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PLEASE INTERNET RESPONSIBLY:

RHETORICAL FEMINIST METHODOLOGIES FOR A DIGITAL AGE

This work was born out of a methodological exigency that I found myself facing. I was trained as a feminist researcher first, and as a rhetoric and composition researcher second. I took two courses in feminist research methodologies—one from a religious studies scholar, and one from a sociologist—before I even entered our disciplinary discourse. While the lessons from these methods courses certainly transferred to the work I saw being done in rhet/comp, and the work that I saw myself doing, it transferred with a caveat.

In my courses on feminist research methodology, as well as in feminist research within both technical writing scholarship and rhetoric and composition scholarship *writ large*, the work drew heavily upon Shulamit Reinharz's 1992 textbook, *Feminist Methods in Social Research*. Reinharz's book is considered foundational for scholars doing feminist research in both the humanities and social sciences, and continues to be referenced in work today even though it is nearly 25 years old. Particularly foundational are the ten "themes" of feminist research that Reinharz identifies (p. 240), which guide the design and implementation of what she calls dialectical feminist research [[SHOW EXCERPTED PG. 240 ON SLIDE]]

While Reinharz's reader offers a good cross-section of the different types of research that feminist scholars might engage in—oral history, content analysis, ethnographies, survey research, experiments, etc.—it *is* geared largely towards sociology, anthropology,

and law. There are no mentions of rhetoric and composition research in Reinharz's book, nor in the most prominent successive interdisciplinary feminist methods textbooks. Because it was published in the early 90s, Reinharz's book's most notable silence is that of digital scholarship—the world wide web was invented by Tim Berners-Lee in the late 1980s, and did not reach widespread adoption until the mid-90s. Even though Reinharz's book is pre-internet, though, it remains popular amongst technical communication scholars, cited in the work of Mary Lay, Laura Gurak, Patricia Sullivan, and others.

I seek to translate Reinharz's discussions into a humanistic frame, and remix them for 21st-century researchers both on and offline. Thus, this talk is a component of a larger adaptation of Reinharz's (1992) feminist research framework, for rhetorically guided inquiry in a technologically mediated age. [[ADVANCE SLIDE TO NETWORK OF PRINCIPLES/PRACTICES]] I have realigned and renamed Reinharz's tenets to demonstrate their linkages in a system of think-practice[1] that grounds research in both feminist and rhetorical theory, using the reflections of scholars within the discipline to situate and illustrate these practices. Last spring, I sought reflections from scholars doing what they self-identified as "feminist" research, and conducted interviews with several, primarily early-career, researchers. These scholars spanned across disciplines—not only rhetoric and composition, but also sociology, literature, communication, and geography—and offered many different intersectional facets for contemplation. Their more informal reflections offered me material to create a poster for the HASTAC conference.

[1] This term comes from a September 2016 talk that I heard Jacqueline Rhodes give on relational feminist frameworks. She referred to think-practice as "an intra-active becoming" that can contribute to "a dynamized feminist rhetorical sense of relationality… that remembers that we, as humans, are a part of the world-body space."

As I return to this work in a more methodical way to prepare it for potential publication, [[SWITCH SLIDE TO DIGITAL ONE]] I want to focus those of Reinharz's ten guidelines that I see as most readily applicable to research with digital tools and in digital environments. I describe how these tactics are operationalized through the work of several early-career scholars in the discipline who are on the cutting edge of methodological practice, as well as through my own work, as I attempt to untangle threads of gender, sexuality, culture, and digital environments.

(Re)presentation: not capturing voices, but amplifying them

Feminist theory begins its inquiry from marginal lives or perspectives. I deploy the term "marginal" here in an intersectional fashion, to encompass those subject positions typically underrepresented within the academy, and within scholarly research: not only are women's lives marginal, but also the lives of other gender and sexual minorities, the lives of persons of color, the lives of youth and of the elderly, the lives of persons with disabilities, the lives of the working class, the lives of persons within developing nations, and the lives of those whose perspectives or experiences are not valued as appropriate for academic inquiry.

This representation of marginal lives and perspectives stems from the feminist value—and, indeed, the social-epistemic rhetorical value—that knowledge and communicative practice are *perspectival*. Of this rhetorical epistemology, James Berlin notes, "...truth is always truth for someone standing in relation to others in a linguistically circumscribed situation... [this epistemology] denies that truth is discoverable in sense impression since this data must always be interpreted—structured and organized—in order to have meaning" (Berlin, 1982, p. 774). Data and experience are subject to interpretation, and interpretation is dependent upon subject position. This is why socio-cultural scholarship

is so important: because our truths are imbricated within a broader rhetorical network or ecology.

Feminist researcher Hesse-Biber (2007) also writes of the importance of creating scholarship that probes such complex social realities. Hesse-Biber echoes other scholars who affirm the political importance of beginning inquiry from experiences typically underrepresented in the scholarly literature. She asserts that, "These new writing practices have made great strides in capturing the essence of some of society's lost voices" (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 345). While I agree with the crux of Hesse-Biber's premise, I would problematize her rhetoric to contend that this practice doesn't *capture* voices, per se—for, as a metaphor, "*capturing*" implies that the voices are either involuntarily taken, as a *captive*, or statically recorded and represented, as a photographic *capture*. An epistemology that recognizes the locally situated and perspectival nature of knowledges cannot seek to capture their "essence" or "truth." To attempt to capture them is to continue the legacy of violence done to the identities of those who are marginalized both in and outside of the academy. Instead of aiming to *capture* the rhetorical actions of women or other populations typically underrepresented or ignored by mainstream scholarship, feminist rhetorical research projects ought to instead *amplify* the voices of these communities through robust and faithful representations of their rhetorical action—in all its often messy complexity. In what ways can we seek to amplify these voices, particularly by taking advantages of the affordances of the social web?

(Re)valuing: Incorporating Webtexts, Stories, and Other Forms of Practitioner Theory

One way to continue this feminist tradition of decentralization and equitable knowledge creation is to incorporate the theory of non-academics—laypeople, or "practitioners"—into

academic texts. I offer a component of the literature review of my master's thesis project to demonstrate one instantiation of this tenet of feminist methodology, which I call "(re)valuation."

For my master's thesis, I sought to use visual and auditory rhetorical methods to delineate and quantify the differences between pornography consumed by men, and pornography consumed by women. I did a lot of counting and timing different acts that took place in a representative sample of videos taken from two internet pornography communities, but I also wanted to find a way to codify the presence of the male gaze—an objectification and commodification of women's bodies—as an interpretive framework. This is where practitioner theory comes in. Because who knows the presence of the male gaze in pornography better than pornographers themselves? [[SWITCH SLIDE]]

Feminist porn director Ms. Naughty created a video in February 2014, where she described eight functions of the male gaze in porn, concluding that "if women aren't into porn, the male gaze is one of the reasons why." The video, which has been viewed over 20,000 times, deconstructs the construction of mainstream pornographic fantasies *for* men, *by* men—from phallocentric imagery ("the headless dick"), to synecdochic representations of the female body ("the woman is always looked *at*, she never *looks*"), to inauthentic portrayals of lesbian sex ("his fantasy")—using clips from real porn videos, all comically censored using images from an internet meme. Ms. Naughty's multimodal caricature of the singular, reductive narrative presented by mainstream porn is the embodiment of porn theory, produced by a porn practitioner.

[[TENETS ARE ON SCREEN]]

In total Ms. Naughty outlines eight aspects of the male gaze, six of which I used as a framework in my analysis, incorporating the work of a feminist porn practitioner into my scholarly praxis. I used these ideas to examine both the function of the male gaze in mainstream pornography, as well as the subversive power of pornography created for women[2].

I deployed six of Ms. Naughty's categories as thematic criteria in my coding schema as I analyzed the twenty porn videos that comprised the representative sample for my project. Ms. Naughty's framework—created out of her expertise of over a decade spent writing, directing, and producing "porn for women" in the adult film industry—helped me to make the male gaze visible and quantifiable (Smith, 2015). This was a deliberate rhetorical and methodological move on my part, not only to make an abstract and theoretical concept ("the male gaze") more easily pinpointed, but also to place the theory[3] that Ms. Naughty created into the academic conversation as a legitimate contribution to porn studies scholarship.

If our scholarship is to truly work towards gendered and sexual (or, arguably, racial, ethnic, class, or social) justice through dismantling pre-existing hierarchies, of knowledge creation, it must revalue and seek to highlight the knowledge of practitioners within the field alongside theorists within the academy. These practitioners can be sex workers like Ms. Naughty, or community activists and leaders, poets, politicians, and citizens. If sexual theory

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[2] The other two aspects, "Tits Sell" and "Your Cock" describe the function of the male gaze in pornography *marketing*, specifically on DVD box covers and in video descriptions, and are thus largely inapplicable to the digital videos that I examined in my project (which were all distributed through free online porn tube sites that simply use a thumbnail image and descriptive title to identify each video).

[3] for her work absolutely echoes the established and even foundational theory on the male gaze, such as Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"

and rhetorical theory are to be truly feminist, they must recognize the discursive value of theory like Ms. Naughty's alongside the established theoretical canon.

As Ellen Cushman (1999) reminds us, when

> "...university representatives tend to esteem their own brand of knowledge more than popular forms of knowledge, they deepen the schism between universities and communities... the production of legitimate (specialized, publishable, esoteric, academic) language... gains material, cultural, and symbolic capital by implicitly devaluing nonstandard (colloquial, vernacular, common, vulgar) language... Public intellectuals challenge the value system of academe by starting with the assumption that all language use and ways of knowing are valuable and worthy of respect" (Cushman, 1999, p. 32–33).

(Re)ciprocity: defining relationships with participants

Re(valuing) non-dominant forms of knowledge and theory-building is closely connected with the tenet of reciprocity—which is highlighted in community-based and participatory action research throughout the discipline. While Reinharz states that "feminist research attempts to develop special relations with the people studied" (p. 240), I would go further to say that the persons studied ought to be involved throughout the research process to ensure the accurate representation of their voices and experiences, and to establish a kind of equilibrium between them and the investigator—where both receive benefit from their participation in the project.

One way to do this is through member-checking, where, after a researcher writes up the results from a study, she asks participants to read her report and offer feedback on her interpretation of the data. A scholar might engage in a participatory research project that seeks reflections from members of a particular community or culture, and then ask those community members to collaboratively code and present the data that they generated. A scholar who collects literacy narratives or conducts interviews with a particular cultural

group might first transcribe the interviews, and then discuss the points she found most relevant or compelling with members of the group in an effort to represent their stories faithfully, as well as to build relationships.

PhotoVoice is an excellent example of a methodology that incorporates this type of member-checking, using multimodal methods. In a PhotoVoice study, researchers provide a group of participants with prompts, asking them to take photos in their local communities that represent particular social justice issues—like poverty, drug use, sexual assault, issues of identity politics and discrimination, and more. These photos are shared, alongside brief annotations or narratives that reflect on their composition, with the researchers and other participants, and ultimately with nonprofit partners and the community in order to create some kind of change. For example, images can be combined into a digital video story that not only documents the lived realities of participants, but can be shared to raise awareness and generate dialogue (PhotoVoice, 2016).

In technical communication, participatory design functions similarly. In participatory design contexts, designers and users of technology—be it a website, an app, a software tool, a product—work together to create solutions that meet both parties' needs. One of the early-career scholars who I interviewed for this project identifies himself as a feminist maker who teaches professional and technical communication. "Recognizing that the designer does not know all, and that they cannot create the ultimate deliverable that works for everyone… while we may have certain expertise, users hold expertise too… Part of that is being able to help people articulate what they need. If you listen empathetically, oftentimes you can figure out what they're doing."

Participatory design is a method that's infused with feminist ideology because it decentralizes the power relationship between designers, users, and stakeholders, distributing agency to make technological change in a more equitable fashion. Moves towards participatory research design and data coding mirror the move to a participatory and social internet. These are technofeminist methodologies because they reflect the user-sourced and user-driven nature of web 2.0.

All of this is grounded in (re)flexivity.

Many feminist rhetoricians draw upon Krista Ratcliffe's theories of rhetorical listening (2006) to ground scholarship in empathetic practice and an ethic of care. Rhetorical listening rests on the assumption that listening involves not only engaging with the words and ideas of a conversational partner, but also your own. This doesn't mean bracketing one's own subjectivity, but recognizing the ways in which it both enables and constrains analysis.

I see this as a two-part process: first, mapping your own subject position in order to be cognizant of its intersections; and second, reflecting upon your own scholarly think-practice throughout the process of data collection and analysis. The mapping is a fairly simple process, but I would like to give another example from my own research to illustrate the process of self-reflection.

While defending my thesis proposal before my graduate advisory committee, they expressed concern about my well-being when I described my intention to examine pornography for such elements as depictions of sexual violence and embedded misogyny. One of the professors on my committee, Dr. Malea Powell, suggested that I engage in an "affective pass" prior to coding the data from the study sample of 20 videos from two

different online porn communities totaling about 10 hours of audiovisual content, to track my reactions to what I was witnessing on screen, as well as to determine my own position in the work (Hesse-Biber, 2007).

To do this, I recorded my reactions to the first two videos from each sample using a screencasting program, Techsmith Camtasia. The first time I watched these videos, I spoke aloud my reactions to the images and actions on screen, thinking specifically about *how* I was feeling about the videos, and *why* I was feeling that way. Employing the affective pass for the first two videos from both of the datasets helped create a critical and reflexive mindset for me throughout the study. These emotional reactions were very much interpretive according to both my training as a feminist researcher and my own experience in my erotic body with its manifold subjectivities. This type of reflexivity the researcher's corporeal body—a site removed from positivist empirical research (Harding, 1992; Hartsock, 1983; Hesse-Biber, 2007)—and foregrounds it through "...situating the sociopolitically inscribed body as a central site of meaning making" (Spry, 2001, p. 710). Within this research on pornography, a rhetorical artifact that elicits very much embodied reactions, it was important for me to take stock of how my own body made meaning of the content that I was coding and analyzing.

The affective pass through the data served a twofold purpose: first, it was a self-care[4] mechanism built into my data collection process that helped to prevent me from feeling triggered or unsettled by potentially disturbing sexual imagery; and second, it

[4] Self-care, too, is a feminist tactic, and a methodological tactic in sexuality scholarship, as articulated by Kathleen Livingston in her 2014 article "On Rage, Shame, 'Realness,' and Accountability to Survivors" (available at http://harlotofthearts.org/index.php/harlot/article/view/237/156).

generated interpretive data for me to place into conversation with the quantitative and thematic data that I gathered from the artifacts.

An affective pass incorporating talk-aloud methods is just one way to engage in this type of critical researcher reflexivity: scholars could incorporate a number of other tactics in order to serve this aim, including writing research memos or journals during data collection and analysis, keeping a Twitter or other microblogging account of their reflections, recording video responses, and more. In the cases of rhetoricians and compositionists who are not able to member-check with participants—for folks who do archival research, or textual/content/rhetorical analysis of texts written by folks who are dead or anonymous or otherwise cannot respond to our interpretations of their rhetorical constructions—reflexivity can also prove helpful as an interpretive trope, and as a feminist methodological tactic designed to foreground subject positions and their relationships within matrices of power and domination (Mignolo, 2011; Hill-Collins, 2008).

Afterword: methodological tactics

I have used the word "tactic" throughout this talk to describe feminist methodological approaches. I use this word as a deliberate rhetorical move, drawing on Michel de Certeau's (1988) operationalization of the term. de Certeau describes *tactics* as operating in direct opposition to *strategies*: strategies "assume a place that can be circumscribed as proper... and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it [such as 'objects of research']." Conversely, tactics involve the "[combination] of heterogeneous elements" by "the other;" they are "unproper" techniques deployed in unsanctioned ways (de Certeau, 1988, p. xix). A tactical methodology involves

remixing heterogeneous methods in order to create change from below—to challenge social and institutional hierarchies.

The methodological moves I describe are tactical in nature. The deliberate choices to incorporate positionality of both researchers and participants into scholarly work, to take community input into account when coding data, to publish images and narratives and the content of viral internet videos alongside or embedded within academic research—all of these choices are *tactical* in nature because they seek to complicate dominant paradigms of positivism and value-neutrality. Tactical rhetorical scholarship reflects shifting, slippery boundaries between previously stark methodological dichotomies—researcher and participant, public and private, bias and standpoint—that are problematized and even dismantled through feminist research methodology.

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