemplified in Wittig's work, which she sees as primarily concerned with representation: "Writing the female experience can teach women how to speak" (144). The representations Crowder favors may not resemble "male descriptions of women," but their reliance on concrete language resembles closely a requirement of rationalism (a discourse traditionally deemed masculine). Crowder fails to recognize that the use of concrete language is a practice heavily embedded in the masculine ideal of

language that often eschews rhetoric in the name of objectivity. The shunning of metaphor complies with masculinist principles of language use, and, as a result, offers no guarantee that a feminist use of language will escape the influence and control of patriarchy.

Both Crowder and Stanton use definitions of metaphor that undermine the force of Cixous's work. Cixous does not use metaphor as a means of replacing one term with another, nor does she view metaphor as the trope of sameness. To suggest, as Stanton does, that Cixous does not bring metaphor into question is also erroneous. In "Castration and Decapitation," Cixous reveals the danger of metaphor and problematizes it through her comments regarding Lacanian theory: "And so in the face of this person who lacks lack, who does not miss lack of lack, we have the construct that is infinitely easier to analyze, to put in place --manhood, flaunting its metaphors like banners through history" ("Castration" 47). In her rejection of the "realm of the proper," Cixous also seems to provide a critique of Derrida's construction of metaphor that emphasizes the "proper" (which leads also to "propriety" and "property"). According to Derrida, "our present position, then, is that metaphor is what is proper to man. And more properly to each individual man, according to the *dominance* of nature's gift in him" (47). The link between the gendered term "man" and the "proper" is rejected by Cixous: "We'd first have to imagine her ceasing to support with her body what I call the realm of the proper. The realm of the proper in the sense of the general cultural heterosocial establishment in which man's reign is held to be proper" ("Castration", 50).

Stanton's definition and theoretical framework for her analysis of Cixous's use of metaphor is heavily indebted to Lacan and Derrida, and it is, as a result, antagonistic to Cixous's work. Not surprisingly, Stanton reaches the conclusion that "this metaphorical body of work may be viewed, somewhat perversely perhaps not as an elaboration of the unrepresented/unrepresentable, but rather--to use a metaphor--as an offspring delivered by/from the father; an appealing, empowering reproduction, not a different production"

(169). Stanton through her own rhetorical strategies brings Cixous's work within a phallogentric theory. In the end, Stanton again turns to Lacan and argues that metonymy (as displacement) is a more propitious rhetorical strategy than that of metaphor (173). Stanton's notion of metonymy and metaphor is very similar to that of Binhammer's (Binhammer, in fact, borrowed Stanton's view of metonymy but rejected her notion of the maternal metaphor). Her endorsement of this strategy also points to a limited definition of metaphor that is incompatible with Cixous's use of metaphor. Binhammer's focus on metonymy deals with the puzzle and problems posed by the terms "feminine" and "female." But, like Rabine's work, it does not provide a broad enough scope to explain the other uses of metaphor in Cixous's rhetoric.

Cixous clearly makes use of a highly developed romantic⁶ view of metaphor. For this reason, the somewhat classical⁷ definition suggested by Stanton and Binhammer is inadequate: the power of metaphor far exceeds the mere identification of similarity. Binhammer's use of metaphor also falls short in its understanding of the relationship between experience and metaphor. Binhammer correctly notes that a metaphor that has become literal is considered dead, but she argues that "when anatomical difference effects

⁶The "romantic view . . . sees metaphor as inseparable from language which is 'vitality metaphorical,' and 'reality' which is ultimately the end-product of an essentially 'metaphorical' interaction between words and the 'hurrying of material' that they encounter. Metaphor deliberately invoked, intensifies language's characteristic activity, and involves, quite literally, the creation of 'new' reality" (Hawkes 90).

⁷The "*classical* view . . . sees metaphor as "detachable" from language; a device that may be imported into language in order to achieve specific, pre-judged effects. These aid language to achieve what is seen as a major goal, the revelation of the 'reality' of a world that lies, unchanging, beyond it" (Hawkes 90).

experience” the metaphor becomes dead, as though the literal and experience are one and the same (73). According to the romantic view, experience is an integral part of all living metaphors. What Cixous seems to be arguing for is the creation (or at least an understanding of) metaphor that is formulated out of women’s experience and in return allows them to construct the reality of that experience. Men create different metaphors according to their experiences and thus produce a different reality.

Barbara Biesecker also seeks to identify the nature of Cixous’s metaphor. She is, however, not concerned with contradictions or the problem of essentialism but with Cixous’s “feminist intervention into Rhetoric” (88). Biesecker argues that “The Laugh of the Medusa” can be read as a “treatise that seeks to provide women with the means by which they may, through language, actively and strategically intervene in the public sphere” (89). In establishing “The Laugh of the Medusa” as a rhetoric, Biesecker identifies the main call to action as a call for women “to discursively intervene in the public sphere” (89). The work focuses not only on the need for women to write but also on the need for them to speak publicly (89). According to Biesecker, Cixous’s appeal is based on the assumption that language functions as “equipment for living” (90). Here, Biesecker provides an answer to one of the contradictions raised by Rabine (that Cixous’s feminist discourse was not applicable to the plight of women in everyday life). According to Biesecker, the realm of social action and the realm of writing are not separate. To write is to do something: “Women must speak and write because speaking and writing constitute ‘*the possibility . . . of change*’ . . . In short, discourse, whether written or spoken, is posited in the essay [“Laugh of the Medusa”] as a decidedly pragmatic and potentially effective means for (re)shaping human reality” (90).

To implement change feminists must answer the questions-- how does language reshape human reality, and how should women use discourse to direct a reshaping of reality? Like Rabine, Biesecker recognizes that women must use a language which “constitutes ‘woman’ as that which must be excluded as the other in order to conserve the

identity of the same" (91). Biesecker suggests that it is woman's positioning in language that gives her a rhetorical edge, for woman is "in-between . . . *both* inside and outside the center" (91). This state of not belonging, of having no place, allows women to "pilfer the discourse that regulates the system and move it in a new direction" (92). In other words, Biesecker endorses the practice of stealing/flying as a rhetorical tactic. She is careful to distinguish this from merely appropriating the masculine discourse. According to Biesecker, stealing is "unfixing the syntax, the grammar, and the signs of the dominant discourse so as to make it possible for new meanings to circulate and 'fly'" (93). The process is a recoding of signs. Because of an imperative within Cixous's work which states that *écriture féminine* is impossible to define (Cixous 883; Biesecker 92), Biesecker avoids defining how this recoding occurs.⁸ However, the examples Biesecker selects of Cixous's own recoding afford us a glimpse at what that process may be. Biesecker argues that one of the most significant signs Cixous targets for recoding is "woman" (93). To illustrate Cixous's "plan," Biesecker uses the metaphor of the "Dark Continent" which connects the sign "woman" to Cixous's notion of body: women are to return to the body and thereby change the function of their sign (93). Biesecker concludes:

If we follow the steps of Cixous's argument closely what we discover is that she neither valorizes nor fetishizes the body as such. Rather, she posits the move toward the body as a way into the space of the unconscious, a concept-metaphor that names nothing less than a structure or reserve of resistance . . . Thus we may read Cixous's invocation of the body animated by a 'sexual difference' as her attempt to configure for

⁸"Because this rhetoric is perpetually on the move, it is an art of improvisation that outstrips any attempt to define it, that exceeds all efforts to theorize it, formalize it, make it proper" (Biesecker 92)

women a *topos*, and her summoning of the unconscious as a resource of invention for a counter-hegemonic rhetoric. (93)

Biesecker continues to outline the basic characteristics of this rhetoric. She qualifies her previous statement by adding that the rhetoric will not be counter-hegemonic, for, as stated earlier, Cixous indicates that *écriture féminine* is not oppositional (see Rabine 27; Cixous "Castration" 44; Biesecker 94). This new rhetoric, according to Biesecker, will not be regulated by a "will to truth" or "a will to power" but by "a will to 'desire-that-gives'" (94). Most significantly, however, Biesecker notes that this rhetoric "does not contain, [but] carries" (Biesecker 94). Biesecker's emphasis on the "body as a commonplace or topos" points to one of the most significant features of Cixous's rhetoric (94). Cixous's use of metaphor constitutes the most radical feature for a feminist reconfiguration of rhetoric. A more detailed examination of the nature and function of metaphor provides more comprehensive answers to the questions: how does language reshape reality, and how should women use discourse to direct a reshaping of reality?

In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous sets out to escape patriarchal discourse and its construction of reality. She notes,

Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis. It has been one with the phallogocentric tradition. It is indeed that same self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory phallogocentrism. (879)

Cixous's view of the masculine discourse or rationalism accords closely with the theory formulated by Ernesto Grassi in his development of the ideas of Vico. The significance of Grassi's theory to Cixous works derives not only from a shared view of metaphor but also from his recognition that metaphor poses a direct challenge to rationalism.

Metaphor as the Grounds for Rationalism

According to Grassi, rationalism is logical thought based on the principle of sufficient reason. Rationalism gives primacy to calculability and technology (the concrete), the means by which objects are secured and fixed (Grassi, *Heidegger*, 43). This process is frequently carried over to beings, securing and fixing them and thereby facilitating their domination and exploitation. To escape this process of fixation and exploitation, we must first call into question the primacy of rationalism. As Grassi suggests, “This would mean that the primacy of logic and man’s calculating attitude towards beings would then lose its position of domination” (*Heidegger* 44).

Rationalism, however, is not easily challenged. It has dominated Western thought since Aristotle, and was strongly reinforced through Descartes’s notion of cogito and German Idealism. It has gained a seemingly unassailable value within Western culture which awards the greatest value to thought which is classified as logical and/or scientific. In other words, thought must be based on the rational process of providing proof in order to gain credence and validity: within such a system of thought, the only acceptable language is one based on assertion and contradiction, and this is only possible within a closed system:

The rejection of all passionate rhetorical language and at the same time all ordinary language as the expression of common sense is based on this. On the other hand, this marks the emergence of the ideal language as a calculus with a mathematical structure that is reduced to the function of formalizing symbols. (Grassi, *R as P* 5)

Within rationalism, rhetoric becomes little more than ornamentation which functions to alleviate the boredom of the purely rational (*R as P*, 15). Grassi rejects this notion of rhetoric; he argues that the problems that concern humans are those which “urge themselves upon us in the construction of the world” (*R as P*, 6). Whereas rationalism insists that nature is the object of study, Grassi, through the humanist tradition of Vico,

asserts that history not nature should be the focus of study. Accordingly, nature has meaning for us only when it meets human existential needs. It acquires meaning through a process of humanization, a process in which we find relationships between what our senses reveal to us and what we need. In other words, it is not through inference that we come to know our world, but through our interaction with nature in the process of meeting our needs: nature acquires meaning in use (*Rhetoric* 9).

The main idea put forward by Vico and reclaimed by Grassi, is that humans make history not nature, and we can only know what we make. The ability to see relationships between nature and need, which in turn lends meaning to nature, comes from invention or discovery, both products of the imagination. In metaphor and figurative language, Grassi argues, we find “the original form of the interpretative act itself” (*R as P* 7), for metaphor is the means through which we represent the relationships and the similarities between the information of our senses and our needs. Metaphor becomes an important tool in that it allows us to transform and construct our world. According to Grassi, the rational has no place in this original process: he notes that “every time that man loses contact with the original needs and the questions that arise out of them, he falls into the barbarism of the ratio” (*R as P* 6). Meaning and reality are created through work (our interaction with the environment), but this work always occurs within the context of a social community. Thus, knowledge is always historically situated, since it is a product of the needs and problems that confront humans within a given time and place (Grassi *R as P* 10).

In formal rationalism, Grassi suggests, the traditional objects of *contemplatio* are the eternal and unchanging first principles from which we derive the meanings we assign reality. The rational process begins at these first principles (also termed premises or *archai*), moves to deductions, and ends with conclusions, thereby producing knowledge. Deductions are really a matter of providing proof, “the giving of reasons” (*R as P* 25). As Grassi states, “the reason becomes evident in connection with the deduction, which necessarily starts from the premises and hence depends on their validity” (*R as P* 25).

The first principles are non-rational; that is to say, they are not subject to proof and are not based on the deductive process demanded by rationalism. Referring to Aristotle, Grassi notes that these first principles are prior to proof and must be known and believed on “more forceful grounds” (*R as P* 25) or “to a higher degree than what is deduced from them” (Aristot. Post. An. 72a 37; Grassi, *R as P* 26).

Grassi's theory is based on a closer examination of these first principles. He posits that these first principles must have a rhetorical character, for they are indicative, nonderivable, primary, and they can only be expressed in what Grassi terms a semantic language:

Such speech is immediately a ‘showing’—and for this reason ‘figurative’ or ‘imaginative,’ and thus in the original sense ‘theoretical’ [*theorein*--i.e., to see]. It is metaphorical, i.e., it shows something which has a sense, and this means that to the figure, to that which is shown, the speech transfers [*metapherein* [i.e., to carry over]] a signification; in this way the speech which realizes this showing ‘leads before the eyes’ [*phainesthai*] a significance. This speech is and must be in its structure an imaginative language.

If the image, the metaphor, belongs to rhetorical speech (and for this reason it has a pathetic character), we also are obliged to recognize that every original, former, ‘archaic’ speech . . . can not have a rational but only a rhetorical character. Thus the term ‘rhetoric’ is not, nor can it be the art, technique of an exterior persuasion; it is rather the speech which is the basis of rational thought. (*R as P* 20)

Grassi's reformulation of rhetoric's relationship to the rational establishes metaphor as the foundation or ground upon which rationalism is built. With this repositioning, Grassi clearly indicates that figurative language--metaphor--and the emotions invoked play a key role in the making of knowledge. As a result, his approach is more inclusive than

traditional objectivist notions of knowledge that exclude figurative language and emotion, and it speaks directly to the ideas formulated by Cixous.

Grassi's attempt to escape (if only temporarily) from rationalism shares with Cixous's break from masculine discourse an emphasis on metaphor. Although Grassi does not use metaphor as a primary means for communicating knowledge in his writing (he mostly uses rational language), he nonetheless gives it a central place in his theory. Whereas Grassi theorizes about the role of metaphor, Cixous practices metaphor. In the "Laugh to the Medusa," she uses metaphor as the primary means for communication. To borrow Grassi's term, she speaks a semantic language, but her use of metaphor communicates a complex conceptualization of language and, more importantly, a specific practice of writing: *écriture féminine*. She poses her use of language as a challenge to a masculine writing. This masculine writing, as previously noted, is linked to the history of reason which, in turn, is considered to be one with phallocentrism. Cixous characterizes the rational as an "enormous machine . . . turning out its 'truth'" ("Laugh" 879). It is calculating and seeks mastery for domination ("Laugh" 881, 887). It "reproduces the masculine view," regenerates "old patterns, anchored in the dogma of castration," and reduces writing to "his laws" ("Laugh" 884, 885, 883). According to Cixous, the dialectic is a trap that women must escape ("Laugh" 890).

Like Grassi, Cixous sees the masculine or rational discourse as fixing objects and creating stasis in order to construct a notion of reality that is located outside of man and in nature: as she states, "they haven't changed a thing: they've theorized their desire for reality" (Cixous, "Laugh" 885). For Cixous, the rational (masculine) language is based on "the inanity of 'propriety'" ("Laugh" 888)⁹. Grassi, too, makes a similar suggestion in

⁹As previously indicated, in "Castration and Decapitation" Cixous states, "We'd first have to imagine her [woman] ceasing to support with her body what I call the realm of the proper.

his recounting of the tragedy of Cassandra. Cassandra speaks a purely semantic language and cannot be understood by the chorus which speaks and understands only in terms of “rational” discourse:

The Chorus is trying in vain to enter into a dialogue with the seer [Cassandra]. Here its first reaction is the reproach that Cassandra’s invocation of the god Appollo as well as the way she invoked him were *unseemly*; it considers her exclamation *senseless and improper*. Cassandra does not hear the words of the Chorus: she repeats her invocation, and again the Chorus reacts in a rational manner. (*italics mine*; Grassi, *R as P* 22).

Cixous also identifies this lack of communication between the masculine/rational and feminine/semantic when she writes, “how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak—even just open her mouth—in public. A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears only in language only that which speaks in the masculine” (Cixous “Laugh” 880-1).

Cixous’s conceptualization of history also resembles in many ways that of Grassi’s. Cixous suggests history is made when she refuses to equate biology with culture and the past with destiny (“Laugh” 875).¹⁰ She notes that “woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement,” and she

The realm of the proper in the sense of the general cultural heterosocial establishment in which man’s reign is held to be proper” (50).

¹⁰See also Cixous’s “Castration or Decapitation” in which she states, “Instead of being made by man, History’s task would be to make woman, to produce her. And it’s at this point that work by women themselves on women might be brought into play, which would benefit not only women but all humanity” (50).

recognizes that her own reflections “bear the mark of our time” (Cixous “Laugh” 875). One of the functions of *écriture féminine* is to change the signification of history by bringing women to their meaning in history, thereby creating a new history (“Laugh” 885, 876, 883). Cixous concludes that writing and, “*seizing the occasion to speak*,” will facilitate woman’s “shattering entry into history, which has always been based *on her suppression*” (880).

As Biesecker notes, to write is to act, but the act is undermined if the existing rhetorical structures of rationalism are put into use. Cixous’s *écriture féminine* exemplifies a semantic language. “The Laugh of the Medusa” consists of multiple layers of metaphor combined with other forms of figurative language. Cixous metaphorically represents language as place. Language is divided into two continents: the White continent is the masculine domain, and the Dark Continent is the domain of the feminine. Cixous also metaphorically refers to the body as the dark continent; by so doing she layers together writing (language), feminine (woman), and body into a complex relationship which is difficult to articulate outside of metaphor, and in itself forms a metaphor based on condensation rather than substitution. Unlike the maternal metaphor Rabine identifies, this one involves a layering of metaphor without connecting the metaphor through words with multiple meanings such as *fil*s and *vole*r. Here the metaphors come together through common signifiers (in this case continent), and they give more meaning to each other rather than introducing contradiction.

Characteristics of the feminine and the body carry over and become the defining features of *écriture féminine*. As a result *écriture féminine* possesses an imaginary (*topos*) which is inexhaustible (Cixous “Laugh” 876). Its language is pathetic (i.e., emotive) in nature: its speech is “never simple or linear or objectified” and “retains the power of moving us” (Cixous “Laugh” 881). Nor does *écriture féminine* conform to linear notions

of time and progress, it reveals itself instantaneously¹¹: “woman always occurs simultaneously in several places” (Cixous “Laugh” 882). As such it undoes “the work of death,” (Cixous “Laugh” 883) the work of rational language, for as Grassi also notes in his account of Cassandra, rational language is “the realm of time dominated by death” (*R as P*, 24). *Écriture féminine* rejects rationalism’s insistence on unity by embracing multiplicity: “She lets it [the body] articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction--will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language” (Cixous “Laugh” 885).

As Biesecker suggests, by metaphorically constructing women’s writing as place, Cixous transforms women’s writing into a topos or commonplace--the realm of discovery and invention.

The most interesting act of metaphorization, however, lies in Cixous’s description of women and their language, for here woman and *écriture féminine* take on many of the features of metaphor. In the English translation of Cixous’s text, the verbs “carry” (convey by carrying (OED)) and “bring” are often associated with women and their language. As Terence Hawkes notes, “the word *metaphor* comes from the Greek word *metaphora* derived from *meta* meaning ‘over’, and *pherein*, ‘to carry.’ It refers to a particular set of linguistic processes whereby aspects of one object are ‘carried over’ or transferred to another object” (1). For example, women write to “bring women to writing,” “to bring women to their senses” (Cixous “Laugh” 875), and “her language does not contain, it carries” (Cixous “Laugh” 889). Women’s writing becomes almost synonymous with metaphor. “Carry” and “bring” are also both verbs that invoke a

¹¹Grassi states, “The primary [semantic] speech instead reveals itself instantaneously {*exaiphnes*}. It does not lie within the historical time; it is the origin and criterion of the movement of the rational process of clarification” (Grassi, 20)

notion of moving something from one place to another and, thus, reinforce the notion of topos in Cixous's writing

Écriture féminine becomes a transitional space where "flights between knowledge and invention" are possible. It constitutes a site of transformation and change; a possibility for breaking and disrupting the "arid millennial ground"¹² of rational knowledge. If, as Grassi argues, metaphor is the basis for rational thought, then Cixous's *écriture féminine* may truly be able to bring about "a mutation in human relations, in thought, in all praxis" ("Laugh" 882). For *écriture féminine* as a language of metaphor forms a new foundation. The use of metaphor or semantic language may, however, have one main drawback. In using the tragedy of Cassandra as an analogy for the relationship between semantic and rational language, Grassi points out that metaphor may also function as a bridge between the two. According to Grassi, Cassandra enters into a dialogical relation with the Chorus when she asks for an explanation--a reason:

By entering the plane of *explanation* and abandoning the world of allusion with this question, she causes her historical reality to be outlined, and she herself moves into a historical framework of time and space. . . . The change is brought about through a *metaphor*, as though this were the only possible bridge between the rational and semantic realms. (*R as P* 23)

Cixous seems to acknowledge this relationship stating, "as soon as the question 'What is it?' is posed, from the moment a question is put, as soon as a reply is sought, *we are already caught up in masculine interrogation*" ("Castration" 45). Although Cixous stipulates that writing is "working (in) the inbetween" ("Laugh" 883), her metaphorical construction of the white continent strongly implies a refusal to move into the rational.

¹²Here the notion that rational knowledge is "rooted in grounds, in reasons" (Grassi, 29) helps to clarify the significance of Cixous's metaphoric language.

The following statement, which many feminist critics have read as an imperative, suggests this resistance:

It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded—which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. (Cixous “Laugh” 883)

Such a refusal and rejection appears to maintain the opposition between masculine and feminine that Cixous herself attempts to overcome.

While Grassi recognizes the separation between the two forms of language, he avoids opposing the two. As noted earlier, he positions semantic language as the basis of the rational. In other words, semantic language is the first step in the formulation of knowledge. Metaphor reduces the multiplicity of the semantic to unity that then forms the first principles or original archaic assertions from which rational thought proceeds.¹³ A refusal to enter into rationalism may inevitably assign women to the margin which is a domain Cixous asserts we should not accept (“Laugh” 881). How then can we escape the

¹³The metaphor lies at the root of our human world. Insofar as metaphor has its roots in the analogy between different things and makes this analogy immediately spring into “sight,” it makes a fundamental contribution to the structure of our world. Empirical observation itself takes place through the “reduction” of sensory phenomena to types of meanings existing in the living being; and this “reduction” consists in the “transferring” of a meaning to sensory phenomena. It is only through this “transference” that phenomena can be recognized as similar or dissimilar, useful or useless, for our human realization. (Grassi, R as P 33)

margin without appropriating the instruments of rationalism?¹⁴ Can the semantic or *écriture féminine* produce knowledge without resorting to rationalism? Can we escape the dialectic?

Metaphor as Experience

The work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson may offer some answers. They too construct an alternative theory to the traditional model of rationalism or “objectivism.” According to Lakoff and Johnson, the objectivist view has at its core a firm notion that truth must be objective and absolute. This core notion leads to a number of suppositions. First, like Grassi, Lakoff and Johnson note that objectivism insists that the “world is made up of objects” (186), and these objects are fixed through a principle which asserts that the objects have inherent properties independent of our understanding of them. In other words, it assumes there is an absolute, objective reality that can be known once we come to know the properties of the objects. We can communicate this knowledge because words have fixed meanings, and if used precisely, in a literal fashion, they can refer directly to this reality (187). Lakoff and Johnson argue that objectivism makes use of a classical notion of language and reality. Within this “myth of objectivism,” objectivity equals rationality, and metaphor becomes nothing more than a decorative use of language which obscures the truth rather than reveals it.

As Lakoff and Johnson note, the myth of objectivism is deeply ingrained in our culture: as members of a common culture, we use it everyday to comprehend our experiences and to give order to our lives (185). Lakoff and Johnson argue that only classical mathematics can fulfil the requirements of an objectivist universe. Outside of this ideal and closed system, objectivism becomes inadequate for dealing with the world of humans: “the real world is not an objectivist universe, especially those aspects of the

¹⁴See “The Laugh of the Medusa” page 887: “Nor is the point to appropriate their instruments, their concepts, their places, or to begrudge them their position of mastery.”

real world having to do with human beings: human experience, human institutions, human language, the human conceptual system” (Lakoff and Johnson 218). In constructing an alternative to objectivism, Lakoff and Johnson also reject the “myth of subjectivism,” which turns to the purely subjective realm of senses, feelings, and intuitions as the source of a “higher truth” (189). Formed in opposition to objectivism, it rejects the possibility of any objective account of human realities (Lakoff and Johnson 223). This myth insists that meaning is determined on an individual basis, and that meaning, experience, and context are unstructured. As a result meaning, itself, cannot be “adequately represented” (Lakoff and Johnson 224). Lakoff and Johnson see the either/or perplex of objectivism and subjectivism as an illusion: each is merely the defining negative of the other. They attempt to offer a third option which they call an “experientialist alternative” (Lakoff and Johnson 226). The third option is founded on the premise that “concepts” govern not only our thought but also our behavior:

They [concepts]also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do everyday is very much a matter of metaphor. (3)

Although we are generally unaware of our conceptual systems, we can, according to Lakoff and Johnson, examine these systems through language since language is based on and perpetuates the conceptual system we think and act through. Even objectivism functions through a metaphorical concept. One of the dominant concepts of objectivism constitutes what Michael Reddy calls a “conduit metaphor” which structures our language about language (Lakoff and Johnson 10). It entails three primary metaphors: ideas are objects, words are containers, and communication is sending containers (words)

to an audience which then removes the objects (ideas). For example, ideas can be discovered and owned, and they can get lost or stolen. Words can convey meaning, be empty of meaning, or be loaded with meaning. And audiences, generally, ‘receive’ messages or information and may even ‘take away’ ideas.

Lakoff and Johnson’s third alternative shares several suppositions with Grassi’s rhetorical theory. According to Lakoff and Johnson, “we understand the world through our interactions with it” (194). As we have seen, Grassi made a similar claim when he states that “nature possesses a meaning only in regard to human needs” (*R as P*, 7). Grassi would also agree with Lakoff and Johnson in recognizing that there is a reality (nature, if you will) outside of us, but we cannot directly know that reality. As such, Johnson suggests, there cannot be an absolute truth but only a relative truth:

We live, move, and have our being within an environment populated with physical things that can stand off against us, resist us, and sometimes even destroy us. So, the issue known as *realism* does not rest on whether or not there is something in the physical world besides human beings, ‘minds,’ ‘conceptual schemes,’ or ‘language’—that is agreed upon by almost everybody. The issue actually concerns what it means for there to be an ‘object’ and what is required for us to be able to refer to ‘objects.’
(Johnson 202)¹⁵

¹⁵Grassi in a similar vein states, “The historical aspects of the realization of the mind are *never eternally valid*, never absolutely ‘true,’ because they always emerge within limited situations bound in space and time: i.e., they are probable and seem to be true [verisimile], true only in the confines of ‘here’ and ‘now,’ in which the needs and problems that confront human beings are met” (*R as P*, 10).

Lakoff and Johnson argue that truth is relative to our understanding which involves human categorization which, in turn, “is a function of interactional (rather than inherent) properties and of dimensions that emerge from our experience” (165). Since the categorizations highlight certain properties and downplay others, the truth of a statement will depend on the highlighted features. In addition:

Categories are neither fixed nor uniform. They are defined by prototypes and family resemblances to prototypes and are adjustable in context, given various purposes. Whether a statement is true depends on whether the category employed in the statement fits, and this in turn varies with human purposes and other aspects of context. (165-6)

Lakoff and Johnson, like Grassi and Cixous, focus on metaphor as an alternative way of reasoning about the world to that of objectivism. Grassi develops a theory that establishes metaphor as occurring prior to rational thought and from which rationalism develops. As he states, “metaphor lies at the root of our knowledge” (R as P, 34). Lakoff and Johnson develop an “experientialist alternative” to the myths of objectivism and subjectivism, in which metaphor plays a primary and central role uniting reason and imagination to become a form of “imaginative rationality” (193).

The most significant feature of Lakoff and Johnson’s work is the degree to which they focus on the role of experience in the development, via metaphor, of knowledge. Grassi only implicitly suggests a connection with experience both through his notion of knowledge as a product of work (*res*) and in the opening to *Rhetoric as Philosophy*.¹⁶ Cixous, in her work, makes a more explicit connection between metaphor and experience. In a 1988 interview Cixous states, “I could write a thesis on the theme of giving birth in

¹⁶ “I began with this autobiographical reference because I believe it is always important to return to the personal situation out of which one’s own thought arises, in order to clarify the theoretical problems that concern one’s self” (Grassi, 4).

the texts by women, it would be fascinating. It's a metaphor which comes easily to women, dictated by their experience" (qtd in Binhammer, 73). Lakoff and Johnson, however, provide a more detailed theory of the connection between experience and metaphor. They assert that "human thought processes are largely metaphorical" (6), and that "*no metaphor can ever be comprehended or even adequately represented independently of its experiential basis*" (19).

Within this theory, Johnson notes that experience is not understood in terms of an empiricist notion of "passively received sense impressions" (Johnson, xvi). While experience may include information that becomes available through the senses, it also includes bodily movement, perceptual interactions, and other aspects of human existence:

"Experience," then is to be understood in a very rich, broad sense as including basic perceptual, motor-program, emotional, historical, social, and linguistic dimensions. . . . experience involves everything that makes us human -- our bodily, social, linguistic, and intellectual being combined in complex interactions that make up our understanding of our world.

(Johnson xvi)

In addition, Johnson argues that the real working material for metaphor comes from two levels of experience. A "basic level" of experience is derived from our interactions with our environment. At this level, we develop gestalts of "overall shapes" and patterns. Using these gestalts, we can identify, manipulate, and distinguish between different objects and activities in our environment. In other words, the gestalts of this experience allow "us to function passably well in our environment" (Johnson 208).

Lakoff and Johnson also note that experience is not separate from culture: "We experience our 'world' in such a way that our culture is already present in the very experience itself" (57). Having said this, however, they posit that there are degrees of experience. Some are more physical while others are more cultural. Lakoff and Johnson primarily focus on physical experiences when formulating their theory of metaphor.

Physical experiences become the grounds for our conceptual systems. In structural metaphors, for example, we transfer a concept which prevails in one type of experience and apply it to another (i.e., we apply our concepts of commodities to our conceptualization of time such that we spend time, save time, and borrow time) (8-9). Orientational metaphors “organize a whole system of concepts” in terms of another (14). For example, experiential concepts of direction, up and down, front and back, and in and out, organize our conceptualizations of other experiences (i.e., we often experience up as positive and down as negative, and we describe good or bad feelings in terms of these directions i.e., happy is up—I am feeling up—and sad is down—I feel really low today (14-15). Our experiences with physical objects and substances give us ontological metaphors which allow us to treat aspects of our experience as distinct entities and objects thereby allowing us to categorize, group, quantify, and reason about our experiences. (The container metaphors, for example, allow us to see ourselves as distinct beings “bounded and set off from the rest of the world” (29) and we project this orientation onto our surroundings such that we can be *in* the clear or we can get *out* of this chore (Lakoff and Johnson 29). By projecting the structure from one domain of experience to another (from physical onto social, epistemic, or linguistic) we create meaning and understanding.

Lakoff and Johnson define metaphor as “*understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another*” (5).¹⁷ They see metaphors as not only coming out of experience, but also forming conceptual systems with some metaphors (those termed conceptual) organizing and structuring other metaphors and determining how individuals will interpret and respond to experience. Even non-physical experiences become

¹⁷Later, Johnson, in *The Body in the Mind*, refines the definition stating that metaphor is “a pervasive mode of understanding by which we project patterns from one domain of experience in order to structure another domain of a different kind” (xiv-xv).

conceptualized in terms of the physical. As Lakoff and Johnson explain, “we conceptualize the less clearly delineated in terms of the more clearly delineated” (59). Through an elaborate network of entailments, metaphors interweave into multidimensional structures (or experiential gestalts) which constitute coherent systems. These systems are embedded within our language and, therefore, our culture: they become the means by which we classify, make sense out of, and come to understand our own experience. We then act accordingly, for “not only are they [metaphors] grounded in our physical and cultural experience; they also influence our experience and our actions” (Lakoff and Johnson 68).

Metaphors function as terministic screens in that they select and highlight certain features while downplaying or drawing our attention away from others. People believe metaphors to be true when a large number of the entailments match up with other metaphors that are accepted as true. Metaphors, thus, become inextricably entangled in our cultural norms and values and become difficult to change. As Lakoff and Johnson note, “most of our metaphors have evolved in our culture over a long period, but many are imposed upon us by people in power . . . the people who get to impose their metaphors on culture get to define what we consider to be true” (159-160). They also point out, however, that part of the truth value of a metaphor comes from how well it fits our own experience. Although very difficult, it does become possible to change metaphors, and metaphors have the power not only to reconceptualize existing realities but also to create new realities (Lakoff and Johnson 144; Hawkes, 90):

This can begin to happen when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it. If a new metaphor enters the conceptual system that we base our actions on, it will alter that conceptual system and the perceptions and actions that the system gives rise to. Much of cultural

change arises from the introduction of new metaphorical concepts and the loss of old ones. (Lakoff and Johnson 145)

Lakoff and Johnson's approach to metaphor illuminates Cixous's work. Cixous, in her writing, re/presents women's experience with and in language, and metaphor constitutes one of her primary means for doing so. The fact that her work has gained broad international acceptance and has become one of the sources for feminist theory, suggests that the entailments of her metaphors 'fit' the experience of many women or, at the very least, many feminists. I would suggest that it is the transformative power of metaphor, this ability to create and change realities, that makes metaphor such a central part of Cixous's *écriture féminine*. Metaphor's origins in experience makes it a useful tool for bringing women's reality to language. But metaphor is not inherently emancipating. Cixous understands the role of metaphor in constructing cultural meaning, and she sees women as trapped in the meanings dictated by metaphors produced in a masculine symbolic:

So between two houses, between two beds, she is laid, ever caught in her chain of metaphors, metaphors that organize culture . . . ever her moon to the masculine sun, nature to culture, concavity to masculine convexity, matter to form, immobility/inertia to the march of progress, terrain trod by the masculine footstep, vessel . . . While man is obviously the active, the upright, the productive . . . and besides, that's how it happens in History.
(44)

For Cixous the chain of metaphors tie us into the realm of the rational (masculine symbolic) with its "Absolute law" ("Castration" 42) and its relentless move to fix everything into hierarchical positions and opposition. The use of metaphor, in other words, is never benign. Metaphors control our perception of reality so that we always see and even redefine our experience in terms of a phallogentric symbolic system. We then, as Lakoff and Johnson suggest, behave accordingly. In this way, language truly does

become a way to imprison women and the Other: it becomes “a false theatre of phallocentric representationalism” (Cixous “Laugh” 884). If we try to alter one conceptual metaphor, there are always several other interconnected ones that pull us back into the dominant structures of meaning.

The masculine interrogation, the posing of the questions-- what Lakoff and Johnson call objectivism, what Grassi terms rationalism--fixes objects and entities and entraps them in the dialectic. This, Cixous states, is the “work of signification,” the “work of meaning” (45). Cixous, like Grassi, recognizes that the bridge, the means of connection, that moves one into rationalism is metaphor. But for her it is the metaphor of substitution, what Rabine defined as the paternal metaphor that performs this function:

And this interrogation precisely involves the work of signification: “What is it? Where is it?” A work of meaning, “This means that,” the predicative distribution that always at the same time orders the constitution of meaning. And while meaning is being constituted, it only gets constituted in a movement in which one of the terms of the couple is destroyed in favor of the other. (“Castration” 45)

In one way, Cixous does what Lakoff and Johnson fail to do: she recognizes “which” body matters, and she genders the body upon which metaphor is created and upon which it is enforced. Lakoff and Johnson state, “‘direct physical experience’ is never a matter of having a body of a certain sort,” and while they acknowledge that “*every* experience takes place within a vast background of cultural presuppositions” (57), they never recognize that the cultural presuppositions differ according to the type of body, or that one body is constantly highlighted while the other is constantly hidden. Instead, they attempt to naturalize (fix) certain metaphors by focusing on the ‘more physical experience’: “conceptual structure is not merely a matter of the intellect—it involves all the natural dimensions of our experience” (235).

“Natural,” however, is a loaded term. It is generally used to associate something with a fixed notion of reality: it locates reality outside of society and culture and places it in nature. It is a term that has been used continually to keep women in their place. In seeking to naturalize a particular set of metaphors, Lakoff and Johnson provide one of their most telling examples of how metaphors impose power relations. Such a process of naturalization is apparent in their examples of “argument is war.” To show that such a metaphor comes from our natural “dimensions of experience,” they construct a hypothetical evolutionary history for the metaphor, claiming:

This metaphor [rational argument is war] allows us to conceptualize what a rational argument is in terms of something that we understand more readily, namely physical conflict. Fighting is found everywhere in the animal kingdom and nowhere so much as among human animals. Animals fight to get what they want--food, sex, territory, control, etc.--because there are other animals who want the same thing or who want to stop them from getting it. The same is true of human animals, except that we have developed more sophisticated techniques for getting our way. (61-62)

Such an ‘experience’ as described here differs dramatically from other “bodily” experiences of moving through space or encountering obstacles in our environment. There are many behaviors found in the “animal kingdom,” but which ones we claim as part of our own repertoire of behavior is clearly a selective process. Assigning any such behavior a biological origin is highly problematic. It becomes more so when we consider the role that culture plays in valuing and structuring such behavior. Our culture is inundated with images, myths, and metaphors of violence: to construct these as biological is to give them an inevitability that does not exist.

Such an account of the origin of a conceptual metaphor would certainly fit into Cixous’s notion of phallogocentric ablation in which the “mystifying charms of fiction” (879) are used to hide other experiences and other realities. For Lakoff and Johnson’s

account of “argument as war” is a fiction. The analogy highlights certain behaviors (particularly those deemed masculine) while it hides others (those deemed feminine). This becomes even more evident when we look at their use of pronouns. As they construct the story of origin, they use the “we” pronoun, including in their discourse a universal audience. The “we” and “our” pronouns are used throughout the text as the standard appeal to the generic reader. The pronoun then shifts to ‘you,’ a direct address and includes the reader in one of their basic premises—we are animals: “Part of being a rational animal, however, involves getting what *you* want without subjecting *yourself* to the dangers of actual physical conflict” (*italics mine* 62). They then shift back to the all-inclusive “we” before moving into the most telling part of their example. Here, they refer to a ‘domestic quarrel’ in which husband and wife both try to get what “each of them wants” (62), but in the next sentence the pronoun becomes obviously gendered: “Each sees *himself* as having something to win and something to lose, territory to establish and territory to defend” (*italics mine* 62). The pronouns “we” and “you” are subsumed into the “himself,” and the feminine aspect of the example, the wife, is lost, hidden, or destroyed in the process. Here, the use of the male pronoun exemplifies the process of the paternal metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson rarely use gender specific pronouns, so this passage stands out. Given the proliferation of feminist scholarship concerned with gender and language in the 1970s, it is surprising to find Lakoff and Johnson “unconsciously” using the masculine pronoun as generic. This is especially so if we consider that their text was published (1980) five years after Robin Lakoff’s *Language and Woman’s Place* (1975).¹⁸

¹⁸The reader may find it instructive to note Robin Lakoff’s comments in her preface to her work in which she writes: “George Lakoff has been my teacher, advisor, and friend, linguistically and otherwise, for many years; most of what I know about language can be traced to him. I have also learned by having to argue him out of male-chauvinist ways and

What Lakoff and Johnson find “natural” is the phallogentric discourse of the masculine symbolic. As Cixous states, “you know those metaphors: they are most effective. It’s always clearly a question of war, of battle. If there is no battle, it’s replaced by the stake of battle: strategy. Man is strategy, is reckoning . . . ‘how to win’ with the least possible loss, at the lowest possible cost” (“Castration” 47). The examples used by Lakoff and Johnson do not reveal the “naturalness” of metaphors, but rather how metaphors are imposed to maintain power relations in society (see Lakoff and Johnson 159-60). Once certain metaphors become conceptualized and conventionalized, they control how others within society see the world. “Natural” in the given examples is merely a matter of convention and domination. In other words, metaphors can and do play an integral role in the subjugation of women.

The presence of power formations within metaphorical structures is most effectively illustrated in a passage from Johnson’s book *The Body in the Mind*. The example describes a passage from an interview taken from a text entitled *Men on Rape* (see Johnson 5-12). In this passage, Johnson seeks to illustrate how metaphorical structures are necessary for understanding. The example starts with an interview of a law clerk who is discussing the issue of rape. In this passage the law clerk confesses that when he sees a “really pretty, and clean” sexy woman, he wants “to make love to her” (6). Because she is not interested, and he cannot act on his desire, he feels degraded and humiliated. He concludes by stating that if he was “desperate enough to rape,” it would be out of spite: a chance to say, “I have power over you and I can do anything I want with you” (6). The law clerk considers this an act of revenge for the unjust power the woman has exercised over him.

assumptions many times over the years; probably I would never have started thinking about the questions posed here had he not forced me to defend myself in arguments about linguistic sexism” (2).

Johnson uses the example to “reenact the logic of the clerk’s discourse” (6). He argues that to understand what the clerk “means,” we must do so through “*our* understanding of *shared* metaphorical projections” (italics mine 6-7). Johnson asserts that the dominant schema or metaphorical structure that functions in the clerk’s text is the “PHYSICAL APPEARANCE IS A PHYSICAL FORCE” metaphor. Johnson stipulates that this proposition is simply a name for “the complex web of connections in our experience and understanding formed by this mapping across domains of experience” (7). Citing numerous examples, Johnson illustrates how this metaphor is often used in our culture in everyday expressions (he was blown away by her, she’s a bombshell, he is strikingly handsome, etc). Johnson works through a series of propositions that accompany the use of the metaphor as it moves through the law clerk’s text. He reminds us that metaphorical structures are non-propositional; an awareness of the “propositional content” of the metaphor is possible “*only by virtue of a complex web of non-propositional schematic structures that emerge from our bodily experience*” (5).

His analysis starts with the combining of two statements: “a woman is responsible for her physical appearance” and “physical appearance is physical force” (8). After working through a number of these statements which he deduces from the text, Johnson ends with the two statements: “A WOMAN WITH A SEXY APPEARANCE MAKES A MAN WHO IS ACTING MORALLY BECOME LESS THAN HUMAN” AND “ONLY AN INJURY IN LIKE MEASURE AND OF LIKE KIND CAN REDRESS THE IMBALANCE OF JUSTICE” (9). He concludes that through metaphor “we make sense of even the most *ordinary* discourse,” and he asserts that “we have reenacted a certain unnoticed logic that would need to be at work for this to be experienced by us as a *reasonable* explanation” (italics mine 10). Johnson assumes that his reader will agree with him and find the text and its “logic” “ordinary” and “reasonable” given his explanation. Johnson presents this example as an illustration of an alternative means of reasoning (which we use everyday) to that of the “ideal standard of rationality” (which

we cannot use on a day-to-day basis). He does not offer the text as an example of one individual's reasoning process but implicates himself and the reader in that process:

We are concerned here with how *real human beings reason* and not with some ideal standard of rationality. We are concerned with *what real human beings grasp as meaningful*. In order to be able to understand the passage, *we, the readers*, must be reasoning that way, too. (italics Johnson's, 11)

Johnson does not adequately distinguish between process and content, and he attempts to generalize from one male individual to all human beings. We would not consider it "ordinary" or "reasonable" for an individual to use such a metaphor to conclude that a car dealer has provoked a theft of his¹⁹ cars. After all, the dealer displays the cars publicly in an enticing fashion (polished and clean, with the hoods up). The appearance of a car is also described in terms of force: it can "knock one out," or "blow one away" or appear "striking." Not to be able to possess or drive the car can also affect self esteem making one feel humiliated and degraded. Few would agree, however, that if desperate a person is justified in stealing the car as an act of revenge or to regain a sense of power. Most of us would not see this as reasonable or ordinary. Why then would this be the case for Johnson's example?

While I would not dispute that metaphor plays a key role in the reasoning process-- the metaphor "physical appearance is physical force" is applied to a vast array of our experiences--but I would argue that Johnson's example does not show what he intends: that is how "image schemata are abstract patterns in our experience and understanding" (2). He shows how certain image schemata are abstract patterns for some men's experience and understanding. A woman would not experience such a pattern

¹⁹With this pronoun, I do not wish to suggest that all car dealers are male, but for this example the masculine pronoun works best.

unless it is used to justify violence inflicted against her as a woman – as it often has been. The reader would only agree with Johnson's conclusions and understand the given passage as "ordinary" if s/he shared the cultural myth or, in this case, metaphorical reasoning process, which suggests that a woman provokes and wants (or at least asks for) rape. I am not suggesting that Johnson is advocating rape, but I am suggesting he fails to acknowledge the gendered nature of his example and the power relations which are supported by certain metaphors. Johnson's failure to recognize the political aspects of metaphor reifies the power difference and violence contained in his example. He sees the metaphorical reasoning process of the clerk as "reasonable" and "ordinary" because he does not acknowledge the implications of the gendered body behind the experience that formulates the metaphors.

Johnson claims that image schemata can have an "objective character" (196) and that they can produce truth, albeit truth-as-correspondence, because "we can see the world through shared, public eyes that are given to us by our embodiment, our history, our culture, our language, our institutions, etc." (211). While he concedes with Lakoff, as previously mentioned, that which metaphors predominate depends on who has power within a social system, he does not recognize or acknowledge that the metaphors he and Lakoff identify are contaminated with these power structures. He does not acknowledge that to see with these "shared, public eyes" we must become blind to the experience of others, those outside the mainstream or, in the case of Johnson's example, malestream. Johnson insists on a shared undifferentiated body, "because our bodies are very much alike with respect to their physiological makeup, we would expect to find commonly shared (if not universal) gestalt structures for many of our physical interactions within our environment" (62). In his example, however, the body is not neuter but clearly masculine.

In fact, in Lakoff and Johnson's work, the body becomes so abstract that it virtually disappears. Johnson reduces it to a notion of embodied understanding: "The

term 'body' is used as a generic term for the embodied origins of imaginative structures of understanding, such as image schemata and their metaphorical elaborations" (xv). Even emotion is reined in and given a limited role in Johnson's vision of an "imaginative rationalism." But bodies do differ, and what passes as "universal" or "objective" is not necessarily shared. Although we all learn to interpret and govern our experiences and interactions according to these metaphors, the metaphors do not always fit or correspond to the experience of the female body. In fact, the experiences of the female body become hidden, if not obliterated, by the web of metaphors that make up the masculine symbolic. As Cixous states, "she [woman] is given images that don't belong to her, and she forces herself, as we've all done, to resemble them" ("Castration" 47). To our understanding of symbolic systems and the role metaphor plays, Cixous brings a notion of difference that arises from the body. Her work reveals that this "universal" and supposedly "shared" body is, in our symbolic system, masculine. There is only one body in this system, or, more accurately, one part that stands in for the body, the phallus--Lacan's metaphor of substitution always already at work. In this symbolic order, Cixous argues, "woman" inevitably becomes a signifier associated with the negative ("Laugh" 884): i.e., nothing, death, or, in Lacan's terms, a double lack ("Castration" 46).

According to Cixous, "woman" becomes caught up in the chain of metaphors that organize our culture ("Castration" 44), metaphors that create of "woman" and the feminine, an automaton: a constructed silent entity/object who serves to define the masculine via the negative. "Woman" thereby maintains a set of hierarchical oppositions which keeps man in his place of power, preserves his "glorious phallic monosexuality," ("Laugh" 884) and maintains the phallus as the central monument of language and, consequently, culture. The signifier "woman" is not only controlled by the position it is forced to hold within the symbolic order, but also by the philosophical-historical meanings that have been attached to and associated with the sign "woman." As Cixous

argues, masculine constructions of “woman” and the “feminine” have turned women away from their own bodies and taught them to view the body with shame and even disgust:

We’ve been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty; we’ve been made victims of the old fool’s game: each one will love the other sex. I’ll give you your body and you’ll give me mine. But who are the men who give women the body that women blindly yield to them? (“Laugh” 885)

Cixous’s call for a return to the body through a “new insurgent writing” (“Laugh” 880) identifies her main strategy for changing not only language (although that is certainly the first step), but also social and cultural structures (“Laugh” 879). To escape or avoid being ensnared in the masculine symbolic order, women and others must create alternatives. Cixous is not suggesting we create a new language. As Rabine indicates, Cixous is well aware that we must work within the symbolic order. As she says, “as soon as we exist, we are born into language and language speaks (to) us, dictates its law, a law of death” (“Castration” 45). At the same time, she does not endorse, and argues against, becoming the defining negative (another opposition) to the masculine.

Cixous recognizes with Grassi the role of metaphor as a precursor to the rational and masculine codes and law. The production of metaphor occurs in our interaction with our environment: its beginning is in experience. To return to the body is to return to this realm, to the commonplace of metaphor. But before we can begin to recognize this commonplace, we must first free ourselves from the influence of the “white continent,” a metaphor for the masculine symbolic order which is a place of old patterns, traditions, conventions. This masculine symbolic dominates the language of our culture that surrounds us everyday, and it controls the specialized metalanguages of the social institutions (“Castration” 51). As Cixous points out, it manifests its power in metaphors, myths, stories, and the “human” sciences.

Once we understand how pervasive and all encompassing this masculine domain is, then we can come to understand the strategy needed to escape its hold. Cixous encapsulates this strategy in *écriture féminine*. As noted earlier, the feminine operates here metaphorically, but Cixous also recreates “woman.” The term, “woman,” (in the English translation) functions as a metaphor for the female experience throughout history of and in society, culture, and language. While Cixous speaks of a “universal woman subject” (“Laugh” 875), she is careful to emphasize that there is “no general woman, no one typical woman,” and she reinforces the importance of individual constitutions (“Laugh” 876). What we have in common is not simply a biological body, but a body of experience that has been unspoken/unwritten, and that has not made its way into language: this is “woman.” That is not to say, as the essentialist charge mistakenly assumes, that women all have the same experience. The bodies of experience may differ, but what is common is their absence from language.

We must also note that experience for women has been named and conceptualized, but more often than not this is done from the masculine perspective through masculine metaphors (with their dividend of power)--Freud’s notion of motherhood is a prime example (as is the notion of woman as mystery). Cixous is careful to reject these representations:

In the child it’s not the penis that the woman desires, it’s not that famous bit of skin around which every man gravitates. Pregnancy cannot be traced back, except within the historical limits of the ancients, to some form of fate, to those mechanical substitutions brought about by the unconscious of some eternal “jealous woman”; not to penis envies; and not to narcissism. (“Laugh” 890)

Woman must, according to Cixous, break these codes of the masculine order, “break the old circuits” of reproduction, and “get away from the dialectic” (890). She does this by recognizing and conceptualizing her own experience and using its schematic structures to

understand other domains of experience: “These drives are our strengths, and among them is the gestation drive just like the desire to write: a desire to live from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood” (891).

The metaphor of “mother” does not simply refer to a biological state or process as Binhammer seems to suggest in her notion of the literal. “Mother” contains the biological, but goes beyond this, becoming a metaphor for a type of relationship between women, and a metaphor for the process of creating knowledge through the body of experience which belongs to women:

Everything will be changed once woman gives woman to the other woman. There is hidden and always ready in woman in the source; the locus for the other. The mother, too, is a metaphor. It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself and return in love the body that was “born” to her.

(“Laugh” 881)

“Mother” is a form of giving, but what is involved in that giving is metaphorization. If, as I have argued, “woman” acts as a metaphor for a body of experience, then for woman to give woman to the other woman, she must first transform this body of experience into metaphor -- schemata that allow us to understand other aspects of the world and other domains of experience in terms of experience we know. Woman thereby creates (or gives birth to) a new reality, and returns the body, through metaphor, to other women (“other” operating in a double sense indicating both another and the Other created to bolster the male subject in the masculine symbolic).

The primacy of metaphor in Cixous’s writing is best seen in her practice. Her descriptions of woman’s writing are frequently stated in metaphorical terms, and the results produced by this writing are indicative of the characteristics of metaphor. When describing the nature of a woman’s text, for example, Cixous tells the reader that it “gives a send-off,” but she emphasizes that we are to consider this “in a metaphorical sense”: “I

think it's more than giving a departure signal, it's really giving, making a gift of, departure, allowing departure, allowing breaks, 'parts,' partings, separation . . ." ("Castration" 53). Cixous goes on to say that the detachment of a woman-text "takes the metaphorical form of wandering, excess, risk of the unreckonable . . ." ("Castration" 53). The results produced by this woman-text and the implementation of the economy that accompanies it are often described, as previously stated, with the verbs "carry" and "transform": terms which constitute the function (or action) of metaphor.²⁰

Unavoidably, the use of language requires a movement into meaning. But that movement does not have to follow the same patterns or rules dictated by the present rationalist system. Cixous advocates a transformation, one that must begin at ground level. Translating our bodies of experience into metaphor is the first step in breaking the "arid millennial" ground of rationalism. Metaphor, as Grassi has pointed out, plays a key role in making knowledge, not a knowledge based on first principles but one, as Lakoff and Johnson suggest, based on a web of metaphorical schemata. The constant metamorphosis of experience, if allowed to "depart," produces difference and multiplicity. When we try to make the metaphors speak with one tongue (shared by all) we fix them and enter the realm of exploitation, domination, and essentialism. If we are to read Cixous's work as a treatise, as Biesecker entreats, then we must read it as one that enjoins us to create and use metaphor to transform the symbolic order and in the process culture. It is not a question of banishing metaphor as a decorative concealment. Rather we must come to see the intimate connection between the body, experience, and metaphor and how these together produce knowledge.

²⁰See "Laugh of the Medusa" where these words appear most frequently in a text that relies heavily on metaphor.

Conclusion

Can we only speak, ultimately, from the so-called “truth” of our experiences, or are all empirical ways of knowing analytically suspect? Finally, what is the pedagogical status of empiricism in the age of what Alice Jardine labels “the demise of Experience”? (Diana Fuss, 113)

In answering her own questions, Fuss eventually concludes that the only way we can deal with “experience” is to see it as an ideological production which allows for the introduction of narratives based on lived experience at the same time it brings those narratives under question. It equates to a double gesture of reification and deconstruction. To conclude this dissertation, I argue that the way we most effectively deal with “experience” is by understanding its rhetorical function. Such an approach does not determine the essence of “experience” once and for all, nor does it create any magical escapes from theoretical impasses. The rhetoric of experience offers feminists a way to embrace the differences highlighted by the use of “experience” and the controversies it provokes. Any declarations of the “demise of Experience” are premature. We still interact with our environment, meet our needs through that interaction, and give meaning to that interaction. That interaction constitutes experience.

How experience comes to have meaning is, of course, important. As we have seen, different theorists have offered different explanations of this process: for Plato the meaning of experience comes from habit and custom; for Aristotle, it comes from a similar notion of standardized bodies of belief and practice; for Locke, it derives from an understanding of the simple ideas that experience produces in the mind of the individual; for Dewey and Woolf, it emerges from an individual’s relationship with the environment and that individual’s level of engagement with the world around her or him; for Scott and Weedon, it depends on the discursive fields in which experience is constructed; for Burke, it forms from the symbols or plots which both arise from and pattern experience to

determine its relevance; for Grassi, it emerges when human needs are satisfied; for Lakoff and Johnson, experience becomes meaningful through metaphor. How experience acquires meaning depends, it appears, on the terministic screens that theorists use to understand the world around us. How we understand “experience” will determine how we assign it meaning.

In understanding the functioning of “experience” and how experience comes to mean, we comprehend how “experience” can persuade individuals to act or not to act. For example, a women’s group wants to change the attitudes of a group of men so that those men will act by voting to give women the vote. Those men firmly believe in the independence of the individual, and they believe that through observation, testing and the application of reason we come to know reality and truth. They also believe that woman was created to be dependent on man for her well being. To argue with these men that the way they see the world is completely false, and to strive to change the whole terministic screen by which they view reality would be rhetorically ineffective. Rhetorically, it would be more effective to understand the screen through which they view the world and to use that screen to alter its own structure so that the men’s behavior (not granting women the vote) becomes inconsistent with their firmly held beliefs (reason and the independence of the individual).

As we have seen, Wollstonecraft does just that in her arguments for women’s right, but she was not the only one to use this strategy. Many of the women who spoke on behalf of woman’s suffrage in the nineteenth century used similar strategies. As indicated in the introduction, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s research highlights the centrality of experience in this feminist discourse. While the scope of this dissertation does not permit a study of Campbell’s collection of key texts by early feminists, I would suggest that future analysis of these texts would prove invaluable in building on our understanding of the rhetoric of “experience.” And such an understanding is crucial. Since feminists are concerned with the act of changing social power structures, they must understand how

“experience” is used rhetorically to maintain those structures and how it can alter those structures.

Many feminists have found “experience” a significant ally in their rhetorical struggle for rights. It cannot be denied that “experience” has also proven treacherous; such will inevitably be the case for a term with the history of transformation that this one carries. But feminists must know how “experience” has been useful to women and how it has worked against them before they can determine the future role of “experience” in feminism. While contemporary feminist theories have done much to critique the use of “experience,” they have frequently overlooked the rhetorical role of “experience.” Of course, this is not surprising, given that feminist approaches to rhetoric are a relatively recent phenomenon. Feminist rhetorical theory is still in its infancy. It is only within the past two decades that feminists have posed a serious challenge to the rhetorical tradition, and much of the initial rhetorical work of feminists has focussed on “sexism in language, differences in communication between women and men, great women speakers, and women’s communication as a separate culture” (Foss, Foss, and Trapp 276).

This dissertation lays the groundwork for an exploration into the rhetorical function of “experience.” Its primary argument is that “experience” functions as a key term in feminist rhetoric. I stated at the beginning that a key term for a feminist rhetoric needed to possess a number of characteristics. For a key term, the general basic requirements are that it be titular and capable of appearing at times as static and monolithic. It must also be ambiguous, possessing a degree of plasticity that allows for agreement and difference at the same time. “Experience’s” titular quality comes from its ability to take a central or naming role in a given terministic screen. In this role it becomes original in that it acts as the source from which all other terms emanate. We see this most clearly in Locke’s empiricism where experience becomes the source for ideas, reason, knowledge, and truth. “Experience” appears static and monolithic because it is accompanied by an assumption that everyone shares the same conception of the term

although a specific definition is rarely given. This is particularly true in earlier works such as those by Wollstonecraft and Woolf. The monolithic facade also comes from the assumption that we can share the same experience, as though experiences can be identical and directly knowable by individuals (e.g., experience of oppression).

Although the term “experience” can still project this monolithic facade and is often used accordingly, its history reveals the term’s plasticity. We have seen from its etymology that the original form of the word links it to both “experiment,” a term that in English is now strongly linked to scientific knowledge, and to “expert,” a term that is linked to authority. The ‘authority of experience’ is itself duplicitous. Plato ranks two notions of expertise to make a distinction between experience and true knowledge, thereby allocating authority to the latter. Knowledge from experience, expertise gained from practice, is ranked as inferior to transcendent knowledge, expertise gained from possessing special knowledge which Plato associates with hierarchical positions. Aristotle maintains this division. Chaucer’s “Wife of Bath” pits the authority of experience against authority based on tradition, social convention, and hierarchy (i.e., the authority of the church). The Wife’s experience of the teachings by men on the conduct of women, marriage, trade, and church doctrines make her a very persuasive, even if controversial, character. Chaucer’s text reveals the subversive nature of “experience,” and the power it possesses to persuasively challenge a transcendent knowledge based on authority.

The questioning of “experience” by poststructuralists discloses that no one-to-one correlation exists between the signifier and signified of “experience”: “the meaning of the sign is not intrinsic but relational” (C. Weedon 23). In addition to this reliance on difference, the sign “experience” possesses a signified that is unusually multiplicitous, changeable, and inconsistent. Thus, the poststructuralists expose the term’s ambiguity. As they argue, experience is constructed, and any given experience can take on different meanings depending on which discursive field (terministic screen) is used to interpret that

experience. In other words, experience becomes, as Barbara Christian describes it, polyvalent. The dual nature of “experience,” that it can be both monolithic and multiplicitous, I would argue, makes it most useful to feminists, for it gives to the term the attributes that make it a *feminist* key term.

As I also stated in the introduction, a key term for feminist rhetoric must possess several additional feminist qualities. It must perform a both/and function in that it must be able to establish division and consubstantiality at different times and sometimes simultaneously. In other words, it must allow for plurality, accommodate diversity, and enable unity. And it must assist feminists in working towards equality without the ossification of totalizing universals. As we have seen, “experience” has been used in feminist discourse as both the source of difference and the source of consubstantiality. Wollstonecraft, for example, used reason to appeal to her audience, but in using that appeal, she invoked the terministic screen of Lockean philosophy, and she brought into play a notion of “experience” that allowed her to make her most radical claim for women. Yet, we note in her use of a general concept of “experience”, she assumes that she and her audience not only share a meaning of the term but also share assumptions about the role of experience in education. Although Wollstonecraft describes in her text how women’s experience in terms of education dramatically differs from men, she never actually appeals to a specifically woman’s experience and thus refrains from possibly alienating her predominantly male audience. She is then free, in her last argument, to use a general notion of “experience” to establish consubstantiality with her male audience that in turn enables her to make a claim for rights equal to them.

Woolf practices a very different strategy in her texts, but she still relies on the both/and quality of “experience.” Woolf uses “experience” to establish the differences between men and women and to uncover division. For Woolf, men and women do not share substantial experiences because of social and economic conditions; they are not consubstantial. Woolf, however, assumes that she and her female audience do share

experiences and are consubstantial on that ground. Whereas Wollstonecraft uses “experience” to achieve unity with her male audience to make a demand for the same rights, Woolf uses “experience” to reveal division between men and women and to reveal unity between women (middle-class white women) and uses the division and unity to make a claim for equal rights.

The use of “experience” to create division and consubstantiality simultaneously is most apparent in the critical moments. Here, each group assumes some level of consubstantiality with women in general, but that consubstantiality based as it is on experience becomes problematic. In its monolithic role “experience” functions as a universal: it covers over differences in experience and gains meaning according to symbols that reflect another more dominant group’s interests. Each sub-group seeks to establish an identity within the category of woman by bringing into play the multiplicity of experience. As a result, each uses “experience” to differentiate itself from a monolithic category of woman while appealing to “experience” to create consubstantiality among the category of women being differentiated. Thus, we saw how Barbara Smith argued that the “women’s experience” of established feminism and the “Black experience” of the fledgling black tradition did not reflect the experiences of black women. She insists that black women share experience as a result of the environmental conditions they have had to share: an experience that is specific to them because they are both *women* and *black*. She contends that they need to create symbols (plots, metaphors, and other literary practices) that reflect and give meaning to black women’s experience. Lesbian and Native women make the same claims. They use experience to distinguish themselves from established feminism and to create an identity for the group. Experience is the common ground for that identity.

Poststructuralist feminists take issue with the use of experience to establish identity. They point out that such a reification of experience relies on a notion of essence i.e., that there is *a* lesbian experience that is shared by all lesbians. But when you try to

stipulate the exact content of this shared experience, the notion becomes a totalizing universal. In its ossified form, “experience” becomes a reductive sameness that excludes and makes invisible others. If we were, for example, to name what constituted Native women’s experience, we would immediately open ourselves up to charges that the naming does not reflect Native women of a certain class or it may exclude women from differing tribal cultures. The multiplicity of experience always works against its use as a universal representation for it always already introduces difference.

I suggest that the ability to use “experience” as a monolithic essence or universal is an advantage rather than a disadvantage for feminists. To create consubstantiality at any level, feminists must eventually resort to totalizing terms. For it is through a sense of common ground that we come together to act. However, I contend that maintaining universals is undesirable. The monolithic quality of “experience” serves a rhetorical function but exists temporarily. To accommodate diversity, feminists must, at some point, let difference emerge and disrupt the veneer of commonality. The advantage of “experience” is that it contains the seeds of its own deconstruction. Experience is too multiplicitous to operate as sameness for any length of time.

This aspect of “experience” is highlighted in the *Language in Her Eye* debate. As each writer in the collection expresses her experience through an “I” narrative, she reveals how she differs from the other writers of the text. As indicated earlier, the only point of consubstantiality is that all the writers consider themselves feminists, but what that means to each of them and how that is enacted in their lives and writing clearly differs. When Christakos critiques the anthology she tries to reduce the plurality of the authors’ expressed experience into two categories. But the categories do not hold, for the slippage caused by “experience” is too great. In the end, Christakos undermines her own attempt at inclusivity when she uses an “I” narrative without moving into the collective “we.” Christakos associates the collective “we” with universals and rejects it (as demonstrated in her critique of Atwood). Her “I” narrative, however, becomes an exercise in the

‘authority of experience’ which can be equally as oppressive as universals, for the ‘authority of experience’ can quickly become a means of establishing power and position, especially when it is used to lay sole claim to a certain type of knowledge. In its extreme form, it claims that only those who have directly experienced a situation or phenomenon, such as oppression, can have knowledge of it. In the process, the ‘authority of experience’ becomes a means of establishing hierarchy rather than subverting it.

How we read “experience” will depend on context and, most significantly, on the terministic screen through which one views and structures reality. The relation of the term “experience” to other terms within any theoretical framework determines its rhetorical function. Thus, I would contend that we cannot separate “experience” from the terministic screens in which it is embedded (although, certainly, we can shift its position). In the rhetoric of “experience” the terministic screens or frameworks constitute the primary infrastructures of persuasion, but no one screen holds a privileged claim to “experience.” And no one screen holds a privileged relation to reality. As Kenneth Burke asks:

Must we merely resign ourselves to an endless catalog of terministic screens, each of which can be valued for the light it throws upon the human animal, yet none of which can be considered central? In one sense, yes. For, strictly speaking, there will be as many different world views in human history as there are people. . . . In the unwritten cosmic constitution that lies behind all man-made (sic) Constitutions, it is decreed by the nature of things that each man (sic) is “necessarily free” to be his own tyrant, inexorably imposing upon himself the peculiar combination of insights associated with his peculiar combination of experiences. (*On Symbols* 123)

Given the rhetorical power of terministic screens, it would be unwise for feminists to restrict themselves to any given screen. The struggle for change takes place at many

different levels and in many different contexts. Feminists need to be able to work within as many terministic screens as possible. That is not to say that they must accept all screens or any screen without question. All terministic screens should be examined and interrogated, and where possible feminists need to change those screens to reflect their values and interests. As we have seen, a number of feminists strive to make such changes. A primary example of such reconstruction is revealed through Cixous's use of metaphor. Cixous does not create a completely new terministic screen. She is working with Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridean deconstruction, but she dramatically changes those screens through her linking of metaphor with "experience" and gender.

In valuing difference, feminists must accommodate a diversity of terministic screens that reveal the different combinations of insight and experience that diverse women impose upon themselves. The explorations of this dissertation illustrate the central role that "experience" has played in giving feminists access to certain terministic screens and in allowing feminists to alter or subvert existing screens. The term is not without its disadvantages: it has been used to deny or limit women's access to the discourses of power. And, of course, I have to concede that my account of the term's history, its uses and abuses, is fragmentary and incomplete. Much research into the rhetoric of "experience" still needs to be done. I have already mentioned the need to examine the texts of early feminists, but feminists need also to examine the work of men such as John Stuart Mill who argued for the rights of women, and other more contemporary feminist texts. The field of composition studies also offers opportunities for expanding our understanding of the rhetoric of "experience" in terms of pedagogical theory. We also need to ensure that the development of the rhetoric of "experience" includes within its scope the diverse voices of feminists who are of different classes, races, and sexual orientations as well as differing terministic screens.

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