



Seeing and Knowing the Womb: A Technofeminist Reframing of Fetal Ultrasound toward a Decolonization of Our Bodies

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Abstract

This article demonstrates that our relationships with body-monitoring technologies often prescribed for our health benefits may also problematically prescribe our bodies and identities. Specifically, we look at the fetal ultrasound machine and interrogate the complex tensions between: the importance of it in Western pregnancy and infertility cultures; the ubiquity of sonogram images in Western visual culture; the diverse audiences for the technology and its visual artifacts; and the potential for hegemonic uptakes to undermine our agency. To do so, we employ a technofeminist methodology informed by decolonial, poststructuralist, rhetorical, visual culture, and embodiment theories.

Our framework reveals that, despite the medical intentions of fetal ultrasound technology, colonial effects and rhetorics can emerge from our interfacing with it. Specifically, we aim to prove that decades of uncritical relationships with fetal ultrasound technologies have sponsored rhetorics and practices that contribute to colonial desires to position feminine bodies as new and open frontiers to explore and exploit—thereby positioning pregnant and potentially pregnant bodies as vulnerable to surveillance and fragmentation. Finally, we offer tactics for negotiating more empowering individual and community relationships with fetal ultrasound technology, the ultrasound procedure, and its visible artifacts.

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Body-monitoring technology is a classification used for a wide range of medical technologies that grant increased surveillance over human bodies. Sometimes also referred to as health-monitoring technologies, recent developments in body-monitoring technologies include wireless patient medical monitoring systems, wearable biomonitors instruments (e.g., alcohol and drug detectors, continuous insulin monitors and pumps, wearable “skins” to measure heart rate and sleep, wristband activity trackers), brain imaging, and embedded and injectible microchip sensors. The promises of these technologies for patients, the medical fields, and the pharmaceutical industry include improved treatments for substance abuse, diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, and cancers—just to name a few. However, body-monitoring technologies can also conjure up fears of invasions of privacy, mind and body control, bioterrorism, and more. Thus, rhetorics about body-monitoring technologies tend to frame them as either altruistic tools for improving healthcare or as terrifying advances into systemic surveillance of private individuals.

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In this essay, we aim to capitalize on this dissonance by interrogating the sometimes-conflicting relationships between women and technologies that simultaneously are prescribed for health benefits and write our bodies in problematic ways. To do so, we offer a case study that interrogates the complex tensions between: the importance of the fetal ultrasound machine in Western pregnancy and infertility cultures; the ubiquity of sonogram images in Western visual culture; the diverse audiences and disparate technical knowledges about both the technology and its visual rhetorical artifacts; and the potential for hegemonic uptakes of both to undermine women’s agency over our bodies. We analyze this specific body-monitoring technology due to 1) its multi- and trans-cultural ubiquity and dependence on it; 2) our sense that it has largely been underexamined, despite its power to compose our identities and its ongoing new developments (e.g., 3D imaging); and 3) our desire to be active participants in “body talk,” or what [Mary Lay, Laura Gurak, Clare Gravon, and Cynthia Myntti \(2000\)](#) describe as “reproductive technologies and the rhetoric that a culture uses to communicate about them” (p. 3). We participate in this body talk by engaging with and contributing to technofeminist scholarship in computers and composition studies by initiating conversations (about fetal ultrasound technologies and their corresponding rhetorics and the hegemonic cultural values encoded therein) that generate insights into “ownership and control of knowledge, access to tools and techniques of science and technology, place and power of experts and professionals, societal definitions of normalcy and pathology, definitions of the self, the rights granted to the embodied citizen, and views about the relationships between technology and religion” ([Lay et al., 2000, p. 3](#)) in relation to fetal ultrasound technologies. Ultimately, we hope to participate in critical body talk that supports a decolonization of our relationships with and subject matter expertise about fetal ultrasound machines, operators, processes, and visual artifacts.

Technofeminist Methodology

We begin our initiation of and participation in critical body talk about fetal ultrasound technologies by making apparent the scholarly conversations that have influenced our collaboration, as well as our rhetorical analyses and implications. Specifically, we employ a technofeminist methodology with a bricolaged¹ framework that draws on—and aims to contribute back to—decolonial, poststructuralist, rhetorical, visual culture, and embodiment theories. Each of these approaches work together to help us resist oversimplified views of technology² and to reveal how fetal ultrasound rhetorics have the potential to colonize and re-colonize the ways in which we understand our relationships to and with this highly ubiquitous and gendered technology—and with ourselves and the world around us.

Technofeminist Theory

Foundational to our inquiry is a technofeminist approach to engaging with the fetal ultrasound machine, its processes, and some of its circulating rhetorics. Technofeminist scholars informing the work of and working in computers and composition studies have long called for and worked toward interrogating and revising the power dynamics that shape identities—specifically gendered and sexed/sexual bodies—in relation to technologies. Among other contributions to computers and composition scholarship, technofeminists ([Brady Aschauer, 1999](#); [Haas, Tulley, & Blair, 2002](#); [Kantrowitz, 1996](#); [Reilly, 2004](#); [Stabile, 1994](#); [Tannen, 1996](#); [Wajcman, 1991, 2004](#)) have critiqued the history of technology design, production, and use as an inherently male enterprise by evidencing how cultural and rhetorical constructions of technology are heavily biased against women—in other words, most technologies are defined by and inextricably bound to male-dominated domains of science and industry, and the employment of technologies dominated by men trends toward reproducing stereotypes of women as technologically inferior, disinterested, fearful,

¹ By bricolage, we mean in the feminist postmodern understanding of a “making do” by bringing together seemingly disparate elements or materials at hand to work toward feminist agendas. We also do so in a way that is inspired by psychoanalyst [Turkle’s \(1995\)](#) application of bricolage to problem solving in programming and workspace productivity projects. She describes the “bricoleur style” of coding and problem solving as working via a step-by-step growth and re-evaluation process instead of a predefined, exhaustive preliminary specification. Further, Turkle explains, “Bricoleurs approach problem-solving by entering into a relationship with their work materials that has more the flavor of a conversation than a monologue” (p. 51). Thus, in this vein, we seek to build a relationship with and construct a dialogue across these areas of inquiry in ways that help us to examine the coding and potentially recode the rhetorics of fetal ultrasounds.

² For example, the approach described by [Haas \(1999\)](#) as the “*straightforward progress model*, a new-is-better view in which new technologies are more advanced and therefore more efficient, more powerful, or both” (p. 210).

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