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# Gender and race, online communities, and composition classrooms

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**GENDER AND RACE, ONLINE COMMUNITIES, AND  
COMPOSITION CLASSROOMS**

by

**JILL MORRIS**

**DISSERTATION**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

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2011

MAJOR: ENGLISH

Approved by:

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## DEDICATION

Without Norandor, Raik, Zynlessa, Anaxagora, Nysarra, Saurastus, Senormuerto, Rhetoroxor, Hessie, John, Tony, Patrick, Sheryl, Donna, Amanda, Candace, Sharon, Anthony, Teresa, Jennifer, Donatella, Kim, Mayville, Colette, and Miss Bev none of this would be possible. You never know who you have till you need them.

I also thank my committee and my family, for they are who really make this process happen.

I dedicate my work to my students—each of you keeps me sane, laughing, and inspired every day.

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## Chapter One

### *Introduction*

In this dissertation I present three case studies of un-moderated online communities to suggest that well negotiated Internet arguments can create “safe spaces” for discussion of race and gender that are not single-gendered or raced. In the first study, a conversation pertaining to gender and feminism has a negative outcome when a feminist blog owner shuts down her site and stops the discussion; the second presents a neutral outcome wherein a man learned a significant amount about feminism but still eventually shut down the dialogue; and in the third example, the community’s use of power, lack of moderation, and open dialogue was kept after the incident. This has created a years’ long discussion of race and has benefitted their community greatly. By looking at these three case studies, I will contribute to existing literature in composition and rhetoric by showing that some techniques of non-traditional digital writing might be effective in educating online community members about these issues, could be used to help students learn how to discuss serious topics in digital spaces and to make online spaces more welcome for minorities.

To begin this discussion, I will examine the history of studying communication about gender and race online as well as digital writing by minorities in the field of rhetoric and composition (specifically focusing on computers and writing as a subfield starting in the late 1980s and early 1990s). This history will show that while there has been an interest in issues relating gender, race, class, computing, and writing for many years, little progress has been made in establishing effective best practices models. I will then examine the gaps in this literature, specifically in how to best communicate about race and gender as well as how to set up safe spaces to do so. This will lead into a description of the sites that I have chosen to study as

negative, neutral, and positive examples of communication relating to race, gender, and identity and how these might affect future computers and writing and classroom practices. The history of being concerned with issues of access and how technology might change the experience of various minorities online is nearly as old as Internet access itself, but we have not yet studied specific instances of adequate or even good digital rhetoric (usually focusing on problems instead of successes) on these topics to base classroom assignments and models on.

### *Literature Review*

The field of composition and rhetoric has been concerned about the presence (or lack thereof) of minorities in online spaces since the early 1990s. Teachers of writing have published on the possibilities and problems related to teaching with computer-mediated systems. They also write about issues of agency and subjectivity within digital rhetoric, new media, and online forums. As the Internet was originally text-based and access to technology remains expensive, many of these issues (as well as hopes based upon the possibilities of networked computers) grew naturally from the computers themselves.

Cynthia Selfe (1990) recognized the early capability of networked computers to make new genres, and wanted the new kinds of writing that women and people of color did on networks to introduce “revolutionary patterns of information exchange and conversations—those that allow individuals with traditionally marginal relationships to an academic discourse community to bring themselves to the center of that community’s exchanges” (1990, pp. 124-125). From the beginning, people in the field of computers and composition studied the connection between human and machine and wanted to use those connections to improve the writing lives of minorities. In 1993, Lisa Gerrard published a statement that she believed represented the core values of the field of computers and composition:

We support an egalitarian pedagogy—one that includes mainstream and nontraditional students, immigrants, the poor, racial minorities, women, the physically handicapped, the underprepared. We see computers as a potentially equalizing force; we praise electronic conferencing for allowing student to converse without being distracted by physical appearance, a foreign accent, or a stutter. We worry about equal access—about poor students who attend schools that can't afford computers, or schools that restrict students to drill-and-practice applications, or programs that route only boys into computer classes. (p. 23)

This statement set up the field as one that was not only directly welcoming to people of all races and genders, but also one that was equalizing to all as well. Technology was, seemingly, going to be a great field leveler in writing instruction because it hid who we were and what we look like. However, as Jeffery Grabill (2003) wrote ten years after this statement was published, while the field projected an ethos of worry about many of these issues in the 1990s, it wasn't until the decade drew to a close that the issues Gerrard presents began to be investigated. In this dissertation I suggest that although we are still “concerned” about these issues, we have not done nearly enough work toward solving the ones in our classrooms; they are especially important to look at now in a time when college enrollments are up because of economic downturn.

Even in what supposedly were the “best of times” economically, teaching with technology involved being aware of how technological literacy or lack thereof was going to affect our students. In *Technology and Literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Importance of Paying Attention* (1999), Cynthia Selfe outlines the troubles associated with the well-meaning but nevertheless fraught governmental Technological Literacy Challenge (TLC) which encouraged and required the use of technology in schools and classrooms. Despite initiatives to provide more technology to and technology instruction in K-12 institutions, the TLC also highlighted the problems our country already suffered from: ingrained racism, poverty in both rural areas and inner cities, and continuing illiteracy (Selfe, 1999). Composition instructors who want to bring technology more thoroughly into their courses must be aware of these challenges even to this

day—in a single class at my current institution (Baker College of Allen Park) there is often a wide gap between the highest achieving students in computer literacy and the lowest. Bridging that gap can be difficult when one student is still learning to use a mouse and another is working with Final Cut Pro. What assignments can possibly benefit both students? Selfe raised these enduring questions, but provided few answers. While I cannot claim to provide those answers for all classrooms, in Chapter 5 I present assignments that have worked well to bridge technology gaps (they worked well for technologically unprepared students) by being open—there are many different but equally valid ways of making a video, writing in a group blog, or posting to an imageboard, for example. By allowing multiple answers to the same assignment, we can allow students to participate equally at or slightly above their current level.

In the same year as *Technology and Literacy* was released, *Passions, Pedagogies, and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Technologies* (Selfe & Hawisher, 1999) was also published. The collection repositioned the field from Gerrard's statement and paved the way for much of what would be researched for the next 10 years. The field was set up as one that discusses issues that shape and surround information technologies—indeed, here I will discuss a small portion of digital technologies. It is not one that promises that we will always provide a steady and unchanging body of knowledge, but one that is ultimately changeable. It will study new technologies as they develop (Baron, in Selfe & Hawisher, 1999); will worry about what will happen to the essay (Hesse, in Selfe & Hawisher, 1999); will study the postmodern ramifications of new media communication tools (Cooper, in Selfe & Hawisher, 1999); and will consider the place of minorities on the World Wide Web (Hawisher & Sullivan, in Selfe & Hawisher, 1999). It will also, by necessity, consider and reconsider how to construct assignments that help our students understand the issues of technology. These last two points—considering the place of minorities

and constructing assignments—are my ultimate goal in this dissertation. To do so, I will make visible three case studies that elucidated, for me, new ways to use technology for digital rhetoric.

Selfe (1999) also writes that even if we want our technologies to remain invisible, it is important to pay attention to how technology is linked to literacy education. Technology and literacy have been linked in a way that exacerbates educational and cultural/social inequities rather than making them better. According to Selfe, our existing system of public, government sponsored education about technology (ten years ago as well as now) enacts social violence and does little to cure illiteracy—both computer illiteracy and the reading/writing variety as well. Selfe (1999) also called for us to put research and scholarship into work as praxis in order to help improve access, computer literacy, and to understand the ties between literacy, gender, race, and computers more clearly.

At that time, numerous scholars began studying technology use both in and out of the classroom. Aschauer (1999) suggested that we needed to study the ways that women use technology in their daily work and school lives. Thus, women’s place on networks and the way that they construct embodied identities in virtual spaces has been studied from chat rooms, to text based games, to Massive Multi-Player Online Role-Playing games, to Facebook. For example, Pagnucci and Mauriello (1999) studied the pseudonyms of female students online and their effect on the peer review process. Students were asked to do online peer review of pseudonymous posters. Many female students felt that choosing a male pseudonym increased their credibility. Although students were playful with their identities, they were playful in a way that supported misogyny. The most interesting finding was that when students did not feel like they were responding to a real person, they simply “sanitized their responses” and did not care about the peer review process (p. 149). Rickly (1999) wanted to test the assumption that female students

actually did participate more when they were in online discussions versus face-to-face ones. Rather than studying the students' gender, however, she also rated the students on a scale of gender representation, and discovered that although the networked discussions were not a place where everyone participated equally, everyone did have an equal opportunity to participate. While these findings are interesting, I want to look at what people are doing online when no teachers are present and take those forms of effective digital rhetoric and consider what they can do for classrooms. While studying what students *do* is important, reconsidering what we want students *to be doing* is important as well.

The field of composition and rhetoric has also looked at how the rhetoric of radical feminism might be used in online spaces (Rhodes, 2002). Jackie Rhodes believes that too many of our studies of online feminists occur in women only spaces, and that instead we should be studying places where women interact with the other *as* radical feminists. On the other hand, much of the feminist theory that shapes computers and composition pedagogy is of the cultural sort—focusing on connection rather than disruption (Rhodes, 2002). Many of these studies also then portray women online as victims of harassment in need of safe spaces when in reality they need rhetorical tools with which to fight back. Selfe and Sullivan (2000), for example, studied a women-only e-mail list wherein the women talked about interactions with men, but no actual interactions with men occurred. While Rhodes, Selfe, and Sullivan focused on single gendered spaces, I would like to study those places where being single gendered is rarely an option, since those spaces more closely resemble *most* college classrooms, no matter how feminist.

Feminist theories and pedagogies have entered classrooms where writing happens with computers and on networked spaces. Influenced by Flynn (1988), many composition scholars ask whether we write in gendered ways when we write online (Alexander, 2005). Hawisher (2003)

says that a feminist-inspired composition pedagogy should create a space in writing classrooms for women's stories and for women to be heard. The hope is for a critical engagement with gender and promotion of agency. Feminist scholars have also used digital pedagogies mixed with gendered practices to highlight and even develop the new genres of writing that have come from networked systems (Yancey, 2004).

Composition and rhetoric scholars also studied online writing and worked on ways to get our existing online space—very white and very masculine—to be more egalitarian. Takayoshi, Huot, and Huot (1999) write that in 1999 there were a lot of young women on girl friendly and empowering websites, even while they were less present elsewhere. They believed that girls could potentially use these sites to fight the low self-esteem that is typical during adolescence and use the Internet as a space to talk about “girl power.” They also write that we must listen to girls’ and women’s voices about why they like these sites. Mary Hocks (1999) writes that we need more feminist interventions in online spaces in order to change the audience of those online spaces (or at least the assumptions that we make about that audience—at the time, that it was primarily male). She suggested new media intervention into these as one way to change people’s automatic assumption of a male-gendered audience. In an update of her earlier statement, Lisa Gerrard (2008) also suggests that the Internet is still a very masculine space despite the “net chicks” that are very comfortable in their own online spaces (p. 185). However, the only one of these studies that looks at places women are already congregating online is unfortunately over 10 years old. While it was elucidating at the time, most women don’t call themselves “net chicks” or even “cybergrrls” anymore, and “girl power” has since been replaced by more individualized interests. In this study, I will therefore look at online collaborations and communities that are

created to discuss things other than girl power that nevertheless gathered women, men, and people of all races to them.

Collaboration online can also reach communities outside the classroom and effect individuals within it. Simmons and Grabill (2007) study how people write to change communities, and specifically how the “everyday aspects of deliberative politics” has been ignored (p. 419). In order to participate in civic discussions that affect them, minorities must first have an understanding of complex issues as well as entry-level technology to begin discussions online. Rather than simply studying what happens in large public forums in real space, Simmons and Grabill propose that we study other sites of contact and types of performances including websites, flyers, newsletters, and even YouTube (here I study imageboards, blogs, websites, graphics, and some video). Grabill and Simmons have begun studying the additional places that persuasion takes place, and have realized that most of what is produced looks more like what is created in technical and business communications courses rather than first year writing—they are more “mundane” documents than we might expect. The implication is that we should be more aware of what mundane documents people use to persuade and teach them more thoroughly and more often in composition classrooms.

While the types of documents studied have expanded, so has the language studied. Cynthia Selfe (2004) writes that composition teachers should be “using” new media texts to teach about new media literacies and provides the case of David Damon (Selfe, in Wysocki, Sirc, Johnson-Eilola, & Selfe, 2004). David was a student in Selfe’s classes and had learned web design skills on his own. He was getting paid for doing web design work and was highly computer literate, but was doing badly in many of the courses he was taking due to poor understanding of Standard American English. Eventually, he failed out of school, proving what



Selfe refers to as the “contested” nature of his literacy. He could easily excel in one area (new media literacy) while failing at another (more standard literacy). The question Selfe lays out for us is: how can we help this student? She does not provide an easy answer. There are more positive examples, however, of technology use benefitting students’ standard literacy: Lam (2000) did an ethnographic study of a student in California who writes at length and comfortably online but finds his English “broken” at school. This example shows that taking ownership of English and using it online can help build fluency rather than stagnate it.

At the same time David was Selfe’s student, the New London Group was meeting to consider the future of literacy. As English is rapidly changing, and as multimedia tools become more available, members of this group including Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis believe that we must adopt a position of “multiliteracies”: rather than simply recognizing a single print literacy, we should learn to value literacy in multiple languages and materialities (2000). My own teaching was heavily influenced by a multiliteracies approach in its earliest years, and I continue to welcome new genres of communicating and producing to my classroom when possible. Canagarajah (2006) defends the multiteracies standpoint, but also writes that we should study the multiplicities available in English. In an extended length project about literacy narratives done at about the same time, Hawisher and Selfe (2006) write about the English language acquisition of two young women from China and Taiwan, adding to our understanding of how English is tied to learning computer languages. Whether studying multiple languages, englishes, or the place English as a discipline has in the acquisition of computer skills—it is clear that the language we use to communicate over computers is complex—often more complex than it is in composition classes.

But we also have begun to study what happens behind new media composition in the classroom, both what informs how our students decide what is possible and how to use it as well as how the infrastructure of the University affects their new media writing (DeVoss, Cushman, & Grabill, 2005). We pay too much attention to why we use new media in classrooms rather than what Danielle DeVoss, Ellen Cushman, and Jeff Grabill call the “when”—what else is going on in the University and technology in general at the time which affects what they can create at the moment they are creating it.

For example, the Internet affects our classrooms whether we are open to it doing so or not (many of our students spend time on it even if we do not do so with them). If the Internet is a “white-washed” space, the parts of our classrooms that touch it may well become that too. This is, perhaps, why one Wayne State student that I had during my first term teaching at that institution felt that the Internet was “for white people.” Early Internet ads represented the Internet as a place where race was invisible. Race did not exist. Nobody knew you were a dog on the Internet (or a woman or a person of color either). However, Nakamura (2002) writes that the Internet is a place where race happens and studies how race, ethnicity, and identity continue to be shaped by networked systems. She specifically looks at the images that create racial identity online and refers to these avatars, menus, and ads as places of racial formation online. McKee (2002) likewise writes that race “happens” online and in classrooms with online components. She studied students who were participating in the Intercollegiate E-Democracy Project, a multi-school bulletin board system that allowed students to discuss issues with each other across many college campuses. There were no faculty moderators in these forums, and students could choose to participate or not. McKee writes that she was surprised at what students (especially African

American students) considered flaming and offensive, since she had mainly seen it defined in the past as outrageous, swearing, charged, and impolite:

Posts that did not seem to be violent attacks, at least to me as a White researcher, may actually perpetuate a violent ‘othering’ that is more destructive to interracial communication than all-capital online shouting, and posts that initially seemed to be merely destructive emotional venting were actually attempts by writers to express their anger in ways intended not to shut down dialogue but to produce the necessary conditions upon which further dialogue could occur. (McKee, 2002, p. 415)

McKee (2002) discovered that anger is not what makes a flame a flame—the audience is. While published, McKee’s piece is a good example of a topic that I will come back to in Chapter 4—white privilege allows people to ignore common everyday occurrences of racism, but they nonetheless can hurt the people of color in our audiences. I believe we must train our students to be more aware of those audiences, even if this is especially difficult if you are also a white instructor.

Race is a fraught topic online, and whether students post anonymously or not, or whether they were outwardly rude or not, othering can still occur. Knadler (2001) is another teacher surprised by the performative nature of race in cyberspace, and writes that black female students tended to be certain to represent their race in web-based portfolios. While the literature at the time was suggesting that race did not exist in online systems, these women insisted upon their race existing in their portfolios in a very performative manner in order to hold onto their race when put into a white space. When I write about video and writing projects I assign in Chapter Five, these ask students to be performative of selves; some of them choose what they consider racial and cultural representations while others masquerade as something or someone else entirely.

One continuing issue in the field has been one of access—without access to computer technologies the people in our poorest communities and schools will be at an even greater

disadvantage than they are now. Grabill (2003) writes that we need to think harder about class and how it affects students' access and ability to use technology. Ten years after Lisa Gerrard stated what the field's core values were, issues of access and class were still not often discussed. Grabill felt that these "core values" were more of an *ethos* of the field than one that appeared in published material, and so argued that we needed to talk more about access and class. One need only look around the Computers and Writing conference every year to see how incredibly white we are as a field—why?

Access, in fact, does not lead to financial and academic success, nor does computer literacy. Stuart Selber writes more about multiliteracies and specifically digital literacy, breaking down digital literacy into three parts: functional, critical, and rhetorical (2004). Functional literacy is that which begins when we learn a new digital tool; however, he problematizes this acquisition with theories of tool acquisition. Specifically, learning tools rather than theories has always been one way that politicians and governments (the ruling class) have created minimally skilled workers. The place of composition instructors can then be to help students situate tool use in the broader political spectrum through critical digital literacy and rhetorical literacy—to help them explore, perceive and even produce digital work in rhetorical context (Selber, 2004).

In the past seven years, similar research has occurred but with few new findings, something I hope to correct by choosing different types of sites of study. Access is still a problem, women can find online power in limited instances, and a turn towards how computing can effect ESL instruction in writing classrooms both positively and negatively has occurred (Ware, 2004; Riling, 2005; DePew & Miller, 2005; Hirvela, 2005; Sugimoto, 2007). There has also been increased interest in what happens to ESL students in electronic writing centers, with

decidedly mixed results, but these deal primarily with issues of language acquisition and not self representation (Opdenaecker & Weis, 2007).

Although the field has thus far discussed how gender, race, and access effect online systems, we have rarely studied how these systems work rhetorically to teach people *about* race, class, gender, and access (in fact, we have paid far more attention to how technology obscures them), something I hope to begin in this project. For example, Kynard (2007) studies how African American students enact race in the classroom, but does not draw on how these performances are connected to writing online outside the classroom. This study also does not look at how students taught each other what was and was not acceptable in the online classroom—how did the students actually decide what was and was not talked about? What was and was not done? Lee (2007) studies how students in Hong Kong use text messaging, but focuses on the linguistic incapacities of the system which was primarily designed by English speakers and not how that, in turn, effects representation. Likewise, online chat debates have been recommended for language acquisition, but how these position students in the realm of the larger Internet has not been fully considered (Laurinen & Martunnen, 2007). Chat is dropping in popularity due to texting—why are we still studying it? Cimasko (2010) studies the use of multimodal composing as an aid for L2 students to communicate more strongly than they would in English alone, but does not study the implications of using extra-cultural signifiers in a multimodal piece aimed at primarily native speakers. While these studies do begin the work of looking at race and gender in online systems, they often dismiss an Internet wide audience for the pieces students create. In fact, in Lee (2007), Laurinen & Martunnen (2007), and Cimasko (2010), the larger system (the computing and Internet infrastructure) these students were using

when they did these activities was not researched at all. The limitations of these and other studies presents an opportunity for my own study of new digital rhetorical practices.

*Digital rhetoric* was a term first created by Richard Lanham in 1992 in an attempt to answer what happens to text when it goes from the page to the screen. He fits new media rhetoric into a longer history of traditional rhetoric—and in many ways there is no reason not to. At the same time, he argues that digital rhetorics happen when the audience can become the author and have some sort of effect on the base text. It was because the reader could effect the text that early new media and hypertext scholars believed that nontraditional students would be drawn to hypertext and hypermedia (Landow, 1992). On the other hand, other theorists (such as Lev Manovich, 2001) believed that the printed word itself is inextricably linked to rhetoric and that therefore no digital rhetoric was even possible. However, since the publication of his *Language of New Media*, it has become somewhat clearer that we can be persuaded by various digital media and that there is an emergent logic to their rhetorical organization—whether it be through remediation of earlier forms (Bolter & Grusin, 2000) or through developing an argumentative structure all their own (Losh, 2009). There is not one singular rhetoric of digital spaces, as each emergent genre of digital communication forms its own norms, either succeeds or fails, and is either used by others or fades from attention.

I begin my own definition of *digital rhetoric* with Haraway's idea above—first, the rhetor in technological systems is a cyborg in the simplest sense. The cyborg is a “hybrid of machine and organism” (Haraway, 1991, p. 180). This is an important move because Haraway describes the cyborg as being disruptive and disquieting—and the examples of digital rhetoric I present here all have at least one party that is disruptive and disquieting. However, in the simplest sense, if I communicate using a machine, I am a cyborg (Haraway tells us that the cyborg *should*

dedicate itself to being more than that). If I persuade using a machine, I am persuading using a technology. That technology mediates what options I have available to me in my persuasion, whether that technology is a pencil or a computer. *For the purpose of the current study*, I am limiting what technologies will be studied to those that are *digital*: a digital technology is that which ultimately “generates, stores, and processes data in terms of two states: positive and non-positive” (TechTarget, 2011). Computers, smart phones, tablets, and web servers are all technologies that are, at the time of this writing, considered *digital*. I further limit my study to Internet sites rather than other digital communications like texting and e-mail.

Defining *digital rhetoric* could then travel in one of two directions—in one sense, we can look at the “conventions of new digital genres that are used for everyday discourse,” the “public rhetoric... [that is] represented or recorded through digital technology,” or rhetorically interpreting “computer-generated media as objects of study” (Losh, 2009, “Hacking Aristotle,” paras. 5-7). The second potential source of digital rhetoric would be to study the code (HTML, CSS, PHP, C++, or even processor code) that creates a message. For example, in *Racing the Beam* (2009), Ian Bogost presents an Atari game that used the actual code of the game itself in the visual display of a “boss” on the screen—the shifting colors and patterns of the strange shape on the screen proved to be scary to players and therefore persuasive as an enemy while not taking up additional memory space on the cartridge. While this second train of thought is interesting, it is not ultimately as useful here because the interactions of *people* on digital systems are those that introduce gender and race (or not) as subjects of debate and discussion, not the code itself.

In *VirtualPolitik* (2009), Elizabeth Losh argues that everyday people online are constantly being taught and retaught how to argue on digital systems. In order to edit a

PowerPoint presentation or a website, for example, we have to be aware of the rules that “apply to specific kinds of verbal and visual interactions” (2009, “Rhetorical Rules,” para. 1). We also must understand the conventions of digital genres, both new and old, in order to be competent in digital rhetoric (Losh, 2009). This is, of course, what Selfe calls “technological literacy”—knowing not just how to use the computer, but how to communicate well with it. But we are taught online through our interactions with our audience just as often as we are told explicitly “this is the way to argue online effectively,” if not more. If we win an argument and get someone to agree with us, get positive comments from audience members, or simply don’t receive e-mails telling us that our post/website/graphic is horrible, we can assume that our rhetoric was received neutrally if not positively. Epideictic rhetoric, as in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, involves the study of assigning negative and positive characteristics to certain practices and techniques. Part of digital rhetoric must, then, be defining what is good, what is bad, and what we want to teach as digital rhetoricians and compositionists. What I will argue here is for a different *kind of what is good or works* providing that we identify our audience as “potentially anybody.”

In composition and rhetoric, part of our concern in teaching digital rhetoric is how to assess it and how to teach it (quite naturally). In assigning digital projects, we must decide what is good and what is bad in some way. It is very easy to take our assessment practices for writing essays and move those into digital space and make the assignments that we give in digital spaces look very much like those selfsame essays—we know what to do with them. In 1997, Doug Brent wrote that many of our texts on the Internet were really just standard print texts put online, suggesting that we should be doing more and having our students do more as well. That “more” would be digital rhetoric.



Zappen (2005) writes that digital rhetoric should encompass not just “persuasion for the purpose of moving audiences to action or belief, but also self-expression for the purpose of exploring individual and group identities and participation and creative collaboration for the purpose of building communities of shared interest” (p. 322). And so digital rhetoric can, as it is here, be both about persuading an audience to some action and creating community at the same time. The digital rhetoric I choose to study in my three main examples is that which attempts to persuade as well as form communities that are open to all races and genders.

There is a sense, however, in all my examples that what made them effective (or not) was the number of people involved. In each case, the more effective party consisted of many individuals—either by reposting a piece around the web, creating new versions, or just participating in the discussion. The popular term for media that is reposted quickly is “viral,” and ways of creating this phenomenon are often studied by business and management writers hoping to figure out a formula to make it happen. Henry Jenkins (2009) describes this as “spreadable” instead: media that is quick and easy to repost will survive and get a wide audience. “If it doesn’t spread, it’s dead” he states (2009). It’s impossible to not note that whether a piece becomes viral or spreadable ultimately determines its rhetorical significance.

For the extent of this piece, digital rhetoric is a piece of media (of any genre) created for the purpose of persuading others or creating and/or exploring group identities. Its effectiveness is judged not on design (providing that there is a visual element), but instead whether it is A) actually persuasive to an audience with no regard to production value and B) generative of dialogue and C) potentially viral. Digital rhetoric allows an audience to respond—if they do not, we cannot in any way judge it as either good or bad. What’s more, online content gains power through being linked, reposted, edited, changed, and sent to your friends. For this, there must be

many people involved in the production or dissemination of really effective digital rhetoric (effective in reaching a wide audience, persuading or amusing many, starting conversation, etc.).

The communities that I have chosen to examine could be considered updated versions of foundational studies of Internet. While the original studies discovered people playing with online embodiments (Stone, 1995), people fearing discussing race or gender in this new “raceless” space (Kolko, Nakamura, & Rodman, 2000), and called for feminist cyborgs (Haraway, 1991); the new studies presented here suggest that having an un-embodied presence is a more powerful rhetorical technique than a body, that un-embodied individuals can teach others about race and gender, that feminists might not be the best cyborgs, and that an unmoderated community might give birth to a safer space for peoples of all genders and races than a moderated one. In other words: a lot has changed, and there has not just been a shift in technologies, but in the way that people use them.

Despite these changes, many of the ways that we encourage new instructors to use technology in the classroom have not changed, or that advice has become too abstract and theoretical to be of practical use. Online identity is fluid, but that does not mean that it is impossible to describe or that we should not focus on it. “Digital rhetoric” is a term that is difficult for the field to define—much in the same way that “digital humanities” means many different things for many different people. To be able to talk about the intersections of digital rhetoric and teaching gender and race within technological systems, practical research is needed. But rather than starting at the assignment level, I think that we need to go back to “how things work” in established Internet communities, then extrapolate from those real communities new assignments that function in similar ways (using, as is explained in Chapter Five, an “Understanding by Design” approach).

In my three case studies, I will show how three different communities negotiated problems and ultimately succeeded or failed at becoming sites of cultural literacy about gender and race. The examples that I have chosen represent three different levels of rhetorical and community building success, allowing us to compare their argumentative techniques and begin to build similar *effective* techniques into digital writing classrooms.

### *Methodology*

This dissertation presents three online ethnographic case studies to demonstrate where online rhetoric about gender, race, class, and identity is happening and *how* it is happening. The sites were selected in response, in part, to a Wayne State student's commentary that the Internet is "for white people," and, therefore, not for him. At the time the comment was made, I was uncertain as to why my initial kneejerk response was, "but that's not entirely true." Upon further reflection, I realized that my experiences discussing race and gender on radical feminist blogs, fandom websites, and Livejournal communities had led me to believe that the Internet *could* be a friendlier place for minorities than what many of my students were experiencing.

Since the three cases studied here all occurred in the past, I was able to select three instances that represent three differing degrees of success in online race and/or gender negotiation. This will allow me to compare and contrast the methods used by various individuals in each case to attack or defend, how identity was formulated, and examine how the rhetorical tropes generated by each case might be carried over into or reflect my classroom practice to be more welcoming to people of all races and genders.

For each case study, documents were saved from the individual websites, printed, and coded as per the instructions for ethnographic field study found in Creswell (2008). Additionally, I consulted Miller and Slater (2008) in considering the ways that individuals shape the Internet

(as well as how the Internet shapes them) in beginning to analyze my results. I believe that in each instance presented here, while the interfaces of the websites used afforded for certain kinds of interactions, the individuals and the communities that they have built are of far more interest to the composition classroom than those interfaces themselves.

To study how a defense of feminism might fail online, I collected information in and around the “Blog of the Biting Beaver,” a popular radical feminist blog that was shut down by its maintainer (herein referred to as “BB”) in 2008 after a long battle with the online groups 4Chan and Anonymous. Near the start of the project (2007), I contacted the webmaster, BB, and was able to procure over 100 pages of single spaced, typed threats that her website had received as well. These were coded by type, from which I determined further sites of study. I consider this a “negative” example because BB eventually shut down her blog and most of her work was lost to the Internet. One of the reasons that she chose to shut down was that although the majority of the comments that BB had chosen to moderate or delete came from anti-feminists, a few came from prominent online feminists as well. She shut down her site not only because of very personal death threats from outside her own community, but in part because of lack of support from feminists who might have helped her as well.

From following several feminists who had sent BB angry e-mails or commented negatively on her blog, I found these same women enmeshed in another online argument, this time with a man who called himself “The Ferrett.” The Ferrett had implemented an experiment in bodies and bodily identification at a local convention which he dubbed “The Open Source Boob Project.” The same feminists who had failed at defending their own blogger while BB was being attacked were using many of the techniques that had been used at her against this man. This second example is one I consider “neutral” because by the end of the conversation, it was

clear that a sort of dialectic had occurred—the Ferrett understood why his project was problematic, but he shut down comments on the post and stopped the conversation.

To study a positive example of race enacted in online fandom communities, I also collected information in and around the community Metafandom, which is hosted on Livejournal.com, for two years beginning in January 2007. This is the primary community for members of multiple fandoms (including *Harry Potter*, *Stargate*, and *Naruto*) to share posts by people within fandom that discuss gender, race, representation, writing, editing, canon, pornography, and even corporate politics. In other words, this community is a place that functions like a bi- or tri-weekly academic journal on the state of fandom in general. Throughout this project, I traced the threads of one major discussion: the use of the term *miscegenation* to describe interspecies relationships in a *Harry Potter* porn challenge community. This topic was part of a broader discussion of race in fandom that has been ongoing on this community and others since 2006 that continues to present day.

All examples were coded multiple times to extract common themes and rhetorical tropes and tactics. I also researched many of the authors that posted to these sites, and looked for information about their online identities and presentations. This led to the discovery of several secondary sites, sources, and further small examples of similar instances proving, for example, that what had happened in the *Harry Potter* community was truly a positive experience for the respondents.

At the same time that I was doing this research, I was actively engaged in writing assignments and curricula for Wayne State University and Baker College. My experiences on these sites and others like them did effect the way that I was teaching my composition (and other) classes using technology. Therefore, in the final chapter I attempt to trace the thought

processes that lead to my current assignments that employ similar rhetorical logic to the case studies here. I have done an extended IRB-approved study of one project using video that helps students consider race and gender in the film industry which will be presented in this chapter in some depth, with briefer descriptions of other assignments based upon these case studies as well.

### *Chapters' Descriptions*

#### *Chapter Two*

In Chapter Two I will present my first online case study. This is the story of Biting Beaver (BB)—as noted above, she was a feminist blogger using her own experiences to educate readers about feminism. In early 2007, she was targeted by Anonymous, an un-moderated group organized by a wiki. BB had posted that she wished her son were never born after he repeatedly watched porn and exposed his little brother to it.

Anonymous is an online group organized via a Wiki to attack enemies. All members use the name “Anonymous” to post, and there are thousands of people who participate in its various crusades. Anonymous viciously attacked BB’s blog and threatened to find her son and “free him” so that he could watch all the porn he wanted. More importantly, Anonymous rewrote BB’s story, recoding her permanent online identity to that of a person who was ugly, fat, and completely unlikeable. Their story of Brandon (her son) valorized him for looking at porn and demonized her for being anti-porn. As readers, they were very different from the feminists that the message was intended for. BB herself had little control over her own online identity as soon as it was rewritten on Anonymous’s Wiki.

On the other hand, this chapter also analyzes Anonymous and sister site 4Chan outside of these attacks. These sites have been involved in creating all of the most famous Internet memes—including Lolcats, the Fail Blog, and recently Derpy Pony—and even many of the

acronyms and Netspeak popular today would not exist without their boards. Their un-moderated community may bring out the worst in people; however, it also brings out the best of their invention and discovery skills. 4Chan's unfettered agency leads to the sort of creativity that computers and composition instructors would love to see in their own classroom: quick invention, ideas that spread rapidly and virally, and a large audience for mediated materials. Thus, I will use Anonymous and BB to claim the following:

1. The rhetoric of the Internet gives power to groups that have experience in meme production such as 4Chan and Anonymous.
2. A large, un-moderated group may be the best way to create discourse online, but is also a powerful way to enforce compliance with a set of rules.
3. By being disruptive and insisting on irony, Anonymous and 4Chan are more "cyborg" than many cyberfeminists.

### *Chapter Three*

In Chapter Three I will recount a story closely related to that told in Chapter Two. BB had very little support from the online community. Many feminists actually attacked her trying to say that they were "different." However, in the case discussed in this chapter, many of the very same feminists that denounced BB used Anonymous's own techniques against a man that offended them by forming their own community through message boards and wikis.

In this case study, I will tell the story of the Open Source Boob Project. At two computer conventions, a small group of friends lead by blogger TheFerrett ran projects related to bodies and gender. Everyone was allowed to touch each other's bodies but had to ask first. They declared the experiment a success, as everyone involved reported it to be a positive experience. The project centered around the touching of women's breasts, and it was referred to as the Open

Source Boob Project (TheFerrett, 2008). TheFerrett then wrote about this in his Livejournal. Within hours of Ferrett's original post about the Project, feminist blogs were alight with posts of their own encouraging others to go and comment about how wrong, patriarchal, and incredibly short-sighted his project was. In all, they posted over 500 comments in a period of a single day, with further activity occurring off his blog. In the end, they did not force Ferrett to change his position, but he did eventually rethink the process the Project was created by and he agreed that it was not as positive as originally thought.

By using techniques that Anonymous is famous for, cyberfeminists were capable of enacting the sort of change online that they often wish to create; however, they still shut down the open dialogue that had been occurring, making this a "neutral" case. I will use this example to discuss

1. How groups online can be formed quickly and efficiently to deliver a positive message.
2. How changing from one group (the people at the conferences) to posting information for another (the Ferrett's Livejournal audience) can create significant resistance.
3. How Anonymous's techniques can be used for good.

#### *Chapter Four*

In Chapter Four, my case study will focus not on conflict between two communities, but on that within a single community broken into two opposing groups. In July 2007, a member of the *Harry Potter* fandom noticed the challenge writing community "Daily Deviant"<sup>1</sup> had updated their monthly challenge. Each month, a word is posted to the community that all members are then invited to write about. In this case, members write a short "porn with plot" story involving the characters and whatever deviant act has been selected that month. That month, the word

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<sup>1</sup> [http://community.livejournal.com/daily\\_deviant/](http://community.livejournal.com/daily_deviant/)



*miscegenation* was used, which they defined as “Sex or marriage between two people (or magical creatures) of different races” (original post now removed, 2007). A fan of color who signs her posts “Zvi” immediately e-mailed the community upon finding the post, asking them to change the language on their posting.

The site’s moderators ignored her original charge of racism, which began one of the longest conversations about race in fandom history. Unlike communities described in earlier online race theory (Kolko, Nakamura, & Rodman, 2000; Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993), fans did not make race a disallowed topic. The original post from Zvi drew eight pages of replies (approximately 112 responses) and many more essay-length posts from other fans. In my discussion of this incident I want to consider the following possibilities:

1. Online communities can be a place where members learn about and recreate critical race studies in embedded context, and therefore may learn about them more confidently than through reading similar materials disconnected from their own lives.
2. Online communities that do not delete posts seen as incendiary but discuss them instead may be more welcoming to minority populations online.
3. The Internet can be a place to learn about race and gender even though it was originally envisioned as a place where these things do not exist.
4. When two groups meet and resist one another, there is a possibility that open communication between the two can ultimately end in a positive, democratic end.

#### *Chapter Five*

In Chapter Five, I will review the potential implications of this research. If the way we should discuss gender and race online looks more like unmoderated communities and less like carefully controlled Blackboard discussions, then how does this change the way we teach? How

should we use networks? What sorts of assignments might work better than our current ones? How does this change the way we interact and research with new media?

Specifically, I will discuss the implications of this research for classroom practice. Looking at the communities and case studies here as models for how the best internet communication and rhetoric can happen (and sometimes fails), I will use an *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006) approach to present several assignments that could emulate the good in the Internet communities shown here and try to eliminate some of the bad.

Conclusion

Through this dissertation, I hope to contribute to the field of Composition and Rhetoric (and Computers and Writing) by delivering case studies of online writing outside of classroom and ESL research and apply them back to the classroom. How is online identity navigated when we aren't part of classes? If it is done well, under what conditions is it done well (and how, then, do I create those conditions)? How do unmoderated communities make themselves welcoming to minorities? How can we, as teachers, recreate freer, more open spaces in our classrooms to allow students to make these negotiations for ourselves through multimodal projects? Although I cannot hope to thoroughly answer all of these questions, I want to begin to rethink the possibilities of online assignments that can create communities and projects that work both in the classroom and out of it.

## Chapter 2

### *Introduction*

In the larger theme of this project, which is studying how online conversations can create safe places for discussions of gender and race without those conversations being heavily moderated as well as how unmoderated, large scale, or viral assignments might affect classrooms, this chapter presents a case study of a moderated site that was eventually shut down because it dealt with challenges from the outside poorly. I show how the blogger whose site was shut down failed as I examine the power strategies and digital rhetorics used by the groups who attacked her, and suggest reasons as to why those strategies and rhetorics were more effective than her own, even if her own looked more like traditionally studied rhetoric. I present her rhetoric as a negative example—what not to do. While I also would not suggest that students attack and flame each other as her attackers will be shown to do, I will also show how their rhetorical practices are effective in persuasion and can be inventionally lucrative—therefore worth returning to when considering classroom projects. I will first present the case, then examine her attackers, reconsider both BB and her attackers in terms of cyborg identity (Haraway, 1991), and finally consider what feminist bloggers and teachers alike should do because of the implications of the attacks presented here.

### *The Case of Biting Beaver*

In the spring of 2006, a blogger named Kim, whose online name was “the Biting Beaver” (BB), was busy writing a popular radical feminist blog. BB held a significant position online and was well known for her anti-porn and anti-rape articles. She had been the victim of sexual assault and rape herself; in fact, her son Brandon was the result of marital rape. However, despite her own personal hardships, she had found a space online where she could educate people about

grass roots radical feminism and tell her own story. People could come to her site and learn about radical feminism and how it might form in a person based upon her experiences—much as we might use readings and even literature in class to access the same issues.

In her own words (at the now deleted journal) she stated that “this space is intended to be a safe space for feminists. Particularly, and most importantly, radical feminists” (BB, 2006). She felt that radical feminists were increasingly being silenced online. Particularly, trolls and men’s right’s activists were the main enemies that she felt that her fellow “rad-fems” were being attacked by. She had just witnessed another radical feminist shut down her site permanently because she was harassed not only by those who normally attack feminists (misogynists), but also by more sedate feminists. Therefore, BB redefined her site as one that radical feminists could feel safe on. She specifically stated that she was creating a safe space for all those radical feminists that were left stranded when other sites had shut down. She did not want her own site to be shut down and did not want her own commenters to be scared off. She wanted to defend against any “non-feminist, non-radical commenter” and in doing so hoped that she could maintain her safe space for an extended period to come. She stated, “This space has been and always will be, a space intended to give voice and courage to those women who have neither, and I will not allow that to be compromised” (BB, 2006). Little did she know, within a year her own blog would be available via invite only. Despite her own best intentions, BB found it impossible to stand up against the threats, harassment, and hate that were sent her way each day.

Feminist websites, and indeed, all websites meant to set up safe spaces for peoples of all genders and races, are an interesting and often-studied use of the Internet. In a virtual space where anonymity is held relatively sacred and websites on nearly any and every topic exist, one would think that these feminist websites would flourish and thrive. However, this is not the case.

Past scholarship suggests that safe spaces for women are creatable in private instances (Hawisher & Sullivan, 1998), even while the internet and the technology that runs it was created by men for men to “fit men’s lifestyles and hobbies” (Spender, 1995, p.169), but when these sites are made public and anyone can join and participate, things get more complicated. Despite these early women’s sites paving the way, misogynistic attacks on authors are more common than ever.

While BB’s site was alive and well, I contacted her and asked if she had any examples of deleted comments from her posts—I thought these would be interesting considering the developing nature of my research. She had noted in a blog entry shortly before that time that she had to reject hundreds of comments per day and would receive even greater volumes of threats, harassing jibes, and flames via e-mail each week. She agreed to send me some that she had recently purged from the journal. The text file generated from this question was nearly two hundred printed pages long. The comments are packed with sexist language and threats, such as one that reads “If I ever find out who you are I’ll fucking rape you to death you stupid cunt” (23.592.104.201, 2006)<sup>2</sup>. Most of the comments were in response to posts about porn or rape.

This is most likely because BB had posted “The Rapist Checklist,” a 51-point redefinition of rape with items such as: “30. If she’s had sex with you hundreds of times before but doesn’t want to on the 101st time then you’re a rapist.... 31. If you penetrate her anally, orally or digitally against her will then YOU my friend, are ALSO a rapist” (2006, paras. 33-35). This post naturally received a lot of attention because readers felt that she was accusing them of rape. Thus, she (and I, too) originally believed that anonymous respondents were playing off her own mentions of rape when they threatened to rape her. However, it wasn’t until I began seeing repeated language between the comments left to her and on other sites that I began to realize that

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<sup>2</sup> Anonymous comments and deleted e-mails will be identified by their IP address and date.

the comments about rape were actually less complicated than that. They weren't in response to anything she said per se, but instead followed a pattern, a set of rules that were also followed on other sites. Rape (usually misspelled "raep" purposefully) was something anonymous commenters would nearly always threaten. While that is still misogynistically offensive, it is *different* in a way that is key to my eventual evaluation and placement of such comments into their place in online relations on the whole.

McKee (2002) hypothesized that what seems like constructive criticism might be taken as a flame online. As I studied the attackers on this site I realized that they not only misspelled *rape* in some instances on purpose, they did so—in part—to assure that it was taken as a flame. Some of the attackers seemed to hate women to the point where they really would threaten rape as a viable thing to do to her for her viewpoints. Others, it seemed, all but labeled their attacks as "this is really just a flame; we don't even spell the words properly—see?" This was one point along which I could divide the people who were commenting on her blog. Searching for the term *raep* online showed that not only was it misspelled on purpose, but that it was also used to discuss bandwidth stealing (bandwidth raep) and character assassination on television programs. The comments seemed to be made from a few different groups. One group were fairly clearly men's rights activists who claimed that rape is often lied about, that women choose to be in porn, and that Westernized women have been destroyed by feminism. A second group all posted very similar messages that seemed to be quoted and that made direct mention of either the website 4Chan or the group Anonymous (which I had not been very familiar with prior to this time). This didn't seem important at first, but if I removed those comments it became clear that some of the cruelest other comments were "lone wolves" that had little connection to either big group (these

people make up the third). The deleted comments fell into several different categories, the last of which would become increasingly important as time went on:

1. Porn (often misspelled “pron”) is good (60)
2. Women (general) / you (specific) are stupid (52)
3. *Ad hominem* attacks (50)
4. Women choose to be in porn (12)
5. Men are raped too (7)
6. Most rape is a lie (31)
7. General threats towards her person or website (22)
8. Feminists hate men (11)
9. People commenting about racism/misogyny (28)
10. You deserved to be raped (3)
11. Men asking, “What about the men? Doesn’t this hurt them?” (24)
12. Anonymous/4Chan are mentioned (124)

Of all of the types of messages left, the ones questioning things like “what about men?” were some of the most eloquent—although no less nasty--often complaining about “nice guys” losing to the “bad boys” who would end up with a harem:

The fact is, men are not threatened by women, we're threatened by other men. Matriarchal ideologies, such as feminism, socialism, welfare liberalism, pacifism - all pretend to want equality with ‘men’ - but in reality seek to uplift the dishonorable man (bad boy/alpha male) at the expense of the honorable man (nice guy/beta male). The nice guy is gullible and compassionate, and falls for the deception. He then provides reproductive resources (time, money, status) to the women, who then simply cuckold him and go give their reproductive resources (sex) to the bad boy (who has bullied and intimidated the nice guy all along) thus allowing the bad boy to metaphorically rape the nice boy.

What we have here folks is serial monogamy, or defacto polygyny, with all of the women flocking around the bad boy, who has now has a harem. This is the true nature of woman, to submit to the alpha male. And this is exactly what feminist wanted - to have an army

of nice guys providing resources, and for women to share the top 10 percent of high status bad boys. We nice guys are all cuckolds. Nice guys need to get independent, and porn is one way of 'outsourcing' women, so they can no longer manipulate us with sex, so they can no longer dominate us with their matriarchal, polygynous hierarchy. Relationships and love are simply exploitation of nice guy resources by women, who use sex as the bait, and only give it up until we give them what they want from us. It is extortion. And of course, the high status 'bad boy' doesn't have to give any relationships to any of you - he simply whips it out and gets as much sex as he wants - the so called feminist 'rules' are not for him - only us gullible, stupid nice guys.<sup>3</sup> (Kane, 2006)

The writer goes on to note that liking porn is just the first part of the process of “nice guys” taking back the world from the women they feel cuckolded by. Next, they will turn to prostitution and so on. Indeed, feminists online have long written about so-called “Nice Guys.” Women, they write, often feel as though a man must be physically abusive or cheating in order to break up with him. Instead, these online feminists describe a phenomenon in which men who describe themselves as “nice” and deserving the best women but getting none are often everything but:

Nice Guys don't actually care what a woman wants, which is one of the keys to identifying a Nice Guy vs. a nice guy, and which runs directly counter to their most deeply held beliefs about themselves. They think that they are great, caring, compassionate partners; usually, they just want a captive audience. They don't have much respect for what her desires and preferences are unless they are for him, because if she wants something different than him, it is attributed to her dysfunction and desire to be treated badly by an asshole. They may spend some time with pick-up books and things that tell them how to get chicks, but they tend to follow the letter of the law and not the spirit. (Divalion, 2005)

Furthermore, other than the “Nice Guy” connection to similar conversations online, threatening to find women elsewhere—by pornography, prostitution, or even travel to third world countries—is a common threat made by American Men’s Rights Activists.

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<sup>3</sup> Note: All quotes from online sources are produced as is with grammar and spelling errors intact. In some cases the numerous [sic] necessary would become distracting.



Men's Rights Activists (MRAs) believe that feminism has destroyed Western culture. For example, on the site American Women Suck (now only a messageboard called "The Ghost Nation"), MRAs describe American women as

[Deluded] - into thinking they 'deserve' a rich, model-handsome husband who will 'take them away from all of this'--whatever the 'this' might be--and leading to resentment when they discover that the universe does NOT revolve around them; [Angry] - ALL the damn time about things which are so far out of their control as to be nonsensical--and constantly wanting to 'discuss' this mind numbing drivel ad nauseam. (Vladtepes, 2004)

MRAs believe that single women in America are "undateable." They specifically describe the women that they believe should not be dated:

Take away the women beyond the marriageable age (over 30). Take away the fat women. Take away the ugly women. Take away the psycho Zoloft / Prozac women. Take away the raped women. Take away the women with STDs / HIV. Take away the women who can't cook. Take away the women who already have kids then, naturally, you would eliminate about 99.9% of the single women in America. (Azrael, 2004, para. 1)

Posters on these sites encourage each other to travel to countries where feminism has not taken on a serious hold, marry women from those countries, and move them back to the US while keeping them isolated from women and media that might convert them to feminism.

Despite the fact that reading comments from MRA's might be chafing, in reality they are simply repositing traditional conservative roles for men and women. They say that women should be happy staying at home, and, in general, one of the most frequent complaints against women is that they don't smile enough. Women should be happy with the roles given them, they should be happy taking care of the house, should be happy raising children and so on. Although their forums in the past were certainly distasteful (an earlier version of American Women Suck, for example, had an entire section dedicated to "rebukes" wherein men described slamming doors in women's faces, yelling at them in public, and so on), in reality their position is fairly ordinary if disappointing. Their attacks on a site like the Biting Beaver's are not surprising. It

might be scary to tell someone in real life that you feel they've destroyed your life and chances at happiness; it's far easier to do so online—especially anonymously.

#### *4Chan*

Although MRAs pose a serious threat to the sustainability of a feminist website, they are not *specifically* part of Anonymous and 4Chan, both of which will become the center of my discussion of these attacks and BB's response to them. If MRAs were the only threatening bodies that BB had undergone, this part of the project, indeed, would not have been possible. It was only in reading the comments through all at once for coding that I began to realize that there were two online groups – 4Chan and Anonymous – that were mentioned often. Furthermore, at certain points and times in their comments they even tried to explain themselves to BB and her followers. However, since the comments were deleted, at the very least the followers of her blog never read these explanations. For example, one e-mail read:

I'm not one of the people who have been trolling you, but I'll have you know that 4chan will randomly hack websites, blogs, etc that we deem to be stupid in any sense of the word. Sometimes we don't even need a reason. Please do some research about who you're insulting before you so blindly do so. As far as your 'pornography' is harmful ranting, it just sounds like the same bullshit soccer moms spew when they talk about violent video games. It's only harmful to a very small percentage. (70.254.34.118, 2006)

And:

In fact, you missed the entire point. You tried to make the 'hackers' (while there was no hacking involving) sounds like they were frightened. They weren't. They just wanted to make fun of that people. Yeah, make fun. You may not believe, but there are people that find these claims fun, and not offensive. I really don't care about people that don't like porn. I just find it fun, and, with my sadistic mind, want to make fun of them. That's the way of thinking the invaders used.

A sadistic desire. Not fear. And, to end, you know the drill: TITS OR GTFO. (Longcat, 2006)

Repeatedly, the posters from 4Chan told BB about themselves, even to the point of seemingly telling her the “rules” of the game they were playing with her. Furthermore, they let her know repeatedly what it was she had done that brought her onto their radar. They saw anyone who was

censoring the Internet as an enemy (Internet freedom is a long held tradition since even before the Free Speech Blue Ribbon campaign of the mid-90s (EFF, 2008)):

You do realize what happens when you start toying with censorship right? You get the Gods of Internet called down upon you. Your attempt to censor something that's been around for as long as mankind's first coherent thought [which this poster is assuming must have been porn] is appalling and falls just short of being downright insulting. Now you reap the benefits of angering the original internet terrorists. (71.106,249,42, 2006)

Although MRAs are cruel to feminists and people they see as “feminist apologists,” they really aren’t the important party here. Differing opinions, even if they are extreme, volatile, and abusive, will unfortunately always exist. Nothing can be done to stop an MRA from visiting a feminist blog (short of password protecting it) just as nothing can stop a feminist from faking Men’s Rights credentials to join a Men’s Rights site. However, there is a significant difference between the opinions held by the MRAs and those held by 4Chan and Anonymous. 4Chan and Anonymous are amorphous bodies—sometimes they include MRAs and sometimes they don’t, depending on what is currently being discussed and who is currently being attacked. Members join and leave all the time and it is almost impossible to track when an influx of members from another site decide to join a “raid” because they are interested in the target. Neither 4Chan nor Anonymous are strictly anti-feminist; several posters to BB’s site noted that they might very well attack a MRA site next (though, as of this writing, they have not). Instead, part of anonymity is never letting another person know what sex you are: “The first rule of being femanon is not letting anybody know that you are femanon!” (/b/, 2010). And while this “gender blindness” may just as well be as dangerous as colorblindness is when considering race, they do not adopt any specific anti-feminist stance on their own sites even though anti-feminist, racist, and even age-ist pictures might be common on their boards. In other words, in a site entirely without posting rules, no common political stance is easy to identify.

A quick examination of the /b/ board of 4Chan (which is where random images, messages, and so on are constantly posted) makes it clear that “raids” are chosen somewhat randomly as well. 4Chan is an “imageboard.” An imageboard, or *channel*, is a site that is similar to a messageboard but does not require strict registration—just give yourself a name (or “tripcode”) and you can post anything (4Chan, 2011). They were first developed in Japan, and most of them are designed to allow for quick posting, editing, and reposting of pictures. Threads also don’t last long, being deleted after only 10-20 minutes or so. This deletion time also makes them an ideal place to plan attacks on other sites (as attacks are hard to trace), but might also make them an ideal place for student or even political action. People come together quickly, do something silly or cruel to another site, and then move on to the next funny cat graphic or the next attack. When 4Chan decides to attack another site or webforum, they call this a “raid” after similar actions taken in games like *Worlds of Warcraft* (but these raids, as I understand them, have been around longer than that game). As a group, they go to that site and post bizarre comments, make fun of members or site authors, and also post disturbing pictures. While some sites may be discussed on the board and a raid is specifically decided to be at that place because of some transgression or another, raids may also be chosen randomly in the following manner:

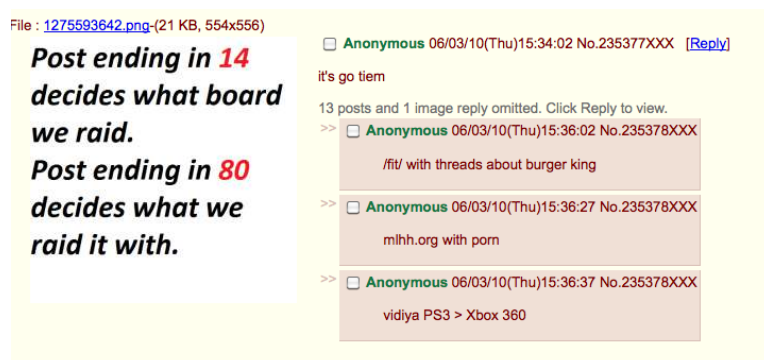


Figure 1: 4Chan Raiding Technique

This graphic represents a real call to raid a random site (/b/, 2010). Because the last digits of each reply’s identification number are cut off, it is impossible to tell ahead of time what site and attack choice

will end up being raided. Each individual member *might* have a specific reason for a site to be

raided that is personal and prejudicial, or they *might* just think that it is funny to go to a specific site about animals, for example, and raid it with lots of pictures of plants. Even better, some suggested raids seem funny even to me: another webforum is suggested to be flooded with smartcars, a different one with pictures of the video game character Kirby, and yet another with “SCIENCE.” This sort of raiding is unlikely to draw enough attention to drop servers and would therefore hardly be considered bothersome to the intended targets at all. Other imageboards use the same posting structure and do not plan raids at all.

In reading through more of the comments left for Biting Beaver, I found that 4Chan’s lack of political stance is described to her in several posts. While they come across as somewhat immature and juvenile, these explanation posts that she banned from being read by site members are not specifically attacking her. Rather, they try to let her “in” on what is actually happening. Whether or not having left them posted would have prevented further escalation remains unclear, however:

You misunderstand the nature of 4chan. We are not pornography apologists. We are not ANYTHING apologists. We like what we like and hate what we hate and do what we do without caring about the judgement other people pass on us. We routinely laugh at national tragedies and hate crimes. Every other forum on the internet (including these so-called pornography apologists) finds us despicable. We could care less. We enjoy our own company and no one else's. Even the forum that essentially spawned us is now looked on with contempt, and they view us similarly. That's just the nature of the animal, so to speak.... Well, that's enough from me. I'm going back to 4chan to share comradeship with some like-minded anonymous users. (154.35.47.59, 2006)

I would even argue that describing the users as “like minded” is perhaps tightening the definition too much. 4Chan is made up of multiple boards, and while the posters on the “/b/” board might be somewhat like-minded, there are just as many other boards that at least claim little to no affiliation with them.

Although some respondents to BB's site made the problem out to be her wanting to censor porn in general, others from 4Chan made it clear that the body as a whole does *not* care about free speech. Because she was also, at the time, deleting all anonymous comments, they also told her why they post with the name "Anonymous" intentionally and what that means:

4chan is an image board that allows posters to post anonymously. That's why we will call a 4chan poster anonymous. Now, let's straighten things out: Anonymous is not pro-porn. Anonymous is anti-social in general. Anonymous doesn't care about your arguments. Anonymous doesn't care about pornography nor free speech. Anonymous just thought you were silly and funny. Anonymous doesn't think you are dangerous in general. Anonymous is making fun of you on /b/ right now. (87.11.32.11, 2006)

The first time I read through these posts that she deleted, I focused angrily on those that directly attacked BB or women in general. It was hard to see past the rape threats and the anger; even the messages that seemed to give her advice on how to end the "invasion" were offensive to me. However, upon a second and even third reading, and then comparing these to current posts on 4Chan, some things began to stand out that I thought were important. Some of the horrific things posted ("Your resistance only makes my penis harder," for example) were actually copy and pasted memes from 4Chan's own messageboards.

Not all of the deleted posts were angry; some seemed to want to educate more than anything else. It also seemed as though a pattern of rules of behavior were emerging, both from the posters and of what was expected of BB herself. For one, both Anonymous and 4Chan expected people to either know about them or be willing to learn (and to be fair, once you recognize their signature style of typing, key phrases, and images, they really are everywhere online). They also weren't entirely unwilling to "work" with a target and help them learn the "rules":

Perhaps you should learn a little more about 4chan and similar sites before you react to them. This is certainly not an endorsement of certain members' behavior, *but your reaction will have a negative effect.* [emphasis mine]

Imagine a pack of young thugs. They don't care who they hurt. They just enjoy hurting. When they can't hurt, they disgust. It's funny for them to watch other people get upset. They have no sense of justice, no ethics, and no morality beyond a primitive pleasure response.

Now imagine that this pack has tens of thousands of members, each of whom believes himself or herself to invisible, invulnerable, and nigh-omnipotent as part of a virtual army.

This is why I called them 'Sharks'.

By admitting your anger and frustration, you've done little more than spilled blood into the water. You've acknowledged the howls with what sounds like a whimper. The pack knows that they can upset you now.

My advice is to pretend like you've never heard of 4-chan. Delete the posts. Add IPs to your ban list. Discuss technological measures to avoid future incidents like this with your site's administrator.

Most importantly, ignore the braying and howling. Acknowledging it only lets the pack know that they've struck. (38.119.107.76, 2006)

Any site that truly wanted to shut down a feminist blog (or any other target) probably wouldn't also hand that same site advice on how to deal with the invasion.

4Chan does not usually want to actually harm any other user or any other site. Because they are an amorphous body made up of many different types of users, rather than one type of user with one viewpoint, posts like the one above happen. In fact, there were many comments (about 15 total of the 124 about 4Chan/Anonymous) that tried to explain what was going on and what BB could do about it. I cannot say for sure why these people chose to try to explain the site to BB, but I can guess that it might have been because they were feminist, sympathetic to feminists, or thought that the raid had gone too far.

Members of the site were also quick to defend themselves. BB accused them of hacking her blog. In reality, what they do is “spamming” instead: posting hundreds of messages, most of them nonsense, some of them more thought out, in a concerted effort to bother the webmaster. Spamming can cause servers to drop offline due to too much traffic, can get the web account of the spam-ee canceled, and can even get the spam-ee charged with the web traffic it generates, but in all reality it is not the same thing as “hacking” a website. Hacking would likely involve

putting up a different website in its place (which is something that Anonymous has done to other websites they have targeted in the past).

Throughout the early days of BB’s site raid, BB maintained her mission of trying to educate. Since her goal was to help people learn about feminism and to give people a safe space to understand it, all of these spammers were to one extent or another treated as people that could and perhaps even would learn about feminism from her and other posters. In many ways she reminds me of a teacher—given the chance to communicate with hundreds of dissenting voices, who wouldn’t call it a teaching moment? However, one “femanon” who goes by the name of Jennifer wrote:

Nobody there expects you to understand the mentality of the community. It's pure, mindless, mob 'me-too'-ism.

Your site makes itself a *target to communities like these*, [emphasis mine] and 4chan is not alone. It's just the most mature of them. ...Recently, 4chan launched an organized raid against the site [www.habbohotel.com](http://www.habbohotel.com). Every room of this chat game in every possible language was completely filled with hundreds of 4chan users. When posting at 4chan peaks near what they call a ‘GET’ run, bandwidth peaks into the terrabytes of data per second.

In closing to this informative email, I would like to remind you that the people you are targeting with your site are juvenile and generally disrespectful. You're basically insulting a mob of hundreds of thousands of assholes and expecting them to join you for tea and cakes. This is not how the world works. (Jennifer, 2006)

While 4Chan and Anonymous may be juvenile and disrespectful, they are not specifically unsophisticated or unorganized. Although the /b/ section of 4Chan seems to be full of random garbage and nonsense, there is a certain kind of beautiful pattern that emerges from the randomness of complete unmoderation. This has included some of the most popular Internet memes—something I will discuss further in the “Analysis” section of this chapter.

However at a point approximately a week after the dated messages that BB sent me began, the tone of them seemed to shift. Rather than mentioning 4Chan and attempts at education about “how the Internet works,” the comments she deleted suddenly got mean and threatening.



The deleted respondents started to state that feminists are considered an “undesirable” on the Internet without noting why. 4Chan posters seemed convinced that they would just as likely attack a Men’s Rights Activist or a children’s site next, so it seemed to me that something was changing behind the scenes that made this post and those that followed remarkably different.

*Enter Anonymous*

On the same date that the messages became cruel and less random, a rather cryptic message described why: “PARTY VAN IS HERE. ENJOY THE B&” (Anon, 2006). This message seems to make no sense at all—what is this “party van?” Since previous posts had contained a certain amount of nonsense, misspellings, and so on it was easy to believe at first that the “Party Van” was also nothing. However, I also noticed that while “Anonymous” was mentioned and used in previous posts, now it was central to the messages that were being posted. Furthermore, they used harsh language and often mentioned being “legion”:

bitch I'll find you, cut your eyes out, and skullfuck you if you fuck with 4chan anymore.

We are not 3rd graders, we are fucking anonymous. we are legion. And you can't fuck with legion. I'll kill you. (4chananon, 2006)

Something had changed.

The messages were coordinated and repeated often enough that it seemed as though they were, again, being planned somewhere. However, who wants to be the one that suggests a conspiracy is happening online where people plan attacks on certain sites? Despite the fact that it sounds unlikely, a web search proved that while “conspiracy” is perhaps too harsh a term, a website did exist where this raid and others like it were planned and executed.

The Anonymous Partyvan Insurgency Wiki<sup>4</sup> is a site that claims to be unconnected to 4Chan and is organized purely around teaching people how to raid other websites in massive numbers and then carrying out those raids (Partyvan Wiki, 2010). Unlike 4Chan, targets are not chosen randomly. Targets may be people who previously drew the ire of 4Chan, although they might be chosen because members are aware of their behavior on other sites, or because an entire website or community online is “breaking the rules” in some substantial way. For example, as of June 12, 2010, sites being raided included one about the book and movie series *Twilight*. One site seemed to be being attacked in particular, with information about the moderators posted publically. Another target was knowyourmeme.com, a site funded by Sony Entertainment that informs people about currently trending Internet memes. Anonymous claims that the site is making a profit off of their work—which is, more or less, accurate.

Anonymous describes themselves as: “not a club or group. Anyone claiming to be anonymous, is not. You cannot join anonymous, you can only be anonymous” (Partyvan Wiki, 2009). They play off the fact that many webservers will name you “Anonymous” if you choose to not provide a name when posting. Web servers require that you have a name, after all. “Anonymous” seems like a better choice to label a post with than “null.” However, the group takes advantage of this simple fact by claiming the name and giving it an identity all its own. By intentionally posting with this name, however, rather than taking it as “default,” they’ve given an entire group of people one singular identity. Despite their differing political views, it almost seems as if “Anonymous” speaks with one voice. Furthermore, “Anonymous” is everywhere. Any time you post and don’t sign your name you become a part of it. In this way, an “anonymous” board of hundreds of thousands of posters, none with a name, all of them

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<sup>4</sup> <http://partyvan.info/>

anonymous, becomes Anonymous instead. This makes it hard during an attack for a website defender to be able to recognize the disparate factions that may be part of the raid. It also makes it hard to not take every post just as seriously as some probably should be.

Their website is divided into seven main sections: Tools, Enemies, Tutorials, Raids, Projects, Methods, and Wiki (a section devoted to explaining what the wiki is). Although the site changes often, the main page nearly always will list current raids. Past raided enemies are rarely removed from the page so if someone wanted to they could continue harassing them. Like most wikis, anyone can edit the page, but if someone from the “outside” were to do something inappropriate (like delete the enemies page), it will be changed back swiftly.

Although there are some main raids occurring at all times, Anonymous has many listed enemies. Although it would be a better use of Anonymous’s collective energy to only raid one site and only face one enemy at a time, online in a large group such as this, fighting a two or four or eight front war doesn’t seem to be nearly the issue it might be in the “real world.” Anonymous and 4Chan both have a large group of users that are very active. It makes good sense that they would not all be paying attention to the same enemy at the same time. Allowing for multiple raids and multiple enemies is one of the powers of Anonymous versus the sites they are attacking: those sites probably only have one problem at once, and many of their members are unlikely to be interested in doing anything about it. Anonymous’s lack of moderation allows them to discuss issues important to them in many threads at once, which is ultimately beneficial to the site as a whole since the failure of any one raid (and some have failed, even by their own admission) does not lead to the failure of the entire group. Compare this to a site like BB’s where the loss of a single battle means the loss of the entire site.

The site provides a template that people recommending raids should follow that helps to keep people from using the site as a way to get revenge on people they actually know or that they only have a problem with. This template requires recommenders to provide an “Intro” that explains what the source does, why they might be a good target, etc. (Partyvan Wiki, 2009). However humor, especially sexual, racist, etc. is encouraged in this section providing that the poster still gets the main idea (why the person is being targeted) across. The next section is described as “Displays of Faggotry” where the poster should note and link (if applicable) places where the raid-target has done something that would be patently offensive to Anonymous—of course, this is another example of Anonymous using offensive terms without compunction. The poster should also provide “Dox” (documents) which describe who the target is in real life including their e-mail, home phone, address; more personal information about the person, his family, employers, neighbors, websites, and so on, although this information does not appear to be available for all targets. Then the person (or persons) recommending the raid will help fill in information about DDoS (Denial of Service) attacks planned on the site, flooding with images, and so on (this will also be done by others if the raid is developed into a fully-fledged one) and lists of nearby businesses so that people can order many pizzas, cell phones, etc. to be delivered to the individual in an attempt to bankrupt or at least annoy them (Partyvan Wiki, 2009).

For example, one target, Adam L. Goldstein, was put on the list for overcharging for common Internet and computer services (Anonymous, Adam L. GoldStein, 2009). He charges \$150 for wireless network configuration, \$199 for virus or spyware removal with an additional \$49 charge if either is found, and \$99 for software installation. All of these tasks are relatively easy, and although it is not uncommon for them to be overcharged for, these fees are very high and clearly are meant to take advantage of people who have never owned a computer before. I

provide this example specifically to show that Anonymous does not always target individuals because of political beliefs or even unfairly—some of their targets have included pedophiles and lesser offenders like Goldstein who seem to be taking advantage of people’s trust online. Of course, this information is also all gleaned from Anonymous and not from Goldstein himself—it is *possible* the fees are overstated. But if Goldstein was not doing something to “break the rules,” why would he be targeted or found by the group to begin with? He must have been fairly heavily advertising his services in order to get their attention. I am also well aware that many small computer stores do grossly overcharge for services having worked for one myself. We would regularly charge full price for used components we removed from other customers’ computers and install illegal copies of Windows (back when such a thing was possible).

Anonymous’s attacks are far more serious than anything that 4Chan did on their own to BB or anyone else, and they are also more akin to what was to begin to happen to her and other feminists shortly. Although 4Chan’s attacks were primarily based around a handful of posts—usually the “No Porn Pledge” and “Safe Spaces” that described her feelings about porn and defined her site as a safe space, Anonymous attacked for only slightly related reasons. Their wiki describes the attack this way:

Anonymous first engaged the feminazis in glorious battle when a post made by BitingBeaver circa July 2007 gained wide notoriety across the internets. When her son Brandon hit puberty, BitingBeaver was disgusted to discover that a lifetime of feminist indoctrination was no match for his libido, as Brandon had no qualms about looking for porn online. BitingBeaver claims that Brandon was the product of marital rape and expressed regrets that she didn't abort him. This angered Anonymous to no end. (Anonymous, Feminazis -- Partyvan Wiki, 2009)

Anonymous hoped to actually find Brandon (and “free” him) since his mom did not want him to look at porn. Although 4Chan does not take a pro-porn stance, Anonymous in this case appears to. At the very least, they seem to target anyone who would censor the web—and removing pornography is just one more kind of censorship to them. No site should exist, they essentially

argue, without moderators allowing multiple points of view to exist on it. For example, Encyclopedia Dramatica notes that another feminist who was targeted “refused to allow any comments that did not support her views” (Encyclopedia Dramatica, 2010). While many people online might consider it the right (or even the responsibility) of a webmaster to make sure that all comments are compliant with the mission statement of a given site, Anonymous and 4Chan argue otherwise. Considering that composition teachers everywhere argue that you must show the “other side” when constructing a solid argument, perhaps they have a point. If no one has a voice except those that agree, constructive conversation is unlikely to ever take place.

The post that Anonymous is responding to did not occur on BB’s main site. At the time, she was a moderator at the Women’s Spaces forums. Women’s Space is a forum for women run by Cheryl Lindsey Seelhoff, radical feminist and one-time Presidential candidate. BB’s original post may not have drawn as much attention from Anonymous except that Seelhoff deleted it when it began to be spammed. The original post that BB made is now quoted in full at Encyclopedia Dramatica (a site that houses summaries of most major memes and arguments that occur online; if it’s ever been “Internet famous,” it probably has a page there). She writes:

Several years ago my accountability program found that the computer had been accessing pornography. Turns out it was my middle son. To date he has been 'caught' accessing pornography many times since then. He was 13 I think when this started....

Most recently my youngest son allowed my middle son to play with his PSP. Brandon (the middle child) used it to immediately access pornography online. The child is now banned from computers, video games and so forth. I've talked until I'm blue in the face, I've grown angry and yelled, I've cried when I was alone and when I was in front of him. I've had him read Dworkin, my site, and other places (namely OAG's site) and I still can't unseat this problem. He can recite feminist literature all day long, he can understand the tenets, the ideas behind it, how it links together but he will not allow this knowledge to stand in the way of his porn use....

I know, that as soon as my child leaves my home and moves into his own place that he will be looking at porn immediately. I know that I am raising a problem for women. I know that this child will one day grow and will fully absorb the messages that porn sends to men....

I know that there will likely come a day where my son coerces a young woman into sex (rape) and there isn't a damned thing I can do about it. I look into the eyes of my son and they still sparkle like they did when he was a baby, but he's not a baby anymore, he's growing into a man and that man will have trained himself to degrade women before he leaves my home....

I have three boys. One of them is lost to me and as a mother and a radical womyn this breaks my heart in a way I can scarcely express. I don't know if it says something terrible about me, but you know what haunts me late at night? More than anything else? I know, in my heart of hearts that, knowing what I know now, if I had it to do over again I would have had that abortion. (BB, as cited in Encyclopedia Dramatica, 2010)

This extreme reaction to her son's porn use was followed by a later note from her reading:

I also find myself blaming myself for his habits and that horrifies, shames, and angers me. Brandon was the product of marital rape (something he doesn't know and I will very likely never tell him). Brandon's father raped me a mere month after my first son was born it was a violent rape that ended up with me being yelled at by my doctor at my 6 week checkup for 'not being able to wait'. (Encyclopedia Dramatica, 2010)

Her reaction to his porn use is extreme, to say the least. However, her fears are at least partly based in a nature vs. nurture argument—would this boy grow up to be like his father, or could she try to educate him away from that path? She later posted to her blog that she was afraid that her son was going to turn into someone that abused women because of society—no matter what she had done to teach him otherwise. BB had earlier written about her own abuse, which had led her into a number of unsavory situations such as stripping, sex work, etc.

Many feminist bloggers have similar backgrounds. These aren't women that came by feminism from the "literature;" instead, they are people whose feminism grew organically and is considerably more angry and pathos driven than that which academics are used to reading. BB wrote often on Women's Space and even on her blog about how responsible she felt as a parent:

I, as their parent and number one source of information about women, must take the time to tell them what constitutes rape, what rape is. It's my job to tell them that No means No. If I wait for others to do it it simply will not get done and I'll be turning a man loose in this society whom I cannot vouch for. We simply don't want to believe that our boys are capable of such atrocities but we, as Mothers and Women, have a responsibility to own the fact that if they're men, they're capable, unless and until we tell them otherwise. I don't know how to do it, I have no earthly idea how to tell my children about rape. I don't want to think about it, I've spent my life refusing to think about it, but now I have to think

about it. I have to think about it so that my son's high school prom date is safe. (Encyclopedia Dramatica, 2010)

Because there are many different types of feminism, not only are sites like 4Chan and Anonymous to take this as an affront, but academic feminists and some other online and cultural feminists might disagree as well. Is it difficult to raise a boy in today's society? Well, yes, surely. Is it difficult to keep kids in safe areas of the Internet? Most people would agree. However, the fact that BB was eventually the center of a worldwide raid to attempt to find and "free" her son may have more to do with the way she and Cheryl Seelhoff reacted to 4Chan's initial attacks than anything else.

After Seelhoff deleted the reply posts at her site, Anonymous and other groups sent her numerous threats, which she posted publically while saying nothing to either support or deny BB's claims. Anonymous was upset that they were called on their behavior while BB was not, and began what they now refer to as the "First FemiNazi War." Between August 4 and August 8, 2007, Anonymous attempted to find and "free" BB's son Brandon due to her comments about wishing he had been aborted. Members stayed on 24 hours a day as more details as to where she lived and whom she actually was were posted. The attack plans (now archived at Encyclopedia Dramatica) included maps of the area that BB lived in. These maps spurred on comments like "Lol, The thread title said war effort and there was a bunch of maps and I was like. What the hell (are we) doing. Gonna go take over Ohio?" (Encyclopedia Dramatica, 2010). Other posters were impressed that one kid had drawn so much attention. Many people were worried about his mental well-being if he were being raised by somebody who thought he would almost certainly become a rapist. However, Brandon was never found. After the attacks on her site (and possibly because people were attempting to discover where she and her son lived), BB permanently shut down her



blog and made it by invite only. Another radical feminist, however, has recently been reposting some of her articles with comments closed (Archive of the Biting Beaver, 2011).

*Analysis: Are Anonymous and 4Chan Always Bad?*

#### *4Chan*

One of my goals in this dissertation project is to find new sources for new assignments that might allow students to explore gender and race in new ways. Anonymous and 4Chan seem like a strange place to begin that search, especially since Biting Beaver lost the raid that they had against her. However, by being unmoderated and allowing what could be referred to as “complete freedom of speech,” 4Chan and sites like it have also been behind some of the most famous



Figure 2: Sample LOLcat

Internet memes ever created. For example, the first known reference to a “lolcat” was made in 2005 on 4Chan. Since that time, combining pictures of cats with poorly spelled *messages* (naturally, because cats can’t spell) has become a huge online success, especially around people who have no idea where the term originated. On 4Chan, it was popular at the time to post pictures of cats on Saturdays—which they called “Caturdays” (Smith, 2008). Today, one can find many different versions of the original cats. The “Cheeseburger” network has sprung up which provides user-created lolcats and dogs,<sup>5</sup> and my personal favorite is loltheorists<sup>6</sup>—which features jokes that play off of a good working knowledge of critical theory.

<sup>5</sup> <http://icanhascheezburger.com/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://community.livejournal.com/loltheorists/>

Lolcats are possibly one of the most famous memes that 4Chan ever created. They have garnered critical attention at academic conferences (Daer, *Computers and Writing*, 2010) and even are

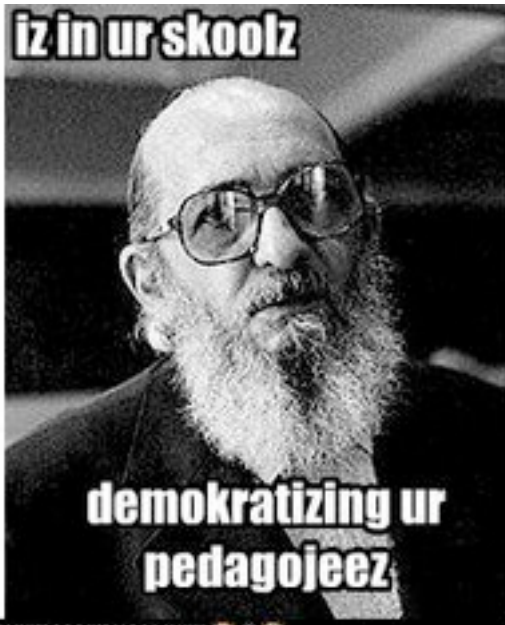


Figure 3: Sample LOLTheorist (Freire)

worth a mention in Clay Shirky's newest endeavor, *Cognitive Surplus* (2010). He describes them as being simply a "cute picture of a cat that is made even cuter by the addition of a cute caption, the ideal effect of 'cat plus caption' being to make the viewer laugh out loud" (Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus*, 2010, p. 17). Shirky also notes that lolcats are a kind of digital mashup, a "combination of existing adds a caption to an existing picture" (2010, p. 86).

People online are more likely to refer to these pictures as "macros" than "mash-ups."

Whatever you call them, Shirky describes these as the "stupidest possible creative act," a point I do not agree with (2010, p. 86). He seems to think their importance comes purely from their existence, while I believe that their power as a fast-spreading meme means they are significantly more useful and more powerful rhetorically than he acknowledges. In getting stuck talking about this form and the rules it follows, Shirky breaks his own rules about not viewing the technology as a technology first, and thus misses the memetic power of lolcats' original creators.

4Chan is known for spreading viral media and memes. 4Chan was also behind "Rick-rolling," the process of replacing a movie online with all or part of Rick Astley's "Never Gonna Give you Up" (1987), the most famous incidence of which occurred during the Thanksgiving

Day Parade in 2008. Rick Astley himself appeared on the *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends* float. While the characters were singing a different song, Astley emerged from a hidden spot, interrupted and sang his song, and then a costumed character from the show/float said, "I love rick-rolling!" (KnowYourMeme, 2011). 4Chan also made the new *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* television series into a number of viral memes that have in turn recursively affected the show itself. 4Chan began naming the various background ponies (including "Derpy Pony," "Dr. Whooves/My Little Timelord," and a DJ they named "DJ Pon-3"), creating images using them, and generally using ponies to spam more than other memes. In a promotional video released by the Hub (the television station that the show is currently on), DJ Pon-3 is directly mentioned ("Equestria Girls," 2011). Despite the negative web presence of 4Chan, the producers of *MLP: FiM* not only were able to see the good in the site, but realize that their fan input could ultimately be used to increase viewership and sales. This is the sort of action that I wish my classrooms could take—even if they did not directly influence a television show, there is no reason to presume they could not directly affect someone other than their classmates.

Christopher Poole, the creator of 4Chan, has been hailed by *Time Magazine* as the "Master of Memes," and the magazine described his site as "the wellspring from which a lot of Internet culture, and hence popular culture, bubbles" (Smith, 2008). Memes that are created in 4Chan may well die there, but many of them escape into the Internet at large. Even while a lot of content on 4Chan can be racist, sexist, homophobic, misogynistic, full of swear words, and packed with every other type of porn (Smith, 2008), it is also the hotbed of pure, unadulterated invention online, and I think that it is worth studying and worth emulating, to some extent.

4Chan's memes, and hopefully their creativity, could be harnessed for classroom assignments. Because lolcats are an easy example of a mash-up, and because tools exist online to create them

without a digital camera or even photo editor, they are an easy entry-level assignment into digital rhetoric, especially if thinking about the rhetoric of humor. Any student, no matter their level of comfort with a computer, can create one of these. Furthermore, because the best lolcats, theorists, or any other photo one wishes to lol-size play off of cultural stereotypes and common cultural literacies, they can also be a way for students to create rhetorically complex messages in a necessarily small space. I will discuss ways of using 4Chan's logic in other types of assignments that are more generative of good rhetoric about race and gender in Chapter 5.

### *Anonymous*

Based upon these described attacks alone, it would be easy to judge Anonymous as one group that should be eliminated. After all, they are only an offshoot of 4Chan, where the real discovery and invention happens. However, Anonymous's power has not always been turned against private individuals, and it also has been turned toward positive endeavors. The most famous of such instances is their 2008-2009 raid on the Church of Scientology, providing, of course, that you are not a member of the Church. This was one cause that I am sympathetic to. They based their attack on three points: 1) Scientology charges people lots of money to belong to what Anonymous called a "cult" (the money part is key as they have begun abbreviating the Church's name as Co\$ instead of CoS), 2) the censorship of a video by Tom Cruise describing Scientology meant for other Scientologists from YouTube and 3) the eventual forced suicide of a Church of Scientology member; Anonymous began a worldwide campaign to make sure that the website for the CoS was dropped, that sensitive Church documents meant only for members were leaked to the general public online, and that various offices would receive many pizzas, free shipping boxes, and be serenaded by the voice of Rick Astley each time they picked up their phone (Encyclopedia Dramatica, 2010).

Because Anonymous was, for perhaps the first time, attacking a target that other people were currently working against (and a target that I, myself, did not mind seeing attacked), a man by the name of Mark Bunker from XenuTV created a YouTube video telling Anonymous that while he was behind what they were doing, he recommended that they only used legal methods to attack the Church (Encyclopedia Dramatica, 2010). While most people who have directly addressed Anonymous in this way have become targets themselves, Bunker was able to get Anonymous's attention because of his true devotion to being anti-CoS (Church of Scientology). He recommended that they peacefully protest and push for governments around the world to remove the Church's tax-exempt status. It is noted on Encyclopedia Dramatica that the success of the peaceful rallies held around Church of Scientology buildings on February 10 and March 15 of the following year wearing Guy Fawkes' masks were potentially because of Bunker's help (2010). He is now sometimes even referred to as the "Wise Beard Man." Although the Church of Scientology still exists, Anonymous has had many successes over them because of their numbers including anti-CoS media coverage on Fox News, in *Wired*, and in *Maxim*; nearly all "top-secret" documents from the Church being made publically available online; some missions and organizations have closed; Rick Astley complimented them on their use of his music; the LAPD dropped all charges against one of the members of Anonymous and began investigating the Church instead; and more Scientology front groups have been exposed. Thus, even here, it is not easy to say this group is always a negative influence (Encyclopedia Dramatica, Project Chanology, 2010).

Since the attacks on the Church of Scientology, Anonymous has also been involved in tracking down pedophiles and helping authorities find a young girl who videotaped herself throwing puppies into a river and laughing about it. Of late, they have been involved in keeping

Wikileaks solvent, while publishing articles about companies that have cancelled peoples' accounts due to Wikileaks donations such as Visa and Mastercard.

While the attacks on BB were negative in the sense that they silenced an otherwise powerful female voice online, the organizing tactics of Anonymous are powerful and should not be overlooked. Wikis do not have to just be treated as encyclopedias—they can also be used as organizing places. I believe that this is being more generally recognized, though not published about. Even the workshop that I presented with at CCCC 2011 organized our presentation and the game we created via a wiki (not at my insistence, I might add). But more importantly, a wiki could be a space to plan other political action, and is largely an untapped resource to do so. Though it is outside the realm of my project (focusing during the last Chapter on classroom projects), I believe that other political and non-profit organizations could benefit from Anonymous's model of planned action. Wikis do not demand that users learn complicated code or syntax to write. They allow people to easily link information from page to page (again, without learning HTML). Wikis also offer easy cross-referencing and are free for educational and non-profit use. Nevertheless, most non-profits continue to buy or have donated expensive webspace, use messageboards ineffectively, and even copy large chunks of their self-presentation from other sites rather than writing their own (often because of technological inadequacies) (Rivait, 2011).

#### *Rules and Serious Business*

Whether or not Anonymous and 4Chan can be “good,” or even effective, in this case they were both effective and a negative influence during their attacks and raids. There are two primary governing factors to whether an individual is likely to be trolled, flamed, or even simply

ignored online. These two factors are a phrase and a list: “The Internet is Serious Business” and the “Rules of the Internet” (4Chan, /b/, 2011).

The first phrase is used commonly online, but it is important to understand that it is meant ironically. When a post or website is responded to with any variation of the Internet being “Serious Business,” what is truly being implied is that the individual is either using the Internet for a non-playful, far too serious use, or they are taking the opinions of others online as being desperately important (Encyclopedia Dramatica, 2010). It can be attached to a complex argument on an Internet forum, a website that is trying to use the Internet to persuade or teach people about something complex and highly political (like feminism), and in some cases it is said with a graphic similar to an lolcat (same type of font) that is referred to as a “macro” by 4Chan that has the words on it in some way (Encyclopedia Dramatica, “The Internet is Serious Business,” 2010).

It is important to note that what is really being argued is that the Internet should never be taken too seriously by participants. Does it really matter if someone is “wrong” online? While the Internet is part of “real life,” should it really be as important or judged as equivalent to it? Anonymous and 4Chan (amongst other people) would argue that this medium was never meant for serious purposes to begin with, and although we have tried to use it for such, many of those uses have failed rhetorically. Social media, Facebook, Twitter, cat pictures—these are the genres that have grown out of Internet practices, and they can also be very rhetorically persuasive (and, ironically enough, they can be so about “serious topics”).

I believe that what is *really* implied by “the Internet is serious business” is one of two things: either A) you reacted too strongly to an attack by another individual online or B) you are posting in essay-ist logic to spaces that essays just don’t fit into easily. BB managed to do both

these things. Her posts were long, and while I had no problem with sitting to read them, both Anonymous and other feminists complained about their length. Her site featured only one graphic that failed to match up to the main point of most of her arguments. She also had a tendency to react strongly to any attack, censored others' speech quickly, and wrote at length about the attacks that she was going through. These things were in direct violation of the "rules" that 4Chan and Anonymous have set down for themselves.

The "Rules of the Internet" are harder to trace. Many different versions of the list exist—although they all hold several of the rules in common. This list was created by Anons who begin them in a *Fight Club*-esque (Palahniuk, 1996) fashion, though they do mean that people should not speak about them openly: "1. Do not talk about /b/. 2. Do NOT talk about /b/" then move into a definition of what Anonymous is: "3. We are Anonymous. 4. Anonymous is legion. 5. Anonymous never forgives. 6. Anonymous can be a senseless, horrible, uncaring monster. 7. Anonymous is still able to deliver" (Encyclopedia Dramatica, 2009).

Although the Rules were created for and by 4Chan and Anonymous, the list or parts of it are often referenced in other widespread message board communities and paired with images. For example, rule 34—"There is porn of it, no exceptions"—is extremely popular. Because the Rules are one of the most easily accessible entrances to Anon-dom, people who are new to the site and want to get involved have a tendency to either over-quote the rules or take them too seriously, attempting to enforce them upon Anonymous and 4Chan as well as other sites. In general this practice is frowned upon, so although the Rules are really a list of the most common memes that 4Chan and Anonymous have been known for, they may not be internally enforced because doing so is often done by new people (aka newbs).



There are only 47 Rules according to Encyclopedia Dramatica, however, other rules exist on sites such as RulesoftheInternet.com. The extended list contains more references to pop culture including video games (Rule 66: “The cake is a lie” references *Portal*, for example (Grimies, 2010)) and television (Rule 90: “It’s never lupus” references *House* (Grimies, 2010)). The Encyclopedia Dramatica version is the one that will be considered more fully here, even if many of the rules on the other site are fun and “current,” because that list seems to more accurately reflect the rules of 4Chan and Anonymous as I’ve seen them enforced over the past four years. It is edited less often and is the one that has been more or less constant.

Despite their intrinsic edit-ability and some Anons claiming they don’t matter, the Rules are perhaps one of the best guides to what has been popular online as well as how to behave to not get oneself targeted by either 4Chan or Anonymous. This is not to say that strictly following the rules will ever completely protect a person, nor should anyone seek to be completely protected from trolls and flaming—they are simply part of networked life itself. Accepting this and seeing the playful nature of *some* attacks for what they are, especially before they get out of hand, would be useful to all members of the online community.

According to the Rules, the rhetoric of the Internet is all but an anti-rhetoric, which is what makes it so difficult to win arguments—in short, using ordinary rhetoric one is unlikely to *ever* win arguments online. This is most likely why we’ve invested so much time into studying the rhetoric of image and multimedia online, but in all reality, the rhetoric of the Internet is almost an anti-rhetoric as demonstrated by the Rules of the Internet:

11. All your carefully picked arguments can be easily ignored.
12. Anything you say can and will be used against you.
13. Anything you say can be turned into something else—

fixed. 14. Do not argue with trolls—it means that they win. 15. The harder you try the harder you will fail. (Encyclopedia Dramatica, 2009)

Rhetoricians generally agree that a well-developed argument follows the same structure that Aristotle proposed in his *Rhetoric*: ethos, logos, pathos, etc. and that such arguments, when well done, should work for at least part of the audience at all times. Based upon these three “pillars” or “artistic proofs” of rhetoric, one can make a valid argument. However, although we often shorten “logos” to a logical appeal, the logic in Aristotle is to use an argument that is “suitable to the case in question” (2004). If you are arguing against individuals who are likely to turn your argument against you, fail to read long and winding articles about your topic, and who seeing your trying to win as funny rather than valid, you most likely would not win an argument if you wrote an essay about it and posted it to a messageboard. The “winning” argument in this case would look very different. Also, imagine a world where not having any ethos of your own, but instead taking on that of a community or group is what brings you power because large numbers of people all posting with the same name will always have more rhetorical power than you. What would be possible in such a space? How would you argue? Would you choose to still spend time attempting to argue alone? And if so, why would you spend time building a carefully constructed argument if such an argument is going to be completely ignored?

In short, there is no reason to build a careful argument online when facing off against a large group or even just a large and varied group of readers—what is picked up, what is carried forward, what *works*, is humor—often ribald if at all possible. What also works is keeping the message simple and able to be conceptualized into an image and a few words. If you cannot make it a meme (from Merriam Webster: “an idea, behavior, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture,” but as used in larger Internet culture, a meme is an image,

phrase, or usage that has become viral) it probably will not have the opportunity to be read or understood by many people (which probably is your goal). Memes, images, web-comics, and games are all powerful sources of persuasion online for just this reason. All of these are seemingly simple, easily shared and can become popular more easily than an essay on the same topic. Furthermore, if you can condense your message into a very short space (a few words, a graphic), you probably have a very strong sense of its audience. The best of these messages (like an lolcat or pony-macro) can be used to draw a person's attention to a larger issue with considerably more writing if needed, but the authors of memes recognize that people browse sites quickly and that if you want to get someone to stay on your website, you need to be able to fit your entire argument into a single screen—at least at first. The average time that someone spends on any page on a website is as little as 30 seconds—not enough time to read a fully fleshed out classical argument (Webmasterworld, 2004). The question I ask my students is this— if you're going to put it on the web rather than writing a standard essay and printing it out, what about it makes it fit the Internet space? Does your argument fit the form that you want it to fit?

Because webtexts are also editable (or easily recreated by copying and pasting) responders can easily twist and bend another user's argument without even having to think very hard; instead, they just change some of the words when it is useful to do so and repost the message elsewhere. This is often done with the tag "There, I fixed it" added after, suggesting that they are saying what the original user actually intended (or was accidentally saying by posting at all). It also doesn't matter if a troll or a responder agrees with the original argument. They might even think it is a very good argument. That does not prevent them from flaming or trolling or spamming the site. All arguments can be ignored, any lapse in grammar or judgment will be identified, and any overreaction to said trolling will be taken advantage of. Even Clay Shirky

himself notes “people who care passionately about something that seems unimportant to the rest of us are easy to mock” (2010, p. 88). This is not limited to online interactions in the least; I have been privy to more than one academic conversation that included overly adequate mocking of someone for their use of critical pedagogy, student centered teaching, or love of Heidegger.

These few recounted rules more or less explain what happened to BB. For one, it is incredibly easy to label any site that deals with social justice as “feminist,” “misandrist,” or even “pro-minority”—if it can be labeled, it can be hated, and therefore it can be trolled (The Rules of the Internet, 2010). On the opposite end of the social justice spectrum from BB, a site like 4Chan or even one like Youtube is harder to put a label on since each represents such a huge variety of opinions. No single political or social group holds sway, therefore each site is unlikely to give in to trolling because nobody specific stands out to be targeted (unless, of course, you count trolling of individual users—that’s still possible, but the site as a whole is likely to stand. Providing that the infrastructure of the larger site is sound, it will survive.). So it seems relatively simple: if you don’t want to put up with this sort of behavior on your site, all comers should be welcomed, all opinions should be heard, and comments should be posted without editing or deletion. While this might not work in every instance, it might be a better model for sites that are repeatedly targeted by trolls. The more opinions a website hosts, the less likely any one opinion is to be attacked. A single student website looks like a target; a student website authored by an entire class, or two classes, or more looks like a rhetorical community.

Interestingly, rule 19: “The more you hate it the stronger it gets,” (Encyclopedia Dramatica, 2009) suggests that by hating a person or their argument, you help them learn how to defend their own arguments—they get stronger. Is this true in the case of feminists? It’s hard to say. Anonymous refers to the Feminazi War as one that they did not truly win—so it is possible

that in standing up to the attacks some of the members of the community (though not BB) were able to come out the other side stronger and with a better idea of how to help themselves online. In many ways though, I see Rule 19 as being more related to what I do in my own classroom than what they did to BB. BB was deeply afraid and left the site as a result. While I would not recommend hating students (and do not), I am almost always poking as many holes as I can in their arguments, whether I agree with their point of view or not. The stronger I can argue against them, the more things I give them to defend, and the better their final paper is. Therefore, although this Rule can result in the take down of sites that should not have been taken down (BB's included); it can also stand as an online version of the way that many instructors already ask their students to revise (but most of us are nicer about it).

*Analysis: Cyborg Difficulties*

BB described herself as a cyborg and a cyberfeminist (BB, 2006). However, Anonymous and 4Chan are disruptive, use their chosen medium (the Internet) well, and have adapted themselves to the affordances and difficulties that networked rhetoric presents to them, so this may mean that they are better at being the true cyborgs of online spaces. While Haraway's cyborg was written by a woman, that does not make her argument about the cyborg be *only about women*. It was only in secondary works that the cyborg was applied to women and minorities in such a way that the Internet became an inherently freeing space for them and *perhaps even only for them*. For example, Sandoval (1995) connects the cyborg to the oppression of minorities and third world feminism, seeing the cyborg as a freeing entity, and Balsamo (1996) argued that the woman's body was constructed as a hybrid of man and other, making it naturally cyborgian. Be that as it may, the cultural construct of my body does not mean that I am automatically a wonderful communicator online.

Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" is often used in discourse that promises minorities (rather than groups like Anonymous and 4Chan) a worldwide utopian society based upon secondary cyborg works like those of Anne Balsamo and even Chela Sandoval. However, this use of her document ignores some of Haraway's most salient points—the cyborg is disruptive, the cyborg does not yet exist, the cyborg is a "fictional mapping" of theory onto bodies to imagine what cyber-life might be like. In ignoring these, these new writers select pull quotes like: "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess" (1991, p. 181). In other words, we—as women—would rather be connected with machines than be inherently human and created in God's image. The cyborg, as a woman's body and machine conjoin, is a symbol of power. The woman's body is inherently other, of hybrid construction, and so the woman can pull power from this source. If we can gain power as cyborgs, should we not embrace becoming them? This sort of logic fueled the cyberfeminist and cybergrrl movements of the 1990s. These were based upon the power of *woman* in what was naturally a female space that had been constructed culturally as an androcentric one. The "cyberfeminist manifesto for the 21<sup>st</sup> century" even reads: "the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix" (VPN, 1991) which directly credits Haraway for its title and theme.

What is missed in reducing the Manifesto down to its barest parts and what was missed in the cyberfeminist and cybergrrl movements of the past is the most essential postmodernist ethic available in the piece—the woman online is minority, and to fight being objectified by other digital users she must become more than woman: she must take up the practices of third world feminist politics and she must become woman/man/computer in one. Instead, secondary cyborg works and online women's sites present the networked cyborg as living in a utopia where neither gender nor race matter. She can be whatever and whomever she wants because *this is her* space. Of *course* this utopia is *still* a myth, but popular visions of the Internet as a genderless, raceless

space where everyone can participate in cybertourism and be equal are potent. However, accepting the utopian myth of race and gender equality online without accepting the myth that Haraway actually describes ignores the real world lived experience of women and people of color online. In this atmosphere, it is little wonder that cyberfeminists like BB have failed to thrive to the potential that they *believe* they read in the Manifesto (which may or may not be what Haraway intended).

In the first sentence of the “Cyborg Manifesto,” Haraway tells us that her writing is a political myth relying on both blasphemy and irony to develop its method (1991). By her own admission, the utopia of networks does not yet exist and it is up to us as readers to create cyborg destinies and new women’s experiences as well as critical theory about them. We must be active in creating the groups and communities that will shape reality, and in many ways feminists online have created such groups—but only for themselves. They do not make the postmodern move of allowing these networks to be open to everyone even though feminism is otherwise very open to postmodernity. Haraway only twice suggests that networks and technology could be a place without gender, and she herself admits that is only “in the utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender, which is perhaps without genesis, but maybe also a world without end” (1991, p. 150). In other words, although we imagine the Internet to be a place without gender, it is still no Utopia. It still has gender within it, and it is unfair and unrealistic to suggest to women that online their gender doesn’t matter or that they are somehow more natural to the medium than men. However, in second generation cyborg works as well as advertisements for Internet systems, that is exactly the message that some women receive. Contrarily, their actual online experience is likely to be much different. Our students may or may not have experienced this difference personally in their interactions on common Web 2.0 systems, but most of them at least

know that unsavory pictures they post of themselves to Facebook and elsewhere have the potential to be submitted by others to sites that make fun of people like Nowygirl.com, the People of Wal-Mart, and even “FailBook.”

In *Cognitive Surplus*, Clay Shirky (2010) describes an essay written by Melissa McEwan for the blog *Shakesville*—one of the more successful feminist sites online which is both serious and playful. In it, McEwan describes jokes about women that are told in her presence:

There are the jokes about women, told in my presence by men who are meant to care about me, just to get a rise out of me, as though I am not meant to find funny a reminder of my second-class status. I am meant to ignore that this is a bullying tactic, that the men telling these jokes derive their amusement specifically from known they upset me, piss me off, hurt me. They tell them and I can laugh, and they can thus feel superior, or I cannot laugh, and they can thus feel superior. Heads they win, tails I lose. (as cited in Shirky, 2010, p. 48)

Shirky claims that “Shakesville provides exactly the kind of writing space Wolf (Naomi of *The Beauty Myth*) imagined, where women can talk without male oversight or advertisers’ courteous censorship” (2010, p. 49), but is that really true? Women can write there without censorship, true, but why is that? And why could they write there without censorship and comment without fearing attack when BB could not? How can we create places for our students to write that are more like Shakesville and less like BB’s blog?

One answer I will give is that some feminists seem to have not yet become cyborgs as Haraway described them. The cyborg is a position of great power online. The cyborg worries less about positionality and embodiment and more about letting go of the body and embracing a more simple presence. Shakesville is a site where “The writing is not for everyone—intensely political, guaranteed to anger any number of people—but that’s exactly the point” (2010, p. 49); the writing is there to anger, is there to draw a response, and is there to be played with. BB was publishing similar opinions but did not want anger or playfulness surrounding those opinions. It is this *seriousness* that makes much rhetoric of the Internet fail. In other words, one of the ways



that all people can be more effective in their use of Internet and digital rhetoric is to be the cyborg that Haraway described. We can be cyborgs by being playful and disruptive and making unusual (but apt) connections. We are *not* already cyborgs.

Haraway tells us that the myth of the cyborg is “a fiction mapping our social and bodily reality and an imaginative resource suggesting some very fruitful couplings” (1991, p. 150). The cyborg is to be used to create critical theories of technology--those that change the relationship between women, technology, and society to create new politics. We are to take “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries” between man, woman, and machine and take “*responsibility* in their construction” (1991, p. 150). Simply being on the Internet, like simply having a blog, is itself not enough to call oneself responsible for the construction of the new boundaries of the cyborg (indeed, simply being present in cyborg reality without any conscious rhetorical motive leads to power structures on networks that mimic those of the real world instead of breaking with them). The cyborg is man, woman, and machine in one. The cyborg is also none of these. It becomes something new--dare I say, something Anonymous?

The cyborg is committed to irony, opposition, loss of innocence—it needs connection with others from which to draw its power. The connections with other cyborg-bodies builds its power. The cyborg is less concerned with creating safe spaces to maintain innocence and is more worried about tearing them down as 4Chan and Anonymous do. And while irony and opposition are taken by Haraway and others to be feminine ideals, reality may prove otherwise in that they are used much more effectively (at least currently) by groups who stand against feminism. The people who attack and harass feminists (even those feminists who believe themselves to be cyborgian online) are in many cases better versed in the use of online power, networking, irony, opposition, anonymity, and lack of innocence than the feminist herself. And when faced by

opponents who may have a better grasp of cyborg identity, many women cannot keep sites and safe spaces running.

The two attacking groups that I discuss here, Anonymous and 4Chan, both use their anonymity and numbers in a cyborgian way to take advantage of unique online power structures to silence opponents. There are some feminist communities and non-serious websites (see Shakesville above), but Biting Beaver worked alone. The idea of an online female “safe space” is certainly not new; they have been around nearly as long as the first networked bulletin boards. These safe spaces continue to be formed despite the paradoxes of online authorship and embodiment (the fluid, fluctuating connections between form, content, and authorship specifically) which invite men’s rights activists—and even some other women—to harass the authors of these sites about their content. It seems that opening such a site invites such attacks. The cyborg might be ready and welcoming to such attacks, seeing them as an unavoidable if one is disruptive, but the notion of a safe space does not make that possible.

So how can we encourage students to be real cyborgs, and how can we make them into cyborgs that are disruptive without being hateful? First, I believe that we must model this practice ourselves. In designing new assignments with new technologies we should think about creating assignments that are disruptive and blur boundaries, particularly those that construct gender and race. The “sweding” project that I present in Chapter 5 asks students to recreate movies given what they have available to them in the classroom—they must find new uses for everything and everyone around them, which leads them to disrupt their ordinary conceptions of what classrooms, teachers, and other students are for (I, it turns out, am an excellent repository for strange costumes and props). But they also usually end up having to cast characters as different sexes and races than the original movie intended, all the while making those characters

still recognizable to an audience who has seen the film. While initially worried that they are the wrong race or that they have an accent, my construction of the assignment does not punish them for these things—and so, Harold and Kumar become female, the workers at Innotech in *Office Space* become Muslim, and the two lead characters in *Dumb & Dumber* are played by women while the lone male in a group of students plays their female love interest in a dress.

When these projects are posted online and shown to classmates, initial worry about gender and race bending is nearly always alleviated—constructive criticism happens, but not once has that commentary from outside the class come from people complaining about the casting choices made. These projects are disruptive, but in a good way. Though I took no formal study of it up at the time, after my students posted a *Napoleon Dynamite* remake to YouTube that featured a female Napoleon, I began to see more gender-bent examples when I went online every term to search for new ones to show my class before they got started.

In writing an assignment that asks students to be potentially disruptive in a good way, I can underhandedly demonstrate the sort of cyborgism that I believe that Haraway intended, all the while not having to lecture about it. I don't come right out and say “this sort of thing is okay, you should do more of it,” and as you will read in Chapter Five, the papers written from these movie projects don't explore cyborg subjectivity specifically, but I have asked students to step into that place for a short time during the assignment.

I cannot suggest that this assignment, or doing one like it, would specifically have saved BB from harm. Like many similar studies before my own, I can only conjecture about what different moves she might have made in order to protect her site and the people that depended upon it. I believe that one answer might be to reconsider the “cyborgian-ness” of a safe space to begin with.

*What to do?*

Feminist bloggers such as BB seek an answer to their problems—what can be done to keep safe spaces open to new members? I ask—is a safe space the right place for feminist discourse at all? “Safe,” after all, is not very cyborgian. Safe is not disruptive (Haraway, 1991). Some feminist writers suggest that resistance to feminism, both online and off, can be a positive experience—which is an ideal that is leaning towards becoming cyborg. Both Flynn (2002) and Stone (1995) suggest that resistance to ideas like feminism can be positive and can create more complex, postmodern systems that admit difference while striving for equality. “Postmodern feminists often represent resistance positively, seeing it as disrupting male representations of women and as involving subversion of those representations, turning them against themselves” (Flynn, 2002, p. 137). A modernist response to modernist resistance would be to delete, disallow, or argue against masculinist commenters. In fact, in response to death threats made against popular blogger Kathy Sierra, a “Blogger Code of Conduct” was written on the Blogger Wikia that suggests that blog owners do exactly that.<sup>7</sup> However, doing this (per her own policy and rules) never provided BB with any relief.

The postmodernist response of leaving those comments there leads to far fewer comments in most cases and, as I will show in later chapters, an open dialogue and digital dialectic as well. Once these comments are left, however, site writers and maintainers should make some adequate response to them other than leaving them public. Although making these posts public gives ones’ readers an adequate chance to defend or deny your attackers, site

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<sup>7</sup> [http://blogging.wikia.com/wiki/Blogger%27s\\_Code\\_of\\_Conduct](http://blogging.wikia.com/wiki/Blogger%27s_Code_of_Conduct). As pointed out by blogger BitchPhD in a 8 April 2007 post, however, the code of conduct does not disallow racist or sexist comments, and the main problem Kathy Sierra had was death threats based upon misogyny ([bitchphd.blogspot.com/2007/04/we-dont-need-no-stinkin-badges.html](http://bitchphd.blogspot.com/2007/04/we-dont-need-no-stinkin-badges.html)).

maintainers should not just be a neutral participant rather than actually a rhetor in the conversation—Chapter three presents an eventual excellent example of this.

Such comments *could* be used to begin dialog. The noise that these comments make by being left in an otherwise matriarchally-powered blog might be useful in fueling debate, which is perhaps what these two groups need the most. Leaving “noise” in place could cause a more complex conversation. At this point in time, masculinist and feminist discourse online is split into this binary. However, the binary is not necessary. A more playful attitude could be used to express where the binaries mix, remix, and begin to not exist.

Of course, feminists are likely to argue that some statements can’t be made in a playful manner, and that some topics simply are serious. This is, after all, true. We should not make light of rape or of the struggles that women face. However, if we want to be rhetorically capable, we should also not be unaware of when the message that we are sending simply seems to not be reaching the audience, just as I believe that we should recognize that even a beautifully designed website made for a class by a student might never be seen by anyone’s eyes but ours—how is this different from an essay written only for us? Just as I knew that some of my assignments were not doing what I wanted them to do or what I had been told by my own instructors that they could do, BB knew that the blog she ran wasn’t doing the job she wanted it to do. Rather than trying to figure out what tool would do the rhetorical job that she wished to have done and instead of going looking for that, she shut her site down.

However, BB still would have lacked the numbers which are necessary to resist. Even if she had been more playful and willing to allow for dissent on her site, if power is centered around the group then resistance must also be centered around a group (Nealon, 2007). BB had little chance of standing up to an entire group on her own, and her own writing was not short or

quirky enough to warrant much reposting. Without being viral or reposted, she did not garner the support she needed to form a group of her own to fight against 4Chan or Anonymous's numbers.

The "positive" (highly rhetorically efficient) Internet communities presented here are those that are almost entirely uncensored. All opinions are allowed to exist, even if they aren't agreed with. In the case described here, learning ultimately did not take place (though much creativity was present on the Chans at the time); in the next example, using many of the same techniques, feminists were able to not only win an argument with another poster, but actually educate that poster at the same time. Thus, even if 4Chan and Anonymous's tactics seem as though they would only be useful with bad intentions, I hope to make it clear that there is a potential for education in them as well.

#### *Potential for Student Engagement*

In addition to looking at students as cyborgs (which in itself would do little), I believe the other thing we can learn from this case is avoiding censorship. Most classroom conversations online are carefully censored by instructors to make sure that nothing "bad" happens. In a case published by Heidi McKee (2002) in *Computers and Composition* wherein even McKee seemed to fail to recognize that her own student was, indeed, being racist. A female white student wrote against Affirmative Action and in doing so compared black students to cars. It was "just a metaphor," but deeply offended the African American students on the message board system that the class was using. McKee defends her student, and even seems surprised at the vehemence with which Black students told her student that she was wrong.

This case horrified me at first, not because the posts occurred and were not deleted, but because the teacher did nothing to attempt to show the white student where her rhetoric had failed and where it could, indeed, be considered racist (McKee, 2002). Deleting this student's

post was not the right call, and fortunately McKee did not do so, which would have silenced the upset Black students as well. However, because McKee did not ask the student to think critically about what had occurred, little more happened. McKee (2002) concluded that even really polite rhetoric can still be a “flame” and can still upset and hurt others online, even if unintentionally.

I think in classrooms we are scared to leave conversations unmoderated because of this very same sort of situation—what happens if somebody says something dumb and hurts someone else? I think McKee nearly had the answer: she allowed the students of color to defend themselves, and indeed quoted them extensively in her article. She did not stop the dialogue when the initial problem occurred. However, she also could have worked with the white student not on how to make a better argument for Affirmative Action, but on how to have empathy for students of color and build ethos with diverse audiences. Such a learning experience and argument would have looked very different for this student than it would have if BB had worked on the same for 4Chan and Anonymous, but ultimately both messages could have been strengthened. In each case, the intervening voices could have created a more diverse, lively digital rhetoric that ultimately would have been more persuasive to anyone reading about the altercation later on.

BB’s original arguments (generally created through narratives of her own life) were actually very persuasive to *me*. I was surprised when she was initially attacked, because I thought her arguments and stories were engaging and effective. However, when seen through the Rules of the Internet, I can see where she failed with 4Chan, Anonymous, and even a wider selection of feminist readers. Rather than moderating her site, she could have tried to make effective arguments to these posters. The primary graphic on her page was that of a female beaver carving (and, indeed, biting) a wooden phallus. It is clear through the use of this graphic that she was

capable of humor, and maybe even making some of the image based arguments that these audiences prefer. In moderating comments, she also might have kept her audience of other feminists safe, but she kept them from learning about and even responding to dissenting opinions as well. Not only did she lose a chance at learning how to fight against an interesting dissenting set of voices, so did her audience.

### *Conclusion*

What we learn from this example is essentially how *not* to fight for gender equality online, with hints of how we just might be able to start doing so. While BB's original posts set up a small safe space for educating homespun radical feminists, that space was not sustainable. Due to the numbers of attackers she was facing, the viral nature of their messages, their own cyborg identities, and her censorship, she was not even interested in dialoging with the commenters and eventually lost the argument and her blog. However, feminists have not always been so unlucky. In the next chapter, I present a case study of when feminists used techniques similar to those of Anonymous and 4Chan to win a very similar victory, and will note how these point to other classroom practices as well.



### Chapter 3

#### *Introduction*

This dissertation proposes to show how gender and race can be negotiated well to create lasting conversations about them in online communities and to demonstrate the implications of these conversations for composition classrooms. In this chapter I present a case study about the Open Source Boob Project—a social experiment that occurred in real life, but when posted about online created a huge conversation about gender, safety, and public space. The feminists involved in protesting the Open Source Boob Project were the eventual winners of the argument, however, I present this as a neutral outcome because the Project’s creator eventually stopped allowing discussion about it to happen on his site. In this case, feminists used many of the argumentative techniques that Anonymous and 4Chan created in order to enable stronger feminist discourse than that which was used to protect BB in Chapter Two. At the end of this chapter I will also consider what this means for classrooms—what projects should be brought into online spaces and which ones should not be?

#### *The Open Source Boob Project – One Ferrett’s Attempt to Change the World*

In April of 2008, a popular blogger on Livejournal called The Ferrett blogged about an incident that had occurred amongst his friends at a conference. Had this stayed amongst them, it would unlikely have ever been an issue online. However, because he posted about it on his blog which had a large readership and it gained a lot of notoriety overnight. It also almost immediately caused a kerfluffle in the feminist community to rival that of any that 4Chan or Anonymous has ever been involved in. His original piece began like this (later updates were posted):

‘This should be a better world,’ a friend of mine said. ‘A more *honest* one, where sex isn't shameful or degrading. I wish this was the kind of world where say: Wow, I'd like to

touch your breasts, and people would understand that it's not a way of reducing you to a set of nipples and ignoring the rest of you, but rather a way of saying that I may not yet know your mind, but your body is beautiful.' We were standing in the hallway of ConFusion, about nine of us, and we all nodded. Then another friend spoke up.

'You can touch my boobs,' she said to all of us in the hallway. 'It's no big deal.'

Now, you have to understand the *way* she said that, because it's the key to the whole project. The spirit of everything was formed within those nine words - and if she'd said them shyly, as though having her breasts touched by people was something to be endured or afraid of, the Open-Source Boob Project would have died aborning. But she didn't. Her words were loud and clearly audible to anyone who walked by, an offer made to friends and acquaintances alike.

Yet it wasn't a come-on, either. There wasn't that undertow of desperation of *come on, touch me, I need you to validate my self-esteem and maybe we'll hook up later tonight*. There was no promise of anything but a simple grope.

We all reached out in the hallway, hands and fingers extended, to get a handful. And lo, we touched her breasts - taking turns to put our hands on the creamy tops exposed through the sheer top she wore, cupping our palms to touch the clothed swell underneath, exploring thoroughly but briefly lest we cross the line from 'touching' to 'unwanted heavy petting.' They were awesome breasts, worthy of being touched.

And life seemed *so* much simpler. (Ferrett, The Open Source Boob Project, 2008)

Ferrett goes on to write that in many ways, this appreciation of the woman's body was very simple: she thanked them for their compliments and they enjoyed what they felt. Another friend who was with them at the time (the original group was comprised of four men and three women) spoke up that hers could be touched as well.

Later on, one of the original women went outside their circle and asked to touch a stranger's boobs. That woman allowed it as well. Of this girl Ferrett writes:

It wasn't that she was a piece of meat to be felt up, but rather that a living person that we did not know had voluntarily lowered the barriers that separate us and allowed us in. And we were so grateful that we were showering her in pure adoration. (TheFerrett, The watchtower of destruction, 2010)

His original words are all full of this sort of prolific language glorifying the women who participated. However, he doesn't talk much about them other than about their bodies—a point that would become problematic for him later on.

Because The Ferrett works as a website programmer, it was not surprising that he dubbed this project the “Open Source Boob Project” after the Open Source Software movement. The idea behind Open Source software is that the code for software is revealed to users and then is worked on and updated by a community rather than simply by the coders that are paid to do so. This allows for easy access, cheaper (or free) software, and supposedly a more equitable distribution of goods than is available in the current capitalistic market model. The Open Source Boob Project, then, was all about making bodies (both male and female) more open and available than society currently deems fit. The people participating had all been picked on and ostracized as both children and adults (also not unusual in technological circles), and felt like they had never had the chance to simply touch the way many other teenagers seemed to have gotten to. Similarly, some women sought out the people who were doing this original project, perhaps because they wanted to be involved but also because they felt they had never been adored in the way these men and women adored one another:

By the end of the evening, women were coming up to *us*. ‘My breasts,’ they asked shyly, having heard about the project. ‘Are they... are they good enough to be touched?’ And lo, we showed them how beautiful their bodies were without turning it into something tawdry.

We talked about this. It was an Open-Source Project, making breasts available to select folks. (Like any good project, you need access control, because there are loutish men and women who just Don't Get It.) And we wanted a signal to let people know that they were okay with being asked politely, so we turned it into a project. (TheFerrett, *The watchtower of destruction*, 2010)

The original events described happened at Confusion. However, the Open Source Boob Project (OSBP) was not given its name and official designation until Penguicon in Detroit during

the same year. At the next conference they created a set of rules and a visible means to identify participant. At Penguicon, as Ferrett writes, they had manufactured buttons:

There were two small buttons, one for each camp: A green button that said, ‘YES, you may’ and a red button that said ‘NO, you may not.’ And anyone who had those buttons on, whether you knew them or not, was someone you could approach and ask:

‘Excuse me, but may I touch your breasts?’

And if you weren't a total lout - the women retained their right to say no, of course - they would push their chests out, and you would be allowed into the sanctity of it. That exchange of happiness where one person are told with gropes and touches that they are desirable and the other is someone who's allowed to desire. (TheFerrett, The watchtower of destruction, 2010)

These buttons were passed out at the conference; although, of course, people had to seek them out. There was no table or centralized location where they could be found, nor was the activity sanctioned by the conference. If men wore the buttons it meant that their own breasts or butt could be groped if they were asked, though there were fewer participants amongst men than amongst women. Some women didn't want to be touched but asked others if they could be touched. At least according to the Ferrett, no one felt offended at being touched by someone that didn't want to be touched themselves, of course, it is difficult to say if a participant would have felt comfortable complaining about such a thing even if they did feel it (2010).

It's worth pointing out that the conventions that these events happened at are mainly populated by people in the computer and video game industry (or fans of both). Penguicon, for example, is a convention devoted to Linux users. Many of the people in this crowd were socially awkward when growing up due to their interest in electronics and computers—which were much less popular at that time than they are now. As such, the popularity of the Project was pretty much uncontested until it was posted online to a broader audience. At the time, however, The Ferrett noted that

For a moment, everything that was awkward about high school would fade away and you could just say what was on your mind. It was as though parts of me were being healed whenever I did it, and I touched at least fifteen sets of boobs at Penguicon. It never got old, surprisingly. (2008)

The Ferrett noted that it was an opt-in project—no button meant that you could not be asked. He also made a special note that some people were not allowed to participate since nobody wanted to go through an “open mouthed five minute grope” (The Ferrett, 2008). However, he also notes

It was a raging success at Penguicon.... And there haven't been any hookups that I know of thanks to the Open-Source Boob Project. It is, as I said, a very special thing. (Though I wouldn't rule it out if two single people exchanged a moment.) And we'll probably do it at other cons, because it's strangely wholesome and sexual at the same time. (The Ferrett, 2008)

His original post ended with the words “Touch the magic, my friends. Touch the magic” (The Ferrett, 2008). Then all hell broke loose.

Between his original post and when comments were closed, The Ferrett received 1379 comments. While this certainly did not set a record on Livejournal (the site where he hosts his blog), these were far many more comments than his average posts receive (anywhere from 20-50 seems to be common). Many of these comments either were asking him for more clarification or were simply trying to teach him why, even if this happened originally amongst friends, it would be wrong and bad in our current society to encourage such a practice since women outside of their group *could* feel coerced, could be psychologically uncomfortable due to past experiences, or could fail to understand the focus of the Project if they were introduced by watching rather than being told about it.

After the first burst of comments appeared, he posted a clarification. The Ferrett noted that it was original participants that were concerned that outsiders had gotten the wrong idea. It's important to remember that despite the feminist outcries about the Project itself, no one that

participated had anything but good things to say about it. Therefore, the participants themselves were upset by the way they were treated and wished for him to clarify details (Ferrett, Open Source: Clarification, 2008). Since many people had complained that Ferrett hadn't talked much about the women who were participating, and instead only represented his own, male, viewpoint, this was one of the first things that he clarified:

The reason I didn't explore the female reaction more thoroughly in my original post was because, frankly, I didn't want to speak for women. For all of those who complained about my male perspective and how I was acting from male power – and I can't debate that, since I'm the fish swimming in water who may not see – it would have been *even worse* if I'd gone on in detail about all how the women clearly loved it. I was skimpy on details not because I wanted to dehumanize the women, but rather because I was *extremely* uncomfortable putting words of pleasure in their mouth. (Ferrett, Open Source: Clarification, 2008)

He also felt that his wife (Ginny, screenname Zoethe) had been attacked by the comments that were left. Although many of the people who came to comment on his post were fair-minded and did so with feminist ideals in mind, others attacked the women that were involved in the OSBP as well. Particularly, he felt that his wife was attacked purely because she had defended him:

And if I'd let them speak for themselves in the post, as others suggested? Well, then they would have been insulted personally to be told how they were clearly needy, ugly, and broken by males, as my wife was. Unfortunately, I have a lot of experience in anticipating the unique styles of dickery people tend to unleash, so I avoided dragging my friends before a crowd of angry trolls... But I did so at the cost of leaving other issues open, which was bad. (Ferrett, Open Source: Clarification, 2008)

The Ferrett said that “the project is something that worked at the time due to good personalities, but runs the serious risk of blowing up if taken out of that culture. I can't say that I disagree with that” (Ferrett, Open Source: Clarification, 2008). In short, not long after people began to talk to him about why his idea might not be applicable to the larger culture, he began to change his point of view.

The type of comment that Ferrett is responding to (when he notes that his own wife was harassed because of the Project) is very similar to the attacks that BB attracted by being attacked

by Anonymous. In this case, although feminist sites were the primary places where the OSBP was advertised as a target, other people found the post eventually. The comment Ferrett links to is one wherein a man asks to see Zoethe's boobs. Although this is a clear application of the "Tits or GTFO" rule, the poster in question was far ruder than most people requesting to see pictures of boobs online, including a further request: "i want you to send me pictures of yourself engaged in explicit sex. if you won't, please explain why you won't" (Quackenbush, 2008). Other commenters followed, also noting that they failed to understand why a woman who wanted to be touched in public would be unwilling to send pictures of herself to anyone that asked.

Unlike Anonymous and 4Chan, who don't usually care if other people outside their groups join in a particular fight and care even less about what strategies they use to fight it, the women who were talking to The Ferrett via comments were not so sanguine: "Hey guys (I mean that in a gender neutral way), please cut this out. I'm also creeped out by the project, but that doesn't mean we should subject a supporter to the same kind of harassment we're objecting to" (Girlnameddoor, 2008). Rather than the "anything goes" mentality of 4Chan, the feminists at least tried to lay down ground rules for what they should be doing to win the argument.

Likewise, female participants of the project were able to respond directly to their attackers in addition to the Ferrett himself (whereas BB was alone in defending herself—the very same group of radical feminists had more or less deserted her). Zoethe did a reasonably good job of upholding the original intent of the project in her responses to these posters. She was willing to enter into the conversation rather than be silenced by it. She helped build a dialog with the community members (both Ferrett's and the feminist's) instead of deleting them or never responding and letting them win.

Although women were rightly mortified at the idea that they might go to a convention only to be asked if their boobs could be touched, badges and buttons worn at other conferences have been used to denote similar attributes in the past. For example, at MENSA conferences, badges are worn that determine whether the wearer is willing to be hugged, should be asked first or is simply against bodily contact of any type:

... a rigid schema of badge identifiers was established over the years. A green sticker told the attendees you were open to a hug. This was practically an invitation to be mauled. A red sticker signified that a hug would be viewed as a serious violation of personal space. A yellow question mark meant you needed to be asked whether you were willing to have all the air squeezed out of your lungs by a total stranger. Then there were the stickers to signify if you were single or if it were your first appearance at an AG. (Miller, 2005)

Such badges are common at conferences to denote first time members (if not who wants to be hugged and who does not), and it's possible that the creators and participants of the OSBP were aware of this or had even attended a MENSA conference in the past. Regardless of that, however, it is important to note that the OSBP was not truly the first of its kind, even if it may have been the first one to be about touching of a sexual nature specifically at a conference whose nature was not specifically sexual.

While looking at BB's case alone might suggest that large unmoderated groups online can be overwhelmingly negative, the feminists that swarmed into Ferrett's space were far from it. They behaved far more rationally, but still used many of the same techniques that Anonymous and 4Chan (amongst others) had pioneered.

Unfortunately, it cannot be said that this was an unmitigated success. Despite the fact that they did, indeed, eventually lead the Ferrett to discredit his original work and say that the OSBP should never, ever, happen anywhere again for the safety of women, he also now refuses to speak about the project at all. I contacted him at the time of his writing hoping to attain an interview. He chooses to speak to no one about the project because so many of his friends that



were involved were hurt by peoples' responses. Within the project the OSBP was a different world where bodies could be open and touched. However, outside of the relatively small group of participants, and when opened to the larger Internet, that simply wasn't palatable.

Because The Ferrett is more aware of Internet practices (and how to avoid being flamed) than BB was, his original posts and all comments remain visible today. He understands that censoring the post would have only lead to him being seen as a coward or even more of a misogynist than he already was. The OSBP was also discussed on many other sites (feminist blogs, message boards, and even Metafilter) and many of those posts, too, remain available to this day. Because this dialogue was more productive and remains in place, it stands as a way for people who stumble upon it to be schooled in some of the theories that make feminism today work.

The women that came from feminist sites far and wide (such as Jezebel, Feministe.us, et al) could have simply attacked and flamed The Ferrett. Instead, they used the power of their group to talk about the issues that might occur because of the OSBP. Although they are talking about a fairly serious topic (feminism, embodiment, and respect for others' space and bodies) their feminist comments did not have the same effect and attract the same flaming as say, a blog post on the same subject. From the very first comment: "So, was there equal enthusiasm for the grab my nuts project?" (Fengi, 2008), it should be clear that this discussion did not take place in a serious tone, even if it was a major win for feminists online. A female respondent (and participant in the OSBP) noted "Yeah - tempting though it was, I think that would have pushed things past the wholesome yet slightly sexual air of the Open Source Boob Project. Such things are better left for more ... specific encounters" (Aeila, 2008). The women involved agreed that

boobs are in some way less sexual than balls, penises, or vaginas. Butts and boobs have other purposes (sitting, nursing) and were the target of the grabbing.

In the end, the Open Source Boob Project is an example of the same strategies that Anonymous and 4Chan utilize being used to rally around a feminist cause and is therefore worth examining. Rather than being intensely problematic (digital rhetorical techniques being used to stop conversation about gender or race) here these same techniques are being used to start and continue a conversation. Many of the same feminists that could have (but did not) support BB at the time she was being attacked were able to gather their thoughts on larger feminist sites and then go to Ferrett's blog to share them. Some of them were funny, others meaningful, and some border on angry and mean-spirited, but they were able to achieve what in the past only had been done to them—they gathered together, attacked, and won.

#### *The Open Source Boob Discussion*

When the very first person that commented on the Project, a poster by the name of Fengi, nearly instantly asked if there was “equal enthusiasm for the Grab my Nuts Project” (2008), Ferrett's response, “There was not. But there's a lot of reasons for that, not the least of which is that it's a lot harder to keep it distant when Little Elvis is bucking and twisting in your hands” (2008), was actually part of what eventually spiraled into a conversation about the sexual and patriarchal nature of the project. If the original claim was that the project was not sexual, then why would it be sexual to touch a man's balls in the way that men were touching boobs?

The responses themselves were heavily mixed, with many people both agreeing or disagreeing with the Ferrett (unlike people who wrote to BB just to harass her—they all disagreed). Most of the posters stayed entirely away from *ad hominem* attacks, however, some did use the Anonymous name in responding. Many more used their Livejournal names which

are, more or less, also anonymous, but it was possible to tell individual posters apart. In any case, it is far more difficult to find out the identity of a single Livejournal user than it is one of the writers at the other major feminist sites.

Whereas Anonymous seeks to silence by numbers and what are generally considered poor argumentative techniques; the women and men featured here used their numbers and carefully chosen arguments instead to make their point clear. Many of them also noted that while the experiment that was ran at the cons would work well in a small group, it was *not* appropriate for the larger public or the Internet.

### *Negative Responses*

The negative comments on both his original post and later clarifications far outweighed the positive ones. Although no one on any feminist site ever specifically made a call to visit his blog and tell him why he was wrong, the link to his original post spread very quickly and was discussed on a great many feminist sites. Since that time, feminist wiki entries have been written that hold content about the Open Source Boob Project including timelines and links to supporting sources about the project and how feminists were eventually able to quash it.<sup>8</sup>

One of the keenest arguments against the Project was that it wasn't really a utopian fantasy at all, nor was it a project that could actually "fix" anything. Posters mentioned that there are many problems about the relations of men and women in this country that need to be fixed (gay marriage, rape, etc.) but that this simply was an entirely different problem cast as a wider social one. Nearly all of these responses were much longer than those to any of BB's posts; the rule of "teel deer" (for "tl:dr," too long didn't read) did not apply. For example, Asphalteden, one of the women who wrote back to the Ferrett about the project, writes

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<sup>8</sup> [http://wiki.feministsf.net/index.php?title=Open\\_Source\\_Boob\\_Project](http://wiki.feministsf.net/index.php?title=Open_Source_Boob_Project)

Your argument is, by my estimation, at the core of a more pernicious problem. You're not constructing new modes of social conduct at all. You're inventing elaborate workarounds for childish and boorish behavior.

Why try to become better, more evolved, more understanding of sexual politics, more empathetic to others, when you can invent a sub-society that makes all awkward or unacceptable behaviors into virtues? It's the ultimate cop-out, and they eat it up, another ill thought-out power fantasy from adults-in-age-only who ought to know better. Spurned at prom, they fantasize about creating their own prom, in a 'better' world (for them), where no one was regarded as 'outcast' (in the way they were outcast), where everyone fits. That is not reality, it is a mere fantasy of reversal, and it evades honest efforts of self-improvement and development integral to becoming a mature man or woman.

We are not talking about eliminating segregation, or legalizing gay marriage here. This is not a real life issue, it's ridiculous people play-acting at being utopian visionaries, so they can do whatever they want. Why else have we seen the "you just don't get it" argument in play so frequently? I suppose I should expect no more from those who take simple escapism so much to heart, but must you take the rest of us down with you? (Asphaltden, 2008)

Although it is not made entirely clear, it seems as though this writer (and many others who responded who are not a part of a fandom or geek culture) feel as though the Ferrett sees the harassment he received as a geek/nerd/whatever have you as being equal to if not worse than what women, people of color, and those of other sexualities experience. This means that many of those concerns became part of the conversation at well—geeks might have it bad in high school, it might be difficult to find a date even as an adult geek, but people of color, women, and other minorities have real culturally-driven inequities hurting them and it is far more important that we fight those than the sort of inequality that the Open Source Boob Project was attacking.

However, the conversion of the Project from a real life one that was successful to an online one that was not is what is of most interest here. When he posted it on his blog, that space (being open) was desperately different from the group he had created at the convention. It was not safe, even if a blog or Livejournal can be a space that can be used to educate about feminism and racism. Safety is not particularly a necessity for learning about sexism and racism, in fact, it may keep people from doing so in embedded domains. Since it is not a safe space, this sort of

body project is not appropriate for it. However, the Ferrett had created this Project in a space that was safe for his friends, and so was upset when the online Project created a problem for those same friends.

Many women were uncomfortable with the idea that anyone would want to invade their personal space in this way to touch their boobs, let alone actually do it (the Ferrett's friends of course, having knowledge of him personally, were less likely to be uncomfortable). Some were specifically upset at the idea that men would not have their nuts grabbed because of "little Elvis ..bucking and twisting in [their] hands" (Spiderdine, 2008) while no claims were made as to whether people considered it right or appropriate that some women were no doubt turned on by the breast fondling. They also felt that the fact that Ferrett was writing about doing this with strangers was very disturbing because it suggested that he thought it was fine that a man get to know a woman's body long before he was interested in her mind (Spiderdine, 2008). One woman wrote,

My body is not 'open source.' It belongs to me. Even if I walk around stark blinking naked, you have no right to ask to touch me. If you want to touch me, you'd best get to know me first. And, just for the record -- because it's almost inevitable that someone is going to reply to me by saying I'm some kind of sex-hating bitch whom you wouldn't want to touch anyway: I happen to be a sex-positive bisexual feminist who used to be a pornographer for a living. If you had a sex life as full and diverse as mine, you wouldn't need to ask to fondle the breasts of strangers. Sour grapes, dude. Sour grapes. (Spiderdine, 2008, para. 3)

It is also interesting here and in other comments to note that many of the women did not see that the Ferrett's "geek status" in any way freed him from male privilege. Just because he and his friends were discriminated against in one way didn't keep them from being men in another.

Any time a woman in the threads brought up the fact that although men can ask to touch women's bodies at any time (and that women can do the same), someone else quickly mentioned that it is nevertheless very "skeevy" for them to do so nor does it reflect the "dignity and

autonomy” of an individual’s body (Spiderdine, Comments, 2008). The feminist posters that responded to the project were unafraid to use terms like *autonomy*, *agency*, and *objectification*—although they never stated a purpose of wanting to educate this man (the Ferrett) or anyone else on the site about those terms and how these things operate in real life, the entire thread became a place where exactly that occurred. For example,

These guys are so wrapped up in male entitlement that they don’t even realize it.... It's perfectly fine to want someone based on appearance -- that's just human nature -- but no, it is NOT okay to ACT on this impulse ALONE, because then you're wanting just the BODY, not the PERSON. That is the definition of objectification. You're turning a thinking, reasoning person, just like you, into an interchangeable object. (Spiderdine, Comments, 2008).

The best way for people to learn about a topic (at least according to Gee, 2003) is to be embedded in a semiotic domain where we can learn about that topic in an engaged manner. What better way to learn feminist principles than to seriously debate and experience the ways that they function in a real situation?

Another poster wrote about the sexual problems that Western cultures face:

I think ‘men have insufficient chances to touch boobs’ is about the lowest possible priority sexual problem facing our society. ‘Men feel overly entitled to access to women's bodies’ is pretty close to the top. Creating an environment in which sexual access, however mild, to someone else is taken so for granted that people are expected to wear BUTTONS indicating their stance to save others the effort of actual interpersonal communication before making an attempt at a grope [is appalling]. (Emmycantbemeeko, 2008)

However, this writer also was careful to note that in a group of friends it might be relatively innocent. It was the idea of taking it outside of that group of friends (or even a group at a conference who were interested in the experience) and not only suggesting it as a con but as a better way to be open about in our society that bothered her. Consent to sexual activity is a fraught topic in feminism and she saw this as a way to get around that, but not a particularly good way. Instead of making sure that consent was always in place, it seemed to her as though

the conference goers were looking for a quick yes or no upfront to keep anything from being questionable later (Emmycantbemeeko, 2008).

Another user under the name Psychesmaia agreed. When contained, the Project was relatively harmless. However, the Ferrett makes the call to extend it beyond the borders of a single convention and other people noted wanting to start their own social experiments based upon it. If it were to be larger, it would be more problematic because the Project lowered “the threshold across the board for men to feel entitled to women’s bodies” (psychesmaia, 2008). If men know that some women do not think it is a big deal to have their boobs touched by strangers, then the slippery slope fallacy leads us to assume that some men will think that maybe all women truly feel that way. While I would ordinarily criticize fallacy in argumentative writing, Anonymous and 4Chan both explicitly encourage members to write in this fashion because fallacies are easy to believe in and hard to disprove. According to the Rules of the Internet, this sort of argumentation is fair (and may be effective) even if it is not rhetorically sound. However, unlike those groups, when she (and other women posters in the conversation) made such assumptions and used fallacies they were quick to point them out, which is a different strategy than that seen when BB was attacked by Anonymous. Psychesmaia writes, “Of course these assumptions do not follow logically but that's not to say they will not occur” (2008). She knows that it is a fallacy, but she feels that giving voice to her fear of what a project like this one might enable still might be an effective way to way to convince Ferrett that he is mistaken. Stating it anyway also gives voice to her very real fear; her noting the fallacy as stated made that an even more salient point to readers (several commented to agree).

Fear of what *could* happen if such a project went more mainstream was a theme in many posts. Some of the women drawn in to respond that had not previously had Livejournal accounts

were those who had suffered some sort of sexual abuse or harassment in their past. One, called *girlnameddoor*, specifically wrote about her need to keep her body apart from the rest of the world and untouched because of past abuse. She needs to keep what she calls “ownership” of her body because of past sexual assault (*girlnameddoor*, 2008). Rape and sexual assault are still incredibly common and unreported, and so she notes that:

The world is already a traumatic enough place for rape survivors, and I can see a project like this one taking off making it even more so. If women start to feel peer pressure to allow this sort of thing to happen, then some women will be forced to relive that trauma on a daily basis. Obviously the entire world cannot be made a safe space for survivors, but neither should it be made a more hostile one. (*girlnameddoor*, 2008)

Unfortunately, Ferrett’s only response was that the assumption that all men are out to harass and rape is also problematic in society (*TheFerrett*, 2008). Online feminists at sites like Jezebel and Feministe have created various versions of a game called “Feminst Bingo,” “Rape Bingo,” “Sexism Bingo,” and so on. A man declaring that women expecting harassment or to be harmed by them hurts them, and those assumptions need to stop (referred to as “what about the men?”) is nearly always on those game cards. Responses like this one, without knowing the context of women’s sites and the games that are played on them, are one of many reasons that Ferrett eventually lost this argument.

Women also felt that this project would have made the convention feel unsafe for them as well as others. As above, some might have experienced sexual trauma in the past or felt like they had to participate. Some women wouldn’t attend a conference where they knew this was going to happen at all. Yet others worried that such a project that was ongoing could make people who had been sexually abused feel “triggered” by the experience no matter what the wishes of the organizers happened to be (*weyrdchik*, 2008).

...women (and hey, maybe even some men) might feel triggered to recall horrible and life-changing violence that has affected them and those they love. I'm not talking about 'offense' here. I know how delicate and slippery that can be. I'm talking about PTSD and



being violated and sometimes having the experience, as women, to never fully trust men or their intentions again because of how they've been violated. Is that rational? Not necessarily. But that's psychology. (weyrdchik, 2008, para. 1)

However, even this poster suggested that boob grabbing and other activities could be located in a separate room or hotel room so that people who were interested could seek the experience out and people who were not could remain safe. She also suggested that this be something that the convention could have been held accountable for if anyone had been triggered or a parent had been unhappy with what their children saw, so keeping it behind “closed doors” so to speak would be the best possible idea for the organizers in any case.

Others simply tore his argument to rhetorical shreds. I suspect, based upon his replies, that the Ferrett had not expected to get much or any dissent to his ideas. As such, his original writing had not really been vetted by many other people, though he claimed that his wife read it before posting (TheFerrett, 2008). He also didn't couch the terms of his argument carefully, and probably did not think he was going to be writing an argument instead. As such, his words were rife with areas that could be easily torn apart, especially around the subject of his word choice and tone. For example, one respondent wrote:

'I touched at least fifteen sets of boobs at Penguicon.' That right there is why so many people think you're objectifying women with this crap. Not 'I shared a wholesome yet sexual experience with fifteen equally open-minded women' but YAYS I TOUCHED THIRTY BOOBIES!!! (hominysnark, 2008)

The significance of “tone” and word choice is often brought up in instances where feminists and anti-racists attempt to use an offensive strategy in order to teach about their respective positions. However, it is most often used against them. When feminists and people of color get angry about what is said about them they are often called out on their angry tone. In this case, that is reversed and that is done to the Ferrett instead.

One of the things that these arguments demonstrate is that most of the participants understand the need to provide examples and quotations much more than average college-aged students do. They nearly always quote the original piece when commenting on it directly. Where they learned such behavior is unclear, but it might well have been from other online correspondence rather than from any direct schooling that they have had. If such quotes aren't made available, often other posters will ask them where such material came from, where something was said, and so on. Online, posters will provide this information to prove themselves right and the other person wrong. In classrooms, it is not always so easy to convince students that such info is necessary.

Coercion and pressure were other concerns brought up by many early responders. It was stated that since many women feel like they can't say no, or that they might be called a prude or worse for saying no since this was such an open (and presented as feminist) project, they did not think it was fair of the Ferrett for saying that all women involved were completely comfortable with it and gave consent. For example, one woman wrote:

I can imagine myself in a situation where I might let someone touch my breasts just to get them to leave me alone, or because I don't feel like spending time constructing a polite refusal. I might even, in the context of the scenario you've described, decide that I'm wrong for feeling uncomfortable. And that's the power of these requests: you're potentially intimidating people into letting you grope them by insinuating that they're in the wrong if they say no, that they won't be part of the cool club if they say no, that if they say no it means they're repressed. (Abulafia, 2008)

Others simply noted that the request was problematic because it, all by itself, would be an invasion of their “personal space, agency, and integrity” as much as someone coming up and touching them would (Miwome, 2008). The same poster (and many others) also was greatly concerned by part of Ferrett's original description.

In the first part of the project (before the buttons) the group of friends saw a scantily clad attractive woman approaching them. They decided that they should ask her if they could touch

her breasts as well. It was clear by his description that the Ferrett found this woman attractive, perhaps more *conventionally* so than the other women involved in the project proper (The Ferrett, 2008). Although he never stated that this woman was more attractive than the other women, he never said that she was like the later participants that he would describe as attractive to him but not conventionally so.

Despite his best efforts at describing the OSBP as both feminist and “wholesome,” this particular passage was pointed out time and again as what was, at heart, the problem. The Ferrett failed to recognize his own prejudice and male privilege and in so doing was unable to see why his posting about something that worked well in a small group as being wholesome for the whole world would be problematic. The women respondents used similar language across their varying personal perspectives in labeling him and his project. They rarely used words like *sexist* which you would expect to see in such a discussion. Instead, they talked about agency and bodily integrity and noted that he and his Project were just one of many things that takes that away. Recall—one of the Rules of the Internet is that anything that can be labeled can be hated. But it is important to note here that *how* a thing is labeled changes the way that it can be hated. No one claimed that the Ferrett was ignorant, a bad writer, or even physically unattractive himself (which many people would probably actually think if they saw his photos). Instead, all of the negative responses were focused upon making him understand that their concerns—agency, bodily integrity, personal space—were more important than his experience becoming more mainstream. They attacked his ideas and his perceptions—not his self. This was exactly the opposite of what BB experienced, where most of the attacks were directed right at her and her body.

One person claiming to be male extensively tore apart the Ferrett's argument, pointing out places where the male gaze was invoked (the passage about the beautiful woman, the use of the term "boobies," and the men's participation in an exploration of women's bodies at all were pointed out as all being problematic) (Tablesaw, 2008). Since many respondents were noting that touching was never okay, Tablesaw instead was very careful to set up his own ethos as someone who encourages touching and wishes that society allowed for more of it.

However, unlike Ferrett, Tablesaw seemed to be very familiar with feminist discourse, especially online feminist discourse. Whereas feminist literature references privilege *only* fairly often, online feminist discourse does almost continuously (privilege is also a major discussion topic in anti-racist communities). As such, Tablesaw writes:

But we, you and I, are men. We are straight men. That gives us a position of privilege, a strong one. So when we go into any situation, we get a whole lot of good out of it, and we don't have to worry about most of the bad. And it's really fucking hard to do anything about it, because it's hard to stop society from continuing to give you the benefit of the awesome. But if we're going to do something about it, we have to acknowledge that it's there, accept how much it skews with our viewpoints, and make some effort to keep Capital-S Society from privileging our points of view over those of others.

A convention happening where women decide that they want to be more open about their bodies is one of those situations. I know how you feel; I literally, directly, understand your experience. In cuddles and snuggles and the like, as a straight man, I get a lot out of it—yes, I do mean that I get a sexual charge when women choose to be freer with their bodies in what is, for them, a nonsexual context....I am aware that I am, *even when I'm not doing anything*, already "taking advantage" of the situation. My privilege has already put me in the advantage.

So what does that mean here? It means that if this was really a movement focused around women respecting their own bodies and the bodies of other women, you probably shouldn't have taken it upon yourself to explain it to the internet. And that when you did explain it to the internet, you probably should have realized that your own personal point of view is very much *not* representative of what happened and was, in some ways, counterproductive to what happened. And that when people started calling you on this shit—including other people who were there and very clearly had a different experience from yours—you should probably have taken a step back and looked at what you wrote from their eyes, instead of blaming readers for seeing what you wrote, *even though you didn't realize that's what you were writing*.

Women's breasts are not magical devices for healing straight men's psyches. Women's bodies do not exist to make straight men feel better about themselves. Women have their own shit to deal with, and a lot of the time, that shit is us, even (sometimes especially) when we're trying to do better. And trying to be the spokesperson for a movement without acknowledging, accepting, and fucking dealing with your position of power is just working at crosspurposes to that same movement. (2008, para. 7-11)

Tablesaw's comments are, in many ways, more clear than many of the people's he is defending.

Of course, we must keep in mind that it is not particularly the clarity of the comments so much

so as the numbers of them that creates a situation of power over the person receiving them.

Nevertheless, I also see these sorts of conversations as excellent points of divergence from which

people can be educated about feminism and racism. Rather than reading about privilege in a non-

embedded context, a conversation like this one takes a specific example, has a fairly well defined

semiotic domain, and uses that space to play with and within a concept. Because this particular

instance had many different points of contention, it is little wonder that the Ferret was the

eventual

loser.

The red buttons were also conversed about at length. Some women felt that having a “no” button was what made the Project unacceptable to begin with (what happens to the women

without a button?) but others had a more nuanced opinion. One Livejournal user by the

screenname of MissySedai even compared the buttons to a hijab—though the comparison was

not as extreme as it sounds. Instead, she notes that bodies should be off limits in polite society by

default, and that at no time should we have to wear a button or a head scarf to make that plain:

“There is no way to ‘politely’ put a woman in a position of having to ‘politely’ let down the guy

who has just overstepped his bounds” (MissySedai, 2008). Each time such notes were brought up

though, various other people that were either involved in the project or were supportive of it

would note (at least once) that women were most of the people groping each other.

One of the key ideas that the participants seemed to miss is that the Open Source Boob Project itself happened within a space where patriarchy functions when it was put online. As one writer replied

The fact that you assert that most gropers were women is irrelevant here, because women aren't going around transgressing the personal boundaries of other women every day on a global scale. What women do between each other is separate and has nothing to do with you or other men. You don't get to compare or co-opt or hide behind the 'well, women were doing it, too.' It's not the same dynamic. (Machineplay, 2008)

Online, where so many Internet theorists have noted that bodies and gender don't matter, it is clear that to these women they *do*. Furthermore, this is the same online space where Anonymous shut down feminist websites and where women have been targeted for harassment for personal beliefs ranging from sexual liberalism to sexual conservatism (again, anything that can be named). Livejournal users have been the target of several of Anonymous's raids. Ferrett posted this piece expecting to be able to reenact his original project, which, as you will see below, was quite positive for the participants. However, he failed to realize that his audience had shifted when writing about his experiences online.

#### *Positive Responses*

The Ferrett's wife, screenname Zoethe, was one of the most vocal supporters of the Boob Project as it was originally created. In responding to the people that were attacking (though very politely) her husband's post, she first tried to describe what the project was like from the inside. Zoethe is an overweight woman, has thin hair, and is not conventionally attractive. Regardless, the Ferrett often writes about her beauty, which is one of the things that drew me to his blog to begin with. To her, the Boob Project was a further extension of her husband's and friends' appreciation of her as a beautiful person. She writes,

We have a very different view of what this meant. To me, it's about being a woman and saying, 'I feel good about my body and my beauty and my flesh is not a dangerous thing that needs to be controlled by society. I have the right to touch and be touched in ways

that are pleasing to me, by women as well as by men. My body is not a dirty thing. My sexuality is not a dirty thing. I own it, and that makes me powerful.' (Zoethe, Comments on the OSBP, 2008)

In our increasingly fitness and anti-obesity obsessed society, she saw the Project as just one example of how women could come to re-appreciate bodies that society rejects. Unlike people who dismissed women's involvement in touching other women, she saw the Project focused on women despite being written up by a man. It was about "Women touching other female participants. Women touching male participants. Women whose shape is not that idealized by society, but who still have the right to be sexual and powerful" (Zoethe, Comments on the OSBP, 2008). By these words, she recasts the Project as being a more feminist endeavor.

Other female participants agreed. Blazepoet, another Livejournal user who was present at the convention and had participated in the project, went so far as to note that

If it was a softcore gangbang I want my money back because that's not what I got. I got a body positive experience with lots of people who were comfortable and happy with each other. Also I missed the perversion because breasts are a natural and attractive part of both males and females. (Blazepoet, 2008)

It is interesting to note here that Blazepoet feels as though she is being told that her experience was more sexual and of a different nature than she thought, and is quick to defend what her actual experience was. The feminists posting to Ferrett's blog in hopes of getting him to change his opinion about the OSBP wanted to recast the men as being overly sexual. At the same time they were inadvertently also casting the women's experience as sexual. While Ferrett's original writing, through the male gaze, would suggest that this was a sexual experience, many of the women's writings suggest the opposite and call into mind descriptions of sex workshops and even sexual performance artists like Shannon Bell (2010). Even those less enthused by the idea of the Project itself noted that if we could start from the idea of bodies being open and positive

that it would work, but since we already have experienced negative invasions of space then it could never work to erase them (Mamcaluna, 2008).

Drewkitty (a long time Livejournal member) saw the project as a “challenge to objectification” rather than enforced objectification (2008). No one actually forced women (or men) to comply with the Project, which Drewkitty compares to other places where objectification happens and women are more or less forced to participate like school and work if they hope to succeed:

To quote Heinlein, a lot of our society's sniggering attitudes towards sex have a lot to do with 'Don't squeeze the Charmin!' (Toilet paper.) . . . without paying for it first, in coinage such as money, sex, power, relationship games, pretending to feelings one does not have, etc. (Drewkitty, 2008)

Men will always want to touch “boobies” if breasts are sexually significant to society. Therefore, Drewkitty believes that “the radical part is the women who realize, correctly, that it's No Big Deal if sufficient boundaries are in place, including the rejection of any hint of coercion or bribery” (2008). Of course, he doesn't make any mention of men that realize it is no big deal. Does this mean that all men realize that, or that all men should consider it a big deal? Drewkitty notes that “boobies” are a commodity. If we enjoy touching other people's breasts, and we do so in exchange for dates, presents, feelings, and money, then they remain commoditized (and although it is not said, Drewkitty seems to imply that bodies should not be commoditized). “The radical part is the idea that this commodity could be Given Away For Free with no one losing anything by it. Except, of course, those who use the promise of boobies to bribe their way into what they want” (Drewkitty, 2008). While further discussion suggested that “Open Source” was the wrong title for the Project since bodies were not open for all, the idea that opening bodies



could keep them from being harmed, misused, and abused is in the spirit of sharing software and ideas that takes place on the Internet. No one disagreed with DrewKitty's point that commodification of bodies and sex is deeply problematic in our culture, nor did anyone disagree that commodification of software harms innovation.

As discussion quickly became more heated, Zoethe once again stepped in to defend her husband's writing and her own actions. In addition to accusing the men involved (mostly the Ferrett) of objectifying women, some posters had begun to point out that the participant women were objectifying themselves willingly. Zoethe disagreed, as she believes that while we can and do objectify ourselves and other women, she felt she could recognize that situation. This was not the situation they described,

... to me this felt empowering. I felt like I was owning my sexuality, instead of being neurotic and ambivalent about it. There was no 'let me wear a low-cut top and then have to act embarrassed that you are looking at my cleavage.' It was all, 'these are mine and they are beautiful, and I enjoy that they are being enjoyed, and hey, I also enjoy your beautiful breasts - and ass.' (Zoethe, Second Comment on the Open Source Boob Project, 2008)

However, each time she (or other participants) posted anything about the Project being a positive experience, they were nearly always told that their experiences were in some way "wrong" by other women (in other cases their experiences were simply ignored, implying that their personal experience was not worth responding to). Of course, this could be just another part of the Rules of the Internet—"all your carefully constructed arguments can and will be ignored"—but to the women participants it felt a lot more like slut shaming (Rules of the Internet, 2010). If you liked this Project, there was something wrong with *you* because there was something wrong with the Project itself.

Despite the "slut shaming," as long as Ferrett left comments open, some women were still defending the position that the Project was positive. One such participant writes:

At ConFusion, when you guys approached me, I think you had already been going around and asking anyone. I was a bit shy when you asked, because Scott and I had just stepped off of the elevator, into a boob-hungry mob \*grins\*, and as you know, neither of us knew a single one of you at that time. But... I was wearing my rope corset. And I've never really been shy about my body (piercing show, everyone!). So it only took me a few seconds to say yes. And you know what I think it was? I think it was Sheryl. I didn't even know her, but she's really the only one I remember of the group. She just was so obviously having a blast that I was like 'Dude, I'm comfortable with this and it's fun!' So the boobs were petted and the corset admired and I felt brave enough this con to even flash them around some various crowded parties and hallways. Hehe. You know what, it empowers me. For a while, I was in a very controlling relationship, and yes, it was many years ago, but my body and myself became not my own. I was HIS GIRLFRIEND and had no other identity. I've been reclaiming myself ever since, and this is no exception. (Blue\_lucy, 2008)

Blue\_lucy did not specifically reply to anyone that claimed to have been sexually assaulted or in a bad relationship in the past and that felt the Project would be damaging to them; however, I do believe that in many ways her experience shows that this Project *could* be helpful to some women that have experienced such trauma. There is no one right way to deal with such incidents, and as such even feminists should be wary of telling other women how to experience them.

Amongst of the Pro-Boob Project men, there was some discussion of rejection. While women were potentially worried about being rejected by not being asked, the men involved also feared rejection as they were the ones that would have to ask women if they could touch (it was not discussed whether women were fearful of other women rejecting their touch). One Michigan resident, Scott Kennedy, writes that:

constant rejection is not, as I see it, a lesson so much as a blow to one's self worth. The open source boob project made me realize something fascinating (to me). I only touched the boobs of those I found 'safe'. A 'Yes' button was not enough confirmation for me - it had to be someone like (oops, don't want to out people, but there were about three) who I felt confident would be pleased to assent. Kind of strange to think about. Was it my self-consciousness, or was it my empathy telling me that some people would have said yes, but mostly to be fair? It's kind of sad, in a way. Even with a bright green 'YES', I can't break through my conditioning. (Kennedy, 2008)

Of course, women had already pointed out (at that time) that it was not up to them or their breasts to “fix” men that had been broken by rejection before even if this man believed that the Project helped highlight a problem that he had to work on.

This was, at least in part, because there were many misconceptions of what the Project was actually about. As bits and pieces were posted, reposted, described, and discussed at length on other sites, naturally details were lost and changed. Anonymous often uses screenshots, seemingly believing that people’s own stupidity will be far more condemning than anything they could write about the original, and also uses a lot of flagrant sarcasm and abusive language when they do describe an incident—not that such descriptions are taken very seriously. Since these reposts were mostly short quotes, paraphrasing, or links to external sites that could be edited or changed, it is hard to say if their choice of referentially is one thing that helped or weakened their argument. Because of this, a user by the name of Mattador returned to the Ferrett’s blog on the third day comments were open to try to clear up any misconceptions that had occurred. This man noted that he was only at the second convention, so could not speak to Ferrett’s description of the first. However, he was able to clarify who participated, how, and why:

First off of the approximately 40 buttons that were handed out 80% of them were to people we already knew (at least talked to or knew about in LJ if not in real life). So the whole ‘stranger’ thing has been blown a little out of proportion.

Yes, there was one person with the buttons and it was a strictly on a ‘If you asked they told you about it’. There was a red button and a green button which you were free to take or not take. I would compare it like getting a wii from the cage at Best Buy and not the person at the food court trying to get you to take the general chicken. The green button was merely that you could be asked. Nowhere was there implied consent or anything like that, nor was it an open yes or no. Everyone was very good about asking for every specific interaction. There was WAY more male interactivity than has been stated/assumed. I am male and I know of at least 6 other males who participated, wearing the buttons and being touched. I kissed other men and touched them (back, shoulder and rear). So there was a great deal more male being touched than has been shared. It also wasn’t nearly as sexual as everyone makes it out to be. There were backrubs and playful ass grabs. Also, it was way smaller than anyone makes it out to be. The people

playing the game where they had to run through the hall with a congo line was way more disruptive than anything we did. (Mattador, 2008)

He also notes that the Project was not based upon the Ferrett at all, and instead had to do with individual motivation more than anything else. Each individual had their own reason for participating, and they might all well be different (so there were actually many different narratives being written by the participants of this otherwise incoherent game).

Men not involved in the Project also occasionally posted more than “great idea! I want to do it!” One, Bonerici, hoped that the Project would be able to desensitize both women and men to the objectification of women and women’s breasts (Bonerici, 2008). He believed the Project had the same end goal as most feminist projects do, but that it was problematic because of who created the Project and because of who posted about it online. This project could have be helpful to feminists if they had been the ones to create it to begin with. Bonerici writes:

It should have been started by a feminist, someone who believed in destroying the cultural framing which men are insulated in, someone who could not only monitor the experiment, but also analyze the results and report back to other feminists what was achieved, was it a failure, a success, or just a waste of time? I think maybe if this is ever done again, the first thing to do is recruit an academic feminist, and make sure that even if the result is merely continuing objectification of women, you will have valuable results from the experiment. (2008)

This further supports the idea that these kind of online interactions can produce rhetorically effective conversations. Mattador also agreed that the project was good, but should have “never been put on the Interwebz” (2008). The original project was effective because the procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2005) involved fit the audience, location, and culture of the space it was enacted in. The Project online failed because it tried to reenact that same sort of network rather than looking at what procedural rhetoric would be useful to use in this new instance.

*Analysis: The Open Source Boob Project vs. Biting Beaver*

When Anonymous and 4Chan were involved in attacking BB, I theorized that it was impossible for her to resist their attacks because she was not formally part of their network and

did not understand the rules by which their groups operated. She was not able to adequately defend herself or to set up any kind of meaningful resistance to their attacks other than simply shutting her site down. She did not have as strong a cyborg presence as they did, and could not be as disruptive as they were.

In the case of the Open Source Boob Project, both the Ferrett and the feminists were able to use parts of the rules of the first project created (the OSBP itself), parts of the Rules of the Internet, and tools enabled by the network itself to effect resistance. Although there were still winners and losers in this conflict (with the Ferrett being the loser when he shut down comments), in many ways this was a more positive outcome than BB's because he first was able to resist. Furthermore, as I will show, his shutting down his site to further comments while leaving it "live" and readable was, in a way, a form of resistance.

Although feminists were involved in both examples noted so far, in this second case both "sides" of the argument were able to make effective rhetorical attacks and defenses. On BB's site, it was almost as if the radical feminist defenders could not see that logic, moderation, and censorship were unlikely to stop the argument from occurring. You can't fight chaos with logic (entropy wins), but logic fought with logic and even some emotion works fairly well (when we teach students how to defend *logos* against *pathos* or vice versa, we teach them to do many of these same things). In the Open Source Boob Project discussion, not only did neither side want the discussion to stop immediately (as BB did with Anonymous and 4Chan), but they wanted to engage with the other rather than silencing them. In this case as well, both the Ferrett and the feminists had the power of numbers, places to congregate and discuss their own points of view outside of the main thread about the Open Source Boob Project itself, and increased awareness of how to "win" at online argument. They were able to employ better rhetorical strategies than

either BB or Anonymous had been able, and still were able to maintain their point of view without resorting to nearly as many *ad hominem* attacks or other logical fallacies that Anonymous even recommends in online argument.

However, they were similarly *organized* to 4Chan and Anonymous. For example, women read about the Open Source Boob Project on sites like the Geek Feminism Wiki (GFW, 2011), Alternet (Alternet, 2008), Metafilter (2008), Scalzi's Site (Scalzi, 2008), and communities like "Unfunny Business" and "Sex and Race" (Livejournal, 2008). While they did not then write their own documents about *how* to attack the Ferrett, they did converse with one another, getting angry about some points while others faded into the background. These, then, were the points that they brought up to him. Through doing this, they were able to produce a more homogenized (and in many ways "Anonymized") voice than in the previous chapter. Feminists presented a divided voice when they were supporting and even attacking BB. While some agreed that in limited instances the OSBP could be okay, they all seemed to agree that what was written *here* was not okay. In Chapter Two, I noted briefly that wikis could be a place to potentially begin political action—that feminists were able to use one in order to do so further suggests this might be a place for further inquiry.

The case of the Open Source Boob Project is interesting in that it shows a progression of understanding of online between when BB was attacked and when feminists organized attacked the Ferrett. Feminist ideals, when put into context of something as seemingly random and silly as a project that involved Open Source Boobs, were not only palatable to the general public, but were more highly accepted to that same public than the arguments that are usually touted on feminist blogs. For one, the embeddedness of the concern for the online community (many of whom participate in conventions of one sort or another, geeky, academic, or otherwise) meant

that this sort of education wasn't the sort of by the book, here read this and understand feminism that BB attempted to hand out through examples from her own life. While that rhetoric would no doubt reach an audience of people with similar lives (sex work, lack of income, etc.), without those experiences connecting with the audience she had little chance of being argumentative to a larger audience.

When things are posted online they are available for *everyone* to read. We assume that we will only appeal to a certain group of people that we want to appeal to. Sometimes, by the nature of argumentation, we also attract the people who disagree with us. BB would argue that she didn't have to be argumentative to a larger audience, of course, as she was writing for radical feminists only, but that is beyond the point. Anything published online *assumes a larger audience* than the author originally intended, primarily because just about anybody can and does find it.

James Paul Gee writes in his *What Video Games Have to Teach us About Learning and Literacy* that people learn best when they are embedded in a semiotic domain (1999). In this case, being embedded in the original Open Source Boob Project and then the networked version allowed all participants not only to learn from one another but to also have some power over the outcome. Unlike BB and Anonymous, one of whom was embedded in the context of the Internet and the other that was embedded only in the cyberfeminist portion of the Internet, both parties held power. Because they had this power whether OSBP participant or outside feminist, they were able to resist each other. It is, in this way, very different from BB's case. Both sides of this argument were able to resist in a variety of ways, but also were able to discuss that resistance with one another since comments were left unmoderated.

For example, some participants discussed resistance to the original project—did people feel like they had to participate or could they turn away and resist if they wished to? Many talked about how difficult it was to resist social pressure (which, of course, was exactly what they were using to convince the Ferrett of their own position). A respondent by the screenname Nicked\_Metal specifically began a conversation about why pressure to join a group like the Open Source Boob Project is not particularly coercion, especially after having experienced sexual coercion in the past he/she did not believe that this was the same sort of thing and was much easier to resist since resistance was built into the Project by the “no” buttons (2008). However, others still felt that resisting in person would not be an option for them. This may be one reason why they resisted as boldly as they did online. The online argument was, in this case, far easier for these women to make, probably in part because of the great numbers they were posting in:

However - I don't know if this is just because of the way I've been raised, but I would feel very uncomfortable saying flat out "no" to the question. Especially if you asked politely. Is there any harm in touching my breasts? No, but by saying no, I feel that I am somehow going against what I'm supposed to be thinking (about liberation, or whatever). (Internet\_Noodles, 2008)

The fact is that opportunities to touch outside of sexual relationships and close friendships are still relatively rare.

The ultimate problem and source of the most resistance that came from the feminists (both male and female) was the sexist language with which he used to define the OSBP (Drooling\_Ferrett, 2008). Whether we like it or not, we are ultimately left with writing in most of our communications online and so we are interpreted rhetorically and through written rhetoric whether we want to be or not, no matter what the “real” experience was like. Maybe a multimedia project could have explained the OSBP better or even a brief documentary video that allowed us to see the women’s faces and hear what they had to say about it—but that would have



been time consuming and costly compared to writing a blog post. Even though Ferrett attempted to write in a “non-serious,” Rules of the Internet approved manner (and even though many people who approved of his writing responded well to what he had to say because he did his best to make jokes and write in a way that showed he didn’t take what he was writing about terribly seriously), in his later defense of the project he did not do a very good job of keeping this playful voice. Instead, he and the other people that were defending the Project treated it very seriously all the while describing the original as good fun. They began to be offended by the repeated messages being sent out by feminists and supporters alike.

On the other hand, the feminists were able to create parodies of the Project, remixing and having fun with it *all the while resisting it* in the same way that one may take an image online, attach words, and turn into a viral macro. Those parodies also went viral (as had the original project) with many still being open to comments as of this writing (January 2011). Two of the more popular parodies are the “Open Source Punch to the Face Project” and the “Open Source Kick in the Nuts Project,” both of which, predictably, were about actions that many humans may be tempted to take but nevertheless must restrain themselves from. Particularly, language in both of these parody projects suggested that even though men probably wouldn’t like being punched in the face or kicked in the nuts, it was appropriate to wear a button that says yes and let others do so in order to enable their sense of power and self.

One woman, who was a medical student at Wayne State University at the time but who posted by the name of Fortuna\_Juvat (and wishes to remain anonymous), had chosen a red button and disagreed with everything that was being said about the buttons as well as the sense of coercion or force that was quickly being built into parodies that were springing up. She wrote that those who believed in coercion were wrong, and that the most anyone ever said to her after

asking a green button participant was, “Oh hey, that’s cool” and would move on without trying to get her to participate, making her feel badly about herself, or anything else (Fortuna\_Juvat, 2008).

However, even confirmations of the positivity of the Project from people who were there did not stop other participants, once the project was brought into the larger Internet, from noting that that didn’t have to be the case for everyone that ever *would* experience a project like it: “It’s great you didn’t feel pressured. It’s awful to say because you didn’t feel pressured no else might have felt pressured and it’s not even worth considering. (I’m 'entirely and completely' wrong)” (Ronilquidity, 2008). People such as Ronilquidity were upset that original participants seemed to be caught up in the original Project, weren’t recognizing that things had changed when the Project was posted online, and failed to recognize the complicated power dynamics and dynamics of resistance that had taken over.

In the year between the attacks that BB, Heart, and other feminists underwent in 2007 and the Open Source Boob Project in 2008, feminists had learned how to organize both defense and attack. Although individual feminist sites and blogs were still left relatively open to attacks by large groups like Anonymous, the big feminist sites like Feministe, Shapely Prose, and Jezebel had gained a great deal of popularity and power with women in general. On these “side” sites away from the main argument on the Ferrett’s Livejournal page, women were able to group together, discuss the Project, and then quickly return with their own comments. They were not as organized in their pursuit of shutting down his argument as Anonymous ever is, however, they were just as effective.

Lastly, and perhaps most interestingly, when the Ferrett stopped accepting comments about the OSBP he made a decision that was an ultimate show of resistance while not actually

breaking the Rules of the Internet. The Rules and the communities that created them want free speech online, net neutrality, and lack of censorship. The Ferrett never censored any of the comments that came about as part of his posting about the Open Source Boob Project (though several journals and screennames involved have since been deleted and some of the writers themselves censored them and deleted them, which is generally considered okay by groups like Anonymous and 4Chan).

The original post, his edited version, and all of the comments still stand years later, although the Ferrett will no longer talk about the Project itself. The only way to stop the comments was to stop accepting them on the original post, and that is ultimately what the Ferrett did. He also posted an apology, which stopped people from commenting about it but did not improve feminists' views of his writing at all. However, the kind of resistance to online power that Ferrett demonstrated here is smart—rather than deleting the evidence, rather than censoring himself, and rather than removing his voice—he left those things in place and did not officially break any of the “rules.” His “loss” then was more of a concession. This was the same sort of concession that Heidi McKee’s white female and potentially racist student was forced to make when faced with her own racism—it was left up, it was commented on, but eventually conversation stopped (2002).

*Analysis: The Original Open Source Boob Project as Feminist Space*

Within the OSBP itself, it is clear that The Ferrett and his friends believed they were creating a feminist space. Although this is never stated explicitly, the original post is seated in terms that are not adverse to feminism: A woman offered her body to be touched without prompting, bodies were discussed and considered both as bodies and as being attached to people, and people reconsidered their engagement with embodiment.

The Open Source Boob Project took the ordinary convention and laid a virtual space on top of it; a separate network was created within the space of the convention. In that space some rules applied, though they were not written down at any point. Women had the right to say no to anyone even if they chose to participate and wore a green button. The people running the Project had the right to tell people that they could not play. Touches were meant to be non-sexual. In the virtual space of belonging to the group (though still within the real space of the conference), such touching was considered socially acceptable and supported feminism rather than the patriarchy by letting all bodies be more open than they are usually.

While the project was occurring, the people participating in the Open Source Boob Project weren't busy considering the feminist rationale or rejection of it, in fact, most of them seemed genuinely surprised that anyone would be against it. I have been trapped in this same space in my own classroom—although, in that case, it had nothing to do with bodies. I allow students to swear at a school that explicitly forbids it, providing that they can give me rhetorical evidence why it is necessary to whatever project they are working on. Since this has led to great conversations with classes about language, the roots of sexism in swearing, and class projects that thoughtfully explore these issues (not to mention the support of my immediate administration), I had rarely considered that others might not feel the same or realize how this one little bit of rule breaking changed my classroom for the better. Unfortunately, when a Dean from another campus (with a past involving an Evangelical Christian seminary) found out, it could have cost me my job. I had understood this risk—my students, however, were furious.

This is because groups tend to trap us within themselves, immersing us in a semiotic domain, teaching us things, and only allowing us to critique them at some later time. We forget that the entire world is not like the group that we are currently a part of, which is why small

segregated spots of immersion are so good at teaching us. They lower the consequences for action and allow us to experiment as well (Gee, 1999). Cass Sunstein makes a similar argument, saying that lowered consequences for action is actually a bad thing (2009). However, as composition teachers (or teachers of any sort) we must realize that lowered consequences are necessary in order for students to be willing to experiment in the classroom. There must be high stakes and low stakes assignments. There must be the opportunity to try out new things in order to find out if they work.

In the Open Source Boob Project, the fact that the first group occurred in “real life” (the space of the convention) was seen as problematic for the women outside of the project. To them, the OSBP was not occurring in a limited version of reality, it *was part of their reality*. The Ferrett and other original members also did not expect people to misunderstand their intentions, at least partially because the safety of the group they had set up allowed them to believe in the reality of the project as well. The narrative that they were telling to each other—that bodies could be more open and that doing so would allow them to feel more free, to gain autonomy over their bodily space, and would help them feel less isolated—was a powerful narrative indeed. While inside the Project and entrapped in its memories and even after, it is little wonder that the members would defend their actions even when faced with very logical arguments.

Living in a relatively body conscious society as well as one not very open to touching, it is not all that surprising that a project like this one was eventually developed and played within a real world circle of friends. However, once posted onto the *freer* space of the web, a space that rarely needs sexual enlightenment, a space where every furry, every plushie, every sexual kink has a webspace—one has to ask whether the Internet really need the imposition of this sort of agency on top of its already relatively open (but none the less repressive) position? Despite this

openness, the Internet is still a space hosting a lot of misogynistic porn, so—perhaps. On the other hand, that very porn colors any situation where a (especially male) person would seek to go outside of social boundaries on a topic about bodies or sex. What happens if we are freer than we think? What if we can resist? What if we can open our bodies to others in controlled circumstances? If we can, then we don't need the network to support that action. It certainly wasn't necessary for it to be written about online in this case. If it had not been, the Project these friends created might still be happening in small instances and the honest good that they believe they got from it would still be being enjoyed by other new people.

The OSBP, as presented here, gave women a chance in this small space to feel more adequate than they had in the past. The men, as well, felt that they were finally freed to experience touch with women that weren't the most attractive people they could find. The Ferrett himself actually explained this idea, since it is not one that most feminists considered. Within the OSBP, men felt free to ask people who they found attractive but weren't *traditionally* attractive to touch their boobs. The Ferrett feels that if he talks to most women about their attractiveness, they will just think he is trying to sleep with them, even if he just appreciates their beauty (TheFerrett, Response to the Open Source Boob Project, 2008). On the other hand, very attractive women are used to being told such things and will most likely be able to take the comment at face value—of course, that's problematic in itself, for why should any woman have to constantly be told about her physical attractiveness, even if they are kindly meant, true words?

In any case, Ferrett described the experience of two women he knew from the Project being surprised that once those social boundaries dropped that men were generally appreciative of them:

Whereas once this was opened up so people could express their sexual attraction in terms of wanting to touch, both of these women found that hey, a lot of guys really do like

them. And I'm sure I'll be told that this is the male patriarchy weighing down - but if they do, then the male patriarchy is weighing *me* down, because I often feel like nobody really wants me and I'm unattractive. It's a human emotion to have. So they discovered, much to their surprise, that many people they liked and respected turned out to be turned on by them. Which, in turn, made them go, 'Wait, maybe I'm not as dumpy as I thought. Maybe I have a sexuality that I own and can control.' And in turn, they've been recharged. Maybe these women aren't traditionally beautiful, but strangely enough, fat girls with small breasts can have a lot of people lining up - because there is a hidden attraction that can be brought out if only there's very little penalty for stating that attraction. Could the rules use some tweaking? Perhaps. Could my statements have been better phrased? Certainly. But I think that hand-waving it by saying, 'Well, we have a lot of work to do, so let's not try,' as opposed to writing the whole thing off to try to squeeze what's good out of it, is wrong-headed. (TheFerrett, Response to the Open Source Boob Project, 2008)

Of course, his original writing, making the Project being about men being healed by boobs, unfortunately over-emphasized the role of men in this Project and underemphasized the role of the women who were participants.

The Ferrett's wife also pointed out how the convention they were at made the project significantly different than it would have been if it were run in another, larger, space. She didn't believe that it particularly needed to be moved into another format (other than the original) either (Zoethe, 2008). Of course, by that point, it already had been moved into a bigger space by her husband, and by his accounting, she had read through and approved his original post. The people who participated during the conference recognized the fun intrinsic to changing social rules for a while. They were able, for a short time, to work in a realm of theoretical truth (bodies should be more open) while ignoring everyday practice. Nealon (2007) writes that there is a "grounding or hierarchical relationship, within the individual subject as well as the social body, between theoretical 'truth' and everyday 'practice': as that great critic of ideology George Clinton would have it, 'Free your mind/and your ass will follow'" (2007, p. 19). The project members probably didn't expect their "asses" to follow, so to speak. They probably didn't think that the Project

would be successful outside of their small instance. Even the Ferrett himself presents the OSBP online as a kind of thought experiment. However, they did appreciate the time that they had in the Project.

But—you don't get to choose what price you pay for social actions. Entering into the larger context of the Internet meant that the OSBP was subject to another whole new set of rules, and not just those written by Anonymous and their ilk. The larger Internet space is founded upon plurality—feminists can name the OSBP as misogynistic, and it can be hated. Online, you don't get to choose what you pay, all of that is set up by the random set of individuals who are present at any moment and who are reading your work when you post. Public chastisement and education are likely to be the price for anyone breaking the rules.

However, all of the rhetoric shown here was more like traditional rhetoric than anything that Anonymous or 4Chan used in Chapter Two. Why? I partially believe that it was because this was a project that never should have been written about online to begin with.

*Analysis: The Open Source Boob Project Meets the Internet*

Two groups cannot exist in the same space at the same time easily if they are founded on different ideologies and rules. The nature of the Internet rejects bodies and identities—the Open Source Boob Project celebrated them. The Internet punishes what can be labeled—the Ferrett's use of language was easily labeled as misogynistic. The Internet asks us to not call its existence into general knowledge (“do not talk about /b/”), and the Open Source Boob Project announced itself to a huge audience.

However, the Ferrett is a popular enough and successful enough online presence that he is a cyborg (disruptive, communicative) and he was able to manage the damage done to his community that had been built on his blog (which BB failed to do). For example, he did not



delete or moderate any comments that he disagreed with, and indeed would even defend the people who had different opinions than him:

...it's a legitimate response. He's saying he thinks it's a bad idea, and he's certainly welcome to say that. I disagree, but that's because we have a very different view of what our ideal society should be like. (TheFerrett, Response to the Open Source Boob Project, 2008)

On the other hand, this comment also demonstrates a problem he was having—he kept referring to (and perhaps even believing in) the idea that his Project represented an ideal society. Later in the thread, the Ferrett also notes that though people were being disrespectful of him (and at times his wife), disagreement on his blog did not particularly mean that a person was going to be banned (and, indeed, no one was as a result).

Where the online version of the Open Source Boob Project failed was in seeing that the new space it was in had different controls and different potential outcomes than the original. Although the Ferrett's post generated a lot of interest from the general public, it did not generate as much positive interest as he had hoped (he didn't earn any of Doctorow's "Whuffie," so to speak). In defending his Project, Ferrett often seemed to forget that he was projecting a fictional reality onto the real world—which of course doesn't work as well as he would have liked. Ferrett took his existing community and game and opened it to derision in putting the OSBP online. He even may have thought things through—the Internet is for porn, after all, why shouldn't it be for boobies?—but the dominant fiction of the Internet prevailed. The fiction of the Internet is different than the fiction of a conference—though in this case they may have more in common than other cultural spaces, to be sure. It is this difference that makes the Project work in one context and not in the other.

Of course, to state that something failed rhetorically because it was out of context or unattuned to its audience is nothing new. In many ways the original OSBP, as it is described, comes across as play: friends exploring each other's bodies and comfort level within the relative safety of the conference. They were playing with gender identity more than actively changing it. But, as was seen when the Ferrett formalized the Project in written rules online, that turned it from playing into reality. While he was attempting to make the broader point that such *play* could be healthy and fun, *his writing* implied that there was procedural rhetoric afoot (Bogost, 2005). Despite the original, positive, play, the structure of the Internet immediately took his rules and proceeded to assume that the OSBP held the cultural values that the Ferrett himself espoused in his written version, rather than the values of everyone else that had been involved. Understanding the Internet was not enough to protect Ferrett (or even members of Anonymous and 4Chan in other instances) from this occurring. Everything can be hated, and everything can be reinterpreted, and not just by the folks who created the rules to begin with. As Stanley Fish notes, what a given text means will be determined by the "interpretive community" (as cited in Juul, 2005, p. 193) and the OSBP is no exception.

*What does this mean for our classes?*

As I mentioned briefly in the beginning of the chapter, I believe one thing this project shows is that some projects and writings simply do not need to be online. We can create some safe spaces for some discussions for our classes that do not have to be shared with a larger audience just as the Ferrett should have done for his friends here. We need to pick and choose carefully which arguments and which assignments will be shared globally and which shall not. As limiting an interface as Blackboard and its cousins may be, it's a space that is only available

to our students. If a topic could potentially garner them *undue*, *unneeded*, or *unfair* criticism, then it may be best to leave it in a classroom only space.

By the female participants' recounting, the original Open Source Boob Project was feminist, but what the Ferrett wrote online was not. The change in audience and tone, and from a group of people arguing for it to a single rhetor made the argument untenable. There were not nearly enough original participants to protect the Ferrett from the digital onslaught. There are not nearly enough of *me* to go around and protect my students either.

Quite simply, I am arguing against the use of technology for technologies' sake. Even a well read, published, and popular author like the Ferrett can make the mistake of posting about something online that should not be. Before we decide to share digital projects with a large audience, even if it is a classroom goal for students to consider that audience, we must first consider if that project is appropriate for larger sharing to begin with.

My students have done many projects that *involve* technology and even classroom created memes that have never seen the Internet. For example, one class found out, much to my chagrin, that I like the word *douchebag*. Two of them set out to find a way to write it into every paper they wrote, but it had to fit, work rhetorically, and make sense (those were their rules, not mine). Many of their classmates joined them in this pursuit, and the word was involved in their final projects as well. They thought it was funny—I, meanwhile, was slightly horrified but when I realized they were all spending hours revising and trying to figure out a way to get that word to work I let it go. It had become viral, and it was helping their writing.

On the other hand, I have not taken excerpts from those papers for my writing or published those projects to the web. I recognize that the word can be offensive, and while it was not offensive *within our classroom*, it is not an appropriate tidbit to share with the Internet at

large. It was something that was very special that group of people in that time, could not be replicated easily elsewhere, and other than giving them a challenge bore no pedagogical purpose. It would not have received the same response as the students gave it on the dystopia of the Internet.

When we make the mistake of thinking of the Internet as a utopia we think of it as a place to hide (Wark, 2007). The Internet as utopia is a safe space, when in reality there is nowhere safe on it from an audience. My classroom above was a safe space. The original Open Source Boob Project was as well. But online there is no “home base,” no calling “Olly olly oxen-free,” or declaring a time out. There is no “pause” button; in fact, the majority of the Open Source Boob Project occurred in 48 hours.

The rules of the original Open Source Boob Project allowed the participants to imagine a world where bodily autonomy and openness were one and the same. They allowed the participants to imagine a world where no one felt ugly, abused, or left out of sexual congress. They allowed a special group of people within a certain framework to create a society where that was possible. The Rules of the Internet, however, did not allow for such a creation. Instead, the Rules of the Internet state things like “no matter what it is, there is porn of it.” In such a system that sort of bodily integrity is all but impossible. To claim one’s body online is to ask others to make porn of it. To claim one’s body is to move yourself from cyborg toward embodiment. It is difficult to make porn without human bodies. In that space, embodiment creates porn, conflict, and anti-feminist rhetoric. Despite the Ferrett’s best interest in creating the Open Source Boob Project to begin with, it could not be moved safely into the Internet.

One thing that the Open Source Boob Project proved is that the *tactics* of Anonymous and 4Chan are not particularly anti-feminist, and neither are the Rules of the Internet, even if

they are often used for misogynist acts. “If it can be named, it can be hated” is just as true for misogynistic acts as feminist ones. The power of numbers can be used just as easily in support of feminism as they can be used against it. But the ability to use these tactics doesn’t stop at fighting a specific act against a specific individual or even group of individuals. Much as 4Chan and Anonymous have created memes through their play, feminists have begun to do so as well (through much the same channels—one person coming up with an idea that others co-opt, copy, remix, and redistribute via message boards, blogs, etc.)

The best example of the latter is a relatively recent phenomenon (as of this writing, February 2011) called “Privilege Denying Dude” (PDD). PDD was created by a feminist who was tired of white men in life and online saying utterly ridiculous, privileged statements and claiming that they, themselves, were entirely feminist and un-racist. She took a stock photo (that was purchased legally), put it on a colored background, and used the standard blocky white font that has become ubiquitous with memes and images macros. On top of this man she posted things like “If we had a white entertainment network that would be racist...unfair!” and “Your idea sounds so much better when I rephrase it,” and “If what I say offends anyone, I’m sorry you’re too sensitive” (Know Your Meme, 2011). These images make use of the play available online all the while making a political statement against a common type of individual.

The meme became far more popular than the original creator ever intended. Thousands of feminists and anti-racists flocked to the creator available on the author’s Tumblr site to put in their own annoyances. The images that resulted could be easily used in anti-racist and feminist teachings (and they are, at least in my own classroom).

The standardized curriculum at Baker College leaves little room for outside readings. Our textbook for the past two years had little about race or gender in it, focusing instead on the basics

of writing for college as well as visual rhetoric. Students, therefore, have read a lot about the rhetorical power of image and writing by the time I introduce macros as a “fun” way to lead into discussion about racism and sexism without giving additional out of class readings. In the case of Privilege Denying Dude, it allowed students an opportunity to ask and then answer key questions like “What is privilege?” and come up with an answer through their reading of the images and text. Students then are asked to create their own macro in this genre—most of them (due to being from Detroit or Detroit suburbs) seem to choose to make fun of a stereotype from their own lives—“guidos,” cops unwilling to help disadvantaged populations, and even teachers. We then use their examples and the ones on existing sites to discuss any problems relating to race and/or gender that come up from their image and word choice based upon privilege or prejudice.

Privilege Denying Dude, unlike the smaller classroom examples that I use in my class, created a public uproar from the individuals that it was meant to mock. Men (privilege deniers themselves) complained about being mocked, much to the mockers’ glee. The conversations that resulted not only proved the meme-creators’ point, they made a lot of people look very foolish for espousing one opinion while unwittingly demonstrating another. The creator still believes, however, that due to the meme’s popularity that it will be used ultimately to show these individuals that their position is mock-able and worth changing—and hopes that it will someday be changed.

However, this is a very recent example—having occurred in 2011. The rhetoric of feminist groups has been developing over time, and to some extent, this project is a limited history of that. Feminists have grown online from the “Cybergrrls” that proclaimed girl-power

for female Internet users in the 90s, to radical feminists having semi-successful blogs, to large group blogs, and now to using memes much as other groups online like 4Chan have popularized.

The power of memes and large online groups should not be ignored by any group, but especially those previously marginalized online like women and minorities. PDD became so popular so quickly that the creator's Tumblr account had to be deactivated to preserve bandwidth and she was also asked to stop using the stock photo she purchased. Why? The website that she bought it from felt that it could be damaging to the individual in the picture to be included in such a ubiquitous meme (while it would be just fine, say, if his picture were to be used in a billboard about herpes because it would be seen by so far fewer people). He was replaced by a pro-feminist actor, although many of the original images still exist.

Although the Ferret ultimately stopped the conversation, and it is therefore a “neutral” example for the sake of this writing, discussion of the Open Source Boob Project springs up on secondary websites from time to time till this day. There is a certain appeal to the idea, mostly because it was successful in its domain. However, like some classroom practices and projects, it was best left to the realm it first happened in and its primary audience.

### *Conclusion*

What we learn from the example and analysis presented in this chapter is that the large group organization developed by 4Chan and Anonymous can be used by any group to argue and inform online. Pro-feminists can gather in large groups and use their number to enact positive change in digital environments—something I would like to teach my students to do. In this case, the feminists won, but this was not an unmitigated good for women online because dialogue was cut off. Because the dialogue stopped (essentially, the feminists overpower the Ferrett), further learning could not happen through conversing about the Project when it was found by new

people later. However, as I will show in Chapter Four, if two groups use these same rhetorical techniques against one another, they can also be a way of dialoging with a group that holds an opposite opinion, or educating them about your own, without truly ever declaring a winner or loser of the argument that results. Without a winner or loser being clear, a lasting dialogue can grow within the community that enacts major change for the people present.



## Chapter 4

### *Introduction*

The larger theme of this dissertation is the idea that individuals can learn about gender and race through being embedded in online group discussions about them. As communities negotiate their rules about what is acceptable and not in the treatment of women and minorities (as they make rules about how they will be treated), they can also teach members of the communities about critical race and feminist theory. In chapters two and three, I discussed issues relating to feminism and gender and how digital rhetoric, large groups, and online hate might affect them. However, racism is also a major problem online that can be affected (and dealt with) by these same tactics. Both race and gender online face increasing subversion from various powerful entities, not the least of which is simple ignorance and colorblind racism that seems to carry over into the Internet from real world situations (rather than being constructed online by corporations and other large groups—the other main source of power online).

This chapter will present a case study from a *Harry Potter* community of what occurred when a racist act was identified and discussed. In what follows, I will present a case wherein two different groups online (those that supported the fans of color and those that supported “free speech” or disagreed with the idea that the act was racist) were able to negotiate a positive outcome that not only involved editing the original text, but also starting a years’ long discussion of race in their community. This incident has remained on their sites as part of their history, as have all other incidents. This has created a stronger community that is more welcoming to people of all races and genders than those that ignore race and gender—at least according to its members. Through studying this case, we learn what the best possible scenario is for a digital

dialectic—an ongoing conversation between community members on how race and gender will be negotiated. I will then discuss how this might lead to classroom practice with similar results.

### *Harry Potter and the Racist Kink*

In late July of 2007 a member of the Harry Potter fandom noticed that the Harry Potter challenge writing community named “Daily Deviant”<sup>9</sup> had updated their monthly challenge. Each a month, a word is posted to the community and all members are then invited to write about it. In this case, members generally write a short “porn with plot” story involving the characters and whatever deviant act has been selected that month.

That month, the word *miscegenation* was used, which they defined as “Sex or marriage between two people (or magical creatures) of different races” (original post now removed, 2007). A fan of color with username Witchqueen, but who signs her posts “Zvi,” immediately e-mailed the community upon finding the post, asking them to change the language on their posting:

You have picked an offensive word for use as this month's daily deviant theme. Miscegenation has the connotation of polluting or corrupting a white person by having sex with or marriage to a person of color. The Wizarding equivalent of the term *miscegenation* would be something like ‘blood treachery.’ Your use of this word infuriates me. There is a common word used in the porn industry for pornography involving people of different races: interracial. That word and the kink as applied to human/human interaction, while not without problems, are much less historically loaded with racist hatred and fear mongering. Please change the term in your list of kinks, your tags, and as the warnings on the relevant stories. (Witchqueen, 2007, July 30, para. 1)

In response, the site’s moderators almost immediately wrote back that they chose themes randomly from an encyclopedia of sex-themed words, and had decided that they would never censor the language used in the community since all words in the encyclopedia were offensive to someone. Their procedure for choosing a term was to flip open the encyclopedia to a random page, and then point at it without looking in order to pick a term. They ignored her original charge of racism (Daily Deviant, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> [http://community.livejournal.com/daily\\_deviant/](http://community.livejournal.com/daily_deviant/)

In addition to sending this e-mail back, they also posted her original e-mail (and subsequent ones) to their site with their replies without her permission under the following summary: “We apologise [sic] to our watchers for interrupting the flow of porn, but our community and its members have been defamed today, and we feel it is necessary to respond” (Daily\_Deviant\_Mods, 2007, July 31). Zvi didn’t feel that the term was chosen with intent to offend, but that despite the fact it was chosen unintentionally, it still implied that “people of color are subhumans, are beasts, are niggers, kikes, spics, gooks, and redskin scalpers” and that she was going to be sending her beliefs on the matter to several popular fandom sites, including Metafandom, the site for this study (Witchqueen, 2007, July 31).

One of the basic tenants of online anti-racism (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2011) is the ability to recognize one’s own mistakes, to “call yourself on your own shit” (my words). The Daily Deviant community was unwilling to do so. Furthermore, in posting Witchqueen’s email to their own site, in many ways they embodied her as *just* an anti-racism advocate, and not a person of color who had built a very nuanced online fandom presence. To this day, she is often referred to in fan communities as “that person who writes about race” and it’s true—she does do that. However, it limits her identity away from the other work that she does like fanfiction.

Witchqueen tried to make it clear that she wants fandom to be a place where fans of color can feel safe and implicitly welcome, and that the term *miscegenation* used in this context is offensive, no matter the intent:

You, as the DD mods, have decided that it is more important to follow your self-imposed theme selections rules than to make a fandom a place where fans of color are welcome....I want to make it clear that I never tried to stop you from having a theme which was ‘Sex or marriage between two people (or magical creatures) of different races.’ I didn’t give negative feedback to any author who wrote on that theme or attempt to make them stop writing any such stories. I just wanted you to substitute the common pornographic term ‘interracial,’ which more precisely accords with the definition you

gave, instead of the racist term ‘miscegenation’, which carries additional meaning you neither explicitly stated nor disavowed. (Witchqueen, 2007, July 30).

These few public posts began one of the longest conversations about race in fandom history.

Unlike communities described by Nakamura (2008) and Matsuda (2000), fans did not make race a disallowed topic. The original post from Zvi drew eight pages of responses (approximately 112) and many more essay-length posts from other fans on their own journals. I would like to highlight some of these responses because they represent the whole fairly well.

A common reply to the situation was disbelief that people simply didn’t know that the term was racist, and that would not change their mind about it even after being informed of it. Given that when I first wrote about this concept in a graduate class and not only had to define the term but tell other students how to say it, this does not entirely surprise me. The American education system has largely whitewashed our teachings of racism’s uglier moments. However, users were not so accepting of this ignorance. For example, Liviapenn responded:

I cannot believe this is their official position. How hard is it to admit that perhaps you made a mistake? ‘Oh wait, saying that interracial relationships are basically the same thing as BESTIALITY might be offensive? Huh, you MIGHT have a point there.’ (2007)

and Kaethe agreed:

It seems like there's an inherent difference between, say, being offended by someone peeing on someone else as an erotic activity and being offended by a word that implies an entire group of people are sub-human. Like, the level of actual suffering caused by the two acts, for example. How is ‘everything's offensive’ even an argument? (2007)

Like earlier examples, some people here pointed out that the rhetorical stance that Daily Deviant had taken was not strong. Liviapenn also pointed out in the comments to another post that the

reason you haven't ever heard the word *miscegenation* is because it's racist. It doesn't just mean 'two people of different races having sex,' it literally means 'polluting the gene pool.' Maybe you would have heard it in Alabama in the 1950s, but there's a reason nobody uses it anymore. (as cited in AnnaVTree, 2007)

Many other users of Livejournal, as noted above, actually created entire posts on their own journals discussing race and fandom and how to make fandom a friendly place for people of color. These posts varied in their responses to the issue, even coming out and telling personal stories of why the challenge bothered them so much when the porn industry does not (to the same extent). Telesilla writes:

However, even the porn industry, for all it's devil-may-care, 'we're only in it for the dough' attitude, doesn't equate the interracial kink with the bestiality kink. And even they know not to use 'miscegenation' in the place of 'interracial.'

So, as one half of an interracial couple, I'd like to extend a laurel and hearty fuck you to *daily\_deviant* for a) using the incredibly offensive and seriously outdated word 'miscegenation,' and therefore being even more offensive than the non-fandom porn industry, b) equating Harry/Cho with Hagrid/Dobby with Hermione/Giant Squid, thus saying, in effect, that my being with Darkrosetiger [another Livejournal user] is like someone fucking a goat, and c) not having the fucking balls to say 'oh hey, we're really sorry; we didn't realize that that term was offensive. We'll be sure to do something about it.' (2007, paras. 1-4)

Indeed, one of the unwritten rules that were beginning to be formed as part of this discussion was that if racism occurs, the offending party can and should admit it, apologize for it, and change the behavior. The real offense in this case wasn't that the problem occurred; it was that the people involved refused to admit that there was any problem because *they aren't racist*. The only people, it seems, that commit racist acts must be racists, and most of us don't self-identify in that way. However, anti-racism advocates and fans alike are trying to change that in some ways by pointing out the everyday simple ways that we inadvertently are racist and create a racist society.

Telesilla continued to write more about this, proving that she has a rather nuanced understanding of racism in general, but also specifically in this instance:

The latter [denying that racism has happened because the offended does not seem themselves as racist] is something that happens all too often in these fannish racism debates.

See, here's the thing, people: most of us (and yes I include people outside America-- please don't tell me that your country of birth doesn't have race issues) were raised in a racist society. Even if our parents raised us well, as children we picked up words and attitudes at school and from the media and from daily life. Sometimes we're gonna say something that's racist; it's just gonna happen. If someone calls you on it, don't get defensive. Chances are good that, while upset, they know that you probably spoke out of ignorance, particularly if the term you used was an older one that's largely fallen out of general usage. An apology and maybe even a “thanks for telling me that; I didn't know that term was offensive” will often suffice. And yeah, no one likes looking ignorant but hey, I'd rather look uneducated than like a racist any day, wouldn't you? Seems like the asshats over at daily\_deviant can't do that. (Telesilla, 2007, 30 July).

In the years since, fandom has called many people on colorblind and unintentional racism— many of the changes that Telesilla has called for have actually happened.

Also as part of the discussion, other fans of color reflected on just how “white” (in the default sense) fandom seemed to them after having participated in a blogging world where people shared real pictures of themselves and daily tidbits of life. Most of the time people didn't share these pictures because anonymity (to one extent or another) is very valued in fandom because it helps protect fanartists and writers. Pictures and identities are not shared in fandom as often where screen names and icons are more likely to represent members, and anonymity was important to keep away lawsuits from copyright owners. Nobody really seemed to know what race or gender posters were, and so most people assumed they were female and white, or claimed colorblindness and that it didn't really matter what race or sex a writer or artist was. Of course, that may be true, but it is also true that this means that artists and writers of color aren't celebrated as such either—and some of them that have since been identified have been paid a lot

of good attention for inserting their own culture into fantasy worlds of authors. One user of color wrote of her experience in fandom:

When I first joined Livejournal, I immediately sought out the presence of other PoC [People of Color]. What I didn't expect was to find myself in fandom, where I was startled at how *white* it seemed. In the blogosphere, there's not a lot of reluctance to say who you are and where you're from. Most people used their real names, or at least a facsimile of such; pictures were routinely posted, and tidbits of real lives and families were shared. In fandom, screen names are the norm, which is perfectly understandable. But it's difficult to glean other information from fans unless they specifically say that they are a person of color. It's only been within the last couple of years or so that I've become aware of some of the virtual lunch tables where many fans of color are in plain view. (Sugargroupie, 2008).

Fans of color, when they get together, tend to criticize racism in television and other source material without *usually* feeling dismissed by white fans. Likewise, my students in the video and writing project that I describe in Chapter 5 often write about the lack of strong female of people of color leads in the film industry—and they are not dismissed by their classmates or the Internet at large. Unfortunately such dismissals do happen, as was the case with Daily Deviant. Although the fans of color were calling for and forming their own safe spaces, these spaces were away from the main part of fandom, and the users arguing against Daily Deviant wanted *all* of fandom to be safe for users of all races—which is a far more inclusive and worthy undertaking. Furthermore, naming a site as being for people of color means that that site can then be *targeted* by others as one that is primarily for people of color, and that should be avoided if at all possible.

However, some fans did support Daily Deviant. They tended to be people who called upon “Free Speech” in their entries. In short, these arguments usually ended around the idea that we could not possibly ban all racist speech online but that it was *okay* to do so ban racist speech within certain communities and especially around certain parts of the Internet like fandom. *Harry Potter*, specifically, was seen as a place where such speech should probably not happen because

the books themselves were so set against “blood purity” in the wizarding world—and blood purity could be equated to racism.

Yet other fans tried to find a reason why a Black person would equate miscegenation to calling them a nigger. For example, Celandine looked up the word then wrote:

\*turns to Oxford English Dictionary\* [Asterixes are sometimes used to set off language describing movement in online prose] The (only) definition for ‘miscegenation’ given is: Mixture of races; *esp.* the sexual union of whites with Negroes. I’m not going to give all of the OED’s usage examples because I can’t cut and paste, but I will give two. The earliest example cited is from 1864, so the word was probably coined around then:  
**1864** (*title*) Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races, applied to the American White Man and Negro. Reprinted from the New York Edition. By 1884 the word was already being used figuratively, as in this quotation:  
**1884** J. Hawthorne N. Hawthorne & Wife II. 178. The lower regions of palaces come to strange uses in Rome; a cobbler or a tinker perhaps exercises his craft under the archway; a work-shop may be established in one of the apartments; and similar miscegenations. Thus I would reject Zvi’s claim that the use of the term ‘miscegenation’ is in any way an implicit way of calling someone a ‘nigger.’ [‘Negro,’ in 1864, was the accepted neutral term, as ‘black’ or ‘African-American’ (in the US) are today.] (Celandine, 30 July 2007)

Of course, *negro* is the common term used by “real” racist and white pride groups that organize online such as *Stormfront*,<sup>10</sup> and so though the term was alright to use in the 1800s, it no longer has the same connotation, and certainly did not carry that in the original community post.

Celandine goes on to state:

If Zvi or anyone else doesn't like the term, s/he need not look at or read the posts that relate to it. I would also like to point out on the userinfo page for the community, there are statements that ‘Nothing is sacred,’ that ‘All posts will be properly tagged with warnings,’ and that ‘We know we are venturing into topics that can be offensive to some, but flaming will not be tolerated and will get you banned faster than you can say *bestiality*. No-one is forcing you to read or look and you have been properly warned.’ The method for choosing the monthly themes is also clearly described (random choice from a list of about 3500). If the mods of the community agreed to remove this prompt (a bit late in any case, as a number of members chose to use it), that would be censorship. There's been a lot of talk lately about LJ potentially censoring fandom, with most of the fic-writing community firmly opposed to that. The *point* of the Daily Deviant community is that it permits the

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.stormfront.org>



exploration of kinks that may be offensive to some, without censorship or disapproval. I stand behind the decision of the mods not to back down to this protest by someone who is not a member nor even a watcher of the community. (Celandine, 30 July 2007)

This entry was tagged in the community as being about “free speech.” Mari Matsuda (1997) tells us that “the strongest argument against criminalization of racist speech is that it is content-based. It puts the state in the censorship business, with no means of assuring that the censor’s hand will go lightly over ‘good’ as opposed to ‘bad’ speech” (p. 33). This is such a common response that we have been writing about it for years, yet it still holds a lot of power online. Censorship is a real and present concern on the Internet. It also has a strong presence in the classroom. Having once written a blog post about disallowing topics like abortion, gun control, and obesity, only to be attacked by several other academics for censoring my students, I doubt that this issue is going to go away in classrooms any time soon. My reasons for disallowing these topics are many—on one hand, I’m tired of reading essays written from the first 10 Google results about abortion. On the other, and more importantly, student essays and presentations condemning women who have had abortions, telling them they are going to hell for being fat, or talking about why gun control is bad to people who have lost family members to gun violence in Detroit are damaging to the students who have to listen to them. I do not believe that any student should feel attacked by another in class—that does not create a safe learning environment. If students choose to attack one another (I had a student who attempted to pass out personalized diet plans for everyone in class once, for example), I stop them and remove participation points. One academic’s response to this was: “You’ve gone beyond warnings here, you know. This is censorship.... This comment made me cry. Do you now lose all your [participation] points for the week, if not longer?” (Dr. Dao, 2010). To some people in the composition and rhetoric blog reading circle, censorship of any type is not allowable anywhere—no matter who that communication harms.

Members of Metafandom concerned about Zvi's "attacks" on Daily Deviant were mostly concerned about censorship possibly to follow: Livejournal had been banning all sorts of journals at the time that had interests that were listed as "pedophilia" or "incest" (both of which are "kinks" in fandom). While "pedophilia" might seem like an interest that nobody should admit to having while online, what it referred to in these communities was usually the various characters of *Harry Potter* and other popular children's literature growing up and finding love (and sex) with each other, and *not* adults having sex with children. Since this was also approximately the time that Daniel Radcliffe (the actor who played Harry Potter) was pictured nude from his role in the play *Equus*, women who found him sexy despite his age began labeling themselves as pedophiles mostly in fun. (While I question the sanity of doing this, or whether it is a wise idea, remember that all of these fandom members are doing so from a place of anonymity.)

Therefore, many people defended Daily Deviant that might have normally not done so if the community wasn't already embroiled in a censorship debate. Eventually, many of the arguments about race in fandom boiled down to tone (which is an incredibly important concept that will be discussed more below) and admissions by various fandom members that racism was their problem whether they were overtly racist or not. A post by Tielan is exemplary of this sort of thought:

If racism isn't the problem of the people who aren't racist - if it's the province of the people who *are* racist, then we're putting a lot of faith in humanity's ability to self-criticize. Abusers are not generally inclined to admit to being wrong, let alone likely to change their behaviour to accommodate the victim. So, if racism isn't the problem of the people who aren't racist, and it's ignored by the people who *are* racist...that leaves racism as the victims' problem. And I disagree that abuse is the problem of the victims; that bystanders have nothing to answer for. So...racism is my problem, too. (Tielan, 2008)

One of the basic tenants of anti-racist discourse as it is practiced on the web is that you must call out racism when and where you see it (WACAN, 2008). You cannot just ignore it because you

are not racist, for this sets up a system where racism is seen as okay by the person who first did something wrong. Non-traditional students, in my experience, are fairly comfortable doing this to younger ones. Traditional students often are not. This often leads me to be the “racism police” whenever we begin to discuss race overtly in class or online. This is also one reason that I enjoy bringing up race (and gender) in some sort of embedded context rather than generically.

The rule of calling out racism has been “written” (more or less) into fandom groups in the years since the original RaceFail, and it is more common for people to call out colorblind and unintentional racism now than they did before. This kind of active anti-racism has spread to other parts of the web as well, where it is increasingly common to see people angrily pointing out racism, sexism, and even fat-hatred wherever they see it. This may mean that it’s harder to be a conservative asshole online—and well, if so, more power to the fans who started it. Unfortunately, this means that conservative posters feel increasingly attacked because they are being increasingly attacked (they scream loudly, too, since they are not used to having their viewpoint challenged). While racism and sexism are still common on sites like 4Chan where people are trying to intentionally offend, anywhere where the writer clearly “means it” is called out as an inappropriate by people who have grown with fandom and other sources of anti-racist action online.

Some other really useful threads of thought came out of this six month long discussion, and many of them may have even changed the way race in fandom is discussed and worked through. For example, Bethbethbeth compared a common fandom practice to her own participation in anti-racist discussions:

A couple of weeks ago, I took a break from reading a long, smart thread about race and racism (in which I hadn't participated) to read some fic. The fic link took me to ff.net [<http://www.fanfiction.net>], and the story, which I ended up not finishing for a variety of reasons, had author notes which included the not-unfamiliar demand to ‘leave reviews or

I won't post another chapter.' I rolled my eyes at the note, as I often do, but all of a sudden, being annoyed by that too-common mark of entitlement started to make me feel really uncomfortable. I flashed back to the thread I'd been reading earlier - the thread in which I hadn't participated - and started wondering about my own relative lack of participation in the ongoing race discussions. What if my non-participation wasn't really about being temporarily burnt out by forty-some years of similar conversations about race, but was, instead, about not having received enough 'positive feedback' when I did participate. What if I wasn't participating because I hadn't received enough acknowledgment of my anti-racist cred (*\*considers and rejects posting list of irrelevant evidence in support of aforementioned anti-racist cred*). Needless to say, it was disturbing to imagine that I might, even unwittingly, be just that much of an ass. (BethBethBeth, 2008)

As BethBethBeth writes, fans often do not participate in discussions of anything that they do not receive immediate feedback upon, as giving feedback in fandom is considered necessary. If a story is posted or if a discussion is started, and no one replies, it is usually assumed by the author that no one is reading. Some authors will continue to write anyway, but many will stop. In applying this same logic to race discussions, BethBethBeth (2008) began a discussion throughout the rest of fandom that suggested that meta discussions, particularly about race, could not be handled in the same way. In general, it was agreed upon that just because nobody was commenting does not mean that nobody is reading. Her post (and others like it) also helped encourage people to respond to articles they were reading even if they weren't turning into huge, multi-page posts like the one by Witchqueen/Zvi that started RaceFail.

Eventually, the Daily Deviant community was "locked" (only members can read the posts) and they made plans to move the site to another journaling site—although not directly because of the miscegenation debate. The owners of Livejournal continued to shut down, delete, and lock blogs that posted erotica, and so the community found a new home. However, it is very easy to gain access—all you have to do is have a DeadJournal account and asked to join. This is very different from the deletion and locks that occurred earlier.

In response to RaceFail, they eventually removed the “tag” as well from their site and renamed the challenge after being asked to do so by many fans of color. Although free speech proponents were upset about the changes, ultimately everyone in this conversation got to work towards a dialectic where kink can happen, racism can occur if it begins a discussion of why it is racism, and all sides of the argument will be able to discuss to their heart’s content the outcome of the situation.

In the aftermath of the miscegenation debate, a second conversation about “tone” nearly immediately arose, however. This put to test the framework they had created for discussing race (and allows me to demonstrate how this framework worked then and continues to work today).

Fans of color were increasingly pointing out racism in fandom wherever they found it. For example, fans pointed out that a *Life on Mars* story that employed the term “Paki” was inappropriate and asked for it to be removed (ChopChika, 2008). However, in each case that fans of color spoke up, they were increasingly charged by white fans of using improper “tone” in doing so. Most of the white respondents’ complaints read similarly to: “Well, I would have listened to you if you had just been more polite about it,” which seems to be a common response to being charged with racism of any kind. For more specific examples, two from the posts about “Paki” read: “In that case, it might have been considerably more courteous to have emailed the author for clarification rather than chastising her on a public forum” and “That was a personal attack and it was totally uncalled for. There's a certain type of person who just enjoys kicking up a stink” (ChopChika, 2008, paras. 1-2).

These conversations about “tone” have been ongoing, and throughout them more fans have learned that it is inappropriate to call a person of color on their tone or attitude when pointing out racist or privileged behavior. Indeed, it seems as though people are finally getting

the idea that silencing people of color is not the same thing as trying to silence someone who is not. Likewise, more lists have been created that help white fans understand how to properly discuss racism. In this way, fandom is creating a literature of critical race documents that can show new fans what is and isn't appropriate, and enable them to avoid similar problems in the future.

Tone is an interesting conversation with my classes as well. In short—it's okay to be angry. However, I do think allow students to comment on the way something is said. Why? Anger is a natural emotive response to being Othered. Rather than censoring students, this actually seems to make more of them more willing to talk. We laugh when appropriate, we yell when appropriate, and we get angry when appropriate—in short, we're disruptive. We're cyborgian. Those people who were complaining about “tone” were, in reality complaining about a person of color being disruptive. There is rarely, if anything, in the posts they mention that is angry sounding or demeaning. Instead, the posts that they felt had an angry tone were those that upset the balance of the community and would eventually rewrite it for the better.

*Analysis: Race on Networks*

As noted in Chapter 2, in “The Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway stated that the cyborg was imagined by her in the “utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender, which is perhaps a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end” and to be a creature in “a post-gender world” (1995, p. 150). Outside of imagination, the Internet is not a world without genesis, race, or gender. Our view of it is not only constructed by science fiction and authors like Haraway, but also by advertisements and our own experiences. Its reality is in turn affected by corporate interests, American politics of free speech, groups like 4Chan and

Anonymous, and racial realisms that are not mentioned by either commercialism or primary technology theories.

Lisa Nakamura (2000) began the work of tracing out our expectations of online race interactions by analyzing early Internet television and print ads. While most users of the Internet are not aware of Haraway's cyborg (1991) or Hayles' post-human (2000), they are aware of the early images of the Internet that they were sold during the 1990s—if they were alive and online then. She begins her analysis of these ads by quoting “Anthem,” an MCI ad that states: “There is no race. There is no gender. There is no age. There are no infirmities. There are only minds. Utopia? No, Internet” (as cited in Nakamura, 2000, p. 15). Other early Internet ads suggested worlds without limits, globalization (where everyone is the same on the Internet, even if they are different and exotic in real life), virtual tourism, and freedom. From a position of white privilege, such as the position of many fans, it would be easy to view such ads and expect race to not exist online at all—that everyone would act and communicate the same. Any mention of race, then, is a disruption to the “norm” of the Internet and is simply unacceptable. And even though those ads were printed years ago, peoples' conceptions of the space online have not changed considerably—especially if they happen to be part of the so-called “dominant” race.

Beth Kolko (Kolko, Nakamura, & Rodman, 2000) writes that race and gender are mostly invisible online in that race is either completely un-discussed in online forums or becomes a main topic of discussion for those same forums. Mentioning race in an online forum at all is sometimes enough to begin a flame war when there are users that simply want to live in the race free world of the Internet—this happened at the very beginning of RaceFail as described here when Daily Deviant responded poorly to Zvi's initial polite request. Many such users have grown into being able to make ignorant and privilege-denying statements such as those shown by

privilege denying dudes worldwide. When race is pointed out and attacks occur against the person who identified it, it is common for users of message boards and communities to label race as all but an unacceptable subject of discussion: “even the most innocent and ‘safe’ references to race were regularly met with snotty asides about how ‘we don’t want to go into all *that* again” (Kolko, Nakamura, & Rodman, 2000, pp. 3-4). However, what Kolko and the fans that I followed as part of this case study would agree upon is that not only do we *want* to “go there” and discuss race online, we actually *need* to.

Repressing discussions of race, hiding racist messages, and “washing” communities of biased information might be common things that moderators feel create a “safe space,” but they do nothing to change the way that a person of color might feel unwelcome within that space. Safe spaces aren’t areas where bad things never happen; instead, they should be places where things that happen are dealt with. Excessive moderation, like that fought against by the Rules of the Internet and groups like 4Chan and Anonymous who support free speech and who are against any sort of censorship, may be part of the *problem* of racism online and not the solution. After all, if you cannot talk about race, then a person of color also can’t visually or verbally represent themselves as a person of color, or discuss any issues that relate to their race, and that is a problem.

Ignoring race online is in some way supported by theories of overcoming the self/body binary. In her study of Neo-Confederates online, Tara McPherson (in Kolko, Nakamura, & Rodman, 2000) criticized the theories of Sherry Turkle (2000) and Allucquere Rose Stone (1995) for ultimately attempting to equalize that which may not be equalizable without leaning towards colonizing practices. Fostering the “rapid alterations of identity” in which users “cycle through different characters and genders” produces multiple selves, but the racial identity of these many



selves is not receiving critical attention (McPherson in Kolko, Nakamura, & Rodman, 2000, p. 118). To “champion cyberspace as placeless or as a breeding ground for new identities when talk about race is conspicuously absent” is to evade the “race question” and to underwrite the “whiteness of cyberspace” (McPherson, in Kolko, Nakamura, & Rodman, 2000, p. 120). This is just one of the ways that white becomes the default race online.

White also has become the default race online because in the Internet’s formative years, more white students and children had access to it:

The equality that has been asserted as a major cultural product of the Internet is largely a figment of advertising imagination. An ideology of presumptive equality within a society of users pervades the Internet, but this ideology does not withstand empirical evidence on differential access and usership rates, or evidence concerning geographic regions of non-access. (Lockard, 2000, p. 179)

These people that grew up in schools with access are more likely to be users, designers, and the “movers and shakers” on the web today. Presence of greater numbers of white people during its formative years also added to its ability to enforce whiteness on all populations in the name of equality (Sterne, 2000).

In one of Lisa Nakamura’s more recent texts (2008), she writes that another possible reason that the Internet became a hotbed for political posturing about a raceless society was because the key years in the development of the Internet happened during a similarly pivotal moment in American politics. During the Clinton-Gore administration, it was not uncommon to hear political pundits discussing whether the Internet was just a fad or whether its rhetoric would have more widespread repercussions. According to Nakamura, Clinton was the first President in over 50 years that had not claimed that he was going to address “racial injustices and inequalities” (2008, p. 2). As such, the Internet that was being set up at the time was full of universalizing discourse that allowed avoidance of any discussion of race. When bad things happened, such as the LA riots of 1992, the issue was less likely to be framed as a racial one, and

more likely to be framed as one of class. It seemed as if one became racist by speaking of race at all.

At the same time that academics like Selfe, Hawisher, and Gerrard (1999, 1991) were telling us that the Internet was a place where wonderful things could happen for minorities if we could help them get access, those same people's experience might have been that that technology was very white and also not for them. If a student grew up that way, if a student tells me that the Internet is "for white people," who am I to stand in front of him and say that he's absolutely wrong?

Default whiteness and enforced whiteness online have been increasingly called out and discussed both in academia and blogs of color over the past ten years. Blogs like Angry Black Bitch,<sup>11</sup> Negrophile,<sup>12</sup> Racialicious,<sup>13</sup> and BrownFemiPower<sup>14</sup> have gained widespread readership and critical acclaim (including blogging awards given out by popular news magazines and the *New York Times*) for their discussions of racial discrimination online. However, like similarly aimed Livejournal communities (and unlike those discussed here), these blogs all at one point or another request to not be sites of learning for newly awakened white anti-racists. In general, people of color on these communities do not want to become places where white people can ask questions about Otherness or begin a discussion of it. They do not want to be held up as examples of their race, or as a person or group of people that can stand in as entirely representative of their race. Additionally, they do not want to be responsible for answering the same basic questions over and over again by people who have recently discovered the online

<sup>11</sup> <http://angryblackbitch.blogspot.com/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://negrophile.com>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.racialicious.com/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://brownfemipower.com/>

anti-racist movement. When we do discuss race in class, I make this a rule as well—we learn only from classmates that eagerly want to share, and do not ask them for more than they give us.

Other communities specifically request that no one study them, and even have member applications to try to determine the identity and interest of potential members. One Livejournal community called “Sex and Race” goes so far as to make the following statement: “I don't care if you're an actual cultural anthropologist, the purpose of this space is not to provide research material or to fuel your academic observations of brown people in their natural habitat. Get it? Got it? Good” (Sex and Race, 2008, para. 1). In other words, study at the source of some online discussions of race, gender, and racism online can be seen as highly intrusive and against the definition of safe space that those sites have created.

On the other hand, in fan communities fans of all races come together to discuss television, books, and movies that they enjoy. These sites don't share the same definition of safe space as those directly associated with race and gender. They are more likely to be concerned with copyright infringement from the fan works posted or being accused of indecency (due to pornographic content) than they are about creating a place where discussions of race and gender can occur safely. However, the precautions that these communities use to protect anonymity for fanfiction writers and fanart creators serves just as well to construct a space where other discussions can occur openly and critically as well. Therefore discussions of race and gender not only occur but have become commonplace. In fact, the race and gender of the ponies in the newest television incarnation of My Little Pony (*My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*) has become one of the most common conversations that occur (PonyChan, 2011).

Lisa Nakamura believes that even though the Internet was intended to be race free, the digital inequalities that have developed over the past ten to twenties years have made it a race-

charged space (2008). This is true in fandom as well, perhaps even more so. Since popular media are less likely to have characters of color than white ones, much fanfiction and fanart is created about white characters—even if done so by artists and writers of color. If a movie has a villain that “happens” to be black, a lot of fanfiction will be spawned that also features that same black villain—often turned good. Since fanfiction and fanart is derivative of other works, it mirrors primary media available to us—and is just as white and heteronormative as that media. When our students analyze that media, they rarely *see* the whiteness and heteronormativity, and we may even have to explicitly point that out. I aim to design assignments that help them discover this fact rather than having to be told it.

The colorblind politics of fan communities of the past were certainly problematic, though there have been advances in discussing race in those communities—starting with the case that is analyzed in this chapter. The original “racefails” that occurred when blatant racism was discovered in the community of larger fandoms lead to later, smaller discussions centered around fan-created meta-conversations. For example, Livejournal user Deepad wrote a moving essay entitled “I didn’t dream of dragons” wherein she discusses the problem of growing up in India but consuming American and European fantasy novels—her race’s fantasies weren’t part of those stories, and when she tried to begin to write fantasy herself, she had difficulty deciding what characters should do and where they should do it since she had no practical experience with pubs, inns, or dragons (2009).

Fans are less worried about legality than many other groups online, although they *are more worried* about racism and sexism than many other groups online. Their groups are set up to be outside the law, breaking copyright law and sometimes even making money off of it. But the theft in their communities is “just part of a larger algorithm” (Wark, 2007, 120). It’s the play

with characterization and plot itself that is important. Although *Harry Potter* fandom is discussed in this chapter, what happened in this fandom probably could have happened in any other. That it did speaks more to the fact that *Harry Potter* generated hundreds of thousands of fans and millions of books sold—the bigger the group of people online talking about a piece of media, the more likely it is to garner attention and critical discussion. In this case, that critical discussion happened to center around race.

*Analysis: Online Fandom Discussion and Critical Race Theory*

What is most interesting to me here is that because of this case a form of *critical* race theory emerges in the communities involved. Despite the fact that most members have not read the source texts, their recommendations on dealing with racism in fandom are very much in line with those of academics studying race theory. For example, Mari J. Matsuda (1993) defines critical race theory as being

grounded in the particulars of a social reality that is defined by our experiences and the collective historical experience of our communities of origin...our work presented racism not as isolated instances of conscious bigoted decision making or prejudiced practice, but as larger, systematic, structural, and cultural, as deeply psychologically and socially ingrained. (pp. 4-5).

Critical race theory gives victims of hate speech words to talk about racism, names the injury to self that occurs because of racism (overt or colorblind), and deconstructs the ideology that creates racism to begin with in hopes of returning voices to female and minority populations (Matsuda, 2000). In some ways, it is not surprising that a race theory growing out of a community like fandom would display many of these same features—after all, the race discussions occurring there are also based in real world experiences and real reactions that real people have to them even if they do happen in fictional universes or online. However, the race theory created here could easily be applied back to situations outside of fandom as well, and thus members gain powerful tools in fighting racism and sexism outside of their particular fandoms.

Critical race theory also often asks white people to examine their own internalized racist practices in hopes of changing the ideology of the system that supports racism to begin with:

The idea that all whites are, to some extent, unwittingly or not ‘agents’ of the racism machine relates to George Lipsitz’s notion of the ‘possessive notion of ‘whiteness’ (vii). In his book of the same name, Lipsitz explains the dynamics by which whites often unknowingly consent to the perpetuation of their own entitlements and privilege in relation to non-whites. Lipsitz is careful to note that not all white people participate in this system, that indeed many have resisted it strongly and continue to do so, but the fact that there is an array of ready-made institutions or machinic systems designed to produce white privilege provides them with that choice, a choice lacking for nonwhites. (Nakamura, 2000, p. 77)

In this case, fandom may be pulling some of their knowledge of white privilege from other sources outside of formal education and publishing about race—for example, there is a Livejournal community entirely about discussing issues related to white anti-racists and letting go of privilege called Debunking White.<sup>15</sup> Many members belong to or watch both communities, so it is possible that some of these concerns are copied from one group to another. I cannot entirely argue, therefore, that critical race theory will spring up unaided in any unmoderated community where race is discussed openly and without editing. However, I do believe that online communities where race is discussed openly and where it is a welcome topic rather than those where it is avoided and ignored are more welcoming to members of all races than those which try to ban members who create problems and delete messages that might be considered offensive.

#### *Racism in Canon and Embedded Learning about Race*

Some source material (television shows and movies particularly) is also discussed within these communities that seems to contain racist or unsympathetic content. Fandom has a number of ways of dealing with this phenomenon so that fan writing might be more racially sensitive than the original material (of course, this doesn’t always work; people unaware of these practices

<sup>15</sup> <http://community.livejournal.com/debunkingwhite/>

are just as likely as ever to write homogenized characters). Within fandom, documents are produced that give “tips” to white fans in dealing with writing about characters of color and people of color that refer obliquely to critical race theories, but also are formulated specifically for fans to understand (Metafandom, 2010). This makes fandom one place where “ordinary” non-academic people are learning critical race theory in engaged, active ways through playing with existing media.

In her more recent work, Lisa Nakamura (2008) also identifies the Internet as a space that can make a difference in racialized interactions, and she firmly takes the stance that no matter what the past of race on the Internet has been that we can make positive changes in the ways we use it in the future (in other words, we can create new communities or recreate old ones to make new possibilities). Today she focuses on locating

the Internet as a privileged and extremely rich site for the creation and distribution of hegemonic and counterhegemonic visual images of racialized bodies. In the early nineties the popular Internet was still a nascent media practice, on in which default whiteness and maleness were the result of serious digital divides that resulted in primarily male and white users. (2008, p. 13)

Based upon my own time spent in Internet communities and my research here, I too believe that the Internet is an important place where people can learn about sex, gender, and race in embedded context instead of from unconnected experiences in school textbooks. However, opportunities to educate about race and gender must be taken seriously or carefully in order for them to be playful, meaningful, and un-racist and un-sexist in themselves.

#### *Classroom Implications*

Depending on the classroom, I can imagine this discussion being useful in two different ways:

1. If a student were unintentionally (or colorblind) racist in class, rather than telling the student that they had been racist and teaching them the critical race theory behind that

belief overtly, an instructor could choose to begin a dialogue with the class about race in general in hopes of generating a sort of classroom-based critical race theory list all on their own.

2. Arguments like this one and the others presented here could be chosen as topics of student rhetorical analysis, wherein the student would discover for themselves how this argument worked, how race was negotiated, and what rhetorical techniques were most persuasive.

Unfortunately, I would not argue that we can easily use these communities as places to intentionally instruct others about race and gender—for example, by asking our students to read a conversation on a Harry Potter community and write a response as if it were a textbook reading. Although the commentary on these Harry Potter communities is fascinating, embedded in context, and deeply meaningful to those who originally participated, unless someone is already a fan of the media being presented, they would probably take a stand against the fans purely for their “geekiness,” and they might not understand how deeply embedded the discussion about race and sex that was taking place was for the fans involved. Unless our students are already *Harry Potter* fans, in other words, we can’t just send them to Metafandom and tell them to learn about race. This wouldn’t be any more effective than handing them readings from famous African Americans and asking the same of them. If they don’t respect the media and are not part of the culture, learning from it would still be difficult.

Even Lisa Nakamura frowns upon fans in some of her writing about them. For example, she notes that Henry Jenkins, in arguing that fans in the “digital age demand and deserve the right to participate in the formation of media texts to put in dialogue with those that they see around them, thus resulting in productive forms of ‘textual poaching’” (2008, p. 50), suggests



that this is a desirable outcome. Her unwritten implication is that maybe it is not—maybe people shouldn't be textual poachers at all. This is the same argument that is put out against fan works of all kinds. She seems to believe that Jenkins thinks that textual poaching will create better and more diverse art. Of course, if everyone can publish it does stand to reason that more people who wouldn't before would then, and some of these people might actually be good. She takes offense, however, at Jenkins' use of Francis Ford Coppola's quote that new digital camcorders would allow a "little fat girl in Ohio" to become a filmmaker (Nakamura, 2008, p. 50). New technology is supposed to stop gatekeeping, of course, but the comparison is insulting regardless. She also inherently questions whether this sort of work is the best use of the person of color's time. She also asks whether fan works would be as celebrated by people like Coppola if we rewrote the statement "little fat girl in Ohio" to "fat little black girl" or "fat little Asian girl" since this statement would then both be racist and would call into question the girl's income status (Nakamura, 2008, p. 51). Would we value the girl's works then?

At the very least, the answer to the Harry Potter community and even the larger fandom community as it stands today is *yes*. Nakamura's own examples, AIM Buddy Icons being one, do not go nearly so far in rewriting race and gender online as these fans are trying to do (2008). While the buddy icon may very well pair up things that interest women and people of color as they switch back and forth between a series of pictures and create a blended identity for the user, they rarely create critical conversation surrounding that identity. Icons tend to be developed for specific communities (Livejournal, for example) and although they may be distributed beyond that space they are usually not critically examined. Unlike AIM users, Livejournal users and those on similar blogging systems keep anywhere from 10-100 icons on the system in order to represent their various moods and alliances, and thus serve a different purpose in the creation of

the user's online identity. Nevertheless, if doing the analysis assignment listed above, students should take into effect what icons were used by different users to say different things. Sometimes people represent their race in them and sometimes they do not—choosing the icon is a rhetorical choice for these writers and one that students might need to be guided toward.

*Analysis: Groups Resisting Groups*

In this case, fans that were unhappy with the continuing problems of racism on the Internet were quick to mobilize and act against what they saw as one slight too far—the word *miscegenation* used as a porn writing prompt. This was probably not the first time that these fans had probably encountered racism online (although it may have been the first time that many fans, white and people of color alike, had seen mass resistance occur over it). However, it was the fact that these fans were already united liking *Harry Potter* and reading *Metafandom* that allowed them to mobilize quickly, and it was *Zvi's* notoriety and snappy writing that allowed the message to be heard and spread just as quickly.

Stereotypically, it is difficult for women and minorities to protest the system that they find themselves in because they nonetheless must make use of the system in order to do so (Nakamura, 2008). However, in this case, because the original community (*Metafandom*) was set up in order to criticize and celebrate writing already, it was fairly easy to change it to criticize the writing and behavior of another part of the community (without the rules already set up by fandom, this very well could create a community that would self-destruct easily by turning upon itself; thankfully, the rules of fandom set up a case where criticism is generally requested, individuals are rarely singled out—even here a full community was called out, not an individual—and criticism is seen as helpful rather than hurtful). Since the Internet was mainly set

up as a place for white rich people to play in its earliest days, it is within these small enclaves and sites that the best resistance in regards to race and sex can begin to take shape.

Nakamura (2008) notes that it is not surprising that minorities have often sought to use online practices in order to gain power that they lack in the ordinary systems that they inhabit every day:

...it is precisely because the world inhabited by wired, technologized, privileged subjects requires constantly shifting and contingent work skills, educational preparation, and cultural expertise that the technologies developed by subjugated populations to negotiate this realm of shifting meanings can prove indispensable. (p. 20)

People of color and so-called “third world” feminists are already used to functioning in a “just in time” way, are not particularly used to living in a world of guarantees and privileges, and do not seek out authorities when wronged. This means that fans of color are far more likely to seek out retribution through education than through reporting those who wronged them to the webmasters of Livejournal—unlike white conservative users of the site who would later report the Harry Potter community for promoting what they saw as child pornography. The form of resistance is one that is more generic, growing from the community instead of from outside it.

Fan communities allow fans to take what has usually been seen as an antisocial and repressive form of media like television, the movies, or even popular novels and turn it into something that is textual and interactive (Nakamura, 2008). This also means that it is easy to form resistance in this type of community. What are fans to do in order to resist television? Form their own network (that would probably be bought out by white people anyway)? Instead, the Internet enables users to be seen as capable of critiquing the media and making something more

of it than they normally would be able to—and this includes resisting the messages that are circulated with it.

Compared to the other two cases discussed in this dissertation, the case of the racist kink does not involve individuals to the same extent as the other two do even though Zvi began the conversation. Instead, here were two groups of *Harry Potter* fans, both of who resisted the others' opinions and began a dialogue rather than simply shutting down and stopping the conversation as both the Ferret and BB did. It is difficult for the individual to stand against the group, but here two groups stood against one another and formed a more powerful ruling body about sex and race within these communities as a result. Neither of the groups of fans had a “leader” so to speak. Just because Zvi and the moderators of Daily Deviant (nearly always unnamed in these conversations) were the players that began the conversation, does not mean that they *lead* the discussion that followed. In Foucault, the greatest power is that which does not belong to a sovereign (Foucault, 1985). A single sovereign like BB or the Ferrett has to incur great personal cost in order to resist, while the group, quite simply, does not bear that same risk as risk is shared throughout the group.

The best way to defeat a group is to have a group of your own, but that is not to say that an individual can go online today and say, “Okay great! I have the answer. I know how to win online arguments; I just have to form my own community!” While that is true enough, groups that are formed around existing ideals or likes are far stronger than those formed purely for attacking or defensive purposes. If a community already exists and part of it decides to mobilize on some issue or another, they are more likely to succeed than a person posting on Facebook that they need a personal online army to get something done. This is why Anonymous was formed—to take care of some issues that 4Chan cared about. The Open Source Boob Project was run by a

subset of the Ferrett's readership and friends. The groups here were able to maintain their integrity after the first Racefail conflict because they had existed before the conflict and already cared about *Harry Potter*—not because the digital rhetorical techniques used here were that different from the ones talked about in earlier chapters.

Indeed, you may see these two groups as being in *competition* with one another rather than in direct conflict with one another. This particular instance lacks the name-calling and hate (at least, direct hate, all colorblind racism and ignorance of racism aside) that the other conflicts shared. Shirky (2010) tells us that this is probably because we often think of competition and conflict as in some ways interchangeable, with both being a bad thing. We compete for attention, for money, for prizes, etc. However, that does not have to be negative. Competition, rather than conflict, introduces resistance that can work positively towards making both sides of an argument stronger and creating a digital dialectic—and indeed, if one “side” is wrong, as was the case here, it allows them to elucidate why they are wrong without really having to be shut down, shut up, or be hurt in the process. Shirky notes that in groups, particularly, competition and conflict are likely to become collaborative and generative rather than simply negative (2010). In the right communities, the same can be said for educating people, especially about things like race.

What makes sites like the *Harry Potter* discussion written about here so important and different than those that occur amongst our friends and often in our classrooms is that they gained a widespread readership and have permanence in the archives of the sites that the took place on. The resistance that the fans of color put up will not be forgotten for a long period of time, and that allows us to not only reference that those conversations happened in the history of our communities, it also allows us to point people there when future conflicts arise, making it

easier for new members to “get up to speed” so to speak. This makes fans of color and women more welcome since they are not constantly asked to explain themselves and teach new white members about racism, what it is, and why it won’t be allowed on the fan communities that they participate on.

The resistance that can be created via online groups should not be ignored or denied—it is real, and it can be scary. Most reasonable people would see that there is reason to fear Anonymous and 4Chan (they are gross, they have successfully threatened people in the past into silence, and so on) but would you have any reason to fear an angry mob of *Harry Potter* fans? Indeed, perhaps you should. Though their methods are “less scary” in that they are less likely to find out who you are and send you hundreds of pizzas, the *Harry Potter* fans are a lot more likely to teach you something and change who you are and how you feel about yourself along the way. Perhaps that should not frighten us, but in a time of increased conservatism and political polarization there may be nothing scarier to many individuals.

Here, the winners and losers in this rhetorical exchange are not as clear cut as those presented in Chapter Two and Chapter Three. In this instance, although ultimately Daily Deviant admitted they were wrong (much to some fans’ chagrin), their site is still available, and the original posts about miscegenation are still present if you become a community member. Rather than losing, the site gained important information about race and racism, while fans of *Harry Potter* began to rewrite their community as one that did not allow even casual racism. Sometimes resistance can lead to an improved society for both sides of a conflict.

One reason this conversation occurred, as is true for the others in this dissertation, is because all of these sites were well established on the Internet before their arguments happened. Our students don’t often have that sort of established community to fall back on (in numbers

maybe, but not in time), which leaves them at a disadvantage to make really cool arguments based upon the past history of a site or a group. Fortunately, I do have one potential answer to this problem, though it will be developed more in Chapter 5. I believe that starting a new class message board, blog, and website each time new students begin a class at the semester's start may be a pedagogical error. Although many students will never go back to old classes and communicate with new students taking them now, a limited example that I've created proves that some will. I have created group blogs both about a tutoring practicum and an office administration class. In each case, some students from past semesters (because they still had access and their work was still posted) came in to comment on new posts or respond to new students' comments to their posts.

This creates a community with a shared history and many more members than we can ordinarily hope to create in an average composition classroom. Because race, gender, and class are difficult topics to teach even when you have an ideal class full of wonderful students, it was a boon to have more experienced students' perspectives about tutoring ESL or working in diverse places when we discussed these topics in class.

Without being established, being about a somewhat viral book, and without the numbers involved on both sides of this argument I do not believe that it would have been as successful a piece of digital rhetoric. I can only recreate a small part of these circumstances in my class, but I attempt to create as many as I can whenever possible.

### *Conclusion*

In the case discussed here, real life misunderstanding of terminology and the power of language was faced by a community online. By discussing rather than deleting and conversing rather than placing blame, the community was able to begin to develop a method of dealing with

racism within its ranks that is positive and enabling. Fans of color are more vocal in these communities (particularly about racism) than they were before the discussions took place, and other fans became interested in anti-racist work through these discussions.

What we learn from this examples is that although it may seem redundant to recreate critical race theory in this context (rather than just linking troubled individuals to existing writing), by recreating documents in fandom's terms, fans of color and their allies are able to create real situated meanings and consequences for the community. It is a lot more meaningful when a person that you "know" (at least online) is harmed by a comment than a person you do not know is discussing being harmed by one in reading in a composition textbook. Likewise, people within communities are likely to find that building their own theories of race and gender that are situated and complex for their own purposes may be better received than using outside scholarship. Perhaps our students would find the same to be true (unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately, nothing "bad" enough has occurred in my class to need that intervention since I originally had that idea).

One of my goals of observing these practices is to consider how these sorts of discussions could build similar communities in classrooms, or even how students might be lead to participate in similar discussions within their own fandoms. Pulling issues of race and gender into the classroom is difficult when students are reluctant to discuss it—they are, in my experience, just as reluctant to disturb the careful construction of "race doesn't exist or matter here" in the classroom as many people seem to be online.

My classroom, however, is a place where interesting conversations about race and gender have grown out of assignments that I created based upon online practices. In the next chapter I



will write about those assignments and experiences to tie my three case studies to classroom examples.

## Chapter 5

### *An Introduction to a Conclusion*

This dissertation proposes to show how gender and race can be negotiated well to create lasting conversations about them in online communities and to demonstrate the implications of these conversations for composition classrooms. This chapter closes that discussion, for now, by demonstrating the ways that these conversations have shaped new, successful assignments in my own classrooms. This is not particularly a direct route—I read these conversations over the years they happened, while I was teaching, while I was listening to my students. I then studied them and others like them in depth. They have changed my classroom practices—but not in particularly stereotypical ways, as I was looking at fairly un-stereotypical examples.

In the first case study, we looked at Biting Beaver (BB), 4Chan, and Anonymous. Ultimately due to greater numbers and organizational skills, 4Chan/Anonymous managed to convince BB to shut down her blog. They were, in this instance, more efficient and persuasive digital rhetoricians, mostly because they are experienced at being highly disruptive (as Haraway would have it). Cyberfeminists, despite the feminists' own long history of public demonstrations (including fabled bra-burnings), tend to only be “disruptive” in their own spaces whereas both 4Chan and Anonymous have a lot of experience being disruptive everywhere because of their raids. In the second study, a more neutral case occurred, wherein the Ferrett faced off against a similar group of feminists about the Open Source Boob Project. In this case, while the feminists organized on their own site (as 4Chan and Anonymous had), they went out into the Internet proper and brought their argument to the Ferrett. Nothing was censored—unlike the censorship that BB had done on her site. Ultimately, however, the Ferrett felt that he needed to shut down the discussion in order to protect his friends, so no more developed dialogue was possible after

that date. This example showed, however, that an un-moderated site ultimately lead to a more feminist ideal than a completely moderated one. In my last example, both sides of an argument about race in the Harry Potter fan community occurred. Both sides were dedicated to free speech online and did not censor either side's comments and were backed up by many digital rhetoricians holding each of two opinions. They ultimately created a dialogue that is ongoing in their community about race and gender. This last type of digital rhetoric is the sort I would like to reproduce in my classroom, but for a variety of reasons (time, lack of common knowledge outside of class, needing time to complete other assignments) this is difficult. As such, I have developed assignments based upon these and related examples that require less time but still encourage students to use technology to explore gender and race.

### *Positioning*

To begin, I feel like I must describe my own position as it helps explain why I make the choices I do: I am a white, female PhD student. I began teaching college when I was 21. To call myself unprivileged would be a lie. Despite past experiences fighting racism as a white ally and despite being the recipient of numerous incidents of misogyny and what is now referred to as “masculinism,” I do not, in any way, feel capable of standing in front of a classroom of inner city Detroit students and telling them how to view race. They are, for the most part, people of color who have experienced racism first hand. I do not want to ask them to share stories that they are uncomfortable with—and they perhaps would, seeing me as being in a position of power. Instead, I would like to guide students through *similar* conversations, projects, and papers to the digital rhetoric presented in Chapters two through four. I want to create a safe space for students to face these issues in, without feeling like they have to overshare or teach the white or male students about race or misogyny from their own lives. In the case of the traditional college

student, I want them to begin to recognize how these issues have affected their lives unknowingly (much as the participants in the Harry Potter community of 2007 did).

One popular method of dealing with issues the instructor has no personal experience with seems to be to assign a reading out of a textbook dealing with the topic and then discuss it as a class. I'm not going to say that that will never work, in fact, I'm sure it works great for a lot of instructors. I am not that instructor. During one summer's composition one class at Baker College, a student reading Alice Walker shared with her small group that she didn't want to admit that she identified with Walker—Walker was a nigger to her (she's black herself). "That would be, like, admitting I'm that too," she said (or something very close to it). Due to my own position, due to *who I am*, standing in front of the room at that moment and looking at my classroom—very diverse one and all, there were not two students of the same age or race in the entire class of 24—I could not stand and say, "Great! Let's talk about why you feel that way." I did, however, encourage her to write it in her response. She did not want to share that writing with a larger audience, feeling that it would be rejected, made fun of, or that she would be admitting a fear about herself she was not ready to talk about. There are echoes of this fear in the case study of Anonymous and BB—if you put it out there, and put a name to it, it can be hated. This student seemed to know this in a way that BB did not. So how can we "put it out there" without it being hated?

My answer doesn't surprise anyone that knows me or my classes. I love using technologies to create classroom projects that have never been done before but that are nevertheless generative of "good" writing (by the standardized rubric we use at Baker, but also by my own looser guidelines of what that means).

As an instructor of rhetoric and composition, I first took this dissertation project on as a way of determining 1. Why some very well crafted arguments by online feminists were doomed to failure and 2. How I could teach my students to not have their own arguments result in such a failure. I wanted my students to have productive conversations about race, gender, and class, but while there were plenty of articles in *Computers and Composition* about why this was important, there were fewer about how to make it happen. As a student, I had been repeatedly asked to blog, to digitally publish, and to make my work “real” for myself in whatever way possible, especially when those projects could be informative about discrimination to the outside world. As an instructor, I am quick to want the same things for my students—I don’t want the projects that we create in composition classes that are truly innovative and interesting to stall in the classroom and never be seen by anyone else. The student who says “I’m afraid to identify with Alice Walker” is interesting, but the assignments during that term had nowhere for her to put that idea that she felt safe with. That, to me, does not seem to be a successful use of the technology that we have been afforded.

No matter how I framed assignments such as blog writing and wiki editing to my students, I was ultimately met with the same sorts of resistance that I had once given my instructors. My students did not want to blog about serious topics like gender and race, no matter how interesting the subjects were to them during the relatively safe classroom discussions that we would have. They would write brilliant papers, but only parts of their best arguments would make it into their websites (or, better yet, they would just copy and paste the whole thing, probably never to be read again unless somebody plagiarized it). The rhetorical techniques that were so useful to them in the classroom were failing in online spaces in the same way that BB and the Ferrett failed—if anyone challenged them, they wanted to delete the assignment entirely

and stop the conversation. Part of my impetus in studying what works (no matter how ribald and crude) has been to begin to understand why that is. I believe that their resistance comes, in part, from the same place as the attacks presented in chapters two through four—some arguments don't translate well into online spaces unless we drastically change their form, support them by many numbers of people, or are highly cognizant of current Internet genres and the power of viral media.

Although much further study is needed to support the claims that I make about digital rhetoric, topic choice, and classroom practice, I do believe that studying communities whose message works online, no matter how crude, has a place in composition and rhetoric. Assignments created from a place of play with technology and gender and race, using technology to learn rather than being worried about a polished finished product, building of communities, and even just a simple admission on the part of the instructor about how common rhetorical techniques often don't carry over to digital systems will help to build classrooms and assignments that can ultimately lead students to know how to navigate the tricky rhetorical territory of online spaces. Doing these things will also help them build an online audience outside of the classroom, much as 4Chan, Anonymous, the Ferrett, and the Harry Potter community have already done.

#### *Getting our Students an Audience Online*

In all three examples, the primary writers (BB, 4Chan, Anonymous, The Ferrett, and Metafandom as a whole) already had a large readership at the time the incidents described in the case studies occurred. If BB had not already posted enough to her blog for people to be paying attention, no one would have cared that she thought porn was damaging to women, that her son was going to hurt women, or that she wished she had aborted her son. If the Open Source Boob

Project was the first post the Ferrett had made, very few people would have noticed. If the Harry Potter community were not highly active, there would not have been enough people on both sides of the conversation to enact an ongoing dialogue for years into the future about race and gender on their websites.

Our students do not have time to build large readerships during the course of a term for their writing—in this sense, they are screwed. But that does not mean that we cannot help them to use whatever rhetorical power they have left to attract readership before and after the term.

There are two ways to get noticed online: either you follow the rules and make good stuff that people find interesting and want to share, or you definitely don't and you create websites and articles that were outdated by web standards a decade ago (note: you do not want to be in this second group). People in the middle—those people who aren't doing anything explicitly wrong but whose works aren't very interesting either—are not going to get noticed. Most classroom work falls into this category. So we have two choices in getting our students noticed in digital publication—writing that takes into effect memes, rules, and groups, or more traditional scholarship that might get them the wrong sort of attention. (Digital academic journals escape the “serious” issues and tons of problems by nature of the numbers of readers, writers, and editors present on them—they do not make very good targets.)

Traditionally, we've leaned towards digital scholarship that looks a lot like the same stuff we'd have students do for perfectly ordinary essays (or, at least, the majority of the assignments, papers, and websites I've seen come out of classrooms have. This sample size may not be fair to the whole; after all, most of the classes I've peered into online or in person via my position as Director of College Writing at Baker College of Allen Park have been from colleagues with similar interests, backgrounds, and mentors to my own, meaning they were pulling from the

same ideals about what makes a good assignment, a good paper, or a good worthwhile website to put out into the world). The problem with this is that the instructor is having students write about the same old stuff—abortion, gun control, anti-smoking, legalizing marijuana, teen pregnancy, global warming, and obesity unless you are really lucky—and put it online. Even the best multimedia projects about these ideas are likely to get a single viewing and then be pushed aside. Why? At best it is because we've read the information in these project before but also because the projects created aren't very innately interesting. They don't really do anything you couldn't do on paper, and they certainly don't encourage you to show your friends (again, there are probably exceptions to the rule, but most student projects on these topics aren't those exceptions). If they do get outside notice, they may get comments in the style that 4Chan and Anonymous leave, telling them that the Internet shouldn't be serious business, that they are doing it wrong, or that they, themselves, are simply wrong in their opinions. None of these are things that I would want to see happen to my students online. I don't want my students to be like BB or even the Ferrett. I want them to experience something like the Harry Potter community did—an argument that ultimately strengthened the relationships of a community rather than hurting them.

On the other hand, if you were a completely different instructor who happened to be invested in enforcing the rules of traditional rhetoric, that website or YouTube video might be of interest purely because it does break so many of the Rules of the Internet. That project might use the Internet very seriously, and in doing so fails to recognize that nobody really cares about such serious usage during their own free time (or as Shirky would put it—their own cognitive surplus time). You have to be *really* good—a really good writer, a really good filmmaker, a really good designer—in order to make this sort of site work. You would, then, make it blatantly obvious



that you were doing it “wrong” on purpose. You’d make a meme out of most definitely not being a meme. Even then, you might find yourself a target for groups like 4Chan and Anonymous as well as all those who are well aware of their techniques. While we all occasionally have a student or group of students who are just that capable, we all also know that those students are relatively rare.

Regardless, we ask our students to write these things, we ask our students to do these things, and a certain percentage of them are going to be flamed and harassed for it (note: in at least one graduate class, I was that student). Are they likely to end up as a target for Anonymous? It’s highly unlikely. They certainly could fight back hard enough and long enough (and we teach them to do this when we talk about civic discourse and not allowing racism and sexism to exist in a safe space like our classrooms) but at this point I do not believe that any enemies listed with Anonymous have come from a school project. Since many of the members of Anonymous and 4Chan are young (college and high school students) they may even recognize that sometimes teachers make you make things you’d never do on your own, and that these things aren’t worth targeting.

But digital scholarship based around groups and communities could very well produce something other than a wiki or a blog or a website that is rarely, if ever, viewed outside of the classroom. Non-traditional scholarship has this potential because it is funny, quirky, and witty in a way that traditional projects often aren’t. And, in direct relation to this project, by carefully examining memes, group websites that work well, and organizational wikis, we may be able to design assignments that lead to interesting discussion of race and gender not only in our class but online as well. Best of all, this sort of online publishing is the kind that you might just show your friends who might show their friends. It’s the type that might get views from random Youtube

searches. It's the kind that is more likely, at this historical date, to get students an audience outside of the classroom and if that is one of the true aims of the instructor then assignments and projects should be designed in a way that allows for this.

We say that we want our students to be cyborgs, to be flexible, to be able to adapt to new and changing technologies, make them a part of their lives, and be able to use them to their advantage in writing and argumentative communications. But why do we not want them to be meme creators and group builders as well? The person disruptive in an online environment is often a cyborg. The cyborg takes the rhetorical situation and turns it on its head. The cyborg is someone who takes the technology and makes it part of him or herself. So why not create writers that are also cyborgs?

#### *Understanding by Design (UBD)*

In order to develop assignments inside the curriculum that I teach within that would meet the needs of that curriculum as well as my own goals for my classroom (a sometimes overwhelming task in ten week quarters) I used an Understanding By Design approach to developing assignments that met the goals of digital rhetoric that I identified in Chapter One. These elements of “good” or “effective” digital rhetoric are persuasiveness to an audience despite design, being generative of dialogue, and having the potential to be viral. Good digital rhetoric allows an audience to respond and gains power through being linked, reposted, edited, changed, and sent to your friends.

In a world increasingly governed by standardized curriculum, student learning outcomes, and grading rubrics, it is easier than ever as a University Composition instructor to get caught up in needing to “cover” all the material or meeting all the outcomes designated for a course rather than worrying about the concerns listed above. In response to this problem, a new pedagogy of

the week has been developed and has gained popularity entitled “Understanding By Design,” and I have been implementing it on Baker College of Allen Park’s campus for the past two years.

Before I get any further, I must write that our curriculum is indeed fairly strict—the three major assignments, student learning outcomes, grading, and even point values are all determined at the administrative level. As one of the administrators myself, I have even less leeway in bending the rules than my instructors do. Despite this, the dominant classroom model that the administrative system has been suggesting allows us to meet classroom outcomes while still encouraging play, collaboration, and creation of spreadable media. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, two of the developers of UBD for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, even suggest it as an answer to this specific curricular problem:

a coverage orientation—marching through the textbook irrespective of priorities, desired results, learner needs and interests, or apt assessment evidence—may defeat its own aims. For what do students remember, much less understand, when there is only *teaching* with no opportunity to really *learn*—to work with, play with, investigate, use—the key ideas and points of connection? (2006, p. 3)

UBD takes the teacher on as the designer of an experience and curriculum, but puts the emphasis on the student and what we want to see the student doing by the end of the term when we are developing assignments and courses.

Under UBD, instructors should take a backwards approach: 1. Identify the desired results, 2. Determine acceptable evidence for having those results met (assessment) and 3. Plan learning experiences and instruction to reach step 1 (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006). I like these steps as a way of developing assignments that look more like the arguments I have been studying online because they make getting that sort of engagement out of students seem less impossible. I also like them, as an administrator, because while “assess” might mean giving tests, I’ve been able to teach this method to other instructors to also include self-assessment. We should assess our classes critically without being cruel, but also be encouraged to find what works really well and

present, publish about it, and otherwise share it with others. I have been able to encourage instructors to publish and present about their interesting assignments as part of their self-assessment.

Stereotypical digital publishing in classrooms does not always gain a large audience. One of the learning outcomes that was set by my institution and that I adopted for myself was for students' writing to need to adapt to many audiences—and, in my mind, not just fake ones. Students in some of our more advanced classes within majors publish pamphlets with local businesses, for example, and get feedback through these projects—and I did not reject these as potential places for this to happen. However, due to limited time spent with students (10 weeks versus many terms in their major field) and the fact that they were still honing writing and graphic design skills in a 100 level class, ultimately I felt that technology based projects that could reach out between terms (where students from one semester were invited to talk back online with those from this semester), that made use of meme and macro building, and that would ultimately bring out discussions of race and gender *with this student population* would be a better choice.

My first step was finding things that I wanted students to *be like*, since I truly did not think that imageboards like 4Chan were what I wanted copied in my classroom. What follows, then, are the memes I looked to for further examples and the assignments that I developed out of them and out of the study I did in chapters two through four.

#### *Desired Outcomes*

One of my favorite online phenomena is “sweding.” Sweding is a practice developed after the 2008 film *Be Kind Rewind*. In the film Jack Black and Mos Def are left in charge of a video store in a poor neighborhood in New Jersey (Gondry, 2008). This neighborhood (Pasaic,

NJ) is not just poor, it is very diverse and, at the beginning of the movie, is somewhat segregated as well. While people might live near others of other races, they don't particularly interact much except two best friends (played by Black and Mos Def). The community is falling apart at least partially because they do not work together (Gondry, 2008).

When Jack Black accidentally erases all the tapes, the already doomed store (it is to be condemned and torn down for condos) seems to be finished. However, the two begin to refilm shortened versions of the movies that have been lost using all of the things that they have around and available to them (I also use "using all available means for persuasion" as a quickie definition of rhetoric in my writing classes). They do not save the store, but the entire town comes together as a cohesive unit, playing with their favorite movies and creating what they call "sweded" versions of the films (Gondry, 2008). The film argues that playing with movies this way and that producing a sweded movie can create community. That community can cross economic, age, gender, and racial boundaries. The last scene of the film shows a large number of people watching the final movie that the town produces together. These people have not yet been seen in the film, and we are seemingly supposed to believe that they have been drawn in by the sweded films to care about this community that they had not in the past (in other words, sweding had gone viral in the film, and it did in real life too).

The film was seemingly released at an ideal *kairotic* moment. Cheap digital cameras were making it easier to post video online than ever before, and YouTube had gained mainstream popularity. Before it was even officially in theaters, people who saw previews began pulling out their own video cameras and making their own brief, cheap movie remakes and posting them to *YouTube*. The movies they made pulled out all the best and most important elements of the films such as scenes, characters, costumes, and even camera angle. A candy wrapper easily became the

glass elevator in *Willy Wonka (Original) Sweded* (Elliott, 2008) while a snow globe became the Eye of Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings Sweded Theatrical Cut* (TheRegent76, 2008). While the number of new sweded films has dropped in the past three years, the movie had undoubtedly tapped into something in their audience—people wanted to make these films too. What was posted online was clever and rhetorically sound. I immediately wanted my students to do something like this. Furthermore, because film was used, the student papers that came out of these projects became an ideal place for students to critique representations of race and gender in movies, as well as complain about the lack of strong female and African American characters.

A similar video meme is the “LipDub.” While far more recent, LipDubs went viral on college campuses worldwide very quickly (in fact, the most popular of them was not made in the United States at all). The concept behind a lipdub is to choose a favorite song and then collect a large number of people (which is why University students are ideal for this project) that are willing to appear on camera. The camera-person then walks through them as they pretend to sing along to the song and perform any number of crazy actions. The most successful lipdubs are walkthroughs of public buildings because they give people ample spaces and rooms to hide behind and in during the filming. They were created in 2006, but did not spread quickly until they were popularized via 4Chan fairly recently (KnowYourMeme, “LipDubs,” 2011). As the genre has developed, it has also become common for participants to dress up in strange costumes and carry objects—none of which usually has anything to do with the song and whose meaning is up to interpretation by the audience (and from comments left on these videos online, most people assume that they have something to do with the person holding them).

Of interest here, since each of these projects has a component related to race and gender, is the fact that many lipdubs are produced in other countries by students who don’t even speak

English—but they choose songs in English and some of the students try to represent themselves in stereotypical “American” ways (someone being dressed as the Statue of Liberty, for example, is common). Others choose to gender-bend, while still others choose to represent themselves in ways that enact their race and culture. In other words—present-day lipdubs are a place where students enact race, gender, and culture in interesting ways that deserve study that, I believe, could be turned into an interesting class assignment that also plays with gender, representations of race, and culture in similar ways.

Blogs are another place where I carefully researched outcomes. Students, as I noted earlier, tend to be resistant to blogging, especially when they are asked to create their own. A student who might spend 23 hours a day on her phone and at least 21 of those also on Facebook will magically not know how to use the Internet when faced with a blogging interface. Furthermore, other students seemed shy about writing on blogs. I, myself, had written a blog for a course that was later flamed for its feminist perspective, and had become wary of asking students to write about gender and race (or politics and religion, for that matter) in a public forum. Even if they did not know they could be attacked for it, *I* knew that they were potentially going to be. While I had moved similar conversations onto locked systems like BlackBoard, those systems did not earn them the advantage of an audience outside of the classroom and would not ever be accessible to anyone else.

Additionally, the blogs that I wanted them to copy weren’t anything like the ones that they were writing for my class—they had a long history, many writers, and included many more visuals than class blogs. Students felt like they had to “write” in order to get “credit” for an idea—even if a visual, a link, or even an embedded YouTube video would have made their point far more effectively. The most popular blogs online often have more than one author

(Feministe.us, for example, has about 25 and Collegemisery.com has 100, while Metafandom has posted the work of over 1000 writers). They put all these varying peoples' opinions in one place, which means that discussion is often furious and long. Furthermore, they don't shut down every couple months and start over as often as single author blogs—they have a long history and an archive available for people to pick up and read if they want to catch up or understand the viewpoints of some posters better. The blog doesn't disappear even when the entire cast of writers changes over—it is still there, still being published, and still has an audience.

The blogs I was looking at for examples (Feministe, Metafandom, and Shapely Prose, for a few) deal with race and gender in very positive ways. They were quirky and fun, while being serious as well. One, Metafandom, was the primary site of research for Chapter Four. Feministe is a site where feminists gathered and discussed the Open Source Boob Project while the argument was ongoing. Shapely Prose examines issues related to bodies—specifically female and often raced ones—in the Western world today. I felt they were able to do this because of their numbers, but because they were seemingly more aware of common internet trends than single authored blogs (it only takes one or two authors to be knowledgeable of a trend—poorly drawn comics being used to illustrate points is a recent example—for everyone else posting to and reading the blog to become aware of that trend and want to try it out for themselves).

When students see what another student is doing on their own website, blog, or wiki page, then start doing that same thing on their own, the first student is very likely to accuse them of “cheating” or “copying.” I have also, unfortunately, known teachers who will accuse them of the same. Copying on the Internet is the way things get to be viral. The person who created the first lolcat is not upset that they have since become popular and does not accuse each person who makes one as being a plagiarist. Simply knowing this is enough for most instructors to stop



viewing one person posting a cat picture and then others posting similar but different cat pictures as a problem, but students may feel like they are in competition with another. If they do, a good idea belongs to *them*, not to anyone else. Fortunately, group blogging may alleviate this problem. If a teacher is careful to leave the site mostly unmoderated, one student's funny idea can quickly be augmented and reposted by another and go viral in a limited instance in the class at least.

The last Internet site I'd like to talk about (briefly) is PonyChan. PonyChan is so new that I have not had a chance to use it in class, but I believe that it proves that 4Chan's imageboard is not an unmitigated evil.

When 4Chan was founded, the creator made the most simple interface for an interactive website possible: you could log in with any name, you were encouraged to upload a picture, and you could say whatever you wanted (4Chan, 2011). Eventually, due to the needs of various members, different boards were created within the site—including the infamous one with all the porn and hate, which was referred to as /b/. 4Chan updates very quickly, conversations get long fast, and it has little to no history feature—you can go back 20 pages or so, but past that the domain gives up no data. Although the format is used on their site for spreading laughs and hate, it could be used, perhaps, for any number of things (such as I've argued here).

In Fall 2010, The Hub (a television network primarily owned by Hasbro that shows cartoons about their toy holdings) began showing the new *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* series (Faust, 2010). The executive producer, Lauren Faust, had worked on past television shows like the *PowerPuff Girls* and *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends*, and it became nearly immediately evident that this series was palatable for adults as well as little girls—something the past pony series were not.

Odder, though, the ponies and their pictures nearly immediately became memes on 4Chan. People created image macros using the ponies, and began suggesting that 4Chan start practicing the ideals on the show—friendship, harmony, and love. Memes were created rapidly.



Figure 4: PonyChan

It was quickly determined that most of the people posting ponies to 4Chan were guys—they began to call themselves “bronies.” The bronies were so popular that they eventually split off and founded their own imageboard which they call “PonyChan.”

Other more traditional sites quickly followed (such as Equestria Daily), but PonyChan was and is the most popular. The site became a hotbed for art and meme creation. The unmoderated status of the community did not lead to hate, as it had on 4Chan. Instead, the motto that the Bronies live by is one of love and acceptance. If hate is posted or a flame war started, their response is to “love and tolerate the SHIT out of you” (PonyChan, 2011). Given freedom of expression, the Bronies quickly made techno remixes of the music in the episodes (Euro PonyBeat, 2011), named background characters including two (Derpy Hooves and a DJ they called DJ-PON-3) that would become “canon” when they were mentioned in the official music video for the show called “Equestria Girls,” began comics, made merchandise, created complex flash games with

professional production standards, and critically dissected every last pony episode available. Of late, they have been reported on in both *Wired* and *Time Magazine*. Because they are vocal and creative, the show creators and developers have started paying attention to this underserved audience of their show—and who wouldn't want their students to garner that sort of attention? Do I think that Derpy Hooves is the pinnacle of Internet rhetoric? Well, quite frankly, no. On the other hand, if any part of a student project were picked up, read, and used by hundreds or thousands of other people online, I'd be very impressed and quite honestly thrilled.

**DERPY HOOVES**



PonyChan proves that the concept of 4Chan and imageboards can be taken beyond the hate and be used, to be punny, for the power of good. While I still have reservations about imageboards, I now believe that because they are easy to code, quickly updated, and take up very little bandwidth, it might just be possible to use them for classrooms. Updating them would not be labor intensive for students or teachers, and instructors would not have to know very much in order to maintain one.

Figure 5: Derpy Hooves

Specifically, this imageboard being made about the ponies allowed for discussion of gender and race and how they relate to *My Little Pony*. A common topic on PonyChan has been the episodes “Over a Barrel” and “Bridle Gossip” (Faust, 2010) in which Native Americans are seemingly shown to be buffalo living in teepees and African Americans as zebras who practice voodoo in huts in the woods—both very stereotypical and prejudiced representations. Because the imageboard format requires that threads be deleted often and quickly by the server, these two episodes have been brought up for discussion over and again by new site members who want to discuss them (PonyChan, 2011). In more ordinary messageboards, somebody who brings up a topic that has been posted before is usually told they should use the search function and they are

directed to the earlier thread and no further conversation occurs. Here, even if anyone tells them that it has been discussed before, it is usually discussed again. This creates a better ongoing argument about the problems the show has presented to site members than a more “normal” message board. These conversations also prove that imageboards can be used to discuss serious topics, something that 4Chan frowns on, without being attacked.

### *Assignments*

In my sections of ENG3010 at Wayne State and ENG102 (both comp 2) at Baker College of Allen Park, I made my first assignment of the term be a rhetorical analysis of a movie. I had recently seen the film *Be Kind Rewind* (Gondry, 2008) as described above, and inadvertently developed an assignment using UBD philosophy. In my class, after showing the film I tell students they are to work in groups to swede (3-8 minute) versions of the movie their group chooses to analyze. After their filming and editing is done, they are then to individually write a rhetorical analysis of the movie based upon the sweding work that they did.

What has remained amazing to me in the years following when I first assigned this project is that students can and do form a very special sort of classroom community around the project. They all step into roles best suited for them, play to their strengths, and ultimately finish a project that they are proud of. They often upload them to Youtube, share them with family and friends, and from that day on are truly excited to come to class. The sort of engagement and energy that I used to experience at the end of the term is now present from this project on during the course. At Wayne State, most of the students uploaded their projects to YouTube, one group won a cash reward based upon their *Napoleon Dynamite* project, and many more got external positive feedback on their work.

Due to the nature of the student bodies at both of these schools, students would also end up discussing race and gender as they cast their projects and even chose movies. I told them up front they would have to swede whatever movie they chose. At Baker, our student body is largely female and primarily made up of students of color. Groups argued every term because they wanted to play strong characters of color and female leads—and there just weren't many to choose from. They would end up choosing films they liked anyway (rather than limited themselves to roles they “fit”) and so changed the genders and races of characters willingly. When they did this, I asked them to write about this process in their movie as more than “well, we didn't have a white guy so a black girl had to play the role.” Instead, they were asked to investigate why those populations are underserved by the film industry.

The essays that are written after this project are also more likely to examine the film from the viewpoint of a producer rather than a consumer of media. In other words, students look at the films as something that somebody made—not just something they happened to watch. One of the main goals I had in beginning this project was to get students to stop simply summarizing the object of their rhetorical analysis for me and to actually get into the stuff that made that object work. Talking about various parts of film criticism and terms had not had the effect I wanted in the past. The sweded films, however, did. In addition to being forced to consider why the female lead was white, students also had to think about filming techniques, characterization, costuming, and even setting.

My best examples occurred during a recent term at Baker College of Allen Park. During the summer term of 2010, one group told me that they wanted to analyze the film *Friday*. Ice Cube's *Friday* (1995) depicts a single day in the life of Craig, a recently laid off young man in a suburb of L.A. During the movie, he gets high with his friend (something he did not do often or

at all before), is shot at, argues with his father about his lack of employment, defends a girl, gets into a fight, and learns from his dad what it means to be a man. A man, it turns out, uses his fists to solve his problems rather than guns (Ice Cube, 1995).

My students said that they enjoyed the movie because it was funny—characters swear, smoke weed, and there are a lot of funny quotes. However, during the filming of their movie something interesting happened.

One young man turned out to be a very good actor (something he did not even know himself). He played Craig's father, Smokey (the friend who gets Craig to smoke weed), and a host of other background characters. He did an excellent job imitating the acting styles present in the movie, complete with accents. He was a student of color portraying characters of color, and was doing so very well.

After the first week of filming he came to me, though, and was quite concerned. His group was very diverse—they had several different races represented, and their ages ranged from 18 to the mid-50s. He told me that he knew he was doing a good job, but that he was getting really offended when some of the white girls (a person about his age and an older woman) were laughing at him. He felt that they were laughing at him instead of with him. "These are *our* jokes," he told me. We had a long talk about it, and his experience ended up being the focus of his paper.

I asked him how that changed his view of the original movie (after, of course, talking to his group members about their behavior). He ended up analyzing the film and writing about how it became popular with white audiences as well. He felt that people were most likely laughing at these characters, and that films like this one (he compared it to the rest of the series, movies by Tyler Perry, and "all of those featuring Eddie Murphy in a fat suit") were not liberating to people

of color at all. While people of color might well feel that these films are theirs and provide much needed comic relief, they have been picked up by other audiences as well and do his community a disservice. Discussions with his group yielded that some of the others felt the same way—especially about the way the neighborhood was represented. They didn't want everyone to think that the neighborhood in the movie, which looked and felt a lot like the ones that they lived in in Detroit, was the way things really were. The movie shows a lot of drug use, violence, and fear, and while these things might be funny, they weren't "every day." In short, they wanted people to see the good parts of their communities highlighted in films—not sugarcoated, but not made fun of and shown in only a negative light either.

Students also become part of a larger phenomenon when I ask them to make these sweded movies. Sweding became popular after *Be Kind Rewind's* original 2008 release, as thousands of people went out, sweded their own movies, and put them on YouTube. I do not require students to share their films in this way, but many do. Other groups may have gotten less fortune from their sharing than the *Napoleon Dynamite* one, but their projects have garnered thousands of hits and many comments on the movie sharing site—gaining them the outside audience I always hoped to get them through past technology projects.

Playing with the films in this way, through the use of technology, allowed the students to access rhetorical invention in ways that meme creators often do but students often don't. It sets up their membership as part of a group of students (the E.T. group, for example), and changes their fate from one of passive compliance to active resistance to the way that classrooms ordinarily operate. I also allowed them to pick any film to write and refilm as long as it wasn't porn. This was my way of making the project "unmoderated." At Baker, students are not allowed to swear (and neither are teachers), but providing that they analyzed the language of their film in

their paper I allowed it to stand. This was a deliberate choice that made the aforementioned *Friday* project possible. It also allowed students to analyze the audience of *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* (including one girl who was offended that filmmakers felt that she, part of the primary audience of the project, was really so stupid to only like dumb jokes).

The most interesting outcome of the project is students' willingness to gender and race-bend. Many student papers were written bemoaning the lack of strong female and person of color lead characters. When students are told that they may select any film, most go through a process of listing their favorites. At Baker, our student population is about 75% female. This worked especially well in getting students to consider gender in film since at least one group would always end up getting stuck either playing male characters or discussing the lack of female characters in their favorite films. One group refilmed *The Breakfast Club* with women—including one lady blatantly hitting on the others on film—something she was comfortable doing but spent a lot of time writing about in her paper. She felt the film did a good job bending stereotypes but a bad job showing the various roles women could play in high school beyond those stereotypes. Why isn't the nerd in the movie a girl? Why are the only roles available in this movie for women the freaky girl and the popular girl? Are there not any inbetween?

Given the success of this video project, I also believe that one of the reasons it succeeds is because video is inherently unclass-like—we just don't do it in classrooms all that often. The next time I teach Composition 1 (a class that is yet, alas, video project-less in my syllabi), I plan on starting with a LipDub assignment. I suspect that many LipDubs require more critical thought than they appear to. Students who participate usually choose their own costumes and location in the film, and so I think that people are putting quite a bit of critical thought into how they will represent themselves.



Self-representation is an assignment that I have played around with, with varying results, for years. For example, I have had students write personal narratives built around an object, a memory, or a place. For this lipdub project, I will have students carefully choose their song as a class, then choose what part of the song they will appear during (again considering the relation of the line of the song to self, including gender, race, and class presentation—will you choose something like yourself or not? Why?). Likewise, their chosen costume, props, and location on campus will all be a part of a reflective essay that they write about themselves. They must tie this object, the song, and their location to a past experience which will then become part of a personal narrative. A second project will be to analyze another student's representation in the film, based upon the same information.

As a lead in to this project, we will be watching existing lipdubs, researching the culture and history of the places they are in, and perhaps even contacting students at other schools who have made these projects when possible. Students will have to thoroughly analyze their own representation in terms of gender, race, and class in order to receive full credit.

At the end of the project, in addition to posting the lipdub itself somewhere public, students will post their self-analysis as well as analysis of others to the class Blackboard site and be asked to respond to each other. By doing this, they will be able to see what other people thought of their analysis, where their own representation might not work with certain audiences, and be able to see how an audience might view them. If we have managed to contact students who have made lipdubs elsewhere during the term, we will also invite them to look at our project and respond to our student essays—gaining students the outside readership that I would like them to have, especially when looking for outside perspectives on gender, race, and class. I suspect this last part will be very important when working at Frostburg State University because

the students there are primarily white and traditionally aged, so an “outside” audience will help them view their own project from an entirely different perspective.

I have also begun to examine the ways that our classroom technology usage fails to fit in with the way the larger Internet is used as a whole. Another change that I’ve made has been to class blogs. Blogs seem like a wonderful idea, but engender much student resistance. In short—they just don’t write them, or if they do, they are very short. They hate having to go read each other’s and leave comments, and even when I force them to, it’s pretty obvious that the writing is forced. As I noted before, they also do not like when other students take their ideas and repost or augment them, because they see this as cheating, copying, and maybe even plagiarizing. Despite all this, blogs are part of two of my sites of study (and a blog-based community, Metafandom, is the third) because they are effective digital rhetoric when used in other ways.

By looking at some of the best blogs out there (including Feministe, Metafandom, Engadget, Sex and Race, and even Inside Higher Ed’s blogs section), I had noticed that most of them do not have a single author. When I was teaching OAD121 (Office Procedures and Technologies 1 for Administrative Assistants at Baker College of Allen Park), I created a group blog and had each student create a username on it. They could post and read on the same site. I noticed immediately that student discussions about sex and race were more productive in this space than they had been on Blackboard or on separate blogs.

The course was a hybrid—we met half online and half in person. This asked students to spend at least 8 hours per week on the class discussion board or blog, and I had to be able to prove this was adequate replacement of “seat time.” Therefore, lack of participation on the blog was a major problem. The course itself is half about business ethics and half about using actual business technology. We spent class time on the technology, and I wanted them to write about

the ethical issues their text and the class presented to them in their online time. These included issues about gender, race, discrimination, and racism.

When I moved to the group blog, students were immediately more active than they had been on the discussion board or the individual blogs. They also shared more links, images, and examples than previously. They quoted one another, would repost slightly edited pictures, and told me that they felt more like they were building something together rather than competing for grades. However, the blog was limited (at that time) to that group of students in that class.

This worked relatively well. The next term, I then added the new students without deleting the accounts or access of the past students, and so on. They were allowed to go back and read what other people had said about past prompts. Old students often commented on new students' posts because I left their accounts active. They were in conversation with people who had finished the program and were working about what things were really like versus what their book had to say about them. Then, because the blog had a lot of activity, people from the outside started looking in as well.

While that first group of students did not see the immediate effects of the new blog style that later terms did, they did eventually communicate with future students in the course and were able to share their experiences as experts. Some of them chose to gently tease the new students about how wonderful life was after college. I no longer teach the class, but see that comments still are being posted from time to time, although many of the students have moved their posting over to Facebook and have added people that they met through the blog (and, from what I understand, this lead to at least one person getting a job where an older student already worked).

This also introduced further diversity to the classroom in race, gender, and experience level. When I regularly taught this course, most of the students were older white women.

However, over time, more and more people of color, men, and younger students began to enroll. By the blog being accessible by multiple classes of students at once, a relatively un-diverse class one term would have access to the diverse experiences of people outside of the immediate classroom. The discussions students had in and out of class became much less one-dimensional when they were interacting with a larger, more diverse group via the class blog. This did not work well, however, during the last few terms that I taught the course. If only one or two students were enrolled as independent study students, other students were far less likely to return. Of course, a discussion board or other device would likely fail in this situation as well.

In learning these relatively abstract technologies (video, blogs, etc.), I believe my students are learning skills that are applicable outside of the immediate assignment. They are practicing skills that help them become better digital rhetoricians in other places. Jesper Juul (2005) emphasizes that even if we are learning this specific thing at this specific time, we are also learning how to perform an abstract technological act that this one is part of at the same time. So we aren't learning how to swede a movie or post on a blog, we are also learning how to communicate with digital rhetoric as well—and we aren't just communicating with other students, we are playing with the “big kids,” so to speak, because we are also opening our class assignments and classrooms to people outside the University via the web. This is better than that which occurs in some of the other examples I have enumerated here because it does not have to be about race or sex or porn—instead, it is about how to use the Internet rhetorically to your best advantage. In today's world of networked communications, that is a worthy goal.

One of my deepest concerns about our current movement in Composition and Rhetoric is that we will fail to take advantage of the real ways we can engage with and teach our students about topics like gender and race and instead continue to try to force them into an outdated

standard of “the way things are done” because that is, on the surface, easier to assess. As a program director I can attest to the fact that a standardized curriculum with a standardized textbook with the same old readings is easier to assess, but at the same time, the best work that I see out of every class I have collected data from rarely comes from the standard assignments. Instead, when teachers develop innovative assignments that allow students to work with concepts and leave them many potential (and unmoderated) paths to completion, the work is outstanding, the students are happy, and the teachers cannot wait to show it off. What more could an instructor want?

Understanding by Design is one approved (by my administration) method of explaining why we want students to create the things we are having them create. Why should students write blogs in classrooms? Why should they make movies? Why should they write papers? If we can explain these things in an outcomes-based manner, we will be more likely to be able to keep them in our classrooms in the future and help our students become adequate digital rhetoricians at the same time.

### *Rhetorical Invention*

I believe that lack of moderation is one way to introduce rhetorical invention to the classroom. When I first stumbled upon 4Chan and Anonymous, realizing that the lack of censorship in these communities led to widespread invention and remixing identified for me one of many things that was wrong with my own use of technology in my classroom. One way that humans create and learn is through being immersed in a domain (Gee, 1999). We play make believe as children and come up with stories. We develop moves and strategies by playing sports. We eventually learn that there is a perfect technique for playing *Ms. PacMan* through actually working with the game itself—not watching, not reading. We can read that each ghost

has a different personality and actually behaves differently but until you experience it you do not really understand it. We can understand, in theory, exactly how to do something on a computer but until we do it ourselves we will likely still not be able to understand the actions we have to take as well as we would like to. Indeed, as I teach many older students I also know that many of them will even be afraid of cameras, computers, and related technology until they find out that recent advances have made these projects simple to create.

Freedom (like that which happens on 4Chan and PonyChan) is an intervention that our classrooms need now more than ever when administrators call for rigid structure and easy to assess outcomes. Shirky (2010) writes that we are lousy at predicting what new technologies actually can do for us. We cannot determine, until we are using them, what a new communication tool is actually good for. If that's true, now that the Internet is in common use we need to seriously take another look at this technology and think seriously about what is working on it and what is not, and not just take our administrator's word for it when we are told that a technology is best used in one general way.

What *works* is what 4Chan and Anonymous and fandoms have created for us. We have a choice—we can recreate small bits of this in our classrooms, or we can put our students into the sites themselves by having them create memes, introduce them to the Internet community, and use things that are already made for us. While I'm perfectly happy having my students make Lolcats as an assignment, that feels less authentic than getting them to come up with their own image macros. If something like Privilege Denying Dude can catch on enough to shut down a Tumblr account (and indeed, if they had not shut it down, it would have likely dropped their entire service), then a meme that my students come up with that makes fun of a common

occurrence in their own lives is just as likely to gain momentum, if not on the Internet as a whole, then at least on campus. If it did that would be a rhetorical triumph.

Because new media has become part of our common lives now does not mean that we can stop relooking at it and re-determining how to best teach argumentation via it. In other words, “Creating the most value from a tool involves not master plans or great leaps forward but constant trial and error” (Shirky, 2010, p. 191). We need to learn to get more out of the process of these shifts, because there are communities out there that are already doing so.

Of course, such pedagogical systems in classrooms will have problems; however, “as a general rule, it is more important to try something new, and work on the problems as they arise, than to figure out a way to do something new without having any problems” (Shirky, 2010, p. 205). Rather than being afraid of attempting new pedagogies and assignments, I have begun to introduce the new at every turn that I can. What has been the result? I am a happier instructor and I have happier students who write better assignments. I am lucky enough to have one of the best graduation retention statistics in the Baker College System at about 89% (Carina, 2011). The Internet has taught me that something rarely becomes viral years after it was created. Likewise is it with technology assignments. Waiting until something is no longer fresh to bring it to my classroom will not make my students as happy as showing them the new now.

#### *A Conclusion to the Conclusion*

Of course, I cannot end this discussion without reminding the reader that the examples written about here do not always create a positive or inclusive space. 4Chan and Anonymous primarily use their spaces for mass terrorism (although they are getting “better” at using their sites for what we generally consider to be good ends). We have a great deal of what Shirky refers to as “cognitive surplus,” and we have to decide how to use it. Giving students complete freedom

in the creation of online communities for themselves might well lead to the creation of something like 4Chan itself, instead of a PonyChan or Metafandom. To make these classroom-appropriate we must carefully monitor and moderate the unmoderatable to create something that looks more like a *Harry Potter* fan community or Privilege Denying Dude—not an easy task.

But the Internet *does not have to be a negative, racist, or sexist space*. It is not, by definition, any of these. It is a *fun* space, but it is not a hate filled space by definition.

We have a cognitive surplus, and we must decide whether we will use some of it in educating our students or allow them to continue using their free time to browse Facebook, text each other, or play *WoW* (Shirky, 2010). We can let the digital rhetoric we teach stay as it is today, or we can begin to use a new kind of digital rhetoric as well. Our input will matter; if we can inject the public and civic value that we wish was there (as long as we don't try too hard and create a forced meme—but no matter) then we will help them learn not to be better digital rhetoricians that attack feminists or people of color, but will support minorities instead. This will not be an easy task, but it is one that I think is worth undertaking.

Can we afford to continue to let the people who are at the bleeding edge of using the Internet be the people who make sexist and racist jokes just because they are offensive? Or can we use the systems that they have designed to get the most of out of our technology and fight racism and sexism? Shirky (2010) notes that we can get what we want out of the Internet, but we have to make it. We cannot simply sit back and be passive observers. Likewise, we cannot use the Internet as we have in the past in our classrooms and continue to have assignments fail or fail to engage students—doing so will mean that our students not only will fail to learn but that we too will submit to ennui and boredom and begin to spend more of our time away from the jobs we love.



Lastly, we have to take advantage of the crowd. We have to recognize that more is different, and that we need to get our students out onto the *real* Internet and away from our safe Blackboard, WebCT, or Angel classes if we want to experience that within our students' rhetorical education. We must embrace the idea that cyborgs are playful and disruptive, and that the cyborgs that Haraway wanted might not lie in the feminist population online at all, but perhaps elsewhere.

In classrooms, we often want to create or defend utopia. But in Internet, there is no utopia, there is no safe space. We have to come out of our safe spaces and begin to live in ugly reality instead.

... the very possibility of utopia is foreclosed. It is no longer possible to describe a shining city upon the hill, as if it were a special topic untouched by the everyday, workaday world. No space is sacred: no space is separate. Not even the space of the page.

(Wark, 2007, 102)

Networks and groups are curious and critical, but they are not perfect. They are not non-violent. Rather than escaping into the digital from the everyday, we should recognize and augment the digital *in* the everyday. The digital rhetoric examined here does this, and its success is partially based upon making fun out of what we already do. We must, then, collaborate, recognize effective digital rhetoric where we find it rather than where we want to find it, and mutate amenable spaces for cyborgism, creativity, and community if we are to remain rhetorically sufficient into the future. I want to teach our students how to be the creators of digital rhetorics, not just their very enthusiastic consumers.

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**ABSTRACT****GENDER AND RACE, ONLINE COMMUNITIES, AND COMPOSITION  
CLASSROOMS**

by

**JILL ANNE MORRIS****August 2011****Advisor:** Dr. Richard Marback**Major:** English**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

As the culmination of a two-year long Internet ethnographic study of three separate sites, I use examples of women and minorities fighting against discrimination online to explore the power structures inherent to networks and how these might affect classroom practice. I will show how our ordinary assumptions in rhetoric and composition as well as computers and writing about the necessity of safe spaces in fostering communication about gender and race and safety for people of color and women online might actually be harming the rhetorical effectiveness of these writings. To focus this discussion, I will develop three case studies and in the concluding chapter I will offer suggestions as to how instructors can use this culture to their advantage and get students involved in techniques for Internet invention in the classroom that they may already participate in outside of it.

## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

I am a new media activist and digital humanist who specializes in Computers and Writing and Gaming Studies within Rhetoric and Composition. I earned my Masters of Science in Rhetoric and Technical Communication from Michigan Technological University in 2004, and with this dissertation I will complete my degree requirements of my PhD in English from Wayne State University in 2011. Between my degrees, I worked as a technical communication specialist and contractor, and continue to teach business and professional writing courses whenever possible even if Composition is my first love.

I have been an adjunct instructor of English, Writing, Computer Science, and Office Administration. I was a Graduate Teaching Assistant for three years. I was the Co-Director of Wayne State University's Writing Center for two years from 2007 to 2009 where I began an online tutoring system and redesigned the training of incoming tutors. After I held that position I was named Director of College Writing at Baker College of Allen Park where I direct the department, develop curriculum, train instructors, founded and run the Writing Center, carry out our budget, create professional development opportunities for faculty, and am a student advisor. I also participate in community theater and chorale activities, and connect these with my classroom practice whenever possible.

I was recently named Assistant Editor of the *Kairos PraxisWiki*, and have published two articles in the past year. When I am not busy with work, I enjoy time with my family and tiny little Pomeranian Delilah, who will be very happy when I finish my degree. At the end of this project, I will be moving to Maryland and taking on the job of Assistant Professor at Frostburg State University—we both can't wait!