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Feminist Composition Pedagogy and the Hypermediated Fractures in the Contact Zone

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Jessica Blackburn

Abstract: This article addresses two central research questions: (1) Are there possible detrimental implications to teaching multimodal composition in first-year composition? (2) If so, what is pedagogy’s role in mediating these outcomes? Guided by these questions and focused on the responses of eighty seven first-year composition students, a mixed-methods research approach is engaged through surveys, pre/post-semester questionnaire data, transcribed interviews, and writing -about-writing essays. Uncovering the 39.6% of students who—through this research—are discovered to feel constrained rather than liberated by technology and who believe that technology amplifies their place in the literacy hierarchy, this article articulates the identity politics inside the multimodal composition classroom and introduces the term “hypermediated fractures” into the pedagogical conversations surrounding feminist pedagogy and the teaching of digital literacies in first-year composition.

Historically, literacy instruction has authorized versions of literacy that have been increasingly separated from the contexts that make these literacies meaningful, a process that, particularly in the United States, has culminated in classrooms designed to teaching nothing but writing and reading. As purportedly context-free literacies, these institutionalized ways of writing and reading authorize a cultural capital that often lacks a legitimacy for the communities in which the literacy instruction occurs, a cultural capital that nonetheless is inscribed upon students (and teachers alike) in a paternalism that some have characterized as acts of violence.

—Christopher Schroeder, *Alt/Dis*

Slowly but surely, previously nonacademic discourses are blending with traditional academic discourses to form the new “mixed” forms. These new discourses are still academic, in that they are doing the intellectual work of the academy—rigorous, reflective scholarship [;] ... they allow their practitioners to do intellectual work in ways they could not if confined to traditional academic discourse.

—Patricia Bizzell, *Alt/Dis*

Alt/Dis: Alternative Discourses and the Academy, edited by Christopher Schroeder, Helen Fox, and Patricia Bizzell, speaks to the progressive vision found in the field of composition studies. With scholars like Schroeder commenting on the “acts of violence” committed against our students when we teach “context-free literacies” and with Bizzell commenting on new, blended forms of writing as alternatives to confining “traditional academic discourse,” we see the field continuing its commitment to synchronizing itself with the surrounding cultural ecologies. Furthermore, early millennium texts such as *Alt/Dis* speak to the swiftness of the field’s willingness to take stock of its paradigmatic, critical, pedagogical approaches to literacy at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Consequently, as increasing numbers of our first-year composition (FYC) students enter the academy as digital natives

who learned to read and write through the filter of a computer (think: Schroeder's "cultural capital" [181]), we see many of our students' nonacademic discourses being encouraged by faculty to do as Bizzell suggests and blend "with traditional academic discourses to form the new 'mixed' form" (3). As a result and in the case of the FYC classroom, we see an increase in digitized and modernized approaches to the teaching of new literacies: literacies that are influenced and altered by the proliferation of technology, computers, and new media.

Keeping up with the proliferation of new literacies (e.g., the composition skills involved in designing websites, blogs, zines, wikis, video essays, etc.), this pedagogical progression can be seen taking place throughout the field of composition studies, and we can easily locate this movement in the burgeoning variety of web-authoring courses being offered as well as the number of sections and readings devoted to technology and media in many of the new textbooks designed for FYC courses. Providing further proof that the field has embraced new literacies and modernized its pedagogical practices of FYC, the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) officially and publicly sanctions multimodal pedagogies and the studies of digital literacy in the teaching of first-year writing. Today's course outcomes for *basic* writing, according to the WPA council, must engage technology so that

[b]y the end of first-year composition, students should (1) use electronic environments for drafting, reviewing, revising, editing, and sharing texts; (2) locate, evaluate, organize, and use research material collected from electronic sources, including scholarly library databases; other official databases (e.g., federal government databases); and informal electronic networks and internet sources; and (3) understand and exploit the differences in the rhetorical strategies and in the affordances available for both print and electronic composing processes and texts.

Additionally, we see this progressive shift taking place throughout the WPA-L dialog threads devoted to digital literacies in the FYC classroom, and we see this progress reflected in the number of the Conference on College Composition and Communication sessions devoted to digital literacies and pedagogies (e.g., searching for conference sessions using the term "digital media" yields sixty-eight results in the interactive program for the 2011 CCCC in Atlanta). Indeed, this exciting modernization of composition instruction is eminently promising, with its potential to provide blended, context-rich writing projects while "doing the intellectual work of the academy—rigorous, reflective scholarship [which] allow[s] their practitioners to do intellectual work in ways they could not if confined to traditional academic discourse" (Bizzell 3). Consequently, blending digital literacies into the traditional composition curriculum (or vice versa) offers many opportunities for composition studies to maintain its focus on the critical pedagogies that arouse a sense of social consciousness in freshman students transitioning into their new academic identities and communities, and doing so offers vast opportunities to support context-rich literacies that authorize a cultural capital of many twenty-first century learners. However, while these digitized and modernized composition pedagogies are certainly promising, incorporating new literacies into FYC is hardly a *simple* "blending or contextualizing" of the FYC curriculum. In fact, it is just the opposite that concerns me and that, consequently, is the focus of this article: the *complex* implications and resulting demands of integrating digital literacies into the FYC classroom.

Just as we know that literacy is not the magic wand that equalizes the playing field for all members of society, we know that technology is hardly a silver bullet for disparities surrounding race, gender, class, and literacy. While I am an avid proponent for the modernization/digitization of FYC curricula, I am concerned that as the field continues to move forward swiftly to integrate new pedagogies into our modernized FYC curricula, there exists a potential to do so without an accompanying critical pedagogy and to overlook the need to mediate the identity politics present in a digitized classroom so

that our students may avoid the hypermediated fractures that occur in multimodal contact zones. "Hypermediated fractures" is a term I have come to define as the cracks in the foundation of digitized learning/teaching; these cracks result from the pressures or tensions surrounding techno-literacy acquisition, and some students may be more likely than others to fall into or become distracted by the hypermediated fractures running throughout a digitized FYC curriculum.

Approaching the literacy hierarchy that is always present in any composition classroom and overlapping *technology* onto that hierarchy undoubtedly amplifies the socio-political/economic positions occupied by our students. Thus, while I encourage the integration of digital literacies into our FYC classrooms, I argue *simultaneously* for an application of an intentional, critical, and socially-conscious pedagogical perspective; and I have found that for me, the critical pedagogy that makes the best sense in the digital era is one that is framed by feminist composition theory and its attendant concerns of identity, power, and agency.

The Research: Rationale, Methods, and Outcomes

In order to better understand the hypermediated fractures in the modern contact zone, I conducted a study of eighty-seven FYC students at a large research university in the southern United States (academic year 2009/2010). These students were enrolled in a number of my sections of FYC, which were taught under a digitized curriculum (i.e. web-based reading projects and website design). With a research rationale rooted around my concerns over the potential hypermediated fractures in the digitized FYC classroom, I approached the research with two questions in mind: (1) Are there possible detrimental implications to digitizing FYC? (2) If so, what is pedagogy's role in mediating these outcomes?

Throughout this study, course sections not assigned to a computer lab met in traditional classrooms, with weekly visits to a computer lab (this ensured ample opportunity for multimodal writers's workshops during the writing process). The average enrollment per section was eighteen freshmen, with a make-up reflecting the demographics of the university's entire freshman class. For example, according to the University's 2009 Freshman First Generation Report, 28.5% of freshmen reported being first-generation students. Additionally, the most recent CIRP Institutional Summary indicates that 51.4% of the student population is male; 98% of freshmen are ages eighteen or nineteen; 92.3% of the freshmen are Caucasian; 97.9% claim English as their native language, with 97.5% being American born; 54.5% of freshmen identify their parents's income as less than \$100,000 per year; 81.4% graduated from public high schools; 51.8% of freshman men rated their computer skills as "above average," as compared with the 33.7% of freshman women claiming the same level of expertise (note this data's relevance to this research project); 75% claim to use the internet for homework; and 86.9% have a personal computer on campus. Boiled down, my FYC classroom research occurred on a campus with just more than half of the population being male, the alarming majority being Caucasian and American (this unfortunate lack of diversity does expose a limitation of the study and a need for further research at institutions harboring greater multiculturalism), roughly half of the students coming from especially affluent households, and with the typical student sitting in my classroom having graduated from a public high school. Especially relevant to this research, moreover, are the disparities between men (51.8%) and women (33.7%) claiming advanced computer skills. Keeping this institutional sketch and classroom context in mind, my research on integrating digital media into the FYC classroom reveals important findings regarding the processes and pedagogies necessary to ethically steward a digitized curriculum overhaul.

While the courses themselves involved basic digital literacies like web-based reading and writing, the most "advanced" multimodal skill used was the students' construction of a research-based website using [Weebly.com](http://www.weebly.com/) [http://www.weebly.com/], a free, basic, online, and reasonably intuitive website

creator. Students embedded images and YouTube videos (although none opted to compose their own videos) and had to demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the architectural literacies of website design (i.e. how to organize pages, link them together, create a thematic foundation, and anticipate the readers' navigational and informational needs), as well as the use of hyperlinks, color, font, and visual rhetoric in general. Essentially, the students created web-born research documents (including reference pages) that relied upon their ability to synthesize primary and secondary texts to create a focused, informative, multimodal website. Other than the website project, it could be argued that the course was very "traditional" in its print-based, academic focus and its lack of such literacies as video essaying. In other words, the curriculum only pushed students slightly toward a hypermediated fracture, thereby allowing me to pull back if the technology became too much of a literacy barrier.

As for the research methods, I collected surveys (see Appendix A) and questionnaires that asked about my students' perception of the academy's use of digital literacies as well as my students' willingness to incorporate technology into the writing space. The average age of respondents was 20.3 years; only a small number of the sample (5) was non-traditional (i.e. over the age of 23). Fifty-three men (60.9 % of the sample) participated compared to thirty-four women (39 %). Sixty-six (66) % of respondents were white. Eighteen (18) % of respondents were in the "upper middle income/wealthy" category; sixty-four % were "middle income"; sixteen % were "lower income." The research results (see Appendix B for complete data) reflect four groups of comparison in the research design: the general sample population and results by gender, race, and class categories. Leaning on the cultural studies tradition of the field, I combined the survey and pre/post-semester questionnaire data with taped interviews and metacognitive "writing-about-writing" essays that urged the students to reflect on their multimodal composition processes. This mixed-methods research strategy afforded a robust perspective on the socio-cultural contact zone of the twenty-first century writing classroom and its resulting pedagogical demands.

The survey results (see Appendix B) uncovered a wider hypermediated fracture than I had anticipated. For example, while many of my students discovered the potential for YouTube's DIY "vernacular creativity" (Burgess and Green 13) to critically arouse their sense of ethos and subject positions as twenty-first century readers and writers, and while many of my students enjoyed website authoring and design as potential pedagogical companions for collaborative and diplomatic classroom writing/instruction, perhaps more important than any other result (and for the sake of this essay, I will focus on this point in detail), I uncovered an even greater number than I had anticipated of students vulnerable to the hypermediated fractures in the contact zone that occur when certain students are placed unintentionally in subordinating positions through digital literacy acquisition: While 91.9% report that multimedia technologies are incorporated into their college courses, only 60.4% claim that the use of technology increases their interest in the course, with 39.6% claiming *it lowers their interest*. Driven to better understand why 39.6% of students claimed a lowered sense of interest in composition projects involving digital literacies, I turned to my transcribed interviews and focus groups.

Inside the Hypermediated Fractures

What I found was interesting, meaningful, and complicated. I began this study expecting my students to desire overwhelmingly the integration of technology, and I expected their history as "digital natives" to afford them confidence in demanding this integration. However, of the eighty-seven students polled, roughly 39.6% of my students are less interested in courses that incorporate digital literacies, and that lack of interest is directly related to feelings of *compounded oppression*. Through follow-up interviews, classroom observations, and reflection essays, I learned that the 39.6% feel *constrained rather than liberated* by technology in the FYC classroom, and many of the students making up this 39.6% feel that technology *amplifies* the literacy hierarchy already in place in the

composition classroom. Many feel that integrating technology into the literacy classroom actually highlights their deficits (i.e. those skills that they identify as being weak or below the level of their peers), both in terms of traditional as well as digital literacies. For example, one student explained during a paper conference that she felt uncomfortable having other students peer-edit her website because she felt that it would "out" the fact that her technology skills were too inferior to be able to express her ideas multimodally and her website was not "fancy enough."

Notably, during one post-term focus group session meant to reflect on the semester, I asked my students what they had learned in our section of FYC that they might not have learned in a "traditional" section of FYC (i.e. a section not incorporating digital literacies into the syllabus). While many of the students were offering up the answers I had hoped for as their composition teacher (e.g., how to be a better writer, to care more about writing, to see writing as a form of agency, etc.), I did have one student in the back of the room who leaned back in his seat with his arms folded across his chest. This same student had shared with me throughout the semester that he came from a laboring-class background; had little exposure to technology in the home; and had graduated from a small, rural high school where he had never been asked to write anything beyond the basic, five-paragraph essay. Furthermore, he admitted in private that he had made his way through high school only being assigned excerpts of full-length pieces of literature or short poems (do keep in mind that according to the latest *US News and World Report* and despite the good efforts of the teachers and administrators, the public school system in this student's home state of Arkansas is ranked 42nd in the nation for public education). Knowing this about my student's cultural ecology and literacy antecedents, I was not surprised when he seemed to integrate *the least* into my digitized FYC contact zone: he did not turn in papers that were largely based around technology and critical deconstruction of web-texts; he would come to student-teacher conferences with blank stares instead of active questions; and he never spoke once in class—even when working in small group projects. So during the focus group, I made my way toward the back of the room to stand near him. I hoped that just standing beside him would offer some solidarity and make sure he knew that he was seen and would be heard, if he chose to speak. While many others were announcing how refreshing it was to blend their digital literacies with their academic literacies and how they wished other classes would make similar transitions, the student who never spoke began to mumble under his breath and fold his arms even tighter across his chest. He leaned back in his seat and stretched his legs out to fill his space. He had not even taken off his coat that day, and his bag sat zipped on the floor beside him. As I continued to ask the class what they had learned through our digitized FYC course, he muttered under his breath but just loudly enough for me to hear, "Yeah, I learned that technology SUCKS!" He never looked up, and he never smiled during our last session together. While the majority of the class found solidarity throughout that semester and while many students had hit a technology wall at one point or another but had worked through it thanks to their collaborating peers, he sat defeated and disengaged. I left that focus group sure that I had managed to reach *more* of my students in ways that my former (offline) pedagogy had not. I left knowing that my students were better prepared to write in the twenty-first century and more critically literate as a result of this digitized curriculum. And even though we may not always reach all of our students, I left knowing that I had lost the young man in the back along with the 39.6% like him who came with an obvious lack of literacy training and who, as a result of *technology* and an inability to manipulate it, consequently finished the semester with an even greater lack of interest in or commitment to literacy acquisition. He, like the 39.6% of students who may not have explicitly announced that technology "sucks," did not make it beyond the technology and into the composition; instead, the technology became the lock on the door that kept him firmly planted *outside* of the contact zone. Further complicating the outcomes of my digitized composition curricula, when it came time to evaluate the students' websites, he and roughly 40% of the class were unable to meet the structural or rhetorical objectives of the assignment. They spent so much time trying to assimilate into the digital culture and design and build their websites, that the composition process took a backseat and their research and ideas were never fully expressed.

Driven to identify his needs—and the needs of so many students like him—I began looking closely at the results of my surveys and polls, reconsidering my recorded interviews and focus groups, and ruminating on possible pedagogical responses to the hypermediated fractures. I found that many of our working-class, minorities, underprivileged, and/or women reach the FYC classroom with a self-conscious awareness of their technology barriers or “inferior” exposure to technology as an *academic* tool (academic as well as social, that is). They do not define themselves as “tech people,” even though 97.5% of my students polled have their own personal computers at college and the average age of the first computer in the home was 9.27 years of age. In other words, while students are increasingly becoming “digital natives,” mere technology *access* does not necessarily translate into technological *literacy*, and we see this constraining an important category of students: what appears to be the less financially privileged. Also exposed through my research are the complicated and sometimes contradictory uses for technology. For example, students polled listed using the Web for social/communication purposes 95% of the time, while they only listed using it for *academic* research 62% of the time. Furthermore, the same 62% of students who claim to use technology for academic purposes also identified themselves as *middle* or *upper class*. While I believe that 95% of my students use digital media for communication, the 38%—an alarmingly high rate of FYC students—who *do not* use technology as an academic tool underscores the notion that mere *access* to

computer technology is serving as the Trojan horse. Politicians who are loathe to increase expenditures aimed at disadvantaged youths make an exception when interventions are draped in the mystique of new technology. The digital divide is the latest effort to encourage our reluctant social and political leaders to ameliorate inequality and social exclusion. We must wait to see whether “Let them have Pentiums” proves more practical than “Let them eat cake.” (Attewell 257)

As Attewell suggests, the late twentieth century push to put computers in America’s public schools and the Technology Literacy Challenge initiated by the Clinton administration aimed at equalizing access to *technology* did not necessarily equalize access to critical *literacy* (Selfe, *Technology*). As my students suggest, just because they had a computer and a SMART Board in their classrooms does not necessarily mean that our incoming students graduated from high schools with a critical digital literacy or even an awareness that technology—when used as an academic device—provides an advantage to some while it maintains the barrier for others. Furthermore, as long as we continue to look away from the roughly 39.6% of FYC students entering the academy without a pre-programmed appreciation for *why* and *how* to use technology in the literacy classroom for socio-academic gain (i.e. deeper content knowledge, refined and modernized literacies, higher grade point averages, greater sense of academic belonging, higher matriculation and retention rates, etc.), “affluent children will leverage their ample resources of social and cultural capital to excel in this new arena of skill” (Attewell 257).

Why Feminist Composition Pedagogy?

As is the case with any curricular redirection, a critical pedagogical perspective is fundamental during the field’s paradigmatic transition into modernized FYC curricula. Due to the socio-economic conditions and disparities surrounding technology usage, critical attention must be devoted to unpacking our newly digitized “contact zones” (Pratt; Bizzell, “Contact Zones”), and this critical pedagogical process is eminently compatible with feminist composition theory. The “contact zone”—a term first defined by Mary Louise Pratt but whose definition I glean from Patricia Bizzell—includes all elements of the classroom such as space, students, professor, syllabus, course content (e.g., multimodal assignments), time in history (e.g., the digital era), and geographic location that combine to create a “site of struggle” (Bizzell, “Contact Zones” 482). Bizzell, guided by her commitment to feminist pedagogy and anti-hierarchical epistemologies, explains:

Studying texts as they respond to contact zone conditions is studying them rhetorically, studying them as efforts of rhetoric. The historical context provides a way to focus the rhetorical analysis. Moreover, professional and student writing can also be seen as contending in contact zones and experimenting with the textual arts of the contact zone that rhetorical analysis emphasizes. Thus boundaries between "content" (literature) and its traditional inferior, pedagogy (composition), are usefully blurred, as are the distinctions between "high" literature and other kinds of writing, including student writing. ("Contact Zones" 484)

Through Bizzell's understanding of the contact zone, we come to see the composition classroom as blurring institutional boundaries around text and context. We see the composition classroom as a space that is inhabited by multiple and often disparate identities and that exists within its own unique socio-historic moment (in this case, the digital era) and material conditions (or states of privilege). When we approach the contact zone in this light, we see where a critical pedagogy is necessary—and feminist pedagogy, specifically, may be wonderfully suited—to responsibly mediate the "site of struggle" in ways that best sponsor critically conscious literacies.

Kay Siebler, in *Compositing Feminisms: How Feminists Have Shaped Composition Theories and Practices*, outlines the sixteen "themes" that she finds central to feminist pedagogy (38-39). Although I do not agree with all sixteen of Siebler's themes (e.g., while I find teaching journals very useful, I do not locate them necessarily at the core of feminist pedagogical practice), I do subscribe to most of her tenets:

- Confronting student/teacher biases
- Productively using conflict as a mode of academic inquiry
- Authorizing the students' power through self-directed processes
- Connecting classroom/local issues to community/global issues
- Mediating the (causes for) disparities between those who speak and those who are spoken for in the classroom
- Sponsoring critical consciousness and active reading/writing
- Teaching to actualize all identities in the room through practical
- (e.g., service learning) and theoretical explorations of race,
- affluence, gender, sexuality, religion, etc. (This last point being
- perhaps most central to my application of feminist pedagogy.)

In addition to Siebler's foundational themes of feminist pedagogy, similar practices and definitions exist throughout the scholarship surrounding feminist composition theories/pedagogies.

For example, in the introductory chapter of *Feminism and Composition: A Critical Sourcebook*, feminist composition theory is defined as a pedagogy that draws from "various feminisms, debating issues surrounding essentialism, social constructionist, and identity politics; exploring personal writing, adversarial arguments, and community considerations; and advocating activism, experimentation, and institutional reform" (Kirsh et al. 1). Feminist composition pedagogy, by tailoring college writing around issues of identity politics and ideological constructions of the self and the Other, invites our students to reconsider their own contextual subjectivity and to see writing as a means of resistance to the dominant and often oppressive power structures currently shaping society (structures which operate vis-à-vis language and literacy). Like Siebler, many feminist compositionists see themselves as obligated to critique, alongside their students, social constructions of status and maintenances of power and, ideally, to encourage a critical literacy that disrupts oppression through the students' written exploration of their own subjectivity and ethos, a term feminist compositionist Nedra Reynolds defines as encompassing "the individual agent as well as the

location or position from which that person speaks or writes" (326). This tenet of feminist pedagogy may be particularly useful as we ask our students to consider their own ethoi as spectators/readers of the Web's narration of culture and identity (White). Likewise, feminist pedagogy is especially relevant as we encourage our students to (re)write their identities into cyberspace, a space which is still largely constructed by those in power and which "tries to convince the spectator that they are in control while depriving them of options" (White 22).

Also consistent with Siebler's "themes" of feminist pedagogy, Dale M. Bauer's article, "The Other 'F' Word: The Feminist in the Classroom," suggests that one of the primary functions of the feminist composition professor is to help create a classroom space that understands that "there is no separation between the outer world and the inner word, let alone between politics and intellectual work" (352). This type of classroom supports our students' understanding of the connections between language, literacy, and identity; additionally, by seeing personal identities as public subjects, identities become politicized. Ideally, the personal identities becoming politicized will lead the students to *use* the words through which they situate their identities as *intentional*, political, rhetorical tools. Nedra Reynolds explains this feminist pedagogical principle as a "strategy [which] uses one kind of mastery, feminist and dialogic in practice, against another, monologic and authoritarian ... [;] the classroom is a place to explore resistances and identifications, a place also to explore the ambiguous and often ambivalent space of values and ethics" (353). Here, we see feminist classrooms as both democratic *and* liberatory in their effort to *authorize* all present identities by productively writing through identity conflicts. Through classroom dialogue, students deconstruct (and ultimately linguistically and ideologically reconstruct) their perceptions of reality, truth(s), and legitimacy as being socio-politically connected to literacy and authority; furthermore, students recognize that dialogic (as opposed to monologic) communities are, consequently, the most likely to support genuine diversity and critical pluralism. We see how the feminist pedagogue's commitment to dialogic communities is especially useful as we encourage our students to participate in blogs (especially public forums constructed through acts of literacy).

Also congruent with Kay Siebler's core themes of feminist pedagogy, Dale Bauer uses the feminist composition classroom to provoke an understanding that "[r]ather than opposing the public and private voices or opposing masculine and feminine, we need to see how to negotiate that opposition in order to speak a multiplicity of voices into the cultural dialogue" (354). And for the feminist pedagogue bell hooks, this "cultural dialogue" is a milieu of critical demographic concerns, not the least of which being affluence or privilege. Applying a feminist pedagogy to her reading of class issues in the academy, bell hooks reminds us that "class warfare will be our nation's fate if we do not collectively challenge classism, if we do not attend to the widening gap between rich and poor, the haves and have-nots. This conflict is already racialized and gendered" (8). For hooks, one simply cannot work toward a feminist objective without simultaneously absorbing class and power into that scope. In other words, no feminized classroom may cross the societal boundaries of race and gender without *simultaneously* crossing class boundaries. All three of these central concerns of feminist pedagogy (race, gender, and affluence) are inseparably entangled and entwined in society and, therefore, within the confines of our classrooms and their hypermediated fractures.

For many feminist compositionists, paramount goals of this socially conscious pedagogy are to actively critique the role that language and rhetoric play in maintaining society's socio-economic meta-narratives and to disrupt dominant cultural paradigms through critical literacy acquisition. It seems only natural, then, that as society increasingly widens its definitions and expectations of literacy to include digital practices, compositionists such as Cynthia Selfe have relocated their feminist pedagogies inside technology. For example, in "Technology and Literacy: A Story about the Perils of Not Paying Attention," Selfe synthesizes the tenets of feminist pedagogy with the politics of teaching writing:

In technology-rich communication facilities, students and teachers can develop a more critically-informed sense of technology by actively confronting and addressing technology issues in contexts that matter—contexts that involve real people... . When confronted and addressed in these complicated and often contradictory contexts, technology and technological issues become connected with social issues, human values, and material conditions—rather than naturalized and separated from such experiences. (110)

In other words, Selfe suggests the same core themes that Siebler outlines, but Selfe does so from an explicitly digitized pedagogy (i.e. a curriculum designed around critically conscious assignments *critiquing and engaging* technology, classroom-to-community connections, productive use of conflict or “contradictory contexts” to promote a backdrop of perspectives inside the classroom, and unpacked assumptions about socio-political issues surrounding materiality). Selfe points again to this connection in *Webbing Cyberfeminist Practice* when she tethers digital literacies and pedagogies to feminist theory:

A Feminist understanding of digital literacy practices and values ... necessitates not only an increasingly rich understanding of the many and complexly related factors that shape reading, composing, and exchanging meaning in digital contexts (historical, social, cultural, biological, cognitive, economic, ideological, personal, and educational); but also the many ways in which individuals’ motivations, physical attributes, material conditions, family background, beliefs, and practices shape and structure literacy practices and values at the micro, medial, and macro levels. (257)

Through Selfe’s observations, we are reminded that many factors impact out students’ digital practices, and many of the factors overlap the barriers to alphabetic, print-based literacy acquisition. For example, affluence, geography, and belief systems doubly complicate the already politicized space of the composition classroom when we integrate technology into the contact zone. Like Selfe, I have come to see that while the benefits of such an integration are innumerable (“Multimodal”), there are genuine pitfalls that require a nimble, adept, and *critically conscious* pedagogue to help diplomatically guide the class around (or through) this complex, hypermediated terrain. Moreover, in the hope of disrupting the replication of the status-quo literacy hierarchy that many argue is already underway in this digital era (Attewell; Banks; Gee, “What Video Games”; Selfe, *Technology* and “Response”) and keeping in mind some of feminist theory’s critical concerns—specifically gender, race, and affluence—feminist compositionists are perfectly poised to responsibly locate their pedagogies *directly inside the hypermediated fractures* of the digitized FYC classroom: the space where students become constrained rather than liberated by digital literacies.

For example, feminist composition pedagogy cautions us against turning our multimodal classrooms into “creepy tree houses”—a term recently explored on the WPA listserv and defined as “a place, physical or virtual (e.g., online), built by adults with the intention of luring in kids [and] any institutionally created, operated, or controlled environment in which participants are lured in either by mimicking pre-existing open or naturally formed environments, or by force, through a system of punishments or rewards.” I mention creepy tree houses as an indication that when we rush to digitize FYC sans a feminist pedagogy that seeks to share power, authorize the students, and flatten socio-political hierarchies, one potential disturbing outcome is the use of digital media to “cool” our curriculum without actually authorizing our students’ new literacies. Without an intentional feminist pedagogy guiding our moves as we digitize our curriculum, there exists the potential to simply include technologies as a *new* way to lure or bait students into our hip and trendy classrooms and writing assignments, only to perpetuate the *same old* traditional, hierarchical (i.e. anti-feminist) approach to teaching and academic discourse (Ritter). Also, while we bring certain students’ “daily

life experiences of [digital] oppression" into conversation with their critical literacy skills, feminist pedagogy reminds us to remain critically conscious in order to avoid "unwittingly positioning the [underprivileged] student writers as the exotic, the ones who should be studied for their differences from the mainstream" (Seitz 19). Specifically, feminist pedagogy reminds us to engage new literacies through *the same lens of social justice* that we have customarily applied to the socio-historical contexts that shape the contact zone and literacy in its entirety. This is not to suggest that feminist pedagogy is the silver bullet that will end all ineffective teaching in the digital era. But when we practice intentionally a feminist pedagogy guided by the principles outlined by Siebler and others, we are less likely to add uncritical blogging to our syllabi, simply depositing our non-tech savvy students into a false, store-front like cyber-settings that replicate the traditional, insulated, academic discourse community—complete with the teacher atop the grading throne, checking off who has and who has not posted enlightening contributions.

Furthermore, perhaps paramount to any other motivation I have for aiming a high beam on the benefits of feminist pedagogy in the twenty-first century FYC classroom is the potential for this critical pedagogy to help us avoid the continued oppression of those students who (like mine) identify technology as a barrier to their literacy acquisition. The 39.6% of students—for the same socio-economic conditions of race, class, and gender that maintain the literacy divide outside the academy—entering our classrooms with underprivileged access to or disparate uses for technology are likely to occupy *a doubly disadvantaged literacy position* in our digitized FYC classrooms. The students who have grown up with access to and validation of academic technologies are more likely to excel at academe's twenty-first century literacies, thereby securing and/or replicating the literacy hierarchy from which they hail. Teaching from a feminist pedagogy reminds us to remain critically conscious of the possibility that our women, minorities, and laboring-class students (Selfe *Technology*; Selber; Banks) may be placed at a temporary disadvantage inside the hypermediated fractures when we ask them to polish their literacy skills in an environment that presupposes their ability to navigate technology to their advantage. Feminist composition theory, however, is equipped to guide us as we step inside the fractures and beside the students and authorize and empower them as they learn the literacies necessary to move out of the hypermediated fractures and back inside the contact zone.

Stepping inside the contact zone's hypermediated fractures—which are the socio-political cracks that become exacerbated when we bring technology into the writing classroom—feminist composition theories/pedagogies are more than equipped to productively tend to—if not mediate—the identity disruptions that frequently occur when we teach new literacies in the FYC classroom. Looking to revision in twenty-first century ways what scholars like David Seitz describe as the "reproduction of inequities sponsored by institutions, ideologies, and social discourses" by "seeking out places to intervene in students' composing processes of the status quo through reading and writing" (5), feminist compositionists have an opportunity to treat digital media and its rhetoric as the critical texts against which many of our students may enjoy learning to read and write their way into and beyond the academy. In fact, feminist composition theory provides a necessary and critical perspective for *leading the charge* as the academy responds to twenty-first century literacies by moving our pedagogies forward in socially conscious ways, for as the new literacies and pedagogies of the twenty-first century make their way into our classrooms, so too do the inherent socio-political complexities of privilege that surround technology. In that light, I suggest that (1) integrating digital literacies into the FYC classroom necessitates the demand for an accompanying critical or radical pedagogy, particularly as the Web itself operates as a discursive space fraught with its own contradictions and underlying enthymemes; and (2) in response to the need for an accompanying critical or radical pedagogy, feminist composition theory is well-suited to critically examine as well as reflexively support digital literacies's legitimate place inside the modern first-year composition classroom.

Conclusions and Reflections

The results of my study are twofold: (1) Yes, there are possible detrimental implications to digitizing FYC, and these implications have everything to do with those identities who slip into or become distracted by the hypermediated terrain of the digitized contact zone. (2) Critically conscious pedagogies have the potential to mediate these implications, and feminist pedagogy, specifically, harbors the theoretical tenets to ethically steward faculty alongside their students into and ultimately back out of the hypermediated fractures. The results of this research are startling enough to necessitate further inquiry into the hypermediated fractures of the FYC classroom. Specifically, I would like to see more robust studies at more diverse institutions so that the limitations of my study (i.e. limited data set in terms of age, economic, and racial diversity) may be explored in fuller light. For example, I would like to know if geography or location influences who does and does not slip into the hypermediated fractures. Do we see differing results at regional institutions versus urban institutions, teaching institutions versus research universities, community colleges versus four-year schools, public versus private, etc.? This new data might enable FYC faculty to focus a feminist-informed gaze in certain directions based upon institutional profiles and settings, and writing program administrators would benefit from this data as FYC curricula continue to enjoy modernization and digitization. Also, I would like to see this research viewed through the lens of critical pedagogies other than feminist pedagogy to better gauge an understanding of the hypermediated fractures across multiple teaching epistemologies. Are there other critical pedagogies equally or better suited to shepherd composition studies through this paradigmatic shift into new literacies/pedagogies? Moreover, new research coming from throughout the disciplines may help mediate my own research biases as a teacher of composition. In other words, I would like to see collaborative research between FYC and other newly digitized general education curricula so that other disciplines may add to post-secondary education's understanding of the implications of layering technology across the disciplines. Obviously, as a teacher of composition, my research is biased toward identifying the results of technology in literacy acquisition. But do hypermediated fractures occur in other disciplines or content areas? Lastly, the results of this research suggest a need for more resources like Cynthia Selfe's *Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers* and *Webbing Cyberfeminist Practice: Communities, Pedagogies, and Social Action*, and these resources need to include explicit connections between multimodal assignments and critical pedagogical theories so that faculty will be able to make intentional moves alongside their students in the digitized FYC classroom and curriculum.

Bringing technologies into conversation with the FYC curriculum undoubtedly impacts the contact zone in both positive and negative ways (although I believe that the positive outweighs the negative ultimately). While we have a privileged 60.4% in our digitized contact zones coming to us prepared to approach the FYC course objectives through the context of digital media, an alarming 39.6% of our students feel they harbor digital deficits (that is, a lack of exposure to and familiarity with academic digital literacies) that validate and amplify bell hooks's claims that "to challenge racism or sexism or both [we must link] these systems to economic structures of exploitation and our collective participation in the upholding and maintenance of such structures" (161). While she may not be writing explicitly about technology or the digital/literacy divide (or participation gap), her vision of radical, feminist, and liberatory education harbors great relevance for those of us aiming to digitize the classrooms for critical consciousness/literacy.

The hypermediated fractures in the contact zone are the potential moments of continued oppression vis-à-vis technology. These fractures occur when we fail to recognize that students who are more technologically savvy—typically white, male, and/or affluent (Gee, *What Video Games*)—are more likely than their counterparts to succeed at the highly nuanced grammatical and rhetorical skills of FYC if asked to do so in a digitized curriculum that presupposes their ability to navigate successfully the "grammar" of technology. Already branded by the academic hierarchy, those students who enter

our classrooms harboring digital literacy "deficits" (i.e. technology skills that are deemed below college level) are the most likely to "fall through" the hypermediated cracks as we integrate the most cutting-edge pedagogies into the basic writing space. While no *one size liberates all* pedagogy exists, and to suggest that technology is the solution to today's hierarchically situated literacy axes of race, gender, affluence, etc. is itself a literacy myth that will undoubtedly frustrate the liberatory desires of any feminist pedagogue and her/his students, the complex epistemology and surrounding discourses of feminist composition theory may hold the most critically conscious and ethically sound approaches to multimodal reading and writing in the first-year composition classroom.

Just as hooks urges us to approach the classroom as a landscape covered over by issues of class, feminist composition pedagogues cannot help but assume a leading role in critically mediating the socio-economic implications of digitizing FYC curricula (i.e. frustrating our underprivileged students into thinking that digital literacy "sucks" or that they "suck" at it). However, while the 39.6% of our working-class, women, and/or minorities may experience temporarily continued subordination as a result of technology in the FYC classroom, feminist compositionists have an ethical responsibility to integrate technology into the classroom and to tend to the hypermediated fractures in the contact zone with the same attention to ethos, power, privilege, collaboration, agency, and scrutiny that underscores the tenets of feminist composition theory in general. Put simply, the same 39.6% who lack a digital literacy (the same students to most likely occupy socio-politically subordinated positions outside the classroom) may gain the most liberation through the acquisition of such skills as they learn to read critically and rewrite multimodally the digital illustrations of their socially-situated subordination. For that reason alone, we must acknowledge the need to digitize the composition classroom through a feminist pedagogical perspective. And as hooks explains,

given the changing realities of class in our nation, widening gaps between the rich and poor, the continued feminization of poverty, we desperately need a mass-based radical feminist movement that can build on the strength of the past, including the positive gains generated by reform, while showing new direction [and] a visionary movement would root its work first and foremost in the concrete conditions of working-class and poor women. That means creating a movement wherein education for critical consciousness begins where the people are. (109)

Given hooks's claims that the gap between the rich and the poor is widening and given her interest in taking up a radical pedagogy that begins where "the people are," it is realistic to say that the socio-economic dynamics of the contact zone are tenuous at best when we digitize our FYC curriculum. This is especially so given the notion that as technology supports social divisions along race, class, and gender, the "digital divide" is turning into a "participation gap" in that the digital divide has now shifted beyond mere *access* (Attewell). However, when we apply a feminist composition pedagogy to our FYC curricula, we recognize the obligation to expose *all* of our students to critical digital literacies so that the privileged 60.4% of our students who enter the academy already knowing how and *why* to use technology for academic success do not leave the "other" 39.6% behind to occupy their historic position at the bottom of the literacy hierarchy.

Furthermore, while we may temporarily constrain some of our women, minorities, and/or working-class students—those who are less likely statistically to bring a digital fluency with them to college (Selfe *Technology*; Selber; Banks)—when we ask them to develop their academic literacies in a curriculum based on an assumed history of academically driven technology usage, those same students stand to gain the most as they combine their academic literacies with their multimodal skills and learn to (re)write socially situated metanarratives surrounding race, gender, and class. While we deconstruct the Web—reading it critically for its socially situated codes and cues—students in a feminist composition classroom have the opportunity to practice their critical literacy skills in a

manner that validates their cultural capital and instigates a postmodern consciousness (Schroeder, *Re-Inventing*), and such digitized deconstruction provides the opportunity for students who occupy the places of Web-depicted power to shift that power if they so choose. However, to do this work, feminist compositionists must remain committed to a dialogic pedagogy in order to address ethically the 39.6% of our students who enter our classrooms with varying degrees of digital literacies, while simultaneously addressing the privileged students sitting in our classrooms who "are ignorant of the power they embody" (Elliott 421). When hypermediated power and the resulting powerlessness that exists is the text that we read and deconstruct through our feminist composition pedagogies, we may arrive at a tenable way forward in the teaching of digital literacies in the first-year composition classroom.

Appendices

1. [Appendix 1: Technology Survey Questions \[#appx1\]](#)
2. [Appendix 2: Summary of Selected Survey Results \[#appx2\]](#)

Appendix 1: Technology Survey Questions

Age:

Race:

Sex:

1. How would you describe your economic background?
2. Is your household lower, middle, or upper class in terms of income?
3. Do you have a job?
4. Did you grow up in a household with both parents working?
5. Do your parents have labor-based or corporate-based jobs?
6. Do your parents have a PC in the house?
7. Do your parents have a cell phone?
8. Do your parents text message you?
9. At what age do you remember your family having a computer in the home for general use?
10. Do you and your family ever participate together in online activities?
11. Where did and do you learn to use technology?
12. Do you teach your parents or people older than you how to use technology?
13. Do your professors use technology in their courses to advance your education (other than email or online grade posting)?

14. If your professors do not use technology in their own courses, how does that influence the way that you respond to those classes?
15. Do you find yourself more interested in classes that do incorporate the internet? If so, why?
16. Do you have your own PC here at college?
17. At what age did you get your own cell phone?
18. Do you have a Wi-Fi phone?
19. Do you text message more often than you call a person directly?
20. Do you read the internet?
21. For what purposes do you use the internet? Please list all reasons for use.
22. Outside of academic assignments, what do you "look up" on the internet?
23. What websites and chat rooms do you most frequently visit?
24. Do you use the internet for news? If so, do you use it more or less than television/radio?
25. When you use the internet to learn about the news, what three places do you go first?
26. Have you ever read anything on the internet that you found biased?
27. What do you do if you are reading something online in a chat room or a blog that you think is offensive or biased? Do you post a response?
28. On an average day, how much time do you spend online (including texting, web browsing, Facebook, blogging, YouTube, etc.)?
29. Do you feel that what you have learned in your college classes can be taken with you online? If so, what?
30. Do you use Facebook or MySpace?
31. How old were you when you first created your Facebook or MySpace?
32. What sorts of things do you think about when you create your Facebook or MySpace pages?
33. Who is your audience for those sites?
34. How old were you when you designed your first website or homepage?
35. Have you ever posted your own thoughts on a blog or chat room?36. If so, what sorts of things do you consider when you post?
36. Who is your audience?

Appendix 2: Summary of Selected Survey Results

Surveys were conducted with eighty-seven students in six sections of FYC. The average age of respondents was 20.3 years; only a small number of the sample (5) was non-traditional (i.e. over the age of 23). Fifty-three men (60.9% of the sample) participated compared to thirty-four women (39%). Sixty-six (66) percent of respondents were white. Eighteen (18) percent of respondents were in the "upper middle income/wealthy" category; sixty-four (64) percent were "middle income"; sixteen (16) percent were "lower income." The following results reflect four groups of comparison in the research design: the general sample population and results by gender, race, and class categories. For the latter three categories, the only survey results presented are those for which notable differences exist between the categories of respondents.

I. General results

1. 59% of respondents are employed.
2. 70.1% grew up in two-parent households.
3. The average age of respondents when a computer was first in the home was 9.27 years. 95.4% grew up with a computer in the home; 97.5 % have a computer at college.
4. The average age when respondents first owned a cell phone was 15.29 years. 51.2% have cell phones with internet access.
5. The average age of respondents when first participating in online social networking was 15.7 years.
6. 51.7% interact with family members online.
7. Respondents learned computer literacy skills in educational settings more than any other: 64.2% acquired at least some of their computer literacy at school; 54.7% acquired at least some of their computer literacy at home; only 35.7% acquired at least some of their computer literacy in other social settings (e.g., independently, through "friends"). More research is needed on this last point, however: 95.4% claim to teach technology to others, which would seem to challenge the validity of the low rate of computer literacy acquisition through "social" means.
8. 91.9% report that multimedia technologies are incorporated into their college courses. Only 60.4% claim that the use of technology increases their interest in the course, with 39.6% claiming it lowers their interest.
9. 95% use the internet for communication, which ranges widely from occasional postings on social networking websites to regular use of email and text messaging. In addition, 84% use the internet for social networking; 74% use the internet for entertainment (e.g., music, video viewing); 73% use the internet for news, but only 50% use the internet as their primary news source; 62% use the internet for educational purposes; 23% use the internet for gaming; 20% use the internet for shopping; 6% use the internet for banking.
10. A smaller sample population ($N = 40$) of the larger sample population was asked to estimate the means and amounts of time by which they communicate with others via technology. In order of significance, students communicate through texting approximately 38% of the time; by speaking via cellular telephone 34% of the time; by email 9% of the time; by speaking via landline telephone 1.8%.
11. 96% believe that internet information is biased; 60% ignore biases when they are encountered.
12. The average time spent online is 4.2 hours; however, 5 respondents reported spending 12 or more hours a day for online gaming and other purposes.
13. 44% have posted on a blog.
14. When given the option of posting their papers online, 54% of students chose to do so.

II. Selected results for gender

1. Male students employed: 54%; female students employed: 72%.
2. Males from two-parent households: 79%; females: 60%.
3. % of males who spend time online with their families: 47; females: 60.
4. Learned computer literacy at home: males 49% and female 63%; learned computer literacy at school: males 54% and females 78%; learned computer literacy socially: males 37% and females 30%.
5. More interested in classes because of technology: 56% male; 60% female.
6. For males, 41% use text messaging as a favored mode of communication followed by 32% for cell phone use; for females, 27% use text messaging as favored mode of communication followed by 40% for cell phone use.
7. Male students using the internet for education: 56%; female students using the internet for education: 66%.
8. Male students using the internet news resources more than TV and radio news resources: 43%; females using the internet more than TV and radio as a news source: 57%.
9. Male students who find the internet biased: 96%; female students who perceive internet bias: 84%. Male students who ignore rather than respond to internet bias: 62%; female students who ignore rather than respond to internet bias: 51%.
10. Average age of first social networking for males: 15.4 years; average age for females: 16.1 years.
11. 41% of males have posted a blog; 48% of females have posted a blog.
12. When given the option to post course assignments online, 53.5% of male students chose to do so while 57.1% of females chose to do so.

III. Selected results for "race"

The social category of "race" was coded for "white," "African American," "Latina/o," and "Other" ethnic minority groups. A total of 28 (of 87) students self-identified as minority, with the majority of this group being African American (15), followed by Latina/o (8). The following comparisons distinguish between "white" and "minority" respondents only.

1. White respondents employed: 39%; minorities employed: 66%.
2. White respondents from a two-parent household: 51% ; minorities: 59%.
3. Communicating with parents via text messaging: 51% whites; 66% minorities.
4. Participate with family members in online activities: 33% whites; 59% minorities.
5. Learned computer literacy at school: whites 42%; minorities: 66%.
6. More interested in classes when technology is used: 39% whites; 62% minorities.
7. Own cellular telephones with internet access: 32% whites; 55% minorities.
8. 36% of whites preferred text messaging for communication; 43% of minorities preferred text messaging. 38% of whites preferred verbally communicating via cellular telephone; 24% of minorities preferred this method.
9. 41% of whites use the internet for education; 62% of minorities use the internet for education.
10. 51% of white students use the internet for news; 66% of minority students use the internet for news.
11. 56% of white students use internet for social networking; 85% of minorities use the internet for social networking.
12. 31% of whites use the internet for news more than TV and radio; 55% of minority students use the internet for news more than TV or radio.
13. 65% of whites say the internet is biased; 92% of minority students view the internet as biased.

14. When controlling for outliers in each group, i.e. 10 or more online hours reported per day, white students spend an average of 2.8 hours a day online; minority students recorded spending an average of 4.5 hours online.
15. 28% of white students have posted to a blog; 48% of minority students have posted to a blog.

IV. Selected results for economic background

Respondents were divided into categories of "working class/lower income" (LI), "middle income" (MI), and "upper middle income/wealthy" (UI) based on their survey responses.

1. Percent employed while in college: LI 78%; MI 58%; UI 50%.
2. Two-parent household backgrounds: LI 42%; MI 75%; UI 75%.
3. Communicate with family members via text messaging: LI 50%; MI 75%; UI 87%.
4. Interacts with family online: LI 35%; MI 51%; UI 66%.
5. Learned computer literacy at home: LI 53%; MI 50%; UI 68%.
6. Learned computer literacy at school: LI 69%; MI 59%; UI 75%.
7. More interested in classes when technology integrated into course: LI 84%; MI 57%; UI 50%.
8. Average age when computer first in the home: LI 10.1 years; MI 9.6 years; UI 7.1 years.
9. Own phone with internet access: LI 50%; MI 47%; UI 71%.
10. Respondents who use the internet for education: LI 53%; MI 62%; UI 64%.
11. Respondents who use the internet for news: LI 76%; MI 68%; UI 85%.
12. Respondents who use the internet for social networking: LI 76%; MI 83%; UI 92%.
13. Respondents who use the internet more than TV or radio for news: LI 69%; MI 45%; UI 50%.
14. Respondents who view the internet as biased: LI 92%; MI 94%; UI 100%.
15. Respondents who ignore rather than contest perceived internet biases: LI 50%; MI 57%; UI 78%.
16. Respondents who have posted a blog: LI 35%; MI 50%; UI 31%.

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