Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, & Difference

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For My Family

sexuality" produced by, constitutive of, or situated beyond theories and categories of sexual difference?

It is important to bear in mind that all of the questions and issues I have raised above are posed in a cultural context which continues to see both homosexual men and women as a threat to public safety and indeed to state security. Recent poststructuralist theories on "the policing of desire" take on more than metaphoric significance in the context of actual legal, medical, social, and economic persecution of homosexuals by the state apparatus. Finally, then, I would like to suggest that we need to continue addressing the problem of the historical relation between the state and processes of identity formation. How does state policy (on AIDS, for example) construct, constrain, or compromise lesbian and gay activity?[20] What does it mean to be a citizen in a state which programmatically denies citizenship on the basis of sexual preference? What are the various gay and lesbian views of the state, and how does the notion that "society needs its deviants" (Dollimore 1986, 7) co-implicate gay and lesbian theory in the equally complicated processes of state formations? Do gay and lesbian subjects escape the objectification and commodification associated with the sexual marketplace, or are we, despite our many protestations to the contrary, fully inscribed within the terms of sexual exchange? These are just some of the questions which remain to be addressed fully and which might define more adequately what we mean by this new discourse of knowledge called "gay and lesbian theory."

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Essentialism in the Classroom

No where are the related issues of essence, identity, and experience so highly charged and so deeply politicized as they are in the classroom. Personal consciousness, individual oppressions, lived experience—in short, identity politics—operate in the classroom both to authorize and to de-authorize speech. "Experience" emerges as the essential truth of the individual subject, and personal "identity" metamorphoses into knowledge. Who we are becomes what we know; ontology shades into epistemology. In this final chapter I am primarily concerned with the way in which essence circulates as a privileged signifier in the classroom, usually under the guise of "the authority of experience." Exactly what counts as "experience," and should we defer to it in pedagogical situations? Does experience of oppression confer special jurisdiction over the right to speak about that oppression? 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"? (1985, 145–55) How are we to handle our students' (and perhaps our own) daily appeals to experiential knowledge when, with the advent of poststructuralist thought, experience has been placed so convincingly under erasure?

These questions often appear particularly irresolvable and especially frustrating to the feminist scholar and teacher who has invested much of her career in the battle to validate "female experience"—in university classrooms, in academic textbooks, in curricular offerings, and even in institutional infrastructures. The category of "female experience" holds a particularly sacrosanct position in Women's Studies programs, programs which often draw on the very notion of a hitherto repressed and devalued female experience to form the basis of a new feminist epistemology. Virtually all the essays in one of the few volumes devoted entirely to questions of feminist pedagogy, *Gendered Subjects:*

The Dynamics of Feminist Teaching (Culley and Portuges 1985), uphold experience as the essential difference of the Women's Studies classroom.[1] But the problem with positing the category of experience as the basis of a feminist pedagogy is that the very object of our inquiry, "female experience," is never as unified, as knowable, as universal, and as stable as we presume it to be. This is why some feminist philosophers recommend resisting the temptation to reduce "women's experiences (plural) to women's experience (singular)" (Griffiths and Whitford 1988, 6). Certainly, Derrida is right to suggest that "egoity is the absolute form of experience" ("Violence and Metaphysics" 1978, 133), but while experience may be underwritten by a metaphysics of presence, this does not mean experience is necessarily present to us—in the form of an unmediated real. The appeal to experience, as the ultimate test of all knowledge, merely subtends the subject in its fantasy of autonomy and control. Belief in the truth of Experience is as much an ideological production as belief in the experience of Truth.

In theories of feminist pedagogy, the category of natural female experience is often held against (and posited as a corrective to) the category of imposed masculinist ideology. The experience/ideology opposition, however, simply masks the way in which experience itself is ideologically cast. One thinks immediately of Louis Althusser:

> When we speak of ideology we should know that ideology slides into all human activity, that it is identical with the "lived" experience of human existence itself. . . . This "lived" experience is not a *given*, given by a pure "reality", but the spontaneous "lived experience" of ideology in its peculiar relationship to the real. ("A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre" 1971, 223)

In the classical, Aristotelian view, experience is the doorway to the apprehension of essence; experience is understood as a real and immediate presence and therefore as a reliable means of knowing. In the poststructuralist, Althusserian view, experience is a product of ideology. It is a sign mediated by other signs. To Jonathan Culler, experience is fundamentally unreliable because it maintains a duplicitous standing: "it has always already occurred and yet is still to be produced—an indispensable point of reference, yet never simply there" (1982, 63). Though it is the latter view of experience which this book explicitly endorses, it is the former view, the "common-sense" Aristotelian understanding of experience, which we all carry into the classroom with us and which constitutes the grounds of a "politics of experience." While it may not always be the case that identity politics is reactionary,[2]

arguments based on the authority of experience can often have surprisingly de-politicizing effects. The ideology and effects of the politics of experience are therefore particularly important to confront in the institutional classroom setting, where identities can often seem more rigidified, politics more personalized, and past histories more intensified. This final chapter is concerned with some of the unwelcome effects of essentialism in the classroom, and with the pedagogy and politics of "essentially speaking."

Problems often begin in the classroom when those "in the know" commerce only with others "in the know," excluding and marginalizing those perceived to be outside the magic circle. The circle metaphor is Edward Said's: "inside the circle stand the blameless, the just, the omnicompetent, those who know the truth about themselves as well as the others: outside the circle stand a miscellaneous bunch of querulous whining complainers" ("Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World" 1986, 50). Said provides the most incisive and compelling critique that I know of the phenomenon which I sometimes call "inside trading." (The economic metaphor is, of course, a calculated one; in the classroom identities are nothing if not commodities.) For Said it is both dangerous and misleading to base an identity politics upon rigid theories of exclusions, "exclusions that stipulate, for instance, only women can understand feminine experience, only Jews can understand Jewish suffering, only formerly colonial subjects can understand colonial experience" (55). The artificial boundary between insider and outsider necessarily contains rather than disseminates knowledge:

> the difficulties with theories of exclusiveness or with barriers and sides is that once admitted these polarities absolve and forgive a great deal more ignorance and demagogy than they enable knowledge. . . . If you know in advance that the black or Jewish or German experience is fundamentally comprehensible only to Jews or Blacks or Germans you first of all posit as essential something which, I believe, is both historical and the result of interpretation—namely the existence of Jewishness, Blackness, or Germanness, or for that matter of Orientalism and Occidentalism. Secondly you are pretty likely to construct defenses of the experience rather than promote knowledge of it. And, as a result, you will demote the different experience of others to a lesser status. (55–56)

Experience, then, while providing some students with a platform from which to speak can also relegate other students to the sidelines. Exclusions of this sort often breed exclusivity.

The politics of experience sometimes takes the form of a tendency amongst both individuals and groups to "one down" each other on the oppression scale. Identities are itemized, appreciated, and ranked on the basis of which identity holds the greatest currency at a particular historical moment and in a particular institutional setting. Thus, in an Afro-American Studies classroom, race and ethnicity are likely to emerge as the privileged items of intellectual exchange, or, in a Gay Studies classroom, sexual "preference" may hold the top notch on the scale of oppressions. This delimiting of boundaries or mapping out of critical terrains is not a problem in and of itself (especially if it allows us to devote serious attention to previously ignored or trivialized issues); however, it becomes a problem when the central category of difference under consideration blinds us to other modes of difference and implicitly delegitimates them. Let me pose an example. Recently a student in a class on postcolonialism objected to another student's interest in the social and structural forms of non-Western homosexual relations; "what on earth does sexual preference have to do with imperialism?" the angry student charged. The class as a whole had no immediate response to the indictment and so we returned to the "real" issue at hand (race and ethnicity); the gay student was effectively silenced. Another common version of this phenomenon is the synecdochical tendency to see only one part of a subject's identity (usually the most visible part) and to make that part stand for the whole. A male professor, for example, is typically reduced to his "maleness," an Asian professor to his or her "Asianness," a lesbian professor to her "lesbianness," and so on. A hierarchy of identities is set up *within* each speaking subject (not just between subjects), and it is this ranking of identities which is often used either to authorize an individual to speak on the basis of the truth of her lived experience (as in the case of a female professor in a Women's Studies classroom) or to de-authorize an individual from speaking on the basis of his *lack* of experience (as in the case of a male professor in a Women's Studies classroom). Identities are treated as fixed, accessible, and determinative, conferring upon the subject's speech an aura of predictability ("Male professors *always* say such things" or "*No* Third World writer would ever make such a claim" are often common refrains). What we see in this ordering of identities is none other than the paradoxical and questionable assumption that some essences are more *essential* than others.

It is the unspoken law of the classroom not to trust those who cannot cite experience as the indisputable grounds of their knowledge. Such unwritten laws pose perhaps the most serious threat to classroom dynamics in that they breed suspicion amongst those inside the circle

and guilt (sometimes anger) amongst those outside the circle. In its most extreme incarnation, the guilt of the outsiders is exploited by the insiders to keep everyone in line—that is, to regulate and to police group behavior. "Provoking guilt is a tactic not so much for informing as it is for controlling others," Anne Koedt has written in challenging the notion of "lesbians-as-the-vanguard-of-feminism" ("Lesbianism and Feminism," Koedt et al. 1973, 256). When provoking guilt in "the enemy" becomes the prime motivation for one's politics, we have to begin to question what negative effects such a project might possibly have, especially in the classroom. The tendency to psychologize and to personalize questions of oppression, *at the expense of* strong materialist analyses of the structural and institutional bases of exploitation, poses one such undesirable effect. As we have seen, contrary to the well-worn feminist dictum, "the personal is political," personalizing exploitation can often amount to de-politicizing it:

> Power then becomes primarily a personal issue between individuals—men and women, white and black, gentile and Jew, heterosexual and gay—and not the way an exploitative system is hierarchically structured so as to get maximum differentiation. (Bourne 1987, 14)

We have to be willing to acknowledge, along with Simon Watney, that "the politics of provocation are comprehensible only to the provocateurs" (1980, 72). We have to be willing to recognize that when identity politics is used to monitor who can and cannot speak in the classroom, its effects can be counterproductive. Rather than automatically interjecting a political note, arguments based on the authority of experience can just as often be radically de-politicizing.

Though I remain convinced that appeals to the authority of experience rarely advance discussion and frequently provoke confusion (I am always struck by the way in which introjections of experiential truths into classroom debates dead-end the discussion), I also remain wary of any attempts to prohibit the introduction of personal histories into such discussions on the grounds that they have yet to be adequately "theorized." The anti-essentialist displacement of experience must not be used as a convenient means of silencing students, no matter how shaky experience has proven to be as a basis of epistemology. It is certainly true that there is no such thing as "the female experience" or "the Black experience" or "the Jewish experience". . . . And it seems likely that simply *being* a woman, or a Black, or a Jew (as if "being" were ever "simple") is not enough to qualify one as an official spokesperson for an entire community. But while truth clearly does not equate

with experience, it cannot be denied that it is precisely the fiction that they *are* the same which prompts many students, who would not perhaps speak otherwise, to enter energetically into those debates they perceive as pertaining directly to them. The authority of experience, in other words, not only works to silence students, it also works to empower them. How are we to negotiate the gap between the conservative fiction of experience as the ground of all truth-knowledge and the immense power of this fiction to enable and encourage student participation?

While experience can never be a reliable guide to the real, this is not to preclude any role at all for experience in the realm of knowledge production. If experience is itself a product of ideological practices, as Althusser insists, then perhaps it might function as a window onto the complicated workings of ideology. Experience would itself then become "evidence" of a sort for the productions of ideology, but evidence which is obviously constructed and clearly knowledge-dependent. What I mean by this is simply that experience is not the raw material knowledge seeks to understand, but rather knowledge is the active process which produces its own objects of investigation, including empirical facts. The theory of experience I have in mind here is, of course, a constructionist one, and is articulated best by two post-Althusserians, Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst:

> Empiricism represents knowledge as constructed out of 'given' elements, the elements of experience, the 'facts' of history, etc. Unfortunately for these positions facts are never 'given' to knowledge. They are always the product of definite practices, theoretical or ideological, conducted under definite real conditions. . . . Facts are never *given;* they are always produced. (1975, 2–3)

The idea that empirical facts are always ideological productions can itself be a useful fact to introduce to students. And, in terms of pedagogical theory, such a position permits the introduction of narratives of lived experience into the classroom while at the same time challenging us to examine collectively the central role social and historical practices play in shaping and producing these narratives. "Essentially speaking," we need both to theorize essentialist spaces from which to speak and, simultaneously, to deconstruct these spaces to keep them from solidifying. Such a double gesture involves once again the responsibility to historicize, to examine each deployment of essence, each appeal to experience, each claim to identity in the complicated contextual frame in which it is made.

It may well be that the best way to counteract the negative, often hidden effects of essentialism in the classroom is to bring essentialism to the fore as an explicit topic of debate. This book aims to contribute to the renewed interest in rethinking essentialism by laying out the terms of the essentialist/constructionist opposition while also providing the critical lever to displace what, in my mind, is a largely artificial (albeit powerful) antagonism. I have argued from the start that essentialism underwrites theories of constructionism and that constructionism operates as a more sophisticated form of essentialism. This is simply another way of saying that constructionism may be more normative, and essentialism more variable, than those of us who call ourselves poststructuralists hitherto have been willing to acknowledge. Any attempt to intervene in the stalemate produced by the essentialist/constructionist stand-off must therefore involve a recognition of each position's internal contradictions and political investments. While the essentialist/constructionist polemic may continue to cast its shadow over our critical discussions, it is the final contention of this book that reliance on an admittedly overvalued binarism need not be paralyzing.

the binary logic in Aristotle that opposes identity to difference. The conventional logical script for representing the principle of identity is the formula "A = A," but as Heidegger points out, "for something to be the same, one is always enough. Two are not needed" (23–24). The doubling of this logical equation demonstrates how sameness always contains difference within it: "sameness implies the relation of 'with,' that is, a mediation, a connection, a synthesis: the unification into a unity. This is why throughout the history of Western thought identity appears as unity" (25). The important word here is "appears": identity only appears as unity, but contains difference within it as the very predicate of its fictional coherence (A = A). In this respect it would perhaps not be inappropriate to revise the title of Heidegger's *Identity and Difference* to the more apt *Identity as Difference*.

11 See, for example, the introduction to *Re-vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* in which the editors remark that "Irigaray points to a very real tendency in much contemporary feminist theory—a tendency to deconstruct and disavow all notions of identity, ownership, possession" (Doane et al. 1984, 10).

12 Bruce Robbins's "The Politics of Theory" is one such piece which, in a self-reflexive parody of its own title, asks whether "the 'politics of x' formula lends itself to self-flattery and hazy thinking" (3).

13 Epstein's approach to the question of identity politics in "Gay Politics, Ethnic Identity: The Limits of Social Constructionism" provides an important and useful overview of the history of social constructionism in gay theory. Where our accounts most radically differ is on the question of identity; while Epstein bases his working definition of identity on ego psychology and object-relations theory, my own work advocates a more poststructuralist view.

14 Foucault, in fact, tends to use *theory* to keep *politics* in line: "I have never tried to analyze anything whatsoever from the point of view of politics, but always to ask politics what it had to say about the problems with which it was confronted. I question it about the positions it takes and the reasons it gives for this; I don't ask it to determine the theory of what I do" ("Polemics, Politics, and Problemizations," 385). In another interview on politics, Foucault also makes the point (as if in anticipation of the current, highly sensationalized controversy over Paul de Man's early journalism) that "the 'best' theories do not constitute a very effective protection against disastrous political choices" ("Politics and Ethics: An Interview," 374). Both interviews can be found in *The Foucault Reader* (1984).

15 See Martin (1982), Schor (1987), and Plaza (1981).

16 Adam argues, in brief, that the transition to capitalism produced the structural conditions necessary for the development of new forms of identity; with the move to the cities and the subsequent dissolution of the agrarian family unit, traditional kinship ties were loosened, permitting the emergence of different sets of social and personal relations (see Adam 1985).

17 Kenneth Plummer's influential work on "Homosexual Categories" appears to be largely responsible for the general trend in gay and lesbian theory to dismiss psychoanalytic studies of homophobia in favor of social science analyses of heterosexism (see Plummer 1981, 53–75). Social constructionist theory in general is heavily weighted towards the social sciences, contributing to the tendency amongst researchers to bracket questions of desire, fantasy, and the unconscious and to emphasize instead sociality, institutions, and ideology. *The Making of the Modern Homosexual*, edited by Plummer (1981), is a prime example of the strengths and weaknesses of such an approach.

18 This is the main import of Freud's "Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman" (1920).

19 D'Emilio, along with other historians of gay culture (Bullough, Katz), do indeed discuss lesbianism in their works (and for this they are to be commended), but they tend to confine their substantive comments on the subject of gay women to a separate chapter, thereby structurally reinforcing the impression that lesbian identity is a variant or a sub-classification of male homosexuality. Jeffrey Weeks's Foucauldian work on sexuality marks an important exception to this tendency to insert the lesbian subject into gay male paradigms (see Weeks 1979, 1985, 1986).

20 The recent investigations into the cultural representations of AIDS fall largely under this category. Simon Watney's *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media* (1987) and the special issue on AIDS in *October* 43 (Winter 1987) are exemplary analyses of the social construction of AIDS and the determinative role of the state in legislating, monitoring, and producing sexual desire.

7 Essentialism in the Classroom

1 See especially Frances Maher's "Classroom Pedagogy and the New Scholarship on Women," and Janet Rifkin's "Teaching Mediation: A Feminist Perspective on the Study of Law." Maher calls for new "appropriate teaching styles to recover the female experience" since "the dominant pedagogical style of most classrooms discriminate against women's experience" (29 and 31), and Janet Rifkin echoes the call for "a pedagogy in which personal experience is viewed as a legitimate and important reference-point for scholarly work" (104).

2 I am here taking issue with a prevalent strain of feminist poststructuralist thinking, represented by Jane Gallop, which holds that "the politics of experience is inevitably a conservative politics" (1983, 83). Could we not rephrase this question to read: "*In my experience,* the politics of experience is inevitably a conservative politics"?