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Bitter Milk: Lessons for the Writing Center

Barbara Cambridge

Madeleine R. Grumet. *Bitter Milk: Women and Teaching*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.

Madeleine Grumet has a mission: her focus on school curriculum seeks “to shift the flow of influence from the public to the domestic by explaining the motives that are generated in the politics of the family and in the projects and intentionality that constitute male and female gender identities” (xiv). In Chapter One of *Bitter Milk* Grumet introduces the centrality of reproduction in the composing of our lives. She proposes that we “refuse to run the classroom like a conveyance, designed to transport children from the private to the public world” but that we make “a real space in the middle, where we can all stop and rest and work to find the political and epistemological forms that will mediate the oppositions of home and workplace” (20).

In fact, Grumet organizes her book to enact her point. Chapters One and Ten, the first and last chapters, focus on family relations that emphasize the relation of reproduction and educational theory. Chapters Two, Three, Eight, and Nine speak about women teachers’ work in schools by relating private and public roles. The middle chapters, like Grumet’s ideal school, provide “mediating space” for working out a healthy relationship between private and public spheres.

Bitter Milk is particularly intriguing for those who work in writing centers because Grumet states that her fundamental argument is that “knowledge evolves in human relationships” (xix). For example, in Chapter five Grumet deals with “The Look in Parenting and Pedagogy.” Using Julia

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Kristeva's analysis of a shift from touch, which is emblematic of a "presymbolic capacity to celebrate disorder," to the look, which is rational and controlling, and invoking Martin Buber's warning that educators may try to teach through themselves rather than through students' reality, Grumet warns about damaging results of certain classrooms. She contends that "look dominates the classroom" (100) in a way that places the teacher as an authority, not to be touched. Facing the front of the room, students are not situated for dialogue; in fact, quiet is often the goal. Writing centers, however, are very different sites: touch and sound, which are associated in Grumet's analysis with familial nurturing, are encouraged. Tutors sit next to writers; conversation is the mode of discourse. Instead of the "mimesis and convention" which promote reproduction of the status quo, the writing center fosters dialogue and the possibility that, in the actions of composing and reflecting, writers can change their worlds.

Grumet argues in Chapter Nine that Common Culture invoked as an ideal is always a "repudiation of the present culture. What is common is never how we live or what we share" (171). In fact, Common Culture privileges those who currently hold power in the public realm because the Common Culture is touted as neutral, impartial and available to all, so that those who do not have it can be excluded. Curriculum can become Common Culture if it is not open to change. If it is only a reproduction of established ideas and methods, it can be disassociated from students who enact and, thereby, have the power to change it.

Indeed, the structure of schooling mitigates against change: Grumet claims the origin of this problem is that pedagogy exists for patriarchy. Tracing the history of industrialization, Grumet describes how submissiveness became the mark of motherhood and innocence the mark of childhood, roles that were reenacted in the culture of schools in which compliance was the norm: "The ideal teacher was one who could control the children and be controlled by her superiors" (43). Notice the her, for Grumet establishes that the feminization of teaching has had everything to do with failure of our schools as vital centers of learning.

The fault does not lie with women teachers per se. Because of the inferential nature of paternity, the symbolic and the objective dominate the public sphere historically shaped by men. Schools, therefore, in preparing children to move from the home to the workplace, emphasize replacing the ambiguous and the personal with the predictable and the productive. Yet, it is women who themselves have valued nurturing in the home and who are excluded from the workplaces for which they are preparing students who must repudiate nurturing and extol values of the public world. When that switch from the home to the workplace is unsuccessful or when the political and economic worlds are not working well, female teachers can be blamed. Parents who turned their children over to schools to be educated for success

outside the family as well as the patriarchy which finds its status quo threatened by change can both blame teachers.

A similar fate awaits writing center tutors. Associated with the intimate teaching of one-on-one conferencing, tutors are expected by student writers to prepare them for success in the academy. Professors, too, expect the writing center to move students from their own writing idiosyncrasies into academic discourse so that students can do well in their courses. When quick success is not apparent, writing centers are criticized as not doing their work. Grumet contends that “most of our classrooms cannot sustain human relationships of sufficient intimacy to support the risks, the trust, and the expression that learning requires” (56). In order to answer criticism of results which are at most only part of the writing center’s agenda, writing centers must be careful not to repudiate the circumstances needed for the building of the intimacy that learning requires. Grumet’s point that “women who teach must claim our reproductive labor as a process of civilization as well as procreation” (29) may be applied to the labor of writing center tutors who know that they are serving as midwife-teachers whose work is essential for supporting nascent writers.

Additionally, Grumet advocates persuasively another point that is crucial to the development of writing centers. Just as the routines of domesticity are “fluid and ubiquitous,” the work of the writing center can be the same kind of “nurturant labor (that does not) demand the recompense it deserves” (87). In one chapter of *The Teacher’s Voice: A Social History of Teaching in Twentieth Century America*, Margaret Nelson describes the intersection of home and work in the lives of teachers whom she interviewed who had taught prior to 1950. She reports that “many of the teachers spontaneously drew a comparison between family life and school life” (28). Teaching was noted as requiring the same skills as mothering and the same kinds of demands were made of teachers and mothers. Nelson explains, “The schoolteachers I interviewed either felt no impulse to keep their home lives and their work lives separate or they seemed unable to do so . . . the two worlds slipped and slid into one another” (31). Women were expected to abandon their occupational lives when family duty called and to disrupt their domestic lives because they were needed in schools.

Other writers, Grumet included, make the point that paternal figures, fathers at home and principals and superintendents at work, simply expected that women would make self-sacrifices. Yet, even with this expectation, Nelson adds that the double burden was eased for women she interviewed by the practices of women bringing their young children to school and of relatives and friends being allowed to substitute at school when teachers were needed at home. Grumet’s argument about the loss of maternal expertise that occurs when women move into professional settings that do not value their skills is underlined by Nelson’s account of a time when maternal skills were more easily applied in both settings with community support.

Writing center staff have longed for the kind of professional status accorded even their composition colleagues who teach writing classes, colleagues whose positioning in English departments is notoriously low. Yet, the writing center may be better off with a kind of fluidity that enables the enactment of the nurturing support that is essential for developing writers. Grumet's line of argument would call for foregrounding the assets of the writing center atmosphere as the assets that need to be brought to all teaching.

This stance, however, would not call for self-sacrificial insularity. In Chapter Four of *Bitter Milk* Grumet builds the argument that teaching is an art, that art challenges convention, and that schools that reproduce patriarchal structures need challenging. In a powerful contrast of the studio and the gallery, moreover, Grumet insists artists and teachers need both spaces for privacy and spaces to share experiences. When teachers remain in their isolated classrooms or writing center tutors operate only in the center, they run the risk that homemakers do in being misunderstood and underappreciated. Grumet sagely warns that "privatization of teaching repeats the exile of domesticity" (93). Writing centers which become oases in university deserts void of the flow of ideas in writing in all disciplines simply reenact the typically female role of nurturing in private space with little impact on or appreciation by the public.

As the National Writing Centers Association, *The Writing Center Journal*, and the *Writing Lab Newsletter* have developed, they have made public the philosophies, epistemologies, and practices of writing centers across the country. In foregrounding basic principles of the kind of sustained and intimate teaching for which Grumet argues, these public manifestations of writing center work support the continual development of nurturing practices while calling for affirmation from other teachers and learners of those practices and their potential to change teaching and learning in classrooms and beyond.

Grumet warns in yet another way about the problem of isolation. In Chapter Seven on "Bodyreading," Grumet insists that the project of curriculum is "to bring what we know to where we live" (127). Instead of situating meaning outside ourselves in the other, learners need the space and time to make meaning themselves. Grumet states that this tendency to locate meaning either in the words, sentences, and structures of texts or in the secret thoughts of the reader (the teacher) tells us that both community and curriculum are defunct, an impression that has been confirmed in the narratives of educational experiences written by students who have studied philosophy of education with me (133).

What writing center tutor has not heard these same narratives from frustrated writers who are sure that they do not and cannot know anything themselves. Grumet claims that "if we can just wrest meaning from the grip of knowledge and return it to art, we will be able to give students something to do with texts.

Activity-based curricula that are bonded to social, political, and physical action cannot contain the possibilities of meaning” (148).

The issue of who gets to make meaning is a central one. In telling a story, an aesthetic experience, the storyteller feels a kind of satisfaction from creating form. Art can challenge convention through a new way of telling. But, historically, teachers, who have been primarily women, have not been the storytellers: “Women were expected to be the medium through which the laws, rules, language, and order of the father, the principal, the employer were communicated to the child” (84). Writing centers, too, can be sites of transmission, transmission only of the story told by others, whether a course, a discipline, or a university.

In a powerful and moving book entitled *Calling: Essays on Teaching in the Mother Tongue* Gail Griffin chronicles her own personal and pedagogical history. At the end of one taxing spring quarter as Griffin greets both hyperactive and exhausted students with encouragement and support, a friend reminds her with gentle humor that Griffin had earlier lamented having no children. Griffin’s reflection on her own response is instructive.

Academic motherhood at that point felt sometimes like somebody else’s old housedress that fit too tightly or too loosely, sometimes like a garment that suited me well but that I was ashamed to wear in public. The problem was that I had bought the same dry goods that everybody else had been buying. I had made an error similar to that of the Victorians who mistook the sentimental icon, the angelic madonna, for the real thing: the woman who expressed her commitment to younger people in her care (and thus to the future in her keeping) in the form of teaching. I wonder at the power of such icons to replace reality and then to begin to recreate it. I had only to sweep the cobwebs and gauze away and look at my own mother to realize that Motherhood is neither winged and haloed nor necessarily haggard and self-abnegating. The heart is, after all, first and foremost a muscle. And the motherheart, uncorrupted, unsentimentalized, is a vital organ. (37)

Grumet, too, insists on the vitality of the motherheart. She relates the practice in Sri Lanka of adolescent girls who drink a mixture of milk and crushed margosa leaves, a ritual tonic to help them deal with the ambivalence of pending separation from their families. This “bitter milk, fluid of contradictions: love and rejection, sustenance and abstinence, nurturance and denial” becomes for Grumet an emblem of “the contradictions of (her) work and of the work of many other women and men who teach” (i). In the process that determines our gender identities Grumet reminds us of Nancy Chodorow’s claim that “differentiation does not require difference” (188). Differentiation acknowledges sameness and separateness without negating either. In moving to the public sphere we need not forego the nurturing

which feeds change: indeed, it is only the interplay of the private and the public that creates new life. That conclusion, claims Grumet, is the “bitter wisdom of this sweet work” (xx).

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