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Re-Considering Essentialism for Feminist Composition Pedagogy: Adrienne Rich's "Politics of Location" as a Theory of Writerly Agency

Krista Ratcliffe

If a feminist calls you an essentialist, you've just been insulted.

Catherine Stimpson

For two consecutive years the 4Cs program committee has invited me to participate in panels sporting the word *essentialism* in the title. Although grateful for the invitations, I am perplexed because neither of my paper proposals mentioned this word. I am troubled too. For at the mere hint of the word *essentialism*, I hear warning voices ringing in my head. Specifically, I hear the voice of Catherine Stimpson, who uttered the above truism to a crowd of Stephens College women in Columbia, Missouri. But if I have learned anything in our profession, I have learned that such truisms should continually be questioned. So if I question rather than heed the warning voices in my head, I recognize that they, as well as my responses to the 4Cs programming committees, not only reinforce a static essentialist/anti-essentialist binary, but also assume that the question of essentialism has been closed. And such a question should remain in question because teachers' assumptions about essentialism (un)consciously drive their pedagogical practices; for example, assumptions about essentialism enable teachers to believe that writing can(not) be taught or that learning with(in) language can(not) change students' lives. To keep the question of essentialism in play, I want to accept Devoney Looser's challenge in "Composing as an 'Essentialist'?":

It is not so much that so-called "essentialist" work must be stopped than that it must be questioned for its historical and cultural assumptions and its assumptions about the category "women." Only then will we be able to talk about feminist composition theory that not only operates "in a different voice" but with voices that more productively accommodate questions of difference. (66)

To explore Looser's challenge, I will re-consider the concept of essentialism, i.e., its definitions and their political expediencies in terms of feminism. Second, I will re-read Adrienne Rich's "politics of location" as a theory of writerly agency, foregrounding its reconsidera-

tion of essentialism. And third, I will re-imagine Rich's theory of writerly agency as the basis for *a*, not *the*, feminist composition pedagogy.

Re-Considering Essentialism

Feminists and non-feminists alike have been debating the question of essentialism for decades, if not centuries. In the past few years, however, feminist theorists have grappled anew with this debate, trying to define the conceptual category "woman" so that real historical women can avoid biological determinism and promote political action. In *Essentially Speaking*, Diana Fuss rekindles the essentialist/constructionist debate by challenging Aristotle's influential definition of essence¹ and employing John Locke's distinction between real essentialism and nominal essentialism to further her cause.² Fuss aligns Aristotle with Locke's real essentialism, "a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the 'whatness' of a given entity" (Fuss xi). She associates constructionists with Locke's nominal essentialism, a belief that essence is a linguistic construction, "a classificatory fiction we need to categorize and to label" (Fuss 4). Unlike Locke, Fuss claims that all real essentialisms are actually nominal ones (5).³ But Fuss's revisions still position us *within* the debate about essentialism, and from that position she asks us to consider "whether essences can change and whether construction can be normative" (6).

These questions are necessary because, if essence is fixed, then subjects are trapped within static structural boundaries and such entrapment leads us down the slippery slope to biological determinism and, hence, to the impossibility of personal and/or social change. If construction can be seen as the order of things, then the slippery slope disappears and the impossible becomes the possible. But when asking "whether essences can change and whether construction can be normative," we must also ask: can feminists revise the concept of essentialism in politically productive ways?

Many feminist theorists are skeptical about redefining essentialism for feminist projects. Linda Alcoff claims that, given the received history of feminist theory, any discussions of essentialism at this particular historical moment are just too enmeshed with Aristotelian assumptions to be of much use: "it is difficult to render the views of Rich and Daly into a coherent whole without supplying a missing premise that there is an innate female essence" (412). Judith Butler echoes Alcoff's skepticism and explains that the desire to supply this missing premise arises from feminists' fear that any "indeterminacy of gender might eventually culminate in the failure of feminism" (vii); for

if we cannot determine what "woman" is, then how can we construct an *-ism* to empower her? Butler argues that this fear affects debates about radical feminisms, which too often center around unanswerable questions of "origin or cause" of female essence rather than around critiques of female essence as the "effect of institutions, practices, and discourses" that write our cultures and ourselves (vii-viii).

Teresa de Lauretis is even more skeptical of the political expediency of any concept of essentialism; consequently, she refuses to participate in debates about essentialism, i.e., does it or does it not exist, is it real or is it nominal, is it immanent and/or is it transcendent. Instead, de Lauretis asks us to think "Otherwise" (Daly, *Wickedary* 153) about the issue. Specifically, de Lauretis asks us to reject the idea that a missing premise of innate female essence must necessarily be supplied in radical feminist theories: "Why do it at all? What is the purpose, or the gain, of supplying a missing premise (innate female essence) in order to construct a coherent image of feminism which thus becomes available to charges (essentialism) based on the very premise that had to be supplied?" (264). Instead, de Lauretis encourages us to concern ourselves with:

developing a theory of the female-sexed or female-embodied social subject, whose constitution and whose modes of social and subjective existence include most obviously sex and gender, but also race, class, and any other significant sociocultural divisions and representations; [such] a...theory of the female-embodied social subject [would be] based on its specific, emergent, and conflictual history. (267)

But other feminist theorists argue that thinking Otherwise about essentialism need not mean ignoring the debate. By reading all essentialisms as nominal, Fuss refutes the tradition of real essentialism and claims that the "deconstruction of essentialism, rather than putting essence to rest, simply raises the discussion to a more sophisticated level" (20); moreover, she concludes by asserting that "politics emerges as feminism's essence" (37). Another more sophisticated discussion about essentialism emerges in French feminist theory. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Helene Cixous exhorts woman to write (to) woman and man (to) man. A rereading of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, Cixous' exhortation merges the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary so as to construct woman's body without resorting to either term in Locke's binary. A frequently misinterpreted redefinition of essentialism is Mary Daly's refutation of both real and nominal traditions. Daly argues that *essence* refers to a "Self" that is constantly "becoming" in the patriarchal "foreground" and the radical feminist "Background"

while simultaneously participating in "Becoming" (Daly's conception of a deity) (*Gyn/Ecology* 26; *Pure Lust* 2); these interwoven processes inextricably interweave immanent and transcendent realms (*Pure Lust* 60-1). By defining "becoming" as a voyage that leads to both "the discovery and the creation of a world other than patriarchy," Daly posits essence as always already in process (*Gyn/Ecology* 1).⁴

As demonstrated by Fuss, Cixous, and Daly, *essence* can be redefined. When posited not as original, pure, or fixed, but as a process, *essence* loses its status as a privileged signifier. As a result, *essentialism* need not be considered either a static biological determinism that traps women or a totalizing linguistic game that constructs them; instead it may be defined as a subject-in-process. This definition empowers both women and men while recognizing the differences both between and among them. The implications of such a definition are enormous. Such an essentialism would allow the signifier to stay in play while simultaneously allowing spaces for political action; or as Joan Scott claims, "If in our histories we relativize the categories woman and man, it means, of course, that we must also recognize the contingent and specific nature of our political claims" (145). Such a move does not force us to reject politics nor to embrace an all-accepting pluralism; instead it challenges us to critique our categories, to question our truths that are based on these categories, and to revise our actions based on these assumed truths.

Thinking Otherwise about essentialism enables us to read Adrienne Rich's politics of location as a feminist theory of writerly agency that constructs a space for identity and for change. Viewed from the site of composition studies, Rich's feminist theory of writerly agency can inform a feminist composition pedagogy. Such a pedagogy foregrounds the functions of gender as it intersects with other categories (e.g., race, class, sexual orientation, nationality); as such, it attempts to empower real historical students, particularly real historical women students, by helping them to recognize their own politics of location and negotiate such positions.

Re-Reading Rich's "Politics of Location" as a Theory of Writerly Agency

Rich posits a politics of location that may be read as assuming an essence-in-process. She describes her own location as follows: "I need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history within which as a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist I am created and trying to create" ("Notes Toward a Politics of Location" 212). But such a location is not a simple identity politics with neat, unblurred catego-

ries. Instead, it is immeasurably complex, as exemplified when Rich critiques her previous statement:

...the woman trying to fit racism and class into a strictly radical-feminist analysis finds that the box won't pack. The woman who seeks the experiential grounding of identity politics realizes that as Jew, white, woman, lesbian, middle-class, she herself is a complex identity: her U.S. passport, in this world, is part of her body, and she lives under a very specific patriarchy. (*Blood, Bread, and Poetry* xii)

Rich analyzes this complexity in order to define her own subjectivity, and in the process she discovers that these definitions change from year to year, day to day, essay to essay, poem to poem. Thus, if we read these categories not as real or nominal essentialisms but as interwoven essences that are becoming, then Rich's politics of location emerges as a space of writerly agency.

This writerly agency does not presume an autonomous will that can single-handedly overcome structural oppression; neither does it presume a human subject relegated only to a discursive position. What it does presume is a space of limited agency where a woman can make choices. One Rich persona is optimistic about this agency and its possible choices: "When / I speak of an end to suffering I don't mean anesthesia. I mean know- / ing the world, and my place in it, not in order to stare with bitter- / ness or detachment, but as a powerful and womanly series of / choices...." ("Sources," *Your Native Land Your Life* 4-8). Rich chooses *choices* carefully, anticipating Rosemary Hennessy's warning:

Like identity and experience, the notion of 'choice,' so embedded historically in the humanist ideology of the 'free' individual, cannot simply be invoked [but] has to be rewritten so as to map out more coherently the mechanisms--both discursive and nondiscursive--that affect the historical availability of particular positions to some subjects and not others as well as movements across and between them. (74)

Thus Rich's politics of location does not ask *whether* choices exist but rather *what kinds* of choices are available at particular locations for particular subjects.

When considered as a theory of writerly agency, Rich's politics of location foregrounds gendered possibilities and gendered constraints of writers' choices, particularly women writers' choices. To make these possibilities and constraints visible, Rich chooses memory and geography as controlling metaphors of her politics of location. Memory implies re-vision, both personal and cultural:

The act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical dimension--is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. ("When We Dead Awaken" 35)

To emphasize the materiality of this re-visioning memory, Rich links it to a cultural, textual, and psychological geography: it is "a difficult and dangerous walking on ice, as we try to find language and images for a consciousness we are just coming into, and with little in the past to support us" (35). This geographical metaphor invokes uncharted regions of possibility, which are both exciting and harrowing. Combined, the memory and geography metaphors identify rhetorical situations of re-visioning writers as "borderlands" between past and present, different interpretations, different truths, and different writers and readers. Within these borderlands women often confront problems that men may not: "I think it has been a peculiar confusion to the girl or woman who tried to write because she is peculiarly susceptible to language. She goes to poetry or fiction looking for her way of being in the world...and over and over in the 'words' masculine persuasive force' she comes up against something that negates everything she is about" (39). But this realization does not free women from the problems of language, for as one Rich persona admits, "this is the oppressor's language / yet I need it to talk to you" ("The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," *Adrienne Rich's Poetry* 2.17-18). Thus, not content simply to identify these gendered possibilities and constraints upon women's agency, Rich also analyzes their implications for women writers in the following ways:

* A woman writer may retreat into the dream of a common language and try to communicate with other women and men as if they all shared the same subject position in the symbolic, i.e., as if their politics of location were all identical. Living with(in) such a dream is not easy for a woman writer, for she frequently fails in her attempts to communicate from this position. To understand her failure, she must awaken from this dream, a movement one Rich persona likens "to wak[ing] from drowning" ("Origins and History of Consciousness," *The Dream of a Common Language* 11.7).

* Once awakened from the dream of a common language, a woman writer must resist being relegated to an uneasy, static silence that denies the reality of her politics of location. That is, she must resist others' attempts to relegate her to this silence, and she must resist her

own temptation to retreat into this "safe" silence. Even though this aware-but-mute option appears to be the safest route, it is actually unhealthy. The unsaid words do not disappear but build up (un)consciously in a woman's mind and body and eventually surface whether she wants them to or not. So what appears to be the easiest option is actually "the hardest thing to learn" ("An Unsaid Word," *Adrienne Rich's Poetry* 7).

* Because different kinds of silence exist, a woman writer may choose a silence that is neither uneasy nor static. For example, Rich celebrates Emily Dickinson's powerful silence: "you chose / silence for entertainment, / chose to have it at last / on your own premises" ("I Am in Danger--Sir--," *Adrienne Rich's Poetry* 21-24). But such silence demands a politics of location that affords the luxury of retreating from the world, and far too many women lack such privilege. Moreover, romanticizing such silence fosters a belief in an autonomy that is impossible to achieve and can result in a woman beating herself up for not being able to attain this impossibility.

* If a woman writer chooses not to be silent, she may opt to repress her emotions, especially anger, and speak "calmly." This option entails consciously playing to the logics of the dominant discourses and downplaying the logics of her particular politics of location, although the two need not be mutually exclusive. Such a move has advantages as demonstrated by the Rich persona whose brother-in-law just happens to be a psychiatrist: "If I stay within the bounds they can't come and get me" ("Contradictions," *Your Native Land Your Life* 4.11). But this move has disadvantages as well. It means staying within pre-established boundaries that may not allow a woman writer room to write, speak, or be (sane).

* A woman writer may try to express the different logics that emerge from her own politics of location, not as a challenge to dominant logics but as a means of establishing a Rogerian communication with them. Such a move tries to bridge the gap between men and women, which "hangs between us / older and stranger than ourselves" ("From an Old House in America," *Adrienne Rich's Poetry* 5.7-8). Although such a gap can never be totally bridged, communication can occur. But it can be exhausting. And unfortunately, it usually entails writing and speaking in terms that dominant logics can accept.

* A woman writer may write from her own politics of location, primarily for herself and secondarily for others. Although Rich celebrates using a politics of location as a writerly agency, particularly for developing a strong writerly voice and womanly sense, her recognition of Emily Dickinson's chosen silence acknowledges a

recognition that particular historical moments call for particular actions for particular people. Moreover, the complexity of a politics of location complicates what it means to be a woman writer who writes for herself. For a woman writer has multiple subject positions, and these positions are not static. Thus, a writing process that would enable a woman writer to write (to) herself would be constantly evolving.

How does Rich conceptualize such writing processes? She does not offer one process every woman writer can employ. Instead she argues that composing processes are closely linked with each woman writer's evolving subjectivity. To model this claim, Rich articulates her own writing process--which celebrates "women trying to speak with women / the subject is how to break a mold of discourse, / how little by little minds change / but that they do change..." ("Turning," *Time's Power* 4.8-11). For Rich, breaking the mold of discourse means conceptualizing strategies that have silenced women in the past and discovering other strategies that may be employed in the present and/or future. Like Paula Becker, a Rich persona claims that "...I'm looking everywhere in nature / for new forms, old forms in new places, / ... / I know and do not know / what I am searching for" ("Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff," *The Dream of a Common Language* 20-24). Moreover, this looking is both conscious and unconscious: "[w]ithout for one moment turning my back on conscious choice and selection, I have been increasingly willing to let the unconscious offer its materials, to listen to more than the one voice of a single idea" ("Poetry & Experience," *Adrienne Rich's Poetry* 89). In addition to disclosing her own interwoven subjectivity and writing process, Rich imagines other processes that may enable women to write for themselves and for others. But whatever the particularities of these processes, their purpose is outlined in her "Transcendental Etude": "Such a composition has nothing to do with eternity, / the striving for greatness, brilliance-- / only with the musing of a mind / one with her body... / with no mere will to mastery" (*The Dream of a Common Language* 165-68, 171). In four brief lines, Rich opens up spaces in composition studies, e.g., the space for musing, not just theorizing; the space of body, not just mind; the space of discovery, not just mastery; and the space of the historical particular, not just the a/historical universal.

But Rich warns that such writerly agency has consequences. One consequence is that a "thinking woman sleeps with monsters" ("Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," *Adrienne Rich's Poetry* 3.1). These monsters can paralyze women with fear, thus reinforcing existing power structures. Yet these monsters may also be reinterpreted in a way that motivates women into action, e.g., Cixous's Medusa. A second

consequence is that the myths, lore, theories, rituals and languages that are so dear to us are suddenly exposed as gendered and sexist and rendered subject for re-vision; such realizations are often personally painful. And third, those with vested interests in maintaining such myths, lore, theories, etc., will fight revisions. What that really means is that they will fight the women who are doing the re-visioning. Why? Because as Rich's persona says in "From an Old House in America": "Such women are dangerous / to the order of things" (*Adrienne Rich's Poetry* 16.1-2). Or at least they are perceived to be.

Re-Imagining a Feminist Composition Pedagogy

So how does Rich's politics of location as a theory of writerly agency inform composition pedagogy? It does not posit one writing process as an a/historical structure that will serve all women. It does not offer a set syllabus, a set of textbooks, and a sequence of papers that will guarantee a feminist teacher emerging in the classroom. What it does provide, as demonstrated by the previous sections of this article, is a set of gendered assumptions that may inform a teachers' pedagogy. Moreover it assumes two important conditions about individual subjects and language: that is, it assumes that different women occupy particular symbolic positions.⁵

Based on these two conditions, teachers cannot expect all women to do (x) and all men to do (y). What we as teachers can do, however, is challenge our students to consider the following possibilities:

- (1) to identify and analyze the positions from which we have spoken, are speaking, and are spoken;
- (2) to play with re-visioning these positions;
- (3) to analyze academic discourse, recognizing how it silences and is sustained by particular voices;
- (4) to analyze when, why, and how we fall into dreams of a common language, or silence, or playing it safe, etc;
- (5) to articulate feminist definitions of writing classrooms, students, teachers, etc., as well as analyze the power systems that permeate these definitions;
- (6) to analyze textual strategies used by women and men in particular positions;
- (7) to listen to the unconscious, recognizing that we can never fully hear it;
- (8) to listen simultaneously to the many voices that inform an issue and critique the "happy pluralism" that attempts to accept all these voices;

(9) to analyze "the order of things" in order to contemplate the possibility and feasibility of being "dangerous"; and

(10) to make visible the functions of language in all of the above possibilities.

Foregrounding such possibilities in the classroom may help students and teachers articulate the limits and possibilities of their own agencies. Such articulations may, in turn, help students and teachers to understand Rich's persona in "Sources XXII" who encourages us all to identify, and write from, our own politics of location:

...I think you thought
there was no such place for you,
and perhaps there was none then,
and perhaps there is none now;
but we will have to make it, we who
want an end to suffering,
who want to change the laws of history, if
we are not to give ourselves away.

(*Your Native Land Your Life* 24-28)

Perhaps not giving ourselves away means seeing past the assumed real essentialisms that function in our daily lives (e.g., my student Janet's father who, in one breath, offered to send her brother to medical school and to find her a rich doctor). Perhaps not giving ourselves away means seeing past the assumed nominal essentialisms in our daily lives (e.g., Janet's father's claiming he was only joking as if such naming of his actions could make his sexism less hurtful). Perhaps not giving ourselves away means conceptualizing our politics of location as an everchanging essence that constructs space for writerly agency. And for feminist teachers, perhaps not giving ourselves or our students away means seeing Rich's politics of location as essential to pedagogy.

Notes

¹For Aristotle's discussion of substance and essence, see his *Metaphysics*. He divides substance into four categories: "the essence and the universal and the genus are held to be the substance of the particular, and...the substrate [is] that of which the rest are predicated" (I.VII.315, 17). He then defines "essence" as follows: "Your essence, then, is that which you are said to be of your own nature.... Hence the formula of the essence of each thing is that which defines the term but does not contain it (I.VII.321).

²Locke posits a two-fold definition of *real essence*, i.e., that of "which all natural things are made" and as "a real, but unknown, constitution of [a natural thing's] insensible parts" (*An Essay on Human Understanding* 1.27). He defines *nominal essence* as "so near a connexion [between the name and essence], that the name of any sort of thing cannot be attributed to any particular being but what has this essence" (I. 27). He further argues:

That men making abstract ideas, and settling them in their minds with names annexed to them, do thereby enable themselves to consider things, and discourse of them, as it were in bundles, for the easier and readier improvement and communication of their knowledge, which would advance but slowly were their words and thoughts confined only to the particular. (1.29)

³Locke does not define real essence in terms of nominal essence as does Fuss. According to Locke, "in a species of simple ideas and modes, [real and nominal essence] are always the same; but in substances always quite different" (*An Essay on Human Understanding* 1.29).

⁴Daly believes that a demystification of patriarchy is available to both women and men, but in a move that gets her labelled a real essentialist radical lesbian separatist, she unapologetically focuses on women's voyages. Why? She figures there are enough other people in our culture to worry about men's (*Beyond God the Father* 8, 172-174).

⁵Rich concludes her "Notes toward a Politics of Location" by asking "Once again: Who is we?" (231). The implied question is: what *I*s are erased by the *we*s of white feminisms? Such a move complicates white feminist theories, calling into question their assumptions, their claims, and their implications.

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