

Introduction: Feminism and Technoscience

WiN Editorial Board

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"Are female leaders more successful at managing the coronavirus crisis?" the *Guardian* recently asked its readers (Henley and Roy), and the writers consent that while many countries with male leaders have done well, few with female leaders have done badly. While headlines like this want to suggest that female politicians rise as model executive politicians in the time of a global health crisis, there is little representational evidence that women (women researchers, women caretakers, women health workers, women salespersons, women parents) will be able to come out of this crisis strengthened and invigorated. An article published rather early in the pandemic in *Inside Higher Ed* on April 21, 2020, suggests that Covid-19 leaves women with "No Room of One's Own" to be submitting articles into peer review. This is, of course, hardly surprising since, thus far, Covid-19 has brought to the fore more clearly the structures that work and those that don't—for women in academia, the "coronavirus has simply exacerbated these inequities by stripping away what supports women had in place to walk this tightrope, including childcare" (Flaherty). Further reports clearly show that "[h]igher rates of infection and death among minorities demonstrate the racial character of inequality in America" (Bouie) and that the "invisible coronavirus makes systemic gender inequalities and injustices visible" (Schalatek). Covid-19, just as earlier health crises such as the yellow fever crisis in the nineteenth century (see Gessner), make socio-economic structures and socio-medical inequalities painfully visible. Covid-19 will leave severe marks on our communities and societies that will need to be carefully researched and rigorously discussed from the critical perspective of feminist, queer, disability, postcolonial, anti-racist, and critical whiteness studies; the question of how gendered

technoscience and medical research (still) are must inevitably be addressed just as much as the ways in which socio-political and economic structures result from and reinforce gendered power relations—but none of this is new.

One of the things that seems to have changed in the first weeks of Covid-19 was the ways in which (some) politicians turned to scientists for advice on how to respond to the pandemic. (Young) climate activists voiced their confusion over how quickly measures based on scientific data were being implemented while scientific data on the climate crisis had heretofore not been taken seriously enough (#fighteverycrisis), and optimists hope that Covid-19 will teach a thing or two in respect to how we acknowledge and act upon scientific evidence. At the same time, Covid-19 also demonstrates the field of tension in which a multiplicity of scientific, scholarly, and critical positions have to be weighed against each other within the democratic process of decision-making: between various understandings of freedom and liberty, different aspects of health and safety, solidarity figures prominently in between those two poles but also appears to be contingent on how each and one of us interprets freedom and security for themselves.

As we were adding the last editorial touches to this issue, we watched as scientists were elevated by some as if they knew all the answers. They knew many, but they also found themselves in the unique position of having to share results and being asked for recommendations as they were researching a novel virus and its effects—a nightmare for any researcher. Among the more curious incidents during this exceptional time, we saw a video go viral in which Germany's chancellor Angela Merkel (herself holding a doctorate in physics) clearly and calmly explains the scientific basis of R0 that is behind the government's lockdown exit strategy (Alvarez); we watched Anthony Fauci, the head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease for 36 years, "gently amend Trump's absurdities, half-truths, and outright lies" (Specter), which unsurprisingly earned him the President's scorn and resentment; we watched conspiracy theorists find new fodder for their positions; and we listened to predictions that world economy will suffer its worst since the Great Depression of the 1930s. In the meantime, N. Katherine Hayles asked us to radically question our own position and to remember "that although humans are dominant *within our ecological niche*, many other niches exist that may overlap with

ours and that operate by entirely different rules” (“Novel Corona”). Covid-19, she writes, “screams at jet-engine volume that we are interdependent not only with each other but also with the entire ecology of the earth,” and she urges us to turn to the “ways in which humans, as a species, are interdependent with one another” and to humbly accept the “opportunity to rethink the ways in which we can identify with each other and with life forms radically different from us.” Feminist (critical posthumanist) technoscience will have to have a significant voice in the assessment of the current situation and the future studies projects that are going to emerge in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is within this unexpected global context, evincing the significance of science and scientists for our collective well-being, on the one hand, and the need for critical assessment of our national, international, and interspecies positions, that we release this second issue of the EAAS open access journal, *WiN*, based on the Thessaloniki 2019 symposium theme, “Feminism and Technoscience.” In light of contemporary sociopolitical developments and prevailing technological practices, the symposium explored the connection between feminism and technoscience. Participants in the symposium and contributors to the current issue examine feminist activism in relation to central notions such as the body, nature, and subjectivity within the context of current technoscientific discourses.

The long history of the feminist movement and the great diversity it displays when approached through the perspectives of race, ethnicity, age, and class underscores its strong political impetus and dynamic evolution. Especially when viewed in the context of technoscience, feminism reveals different socio-cultural, political, and media practices at work that not only affect but also shape public perceptions of femininity with respect to gender-defined skills, relations, and reproductive abilities. A number of contemporary feminist theoreticians, such as Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, and Rosi Braidotti, have commented, each from her own unique perspective, on the impact that technology has had on female labor, bodies, and subjectivity within the context of transnational and global capitalist control.

The Thessaloniki symposium that was masterminded by Tatiani Rapatzikou and Zoe Detsi and their excellent team of gifted young women scholars brought together 50 speakers from 15

countries in the beautiful space of the Museum of Byzantine Culture on April 6, 2019. Participants explored all aspects of the symposium's topic in ten thematic workshop sessions.

Keynote Speaker Lisa Tuttle, acclaimed writer of science fiction, fantasy, horror stories and novels, asked "Is Technology Gendered?" Tuttle discussed the role of science fiction in shaping ideas about new technology, and she teased her audience with some technologies that, while not yet real, are widely expected to bring about radical changes once developed: artificial intelligence, new reproductive technologies, extreme life extension techniques, and sexbots. The answer to Tuttle's rhetorical question is, of course, yes; like everything else in our society, technology is gendered. And because it is, women are more likely to be ignored, marginalized, and damaged by the unintended consequences of many new developments in science. SF is one way of thinking about technology, but an active, thoughtful, critical feminism is more important, or even vital if we have any hope of shaping non-gendered technologies in the future.

In the workshop "Feminism and Science Fiction," scholars engaged in questions of gender hybridity, the creation of scientific knowledge, and the posthuman female heroine in dys/utopian science fiction. Papers that dealt with different aspects of "Feminist Activism" focused on consumer safety and women's activism in the 1960s and 1970s, the implications of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the "rhizome" for feminist activist practices, and feminist activism in contemporary serial cultures. Questions of "Race, Ethnicity and Feminist Technoscience" informed presentations that engaged with literary representations of the black female cyborg, the tragic female scientist, and feminist re-appropriations of technology in literary practice. Feminism and the biopolitics of reproductive technologies were at the center of the workshop on "Reproductive Fictions." Presenters explored the regulation of the female body, including sexuality, maternity, and hysteria, in speculative fiction and science drama. Several scholars explored the realm of "Women and Health" in their papers on women's temperance writings, the return of the gaze of technomedicine in breast cancer pathographies and autographic narratives, and by revisiting Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* in examples of contemporary fiction. In the workshop on "Social Media" presenters looked into instances of misogyny, political agitation in networked spaces, and affective economies of hashtag activism. Under the heading

“Pedagogy and Technology” papers dealt with media literacy, computational empathy, and the pedagogical lessons of online poetry. Several papers engaged with “(Bio)political Narratives and Discourses,” and others explored “Virtual Technologies” in the fields of feminist game studies and game production, and virtual and augmented reality. The workshop on “Film and Technoscience” rounded off a day of innovative performances and exciting discussions.

The second issue of *WiN*, an offshoot of the symposium, comprises seven essays that illuminate various aspects of the intersection of feminism and technoscience. In her contribution titled “Porous Bodies: Trans-corporeality and Passages of Becoming,” Sarah Carlson, a Toronto-based artist, discusses her own 2019 exhibition “Gardens & Grottoes” that sprang from her engagement with two very different grotto environments, the human-made Grotta Grande in Florence’s Boboli Gardens and the nature-made Eramosa Karst in Ontario, Canada. Interweaving artistic practice with theoretical insights, Carlson’s essay convincingly argues for what the author terms “an immersed and enmeshed conception of humanity,” challenging human superiority over other elements of the natural world.

Zoe Detsi’s essay “The Technology of Orgasm: Sexuality, Maternity, and Hysteria in Sarah Ruhl’s *In the Next Room, or The Vibrator Play*” offers an insightful reading of Ruhl’s 2009 play, in which the playwright looks through a contemporary feminist lens at the Victorian method of treating the so-called female hysteria with the use of electromedical technologies, or, to put it bluntly, with a vibrator. The author shows Ruhl’s play to be a successful critique of male control over the female body, deemed as sexually pathological, challenging the existence of rigid boundaries between man and woman, nature and culture, body and mind.

In “Twenty-first Century Intertwining Feminist Writing and Speech in Networked Spaces” Despoina Feleki investigates the connection between technoscience and feminism in the context of the New Media Age. More specifically, by focusing on online creative projects and activist practices, the author highlights the impact of social networking sites on feminist discussions, and the way online social platforms have contributed to raising awareness of women’s issues and activating larger audiences.

In her contribution “Skin-Deep Gender: Posthumanity and the De(con)struction of the Feminine/Masculine Dichotomy in *Westworld*,” Amaya Fernández interrogates the formation and deconstruction of gender identities when agents are not humanly embodied, that is, when “gender is only skin deep.” Between Donna Haraway’s cyborg and Judith Butler’s performative theory of gender constitution, Fernández’s reading of *Westworld* brings to the fore the ways in which the show (both successfully and unsuccessfully) explores what it might mean when gender is “reduced to a prompt on a merely spectacular level.”

Lizzy Pournara discusses Shelley Jackson’s electronic hypertext *Patchwork Girl* (1995) and its “palimpsestuous” relation to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) in her article “Patchwork Palimpsest: Fragmentation, Literary Tradition and Remediation.” Applying the concept of the palimpsest on two relational levels—between male and female literary production and between electronic hypertext and print medium—Pournara is able to show how Jackson manages to foreground female literary production in digital media production.

In “Digital Media and Hungarian American Women’s Migration Narratives,” Agnes Strickland-Pajtók examines a number of oral testimonies by women who emigrated from Hungary to the United States in the wake of the 1956 uprising, by considering both their gendered content and the technological input of digitization. Insights into the three main topics broached in the *Hungarian American Visual History Archive, Memory Project*, namely “life in the home country [...]; the perilous act of escaping; and the challenge to come to terms with the cultural-political-economic constraints of a new country” (6), show how digitally broadcast oral history can contribute to establishing a female storyline and history that complicates and enhances the existing mainstream narrative.

Finally, Mariza Tzouni’s “Cyberlesqued Re/Viewings: Political Challenges in the Neo-burlesque Spectacle” focuses on the way YouTube and social media, such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, have influenced neo-burlesque performances and performers. While acting as a means of consolidating communities and exchanging comments and feedback, networked spaces have also contributed to the perpetuation of stereotypes and misogynistic assumptions. By

offering insightful examples, Tzouni's essay investigates the political dimensions of cyberlesqued re/viewings.

We would like to thank the authors for their contributions, the anonymous peer reviewers for their valuable input and suggestions, and EAAS for their continued support. As the Women's Network of the EAAS, we are looking forward to continuing our work of facilitating women's and gender studies research and extending our and your networks within Europe and beyond. But before we look too far ahead into the future of the Women's Network of European American Studies, we hope you will enjoy this current issue of *WiN*!

Over the past year, the EAAS Women's Network underwent a number of changes, the most visible one being our new website. But it was also time to say goodbye to three of our steering committee members who have shaped the Forum and its journal. We would like to express our deepest gratitude to Annessa Ann Babic (2014-19), Susanne Leikam (2016-19), and Tanfer Emin Tunç (2012-19), without whom the network and the journal would not exist in its present form. At the same time, we, that is, Elisabetta Marino (Italy), Izabella Kimak (Poland), and Ingrid Gessner (Germany), are happy to welcome Johanna Heil (Germany) as the new member of our team.

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