

Gender Circuits
Bodies and Identities in a Technological Age
Second Edition
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Preface

Recently, while sitting at a coffee shop writing (and surfing the web on my smart phone, honestly) two men behind me were having a vibrant conversation about cloud computing, smartphones and about why the internet connection might be slow that day. While neither worked in the tech industries, each was remarkably proficient at making sense of the intricacies of information technologies, both hardware and software. I was struck by how benign, how taken for granted, the quite remarkable integration of technology into day-to-day life has become. The recent explosion in the “internet of things” wherein objects are linked, traceable and usable through the internet, is just one example of how emerging information and biomedical technologies are reshaping our lives anew. From phones, glasses and watches that allow on-the-go video conferencing and interactive heads-up displays, to biometric devices that track one’s physical activity, heart rate and blood pressure and import all of that information to one’s social networking website of choice, human beings are ever more cyborg beings.

In 2008, when I was working on the first edition of this book, I took myself on a writing retreat to get away from my daily distractions. Since it was off-season, the inn at the retreat was empty and I ate my meals, for the most part, alone. During my first meal at the restaurant I was engaged in friendly conversation by my waiter who asked me what I did for a living. When I shared with him that I was a sociologist, he became quite agitated and launched into a long, rather one-sided conversation. Shifting his weight from one foot to the other repeatedly, Will grilled me about what I thought had caused some of the biggest changes in our society. I was not particularly interested in having a conversation with Will, so I mumbled a response and made motions to get back to my meal. Not to be deterred, my chatty waiter shared with me his take on his own question. He informed me that technology was transforming our world, including individuals. At

this point my ears perked up; I had not mentioned to Will that I was currently writing a book on technology, and here he was lending credence to my ideas. Will went on to explain that in his view technology was changing how people acted, what people believed, the nature of interpersonal relationships, and indeed who people were. He also shared that as a technophobe he knew that he was missing out on key parts of contemporary life. Without an email account he felt left out with friends, and with no computer skills he felt unable to pursue his true passion, becoming a wine buyer for the inn. What struck me as poignant when talking with Will was that his internal struggle over technology was palpable. He wanted so much to join the fold, so to speak, and simultaneously was afraid of who he might become because of it.

I wonder what Will is doing now, four years later. Did he finally get an email account? It is hard to imagine not having one in this day and age. In fact, many activities -- from obtaining social services to applying for jobs and participating in school events -- now exist solely online. In California, for example, social services are almost exclusively accessible online. If one has to apply for unemployment benefits, for example, an online application is available and quick while phone lines are only open for a few hours a day.

Since the first edition of *Gender Circuits* was published in 2010 I have had the immense pleasure of talking with a wide range of people about technology and gender. I am amazed at the places the book and its ideas have reached, from family therapists, doctors, corporate leaders and students across the United States, to technological innovators, scholars and politicians. Throughout these diverse conversations, the ubiquity of technological intervention -- welcome and unwelcome -- in people's lives was a common theme. No matter who someone is or how they have come to know *Gender Circuits*, individuals describe feeling a connection to the material because of their own complicated relationship to technology in different parts of their lives. Whether it is a complex decision over a medical treatment or an effort to regulate their child's (or their

own) time on Facebook, the rewards and challenges of new technologies resonate with people.

Since writing *Gender Circuits* I have felt as if everywhere I turned I found evidence of how technologies were reshaping people's lives and embodied selves. Perhaps I am a magnet for this type of information because I am so attuned to the topic, but I think it is more than that. These conversations have become commonplace in society as a whole. In numerous venues, including in popular media, political debate, and social commentary, attention has been paid to the changing nature of life in North America amid technological innovation. Consider, for example, telephones. While few individuals had cell phones 10 years ago, most teens today cannot imagine a life without them, and pay phones are disappearing from public streets. In fact, smartphones are such "old technology" that young people view emails and voice calls as relics of the past; texting has replaced both voice calls and email as the choice mode of communication. Similarly, we accept as normal the integration of biomedical technologies like implants, contact lenses, pharmaceuticals, and pacemakers into the human body; many of these technologies were the sole purview of science fiction just a few years ago. All to say, trying to make better sense of how new technologies are reshaping contemporary bodies and identities continues to be an engaging and prescient endeavor at this moment in North America.

Technology and technological innovation have a long history. Technologies have been in a dynamic relationship with gendered bodies and selves throughout history. However, the pervasiveness of technology and the speed of change that we are experiencing in this era are impacting modern lives and societies in new and transformative ways. These changes, in conversation with social norms and in line with dominant ideologies are transforming what it means to be an embodied, gendered person. This is true even if we, as individuals, ignore or resist these processes. Dominant power

holders construct some beliefs, norms, appearances, and experiences as prized, normal, and valued, while discrediting others. Normative values and expectations shape individuals in myriad ways even when they do not fit into or abide by them. The inspiration for *Gender Circuits* lies at the intersection of these social forces—technology, bodies, identities, dominant ideologies, and social scripts. I begin and end by questioning how technological change is affecting society and individuals. I hope that this book, born out of my own questions, generates new inquiries and offers new analytical tools to help answer your own questions about your life, community, society, and world.

The new edition of *Gender Circuits* has a number of exciting additions. First and foremost, there are three new case studies that examine key contemporary technologies: modern beauty norms, Botox and eating disorders; the gender of medicine and reproductive technologies; and gender diversity on social networking websites such as Facebook. These cases, along with the updated and expanded cases from the first edition offer contemporary, real-world examples of how new technologies are reshaping the embodied lives of individuals and help to bridge sociological concepts and everyday experience. In addition to the new case studies, all of the chapters have been shortened and updated to reflect the most current statistics, research findings and social changes. This is particularly important for material on transgender and intersex lives because of the significant changes in psycho-medical treatment and social and civil rights that have taken place over the last five years. Finally, *Gender Circuits* includes many more images to help elaborate historical and contemporary examples, and additional multimedia materials will be available through an online companion site. I hope that these changes make *Gender Circuits* even more readable, teachable, and thought provoking.

A few notes about language. I have endeavored to write in a jargon free manner. I have, in the process, made a few stylistic choices. First, given my focus on the complexity and historicity of sex and gender categories, I have tried to minimize

gendered language. In the absence of common gender neutral pronouns (although I do introduce some in Chapter 1), I use “they” instead of he/she and “their” instead of his/her. While grammatically incorrect, this approach has the benefit of avoiding gender-specific language. Second, in an effort to engage in conversation with readers’ own lives and experiences, I have at times used inclusive language (for example “you”, “we” and “us”). My intention is not to assume a shared experience or identity with readers or to be condescending. Rather, it is my invitation to you, as readers, to consider whether your own experiences mirror or contradict the examples in this book and how you might make sense of these overlaps and divergences using the analytical tools developed herein.

In addition to text boxes that highlight the definitions of new terms and theories, the notes offer more details about the ideas raised in the book and list many wonderful empirical articles and books on the topics introduced here. They are a wonderful place to learn more about the mechanisms by which particular identities are integrated, technologies are developed, and bodies are shaped. I encourage you, when inspired, to use the notes to find books and articles that elaborate a particular topic and continue your research there.

The analytical approach I use in this book can be used to examine many other areas of embodied identity and social change. I hope that *Gender Circuits* can serve as a launching pad for research on a diverse array of other topics. Because of both space constraints and issues of complexity I have chosen to focus on social changes, gender ideologies, and social contexts within North America. However, there is outstanding work that engages these same issues outside of this region and I encourage you to explore this scholarship.

A project such as this cannot be accomplished by one person alone. I had the great joy and privilege of being trained by an incredible group of scholars including Richard Flacks, Jodi O’Brien, Leila Rupp, Beth Schneider, and Verta Taylor, all of whom have,

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