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1

FEMINIST TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

INTRODUCTION AND EXIGENCE

This book serves as an introduction to feminist technical communication and argues for intersectional feminist approaches as vital for the future of technical communication as a field. Situating feminisms and technical communication in relationship as the focal point of an entire book is a project that has not been previously undertaken, feminisms are more often understood as one tool in a larger toolkit of cultural approaches to the field. This project does not contradict such approaches, but it also centralizes the importance and magnitude of feminist contributions to technical communication. To that end, it takes an intersectional approach to feminist technical communication and offers relevant histories of a variety of feminist works in the field. As several scholars have noted, a surge of work in feminist technical communication took place in the 1990s and interest in the subject then waned; more recently, social justice has become an important organizing principle in the field. This text seeks to revitalize and intersectionalize feminist technical communication as part of that larger social justice project.

I forward two main arguments, the second predicated on the first. While my framing of intersectional feminist approaches as vital for the future of technical communication is the larger-in-scope argument of this book, and while I hope this argument and its attendant literature reviews will be useful particularly in graduate technical communication classrooms, I also use apparent feminisms to argue more specifically that the traditional efficiency model in technical communication is not an effective or a sustainable approach. If our field is to retain *efficiency* as a guiding principle—Kenneth Burke (1945) would call it a “god term”—then our field’s understandings of efficiency must change. Because crisis communication and health communication are the sub-fields that tend to most explicitly call on efficiency models, much of my work is sited in

those contexts. Context, of course, is critical to rhetorical understandings of technical communication and feminisms.

Because feminisms are based in material experience and feminist theory can never be separated from the corporeal, I utilize a specific model context. This book explores communication about health effects related to the Deepwater Horizon Disaster (DHD). Some people will say no such effects exist and thus there is no problem to be addressed here. However, patterns of communication surrounding the DHD and (the lack of communication about) health effects demonstrate purposeful rhetorical attempts to steer the conversation in directions that are efficient or expedient for those with the most rhetorical power.

Sometimes a problem is not apparent—but that doesn't mean it is unimportant. Sometimes a problem is not (made) apparent precisely because it *is* important. A relevant example that touches on the context at hand and also demonstrates the problems with lack of apparency is made evident in an investigative story by the National Audubon Society: “Even before the BP [British Petroleum] disaster, the Gulf was a region of neglect. We certainly have not treated it like a spot that deserves to be studied, which would have been helpful. Many scientists say it's practically impossible to determine what the state of the Gulf ecosystem is *now* because we didn't know what it was *then*. As John Dindo, senior marine scientist at Alabama's Dauphin Island Sea Lab, puts it, ‘Without that baseline data, you are pulling things out of your ass’” (Gessner 2015, para. 4, original emphasis).

In other words, it is not just lack of apparency that is a problem but also the timing of that apparency. Without prior data, we are unable to effectively extrapolate. This is a problem that will be repeated until we learn to understand the efficiencies of data collection differently. A grittier example demonstrates a future lack: “Defenders’ Chris Haney’s retrospective study of bird deaths concluded that approximately 600,000 to 800,000 were killed by oil from the BP spill, despite the fact that only 6,147 cadavers were collected and counted in the year after. ‘Of all the spills I’ve ever studied, none had as many combinations of factors that have made it harder for a dead bird to actually reach the morgue and be counted,’ he’d told me. ‘I fear that the science coming out of the spill won’t be a match for the size, scope, and volume of the spill itself’” (Gessner 2015, para. 12). General lack of data can be a problem with apparency, and this is the problem I most often faced in the present project.

However, specific lack of data—like absent bird bodies—is also a potential choke point for studies of crisis situations. As in the example above, an apparent feminist analysis of the DHD faces both these

problems of lack of apparency—and this is hardly a new problem for environmental work. Donnie Johnson Sackey's (2020) groundbreaking work in regard to the Flint, Michigan, water crisis and including participants in design work asks environmental justice advocates to consider how policy design that is more inclusive of all stakeholders could have prevented the disaster altogether. He notes that reports of a problem with the water in Flint are documented as far as two years in advance of confirmed contamination (39), meaning that lack of apparency resulted in two years of poisoning for Flint residents. Importantly, Sackey has also worked on a National Institutes of Health grant focused in part on studying means to "more effectively utilize modern modes of communication (e.g., social media such as Facebook)" in relation to risk information (McElmurry 2016, para. 1). In short, Sackey's work, which focuses on environmental justice and technical communication, takes problems of apparency as a first space for intervention.

To attend to such problems of apparency and to narrow the scope of this inquiry to something manageable, I begin with health and medical rhetorics. In examining health communication, it is important to be cognizant of the broader contexts in which health conversations operate. Health and medical rhetorics, a burgeoning sub-field of technical communication, often purposefully blur the lines of health and medicine. Healthcare and medicine are terms with different connotations and varying attachments to ethos, with medicine most often the more respected of the two terms by most measures. Generally speaking, this book engages with health and approaches it as the broader concept—a concept that can encompass not just biological phenomena but also ideas about how economic and ecological health can impact stakeholders.

I focus on healthcare communication with the understanding that it functions, in this instance at least, as a repository and reflection of public understandings of risk and health. This is to say: we understand efficiency in a certain way, and that limits what is recognizable to us about a rhetorical situation. In the case of Deepwater Horizon, efficiency affects what is recognizable about environmental disasters, thus also limiting our possible responses to health as it relates to environment. Our efficiency models tell us where to look and what to look at; they thus implicitly also determine what and who we do not take into account. If we understood efficiency differently, we'd develop different areas of concern and thus have different rhetorical options for moving forward. Kim Hensley Owens (2015) discusses the paradigm shifts that undergird progress narratives and decline narratives. In her case, cultural ideas about the relative safety of hospital births versus midwife

births condition us to find data to support our beliefs. It took some time after hospital births became the norm for them to become statistically safer, despite popular conceptions to the contrary.

More recently, we have observed a similar logical problem happening with Covid-19 vaccinations among pregnant women. Kate Cray (2021, para. 2) reported that despite ample evidence that the Covid-19 vaccines are safe and beneficial during pregnancy, “only about 25 percent of mothers-to-be have gotten one during their pregnancy. Rates are even lower for Latina and Black expectant mothers, at 22 and 15 percent, respectively, compared with 27 percent of white and 35 percent of Asian expectant moms.” Given our cultural expectations that pregnant women should keep their bodies pure and unaltered by things like alcohol and caffeine, vaccine hesitancy in this group is unsurprising. We are conditioned to believe that pregnant women are behaving as “good mothers” by denying themselves things to protect their unborn child. The problem with this particular cultural logic (as my own high-risk obstetrics team told me repeatedly in the time just before Covid made national headlines, while I was debating the benefits of cesarean delivery) is that pregnant people are then prone to miscalculate risk, construing non-intervention as the least risky approach even when the opposite is empirically true. To offer full context for the aforementioned example, women of color (particularly Black women) have a long history of valid reasons—as long as the history of gynecology—not to trust agents of the medical establishment, meaning their vaccine hesitancy is additionally rooted in a parallel set of cultural narratives that advise them to protect themselves and their families from unjust experimentation (Baker 2017; Cray 2021). It is not surprising that the descendants of Betsey (Washington 2006) and Anarcha (Cox et al. 2008), upon whose un-consenting bodies modern gynecology was built, might have reservations about medical directives. Owens (2015) argues that we, as a culture, will not bestow legitimacy on details that do not fit whatever the current narrative is. This, of course, points to the constructed nature of risk and the culturally relativistic nature of ethical systems.

Health communication is a subject increasingly debated in more mainstream arenas in recent years. The Covid-19 pandemic is partly responsible for this, but maternal health is also seeing increased scrutiny. In 2017, tennis phenom Serena Williams suffered a pulmonary embolism (PE) after giving birth. She knew what was happening, as she had had a PE previously, but she had to advocate fiercely for herself to get medical professionals to take the situation seriously. Her story was something of a lightning rod for both the medical community and Black

birth-givers. “In 2018 journalists started to tell the stories of people that were dying in childbirth,” said Neel Shah, professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Harvard School of Medicine. “Those stories ended up compelling the federal government to start tracking maternal mortality much more systematically” (Eiselt and Lee 2022). Shah’s quote is delivered in the recently released documentary *Aftershock*, which follows the families of Shamony Gibson and Amber Rose Isaac after the two women, both Black, died from childbirth complications and medical failings. In the documentary, during a meeting with (Brooklyn) Weeksville Heritage Center’s deputy director Anita Warren, Shamony’s mother, social worker Shawnee Benton-Gibson, notes that she does reproductive justice work and it didn’t make a difference in the outcome for her daughter. “Knowledge doesn’t save you,” she says.

Benton-Gibson’s implicit emphasis on systemic change suggests one way that coalitional feminist models can be useful in community-engaged contexts. One relevant and excellent example of community engagement is when North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University associate professor Kimberly C. Harper (2022) went on NCImpact to explain what a birth doula is and why doulas are important interventionists for Black women. “Black women are reporting repeatedly that they feel dismissed and their concerns are not heard,” Harper said (a statement Shah echoed, speaking specifically in regard to pain). “[A] doula can step in and assist with getting the care that you need . . . Doulas are, I think, integral in changing the maternal landscape in this country.” Doulas, of course, function as technical communicators in that they serve as a bridge between different kinds of experts and across various cultures.

The intersection of feminist technical communication and health communication is a rich site to get at cultural relativism. In this book, I use an apparent feminist theoretical lens—with attending ideas about the place of technical communication scholarship and health and medical rhetorics—to demonstrate how reconsidering understandings of efficiency in environmental disaster situations subsequently changes possible approaches to acceptable risk related to healthcare. Researchers in technical communication have addressed the confluence of risk, ethics, and healthcare communication (Ding 2009, 2012, 2013; Faris 2019; Itchuaqiyaq, Edenfield, and Grant-Davie 2021; Lundgren 1994; Youngblood 2012) as well as risk and identity (Chandler and Sano-Franchini 2020; Ruiz 2018). However, rapidly developing technologies and the changing role of media consumers and producers renders this an area where study remains necessary.

Much of the existing work on healthcare communication, risk, ethics, and environment, for example, is focused on crisis communication and thus deals only with urgent threats to life. A recent issue of *Technical Communication Quarterly* (Frost et al. 2021) begins to push at our understandings of what constitutes urgency in its examination of unruliness and what sorts of urgent problems unruliness can address in the context of healthcare and technical rhetorics. In that special issue, Kimberly C. Harper (2021) shows how ethos itself is a term that is constructed differently depending on positionality and identity, and Jamal-Jared Alexander and Avery Edenfield (2021) offer cases showing how marginalized peoples—for whom urgency may be omnipresent—navigate medical institutions. They likewise supplement existing evidence that those who are disenfranchised by biomedicine are those most likely to turn to alternative therapies (Derkatch 2016; Frost and Eble 2020). Peter Cannon and Katie Walkup (2021) address the reification of healthcare inequities in mental health, an entire arm of healthcare often falsely cast as less than urgent. McKinley Green (2021) interrogates how software can close off space where users otherwise might have been able to talk more openly about health status in his analysis of PrEP and HIV disclosure narratives on Grindr, thus creating new urgencies. Gina Kruschek (2019) adds a focus on stigma and the ways cultural urgencies surrounding (a lack of) disclosure develop. Hua Wang (2021) shows how economic urgency provokes subversive practices in her study of how Chinese mothers literally capitalize on their motherhood status to make ends meet. Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyaq and Breeanne Matheson (2021) encourage technical communication to move beyond decolonial metaphors, arguing that those who use the term *decolonial* should be doing active, or urgent, decolonial work—not metaphorical decolonial work.

In the same way these recent conversations reframe how we understand urgency in technical communication, my analysis of the Deepwater Horizon Disaster likewise goes beyond what is traditionally understood as crisis communication (and beyond what is traditionally understood as health communication) to include longer-term effects. I revise what constitutes *crisis* by rethinking what constitutes urgency or exigency as a corollary of *efficiency*. Our understandings of efficiency are based on an assumed time frame, and our understandings of urgency are bounded by this paradigm. If we consider different temporal configurations, our understandings of urgency and crisis are consequently affected.

Further, this particular study is unusual in that it considers environmental disasters as a catalyst for health risks and questions the role of efficiency in identifying those health risks and producing healthcare

communication about them. Health risks, like environmental crises themselves, may be constituted differently by revised understandings of efficiency and its supporting terms. In some places, legal rhetorics set out temporal limits on our understandings of health effects very directly, as in the Deepwater Horizon Disaster Settlement's instruction that the time limit for bringing suit after a related diagnosis is four years. In other places, the allowable time frame of cause and effect when it comes to environmental health concerns is assumed.

On a larger scale, this book critiques contemporary instances of sex- and gender-based injustice in technical rhetorics (Frost and Eble 2015) with the goal of moving toward social transformation. As a technical communication scholar, I have found that many people outside the field (and some within) consider technical communication to be "neutral" or "objective." As a result, I became interested in questioning what precisely causes a person to believe a piece of communication is objective. Further, I became invested in disrupting these notions of objectivity. Technical documents are as situated as any other communication, but this common perception of objectivity—the notion that they *don't* persuade—actually means they have particular power *to* persuade. They also can be especially difficult sites for cultural critique. I have found, as well, that disaster communication tends to sponsor an urgency to swiftly and uncritically accept rhetorics of efficiency; as such, it is especially important to apply critical approaches—in this case, apparent feminism—in disaster scenarios.

I consider this book to be no exception to the statements I've made above. While I will do my best to be as descriptive (rather than evaluative) as possible in some passages, perhaps particularly in those places where I draw on my experiences as an investigative journalist, I also never abandon the idea that the information I present here is situated. In the words of Owens (2015, ix), "As a feminist rhetorician, I take seriously the obligation to provide context for readers about my own position and experience." Thus, this book includes what may seem at initial observation to be two distinct writing styles—one more narrative, based in experience, and one more scholarly, based in "traditional" research. My experiences affect the way I view the world, and so I work to make them apparent rather than hiding my writerly voice behind a veil of false objectivity. And yet, I also recognize that objectivity functions as a style and not always as an absolute, and so I am unwilling to completely leave its trappings behind. Finally, I also make a habit, throughout this book, to present what I think of as generative critique; that is, I attempt to offer a variety of new directions rather than suggesting that we replace one paradigm wholesale with another.

One example of this is an intervention into the ways risk communication scholarship generally looks. Studies of risk communication often attempt to find communication breakdowns prior to disaster events to prevent similar future disasters. For example, noted risk communication expert Beverly A. Sauer (2010)—who has done work on the Deepwater Horizon Disaster—often examines what is missing from risk communication documents; she finds the gaps that could prove useful in developing better risk communication in the future (Sauer 2003). Paul M. Dombrowski's (1994) work concerning the Challenger disaster is another well-known example of risk communication critique aimed at improving future practice. Most risk communication scholarship, especially that within technical communication, is explicitly aimed at working to prevent disaster in the future. In other words, it examines risk constructions with an eye to mitigate future risk—an unsurprising turn for scholars aiming to ensure the relevance of their work and also an admirable goal that is undoubtedly in the public interest. While I am happy to claim this as a tangential goal of the present text, I am working with risk not as a central term aimed at preventing future disaster but rather as a way to think in more depth about the social and cultural constructions of risk toward strategies for helping us conceive risk, disaster, and crisis differently. My concern is less with the business cultures that produce risk communication or official preparedness practices than it is with tracking how local, regional, national, and international cultural groups use communication to shape understandings of risk and disaster after the disaster has already been recognized as such. This work, too, can function in service of the public good and social justice. Altering our understandings of the common events in our lives is a necessary prerequisite to the sorts of specific, material change urged by many risk communication scholars.

FEMINIST TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

Our point of departure for doing the work described above must be a shared understanding of the field of technical communication. Technical communication has existed as a formalized discipline for several decades,¹ but its explicit engagement with feminisms and related social justice and cultural studies approaches has been more recent. Before proceeding, it is imperative to understand the foundations from which this book's theoretical approaches emerge; this has the added benefit of also mapping the conversations this scholarship—including my apparent feminist methodology—speaks and contributes to. In what

follows, I offer a particularly situated history of technical communication as a field, followed by a history of feminist interventions into technical communication.

In chapter 2, I explain apparent feminism. But here, I provide an organic enactment of this approach even before explicating it. Offering a history of a field is not a neutral act, and my approach to doing so is not traditional. We must pay attention to the development of disciplinary histories and must also strive to add origin stories that are inclusive of diverse perspectives—particularly the perspectives of women, because they have been so long excluded from traditional origin stories. Here, I do my best to avoid essentialist perspectives while at the same time establishing a flexible, permeable, temporary foundation from which to work. I strive to work across alleged disciplinary, national, and cultural divisions. I contend that all this work can be attended to by making feminist identities apparent whenever possible, by hailing allies in social justice work and recognizing their valid reasons for not self-identifying as feminist, and by constantly reimagining the purposes and functions of efficiency as a disciplinarily valued term. Most important of all, though, I recognize this as a partial history and as a beginning. This sort of apparentness is valuable because it makes explicit the underlying inequities and inefficiencies that we must now tend to.

Thus, this history introduces problems. This is a deviation from what histories are supposed to do, which is to create a single, contained, cohesive narrative so that all readers operate from a shared understanding. It feels much nicer to tie a metaphorical bow out of any loose ends than to linger in uncertainty. However, I choose to introduce problems—or, rather, to make existing problems apparent—because I recognize that the methodological favors I will ask farther on are not easy, and a certain amount of discomfort may be a useful preparation. This approach doesn't solve every problem, but it does provide a method of engaging in and making apparent important conversations within technical communication that might not always be made explicit in other places. I seek to animate N. Katherine Hayles's (1999, 12) "Platonic forehand," which moves us away from simple abstractions and "evolves a multiplicity sufficiently complex that it can be seen as a world of its own." This is one way to say that this book does not seek to make the relationships it describes less complicated but rather to make apparent the complexity and importance of the relationships among technical communication, feminisms, rhetorics, efficiencies, and social justice as well as health and medical communication, technologies, and environmental rhetorics.

(Some of) Technical Communication's Origin Stories

In this section, I introduce several possible re-tellings of technical communication's origin stories—some of which coincide with familiar origin stories for the field of rhetoric. In doing this work, which follows work like that of Carolyn Rude (1979), Angela M. Haas (2007), and Jay Timothy Dolmage (2014), I seek to produce a more efficient understanding of technical communication's disciplinary history. This means that I am setting out to hail more diverse audiences—perhaps especially women and people of color—with the origin stories I will make apparent. In other words, these narratives may seem to the reader to be problems, as it is impossible in some cases to reconcile the stories I tell with the discipline's traditional stories. My goal is to make these stories explicit rather than provide all the answers about what to do with them.

I suggested above that technical communication is a young field. I based this suggestion on my observation that scholars before me have marked the beginning of the field of technical communication (though not the beginning of the practice of technical communication) based on the existence of the familiar term *technical writing*. Teresa Kynell (1999) reports that textbooks that use the term *technical writing* in their titles first began to appear in the mid-1920s. This narrative coincides with the rise to power of engineering departments in universities (McDowell 2003).

However, rooting the discipline in this singular origin story is a problem; it is inefficient in that it obfuscates more diverse understandings of what technical communicators can be and can do. I suggest now that we might imagine technical communication as much older than the particular history associated with engineering implies. Further, if we believe technical communication is much older than this, we might also believe it is a field with transdisciplinary roots, though those roots have often been rendered unapparent. Even in the most common origin stories—those tied to engineering—it is fairly apparent upon close inspection that the 1920s did not give rise to something new but rather repositioned an age-old practice in a new, professionalized way. The practice of technical communication—though it has not always been so named—is an ancient tradition that focuses on reaching a specific audience who is in possession of a specific body of knowledge. Technical communication and rhetoric—as disciplines and practices—are intricately connected; neither encompasses the other.

These imaginings are one possible remediated version of technical communication's history. However, a focus on any one disciplinary history for technical communication necessarily leaves out others. I recognize that this critique applies to my own work. I will not have the

time, space, or knowledge to tell all—or even very many—of the possible origin stories that have affected the trajectory of the discipline of technical communication. This historiographic project must be a continuing endeavor. Nevertheless, this section provides a space to start such a project of reimagining. I begin this section, then, by asking: what origin stories are left out when we focus narrowly on the existence of the term *technical writing* as a marker of the discipline's existence? In answering this question, I have focused on some of the possible origin stories that are most important to make apparent from a feminist perspective.

One possibility for relocating our origin story might be to follow the work of scholars like Susan Rauch (2012), who argues that technical communication's beginnings should be tied to the work of female writers in medieval times. Rauch (2012) suggests that Hildegard von Bingen, a writer of medical and scientific texts, has not been revived and reintroduced as a technical writer in the same way as other medieval figures, one example being Geoffrey Chaucer. However, when we do consider von Bingen as part of technical communication's origins, we find that this inclusion alters our understanding of the discipline itself. For example, Rauch suggests that understanding von Bingen as a part of technical communication's history opens up opportunities today for us to consider practical approaches to women's influences on health and safety research and to point out connections between healthcare writing and related fields (397). By including von Bingen as part of technical communication's origin story, we stand to gain new understandings of the field's interdisciplinary nature, responsibilities, specialized skills, and important conversations. Of course, we also introduce many problems, including leaving out technical communicators who preceded von Bingen chronologically. I purposefully resist ordering the stories I tell here according to chronology because I do not want to imply that the stories I tell are comprehensive. I am more concerned with setting priorities for apparency than in reinforcing linear notions of time and history.

We could figure ancient Greece as part of technical communication's origin story—a move perhaps more common to rhetoric, but then, I mean to trouble the boundaries that supposedly separate technical communication from rhetoric. Specifically, Greek scholars Sappho and Aspasia have inspired historiographical work in the field of rhetoric and composition (Bernard 1999; Glenn 1994; Jarratt 1998, 2002). By counting Sappho and Aspasia as technical communicators as well as rhetoricians, we stand to widen the discipline in ways that will allow practitioners and scholars to listen to more voices from across time as well as

space. Further, claiming Aspasia and Sappho as technical communicators introduces a narrative in which technical communication exists and develops hand in hand with rhetoric.² Although many modern scholars already span these fields and contest their separation, this is an origin story that might create more space for today's transdisciplinary scholars to do dynamic and important work that does not always fit neatly into currently existing disciplinary categories. However, again, this revised origin story introduces many problems. By beginning with Sappho and Aspasia, we leave out rhetors whose work was not recorded or reported. And, of course, we introduce a length of time so extended that we can never hope to come close to producing a representative chronicle of our disciplinary history.

Reimagining origins, though, is not just about people; it's also about sites and disciplines. We can work around the constraints introduced by technical communication's engineering origin story by revising our beliefs about our intellectual foundations. Francesca Bray's (1997) gynotechnic inquiry, applied to digital rhetorics and technology studies, demonstrates that other traditions are not only possible but have been thriving. For example, Haas (2007) argues that the term *digital rhetorics* refers first to rhetorical artifacts produced by digits, or fingers.³ Thus, digital artifacts and technologies are—and long have been—parts of various technical systems that produce ideas about gender relationships. By embracing wider understandings of technologies and digital rhetorics, apparent feminists can draw upon and dialogue with a variety of scholar-practitioners not traditionally recognized as technical communicators, including Indigenous rhetorics scholars, cultural anthropologists, architects, linguists, archaeologists, literature scholars, artists, cultural studies scholars, and many more. This particular apparent feminist origin story is far more inclusive than the traditional engineering-oriented origin story and as such hails much larger and more diverse audiences. It is much more efficient in imagining the possibilities offered by this diverse field.

(Some of) Technical Communication's Organizing Concepts

What if we imagine technical communication as a socially just endeavor that is always necessarily a tool of the oppressed? This reimagining of technical communication means that we include more voices, stories, goals, and epistemologies in our understandings of what technical communication can be and do as well as what it *should* be and do. For example, a version of technical communication that focuses on rhetorics of

the oppressed might include the story of Nujood Ali, a young girl who engaged in persuasive technical communication to convince a Yemeni judge to grant her a divorce from her abusive husband (Ali and Minoui 2010). Ali has since written a book—a technical composition—in an effort to increase the efficiency with which her story is disseminated. This new version of technical communication also might include the story of Nakato Juliette, a Ugandan mother who created a video to promote a cooperative wherein she and other women became jewelry makers to earn a living rather than prostituting themselves (Juliette 2011).⁴ We might recognize these women—who do not publicly profess to be feminists but who are certainly engaged in social justice endeavors that benefit women—as technical communicators by revising our disciplinary efficiencies and obligations. This recognition permits us to contribute to their causes and to learn from their tactical interventions into systems of oppression. It helps us remember that technical communication does not only happen in academia.

However, recognizing technical communication as a tool of the oppressed also requires technical communicators to interrogate the effects of incorporating these narratives. For example, how do we identify a party or a person as oppressed, and who makes decisions on what constitutes oppression? What risks might women like Juliette and Ali face because of the apparency associated with inclusion? What specific contexts, histories, and local practices might be obscured by the presence of these women rather than others as part of technical communication's histories?

An excellent approach to thinking about technical communication of the oppressed and technical communication beyond academia is Cecilia Shelton's work on marginality (2019a). Shelton argues that her theoretical approach, "A Techné of Marginality[,] positions technical and professional communication theorists and practitioners to recognize the ways in which Black communities, and particularly Black women, have always, already done the unpaid labor that builds the [technical] communication infrastructures for equity, inclusion, and freedom" (abstract). She expands on this approach in her pedagogical article "Shifting Out of Neutral" (Shelton 2019b) by grounding her inquiry in Black feminist theory and positioning it as always already pivotal for technical communication and rhetoric:

One of the central and critical questions that Black Feminist theory poses to those of us who want to do social justice work in technical and professional communication is, "How do we decenter whiteness (and other privileged identities) to insist on a more intersectional analysis of oppressive

systems and the activism that disrupts those systems?” This article takes up that question by arguing for the inclusion of two themes which have been, so far, largely overlooked in technical and professional communication scholarship: the invisible labor of being Black women in the field of technical and professional communication and the significance of our bodies as texts in our classrooms. (18–19)

Shelton’s work responds to some of the questions I raise above by pointing out that self-identification is an important method for determining whose marginality might point to associated expertise and that those on the margins are always already running some of the risks white feminists worry about exposing. Apparency, in this case, can be co-opted to help recognize infrastructure that has long existed without being recognized.

Indeed, including and centering Black experience is an astoundingly obvious and yet still too often glossed-over response to recognizing technical communication as a tool of people who have suffered marginalization and oppression. In 2020, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) published a position statement from the Black Technical and Professional Writing Task Force (Mckoy et al. 2020).⁵ The task force wrote that “Black technical and professional communication is defined as including practices centered on Black community and culture and on rhetorical practices inherent in Black lived experience” and that it includes academics and practitioners (para. 2). It advocated including and amplifying Black practices and the work of Black scholars, and the task force immediately put words into action by providing a detailed thematic list of suggested readings. Later, the same group of scholars who comprised the task force—Temptuous Mckoy, Cecilia Shelton, Donnie Johnson Sackey, Natasha N. Jones, Constance Haywood, Ja’La Wourman, and Kimberly C. Harper—offered the field a further tour de force in definitional work and inclusion in a complete special issue of *Technical Communication Quarterly* (Mckoy, Shelton, Sackey et al. 2022). Black technical and professional communication (BTPC), the authors wrote in their introduction, “is not a niche or add-on subfield of the discipline of TPC [technical and professional communication], even though it has traditionally been treated as such. BTPC is an important and integral part of TPC and foundational to understanding how TPC is taken up, applied, theorized, and shaped in culturally sustaining and contextual ways” (221).

This special issue demonstrates both that Black rhetorical practices have always already been central to the work of technical communication and that the inclusion and centering of marginalized knowledges is welcome and inevitable. The issue’s conclusion forwards the same

main argument as does this book: that intersectional and social justice approaches to TPC centering the voices of those who have been historically marginalized moves us toward better communicative practices.

Challenges and Professionalization

A potential problem for apparent feminist reimaginings of technical communication's origin stories is the possibility that some scholars might suggest I am promoting an agenda in which technical communicators would lose the social capital associated with special expertise. The question of how (and if) to professionalize—that is, to engage in strategies that persuade others of the specialized expertise and professional identity of this discipline—is an ongoing debate in technical communication circles (Carliner 2012; Coppola 2012; Davis 2001; Faber and Johnson-Eilola 2002; Johnson-Eilola 1996; Kynell-Hunt and Savage 2003; Savage 1996, 1999, 2003, 2010). I understand the professionalization debate as one manifestation of the ongoing argument about the relationship between diversity and efficiency. The notion that increased diversity of origin stories necessarily means decreased social capital for technical communicators is erroneous, as Shelton shows. Rather, I follow Shelton and Savage in believing that many contemporary understandings of professionalization are based on “a modernist agenda which is no longer appropriate for a field of work for which modernist notions and practices are less and less relevant or useful” (Kynell-Hunt and Savage 2003, 170).

All of the origin stories I have mentioned above—and many more that I haven't—are narratives that can help expand researchers' and students' understandings of the discipline of technical communication. By thinking differently about where technical communication comes from, what it is constituted by, and who is creating it, we can think differently about the places where it might go and the tasks it might confront. By imagining a more diverse group of actors, we can imagine more diverse audiences, scholars and practitioners, and students. This is a step toward helping all these actors to “reconceive the profession as one that can be practiced in alternative ways” that privilege integrity and social justice (Savage 1996, 310). Just by drawing inspiration from the very few possible origin stories I have mentioned, we open up new realms of immense transdisciplinary possibilities in terms of future research and perspective. We also introduce a vast repertoire of new problems and challenges, not the least of which is resistance to disciplinary change and practices of inclusion.

Disciplinary friction is, in fact, an important part of technical communication history.⁶ That friction is also something that is not often written about in formalized settings—for a number of reasons, but at least in part because so many technical communication scholars hail from multidisciplinary English departments. Those departments are the very places this friction lives, and the same departments are made up of the people we need to get along with every day to do our work, best mentor our students, and achieve tenure and promotion. In the introduction to a reprint of Robert Connors's (1982) history of technical writing, R. Gerald Nelms (2004, 4) writes explicitly of how the history records that "a major obstacle to progress in technical writing instruction—one that handicaps all writing instruction—is the dominance and prejudices of English department literature faculty." Nelms points out that Connors wrote his history without having tenure and describes him as courageous in intervening in elitism that interfered with instruction in English departments. Connors himself wrote of Samuel Chandler Earle, who believed "the problem of a cultural split between English and engineering teachers" was significant.⁷ "He condemned the attitude of English teachers who saw engineers as philistines, to be proselytized to about the superior virtues of culture and literature over engineering" (2004, 6).

From the privilege of tenure, I can confirm that disciplinary tensions between literature scholars and technical communication scholars do continue to impact curricula—perhaps particularly when it comes to decisions about who we should hire to best serve students, which then impacts our course offerings—and, further, that different constellations of disciplinary understandings do so as well.⁸ For example, I earned my PhD at Illinois State University and left that institution with an understanding of rhetoric and composition as a widely recognized discipline and technical writing as a subsidiary of rhetoric, though all three are related and different understandings of technical communication and rhetoric might reverse which of them is the umbrella term; put another way, I generally believed most technical communication scholars also considered themselves rhetoricians, whereas the reverse was not necessarily true. I took my first tenure-track job at East Carolina University, where I was hired as a technical and professional communication specialist and expected to caucus in a group of similarly situated people—some of whom did not consider themselves rhetoricians—which did not include a separate group of rhetoric and composition specialists who caucused on their own. While nearly everyone in these two specialties seems to recognize that the divisions are somewhat arbitrary, the divisions remain because they are also political.

The gendered language and ideas that emerge throughout Connors's history (that is, both the language he reports and language he uses/reflects) are worthy of note. Dissatisfaction with the discipline is "shrill" (2004, 10), and English teachers are accused of being too effeminate. It is impossible to miss the association of literary, humanistic work with the feminine and of technical, vocational work with the masculine. This association lives on today, with an implicit understanding that masculine work is more highly valued. This understanding goes beyond cultural value; work that is conceptualized as masculine is better paid. As many technical communicators—also often trained in rhetoric and composition—know, the history of composition instruction in the United States is rife with gendered assumptions. From the lament that "the first-year composition courses were 'given to just about anybody who would take [them] . . . faculty wives, and various fringe people, are now the instructional staff'" (quoted in Crowley 1998, 119) to a variety of studies of the feminization of composition (Holbrook 1991; Schell 1998), we know where this history comes from and where it leads. It took years before composition gained some recognition as its own, professional discipline, and it still lacks prestige—at least as measured in dollars—compared with many of the disciplines it serves. Technical communicators have worked hard to avoid a similar fate, even as many technical communicators—perhaps especially the feminist ones—feel a deep kinship with composition studies. The result is a somewhat fractious approach to professionalism and its trappings.

Feminisms in Technical Communication

Professionalization is a common topic among technical writers, and informal markers of licensure are useful historical points for telling histories. Some would say "technical writing finally became a genuine profession as wartime technologies were translated into peacetime uses" and "the demand for [technical writing] courses rose dramatically as the colleges were deluged with returning veterans after 1945" (Connors 1982, 341). If this history is to be believed, then technical communication was growing up as a field just before the time when second-wave feminism was gaining power—the first wave, which focused largely on property rights and suffrage, having ebbed by the early 1920s. The second wave, often said to have begun with the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* (Frieden 1963) and certainly associated with the Civil Rights movement, shifted attention to identity and gender roles. Women began to question the notion that being a wife and mother was the only

path to success as a woman. The second wave gave rise to various kinds of feminisms that were sometimes in conflict with one another;⁹ for example, cultural feminists' belief in valuing traditionally female roles could sometimes clash with liberal feminists' injunctions to respond to stereotyping with resistance. It is the second wave when feminism began to wrestle in earnest with the concept of subjectivity, which, "with its explicit universality but implicit masculinity, creates a dilemma for feminism" (Meagher and DiQuinzio 2005, 3). Patrice DiQuinzio and Sharon M. Meagher (Meagher and DiQuinzio 2005) explain that feminisms are trapped into arguing for equality of the sexes by denying sexual difference but then must rely on sexual difference to analyze the unique experiences of women. Second-wave feminisms and all their complications and perceived excesses, I have discovered, are often the feminisms early-career college students are still responding to; they are the feminisms that are characterized—or, more accurately, caricatured—in popular media. And it is at what is typically considered the end of the second wave that explicitly feminist interventions into formal technical communication literature began.

Mary M. Lay's (1989) article "Interpersonal Conflict in Collaborative Writing: What We Can Learn from Gender Studies" is widely regarded as the first explicit engagement of technical communication with gender studies.¹⁰ In this piece, she transfers gender studies' knowledge of the ways gender perceptions affect relationships to the domain of technical writing and offers strategies for helping technical communication students understand the limitations of gender roles and better collaborate. As is often the case with both cutting-edge and teaching research, Lay's work was not immediately taken up. However, the same journal, the *Journal of Business and Technical Communication (JBTC)*, evidenced its commitment to understanding technical communication through a cultural lens with a special issue two years later.¹¹ In fact, as noted by Isabelle Thompson (1999, 155) in her qualitative content analysis of journal articles from 1989 to 1997, "most journal articles about women and feminism in technical communication appeared in special issues devoted to those topics."

The 1991 special issue of *JBTC* promotes a cultural turn in technical communication. This cultural turn, which is an important prerequisite for the reimagining of efficiency that I suggest, was not widely taken up, as suggested by the much later return to the idea by J. Blake Scott, Bernadette Longo, and Katherine Wills (2006).¹² This special issue provides important foundations for work in feminisms and cultural studies; it also points to what some might consider a conflation of these two

theoretical approaches. For example, Lay (1991) suggests a redefinition of technical communication that considers cultural issues, most notably issues of gender. She relies on technical communicators' understandings of social constructionism to combat and make visible scientific positivism in technical communication artifacts. Diane D. Brunner (1991, 409) encourages recognition that "we and our students operate within a culture in which domination/subordination is produced and reproduced" and that, embodied as we are, this creates ideologies in which some people are affirmed and others are cast out. Others in the issue advocate revision to static conceptions of female cultures and resistance to auto-colonization (Carrell 1991; Flynn et al. 1991).

Notable in this same special issue is an article by Elizabeth A. Flynn, Gerald Savage, Marsha Penti, Carol Brown, and Sarah Watke (1991). This article stands apart in its attention to and explicit naming of gender studies. Flynn and her coauthors specifically advocate bringing together composition studies, gender studies, and technical communication as a methodological approach. The authors find unrecognized misogyny in their studies of engineering students. They frame feminist gains in the field as "fragile and provisional," suggesting that "there is little evidence that women are aware of the potentially threatening climate in which they operate daily" (460). These authors, then, come together in this special issue of *JBTC* to suggest that feminist approaches to technical communication are a necessary remedy to the field's unrecognized male domination.

The journal *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication* furthered this project with a 1992 issue devoted to the effects of gendered assumptions on understandings of rationality. Elizabeth Tebeaux and Mary M. Lay (1992) engage in a historiographical recovery of English Renaissance-era technical writing for women; Kathryn Neeley (1992) explicates a history of women mediators in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and Beverly A. Sauer (1992) argues that gendered assumptions about male ways of thinking affect mine safety management. L. J. Rifkind and L. F. Harper (1992) assert a paradox between sexual harassment policies and the necessity of interpersonal relationships in the workplace, and Sherry A. Dell (1992) draws in communication theory in a rhetorical analysis of the "glass ceiling." Stephen A. Bernhardt (1992) and Deborah S. Bosley (1992) separately engage issues of gender in visual design. Notably, several of the authors in this special issue are among a small group of scholars whose work consistently shows up in the disciplinary special-issue space that seems to be reserved for feminist issues.

Two years later, *Technical Communication Quarterly* (TCQ) expanded on feminist approaches to technical communication with an issue that “explores gender as a social force that shapes and is shaped by professional communication practices and readerships” (LaDuc and Goldrick-Jones 1994, 246). Linda LaDuc and Amanda Goldrick-Jones (1994) invoke the power of feminism’s ability to take on multiple theoretical and political positions. This multidimensional approach reflects an understanding of the importance of “forsaking the comfort of even a single feminist method or ‘truth stance’” (249) in favor of embracing diverse methodologies that avoid feeling “mechanical” (Christian 1987, 53) and instead make otherness more apparent. Laura J. Gurak and Nancy L. Bayer (1994) and Sauer (1994) engaged in this kind of complex work by writing articles that describe a variety of feminist methodological approaches (and resulting implications) to their subjects rather than limiting their investigations to a single methodological approach.

Some of the work in this special issue—especially the articles by Jo Allen (1994), Bosley (1994), and Susan Mallon Ross (1994)—also continues the aforementioned conversation about the field’s unmarked maleness. These articles suggest that resistance to hegemonic, masculine notions of technical communication has already begun and that such resistance gains power from interdisciplinary awareness. Both Allen and Bosley point to ways of challenging and marking this invisible valuing of maleness; Allen finds that both women and men are already subverting traditionally gendered modes of constructing authority in technical documents, while Bosley showcases attention to the rich value of perspectives from other disciplines. Most notably, she cites gender studies scholar Susan Bordo to situate the “masculinization of thought” (Bosley 1994, 297) in technical communication. Like Bosley, Ross looks to sources outside the discipline for additional insight; she pushes for intercultural studies such as her own on the interactions between a Mohawk community and the Environmental Protection Agency. In so doing, she provides an example of how feminist concern with other injustices—namely, racism and environmental oppressions—can inform broader understandings of the applicability of feminism to a field like technical communication. Feminism and social justice agendas, in other words, are often symbiotic.

Social justice and social change have been advocated by many technical communicators; the 1997 TCQ special issue recovers histories of women technical communicators and questions the absence of such histories. Katherine T. Durack (1997) begins by suggesting that women’s work in technical communication has been overlooked because the field

has been understood as the domain of men and because historians have tended to internalize that belief. Elizabeth A. Flynn (1997) and John F. Flynn (1997), among others, begin to remedy this situation by paying attention to the mapping of feminisms in technical communication and by engaging in the recovery of domestic sciences and technologies—like grocery shopping, cooking, and bread making—as technical communication practices.

Technical communication journals have largely left feminisms and gender studies behind as a named topic for special issues since 1997, although complementary and related approaches have sometimes been evident. For example, *TCQ* published a special issue on “New Directions in Intercultural Professional Communication” in 2014 that included articles with cultural studies approaches, as well as a special issue on “Tactical Technical Communication” in 2017. This change in the focus of special issues mirrors a larger shift in the field; “technical communication scholars’ interest in feminism and women’s issues has declined over the past 15 years” (Thompson and Smith 2006, 196).

While the special journal issues I reviewed above may provide the most systematic, discipline-sponsored engagements with feminisms by technical communicators, these issues are not the only examples of feminist technical communication work. For example, feminist technical communicators whose work has appeared in more solitary fashion have taken up the historiographic project of the 1997 *TCQ* special issue. However, it is important to understand that the historical injustices that are to some small degree remedied by this work also provide windows into contemporary exigencies: who is being left out in the histories and recoveries we are currently writing? Who is being left out of this very review of literature? Kyle P. Vealey and Alex Layne (2018) argue that scholars cannot treat ontology as just an abstract topic of inquiry but rather must consider the ways our scholarly practices create realities. Using the example of scholars of object-oriented ontologies and their tendency to elide and ignore their feminist influences, Vealey and Layne argue for more responsible and ethical citation practices by putting forth a theory of reverberation: any piece of scholarship and its attendant citation practices create ripples outward that affect past, present, and future.

In an effort to sponsor ethical reverberations as I create this brief history, I now devote some space to discussing the work of technical communicators whose feminist or gender-based scholarship has appeared in more solitary, self-sponsored fashion rather than appearing in the special issues discussed above from the late 1980s to 2012. Maryanne Z.

Corbett (1990), Sherry A. Dell (1990), and Jeannette Vaughn (1989) all address sexist language in technical documentation. Ann Brady Aschauer (1999), Lee E. Brasseur (1993), and Mary M. Lay (1993) interrogated the intersections of gender and technologies. Evelyn P. Boyer and Theora G. Webb (1992) and Maria de Armas Ladd and Marion Tangum (1992) looked to diversity and difference as guiding principles in feminist thought in technical communication. A number of other scholars in the early 1990s also did important work on the subjectivities of technical communication and on the importance of feminist methods and of having female perspectives in the profession (Brown 1993; Coletta 1992; Dragga 1993; Sauer 1993; Tebeaux 1993).

As part of this history of individual scholars, my assertion of a lack of feminist work in technical communication in the fifteen+ since 1997 (Frost 2016) does not constitute a complete absence. Rather, it signals a waning of interest at a kairotic moment that is, from my perspective, politically unfortunate. However, this waning of interest—and my mentioning it—is not meant to discredit the important work of those relatively few scholars who have continued to publish at the intersection of feminisms and technical communication. For example, Gail Lippincott (2003) examined Ellen Swallow Richards's rhetorical development of an ethos that allowed her to do work with her experimental food laboratory, the New England Kitchen. Brasseur's (2005) historiographic work on Florence Nightingale's persuasive use of rose diagrams to advocate for government reform of sanitary conditions in hospitals points out that Nightingale was a talented administrator, statistician, and technical communicator. Some technical communication scholars have also taken up cultural studies approaches with explicit feminist components. Jeffrey T. Grabill's (2007) work focuses on the ways information technologies penetrate and shape everyday lives, and he encourages emancipatory action on the part of citizens—especially women and people from economically disadvantaged communities. Meanwhile, Angela M. Haas, Christine Tulley, and Kristine Blair (2002, 247) complicate constructions of women's and girls' relationships with technology and technical communication, arguing that it is dangerous to "presume that 'going online' somehow alleviates gender inequity and power imbalance," especially given the traditional masculine gendering of technology. In response, they propose feminist methodological alternatives to male-centered models for "mastering" technical communication and technology. In sum, these scholars—and others I do not have the space to discuss at length (e.g., Koerber 2002; Lay, Monk, and Rosenfelt 2001)—have kept many threads of feminist inquiry alive and thriving in technical communication.

Since 2012, interest in the social justice movement in technical communication and, thus, intersectional feminist work as well has gained some steam. However, feminist work in technical communication is still regarded by some as a box that has been ticked—a sentiment I heard expressed directly by a well-respected technical communication scholar in the audience at the plenary session of the 2012 meeting of the Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication. As Kate White, Suzanne Kesler Rumsey, and Stevens Amidon (2016, 29, original emphasis) put it in their update to Isabelle Thompson (1999) and Thompson and Smith's (2006) aforementioned work:

In our initial analysis of textbooks and journals in the field, we were stunned to discover that an implicit message seems to be inherent in the published discourse of our field that issues of gender and feminism in the workplace or in our business and technical writing classrooms are a minor concern. In many ways, this published discourse seems to be doing little to challenge the insidious notion that the workplace is neutral and nongendered. This implicit message makes little sense to us, given the presence of dozens of scholars and teachers in our field we meet at conferences who are obviously interested in these issues. For instance, the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW) Conference has created an event for women to discuss issues that affect them professionally including obstacles to success and both feminist research and administrative practices. However, we couldn't ignore what the written record seemed to be telling us. While examining our own teaching practices, our textbooks, and the leading journals in business and technical writing studies, we are disturbed to find that very little seems to have changed in the past 25 years. We were surprised and dismayed not at what we found in textbooks and professional journals, but [at] what we *didn't* find.

Put another way, White, Rumsey, and Amidon observed the same pattern I did in 2016: an apparent waning of interest in feminist work in technical communication literature. At the same time, they point out that this waning interest is not reflected in the field's less formalized work. Regardless, in the absence of widely apparent special-issue-sponsored approaches to feminist technical communication, the burden of gender-based and cultural work is born by a limited number of dedicated scholars who must work for apparency. In most cases, these scholars tend to be made responsible for doing this apparency work in addition to all the work expected otherwise.

These individualized approaches continue within a network of feminist technical communication scholars who more broadly embrace social justice as a vital foundation for future work in the field—and who increasingly combat the isolation of individual scholarship on social justice issues by coauthoring. Much of this work has been made possible by

Haas's (2012) argument for intersectional approaches to race, rhetoric, and technology. Since then, a number of other works have been published that both directly and indirectly engage with feminist and gender studies approaches to technical communication as part of a larger cultural studies-savvy body of work.

Some recent scholarship directly points to concerns for women as producers and consumers of technical communication. Kathryn R. Raign (2018) recovers the history of Enheduanna, the first woman writer, and uses that recovery to cast doubt on histories that suggest that men developed and honed persuasive and technical writing. Patricia Sullivan and Kristen Moore (2013) track infrastructural mentoring practices and needs for women in engineering, and Jennifer C. Mallette (2017) writes about recruiting and retaining women in engineering fields. Emily January Petersen (2014) discusses the formation of motherly identity through blogging. Valentina Rohrer-Vanzo, Tobias Stern, Elisabeth Ponocny-Seliger, and Peter Schwarzbauer (2016) examine the effect of gender on assembly documentation, with a specific focus on male technical writers producing documentation for female consumers. Lehua Ledbetter (2018) examines a group of women who produce tutorial-style videos and explores their uptake of and connections to (or lack thereof) feminist approaches.

Other scholars take more systemic or philosophical approaches, such as Petersen's (2019, 37) technical and professional communication workplace study that showed the gendered difficulties of navigating power structures, which are "loose, unarticulated, malleable, and negotiable." Jared S. Colton, Steve Holmes, and Josephine Walwema (2017) take up the work of feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero to complicate the way ideas like Michel de Certeau's (1984) tactics and social justice have been taken up in technical communication through an analysis of the hacktivist group Anonymous. Natasha N. Jones (2016a) uses feminist theory and the concepts of voice and silence to offer an alternative approach to technology production and design.

Importantly, a number of scholars who engage (directly or indirectly) with feminisms have also emphasized intersectionality and feminisms' place as just one of a number of cultural approaches aimed at social justice (Baniya et al. 2019; Edwards 2018; Garrison-Joyner and Caravella 2020; Lockett 2019; Williams and Pimentel 2014). In an already well-cited 2018 article, Petersen and Rebecca Walton put feminisms into conversation with social justice work. Jones (2016b) argues for a social justice approach to technical and professional communication and articulates feminisms as part of such an approach. Jones, Kristen R.

Moore, and Walton (2016) draw on feminisms and gender studies, work in race and ethnicity, and intercultural and international approaches to professional communication to disrupt the dominant narrative/history of technical communication as a field; in so doing, they suggest that new (understandings of) pasts can create new futures. Petersen and Ryan M. Moeller (2016) take a similar approach in their treatment of antenarrative as a methodology for feminist historiography of IBM. In the sub-field of rhetorics of health and medicine, Lori Beth De Hertogh (2018) argues for an intersectional feminist digital research methodology for medical rhetoricians, particularly those working with vulnerable online communities.

Vulnerable communities are necessarily a focus of BTPC, which is always already complementary to feminist goals in its articulation of a desire for justice. Miriam F. Williams and Octavio Pimentel's (2016) edited collection offers a carefully curated diversity of scholarship on identity work in technical communication, focused on race and ethnicity but engaging many research methods shared with feminist work. Jones's (2017) study of rhetorical practices of Black entrepreneurs uses narrative as a methodological tool and shows the importance of an explicit practice of cultural empowerment. Laura L. Allen's (2002) rich description of various methods of collaborative leadership as shown through Black family reunion planning and management demonstrates that the boundaries between what is "professional" and what is "social" are not nearly as impermeable as objectivists might like them to be. Likewise, her attention to her role as a researcher through a critical race-grounded theory approach exemplifies a commitment to positionality complementary to feminist work: "I experienced the most anxiety with this project when I knew I would be attending my first reunion with the Marshall-Beaumont family without a Marshall-Beaumont reunion t-shirt. My unease led me to contact Shannon, my colleague and a member of the Marshall-Beaumont family, to ask her the t-shirt color so that I could blend in as much as possible" (238).

In a similar vein, Constance Haywood's (2019, para. 2) work on the difficulty of studying communities to which ones belongs demonstrates the importance of a commitment to care and reciprocity for academics: "I am in a position where I could replicate the very things [e.g., surveillance, digital aggression, white supremacy] that those ahead of me have worked so hard to avoid. This is why I find such importance in (re)thinking the hows and whys of researcher-community relationships." Attention to identity and affective response is a common theme for both feminist and Black technical rhetorics. Antonio Byrd's (2022)

theorization of “Black technical joy” features descriptions of the rhetorical practices used by Black professionals as they navigate the software industry, and his work points to the importance of the recognition of affect in identity building. These stories “feature a range of emotions that point out the humanity of Black people and the ultimate joy they attach to the process of learning TPC: paying the risk, failing fast, trusting the process of failure” (299). Byrd points out, too, that “racialized emotions remain undertheorized in the field as research centers white experience in the workplace” (299); I would add that the same is true of feminist theory. That is, while affect is widely recognized as important in feminist works, plenty of space remains for more explicit explorations of racialized and intersectional affective encounters in technical contexts.

Jessica Edwards and Josie Walwema’s (2022) brilliant historiography of the 1881 Atlanta Washerwomen’s strike puts on display the affordances of *affirmative technical communication*, or rhetorical work that engages in technical communication to work on behalf of the oppressed. Essentially, this is a form of working within the system through self-determination and collective action, even though the system was not designed for the people engaging in the technical communication in question.

Queer theory, too, has recently emerged in technical communication as an important parallel to feminist work. Matthew B. Cox (2019) draws on feminist theory to help in mapping queer professional discourse. Fernando Sánchez (2019) makes a powerful critique of textbooks’ cis assumptions. Avery C. Edenfield, Steve Holmes, and Jared S. Colton (2019) use queer theory to examine the tactical technical communication genre of user-generated instruction sets, in this case instructions for the self-administration of hormone therapy for trans individuals. Indeed, queer theory provides an important complement to feminist technical communication work that I will return to shortly.

Scholars who have explicitly engaged materialisms and embodied work include Kathryn Yankura Swacha (2018), who explores the concept of embodied literacy vis-à-vis feminist theory through a classroom study of a cookbook activity; she shows what a critically informed pedagogy attentive to vulnerable populations and attuned to embodied literacy might look like. Sweta Baniya, Les Hutchinson, Ashanka Kumari, Kyle Larson, and Chris Lindgren (2019, 6) argue for attention to “what our bodies go through as we engage in our research,” and Kelly Medina-López (2018) grounds her cultural rhetorical understanding of embodiment in literal building. Meanwhile, Maria Novotny and Hutchinson (2019) offer a previously unexamined genre for technical communicators to consider: fertility and period-tracking software applications.

They look at examples of this genre in detail and argue that “hundreds of other gendered health applications that could benefit from further analysis and action—not to mention technological applications in general”—exist for technical communicators to take up (357). Allegra W. Smith’s (2014) poster brief on tagging and filtering systems used in a mainstream and a feminist porn sub-Reddit points to the importance of understanding users—especially often overlooked populations including women—when engaging in interface design. Liberatory cookbook narratives and the ways women are treated as consumable are also subjects of critique (Moeller and Frost 2016). In returning to the importance of bodies, Novotny (2015) studies the reVITALize Gynecology infertility initiative using apparent feminism to show how both the project and the methodology rely on stakeholder input—an important contribution I take up in more detail in chapter 2. Kimberly C. Harper’s (2017, 2020, 2021, 2022) body of work details the ways the fertility industry and fertility communities, despite a history of conversations about embodiment, center white-embodied experiences. Finally, Maureen Johnson, Daisy Levy, Katie Manthey, and Novotny (2015) offer a key concept statement on *embodiment* for feminist rhetorics, one that complicates the body’s usual subject/object binary position.

Several book projects in the past decade have also engaged feminisms, sex, or gender and technical communication as main themes. Amy Koerber’s monographs (2013, 2018) deal with women’s issues. Walton, Moore, and Jones (2019) embrace feminist perspectives as part of a larger orientation to social justice and cultural awareness, as do Godwin Y. Agboka and Natalia Matveeva (2018). Earlier, and influential for feminist technical communication scholars but beyond what is generally considered within the body of technical communication work, Donna J. Haraway’s books (1989, 1991) made a significant impact.

In reviewing feminist literature in technical communication, a problem of apparency arises. To illustrate: Thompson’s 1999 study limited her corpus by identifying only articles that had a keyword relating to women or feminism; she surveyed 1,073 articles and came up with 40 while acknowledging that “articles not included in this analysis have made significant contributions to research about women and feminism in technical communication” (157). Thompson also points out that key terms with the root word *gender* were always coded as feminine in the articles she analyzed. This pattern betrays the common assumption that gender is something women and non-binary people do rather than something performed by everyone—a conflation that largely holds true in the field’s literature today. Further, feminist technical communication scholarship

has struggled to be fully inclusive of lesbian, bisexual, queer, and trans experiences. Even when engaging in feminist work, we too often assume that the subject in question is an assigned-female-at-birth ciswoman—and I know this because I recognize the patterns in my own thinking and have to work against them to disassociate from learned assumptions and flattenings of identity. Thus, finding robust representations of intersectional feminisms through keywords becomes nearly impossibly complex.

(Un)apparent Feminisms in Technical Communication

But if feminism is not apparent or readable in keywords, does that mean it is absent from the literature? I argue that this is not the case. For example, a 2012 issue of *Technical Communication Quarterly* included several articles with feminist perspectives without explicitly marking the issue as a feminist work. Sarah Hallenbeck (2012, 305), in her study of women bicyclists, argues for the complexity of the ways “extraorganizational” technical communication reshapes technologies along gendered lines, suggesting that “normalization can be resisted, complicated, and amended even after a technology becomes commonplace.” Carolyn Skinner (2012) analyzes the rhetorical strategies of Julia W. Carpenter in the late nineteenth century as she navigated the competing rhetorical requirements made of her as a physician and a woman. Hannah Bellwoar (2012) uses CHAT to research a woman’s navigation of medical and health rhetorics related to reproduction. All of these articles could easily be framed as productively contributing to feminist technical communication, and this issue is just one example of how feminist work is not always apparent as such.¹³

What is essentially a labeling/metadata difficulty has impactful corollaries beyond the field of technical communication. For example, when I began teaching at Illinois State University in 2008, I promptly encountered a contingent of young women, mostly from affluent families in the Chicago suburbs, who subscribed to every feminist take on popular issues we discussed (e.g., equal work for equal pay, legal recognition of sexual harassment, reproductive rights, the viability and importance of women as political candidates) but adamantly insisted they were not feminists. I become frustrated by these conversations, in particular during a semester in which I was teaching a course on the history of rhetoric from a feminist perspective; this group of young women would easily engage with anti-feminists in the class, win their point, and then promptly disavow feminism and the very scholars who laid the foundations for the arguments they had just made.

It was this experience, along with the development of many anti-choice laws related to fetal ultrasound culminating in 2012, that led me to develop an apparent feminist methodology for technical communication and rhetoric, which I will preview briefly here—since it is part of the literature of feminist technical communication—before explaining it in detail in chapter 2. Apparent feminism addresses political trends that render misogyny unapparent, the ubiquity of uncritically negative responses to the term *feminism*, and a decline in centralized feminist work in technical communication. More specifically, it suggests that the manifestation of these trends in technical spheres requires intervention into notions of objectivity and the regimes of truth they support. Apparent feminism is a methodology that seeks to recognize and make apparent the urgent and sometimes hidden exigencies for feminist critique of contemporary politics and technical rhetorics. It encourages a response to social justice exigencies, invites participation from allies who do not explicitly identify as feminist but do work that complements feminist goals, and makes apparent the ways efficient work actually depends on the existence and input of diverse audiences.

Based on the literature reviewed above, apparent feminists might make the argument that a feminist resurgence in technical communication has begun. I suggest that apparent feminists must listen to this important work while at the same being aware that this work represents a minority population of scholars and that the disciplinary trend since around 2005 should be troubling to feminist scholars.

As shown here, feminist technical communicators have long paid attention to the need for more wide-ranging feminist approaches. In brief, then, feminist technical communicators:

- Embrace a plurality of feminisms and describe myriad feminist methodologies that can support even more feminist methods
- Persist in doing important feminist work even in the absence of discipline- and journal-sponsored forums
- Work within and across gender studies, cultural studies, and social justice agendas
- Conduct historiographical research and engage in scholarly conversations about the impact of that research
- Provide critical perspectives on technologies, sciences, terminologies, and social conventions (both within and outside the discipline itself) that hide value systems wherein misogyny is supported, valued, and reproduced
- Engage in interdisciplinary scholarship and activism
- Pay attention to the importance of intersectionality in terms of oppressions, theories, methodologies, practices, and more

- Intervene in problematic actions (including rhetorics) that exist in and between public spheres, private lives, disciplinary venues, and pedagogical spaces.

In addition to and in support of these projects, intellectual and activist transmigrations—described by Haas (2008a, 57) as points of exchange “dedicated to respectful and reciprocal dialogue”—constitute an important tradition for feminist technical communicators.¹⁴ As such, apparent feminism requires its practitioners to draw on and contribute back to interdisciplinary feminisms. In the next chapter, then, I survey feminist theories, methodologies, practices, and rhetorics—from intersectional traditions including gender studies, rhetoric and composition, progressive social criticism, cultural rhetorics, and anthropology/sociology—that should be taken up in the disciplinary conversations of technical communication. By emphasizing transdisciplinary and transmigratory feminisms, I point to spaces for intersection and argue that feminist technical communicators should pay attention to the development of disciplinary histories, including being critical of the exclusion of diverse feminisms from technical communication. At the same time feminist technical communicators work to avoid essentialist perspectives, we also must establish a flexible, permeable, temporary foundation from which to work.

A PLAN FOR FEMINIST TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

As explained above, this book’s main focus is on demonstrating the importance of feminist technical communication and the network of theory it relies on and contributes to. As one method of doing so, it looks at how our understandings of efficiency bear on our actions as they relate to several common feminist concerns: ecology, economy, health, and their interconnections. Although the reviews of various literatures in this chapter have established some temporarily stable understandings of these terms before moving forward, it is important to remember that—like queer time—they are concepts that are fluid and ever-changing.¹⁵ Indeed, the same can be said for feminist technical communication. As Cheryl Glenn (2018) argues, rhetorical feminisms are changeable, responsive, tactical. A term I would add to this list, although Glenn does not dwell on it specifically, is that rhetorical feminisms are reactive—and this is not a bad thing. Specifically, rhetorical feminisms in technical communication are currently both responding and contributing to the social justice turn.

Rhetorical feminisms as reactive is an important concept that allows feminisms to respond to the perceived objectivity of technical

communication as a field. Reactivity allows feminisms to be responsive to both systemic and personal instances of sexism and misogyny as well as other intersectional concerns. As Jacqueline Rhodes (2018, 90) says, “I reject . . . any feminism that doesn’t include systemic analysis as well as personal liberation—an analysis that must include discussions not just of gender but also of race, class, sexual orientation, ability, and how those things intersect.” My first instantiation of apparent feminism, as previously mentioned, came about as a reaction to young college women’s resistance to feminism as a term but not a concept. Apparent feminism does not aim to vitrify an approach to feminist objects of critique, smoothing over the rough edges of various feminist approaches with direct heat. Rather, it advocates a slower approach—no less angry when anger is called for but deliberate, temporary, permeable. Apparent feminism is a rhetorical feminism, able to finesse, open to change, amenable to its own obsolescence. Indeed, at its heart, apparent feminism was always meant to be situational; when I coined the term, it was partly in response to an idealist desire for a world in which “feminism” would indeed be an unreasonable perspective because equity would have been achieved and no need for a focus on “femme” would exist. That world, of course, will not be achieved in the foreseeable future, and so rhetorical feminisms—like apparent feminism—remain necessary. In combination with queer theories that offer models for temporal stretching, theorization of slow crisis expands apparent feminism’s effectiveness.

This book is messy—it uses multiple methods and builds on a methodology that is permeable and flexible. This is on purpose. As Rebecca Walton, Maggie Zraly, and Jean Pierre Mugengana (2015, 46) tell us: “Process-focused pieces . . . are rare in technical communication . . . Pieces that foreground not only process but the messiness of that process are not the norm . . . and technical communication scholars wrestle with anticipating and navigating messiness in designing and conducting community-based research.” The authors argue that foregrounding messiness can help us, as a field, learn to better match methods with objects of study. With attention both to allowing messiness and to the layered metaphors at work (Fleckenstein, Spinuzzi, Rickly, and Papper 2008)—metaphors that speak to economy, ecology, and health—I seek to animate these ideas in this book.

In chapter 2, I offer a detailed explanation of apparent feminism as a methodology. While apparent feminism grew out of the teaching frustrations I described above and did so at a time when anti-choice legislation was on the rise, it is not limited to addressing situations having to do with reproductive rhetorics or pedagogy. Throughout this book,

I demonstrate how apparent feminism can be applied in these contexts and more. Chapter 2 takes reproductive justice as a common example to show where apparent feminism came from and to demonstrate the simultaneous messiness and productivity of that invention process.

Chapter 3 maps slow crisis onto apparent feminist contexts as a way of showing the complementary work social justice, queer theory, and apparent feminism—as concepts that are both separate and overlapping—can do together. I explain what I mean by slow crisis and offer a history of the term, I use queer temporality as a guiding theoretical concept for demonstrating the possibilities in imagining different temporal approaches to crisis, and I show how an apparent feminist understanding of efficiency can utilize queer temporality to operationalize slow crisis as a concept. In sum, this chapter uses slow crisis as a pivot point to show what queer theory and apparent feminisms can and should do in a reciprocal relationship.

Chapter 4 shows where apparent feminism can go and what it can do through detailed analysis of pre- and post-crisis communication related to the Deepwater Horizon Disaster. It offers deep context for the disaster itself—an important step since rhetorical feminisms like apparent feminism must understand context to be appropriately, rhetorically reactive. Building on chapter 4, chapter 5 opens with a mapping of responsibilities and then adds an additional layer of analysis by demonstrating how transcultural and intersectional approaches are absolutely vital to apparent feminist critique.

Finally, chapter 6 offers more applications of apparent feminisms through histories, demonstrating how far we've come, how very far we have to go, and how apparent feminisms can help. This concluding chapter—in defiance of what concluding chapters are supposed to do—offers pathways without solutions, ideas without endings, and a refocusing on bodies and notable people toward theorizing new efficiency frames. That is, it leaves readers with a new way of thinking without telling them what to think. This final chapter keeps an eye to foreshadowing additional applications for this original methodology and reflects on the potential for this methodological approach to create openings for further theorizations of feminist technical communication.