PROJECT MUSE®

Editor's Note: Input, Feed, Reboot

Victoria Pitts-Taylor, Talia Schaffer
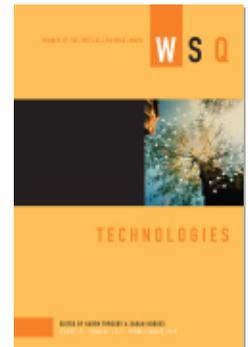
➡ *For additional information about this article*
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/265792

EDITORS' NOTE: INPUT, FEED, REBOOT

This special issue on technologies gives us a chance to measure how much current feminist thinking about technology differs from the somewhat bifurcated views of the twentieth century. Feminism's response to technologies in the second wave was widely varied, but it is fair to say that technologies of all kinds—industrial, medical, and pharmaceutical—were usually greeted with deep suspicion, as they were identified with masculinity, capitalism, militarism, and dominance. While reproductive technologies were envisioned by many as emancipatory, emerging reproductive technologies like IVF were also widely condemned. For a time, what seemed to be at stake was the status of the natural—represented primarily by the body—against the dominance, the insertions, interruption and interferences of the technological. The natural was particularly affiliated with the maternal body, and with a kind of spiritualist environmentalism; women's bodies were associated with the Gaia hypothesis, the earth mother, and the female goddess. However, in contrast to this history of what seemed to be feminist technophobia, cyberfeminists of the third wave embraced technologies, especially but not exclusively information technologies, as offering release from the bodily inscriptions of gender and race. Perhaps such interruptions could reboot social facts and shake us from the cultural inscriptions of the body. Theorists aimed to prove that bodily ideas were not essential but cultural and therefore mutable, that one could perform new ways of being. As different as these perspectives were, they were underwritten by the same assumption: the oppositional relation of technology as object/inert/masculine with the body as living/subject/feminine.

Feminist skepticism about technology has not disappeared; in fact, we have only deepened our critical understanding of technologies. But our critiques no longer necessarily presume a natural, essential state of life or embodiment which stands against the technological. Perhaps for this reason, cyberfeminist enthusiasm has been tempered; if bodies and technologies are not in opposition, technologies cannot release us from the social inequities of embodied life. As guest editors Karen Throsby and Sarah Hodges point out, technologies are always, among other things, practices, always mediated by and mediating the social. Such practices are represented by artifacts (as varied as wrenches, breast milk, and blogs), knowledges (from biometrics to neuroscience), processes (the manufacture of non-bleeding maraschino cherries), and embodied experiences (from surrogate motherhood to trau-

matic brain injury). The articles, poems, and creative prose collected here show us a way of looking at technological knowledges, processes, objects, and experiences as instantiations of living and being.

One of the things they reveal is the tension between the technological drive toward uniformity and the political and biological fact of variation. From the early twentieth century scientists who wanted to override the differences in lactating bodies, to the military mothers' blogs that have trouble accommodating political utterances, we find that technologies which provide universal access to a widely acceptable product often do so at the cost of the individuals who compose it. We also notice that imaging has come to mean something different, and more threatening, than in its nineteenth century incarnation as a form of portraiture. Today images shape ideas of male sexual aggression, from the worrisome racial assumptions encoded in FaceGen to the Hollaback website's calls to snap pictures of sexual harrassers. Finally, let us complicate our earlier sketch of the transition from second wave to third wave feminism. Feminist history is not necessarily a narrative of progress. A highly sexualized form of female empowerment ("chicks who fix") may actually be less useful than earlier notions of women's capability that linked skill to domestic or intellectual prowess.

Technologies shows us that feminism is enmeshed in information technologies, medical technologies, and reproductive technologies; that (to say something perhaps too obvious) they shape women's experiences, as women's needs continue to shape them. But it also shows us that we need to be alert to what is not obvious: the hidden assumptions of avatar designs, the blog entries blocked from online forums, the bill withdrawn due to the actions of infertility bloggers, the implicit promises of pregnancy tests, the military affiliations of surrogate mothers, to name a few. If technology often shows us a brightly lit array of information, that shiny face conceals more shadowy codes. Screen—the public face of information technologies—is a verb as well as a noun. Those codes—concealed, deleted, but still recoverable—are the real data this issue presents.

Victoria Pitts-Taylor
Professor of Sociology
Queens College and The Graduate Center,
City University of New York

Talia Schaffer
Professor of English
Queens College and The Graduate Center,
City University of New York