

SHARING IDEAS AND LANGUAGE WITH ILLITERATE WOMEN: A CHALLENGE FOR PRINT FEMINISM

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This is a condensed version of a longer paper originally entitled "Sharing Ideas and Language with Illiterate Women: A Challenge for Academic Feminism". The paper was written as a graduate thesis for a Master's degree in English from McGill University in 1992. The longer version includes a more in-depth and comparative study of feminist narrative theory and literacy theory.

INTRODUCTION

Further to the new knowledge regarding complex definitions of illiteracy, researchers have also begun to identify the gendered nature of the literacy issue. Most statistics show that illiteracy is in fact, a gendered problem: two-thirds of the 750 million nonliterate adults in the world are women ("Closing" 56). Within the North American context, though, there are a relatively equal number of men and women who are illiterate. Nevertheless, even in North America, the complexities surrounding illiteracy are most certainly genderspecific. Further, those complexities are directly related to many of the issues central to the feminist movement. Those who are professionally involved in feminist literacy theory and training (a growing discipline) recognize how poverty, violence against women, and childbearing are central to illiteracy as cause and effect. Recognizing this interconnectedness of feminist issues and illiteracy is essential.

This paper will be divided into three sections. In the first section, I will discuss the common state of living as an oppressed and silenced minority by juxtaposing the reading and non-reading woman's respective experience, thus highlighting how certain similarities make non-literate women's voices indispensable to the feminist effort. These conditions and feminist ideas have, in most cases, entered the lives of and have been acknowledged by the community of illiterate women quite naturally, yet that experience has yet to be validated by educated women.

It is due, in part, to certain working assumptions in feminist theory that these voices cannot be heard and therefore those

very assumptions will be challenged. Throughout this paper, illiterate women will be frequently referred to as just that: illiterate women, non-reading women, or new readers. This "non-reading women" vs. "women" dichotomy is presented as such because non-reading women frequently occupy that "other" position in society. As this paper develops, that "otherness" or "difference" will become groundless.

Section II will include a discussion of the common understanding of the necessity to resist dominant discourse. There are large gaps in the relationship between reading and non-reading women. Feminist theory has brought women as readers and writers to the forefront in an effort to eradicate malecentered representations. Women are redefining their identity in response to systematic discrimination and oppression in society. Women themselves are gaining control of that process of redefinition through the power of the written word. The hope instilled by this kind of work is very great; however, the debate over representation makes the assumption that the powers of critical reading and thought are within women's reach. Still more dangerous, it is assumed that the vehicle for expression itself, that is reading and writing, is granted. Further, the academic nature of feminist theory undermines the movements own goals: solidarity within the movement is impossible if non-reading women continue to be excluded from the discussion.

Section III addresses the common need to restructure a power base by crossing barriers of communication. In the early stages of this project, I became aware that I would be concerning myself with the need for feminist theorists to make their writing more accessible to an audience of women who were new-readers. In my own writing, then, I would have to adhere to my own petition, writing in a non-academic style. (1) Yet just prior to writing, I realized that I would be addressing the very audience that has been guilty of communicating almost exclusively in one language, and that if I wished to be heard, that I should address them in the language with which they are most comfortable, most familiar--the language of academe. As an academic, a feminist, and a literacy practitioner and tutor, I feel equipped to speak as an intermediary between two groups which have so far experienced difficulty communicating with one another. A consideration of this kind exemplifies the necessary reciprocity that ought to exist between those who use "different languages".

THE COMMON STATE OF LIVING AS AN OPPRESSED AND SILENCED MINORITY

This paper concerns itself with the marginalization of a minority group, one that is not only devalued, but also virtually invisible. Due to this neglect, such a group could continue to exist under oppressed conditions indefinitely. Illiterate women and men experience a strong sense of "otherness" in their lives on a daily basis due to the common belief that to be "illiterate" is to be stupid or "childlike". Further, illiterate women and men are often subjected to the kind of sympathy that has been so detrimental for the disabled, as Susan Hannaford, speaking of the Year of the Disabled, points out:

Assigning a "special" year to the "disabled" ...serves a clear ideological function: the separation of the "abnormal" from the rest of society. Once labeled and categorized in this way, people stop being people, and stereotyped attitudes and explanations of "them" take over. (TVOntario)

Oppressions of any kind produce similar results. The most important and perhaps the most common is silencing. For both women and men nonreaders, this silencing takes on an extra dimension that begins in school. A child who learns differently from others will most likely be labeled a "slow learner", seated in the back of the class, and subsequently passed through the system. As the education gap widens between the child and his or her peers, the child contributes less, and subsequently decides that his or her words are worthless. The individual may never understand his or her own silence, and it may never be broken down. Unfortunately, illiterate women and men will often keep their "handicap" to themselves--a family member may be aware of it, one friend may share the secret, but an employer will rarely ever know. While non-reading men and women share this repression, it is women who face a double jeopardy of genderlinked oppression.

Women are silenced in their domestic and their working lives by the men that surround them due to an established patriarchy. Moreover, literate and non-reading women, as women, often share a disabling sense of low selfesteem,

maintained only through isolation and the perpetual marginalization that brought about the vulnerable state. illiterate women, though, are silenced and oppressed in three ways: they must fight the silencing due to patriarchal oppression; they must fight for a voice and a positive identity as non-readers in a literate society; and finally, they must struggle to have their life's experience validated in the eyes of other women, particularly educated ones.

One might assume that amidst this multifaceted silencing, that the illiterate woman may turn to other women to share the oppressed experience, as is characteristic of so many strands of feminism. She may be aware of the potential support network that is attached to this struggle by virtue of the fact that it is a gender issue and that there are other women in the world who are facing similar experiences. Unfortunately, she could have more in common with illiterate men than with literate women. (2) Though the working-class non-reading woman may still be able to see the divisive gender line that separates her from men, and though she may be overpowered by those men in her community, she also realizes that she is devalued by what should be her own sisterhood due to racial, class, or educational differences. She is, consequently, at risk of abandoning what was her seemingly reliable position as a woman in a woman's struggle.

The fact that reading and non-reading women share certain conditions often goes unrecognized by the academic feminist community for two reasons: first, academic feminist theory is available in print and therefore there is very little communication between the two groups; and second, the actual content of that theory fails to take non-reading women into consideration, since one of its many assumptions is that all women can read. The following section will address and challenge some of these assumptions.

THE COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF THE NECESSITY TO RESIST DOMINANT DISCOURSE

"Dominant discourse" takes many forms for different groups of women. For women of color, discourse may be dominated by a white bias, or a white male bias. For lower-class women it is the middle and upper classes that create and utilize a dominant discourse. Whether realized or not, there always exists the necessity to resist that domination. For some academic women, the dominant discourse takes the form of patriarchal literature (among other things). The 1800's saw women making an attempt to write their own stories which today is indisputably the most popular form of reappropriation of female identities. In this sense, women are resisting the dominant discourse by creating their own arena in which they may speak freely.

Dominant discourse then, is one of the strongest contributing factors to an unequal social structure. It causes the exclusion of the subordinant voices in what should be an all inclusive public sphere. The literate vs. non-literate issue is a case in point of social inequality, based on one's participation in, or lack of participation in, the dominant discourse: print.

Print is the primary medium of the literate world, specifically the academic world, and is, thus, a form of dominant discourse for illiterate men and women. More visible and obvious than any other point, is the fact that feminist theory neglects to address the community of non-reading women due to the fact that most of it is discussed in print, "frequently *academic* writing for which much experience with print is needed" (Garber et al, 7, emphasis mine). To participate in print feminism, one must be able to read at an advanced level. Moreover, the writer expects from the reader a strong sense of self in the context of the material, critical abilities, and ultimately the ability to generate a definitive response. These are all wanting for the new reader. These expectations and assumptions apropos literacy, then, are what ultimately define a crucial aspect of print feminism.

Further, that advanced writing style or jargonese is incomprehensible to a large community of women who are competent readers. What is in question here is not so much the value of academic writing, but rather the necessary acknowledgment of a new audience of women readers, an acknowledgment of the limitations of academic print and a reconsideration of print itself--presently it is perceived as the most worthwhile medium. (3)

Throughout my readings of feminist theory, I have seen very little criticism of the ways in which academic feminist theorists exclude nonreading women from their discourse, simply by virtue of the fact that the theory is "academic" in

written style. A learning reader cannot even attempt to read these materials, and even after a lifetime of study, some still may find them too difficult. If women are to find solidarity in their movement, as they are still attempting to do, and following two decades of experience with racism and classism within the movement, it seems extraordinary that there still exists a group, (print feminists), so unable to recognize the exclusivity of their primary medium. In being excluded from the public discussion, nonreading women's opinions become devalued. What follows is a breakdown in self-confidence, and subsequently the abandonment of any newly-developing critical skills.

Regarding writing, Bell Hooks in her essay entitled "Educating Women: A Feminist Agenda" points out many ways in which women cannot meet or find common ground. She discusses race, class, politics, and education. There is no question that she has taken well into account the limitations of academic writing:

While feminist scholars should feel free to write using complex styles, if they are sincerely concerned with addressing their ideas to as many people as possible, they must either write in a more accessible manner or write in the manner of their choice and see to it that the piece is made available to others using a style that can be easily understood. (111)

Hooks has certainly made a very workable proposition, one that will be expounded upon later in this paper. Still, she makes an assumption that many continue to make, namely that *not every woman will be able to read and write*. Further, it is not in every woman's cultural scope to embrace reading and writing as other North American women do. For that reason, feminist scholars make a third assumption in addition to the two listed above: all women should learn to read and write.

While disputable, the idea that all women should learn to write comes from the hopeful message that by expressing one's own identity in print, a woman may come to terms with her sense of self, and may contribute to the redefinition of her place in the world. All women have the resources for self-expression, but those resources are not always in print form.

The literacy movement has taught us to recognize that there are many valuable forms of self-expression and that in order for learning readers to overcome their feelings of isolation and dependence, they must come to terms with some of the reasons why they are unable to read and write in the first place. For women, this sharing of life experiences is crucial to their learning, as well as to their fundamental sense of self and identity. (4) Women coming together to talk about the "woman experience" has become a valued pastime.

Informal types of discussion are, in essence, the delivering of private to public, which is greatly emphasized in effective literacy techniques such as the Language Experience Approach or LEA. This approach is an exercise whereby the tutor transcribes the learner's spoken words to print which subsequently become the learning primer for that learner and potentially for others. With the help of the tutor, a nonreading woman is able to participate in print culture, and when circulated amongst other learners, that work becomes another valuable vehicle for public discourse that was at one time private. I will elaborate on the LEA in a later discussion. For now it suffices to say that many women who are new readers have been freed from the confines of their private existence through the work of effective literacy programs.

Despite this progress, the reality is that the work produced by these women will be devalued by educated or literate women, even though those non-reading women have been encouraged to speak out. (5) For the complete non-reading woman, that is, one who may never read or write, entering the "feminist arena" is impossible as long as it depends on print media. Non-reading women have had to create their own arena in which a public discourse may flourish. Literacy programs are trying to facilitate that process by valuing the types of discourse specific to illiterate and new-reading women. Yet it is still an arena that is dominated by a print medium and the assumption of literacy from which they are excluded. We do not need to teach non-reading women what it should be or what it is to be a woman. They have figured that out. We need to empower them by valuing their new critical thinking and their participation in critical discourse, which have been stifled by much of the academic feminist movement itself and most of the rest of society.

More and more, women are coming together and sharing their life's experiences and it is not unreasonable to suggest that those women come from diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. The problem arises after the collective discussion is done, and the narratives are waiting to be chronicled. Some women will then preserve their stories and

experiences in an autobiography or some other print form. Carolyn Heilbrun, author of *Writing A Woman's Life*, addresses the autobiography as the text through which women may liberate themselves from previously established texts and encourages women writers to answer the question "What do I want?" by bringing that writing to public. Unfortunately though, Heilbrun fails to address the problems of publishability, circulation, and distribution, mainly because her focus on "accomplished women" (93) limits her scope.

Indeed, the written preservation of women's unrecorded experience is a key to a new tradition and new lives shaped by it. But many women may have no valued way of grounding their lives in history. The learning women with whom I have worked in literacy have shown strong desires to share their oral histories with others. Discussion groups have been formed, and some are then encouraged, with the help of a tutor, to make an attempt at documenting their stories. Yet, these narratives will more than likely never be published, nor will they be read by anyone not directly connected with literacy. Though valuable, they will never have the impact on gender conventions that Heilbrun is looking for.

THE COMMON NEED TO RESTRUCTURE A POWER BASE BY CROSSING COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

The idea of including illiterate women in the feminist discussion is not simply a question of teaching them to read and write so that they may join an already established form of discourse. The problem is more deeply rooted. In order to redistribute power equally so that women of all educational levels, even nonreaders, may participate in feminist discussion, each of those levels and their characteristic forms of discourse must be valued in and of themselves. And they must be understood by one another. That is not to say that there should be no attempt made to encourage literacy and a coming together of forms, but that cannot be forced. A homogeneous form of language and communication is not the goal here.

Nancy Fraser pursues the question of "communication across lines of cultural difference" (69) in her avowedly utopian vision of egalitarian society. In this vision, she recognizes that "subaltern counterpublics" (67) are empowered to "disseminate [their] discourse into ever widening arenas". The nature of "public", as she understands it, would make this dissemination possible:

The concept of a public presupposes a plurality of perspectives among those who participate within it...[and] people participate in more than one public, and memberships of different publics may partially overlap. (70)

There is most certainly an overlap to be considered in this discussion. To use Fraser's term, an emphasis on "multicultural literacy" is what is essential. Fraser's model is a complex geometrical network of interconnecting and overlapping language or cultural circles. Occupying more than one circle at one time is invited.

Her discussion includes language and I suspect that cultural forms, such as print, painting, or song, may also be interpreted as actual forms of communication. Learning, valuing, and promoting more than one form of communication is not only a possibility, but a requirement in Fraser's model.

Crossing cultural barriers, then, means understanding more than one form of communication. I will now identify and expound upon the forms of communication to which I refer, beginning with print. When discussing print, one should be reminded of the fact that standards in language emerged only with the advent of the printing press and that the mutable quality of language was even greater before that time. For "[p]rint altered not only the spelling and grammar but the accentuation and inflection of languages, and made bad grammar possible" (McLuhan 231). And further, "Nobody ever made a grammatical error in a non-literate society." (McLuhan 238) Writing that deviates from grammatical standards is arguably another form of writing. From the perspective of the academic, this type of writing is considered "wrong". From the standpoint of the literacy practitioner, tutor, and student, it is considered "unconventional".

For the literacy student and tutor, unconventional written forms are commonly accepted during the learning process.

One of the ways that new writers produce written pieces is through the use of the LEA. As discussed earlier, the LEA is a tutoring exercise that has become widely used among literacy programs. Its applications are limitless and allow for a student-centered approach to learning. Because the learner speaks her own words (which are then transcribed for her) and because she is then taught from those words she is, in effect, designing her own learning primer and simultaneously producing materials for others to share. The tutor transcribes the learner's words exactly as they are spoken, including unconventional pronunciations, grammatical variations, and so on. The learner then attempts to read the written piece, and any difficult words may be drawn from the exercise, transcribed onto index cards and placed in what would become the learner's "word bank" or personal vocabulary: a set of words specific to the learner's own language. It is important that a literacy student build a personal vocabulary because it is specific to her personal life, she will thus retain the words quite easily, and she will most definitely use them again. By writing those words she is telling her own story, in her own words.

Maria Diamond, a learner from Manitoba, wrote a poem entitled, "A New Beginning". It is a piece of writing that echoes a common message from the illiterate community of women:

A New Beginning

Life was a burden.
As long as I can remember.
I wanted so desperately to be loved.
I went around for many years.
With the heaviness of life on my shoulders.
One day I walked into a clubroom.
They spoke of Love, Honest, Trust, Hope.
It was then that I realized my biggest burden was me.

It was in this clubroom I learned about me.
I learned if I forgave myself first
I'd be able to forgive others.
If I loved me first.
People would be honest with me.
If I trusted myself first
Then I would trust others.
If I was happy with me first
Happiness would be around me.
It was then I found all the wonderful gifts of life.
(The Movement 20)

To the "conventional" writer, the grammatical errors are apparent: she uses a full stop at the end of every line in the first stanza, regardless of whether or not it is needed, and the series of words in the seventh line of the first stanza do not flow as they perhaps should (Love, Honesty, Trust, Hope). Yet this work reflects a very strong message about the life of an illiterate woman and her battle with low self-esteem. By simply writing, she has accomplished much. She has produced a written piece. This may have been an impossible task at some point in her life and possibly the cause of her low self-esteem. For a new writer to see her words on paper and to then see others reading them is a valuable first step. She has also participated in a valuable form of self-expression. This may help her in coming to terms with her oppressive or stifling conditions. Finally, she is bringing her private experience into the public sphere for others to share and understand. She is thus working towards taking on a larger role in the global efforts to control seemingly inevitable conditions of oppression and poverty. No "conventional" writer would be able to tell Maria's story. It is her own, and the "unconventional" way in which it is told is a valuable part of that process. No literary critic would ever demand that a story that includes Caribbean dialect, for example, be translated into "conventional" writing. It is not translatable.

Unfortunately, due to restrictions set by editors and publishers, new writers are rarely read by readers, particularly scholars, not involved with the literacy movement. The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAOW) for example, continues to publish papers "from a feminist viewpoint" that may include "'fugitive' papers

which have not been previously published". Yet regarding writing criteria:

" each paper must meet scholarly standards of intellectual quality in relation to evidence, argument, thesis, presentation and form, to the degree that each of these factors is required by the discipline and character of the paper presented" (CRIAW inside front cover). [\(6\)](#)

Conversely, there are journals of learners' writings targeted towards new readers only. *Voices: New Writers for New Readers* is such a journal published by the Lower Mainland Society for Literacy and Employment (Surrey, B.C.), but as the title implies, it is not intended for experienced readers. *Coming Out of My Shell* is an autobiography by Ann K. Green, a literacy student from Newfoundland. It is a poignantly honest story of a woman who suffered from child and marital abuse, poverty and isolation. She tells of her slow recovery and of her hopes for the future. The risk involved for Ann is threefold: 1. she speaks out as a woman, 2. she goes public with her story of incest and battery and 3. she makes public the fact that she is a learning reader and writer and that although her writing is not sophisticated, her story is, and is worth passing on. Her message is that she wants to help pave the way for others through the telling of her story: "I am proud of myself and what I have accomplished, especially the writing of this book" (33). She explains her feelings about joining a literacy program, "that was the best move I ever made in my life. I was finally doing something for myself" (31). Ann took the necessary steps in order to help herself and she wrote her story with the intention of helping others as well.

The Distance Education Program for Literacy Providers published the book in 1990, but it is not distributed outside of Newfoundland. I became aware of the work only because of my involvement with literacy and it is quite obvious to me that works such as Ann's are invisible when removed from that discipline. How can we be the stories we tell if the stories are not circulated?

We see educated women redefining their identities for a reason--they are participating in a process of social change that is long overdue. Yet we must acknowledge the problems of circulation that may interfere with the telling of our stories. Many experienced women writers and most women who are new writers will face numerous publishing and circulation obstacles. Unless the participation and worth of non-reading and writing women, such as Ann Green, in this process is acknowledged, their stories will not be heard nor will their lives be unearthed.

I suggest that in order to bring together the voices of experienced and inexperienced women readers and the cultures in which they live, an effort must be made to overcome this publishing arrangement. [\(7\)](#)

As discussed earlier, many women in North America may never make use of reading and writing, yet their strengths must be acknowledged. This acknowledgment means turning to oral culture. There are countless ways in which nonreading women have learned to express themselves. Song, dance, quiltmaking, and storytelling are just some of the forms of expression used on a daily basis by non-reading women in North America. Ruby Sales tells of her experience with a women's literacy course where she encouraged the use of oral skills:

African American women who came to the class brought strengths that were not recognized or validated because we live in a society that is predicated on the written tradition. But they brought a sense of the oral tradition and I often used that strength to get to the point of the written word. . . Black people historically have a facility with being oral and can talk very well. (25)

She explains that using song was very effective in philosophical discussions:

'My soul looks back in wonder, how I got over.' Historically we would be told that's a song about escapism. And a song about religion. But in the class we understood that's a philosophical statement of a people who rely on the oral tradition to talk about what it means to be in the world. (25)

An awareness of the value of oral history, storytelling and other forms of non-written communication must be instilled early on in children's education and throughout the school system. Naturally, the basics in literature must continue to be encouraged, but education must begin to include the works of those not yet recognized by the buying audience. "Teaching oral history, in addition to granting access to the stories of people who may write and read infrequently, can

help students to read--if by reading we mean not merely decoding but making meaning" (Stitzel 139). This is a beginning.

Transcribing oral histories and "verbal art" in order to bring it to reading society remains a strong option. Yet based on the idea that it is not only a form of communication but also a form of performance (Godard 9), there are certain risks involved in the translation process. Storytelling so often relies on gesture, intonation, and expression: these are lost in print. James Agee, in the writing of *In Praise of Famous Men*, faced the dilemma of print limitations and problems with translation in his documentation of the lives of American sharecroppers living during the Depression.

If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement. . . A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point.(12)

Even with the visual images of Walker Evans, Agee concludes that his representation would never be more than merely a "book" (13).

In established oral cultures, oral testimony is cherished. In a lecture sponsored by the McGill Students for Literacy Program, Majid Rahnema, former Secretary General on the World Conference on Illiteracy, spoke of his experiences in Mali where literacy efforts were being made in the mid 1980's. One of the most significant projects was the instillation of an "AudioTec", a "library" of taped oral performances that included histories, ceremonial songs, storytelling and bodies of traditional and functional knowledge. It was a successful project, in that it did not impose written testimony on the country's well-established oral culture. (8) In the North American context, a project such as this would go unrecognized unless drastic changes were made in the way people think of oral culture.

CONCLUSION

Changing the way people think is a long process and one that takes persistence, determination, and most importantly, it requires sound logic. Making room for other forms of communication has been relatively painless in the last Century--radio and television moved into place in under 30 years and are now considered indispensable. Computers have become the backbone of global communications and education and are also here to stay. There is no doubt, though, that these innovations were brought into popular use because they were easier and they could say more in less time, though they did not necessarily cost less. One can not help but wonder what has been "lost in the translation" from slower to faster and from local to global.

It is only since my extended involvement with the literacy movement that I have begun to think of print as belonging to the same fast lane as these technological forms of communication. I have learned of the exclusive nature of print and of the ways in which it has made our three-dimensional existences only two-dimensional. When a writer takes ideas, actions, or experiences, puts them into print and sends them to a reader, the reader receives a two-dimensional message. If that reader has an imagination, she will come up with her own third dimension. Yet if the receiver cannot read, she will receive nothing at all. Herein lies the exclusivity of print.

My positionality as a print feminist and as a literacy practitioner has enabled me to translate important ideas of print feminism to my understanding of nonreading women. Unfortunately, without the help of a mediator, illiterate women remain isolated in their non-print world. They experience silencing in more ways than the women who are experienced readers and writers do. Those non-readers who have attempted to express themselves in print are still silenced because of the "low standard" of their writing. As a result, their work is considered unpublishable and will not be circulated. In closing, I wish to consider one of the currently most controversial concepts in the field of literature as it relates to the literacy issue: the literary canon. The Canadian canon, for example, is a body of literary works selected by academic "experts" in literary criticism and is set up to represent a sampling of Canadian culture from the perspective of a uniquely Canadian literary tradition. In recent years, the concept of the canon has been challenged by the issue of "cultural appropriation" and has been encouraged to include works written by Canada's Native population, its Francophone population, and so on.

Women have developed their own feminist canon in response to a virtual exclusion of women writers in the larger Canadian canon. Perhaps someday illiterate men and women will develop their own as well. For this specific group, however, such a canonization would only serve to widen the gap between academic and non-academic traditions. Could it ever be possible that we reconsider how and why the present canon is constructed as it is, and that perhaps there might be room to include some representative works of the nonreading culture of Canada? These may be unconventional pieces of writing: poetry or short autobiographies from new writers that are truly timeless and that represent illiterate culture and expand our definitions of what is human culture in this time and place. This is not a utopian vision--it is a substantive one. The reasoning is sound: if the right to self-expression and the acknowledgment of a variety of forms are denied by the dominant group, then that self-expression becomes not longer a right, but a privilege.

FOOTNOTES

1. I would add here that though I will be discussing new and non-reading women, jargon is also incomprehensible to many who are experienced readers and writers. Many of those who have spent a limited amount of time in an academic community do not understand the language. [Back](#)

2. This idea parallels those of bell hooks in her essay entitled, "Men: Comrades in Struggle". In this discussion of race, class, and gender relations, specifically non-white working class women, she states, "Their life experiences had shown them that they have more in common with men of their race and/or class group than with bourgeois white women." (68). [Back](#)

3. Of course, feminist activism is not limited entirely to print. Women's discussion groups including women's literacy programs are one effective way to bring private to public without the use of print. This will be addressed in a discussion on crossing communication barriers. At this point, however, it is necessary to stress what still exists as the most influential, most valued, and most widely used medium--print. [Back](#)

4. On yet another level, nonreading women are able to relate to the stigmas that arise due to the prevailing ideas on "motivation". Illiterate women are frequently accused of hovering in the welfare bracket due to their lack of motivation in learning, when, more often than not, significant social conditions, such as low income, sexual and violent abuse, and single parenthood have played a more direct role. Horsman states,

The discourse on 'motivation' makes invisible the social organization of women's lives and the contradictions within the ideology that 'anyone can achieve anything if they are only motivated enough.' Unless women can articulate alternative discourses which expand the ways in which they can see their own participation in literacy programs or lack of it, they are left blaming themselves for their lack of motivation. (150 emphasis mine) [Back](#)

5. I do not wish to undermine the efforts of learning readers. Literacy theory has now made critical pedagogy a top priority in the tutoring process insofar as the need for a reconsideration of the societal influences on literacy is being petitioned. Nevertheless, academic feminists must recognize how limited the audience is which they so vehemently entreat. Feminist efforts are teaching women to become critical: critical of their place in the world, critical of written representations of that place, and critical of each other in order to come to some form of common ground. For new readers, their first criticism is that they are unable to communicate and are thus less likely to be critical. [Back](#)

6. I acknowledge the fact that this is a "scholarly journal" and that such journals have a specific function, however, this is an example of a common attitude among a wide variety of editorial boards. [Back](#)

7. Relevant and worthy of attention are the efforts of The Common Thread Project. The Common Thread Project is made up of a group of working-class women committed to "challenging the dangerous and insulting stereotypes of working-class women that the media in all forms continue to perpetuate, and to the idea of giving working-class women

a voice, both through the book, and through evenings of readings by new working-class women writers" (The Common Thread 246). "Making Connections: the Collective Working Experience" is the result of a taped conversation between some of the women of the group as they discuss the need to have their efforts published. "Some of us are writers, and some of us are just committed to the idea of getting working-class women's writing into print" (187). [Back](#)

8. There were Western assumptions made though, that impeded the early stages of the project. The organizers, Rhanema, and his group were concerned with funding for the project as they anticipated using the most sophisticated recording instruments. The native participants who had a hand in the project's organization, explained simply that such instrumentation was not necessary. A small cassette deck was used in the end. The recording environment also came into question early on. The Western organizers searched frantically for a "conference room" type of facility. The Malian representatives solved that problem quickly by pointing out the importance of maintaining a natural environment for recording: sitting under a tree would do. [Back](#)

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