Chapter 5: Teaching and Transformation: Donna Haraway’s “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” and Its Influence in Computer-Supported Composition Classrooms

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In an increasingly global and post-modern world marked by rapid technological, political, and social change, teachers at all levels face the difficult if not impossible challenge of preparing a coming generation for a world that they, themselves, have never seen or experienced (Mead, 1970). Within this context, Donna Haraway’s “Manifesto for Cyborgs” has offered a broad range of humanist teachers and scholars a challenge and the possibility of hope.

In part, it is Haraway’s interdisciplinary background in philosophy, biology, and English that has made her work so important to such a wide range of scholars. She earned her Ph.D. in biology from Yale in 1976 and has since helped to articulate and explore the interconnections among language, science, and technology both as a scholar and as a teacher in the History of Consciousness program at the University of California Santa Cruz. Her major works include Crystals, Fabrics and Fields: Metaphors of Organicism in Twentieth-Century Developmental Biology (1976), Primate Visions: Gender. Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science (1989/1992), Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature (1991a), and Modest Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan©MeetsOncoMouse™ (1997). Haraway’s theory of “situated knowledges” (1991b), however, has also proven instrumental to feminist, post-colonial, and technology studies, emphasizing an approach to scientific inquiry that assigns agency to our “objects of knowledge” and refuses to view them as “a screen or ground or a resource, never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic” (1991b: 198). Her critique of objectivity has extended to Marxist/socialist feminist and cultural theories that provide totalizing or essentializing explanations of self and society. For Haraway, “partiality” as opposed to “universality” (1991b: 195), ambiguity as opposed to certainty, provide more productive ground for both feminist theory and epistemology.

Although Haraway’s scholarship has been broadly influential in the humanities, however, there is no discipline it has shaped more specifically, and more fundamentally than that of computers and composition studies as it is practiced in the United States. Part of what has made Haraway’s work so appealing to teachers and scholars in this area is her preoccupation with language and the
skillful deployment of metaphor. She writes “Like all neuroses, mine is rooted in the problem of metaphor, that is, the problem of the relation of bodies and language” (1991b: 185). This focus made both Haraway’s approach and her insights of particular interest to composition scholars and literacy colleagues who began to grapple in the early 1980s with helping students communicate responsibly and effectively in digital contexts. Importantly, however, Haraway’s work—and the work of scholars she influenced—challenged many of the nascent approaches to computer-supported composition in the United States, especially those that employed computers simply to teach skill and drills, but did not adequately address the critical dimensions of new technology or its possibilities to support more broadly transformative social and communicative relationships. For those scholars and teachers who imagined more radical possibilities for composing and communicating within electronic environments, Haraway’s debt to the liberatory literacy work of Paulo Freire, “the inescapable ancestor” proved inspiring. As she noted, “I think of him as one of my fathers, or one of my brothers. I inherited his work; we who try to link writing and freedom projects inherited his work, collectively” (Olson, 1996).

For all of the teachers and scholars who read Haraway’s germinal work—both in the specific area of computers and composition studies, as well as in the broader disciplines of social sciences and English—“A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s” (1985) presented the challenge of recognizing and honoring the contradictory nature of cyborgs, to participate in building and sustaining an “ironic, political myth” (p. 65), a blasphemous, socialist-feminist identity that resists many of the negative influences of contemporary technological society and, instead, embraces “partial, contradictory, permanently unclosed constructions of personal and collective selves” (p. 75). As “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (1985: 65) Haraway’s cyborg is a metaphor of resistance, specifically opposed to the destructive social formations of racism, sexism, poverty, capitalism, violence, ecological degradation, and domination that grow out of male dominance, capitalism, and a delusional faith in the related modernist projects of science and technology. These forces, among others, Haraway notes, have helped support and construct a series of progressively problematic dualisms (nature/culture, humans/machines, and men/women) that artificially separate members of the global ecosystem, masking the fact that they are actually related by a series of complex actions and effects. This false separation, in turn, serves as both a foundational and continuing basis for increasingly destructive social, material, and industrial practices, and the related beliefs that average human beings have little responsibility to control the technologies they create and limited ability to change the technological systems within which they participate for the better.

Haraway argued that the notion of a closed, organic body is especially detrimental to women with regard to technological agency: “Only by being out of place could we take intense pleasure in machines, and then with