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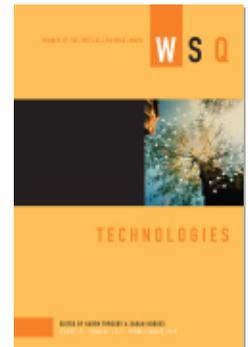
Introduction: Situating Technology

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INTRODUCTION: SITUATING TECHNOLOGY

KAREN THROSBY and SARAH HODGES

We share a commitment to analyses of technology rooted in narratives of practice, although we express them through different disciplines: sociology (Karen) and history (Sarah). This gave us our starting point for the special issue: that technologies inform our understandings and experiences of our own bodies and that feminist analyses of technology derive an historical epistemic privilege because of the intensity of the relationships that continually converge upon identity, gender, the body, and discipline. Technologies, from our disciplinary perspectives, are simultaneously material and social, and both mediate and are mediated by social relations. They are knowledges, artifacts, and practices (Wacjman 1991) that have reshaped, and continue to reshape, the ways we think, write, communicate, create, and perceive the self, body, and community.

Both within and beyond our own disciplinary frames of reference, the topic of “technologies” encompasses a bewildering range of possible lines of inquiry. The rapidly changing nature of technology generates an energetic drive within academic and creative fields to make sense of those changes. The call for papers alone listed sixteen possible thematic areas that the issue might address, and we never considered this to be definitive. Embarking on a special issue is always an uncertain (and exciting) process, and it is impossible to predict the form it will eventually take as the call for papers begins to circulate, since the central themes of the final product are strongly subject to the concerns of the abstracts that are submitted.

From the process of working through the initial sheaf of abstracts received up until we put together the running list of articles, we have been struck by the extent to which the vast preponderance of submissions, to one degree or another, reflected the enduring centrality of human reproduction to feminist analyses of technology. What are we to make of this? One possible reason for this enduring critical and material relationship between feminism and reproductive technologies may be that so much pathbreaking feminist work addressed how technologies have mediated women’s understandings and experiences of their own reproductive practices. Books such as Ann Oakley’s *The Captured Womb* (1984) and Emily Martin’s *The Woman in the Body* (1987) were part of a broader feminist project that not only ad-

dressed women's complicated relationships with technology, but also made central women's concerns and bodies in analyses that had conventionally rendered them invisible. For many of us, these authors showed us how to deal with technologies without losing sight of the body.

Nevertheless, this explanation leaves unexplained our observations of (for the purpose of putting this special issue together, at least) the relative abandonment of the cyborg as a vehicle for thinking about the relationship between gender and technology. Why should this be the case, particularly in a digital age? Is it because Donna Haraway (1991) is harder to read than Emily Martin (1987)? Is it because the cyborg occupies a distinct ontological status from that of forceps, or a petri dish? We balk at trying to draw conclusions on the basis of such particular evidence as a call for papers response. Nevertheless, what we can say is that reproduction (both for those who are and for those who are not mothers) remains a trenchant and defining marker of the female body, and a central lens through which to think about technologies.

This is not to suggest, however, that this special issue is confined to reproductive technologies; indeed, even though reproduction/motherhood features in several of the essays, it tends to operate as a site for exploring other technologies (for example, online forums and blogs). Consequently, instead of focusing on a particular *kind* of technology, we see the special issue as exploring three core themes: the interplay between enhancement and constraint, the shifting interface between technology and the body, and growing dominance of technomilitarism. Each of these will be introduced in turn below, before we conclude with a brief summary of the essays presented in this issue of *WSQ*.

ENHANCEMENT/CONSTRAINT

One of the core feminist concerns surrounding technologies is the extent to which they facilitate or obstruct feminist goals of equality and emancipation. Do they enhance women's lives and capacities, or constrain them? There is, of course, rarely a zero-sum answer to such a question, but the articles presented here signal the *potential* of given technologies to enable, if not empower, women. Several of the essays—for example, Jessie Daniels's insightful review of the literature on cyberfeminism or Clancy Ratliff's analysis of infertility blogging and its potential for political activism—either point explicitly to, or suggest how, dominant ideologies might be subverted by skillful appropriation and deployment of selective technologies. Other pieces, such as Amy Bix's historical essay on women's tool knowledge and home

repair, examine how, even when dominant gender relations teeter on the high heels of home repair vixens, these possibilities are readily subsumed under hegemonic patriarchal wielding of discursive power tools. Kara Swanson's study of attempts to technologize breast milk, on the other hand, describes the technological fantasies—albeit often frustrated by the canny proclivities of lactating breasts and the bodies attached to them—of obviating the need for real-time women entirely. The possibilities of technologies to enhance women's lives, therefore, are always contingent. Indeed, both Linda Layne's article about the home pregnancy test, and Laura Carpenter and Monica Casper's paper about the HPV vaccine explicitly urge caution at celebrating technologies as inherently feminist, demonstrating the ease with which women can be caught up in novel, technologized forms of surveillance in the name of freedom and choice.

TECHNOLOGIES/BODIES

Another of the striking absences from the abstracts that we received in response to the call for papers was analyses of body-modification practices (such as cosmetic surgery or dieting)—practices that Ann Balsamo (1999) famously articulated as technologies of the gendered body. Nevertheless, bodies, and bodily secretions, still receive significant attention in the essays. Both Swanson and Layne figure women's leaky bodies—breast milk and urination (the latter on a stick to diagnose pregnancy), respectively; while in Bree Kessler's paper, it is body parts (wombs) that provide an analytical focal point. Jennifer Terry, by contrast, offers an account of the “signature wound” of the current conflict in Iraq—traumatic brain injury—while Karyl Ketchum's essay about the disturbing politics of digital facial imaging technologies highlights the extent to which the embodied markers of gender and race extend to the digital domain to material and troubling effect. Bodies, then, are rarely absent in the “doing” and the “being-done-to” of technologies.

Informed by these first two themes, we attempted to organize the essays in such a way that the reader is taken through a sequence that begins with what could be described as body technologies (milk, tools, home pregnancy tests, HPV vaccines) toward what can be broadly conceptualized as information technologies (cyberspace, blogs and forums, visual technologies). However, this sequence is not intended to suggest a progressively technologized disembodiment, but rather to explore the multiple ways in which gendered, raced, and classed embodiment manifests itself across different technologized contexts. This led us to our third unifying theme: technomilitarism.

TECHNOMILITARISM

The sequence from embodied technologies to information technologies is punctuated by technomilitarism and its associated militarized bodies in various guises: Bree Kessler's military wives working as surrogates; Wendy Christensen's military mothers on online forums; the use of FaceGen's facial recognition technology for security and surveillance purposes in Ketchum's essay; and perhaps most explicitly of all, Terry's thought-provoking discussion of bodies wounded in Iraq. In these essays, the militarized body lies at one of the most potent crossroads of technologies and women's experience, and we see technologies facilitating the construction of ever-expanding terrains of combat—bodily, affective, and geographical. This technomilitarism brings together individual bodies and body politics; technologies ensure that, in the current historical moment, the technomilitarized body is always already everywhere.

The issue opens with Kara Swanson's essay, "Human Milk as Technology and Technologies of Human Milk: Medical Imaginings in the Early Twentieth-Century United States." Swanson explores attempts in the 1920s to develop the technological capacities to dry human milk in order to obviate the need to rely on women's "unruly" bodies for the immediate supply of infant nutrition. Ultimately, both the lactating body and the technical process proved less amenable to technoscientific intervention than the aspiring engineers and doctors had envisaged and the project foundered. Swanson's essay, then, offers an interesting—and unusual—insight not only into classed and gendered relations of power but also into the story of an unsuccessful technological venture, of the path not followed.

In Swanson's essay, it is men who (potentially) hold the technological expertise to dry milk, with women figuring as the suppliers of the raw materials and as grateful beneficiaries of the imagined final product for their ailing babies. Amy Bix, by contrast, in "Creating 'Chicks Who Fix': Women, Tool Knowledge, and Home Repair, 1920–2007," addresses the reclaiming of technological skills and tools by women. Focusing on twentieth-century home repair instruction in magazines and books aimed at women, she explores the ways in which the presumption of technical incompetence and physical weakness was challenged by exhortations for women to acquire those skills for themselves. However, as Bix notes, the apparent rush to technical competence and independence did little to disrupt entrenched gender inequalities, with women continuing to be largely excluded from technical

professions and this movement creating new burdens of work for women without being met by a similar movement of men into the traditionally female realm of domestic and reproductive labor.

Both Linda Layne, in “The Home Pregnancy Test: A Feminist Technology?” and Laura Carpenter and Monica Casper, in “Global Intimacies: Innovating the HPV Vaccine for Women’s Health,” share the skepticism demonstrated by Bix toward simplistic presumptions of particular technologies (or technical capacities) as liberating for women. The home pregnancy test, for example, is conventionally understood as offering women a quick and discreet means of establishing whether they are pregnant or not, a woman-controlled technology that enhances the ability to make informed choices. However, Layne highlights the ways in which the tests are conceptualized as useful in conjunction with medically administered tests rather than as a substitute for them. The tests are not only expensive, but are often used multiply for confirmation, and the privacy they purport to offer is compromised by the need to purchase them in public settings (stores and pharmacies) and to dispose of the test stick. For Layne, these problems, among many others, cast doubt on claims for the technology as feminist. Carpenter and Casper focus on another, more recently heralded, technology—the vaccine for human papillomavirus (HPV)—a sexually transmitted virus linked to cervical cancer. In many ways, the vaccine can be understood as a significant advance in women’s health care, since it has been shown to prevent 70 percent of cervical cancers. However, as Carpenter and Casper illustrate, when looked at from the perspective of transnational women’s health, it is supplemental to screening rather than a substitute for it—the provision of which remains significantly lacking in the developing world. Furthermore, they argue that the vaccine reinforces dominant cultural beliefs about gender and sexuality through which women’s bodies are figured as dangerous and in need of control, and that the linking of HPV and HIV further obscures the needs and specific realities of women. The HPV vaccine may, they argue, be a solution to preventing cervical cancer, but it does not resolve sexism, poverty, or global inequality.

Jessie Daniels’s essay marks the transition point between the focus on explicitly embodied technologies and the trend toward information technologies (with the significant caveat, as discussed above, that these latter can never be disembodied). Beginning with the example of HollaBackNYC—a website that encourages women to photograph men who harass them in the street and upload the images to the site—Daniels presents an extensive

review of the booming literature on cyberfeminism. Drawing on theoretical literature and empirical research, she argues that the Internet is used by girls and self-identified women to transform their material, corporeal lives. However, drawing on examples such as the “pro-ana” online communities, she also highlights the extent to which this involves both resistance to and the reinforcement of entrenched hierarchies of gender and race. The Internet is, therefore, a technology that can be (and has been) appropriated by feminist networks to transformative intent and effect, but is never predictably or uniformly so.

The next two articles—Clancy Ratliff’s “Policing Miscarriage: Infertility Blogging, Rhetorical Enclaves, and the Case of House Bill 1677” and Wendy Christensen’s “Technological Boundaries: Defining the Personal and the Political in Military Mothers’ Online Support Forums”—both take up these issues by focusing on particular forms of online activity. Ratliff argues that infertility bloggers’ responses to a bill that made reporting a “fetal death” within twelve hours a legal requirement were instrumental in getting the bill withdrawn—an impact that mitigates against the familiar characterization of “mommy blogs” as expressions of self-indulgent egocentricity. Ratliff suggests that blogging communities are often conceptualized as enclaves that do not permit the politically productive work of argumentation; however, the analysis in the essay suggests that this can generate a technologically mediated, meaningful intervention into political discourse in ways that directly affect women’s material lives. Christensen’s essay is much less optimistic in tone about the political possibilities of the online military mothers’ support forums that she studied. She argues that these communities actively position politics and support (for loved ones serving overseas) as mutually exclusive, and that these boundaries are produced and sustained by the communities’ members, but that this process of boundary construction is facilitated by features of the online technologies themselves, including message board rules, discussion topic lists, the authority of moderators, and participants’ messaging practices. While, for Ratliff, online writing can facilitate political transformations, in Christensen’s case, the textual aspects of online technologies are central to the policing of the public and private domains and the constraining of politics.

Bree Kessler’s essay, “Recruiting Wombs: Surrogates as the New Security Moms,” offers a further inflection on the lives of women left behind by those who are serving overseas—in this case, military wives, rather than the mothers of soldiers. Drawing on a 2008 *Newsweek* report, she brings attention

to the growing use of military wives as surrogate mothers—a time-limited form of employment for women whose male partners are low paid but who are frequently relocated, making it difficult for the women to hold down jobs to supplement the household income. The women are, Kessler argues, the new “security moms,” who not only take responsibility for familial and community security in the absence of their male partners but also transform reproductive technology (surrogacy) into a military technology, (re)producing new citizens to defend the nation.

Karyl Ketchum, in “FaceGen and the Technovisual Politics of Embodied Surfaces,” presents a very different technology, one that is increasingly being appropriated for security purposes. Ketchum first encountered the software FaceGen in the context of computer gaming; it enables players to create characters and, especially, faces, which are intended to display intelligible signs to others of the defining traits of those characters. Ideologies of gender and race are revealed as inextricably intertwined in these creations; as the user morphs the created face along a continuum toward hypermasculinity, the face darkens. Ketchum tells us that the software (and particularly in relation to facial recognition and other surveillance technologies) is now being used by the U.S. Department of Defense. It is an ominous move that she argues “feels familiar,” in spite of the newness of the technology, mobilizing as it inevitably will the troubling associations between facial characteristics, national identities, and character traits that have historically criminalized certain bodies.

The final essay brings many of the core concerns of this special issue together in a powerful exploration of the “signature wound” of a conflict—in this case, traumatic brain injury inflicted in the current conflict in Iraq. Jennifer Terry, in “Significant Injury: War, Medicine, and Empire in Claudia’s Case,” argues that military technologies are inseparable from the specific wounds that they cause. However, it is also the case that military and medical technologies are intimately interrelated, since each round of signature injuries prompts innovative medical responses, or the refinement of techniques. This poses a fundamental challenge to the conventional separation of militarism and humanitarianism—a challenge that is made more potent by the increasing linking of warrior/peacekeeper roles in U.S. military interventions. Women (and especially black women), Terry argues, constitute a rapidly expanding proportion of military personnel, yet are excluded from those aspects of the profession leading to higher pay and status; they are increasingly assigned to medical and logistical tasks that expose them to the

risk of injury. Their wounds—technomilitarily inflicted and biomedically treated—tell a potent story about gender, race, and global politics in a way that resists cultural amnesia.

For us as guest editors of this special issue, the rise of the technomilitarized body at the opening of the twenty-first century provides both inspiration and despair for feminist thought—perhaps in the same way that the feminist focus on the intersections of reproduction and technology also does. We despair at the pain, and we take inspiration insofar as feminist analyses refuse to bear mute witness. Instead, we pursue our only option. We continue to read like crazy, talk like crazy, and write like crazy. And it is in this spirit that we invite you into the contents that follow to explore the puzzling complexity of technologies—in all their seductive appeal, their enhancing possibilities, and their potent capacities for harm.

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