CHAPTER THREE

Imaginary College Students

Malcolm Harris, writing about the true forces for educational change, in 2016:

“Capitalists will constantly seek to reshape schooling because their labor supply can always be more efficient.” (n.p.)

Multimodality. Multiliteracies. These concepts have been championed in recent scholarship in my own discipline of composition, but also across the humanities, with extraordinary volume and enthusiasm. In this chapter, I will examine this push as one specific trend signaling progress in higher education, yet reproducing old exclusions. This exploration is first of all about how universities argue for change through the invention of specific types of student mind and body. This exploration is also a sort of test case: Is it possible to ever argue for educational change without reinforcing the stigma of disability?

To keep things simple, in this chapter I will define multimodality as the engagement with many modes of meaning-making. Multimodality is communication and composition across textual, linguistic, spatial, aural, and visual resources. Multiliteracies, on the other hand, is a term coined specifically by one group (the New London Group) to talk about the skill developed by communicating across these modes and the skill needed in order to communicate across these modes. Multimodality should be an agnostic, descriptive term; multiliteracy is the term that is supposed to
work as an assessment, a measure. But in a way, the distinction between the terms is irrelevant because, as you will read, the terms are rarely invoked to simply describe what a student or a classroom is doing. Much more often, the terms are used interchangeably to count or diagnose or prescribe modes or literacies.¹

So, while the arguments that support these concepts of multiplicity are ambitious, democratic, often incisively careful and critical, and hopeful, this energy does not always lead to inclusive classroom practice. Many students who think and express themselves in nonnormative ways are actually further excluded by pedagogies of multiplicity. In this way, it is imperative to understand the context of a push toward these multiples.

To begin with, disability and literacy have generally been severed by science and by law. As disability and education researchers Christopher Kliewer, Douglas Biklen, and Christi Kasa-Hendrickson show, “restricted literacy among people with disabilities has become institutionalized as a presumably natural manifestation of organic defects thought to objectively exist well beyond the reach of social, cultural, or historical consideration” (164). Authorities from doctors to immigration agents used literacy tests to establish baselines of deviancy. Kate Vieira writes that literacy is a “navigational technology that opens up some paths and closes off others, that orients and disorients, that routes and often reroutes. . . . it is also an infrastructure that regulates movement” (30, italics mine). This metaphor of literacy as mobility (and orientation) is of utmost importance to the intersections between literacy and ability, illiteracy and disability. Literacy has been used to tightly control the movement and rights of disabled people for centuries; this deeply affects what literacy is and what it can do for anyone.

As notions of literacy developed from the idea of illiteracy, so too has ability been developed only as disability has been (often arbitrarily) marked out. I allude here to the fact that the concept of “literacy” in its contemporary sense came into use only in the late nineteenth century. Previously, to be literate meant to be familiar with literature. Original definitions of literacy were based on one’s ability to read the Bible or sign one’s name. In this way, literacy only came about as a result of the judgment of illiteracy (access Kendall). As Karl Marx and Foucault can be seen to argue, and as disability geographer Brendan Gleeson also reminds us, the factory “produced physical disability on an industrial scale” (109). Before industrialization, though there were ideas of ability
and disability, society did not comprehensively sort its citizens using disability as a criteria. Concurrently, and consequently, illiteracy has been a way to sort society, determining who can immigrate, deciding who can vote, determining the divisions of the labor force, and so on. This sorting has always been clearly biased—for instance, at Ellis Island, Russian Jews were not allowed to take literacy tests in Hebrew. Why? Because U.S. immigration restrictionists wanted to be sure that many of them would fail, and thus forced them to take the tests in Russian (access Dolmage, “Disabled upon Arrival”). In the South, literacy tests to determine who could vote were almost comically difficult (Onion). They were designed to disenfranchise African Americans.

Like literacy, ability is defined by its inverse. It gains shape only when a negative prefix is appended, and without this prefix it has little to no social power. The concepts of disability and illiteracy might be seen to have developed in similar ways, at similar times, in the Western world, the prefixes being used with particular, and similar (perhaps connected), ends in mind. In this chapter, I will explore how, through the push for new and multiple forms of literacy, we also come to tell stories and create maps of disability.

**Somnolent Samantha**

Against this backdrop of illiteracy and disability, there is also a push for new forms of literacy and ability. This can be understood as a hallmark of neoliberalism: the redefinition of intellectual values that highlight the need of the individual student (or worker) to become a more flexible (and thus fungible or disposable) producer and consumer.

The rhetorical push for multimodality and multiliteracies, such as that provided by the New London Group (Cope and Kalantzis) is now more than 15 years old, but still building momentum. Behind much of the New London Group’s work is the implicit argument that, in each individual learner, the more modes engaged, the better. Of course we do not all have the same proclivity, desire, or ability to develop all of our modal or literate engagements. It seems useful and pragmatic to encourage the multiple engagement of senses and learning pathways, across multiple modes, but not to map them and add them up toward a multimodal IQ. This said, Gunther Kress of the New London Group also argues that, because a culture selects and privileges certain forms of embodied engagement, some will be “affectively and cognitively at
an advantage over those whose preferred sensory modes are not valued or are suppressed in their culture” (187). So it is important to remain critical not just of which literacies and modes a culture privileges but also which combinations of literacies and modes, and which interactions between literacies and modes, come to enable or disable learners in pedagogical design, in the classroom. So this chapter will help us to further attend to how disability and illiteracy come together and create one another.

Earlier, I discussed the notion that 2015 was the “year of the imaginary college student” (Hsu). I am going to extend this to suggest that there are two specific imaginary characters created by discourse about multimodality and multiliteracy, and I am going to suggest that these two characters—both of them students—link to two dominant discourses about disability in education. I’ll note that these two students should bear some ironic relationship to Somnolent Samantha, the character that Jon Westling, president of Boston University, invented in 1995. (Thanks to Zosha Stuckey and Lois Agnew, who examine this case more closely in an essay in the journal Open Words). Westling’s story was about a student named Samantha, who had a documented learning disability. In Westling’s story, Samantha is a caricature who greedily demands extra time on assignments and exams, copies of notes from lectures, a seat at the front of the class, and a separate room in which to take tests; most memorably, she also warns him that she will fall asleep in his class, and thus will need someone to take notes while she is asleep—thus he calls her “somnolent” Samantha. Later, Westling admitted that the story was a lie. But he argued that Somnolent Samantha characterized the unreasonable expectations universities were being held to by opportunistic students and the unfair challenges administrators and teachers faced in responding to their mandate to accommodate disability. His argument was, basically, that these students were milking the system and probably didn’t belong in university at all if they couldn’t play by the “normal” rules. Somnolent Samantha and other fictional students like her are key characters invented through discourse about disability in higher education. These students are the “real” problem, Westling argued, despite the fact that he had just invented one.

Samantha is much like the “Johnny” of Myra Linden and Arthur Whimbey’s 1990 Why Johnny Can’t Write, an unfortunate classic in writing scholarship, a book that begins with the warning that “Johnny’s Country Is Losing Business,” and goes on to strongly advocate for a series of sentence-combining and text-reconstruction exercises to fix Johnny and
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the economy. But imaginary college and university students are more common than you’d think. They pop up everywhere.

This book would be incomplete without both a deeper investigation of the students who get invented through the backlash to accommodations in higher education, and a deeper investigation of the invention of the ideal students who stand in their inverse image. So I’ll introduce two more characters, each reinvented and reshaped in unique ways by recent attention to multimodality and multiliteracies. To keep things simple, I’ll make everyone a Samantha of some sort.

Super Samantha

The first character might be named Super Samantha. This student appears in some form in almost all of the literature about multimodality, and quite a bit of the scholarship about the use of technology in the classroom. Super Samantha is much better at nonprint literacies than all of her peers and most of her teachers. She is technologically savvy, crafty, and has mastered modes that her elders haven’t even heard of (yet). She is Mark Zuckerberg and Doogie Howser and Dora the Explorer with a brand-new backpack.

Samantha, very notably, is a spectacle. As Rachel Riedner writes of such spectacular stories, “like melodramas, spectacles are written to obscure more complex and nuanced stories. The shock they elicit displaces complex situations, shaping our response through astonishment and surprise rather than through sustained attention. . . . no effort is called for to shift how we respond” (105). Somnolent and Super Samantha are spectacles of neoliberalism, in Riedner’s scheme: they are in fact the only two types of student neoliberalism needs. One is totally flexible to a wide range of uses and values within capitalism. One is a total drain on the system and thus disposable.

Bronwyn Williams writes obliquely about this super student in his introduction to Cindy Selfe’s edited collection *Multimodal Composition,* suggesting that he sometimes finds this student’s “energy and creativity unnerving” (xi). In short, this student is Super, because they already have multimodal literacies that far outstrip those of their teachers; thus, they are also Scary because these teachers aren’t sure how to teach them. In either case, they hide more nuanced stories and more realistic roles for students.

Selfe has looked extensively at how technological literacy has been
characterized in the media, government, and in our scholarship. She would likely say that Super Samantha belongs in the overdone discourse or “story” of what she might call multimodality as a literacy boon: “in the hands of [Super Samantha, multimodality] can help us make the world a better place.” In this way, Super Samantha is not scary in the horror-film way—she is scary in a way that should be celebrated. Selfe would likely say that Super Samantha is linked to “science, economic prosperity, education, capitalism, and democracy,” and thus her story “has a potent cumulative power” (Technology and Literacy, 27). But, again, she is an idealized character, and she is invoked most often to show that universities do not have the educational resources, infrastructure, or pedagogical skill to accommodate her in the classroom.

Regardless, Super Samantha is in the driver’s seat when it comes to designing multimodal pedagogy. As Gunther Kress writes, multimodality is born of the idea that “we do not yet have a theory which allows us to understand and account for the world of communication as it is now” (Multimodality, 7). This world will belong to Super Samantha. The ideal that she presents propels us to create learning opportunities that live up to her potential: build it because she is already here. For instance, Stuart Selber, in *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*, uses “a portrait of the ideal multiliterate student” to lay out his argument for educational change (22).

In some stories, she is all of our students already. Selfe, in an article coauthored with Gail Hawisher and others, profiles a student named Brittney who “authored web sites as a child,” and saw computers being as essential as air (Hawisher et. al. 656). Brittney’s story shows “how little teachers of English, composition and communication know about the many literacies students bring to the classroom” (Hawisher et. al.676). This student, then, is not molded by education, but rather bursts through the doors of the classroom and demands its reshaping. The literature is full of further case studies, and example work, from multimodally advanced students (students with advanced multiliteracy).

Super Samantha’s multimodality, however, is strikingly visual. Perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised. We do live in an “ocularcentric” culture—that is, one in which visual images dominate (Jay, 344). But there is a distinct lack of exploration of, for instance, tactile modes of creation in the classroom. This omission might tie into what Evan Watkins suggests is the dominance of visual culture in an “attention economy” in which teachers become resource managers who need to train students to create a “product” that gains value only if people will pay attention to it (94). Creating
a truly diverse range of modes, or creating a redundant array of modes, doesn’t have the same value.

Especially in a time of economic crisis, in the panic of postindustrialism, as manufacturing jobs disappear and new “knowledge jobs” (or “attention jobs”) need to be created, Super Samantha is a powerful character. She is never invoked uncritically—but she seems to be always invoked. Super Samantha can be considered a product or even a flag-bearer of fast capitalism, a logic stressing the need for constant change, flexibility, and adaptation, particularly in modes of expression. Fast capitalism is also a logic that uses this rhetoric to encourage compliance and to sort workers. Simply, when capitalism demands speed and flexibility, it is mostly in service of more efficiently exploiting workers. So while a postindustrial society (and a post-Fordist one, where the rigidity and uniformity of manufacturing is less prevalent) might or maybe should help us to de-emphasize things like the strict time regimes of academia, there are always other demands to be made.

In other stories, Super Samantha lives in India or China, where a new generation of savvy students is mastering all of the skills that North American students are not, and leaving these domestic students behind. She is then marked also as being governed by different political, religious, or social rules, each of which somehow frees her to develop her superiority in ways that North American students cannot. As Kress warns, “a new theory of text is essential to meet the demands of culturally plural societies in a globalizing world” (“Genres,” 186). Meanwhile, in North America, the question of whether multiliteracies would accommodate multilingualism continues to hinge on economic and cultural values that recognize foreign language usage as either only a skill, or as a threat to national sovereignty: “skill versus sedition” (Lo Bianco, n.p.). Multiliteracy gets framed as something North American students need to acquire in the name of nationalism and economic competition. North America needs to globalize and become more culturally plural—again only, somewhat ironically, in the name of nationalism and economic competition. So we witness a sort of literacy protectionism—the shielding of domestic assets from foreign competition by taxing imports; the shielding of domestic student abilities from foreign competition by taxing the import of multiliteracy, especially when language difference is part of the equation.

Super Samantha is also a character that many in the disability rights community know well, even if at first we don’t recognize her. It is the specter of just such a student that leads to a backlash against accessible education and things like the ADA: if you accommodate all students and
treat the classroom with a democratic and egalitarian ethic, then you could be holding back our Super students. That’s un-American!

It’s un-Canadian too, it seems. An administrator at my own university visited a department meeting recently to give a “state of the university address” to myself and my colleagues. The thought that the administrator left us with was this: Is it time for special classes for our best students? What this individual meant, in my opinion, was that we needed not just honors plans or specializations that only a few students could get into, and not even just the usual selectivity of admissions. What they meant was: Do we need to create distinct tiers within the university wherein the smartest students could be kept away from the riffraff? My university, Waterloo, is a Canadian (and world) leader in engineering, math, and computer science. The administrator, then, was distilling an emerging institutional ethic: we need to let a lot of students in because we need the money; but then we’ll also need ways to ensure that these new individuals don’t impede the progress of all of our Super Samanthas. Again, any teacher could likely look around their own campus and find similar programs, programs that could be similarly questioned: Are these programs about bringing the brightest together, or about keeping them away from the least bright? It is clear that one group will be tolerated for their tuition; but the university’s real priorities are built around the other.

In the disability community, there is awareness that accommodations for students with disabilities have traditionally been cast as happening at the cost of all other students, and particularly at the cost of Super students. A New York Times article suggested, for instance, that such accommodations have “subverted the goal of education” and have “discouraged students from discovering their strengths, and instead encouraged them to get ahead based on their weaknesses” (Sternberg, A23). Super Samantha fools even the best teachers into believing that the entire education system must be oriented around her. This orientation should then cue educators into the realization that modes and literacies come from bodies. (Remember: If rhetoric is the circulation of discourse through the body, then spaces and institutions cannot be disconnected from the bodies within them, the bodies they selectively exclude, and the bodies that actively intervene to reshape them.)

As Charles Murray has shown, North American colleges and universities have been tremendously successful at sorting citizens, with the top 10 U.S. schools sucking up 20 percent of the top group of students—based on standardized tests. This sorting then also leads to what he calls
"cognitive homogamy: when individuals with similar cognitive ability have children," as discussed previously (61). Then this allows Murray to map every zip code in the United States based on education and income and recognize a small number of “SuperZips” to show that “the college sorting machine replicates itself with remarkable fidelity as the residential sorting machine” (88). The connection between Super students and something like SuperZips, however, is rarely made by teachers or administrators. As Evan Watkins argues, “one of the more dangerous assumptions” of the expansion of “adjectival literacies” (his term for the multiplication of different types of literacy, most often linked to “professional” opportunities and prestige) “with their maximizing of student/teacher educational freedoms” is that they transform “a particular institution into one of the prestigious stars that visibly succeed” or for students to likewise become “stars” (Literacy, 159). The evolving neoliberal economy needs a few prestigious schools to provide “just-in-time” flexible labor and “human capital” but it is also “structured to lose excess people—both students and workers” (Literacy, 158).

So Super Samantha also possesses a kind of magical invisibility cloak. When she appears, she is able to sweep important considerations about socioeconomic class, race, gender, and linguistic difference away. When Super Samantha is invoked, and the demand is made that instructors adapt curriculum to catch up to her, we can also conveniently ignore the fact that access to the technologies and means that facilitate multimodality is not distributed equally. For every SuperZip with a direct line to the Ivy League, there are other Zips with pipelines to prison. So long as we are straining to change for the ideal student, and for a new knowledge economy, we can ignore the inequities that may have positioned her ahead of the pack to begin with. We can ignore the economic realities that make Super students temporarily valuable. And we can definitely avoid wasting time on the stragglers.5

Slow Samantha

This brings us to the second character: Slow Samantha. She is the sister or cousin to Super Samantha. Unlike Super Samantha, who is most often seen as an independent and self-determined individual, Slow Samantha is a composite, invoked to represent an entire group or population of students, and to represent troubling trends that multimodal pedagogy might sweep in to heroically alleviate. In the end, Slow Samantha is
a threat. As one *Time* magazine article put it, “the rising numbers of learning-disabled students have altered classroom dynamics in ways that harm average kids’ ability to learn” at the K-12 level (Ratner, n.p.). Further, the article suggests that these learning disabled students cost nine billion dollars a year to educate. The suggestion is that this is badly wasted money. This calculation is a kind of eugenic economics, because no one ever talks about the billions spent on other groups of students as anything like a waste. Jasbir Puar asks: “Which debilitated bodies can be reinvigorated for neoliberalism, and which cannot?” (153). More simply, the United States likely spends over eight hundred billion dollars a year on education (or 4.8% of its GDP). That makes nine billion actually seem quite small. And then one has to ask: why single this group of students out as a cost rather than as an investment?

What we have seen over the past 150 years of disability history is that, during periods of economic collapse or downturn, people with disabilities are the first to be constructed as drains or threats—Susan Schweik’s work on *Ugly Laws*, or David Serlin’s history of postwar prosthetics, shows how industrial capitalism picked up or put down disabled bodies according to its needs. The ways in which disability is socially constructed in contemporary society can also be seen as, from top-to-bottom, economic. Disability is an object of charity rather than part of the social contract, the disabled body must be made productive or expendable, exhibited or warehoused for profit, the disability itself must be easily monetized—all of these things ensure that disability can be easily controlled in order to absorb or expel citizens from status positions. The work of Chris Chapman, Liat Ben Moshe, and Allison Carey on disability and incarceration powerfully shows one such way this economic expendability works from below. The university is another perfect example of such an economic ordering of disability “from above.” That is, more simply, incarceration warehouses and disciplines certain groups disproportionately, and uses disablement as part of this work. Colleges and universities support this work, but they also work to suspend opportunities for disabled people, or use forms of disablement to suspend opportunities and privileges for marginalized groups.

More simply, which type of body will our current academic economy choose to take advantage of next, and which type of body will be cast aside? On college campuses, an individual learning disability makes you a drain; but a collective lack of multiliteracy calls for an investment. In turn, administrators, teachers, and commentators will take the liberty to
question or ridicule “new” disabilities claimed by students. But they will also invent disabled students as straw-figures and scapegoats.

Slow Samantha is the direct descendent of Johnny-Can’t-Read and Johnny-Can’t-Write. In fact, a New Republic article on this topic actually remixed this classic title: “Why Johnny Can’t Read, Write or Sit Still.” In the article, Ruth Shalit argues that disability accommodations in higher education have created a “new frontier, the learning disability as an opportunistic tautology” (244). In this invented scheme, we aren’t looking at multimodality, but instead we are looking at a strong backlash against an expanding range of disabilities. Multi-disability. As Shalit writes, “as the ranks of the learning-disabled swell, so too do the number of boutique diagnoses” (244). She goes on to incredulously list dyscalculia, dysgraphia, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), dysphasia, dyssemia, and dysrationalia before she concludes that “these neo-disabilities are likely to strike the nonspecialist as an exercise in pathologizing [regular] childhood [and youth] behavior, and the nonspecialist would be on to something” (244). Robert Worth, writing in the Washington Monthly, sees this as a class conspiracy: he argues that we have “inflated the meaning of ‘disability,’ encouraging wealthier families to capitalize on their [children’s] weaknesses at the expense of their peers” (n.p.). He wishes, instead, that disability policy could be “merely a matter of accommodating physically disabled kids” and thus return to being “a relatively straightforward affair” (n.p.).

While we are urged to race to accommodate the multiple literacies that Super Samantha introduces to the classroom, we are urged to dismiss and derogate the needs of Slow Samantha. Slow Samantha may not be as powerful a character as Super Samantha in our scholarship about multimodality, but she is present persistently. Hawisher and Selfe begin an acceptance speech with this warning: “Today, if students cannot write to the screen . . . they may be incapable of functioning effectively as literate citizens in a growing number of social spheres” (642). Their warning is later carefully qualified. But others are less cautious, more willing to invoke an epidemic of multi-illiteracy. There is urgency to this epidemic: Robert Davis and Mark Shadle argue that we need to “prepare students to compose flexibly in a world that will present them with discursive occasions, genres, and technologies that cannot be seen but will break upon them in an instant, like a rogue wave upon a surfer” (3). And there are diagnoses in this epidemic. Frank Zingrone perhaps distills this most
simply: “a one-medium user is the new illiterate” (237). Slow Samantha is a kind of human vacuum, and whenever she appears in rhetoric about multimodality, she is defined by what she can’t do—and what she can’t do stands in for deficits of the entire educational and social system.

In this way, the rhetoric is normative, with the norm defined as “a polemical concept which negatively qualifies: the abnormal, while logically second, is existentially first” (Canguilhem, 243). To norm is to employ a logic of negation. Roland Barthes, John Fiske, and Patricia Williams have all written about this process of “exnomination” as it applies to race. As Jeffrey Melnick and Rachel Rubin argue, “the practice of racial naming” always entails “the unnaming of whiteness itself as a racial identity” (265). Siobhan Somerville argues that “culture anchors whiteness in the visible epistemology of black skin” (21). This contrast is also how normativity works: an elaborate taxonomy of abnormality is created and applied. Ability is anchored and erected through the labeling of disability. Others have written about how such a logic exists with the literacy/illiteracy binary: we track illiteracy rates; literacy is existentially second to illiteracy (access Connie Kendall). Mental health is also an exnomination of mental illness or mental disability. We act as though what we are talking about is health, and this conversation will be generative, but really it is health that is being demanded. The New London Group coined the term multiliteracy as part of an argument for multimodality. But that argument is based on a lack, on the absence of enough of this learning and of these learners. Slow Struggling Samantha reveals how multi-illiteracy precedes any concept of multiliteracy.

What we get is an intersection of a sort of rhetorical “literacy craft” and “ability craft”—ways of insinuating that a lack of literacy or a lack of modality are actually deficits, biological deficits, and that if you don’t have these things, you are disabled. As Elspeth Stuckey wrote, “The face of illiteracy is less and less linguistic” (101). That is, illiteracy is now directly affiliated with immigrants, with young mothers, with inmates, with indigenous peoples, with the jobless, with those on welfare, and so on. Thus illiteracy gathers power from what it can be associated with, and it also crucially gathers definition from these affiliations; it is magnetically affiliative. Other downward comparisons stick to illiteracy. A lack of literacy, like a lack of “modality,” can thus be a way to insinuate a biological lack or difference, a disability, without coming out and saying it, or writing it.

Slow Samantha is at all times defined by incapacities, inabilitys, and lack of function. This concept of slowed literacy also has a eugenic histo-
As Christina Cogdell shows us, the creation of streamlined fonts and the inclusion of photographs in magazines such as *Time* created speed and an “efficiency . . . produced through the processes of ‘natural selection’ that had weeded out all that was too ‘slow’ and ‘cumbersome’ and increased the tempo at which a text could be read” (145). This increased efficiency led to the idea of “greater rapidity and intelligence brought about by evolution” based on the idea that “certain linguistic developments evidenced racial superiority” (Cogdell, 144). A culture that could read quickly, and multimodally access information on the page, could advance. To be slow was to be illiterate, and to be illiterate was to be (cognitively and evolutionarily) slow. Both concepts work together within larger eugenic frameworks in which the speed of thought is aligned with racial and biological progress. If we aren’t maxing out all the different ways our brains might be engaged, then our brains are somehow deficient (individually and across the population).

The call for multimodal pedagogies rises out of warnings about increasing multi-illiteracies, and thus Slow Samantha’s incapacities seem to multiply: there are seemingly no limits to the number of social spheres for which our students will be unprepared and from which they will be exempted if they don’t max out all of their literacies by maxing out all of the possible, interconnected modes of expression. The New London Group talks about the “social futures” that multimodality might make possible: but these have a tone of warning wrapped around their optimism. Even after the concept of multimodality opens up an expanded realm of literate possibilities, the very idea of multimodality remains based on the idea that we have nations of Slow Samanthas. The social future she is prepared for is not very bright at all.

Hawisher and Selfe, in the above-mentioned essay and in other work, are strongly focused on the social consequences of literacy debates—and thus the consequences of modality debates, too. So the very basis for the focus on multimodality includes a blanket awareness that the focus on traditional print literacies privileges one group and one avenue to learning. There is a theoretical way to look at this: the New London Group argues that all learning happens multimodally—as Gunther Kress writes, our senses’ interaction “guarantees the multimodality of our semiotic world.” Yet, “the selection and concentration by a culture on one or several modes (and the non-selection of others) opens up and facilitates [our] bodily engagement with the world in specific ways” while closing down others (111). There is also a practical way to look at this: in the classroom, we have focused on very few literacies and modes for expres-
sion for far too long. It follows that students who think and communicate differently have been suppressed and silenced through our teaching.

But immediately following this argument, however it is posed, we almost always get the connected argument that because of this enduring mono-literacy, we are left with classrooms full of Slow students—but now, instead of the old illiteracy, we have a new range of multi-illiteracies. What remains, recognizable to those in disability studies, is the creation of a stigma that can be applied to students based on a perceived deficit.

Importantly, Slow Samantha is also the product of a much larger educational paradigm—one that demands that all skills be quantifiable and testable. This demand means that the multimodal student must max out all literacies and modes as much as possible, all of the time. Modality is not about choice. But if it isn’t about choice, then it isn’t about access. Further, we know that teachers generally “miss opportunities to incorporate non-Eurocentric scholarship to normalize the ‘what’ of multimodal composition” (access Yumani Davis). So the only multiliteracies that come to matter are those already dominant, already sanctioned, and already filtered through English.

In the “good old days,” something like “cultural literacy,” made famous by E. D. Hirsch’s arguments about—and lists of—the essential cultural facts every citizen should know, could sort society. You either knew the names of Shakespeare’s plays or you did not. But now that access to this sort of cultural information is just a click away, it becomes more difficult to classify society based on access to information. The push for multiliteracies, then, shifts the framework. Now there is an increasing list of modes (most often technological but also increasingly artisanal) that one must master. This listing, in and of itself, is relatively unproblematic. It is good to have access to these varied ways of learning. But multimodality and multiliteracies pedagogy has more often emphasized panic about multiple illiteracies, demanded that students learn to max out all literacies, engaged with new modes and mediums and genres without interrogating their accessibility, and failed to foreground students’ agentive role in forming and transforming avenues for expression.

The problem, for example, with much of the rhetoric of the New London Group is the implicit argument that, as mentioned earlier, in each individual learner, the more modes engaged, the better—and this is rooted in much of the underexamined cognitivist emphasis of the group’s work. I would argue that we do not all have the same proclivity, desire, or ability to develop all of our sensory engagements—nor do the forms of sensory engagement necessarily align with single senses.
We should encourage the multiple engagement of senses and learning pathways, but we should not map them and add them up toward a multimodal IQ. There is a difference between engaging multiple modes and offering students choices of modes.\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{Critical Multimodality}

Joddy Murray states that multimodality “is a compositional form . . . which, coincidentally, happens to be closer to the way humans think” than discursive text is (185). This closeness may be somewhat truthful—but this does not mean that multimodality will allow for expression uncomplicated by unequal and unpredictable affordances, proclivities and abilities. In short, multimodality should not make us forget everything that either poststructuralism or the disability rights movement has taught us.

To begin with, amid all of the panic and excitement around multimodality, very few teachers have paid any attention at all to the ways that these new modes multiply possibilities for inaccessibility. Instead, they create what Stephanie Kerschbaum calls multimodal inhospitality: “many multimodal texts are not commensurable across modes, [and] inaccessible multimodal spaces are too often remedied by a problematic turn to the retrofit [and] texts and environments are rarely flexible enough to be manipulated by users” (in Oswal et al., n.p.). Thus “multimodal inhospitality occurs when the design and production of multimodal texts and environments persistently ignore access except as a retrofit” (in Oswal et al., n.p.). Janine Butler adds that “to increase the potential for making multimodal compositions inclusive, we need to synchronize modes so that different bodies and senses can access meaning” (n.p.). In my own field of composition, we have acknowledged that composition (as a process) has become increasingly multimodal (Yancey; Ball). This acknowledgment means that the tools and avenues of composing need to be reconsidered in terms of accessibility. Which bodies can compose which texts, under what circumstances? But we also need to realize that, even when a composition is primarily text based, its reception is bound to be multimodal—it will be accessed through screen-readers, enlarged, read across platforms, translated, and so on. Moreover, in what ways will the text move, move through, or move past (which) bodies? Reception needs to be reconsidered in terms of accessibility—this expands the author’s responsibility. But the means of distribution and reproduction
also need to be reconsidered in terms of accessibility. Which bodies can
take up texts and move (with) them? If we understand rhetoric as the
circulation of power and discourse through the body, then we’d want
to view this through a wide range of possible bodies, or even the widest
range of possible bodies.

So a starting point for any multiliteracy or multimodality pedagogy is,
as with any other form of teaching, a questioning of access.

In my discipline of composition and rhetoric, the landmark Confer-
ence on College Composition and Communication’s “Student’s Right
to Their Own Language” argued that varieties of language use do not
derive from “supposed differences in intelligence or physiology” and
that the “variety of dialects enriches the language” (Scott et al., 717). We
must extend this argument to recognize that engagements with different
modes of meaning-making does not map onto differences of intelligence
or physiology either. Students must have the right to their own literacies,
learning styles, and modes of expression—literacies, styles, and modes
that it is the job of the academy to recognize, validate, and make space
for, therefore enriching our cultures, ourselves, our classrooms, and our
disciplines.

Just like Somnolent Samantha, my Samanthas are fictitious. How-
ever, recognizing the ways that these characters are created in service
of particular cultural narratives is important—especially as they impact
the roles that we make available to any student. Multimodal pedagogies
might move forward by recognizing that an expanded range of expres-
sive possibilities, instead of creating new ways to be inferior, and instead
of hiding inequities under the costume of progress, offer new contact
points for engaging with the difficult work of teaching and learning.

Putting together this chapter with the last chapter on retrofits, we
can understand that so many academic accommodations are shifts or
even redundancies in modes: copies of lecture notes, a transcript for a
video, the ability to be tested orally instead of in writing, and so on. But
why, when one group asks to shift modes, or for information to be given
across more than one mode, are they deficient, asking for something
special? Why, then, when another group shifts or repeats modes, are they
constructed as Super? In the next chapter, I will explore the ways that we
might better teach all students if and when these redundancies, shifts,
and multiplications in modes of engagement become part of the Univer-
sal Design of teaching.