Women's Studies On-line: Cyberfeminism or Cyberhype?

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It is the first day of class—Women's Studies 10: Sex, Gender and Society—and though my co-teacher, Michelle Meyers, and I have taught this course before, this term is different: we have put a good deal of the course "on-line." It took some tough wrangling with the registrar to get the particular classroom we needed for the course: one of a few of Dartmouth's new "smart" (that is, technology-smart) classrooms. With some trepidation, we stand before the special podium, and boot up the powerPC that is artfully fitted into it. Our computer desktop springs instantly onto the large screen at the front of the lecture hall.

The Teachable Moment

As we navigate onto the web via Netscape, a hush falls over the one hundred or so students sitting expectantly in rows of bolted-down seats. There is a palpable edginess in the air, since none of us, students or professors, knows exactly what this will be like. Instead of hand-

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Field(s):
American literature and culture, especially colonial and early American; women's literature and culture; Women's Studies and feminist theory; race, ethnicity and identity studies.

Courses:
WS 10: Sex, Gender and Society

Context:
Introductory WS course; required for the WS major, minor and certificate. Enrollments capped at 100 in the Fall term; summer term enrollments from 25-40. Dartmouth is a small liberal arts college with an influential, intellectually rigorous WS program.

Intentions:
--to use web technology to further feminist pedagogical goals; --to enhance research possibilities and familiarize women and allies with web technology.

ing out syllabi and other paper notices, we begin by showing students step by step how to get, via the Dartmouth College homepage, to the Women's Studies 10 homepage which gives access to the syllabus, course requirements, and writing assignments for the course; what we are doing on our Mac appears enlarged on the big screen at the front. Then the unexpected happens: as the image on the College's homepage takes shape, I gasp at what I see: a young woman in a tight white T-shirt sitting on a grassy spot in front of an immaculate 18th century college building. She is bending over her books, evidently studying, but the lay-out cuts off part of her head and her lower body, so that the focus is—you can imagine where! I cannot resist pointing out the gendered politics of representation, in which even women who have proved their intellectual *bone fides* by matriculating at the College are objectified and fragmented in Dartmouth's choice of such an icon for its homepage. You can be sure that we called College Computing directly after class.

What we discovered was that the headless, faceless coed was one of a rotating series of images of males, females and college scenes that come up randomly on the Dartmouth homepage. We just happened to log-on at the moment when a prime candidate for the wet T-shirt contest had her turn. This was a small comfort, and in no way accounted for the *lay-out* of the image which prevented the viewer from gazing anywhere else besides the woman's midsection. Nor did this explanation stop us from using the image as an example for our largely privileged students in response to their (often repeated) protest that gender politics and oppression do not exist because *they* in particular do not experience it. But, on reflection, this moment also provided an initial, concrete and irrefutable counter-example to the popular utopian myth of cyberspace, that it transcends hierarchies such as gender, class, racial and other differences, and allows users to operate as disembodied, and thus unmarked, entities. On the contrary, Anne Balsamo, citing Sandy Stone's work on electronic communities, concludes that "cyberspace both disembodies and re-embodies in a gendered fashion," enabling "new forms of repression of the material body" (138-39). This was not a conclusion we were eager to reach as we initiated our students and ourselves into web-assisted instruction, but it certainly buttressed the basic understanding of the operation of differences in mainstream US culture we were committed to interrogating in our introductory Women's Studies course.

However strangely, those first surprising moments "on-line" in

WS 10, teachable in ways we could not have predicted, provided us with unexpected avenues and insights into the effect of web technology on feminist pedagogy and feminist politics. The following account is retrospective, and has come about largely in response to my participation in the Crossroads Projects, and the extensive collective exploration of the uses of technology in the teaching of American Studies we were encouraged to have. Michelle Meyers, an art historian turned pop culture critic and feminist theorist, had put WS 10 on-line in summer 1997 to take advantage of the opportunities for research and interaction offered by the internet and to offer feminist-friendly students a familiarity with the latest web technology. The following term, when we co-taught the course, we intensified the web-interface of the course, but aside from the novelty and excitement involved in making use of the smart classroom, and the reduction of some of the hard copy clutter that comes with a big course, I did not expect momentous changes.

However, I have come to see that web technology and web-related teaching, with certain important caveats, have the potential to actualize some of the basic goals of feminism and feminist pedagogy. As we discovered in the course of teaching WS 10 that term, web technology gave our abstract academic endeavor a virtual "space" that made it more "real" and more accessible than ever before. Web assistance also materially augmented the empowerment of student voices, and freed them from the sometimes inhibiting presence of authority figures. As I elaborate below, creating the spaces in which people can find their voices is one of the major goals of feminism and feminist pedagogies. By providing these spaces, the web has the capacity not merely to challenge, but to change the structures of power in the classroom and, perhaps, the world at large.

Feminist Principles: An "Engaged" Pedagogy

Dartmouth has been at the forefront in bringing computer technology to the campus and college curriculum. As a result, we have an extensive infrastructure for web-related teaching and learning, including a fast and reliable internal email system called "blitzmail" which students patronize for academic and especially social communications. We wanted them to use some of the enormous amounts of time they spend in cyberspace learning to think critically about sex and gender in contemporary US culture, not just performing its rituals via their powerPCs.

Furthermore, our own growing familiarity with computer technology drenching the campus led us to suspect that using the web would offer us opportunities to modify the traditional classroom in ways that further advanced our feminist goals. While there are probably as many definitions of "feminist pedagogy" as there are feminist teachers, practitioners in various fields agree on a few principles. It's important to summarize these principles, so that we can measure the ideals of the discipline, and how they implicate politics outside of the academy, against the actualities of our course.

My co-teacher and I strive for the kind of feminist pedagogy articulated by bell hooks: an "engaged pedagogy" that fosters a "community of learning" and advances the "practice of freedom" not only in the classroom, but in the world.[1] A major feminist contribution to this kind of practice has been the emphasis on coming to voice: making ourselves visible, recognizing ourselves as the subject of knowledge production not simply its object or receptacle, and granting all others a similar validation. Such a pedagogy unfolds from the basic notion, to use the well-worn expression, that "the personal is political," that our private, individual and "subjective" experiences are crucially important. Furthermore, these experiences comprise the many important bits of evidence that allow us to make that inductive leap and "theorize" about collective experiences and the larger structures of domination and subordination.

For this reason, a basic and crucial component of WS 10 is the application of critical paradigms to personal experience and what I call "the micro-political climate" of the campus community. For example, in the past, students have read, critiqued, and applied works like Deborah Tannen's linguistic theories of gendered conversation to their own experiences in the snack bar or the classroom. This, however, is not a mere exercise. In almost a decade of teaching WS 10, it never fails that after the Thanksgiving break, my office hours are swamped with students who complain, sometimes bitterly, that they could not sit at the holiday table with their family, or interact with their boyfriend or girlfriend, without seeing some of Tannen's principles at work. Similarly, in observing classroom dynamics, understanding the implications of who gets called on, who monopolizes the floor, who interrupts whom, and who is silenced, students see the limitation of Tannen's gendered approach, recognizing that race and class are also important determinants of classroom politics and the general politics of "space."

These kinds of critical investigations encourage students to question the dominant paradigms of power. Ultimately, this questioning kindles the desire to subvert those paradigms, and envision and create alternative forms of empowerment—voice— and interaction—space. This desire is, as historian Robert J. Bezucha points out, why feminism is threatening, because it is not content with merely analyzing, but "seeks to undermine one of the most powerful and deeply held sets of distinctions drawn in Western thought and society: the separation of the public, the impersonal, and the objective, on the one hand, from the private, the personal, and the subjective on the other" (81). Students, like teachers, have to *unlearn* this false separation that dichotomizes their experiences and tells them—to take a sensational exam- ple—that marital rape is a "private" activity inappropriately dealt with by courts, laws or rules controlling international immigra- tion. Or, that the coercion fathers use to force young women to marry against their wills is, in the eyes of the majority of judges who decide on cases of asylum, private and culturally specific. At the same time, students have to learn a critical approach towards the personal and private; they need to be able to filter their own as well as others' experiences through analytical lens- es, often clarified by theoretical constructs, and distinguish that from the merely confessional or emotive.

Our Challenges

One of our constant challenges in teaching WS 10 is not to replicate destructive dynamics that all too often resurface in the women's studies classroom. These dynamics are exacerbated by large classes (made necessary in order for embattled programs like Women's Studies to "prove" their relevance and popularity), impersonal lecture halls where all the rows face forward and the seats do not swivel, and course syllabi in which information is dispensed by the instructor/producer of knowledge, replicated by the student/consumer of knowledge and rarely produced or shared among peers.

Another challenge we face is to foster critical thinking and self- awareness. One of the most effective strategies to do this is to nudge students to become active participants in the creative dialectic of theory and practice, learning and doing. In an infor- mal survey of his feminist colleagues, John Schib found that "a student-centered classroom, in some meaning of that term, lay at the heart of our pedagogical dreams"(257). Like bell hooks,

Schib drew from the educational philosophy of Brazilian thinker Paulo Freire, whose thought appealed to him because it "connects true reciprocity in the educational process with a truly humanistic praxis in the larger world" and enables students to "attain a new power to distinguish the ineradicable laws of nature from the transient institutions of culture, along with a new optimism about the prospect of social change" (258). The slippery notion of "true reciprocity" is still, I think, a key term for our educational goals, and one made all the more possible by web technology which has untapped potential for creating connections. In Schib's use, the term implies not only the active participation of students in the learning process—the common understanding of a student-centered classroom—but a reciprocity between teacher and students in which the teacher is not merely the overseer of student learning, but is also open to new understandings.

Frequently, when students "find their voices," they come to interrogate the very notion of authority, which leads them to question the authority figures in the classroom—the authors they read and the people who teach them. Hooks points out that in the early 1970's, feminist classrooms "were the one space where pedagogical practices were interrogated, where it was assumed that the knowledge offered students would empower them to be better scholars, to live more fully in the world beyond academe" (6). I do not want to give up entirely the authority of expertise, experience, or evaluation of students. Rather, I think we should explore how feminists can model different ways of being authoritative, not authoritarian. One of the ways we established in WS 10 of subverting the structural effect of teacher authority was to turn part of the process of coming to critical self-consciousness over to the students.

We found that what benefits this process of interrogation, and lets off steam that might otherwise cloud up the classroom atmosphere, is the existence of a space defined in students' own terms, and lots of nearly unstructured and unsupervised interaction with peers—a kind of free-form group exploration within the larger, governing themes and structure of the course. It has been my experience that students learn best what they need and want to know. When that learning is not rote but expansive, it often requires a long, and sometimes tedious, process of exploration, the endless conversational give-and-take that seems repetitive and that classroom time and structures cannot easily accommodate. In years past, I sent groups of students eager for this kind

of extra-curricular consciousness-raising to the Women's Resource Center. I was concerned that Women's Studies classes not be branded as "touchy-feely" enclaves where students merely vented or talked about their menstrual cramps—our local stereotype of how feminists "bond". But such extracurricular exploration is absolutely necessary for the kind of learning and analysis that invites and requires students to think beyond the academic subject matter, the required reading, the parameters of the classroom.

Breaking large classes (usually between 100-150 students) up into smaller discussion groups has been the conventional means by which we provided this space. In years past, discussion groups have been led by the teachers and aided by a cadre of experienced Women's Studies students enrolled in the course whom we selected, trained and met with on a weekly basis. Still teacher-initiated and structured around a discussion leader, these sections have been only marginally successful. No matter how free-wheeling and spontaneous these discussions may be, they still feel constrained and scripted. This time, we hoped that the web would make new spaces available that were somewhere between the teacher/lecture-centered classroom and the student-centered rap session, but avoided the limitations of the discussion section.

We never imagined that our web-assisted course would eliminate the instructor or the need for face-to-face (FTF) student-teacher or peer interaction, which many students feared when we explained the web interface format of the course to them. It is certainly true that these mainstays of traditional teaching are rendered superfluous by internet innovations like the "Virtual On-line University (VOU) which was unveiled in September 1994, or the Women's International Electronic University (WIEU), which came on-line in December 1996. According to their announcement, VOU "operates within a Virtual Educational Environment using Multiuser-Object-Oriented environment database software (a MOO)" to produce various online virtual campuses from which students can choose. This is called "distance learning;" students can "attend" any number of university environments, at any time they choose, and from any location they choose.

There are enormous advantages from a feminist perspective to doing away with the traditional, physical classroom as the privileged site of academic instruction where a masculine ethos has, for a long time, held sway. Furthermore, "simulated interactivi-

ty," as this kind of instruction is called, would significantly benefit individuals—mothers with small children, persons with disabilities, people living far from academic institutions—who cannot physically attend traditional classes. However, these benefits depend upon people owning or having access to computers and network hookups—no small consideration, since the target groups of sites like WIEU are precisely the undereducated, under-skilled and economically deprived. Still, if computer technology is here to stay, then what we need, according to Dale Spender, an Australian net tech booster, communication expert and long-time feminist, are "computer-competent women . . . to 'suss out' this new public space and pass on advice to the next generation" (xxiv). Our challenge was to make not just our students, but ourselves, familiar and comfortable in this new public space precisely in order to be able to "suss out" its potential from a feminist perspective.

We also believed that the vast resources of the web would enhance the students' intellectual experience. Feminist pedagogies often operate in academic arenas of interdisciplinarity, where knowledge is not static but evolves out of the interstices between traditional disciplines and methods. Such pedagogies try to be self-conscious and self-critical about the implications of their positions and the way in which they produce knowledge and constitute subjects of study. Both as a high-powered research tool and an efficient retrieval system for a vast and expanding "infosphere," the web makes available an array of information that encourages students to design provocative connections to fields that might have otherwise been closed to them or hard to reach. For example, projects like Spender's WIKED (Women's International Knowledge Encyclopedia and Data), a database on women that she co-originated, makes interdisciplinary research more accessible to students. It also opens up the possibility of creating multimedia and multidimensional research assignments—of encouraging new forms of knowledge and new ways of knowing that embody feminist values.

The Web-site: A Location of Our Own

Because all the information about our course was posted on our website, the site served as a virtual information center and location for the course that did not depend on our presence. (See figure 1.) Students could visit the site at any time between office hours or late at night when they often like to work. The

advantage this arrangement had over hard copy information is that it could accommodate the changes, updates, emendations and additions we posted over the entire term. Instead of a course defined and ultimately limited by a syllabus which had been constructed before we even had contact with the particular group of students who would be taking the course, the website allowed us to make changes to the skeletal structure of the course in response to student responses to the material.

Although it was a bit unnerving *not* to hand out a hard copy of the syllabus—to insure that all the students had it and so absolve ourselves of the responsibility for disseminating it—this became the first and most basic way we gave responsibility for learning to the students. We showed them (several times) how to get to the website and use its links. They could visit the site whenever they needed to check the syllabus for reading assignments, or for the contents of the course reading packet, or for the "Additional Bibliography," a constantly expanding list of related readings which we updated as titles and subject matter came up in lectures or discussions. Dartmouth's Baker Library now has its on-line catalogue in web-based form, so that in the website's next incarnation, there will be direct links from the titles on these bibliographies to the library's electronic catalogue. If the journals containing essays on the bibliography are web-based, students can have access to these readings immediately.

The website also had a description of the written and web assignments required for the course, as well as a short list of links to websites important for the course content. But to merely detail the contents of our homepage doesn't explain how its existence subtly affected how we perceived and the students reacted to the course. Instead of existing on a xeroxed sheet of paper that we distributed, that could be torn and lost, WS 10 had a location—in cyberspace, it is true, but a location nevertheless. It occupied a "space," a "site," a place to be visited and consulted. This website located us even when we were not in that Goddess-forsaken classroom with its harsh lights and immovable seats, so that the course existed, if only in potential and until someone visited it, all the time and extended beyond the three or four hours of in-class time we were allotted by the College and Registrar. At any time of the day or night, there was a place students could "go" called WS 10.

And they did, especially by posting comments and reactions to the Open Discussion forum we set up. By not giving students hard copy of syllabi and assignments, we asked them to

acknowledge and validate this space as the imaginary space or promise of our learning community. We showed them the way there and then left them on their own to find it again, whenever they needed it. We also required students to add to the website, so that the site itself became theirs, the sole and lasting evidence of this particular class's existence.

Links and the Gender Politics of the "Electronic Frontier"

Our web links assignment asked students to find a link relevant to the course content, evaluate and annotate it, and add it to the site. The website also held traces of other students' explorations in the form of a Student Links list—an annotated list of links to websites that students from the previous WS10 class had posted which formed a veritable (or more precisely "virtual") archaeology of links to issues of sex, gender and society in the late nineteen-nineties. Because these lists are specifically tailored to the concerns of WS10 they reflect the interests not of its faculty, who are at least a generation or two removed from them, but of its students.[2] Although our link assignment only required that students provide one link, many students reported that their initial link led them to other sites, forming "links of association" that Steven Johnson calls "trails." Although these trails are evanescent, the process of linking that produces them is one key to the web's treasures.

Johnson, author of *Interface Culture: How New Technology Transforms the Way We Create and Communicate*, explains that the link is "a tool that brings multifarious elements together" to augment knowledge, rather than a fragmenting or dissociative element, as hypertext fiction has prompted many people to think of it (111). Trails, or groups of links, "imply a profound shift in the way we grapple with information." They move us away from a nineteenth-century "encyclopedic mentality" obsessed with ordering and cataloguing small nuggets of information whose value derives from the class or species in which they are placed. Trails of links, by contrast, allow us to "see the world the way a *-poet* does: a world teeming with associations, minglings, continuities" (118-19).

As Johnson and others contend, this aspect of web technology brings us to the threshold of the new: "The link is the first significant new form of punctuation to emerge in centuries, but it is only a hint of things to come. Hypertext, in fact, suggests a whole new grammar of possibilities, a new way of writing and

telling stories" (110-11). Hypertext creates texts or takes existing texts and builds in links that provide an almost endless set of narrative possibilities or informational connections, producing what Michael Joyce calls a poetics of "hypertext pedagogy." While neither Johnson nor Joyce explicitly considers the gendered qualities of hypertext (see note #4), Johnson finds links to be proletarian and potentially subversive: "More than any other interface element, the link belongs to the cultural peripheries and not to the high-tech conglomerates" (110). According to these critics, linking and hypertext have the potential to significantly change how we understand ourselves and our world, and produce knowledge.

From the evaluations at the end of the course, we learned that some students found this assignment to be mechanical and uninteresting—clearly, they did not experience themselves adding a significant trace to an intricate and infinitely expanding "trail." Although it *was* mechanical and preliminary, the exercise pushed students out onto the web by themselves, and encouraged them to follow their interests, an activity usually referred to as "surfing." A term borrowed from the "channel surfing" associated with TV, "surfing" suggests a passive or superficial sampling of a large but limited amount of possibilities, and actually bears little resemblance to the experience our students had in their exploration of related websites. More than a few reported making far-flung associations, clicking themselves sheer across the infosphere—what Johnson identifies as the "eureka moment" when net users first experience the enormous possibilities of the technology and get "hooked" (110). As Johnson argues, web surfing, unlike channel surfing, highlights the connections between sites and works the interstices between locations. It allows users to make their own unique connections—"to blaze your trail through information space" (123).

A collateral and unexpected effect of the links assignment was the examination and critique it precipitated of the very discourse we use to describe our activities in this new space, which led to a wider consideration of gender dynamics on the web. Inexplicably, the term "surfing" for web exploration rather than "trailblazing" has stuck. Though web "surfing" encompasses activities far removed from the couch potato clutching the remote, its connotations of passivity and randomness according to Johnson may prevent software designers from developing the means to preserve individual trails.[3] But his alternative discourse also gave many of us pause. Although Johnson is carefully gen-

der-inclusive throughout his descriptions of web activity, the imagery of "trailblazing" too easily and unproblematically invokes the analogy of the web as frontier.

Students were tickled by the idea of themselves as technophilic bushwhackers, but were stopped in their tracks, so to speak, by Laura Miller's canny analysis of the language of pioneering in her response to a controversial article in *Newsweek* on May 16, 1994, that declared cyberspace to be a "sexist" and hostile environment for women. Miller argues that the pervasive description of the web as the "electronic frontier" evokes popular masculinist fantasies of rugged individualism, female vulnerability, and quintessential Americanness that not only stereotype and exclude women, but also justify the call on the part of conservative "civilizing" forces for web regulation. Women, Miller believes, should resist the argument that plunges them back into the roles of helpless victim "especially when we are used as rhetorical pawns in a battle to regulate a rare (if elite) space of gender ambiguity" (57). We should also resist this imagery because it divides us in all-too-familiar ways: "As the schoolmarms arrive on the electronic frontier, their female predecessors find themselves cast in the role of saloon girls, their willingness to engage in 'masculine' activities like verbal aggression, debate, or sexual experimentation marking them as insufficiently feminine, or 'bad' women" (57).

While recognizing the potential for gender stereotyping on the web, which our students saw for themselves on the first day of class exemplified by our very own Dartmouth homepage, Miller also refuses *Newsweek*'s simplistic and reductive claim that "the gender gap is real" in cyberspace or has to be. As our students discovered, cyberspace allows for gender blurring and masking, for passing and experimentation which rarely, if ever, occur in traditional classrooms.

Reading Responses as Public Pedagogy

The most important advantage our website provided was, on the one hand, to break down the traditional notion of the classroom as a limited physical space, and to intensify the sense of a shared location for the course, on the other. This dual effect was reinforced by our adaptation of "reading responses" to the web. In years past, we asked students to choose a particular passage in the weekly reading, quote it, and make specific connections between the passage they cited and other course readings. They

could discuss the relevance of the passage to their own experiences, but had to frame their ideas critically. I must admit I dreaded this aspect of the course, despite its obvious pedagogical value, because it inevitably became a logistical nightmare, trying to get over 100 responses, collected, sorted, read by teams of student TAs and returned. Having students post their reading responses to us via the website was an extremely convenient form of receiving, checking and vetting a large volume of responses.

More importantly, however, the website posting of reading responses was public, so that students could read each other's responses. This created an instant and comprehensive public forum in which students responded to the material they had read, not to each other, as in the Open Discussion, discussed below. The public nature of this pedagogical method may have inhibited some of the more extreme responses we received in the past when they were private, but it also encouraged students to take more responsibility for their positions and their efforts. Students were on their toes when they knew they were being "checked out" by everyone else. The TAs and instructors could survey the entire class's responses for a sense of the impact of certain readings or topics, and orient our discussion strategies accordingly.

For example, in the second week of the course, we launched into a consideration of the social construction of gender and race; the readings for that class by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and Judith Lorber were complicated and demanding. We followed them up with a set of readings on "Doing Anti-racist, Anti-classist work" which were more testimonial than the previous class's assignments, but concluded with Tessie Lui's complex meditation, "Teaching Differences Among Women from a Historical Perspective." The reading responses for that week clearly indicated the extent to which students understood a constructed notion of gender but had trouble with what Higginbotham labeled "the metalanguage of race." Because we could easily survey the responses, we could pinpoint concepts students struggled with, ideas that riled them up or notions they couldn't grasp, and adjust the topics for discussion. We could also identify which discussion group needed work in which area, and coach the TAs accordingly. One certainly does not need web technology to accomplish the same thing, but I doubt whether we would have been as eager to sort through a clutter of notecards when we could easily scroll down a continuous page, stopping at will, highlighting passages, cutting and pasting if we

wanted to. As a result of the technology, the reading responses were transformed from private analytical exercises, into mini-evaluations of the effectiveness and effect of the course's reading assignments.

An Example of Classroom Web Use: Riot Grrls

For many of the class meetings, we worked from the course website. By this I mean that we had the website up on the large screen, and as we lectured, we linked to other sites, exploring their contents to enhance the materials presented in the lectures. Probably our most successful class in this regard was an exploration of "riot grrls" and their relationship to feminisms past and present, presented by guest lecturer, Susan Marine, the Coordinator of Dartmouth's Sexual Abuse Awareness Program, and a bit of a riot grrl herself. Susan used music and a personal collection of rare riot grrl "zines" to bring not only the sounds but the powerful, gut-level feminism of these contemporary artists to life for us. In addition, she navigated the class through the history and politics of riot grrls and other related girl groups, as illustrated by their wildly personal and in-your-face home pages. Throughout this presentation, Susan emphasized just how subversive, counter-cultural, and politically empowering self-created homepages could be as a site for the expression of radically charged feminine and feminist subjectivity and sexuality. In the "real," non- or post-academic world, this was the popular media of our students' generation.

In an email conversation with Michelle Meyers after the class, Susan elaborated on the differences between riot grrls' feminisms and feminist activism and other forms such as ecofeminism, sex radical feminism, feminism of Third World women, women of color in the US, etc., which dominated our syllabus:

> I think those are essentially "academically developed" forms of feminism. riot grrl isn't about thought or deconstruction or close reflection . . . most riot grrl musicians are high school dropouts . . . i think it's the rawest, purest form of feminism even tho it isn't very well thought out. it's getting in touch with that carnal sense of injustice as a gendered being and saying "fuck this, im not gonna take this." Is it lacking in multilayered understanding? yep! but it's raw and pure, i think, and still meaningful because of it.

Being able to visit these sites allowed Susan to bring extremely powerful and, in terms of our syllabus, absolutely unique feminist incarnations into the classroom, as well as explore links to other related sites of "indie" music for a contextualized discussion of the politics of music production and marketing. In studying these sites, we saw how they give the particular grassroots politics of the riot grrl fanzines—their self-generated mode of communication—a hightech immediacy and national range made possible only by web technology. This kind of lesson is important because it makes contemporary popular culture a more accessible object of study and analysis. As a result of this lecture, many students chose as their final essay the option to do a "textual analysis" of some aspect of popular culture, and their analyses were enriched by the information they gathered from the web.

A challenge for our next version of the course would be to structure a series of web-based research questions or group projects that would guide students in their use of the web as an information resource. These assignments could specify a broad topic, such as riot grrls or women's reproductive health, or a historical event, such as the 1851 Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio at which Sojourner Truth gave—or, according to Nell Irvin Painter, didn't give— her famous speech. Using the web would permit students to gather a wide array of information about the social, cultural, and political contexts of these topics and events from sources that might not be readily available in traditional forms. We could also design web exercises that are text-centered, focusing on specific historical documents or literary texts, and ask students to produce hypertextual readings and analysis of texts, creating links to an array of explanatory and corroborating materials. In this respect, the web creates a "virtual library effect," as if all the sources a student consulted to round out her understanding of a document or event are opened on the table before us—and often annotated with links to other sites as well. These innovations do not merely augment interdisciplinary research, they also produce new and different ways of knowing.

We could also encourage students to do more research on contemporary and international issues, looking at the ways in which web technology advances feminist causes. For example, electronic bulletin boards have been crucial to the peace movement in Croatia, in which women have played a central role (Wilding 58). We could invite students to explore contemporary politics and culture by using the web to gain access to grassroots move-

ments like riot grrls or the peace movement in Croatia which are largely ignored by the mainstream press and by academic criticism. Despite their relative invisibility, these movements exist at the cutting edge of feminist activism, unsettling a strictly academic perspective, and reshaping the way we conceive of feminist politics. Furthermore, studying these movements via the net would allow student to see theory in practice and practice informed by theory. From such research, they could create interdisciplinary and interactive presentations that would expand the traditional definition of "assignments."

The Open Discussion

Besides web-based research, the aspect of our web-assisted version of WS 10 that most advanced our feminist pedagogies was the Open Discussion. This was an unrestricted public space for the discussion of topics related to WS 10. Because it was an open site, easily accessible from the Dartmouth College homepage, we made it available to everyone: students in the course, Dartmouth students in general, and anyone else. We required that contributors identify themselves, and we cautioned students that anything posted to the Open Discussion was public. As the course instructors, we monitored and could contribute to the discussion, but we did not guide or grade it. There were no rules for this discussion site except the community standards that prevail at Dartmouth which we emphasized in our small discussion sections. Students were not required to post a response to the Open Discussion, and some never did. Nevertheless, this site was active during the term, and played an important role in reinforcing the student-centeredness of the course experience and creating reciprocity among students.

Those who logged on to the Open Discussion site contributed detailed, thoughtful and often passionate postings in response to several different stimuli: class reading assignments, class or section discussion, the postings of other students to the Open Discussion, or events on campus and in the nation that touched on issues of sex and gender. Some specifically indicated that they were responding "emotionally" to issues raised during class, differentiating their posting from a reading response, which had to be "critical." Thus, the Open Discussion had the effect of "continuing" the conversation initiated by classroom lectures, the reading responses, and discussion sections on a less formal, more individualized basis.

Several postings took off from the reading responses for that week. One especially controversial comment from a male student about gender equality began, "Im gonna toss this onto the table and see what happens." He had obviously read many reading responses which supported the notion of the social construction of gender; he argued against gender "sameness," and for a reconsideration of "nature" and "biology" in the shaping of gender differences. Although students responded to his ideas, they did not attack him or dismiss him. He was not silenced or interrupted or dismissed. One student agreed with him, but argued for a "celebration of 'natural' differences" of sex, gender and race—not exactly what he had in mind. These students were working out their separate understandings of the material, and defining positions for themselves in response to other students' positions. The ability to take risky stands, be informal (signaled by the slangy spelling), and yet know you will be read and reacted to—this was precisely the kind of free-wheeling interaction among students we hoped the Open Discussion would encourage.

In several postings, students articulated their sense that the Open Discussion was a unique space within the course, and not just for emotional venting, but for critical exploration and taking strong, even extreme, political stands. For example, one student began: "I was struck by a phrase in the Milton reading, "Paradise Lost" [for a class on Gender and Religion] but didn't think the RR [reading response] was the right format for my comment." She went on to quote the passage in which Satan resolves to "excite" the minds of Adam and Eve "with more desire to know, and to reject envious commands invented with design to keep them low." She then related God's command not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge which Satan deliberately counteracts, to a contemporary notion of education as a "commodity which has been intentionally withheld from women and minorities," and concludes: "Perhaps ignorance would have been bliss, but from my standpoint as a Chinese American woman enrolled in a liberal arts college, I am grateful to that first dark professor who introduced a commodity far greater than any soft mossy knoll or scented bower." Rereading this comment now, I wonder to what extent the entire course embodied for this passionately involved first year student the eye-opening teachings of Milton's "dark professor" against a paternalistic withholding of traditional ways of knowledge.

Another example illustrates the important feedback we got

from the Open Discussion, but also its limitations and the tensions produced by spaces on the web that feel "personal" (no one else is with you or immediately apparent as you type) but are very public and uncensored. A woman who was not a member of the class posted this comment after seeing "Dreamworlds II," a video critique by Sut Jhally which juxtaposes MTV's representation of women to the gang rape scene in "The Accused" (we always have a counselor on hand for this screening): "I pass Ivy consoling a group of very upset women and she says to no one in particular, 'What, no one wishes to stay and discuss.' And since I am no one in particular I say, 'We wanted to leave and collect our thoughts.' To discuss something like this we need, what is it called? A safe place. And that place is not safe enough to discuss such things. Or is it perhaps unsafe by virtue of the things we saw there? I am looking for a safe place to collect my thoughts." This women makes painfully clear that the violence and hard revelations of Jhally's video rendered the physical classroom an unsafe and uncomfortable place for her, and other women, to discuss and debrief. She could not "revert" to an analytical or critical mode, nor could she be fully emotional there, which is what she needed to do. But quite soon after the screening (judging from the rawness of her reactions), she logged on to the Open Discussion—the public site of the course—to express that powerful understanding.

   In reviewing the postings at the conclusion of the course, I was struck by how voluble students were on issues that elicited little or no comments in class. For example, sexual orientation was a major issue in many of the readings and lectures. Although a selection of readings on lesbian motherhood produced some shocked, resistant, but also sympathetic reading responses, students in class consistently ignored sexual orientation as a category of analysis and experience. When we asked students, in response to the final reading by Dorothy Allison discussed below, "what were 'the two or three things you know for sure'" as a result of this course, many confidently reeled off categories related to issues of gender, race, ethnic identity, even class status. Not one person mentioned sexual orientation, as if that were the part of the readings these privileged young people wanted most to forget or deny. This attitude persisted, despite our efforts to frame issues from a queer perspective, and the presence in class of several out lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, one of whom was an outspoken, shaven-head (and thus, unmistakable) TA who, as a discussion leader, would be familiar to all of the stu-

dents. However, a long thread of postings raised the question of the pervasive discrimination faced by gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people at Dartmouth and in society at large. In this conversation, students called each other out for essentialism, homophobia, insensitivity, tokenism, pc-ism, and apathy. They debated the effectiveness of action, and the differences between "anger" and "rage." They challenged and critiqued each other in ways inappropriate between professors and students. They took risky positions and defended them passionately. They cleared the air. They said their say in ways inappropriate for class discussions, but essential for intellectual growth.

   This suggests that although students were not anonymous in the open discussion, as one can often be in web chat groups, the asynchronous interaction provided enough mediation to allow for more frank and energetic confrontations, for the "true reciprocity" we want to characterize our feminist endeavors in the classroom and outside of it. In some ways, this space was antithetical to the classroom: the usual "authority" figures were not immediately visible, and students dominated. They wrestled intellectually and emotionally with each other, at their own pace—not during limited, artificial and short class sessions three times a week. We could monitor and join in, but it definitely was not *our space*; it allowed students to express and foreground what was significant to them, and to learn from each other. Many students reported in their course evaluations that the Open Discussion was one of the best aspects of the course. It got them thinking and responding; they said it took the "academic" issues in the reading and made them "real." A few students reported that though they did not participate actively in the Open Discussion, they logged on during the term and appreciated the intellectual free-for-all that this web-based student-oriented site provided.

Conclusion

   Without much scientific evidence, both Michelle and I *sensed* that our use of web technology, especially the creation of a virtual location for the course, the posting of reading responses and the Open Discussion, created an important public dimension to this course that it never had. These innovations located students in the course as a virtual site and learning community, encouraged them to find their own voices on contentious issues, and gave them a relatively free, and relatively safe avenue to do so.

A majority of students reported on their final evaluations that the web interface was a "challenging" and "extremely valuable" aspect of the course. A few were wildly enthusiastic, and a few were indifferent; no one dismissed it outright. But, of course, we were just sampling some of the possibilities that web technology makes available to educators, possibilities which I am inclined to pursue and expand. However, before we sign on wholeheartedly to this "revolution," we need to consider just how and whether web technology will advance feminist pedagogies. Ultimately, this depends on one's attitude toward the web's potential as a liberatory space.

It should not escape notice that the "Virtual On-line University" includes on its menu of distance learning environments "a traditionally designed university campus" that can simulate FTF instructor and peer contact (Spender 137). The question arises—and it is a question feminists and media critics alike are asking about the entire so-called "information revolution"— why substitute an interactive simulation when you can have the real thing? Because, as WIEU points out in its website rationale, many people, especially non-traditional female students worldwide, cannot come to a university. The organizers of WIEU argue that "Electronic education holds the greatest hope and possibility for the Two-thirds World where poverty, isolation and gender bias disempower so many women. It is the first technology since the industrial age which has the potential to transcend class barriers." No longer a physical place, this electronic university is intended to be "an experience" in feminist values of "connection and collaboration between learners and mentors" which will empower women and democratize education.[4]

Spender makes a similar argument for the feminist and democratic benefits of virtuality in her book, *Nattering on the Net: Women, Power and Cyberspace*, which appeared in 1995. She speculates that the "virtual classroom has many distinct advantages" and may provide "the best opportunity yet for solving the problem of boys getting more than their fair share of teacher attention" (143). However, her optimism sidesteps her own conclusion that "when it comes to cyberspace, men have the power" (xxiv)—that information technology as it has developed and in the ways it is represented, is a stereotypically masculine realm that reinscribes and may even intensify current off-line ideologies of difference and power.

Spender's boosterism also ignores deeper concerns raised by self-proclaimed Luddites like James Brook and Lain A. Boal.

They argue in the preface to their collection, *Resisting the Virtual Life; The Culture and Politics of Information*, for an intelligent resistance to "machine fetishism" and the ritual worship of the "free market" and its analogous "free flow of information." Arguing from a materialist perspective, they compare the flight to cyberspace to "white flight" to the suburbs, pointing out that to "hang-out" in virtual reality allows users to avoid all the unpleasantness that may be going down on your street corner or downtowns. They also question whether it is not multinational corporations and global capitalism—the very and already privileged few—that benefit most when we all get on the "information superhighway." After all, it is an avenue that offers only some of us helpful prosthetic extensions of our power and creativity, but also proffers more alienated experiences like simulated interactivity (vii-xv).

It is important to note that what we accomplished in WS 10 was far from VOU and MOOs, and that the use of web technology, even in the form of mediated interactivity, does not inevitably lead to virtual education. By extending the opportunities for student-centered interaction, we muted some of what we feel to be the hierarchical effects of the traditional, physical classroom. We can take this even further, but that still leaves open the question of whether and how web technology can help to realize feminist and radical democratic goals by benefiting marginalized groups and changing dominant structures of power. Can this technology, despite the problems I have outlined, help to create, as Spender urges, a "virtual sisterhood"? In determining this, we need to carefully distinguish the goals of social change from the loudly touted "liberation" offered by the web, since we must always ask—whose liberation and from what? If we accept Spender's argument that this technology is here to stay, then we can work on shaping the technology or demanding that it be shaped to serve specific ends. To introduce students, and especially large numbers of women and pro-feminist students, to the web makes them informed users who can also become active resisters, critics and even shapers of future interface technology.[5]

Technology, as feminists who work on reproductive technologies have found, while not politically neutral, is not inherently good or bad for women, the poor, and people of color. Its effects depend on who owns and controls it, who determines the trajectory of its development and its research agenda. At present, according to Faith Wilding, a member of Critical Art Ensemble and a feminist artist/activist since the early second wave, "real

world social stratifications are, in general, reflected and replicated in cyberspace" (50). Attending the proceedings of the first Cyberfeminist International held in Kassel, Germany, in September 1997, Wilding reports that these self-declared cyberfeminists reject the two popular "utopic myths of the internet: that the Net transcends hierarchies because there is a free interchange of information across boundaries and that the Net is ungendered so that you can create any way you want without regard to body and sex." On the contrary, they argue, "the Net is a contested zone" and is "not automatically liberating" (55). In order to see through the "cyberhype" of marketing and male-oriented soft and hardware, "women need to experiment in developing their own working and learning spaces in this postfeminist decolonization of cyberspace" (51).

Wilding, who enthusiastically embraces the new technology for art as well as political organizing, calls for a therapeutic and politically strategic and pedagogic "separatism" that would help women escape from "a false universal" and foster "a cyberspace of difference" as a means of undermining structures of domination (51). This sounds like second wave arguments for separatism and consciousness-raising, but Wilding's use of the term "decolonization" suggests a cagey politics borrowed from and allied with postcolonial discourse. Homi Bhabha's theory of interstitiality makes claims for the contested spaces of colonialism that can be applied as well to the net as a "terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular and communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestations, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (1-2). Or as Michael Joyce (adapted by me) concludes: "A fully coextensive, truly constructive electronic text will present the reader with opportunities for capturing the figure of connection at its interstices . . . so she can recognize, resist, appropriate, possess, replace, and deploy . . . it to her own uses" (244).

Without realizing its relevance to WS 10 on-line, we assigned as the final reading for the course Dorothy Allison's poignant memoir, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*. There are many ways in which Allison's text was a fitting conclusion for a course that investigated sex and gender in US society. What I hadn't realized until I began to formulate my ideas about our use of the web for WS 10, was that Allison ends her meditation on storytelling as "an act of love," with a hypertext dream. She tells of being at a reading in Providence when two very intense young people approach her with the proposition of putting "everything

you've every published . . . in hypertext" (90). "It's the latest thing," the thin young man says, but the young woman is beyond trends, transformed by hypertext's   multi-dimensional nature: "'It's so beautiful,' she said. 'After a while it's like a skin of oil on water. If you look at it from above it's just one thing, water and oil in a spreading shape. But if you looked at it from the side, it would go down and down, layers and layers. All the stories you've ever told.   All the pictures you've ever seen'" (91). Overwhelmed by the prospect, Allison demurs, but that night dreams of herself, aged and debilitated, walking through corridors, and coming finally to a brick wall that is composed of all the stories of her life. Touch one brick and it opens a window into that life. . . . I don't want to ruin with paraphrase the pleasure of reading this sequence. Suffice it to say that Allison's dream, while it acts out the very tensions that attend women and the web, also suggests new ways of looking at old truths that feminists educators and students will want to ponder, pursue, and shape to our collective needs and desires.*

Notes

[1]hooks combines her early experience of black teachers with the feminist pedagogy of the early second wave and the ideas of Brazilian thinker Paulo Freire, whose work on critical education, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, has been extremely influential in shaping radical notions of education. I cite hooks' work because of the way it foregrounds issues of race and class consciousness. For more accounts of feminist pedagogy, see *Gendered Subjects: The Dynamics of Feminist Teaching*, *Women's Studies Quarterly: Special Issue on Feminist Pedagogy*, 15 (Fall/Winter, 1987), *Gender in the Classroom: Power and Pedagogy*, eds Susan L. Gabriel and Isaiah Smithson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy* eds. Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore (New York: Routledge, 1992).

[2]The Students Links performed the function of "sifting and sort-

ing" through the overwhelming amount of information offered by the web, a task that Nicholas Negroponte, the founding director of the MultiMedia Lab at MIT, predicts will be accomplished by new kinds of computers called "intelligence agents." He calls these computers "the most fashionable topic of research in human interface design," which will "filter, sort, prioritize and manage multimedia on our behalf—computers that read newspapers and look at television for us, and act as editors when we ask them to do so," (20, 151).

[3]Johnson distinguishes lists of links that form trails from bookmarks, which he describes as "just momentary excerpts from a longer train of thought, like snapshots or postcards mailed home from an overseas vacation. The journey itself—the movement from thought to thought, document to document—is the key here. . . . You can create a master list of all your favorite resources, but there's no way to describe the relationships between them, the links of association that make that personal web intelligible to you" (122).

[4]By emphasizing "connection and collaboration," WIEU's discourse about distance learning ties web technology to a basic feminist perspective. The "new grammars" of links and hypertext are most frequently associated with post-modernist modes of interstitiality and nomadism, post-structuralist intertextuality and the rhizomatic imagery of theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (Joyce, 5). But it is difficult *not* to hear how descriptions of hypertext and simulated interactivity resemble the particularly feminine (as opposed to female) ways of thinking described by Carol Gilligan in her well-known study of women's moral development, *In A Different Voice* (1982). Gilligan gives copious evidence that in approaching moral dilemmas, women tend to construct "a network of connection, a web of relationships that is sustained by a process of communication" (32). WIEU alludes to the pedagogic counterpart of Gilligans's work, expressed as "women's ways of knowing," to explain the student-mentor connection they feature: "These 'ways' are believed to be more collaborative and more friendly to the protection of earth and of life itself." Moreover, WIEU contends, "Any discipline that is not informed by or omits the history and evidence of women's experience is incomplete and distorted."

[5]Susan Damarin reinforces this point: "There is a very real question as to whether the computer is so heavily valenced against feminist values . . . that it precludes the development of useful feminist approaches. . . . In some circles the question is regularly asked: 'Are computers ultimately liberatory or are they essentially disem-

powering?' An answer is that computers will be whatever we make them" (367).

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III. MEANING
(Respondents)