From Curlers to Chainsaws

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Published by Michigan State University Press

Walls, Elizabeth MacLeod, et al.
From Curlers to Chainsaws: Women and Their Machines.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/43337.

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Wheel, gear, handle, lever, button, key, window, screen—regardless of what it does or when it was first made, a machine is always the sum of its parts. Performance is all: what happens when the button is pushed, the lever switched on, the gear engaged, the screen illuminated. A combination of ingenuity and miracle, machines expand the capacities of the human. Invent a wheel, and bodies move faster than legs. Design a spinning jenny, and wool is transformed into winter clothing. Create a computer, and minds roam through space and across time.

As editors of this collection, we believe that the most significant part of any machine is human touch—the energy that brings the device to life and directs its performance. When people combine mechanical ingenuity with the wonder of touch, their eyes see farther, their ears hear better, their bodies move with greater fluidity and speed. In this collection, our writers use machines to make a voice resonate, to restore a lost limb, and to extend the pleasure of sex. For a machine is a kind of magic, whether it’s a stove in a kitchen or a smartphone at a board meeting. With the touch of a hand, a dead object is animated, Lazarus-like. As Ana Maria Spagna says of her Stihl 026 chainsaw, “After a while, after a few years and a few hundred trees, the 026 began to feel like an appendage.” We humans are right there with our machines, and they are with us.

Although science fiction and movies predict the rise of machines—signaling their importance as icons of danger and awe—they are not in the world merely to serve us, nor are we here to serve them. Rather,
since machines come from organic computers (our brains), they inhabit our collective imagination. They are symbols. They are metaphors. And yet, when we're not confronted with fantasies of Terminator robots or a sentient HAL 9000, we tend to forget or ignore the import of machines in our day-to-day lives, reducing them to their functionality. This anthology, then, is an attempt to think carefully and deliberately about our unthinking tools, to have a conversation with plastic and steel in order to try to understand what our machines mean—why we need them, or if we do; where they came from, or what they might signify; and what the future holds for further integrations of body and contraption.

Numerous writers and scholars have warned about envisioning machines as antagonists, oppressors, and competitors. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote about the potential dehumanization that can result from engaging with gadgets. The mechanic becomes his machine, the sailor “a rope of a ship.” Even now, a “hired hand” is a metaphor suggesting that a person wielding a tool becomes his hammer or her scythe. And history itself has made us deeply aware of the harm machines have caused people in the factories of industrial America. In the textile industry in the 1820s, roughly 85–95 percent of workers were women, and by 1850, Massachusetts employed one-third of its women between the ages of ten and twenty-nine in factories—the town of Lowell having emerged as the “City of Spindles.” The textile mills were dangerous and unhealthful. Poor ventilation and too few exits led to fires and deaths, and every two or three minutes, workers had to put their mouths to the shuttle and suck thread through a small hole, a literal “kiss of death” from inhaling lint and fabric in the process. Feminist scholars have pointed out that, despite theoretical discussions of a genderless or transgendered worldview, machines often continue to be seen as either “feminine” or “masculine,” particularly in terms of their use. In a potent phrase coined by Arlie Russell Hochschild, there persists a “second shift” for working women, tasks performed at home, using domestic machines, added to a woman’s paid labor in the public sector. Ruth Schwartz Cowan, writing about technological systems in postwar
America, asks that women not “succumb entirely to the work processes that they seem to have ordained for us.”

Indeed, historically women have been strongly associated with machines that cast a domestic hue, defined by the task at hand. These machines are often ones that weave, feed, and clean: the hoe, the stove, the loom, the vacuum. Throughout the centuries, such contraptions have enabled women to care for children, the ill, and the elderly. Yet women have wielded other machines, too: those of engineers, farmers, athletes, and artists. During the Neolithic period, women across the Near East pulverized grain with grindstones. Farming in Iowa around AD 1000, Oneota women scraped the ground with hoes made of bison scapulae to cultivate corn. Women living in medieval and Renaissance Europe operated machines to weave cloth, to give birth—and to write. Rural Victorian women risked their lives manipulating threshers on the farm, while their urban counterparts used gymnastics equipment to offset the potential harm of sedentary city life. Even goddesses have plied certain tools. The British Museum displays an ancient tablet showing Athena handling a wooden level as she oversees mortals building a ship, while the princess Devahuti, of Hindu lore, joins her husband in piloting a vimana, a rudimentary airplane.

While drawings, letters, histories, and museums tell us something about the machines women have used across time, what those women thought of these devices—and what they felt about them—has largely been lost. What remains are the objects themselves, sitting cipher-like on shelves or in the pages of books: pestles, blades, steel arms, spoons, and a treadle wheel or two. Given the impossibility of retracing or restructuring the histories of women of the past, as editors of this volume we have turned to contemporary women.

In the modern moment, both women and men have many of the same machines—computers and iPhones, cars and coffeemakers. As editors, however, we’ve chosen to focus this collection on the particular complications and complexities women have with their devices, in part because women’s own bodies have often been perceived as machines
themselves (sex machines, baby-making machines, domestic machines), and also because women have been urged by industry and advertising to use various devices to modify deeply personal matters of identity (how they look or act). Even now, machines have distinct implications for women. As Emily Rapp says in her essay about growing up with a leg prosthesis, “This relationship I have with a mechanized body has always been contentious, because a woman’s body is, in part, her currency in the world, however we might try to deny it. . . . We are easily reduced to the sum of our parts, and sometimes we are reduced to only our parts.” With informed and lyrical voices, and with extraordinary fearlessness, our writers focus on the meaning machines contain and retain for them—modern women who can only speak for themselves, of course, but whose responses are so redolent that they echo the past even as they invite others into future conversations.

The writers in our collection continue to write about machines that are domestic and intimate, though they are aware of the historical weight such devices have for contemporary women, since domestic machines carry the stories of generations of women who came before them—including their foremothers. What did domestic machines once mean to their ancestors, and what do they mean to women today? Psyche Williams-Forson cooks collards on her gas stove; E. J. Levy extends pleasure for herself and her lovers with a vibrator; Mary Swander experiments with an Excalibur food dehydrator; Norma Tilden directly addresses a photograph of a 1939 Maytag washing machine (“Maytag, you crafty girl”); and Joyce Dyer removes her mother’s Singer sewing machine from the dusty cabinet where for decades it had been “roosting, but unable to fall into flight.” Rebecca McClanahan finds that ironing is her way “to survive the deepest pains and joys,” and will not apologize for her need to iron. But other writers in our collection deftly handle machines usually seen as masculine. Maureen Stanton learns how to operate the bright red Snapper lawn mower she purchases. Debra Marquart, a rock singer as well as writer, explores how her erotic Electro-Voice PL-80 microphone helps her keep her own voice “above the noisy fray” of the guitarists standing
behind her. Mary Quade learns about the Cockshutt tractor used by her family on their Kansas farm, along with the stories that accompany it, the “dings and dents” of both. And Karen Salyer McElmurray drives a 1967 Dodge Dart—“to the next town. The next state. The next school, degree, boyfriend, lover.”

Whatever machine is their subject, our writers take seriously the job of understanding what it signifies. A machine is what’s beneath and beyond the mere gears and metal plates of its making. The essayists in this collection know that machines are more than just practical or serviceable, whether the object is Jennifer Cognard-Black’s curling iron, or “hot thing,” which she takes up in “fearful fantasy of attaining such beauty” though she risks being burned; or Joy Castro’s Ruger GP .357 handgun, which may or may not contain the power to shield her infant child from the fear she carries of her own stepfather, whose violence, Castro writes, is knifed into her “like scrimshaw cut in living bone.” In turn, Mary Swander, struck by illness that demands she preserve organic food for long Iowa winters (and eat only that), has spent the last several decades negotiating with a variety of machines that help her dehydrate the food she grows. Her story is both a literal progression and metaphorical tracking of a better understanding of herself, the natural world, and the universe—as is Jen Hirt’s story of her metaphorical stapler (“I need to remember that it took me a long time to learn how to let the staple do its job”).

Other writers consider how mass-media machines have shaped their inner lives. For Elizabeth MacLeod Walls, her iPhone is a device that has at times served as an uncomfortable link to the external, one that has altered her seclusion, the private life within so important to the production of art and ideas. For Diana Salman, however, the opposite is true: media machines once helped her escape the seclusion of wartime Lebanon. As a young girl, she discovered the poetry of Nizar Qabbani on her grandfather’s portable radio, her longing for both love and the Arabic language in black-and-white Egyptian movies on the TV, and her desperate loneliness for her father—working in the Congo without his family—through the cassette tapes she was forced by her mother to make.
Even Nikky Finney’s No. 1 pencil, such a simple tool of both mass media and intimate thought, is not merely a writing implement. “The more I pencil-dig down,” she explains, “the more frankincense I turn up from the shank and shale of this life, the more I understand that there is even more bounty to field into the air.” Melissa A. Goldthwaite’s Canon PowerShot camera alerts her to both the riches and the dangers of an artist’s life. Though the camera allows her to capture images of sugar packets, fruit, and flowers, she also recognizes the distance her photographs place between her subject and herself—her inevitable role as observer. And Monica Berlin conflates time, experience, and place with the myriad machines associated with city living (trains, cars, turntables, telephones) to outline the relationship between art and the past as represented by the tools and machines all around us, outside of us, and in our memories.

It’s not surprising that—in a collection that sets out to consider the integration of machines into the bodies, minds, and imaginations of women—several of our contributors talk about how certain devices translate artistic creativity: a camera and a microphone and a pencil. Such devices become word, image, note. In Karen Outen’s essay, the device itself metamorphoses into idea. Her typewriter, companion to all of the artistic impulses of her early adulthood, emerges later in life as a MacBook Air, a new creature entirely—and one that serves both as a conduit and a symbol of her interior world. Sometimes these machines resist the hard job of artistic translation—for months or even years—but then, one day, Debra Marquart’s Electro-Voice PL-80 microphone bends and yields, finally fitting the contour of the fingers pressing down on them, the mouth close to them, the hands holding on tight.

Sue William Silverman comes to see how the pressing down of keys, over time, can bring a life together—the whole past and present of it. Two parallel actions, both pressing down on piano keys as well as the keys of a qwerty keyboard, slowly but powerfully join Silverman’s difficult family past and her changing sense of that past, and through this integration, Silverman produces art. For ultimately, to write—to be a woman writer—is,
in one way, to be both mechanical and a mechanic. We still call punctuation and grammar the “mechanics” of writing, and even language itself is a technology. But then, as writing occurs through such machinery, craft and art combine. The writer takes the mechanics (craft) from the machine, but the machine takes from the writer the art that causes it to move.

All women who use machines, and have used them since the beginning of civilization, have understood the world the way they do in part because of the devices they employ. Our writers have taken machines into all the spaces where they live their lives, giving these spaces a local habitation and a name. As editors, we have chosen to organize the essays around such places: Hearth and Home; Bedroom and Birthing Room; Farm, Lawn, Hill, and Wood; Stage and World; and The Writer’s Studio. Women’s relationships to others, to the world, and to themselves are often articulated by the machines that accompany them into these spaces, which then help to connect them to the tangible world. The writers in our volume understand the transformation that occurs when a hand touches a machine. It should not surprise us that Monica Frantz, a midwife, rethinks human hands as the most valuable of machines during birth—“tools of muscle and bone are best suited for working with muscle and bone.” Only after she sees the hands of her newborn daughter does the fact of her child’s birth seem real. “She had passed from my body into my arms, but she didn’t feel like mine until I saw her hands. There were my long fingers, my wide fingernails. I knew those hands,” she writes. “My own reborn.”

As women writers, our contributors are indeed reborn—remade—through their craft. With the symbol and metaphor of the machine as their collective conduit for new understanding, their essays become spaces where readers can join them to reconsider these machines that inhabit and change our world.

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