

Pentimento:
Feminist Critiques of Technology and Science
HU 5112, Fall 2011

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By appointment

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To know our history is to begin to see how to take up the struggle again.
—Ehrenreich & English, *Witches, Midwives, & Nurses*

What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.
—Arendt, *The Human Condition*

Feminists share the belief that women, too, are fully human.
—Harding, *Sciences from Below*

The science question in feminism is about objectivity as positioned rationality.
—Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*

The argument that women’s relationship to technology is a contradictory one . . . opens up fresh possibilities for feminist scholarship and action.
—Wajcman, *Feminism Confronts Technology*

This course traces social, political, and cultural issues that have gradually emerged in technical communication, technology studies, and science as a result of feminist examinations of gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and physical ability. The course begins with a review of selected scholars who have theorized technology and human interaction and whose conspicuous silence about gender, class, race, ethnicity, and the physical body establishes the gaps that subsequent feminist scholarship has sought to bridge. Focusing on feminist historiographers and theorists, the course explores the aforementioned gaps with an examination of the ways in which modern and anti-modern feminists aim to foreground and bridge them, for women in particular. Turning to recent alterations in the scope of technical communication and technology studies, the course takes up the work of postmodern feminists, who probe issues of power and control in such contexts as cross-cultural communication, medical rhetorics, and disability studies.
Goals:
This seminar aims to:

- Contextualize the historiographies of U.S. feminist undertakings with the goal of seeing "feminism" as plural and contradictory
- Recover classical understandings of episteme, phronesis, and techne in order to appreciate how they have marked—and can be used to resist—dominant attitudes toward science and technology
- Appreciate the complexity of feminist science and technology (FST) projects
- Interrogate the twin dangers of gender essentialism and technological determinism
- Entertain feminist calls for research that critique and counter the modern and the postmodern
- Consider how you might—or not—locate yourself as a feminist in your own scholarship and teaching

Required Texts:

Additional shorter texts, available in PDF on our Blackboard website.

Projects:
Discussion facilitator
Once during the semester, select a reading from the calendar and prepare to facilitate a discussion of it. The purpose is to give you practice in understanding a text deeply enough to help others understand it—that is, to teach.

1. Let me know, as soon as you can, your choice of reading. I'll post you to the calendar.
2. Decide on what you want people to take away from the discussion—your purpose.
3. Prepare question(s) that advance your purpose and offer pathways into the text. Questions, for instance, might focus on a text's argument, methods, successes, and shortfalls. They might also take up how a text conforms to, or resists, our emerging and ongoing understandings of feminist scholarship as it intersects with critiques of technology and science.
4. Two days before you facilitate (Sunday, if on Tuesday; Tuesday if on Thursday), email the list the title of the text, your purpose, and the questions.
5. I encourage you to use the technology in the seminar room to supplement your discussion. Ted Talks, YouTube, documentary excerpts, and newspaper and magazine articles can be interesting ways to begin, organize, or conclude a discussion.
Position paper
Once during the semester, select a text from the calendar or from your own readings and write a position paper of (5–6 pages) on it. The purpose is to give you practice in close reading, critique, and academic argument.

A position paper, or critique, is a careful analysis of an argument to determine what is said, how well the points are made, what assumptions underlie the argument, what issues are overlooked, and what implications can be drawn from such observations.

To move a critique beyond a personal opinion, you need to develop systematic reading practices. Keeping in mind that a critique involves your asking and coming to grips with the particular questions raised by a particular piece, following are seven broad questions to guide you:

1. What is the nature of the piece? Who wrote it and what are her/his qualifications? Why was the piece written?
2. What is the significance of the piece? What relation does it bear to other material on the same subject?
3. What are the objectives? What material is presented to achieve the objectives? How well are the objectives achieved?
4. What is the method of the piece?
5. What is the appeal—or lack of appeal? What are its most striking or illuminating qualities? What are its shortfalls?
6. What assumptions underlie the piece? Are they explicit or implicit? What biases pervade the piece? Are they obvious or do they lurk behind objectivity or neutrality?
7. How do the assumptions and biases affect the argument? How do the author’s assumptions compare with your own assumptions? Do your knowledge and experience allow you to support the author’s position? How would you assess the author’s judgments and conclusions?

Journal map
Once during the semester, either individually or in teams of two, research and prepare a map, both visual and written, for one of the journals suggested below. The purpose of the journal map is to immerse you in the intersecting and diverging discussions about feminism, science, and technology.

The visual map, for instance a simple table, covers the sections marked “V” below; the (co)written map covers the sections marked “W.” Both are due on the day you choose to present (10 minutes).

Once you have chosen a journal, all available from Van Pelt e-journals:

1. Review three years (2008–11) of the major articles, not book reviews or letters. Use the abstracts or introductions at this stage:
   a. In the feminist journals, identify articles that take up technology or science.
   b. In the technical communication/studies, composition studies, or science journals, identify articles that focus on the underrepresented, for instance, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, race, class, or ethnicity.
c. Listen, also, for silences about these topics. Why? The U.P. is not represented on some maps; consider the implications of our absence.

2. Summarize, in a sentence or two, the major arguments of each pertinent article (V)

3. Describe, in a word or two, the approach(es) used in the article: feminist, empirical, rhetorical, for instance (V)

4. Assess, in a sentence or two, the contribution of this article, at the time it was published, to feminist studies of technology and science (V)

5. Step back from the "sites" of the particular articles. Using them as "markers," "map" the general theoretical, research, and/or pedagogical directions they suggest, across the three years (W)

6. Assess the contributions of this journal to feminist studies of technology and science (W)

**Feminist, Gender Studies, or Women's Studies journals**

- *Differences*
- *Feminist Studies*
- *Genders*
- *Hypatia*
- *Journal of Feminist Philosophy*
- *Women's Studies International Quarterly*
- *Women's Studies Quarterly*
- *Signs*

**Technical Communication, Technology Studies, or Science journals**

- *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*
- *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*
- *Journal of Science Education*
- *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*
- *Technical Communication Quarterly*
- *Technology and Culture*

**Rhetoric or Composition Studies journals**

- *College Composition and Communication*
- *College English*
- *Computers and Composition*
- *Rhetoric Review*

**Seminar paper or research proposal**

You are encouraged to advance your own scholarly interests and research agendas, which includes writing a seminar paper or research proposal in light of feminist epistemologies and/or research methodologies (10–12 pages). A statement of topic and purpose, an outline, and a working bibliography are also required.

**Participation and Attendance:**

The success of this seminar depends on careful preparation and engaged participation. Attendance is expected. In case of emergency or unforeseen conflict, or if you know in advance that you must miss a class, let me know as soon as possible. I will not accept late or incomplete work.
Grading Criteria
Discussion 10%
Position paper 25%
Journal map 25%
Seminar paper 30%
Participation 10%

Additional Information
MTU's Policy on Discrimination and Harassment
MTU complies with all federal and state laws and regulations regarding discrimination, including the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. If you have a disability and need reasonable accommodation for equal access to education and services at MTU, please call Dr. Gloria Melton, Associate Dean of Students (7-2212). For other concerns about discrimination, you may contact your advisor, department chair or the Affirmative Action Office (7-3310).

Safe Place
I am a member of Safe Place. Its mission statement: "The GLBT Safe Place Program strives to reduce homophobia and heterosexism on Michigan Tech's campus. Through education, advocacy, and awareness, the program contributes to an open campus climate that is safe and accepting to all members of the University community."