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Blogging, Bowen, and Butler

In her essay “E-criture Feminine,” author Deborah Bowen says online diaries create a space where women can express themselves freely. They foster an entirely female discourse, she says. Women are usually written about. The autobiographical form, though, allows women to speak for themselves (311). She also says this new discourse has three components: style, space, and medium. But can this form of writing be called distinctly feminine? In this paper, I apply Bowen’s theory to the blog *Baghdad Burning*, written by a woman in Iraq. While I agree with some of her points, I don’t think the internet completely erases the boundaries of gender. Also, Bowen sometimes reinforces stereotypes about the sexes.

Bowen says language is dominated by men (312). She writes, “This is true not only in its vocabulary and syntax, but also in its rigorous rules of logic, its proclivity for fixed classifications and oppositions...” (313). But this is beginning to change, she says. According to Bowen, “...a women’s discursive tradition is evolving on the Internet” (309). She suggests online journals foster a new, uniquely feminine way of speaking.

Bowen begins her study by describing online journals. She says there are three kinds: diaries, blogs, or some combination of the two (309). An online diary is a lot like the paper version. Entries appear in chronological order, and only one can be viewed at a time. The blog is only slightly different. Entries are usually shorter. There are multiple entries per page and they appear in reverse chronological order, with the most recent on top. Bowen looks just at online diaries, but says there isn't much difference between the two. Because they're so similar, I think her argument can be extended to blogs.

For her study, Bowen selected thirty diaries from sites like diaryland.com, Open Diary, and diarist.net. She chose them at random. She only required they be at least two years old and by women. She uses these diaries to describe an all female discourse. Bowen says it's impossible to define "women-writing" or e-criture feminine (a play on feminist theorist Helene Cixous' term "écriture féminine"). Theorists can't agree on what it means. Bowen, however, suggests it's autobiography. She says,

"Throughout history, women have danced around that subject position, creating 'off-camera' narrators who subtly guide the action and control the story, but are not main characters. However, when a woman author aggressively pursues the foregrounded 'I' subject position, she may find a greater emphasis on authority within her Self as the external authority...loses power" (311).

Women are usually written about. They stop being the subject of writing, though, when they use the autobiographical form. It allows women to speak for themselves. Even though e-criture feminine can't really be defined, Bowen says it has three parts: space, style, and medium. She then describes how each one functions.

Bowen begins by talking about the site of writing, the first component of feminine discourse. She says online diaries create a space where women can express themselves. In this space, the writer “dictates all of the content the site contains” (314). This means she can write about anything. Bowen uses the example of Fairybytch, a diarist who says she’s thinking about having a threesome with her boyfriend (316). This also includes the layout. The writer can post pictures, make an avatar, or change the background color. Second, Bowen says the writer gets to decide what gets published and when (316). She can make all of her entries public, or only some. She can post something immediately or wait a while.

We see all of these components in *Baghdad Burning*, written by a woman using the pseudonym Riverbend. She controls the blog completely, starting with the look. It’s hosted by Blogspot, a popular site owned by Google. Users can pick from different layouts. Some have columns of text, while others are more simple. They then can change the background color or font. Riverbend picked a very simple layout—the colors are cool, white on light blue. There’s one large column of text, with links to her some of her favorite sites on the side. Riverbend also has control over what she writes about. When she first started, she was twenty four years old, living with her parents and younger brother in post-war Iraq. She begins by saying, “...expect a lot of complaining and ranting” (5). Her blog is more than that, though. She talks about everything from politics to religion to family. She even writes about how dangerous it is for women in her country. Before the war, a little more than half wore a hijab. Riverbend only wore jeans and t-shirts (17). Now, though, she has to cover her hair. She can’t even leave her home without a male escort. She says, “A woman, or girl, out alone, risks anything from insults to abduction” (16). After the war, extremist groups flourished. They terrorize the city and

force women to cover themselves. Riverbend's blog, though, provides her a kind of freedom. Bowen says, "Women who participate in the entrepreneurship of autobiography are...participating in a simultaneous, parallel act of cultural deconstruction so that reconstruction of the self may take place" (314). This is especially evident in Riverbend's blog. She deconstructs the rules controlling women. In their wake, she recreates herself. She's the same, but now she can speak.

This is only possible, though, because she writes using a pseudonym. Riverbend says, "But no matter what—I shall remain anonymous. I wouldn't feel free to write otherwise" (21). Bowen calls this an important part of e-criture feminine. She says, "These diarists rely on the veil of anonymity as the bunker of seclusion" (317). This is true for Riverbend, especially when journalists are being tortured. She writes about this in one entry (82). The number of newspapers increased dramatically after the war, she says. Some of them were more serious than others—they covered everything from politics to pop culture (83). After a couple months, though, many were shut down. Others were given a list of things they can't write about. On the list—the number of bombings or people killed. They can't say anything to make the new government look bad. Journalists who don't comply are sometimes beaten (84). I don't think this idea about using a pseudonym applies to all women, though. Riverbend's blog is an extreme case. There are plenty of women who write using their real names. Look at Kelly Oxford, who used her blog to catapult her writing career (kellyoxford.tumblr.net). She was recently hired to write a television pilot after a Hollywood executive saw her blog.

Bowen emphasizes how important it is for the writer to have total control. To illustrate her point, she compares each diary entry to a room (316). The writer can invite readers in or,

conversely, shut them out. She says, "The author controls the two-way communication here. The writer opens the dialogue, and she decide to whom she responds, to whom she does not respond, and, of course if she ever addresses the matter again with her readers" (317). I think Bowen makes a good point here (317). I also think it's interesting, however, Riverbend makes her entire blog public. She says in one entry, "Most of the emails moved me to...gratitude. Thank you for understanding...no thank you for even *trying* to understand...It's great to get questions and differing opinions..." (10). She invites readers to post comments or e-mail her, even though she doesn't always like the responses. She recognizes the importance of conversation. How else can she help subvert the dominant discourse? She lives in a society where journalists are being silenced.

Bowen goes on to talk about the second component of e-criture feminine: style. She says the new female discourse must "reject traditional narrative form" (315). She suggests hypertext as an alternative. It's not fixed like male language, she says. The writer can link to other sites, creating a more fluid way of reading. Bowen also says,

"...the reader is...now able to learn more about the diarist through these alternate sources. In the three-dimensional world of hypertextuality, these extratextual materials succeed in 'fleshing out' the different sides of the diarist, and offering the reader an equally well-rounded look at the writer herself" (318).

Finally, she quotes another theorist, Sidonie Smith, who says women feel a couple different things when they write. They want to speak, but they're also afraid of being quieted by male society. Hypertext is the solution to this problem. Women can have their own voices, while at the same time appropriating accepted, male texts (318).

Riverbend definitely creates a more fluid way of reading. She links to herself. She often mentions her other blog, *Is Something Burning?!*, about traditional Iraqi recipes. She also links to outside sources like news articles. This is where we encounter a problem with Bowen's argument, though. For example, in one entry, Riverbend refers to an article from the *New York Times* (92). In "Iraq Family Ties Complicate American Efforts for Change," author John Tierney claims, "A key purpose of veiling is to prevent outsiders from competing with a woman's cousins for marriage." Riverbend appropriates this article, but not for the writer's authority. She talks about the difference between a hijab and a veil. The former is worn by millions of Muslim women. It only covers the hair, and comes in many different styles and colors. She says, "...I have friends who own every color and design imaginable and look so good, it almost seems more like a fashion statement than a religious one" (93). A veil is something completely different. According to Riverbend, it's usually only worn by fundamentalists, and rarely found in Iraq. She concludes by saying, "...*none* of these females wear a headscarf because their *cousins* make them wear it. They wear the headscarf out of a conviction that it is the correct thing to do and out of the comfort and security it gives them" (93). She proves she doesn't need the author's discourse.

Also, while trying to define a new discourse, Bowen actually perpetuates old stereotypes. She writes,

"In contrast to the male diary, which is predominately a chronicle of events, of day-to-day happenings, all of which focus on a single goal, most women's journals appear to be layers, each entry a complex network of thoughts, feelings, ideas, and events that all move in, out, and around one another thematically, contextually..." (314).

She implies most men are incapable of “complex...thoughts, feelings, ideas.” This seems contrary to the point she’s trying to make. Bowen divides the sexes. She insists she’s just trying to describe e-criture feminine, though. She writes, “Women-writing is not a divisive movement or act, seeking to separate women from men, or women’s writings from those of men...” (310). While this may be true, Bowen only reinforces stereotypes about men.

Bowen goes so far as to compares the online diary to a scrapbook. She says they both include pictures. Also, each contains “leaves that can be turned, skipped, added, and removed” (321). Riverbend doesn’t post pictures to her blog, but it doesn’t have to be read in a linear way. Her entries appear in reverse chronological order, with the most recent on top. Her blog also includes an archive of old entries, organized by month. Readers can skip around in time. While I agree with Bowen--blogs and scrapbooks are similar—I think her comparison is unusual. Again, she talks about subverting the male discourse, but relies on sexist tropes. She picks a traditionally female pastime. She couldn’t compare it to anything else? There are other creative forms of expression she could’ve used, like zine making.

Finally, Bowen talks about medium, the third component of e-criture feminine. She says women must write about women. She quotes Cixous again, who advocates “writing from the body” (315). She says women have been objectified for so long, they have to reclaim their bodies. One way to do this is through language. This is where Bowen’s argument starts to unravel, though. She seems to contradict herself. She says online diaries also help blur the boundaries of gender (323). But is this possible? Can there be a distinctly feminine discourse that also blurs gender boundaries?

Also, Bowen doesn't say what she means by "writing from the body" exactly. I feel like this is an interesting omission. This might be outside the scope of her study, but she doesn't consider the difference between sex and gender (9). Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble* says biology isn't "destiny." Sex refers to someone's physical body, but gender is imposed by society. She writes, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (44). It's a series of motions, performed over and over again. So when she says women must write women, is she including people who are gay? Transgendered people?

I think this is interesting for another reason. The internet, in a way, displaces the body. It puts more emphasis on words. Bowen hints at this when she writes, "Language is the primary tool for the construction of an online identity" (312). She suggests it's possible to invent some kind of virtual alter ego. She even uses the example of Fairybych, who's obviously created a persona for herself. Bowen, though, doesn't really talk about this idea much. I think it could use more exploration. For example, the question of writing from the body also applies to Riverbend. It's possible she isn't a woman or from Iraq. Readers sometimes question her identity. She says, "A lot of you have been asking about my background and the reason why my English is good" (20). She doesn't reveal much, though, except her parents are Iraqi and she was raised abroad. She ends by saying, "You wouldn't believe how many young Iraqi people know so much about American/British/French pop culture" (20). Readers are still left wondering, though, who is Riverbend? And can she really write from the body?

This also raises the question, do women have to write about women (322)? Bowen implies e-criture feminine is the only way to subvert male discourse. Riverbend blogs about women in her country, but she also blogs about other things. Butler also talks about this a little in her book. She asks, "Is 'unity' necessary for effective political action?" She says it isn't "democratizing." Someone will always be in charge (20). I think this is another interesting omission from Bowen's argument. She talks about how online diaries can empower women. There's still a kind of hierarchy, though, even within this new discourse. Some women have more access to the internet and blogging than others. Riverbend, for example, tries to explain the long periods between her entries. She doesn't always have electricity. When it finally comes on, she says, "...we remember a long list of things that can only be done in an electrical world...like vacuum" (162). Sometimes blogging is the last thing on her to-do list.

In conclusion, I agree with a lot of what Bowen says. I think online diaries and blogs create a space where women can express themselves, perhaps a little more freely than in real life. I also think they foster a new kind of discourse. Whether or not it can be called distinctly feminine, I'm not sure. I'd perhaps revise Bowen's thesis. I think online diaries and blogs do more than blur gender boundaries; they also blur the boundaries of the body. The virtual self becomes an extension of the physical, but the two don't necessarily have to correspond. This is what really subverts male discourse

Works Cited

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