Review of Eve Shapiro's Gender Circuits: Bodies and Identities in a Technological Age

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Review

Eve Shapiro's *Gender Circuits* provides a concise survey of the complexities of gender and sexuality in relation to technological progress, weaving an exacting narrative of the ways in which our technologies reflect our cultural norms and vice-versa. Shapiro explores several subjects, encompassing a brief historical survey of gendered terminology employed in Western culture, as well as gender expression and presentation in the social sphere. Also included are several case studies pertaining to the gender-specific cultural implications of body art and modification, gendered performance groups, attire and cosmetic presentation regarding gender, scientific progress in gender-affirmative medical treatments, and digital activism and advocacy. Throughout her work, Shapiro implores her audience to consider the means by which technology is moulded and adapted to suit our experiences and behavioural expectations in society, and also the means by which this endless feedback loop of sociocultural revision - to which Shapiro refers as "identity work" - is influenced by our technologies.

Shapiro begins by providing historical context for the post-Enlightenment emergence of individualism and widespread Western prioritization of self-cultivation, particularly with regard to social constructions and terminology defining gender. Hearkening back to Judith Butler's performativity doctrine of gender as the effect of reiterated social performance (Butler, 1990), Shapiro crafts an accessible introduction to the concept of gender as a social construct, apart from the Western preconception of gender as being inherently tied to reproductive anatomy, and makes a compelling argument to discard false dichotomy of binary gender. Also introduced is the spectrum of social 'scripts' and terminology employed to describe normative and non-

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normative gender identities (e.g. cisgender, transgender, gender queer, and non-binary individuals), terminology used in description of physical states (e.g. intersexed and transsexual bodies), and the social juxtapositions introduced by cultural memes such as masculinity, femininity, androgyny, and gendered pronouns in relation to gender identity and anatomical states.

Continuing in this vein, Shapiro presents a case study which focuses on the practice of tattooing and the ways in which such body modification is received socially, especially in the context of tattooed persons perceived as male compared with persons perceived as female and the respective social reception of each. Following this, Shapiro presents another case study regarding the nineteenth century emergence of bloomers - long, loose-fitting pants worn beneath skirts which allowed greater freedom of movement than the long skirts of Victorian fashion - and the political feminist controversy surrounding their popularity, as women were discouraged from wearing trousers at the time. Further, Shapiro explores Donna Haraway's theoretical framework of the interactions between emergent technologies and gendered bodies (Haraway, 1991), using the Second Life social networking site as an ethnographic model. Shapiro's subsequent analysis of such online communication demonstrates her findings that even anonymous communication can embody the same gendered, sexual, racial, and classist inequities as society at large. In this respect, Shapiro's analysis discourages overly optimistic impressions of technological progress, instead cautioning that, while emergent technologies often challenge gender and anatomical binarism, technological progress - especially the potential for anonymous digital communication - is not inherently free of such prejudices. Rather, technological progress is shown to have equal potential for reinforced prejudice as well as social liberation.

Shapiro's prose is accessible to casual readers and her approach is vast in scope, informative for even the seasoned academic, and encompassing a body of literature spanning the past three decades concerning studies of gender and sexuality, culture, sociology, and scientific and technological advances. Her criticisms pertaining to technology and its impact on cultural expectations and gender identity are ultimately constructive, and her resistance to any oversimplified optimism regarding technological progress is equally refreshing. *Gender Circuits* would serve as an excellent introductory text for any curriculum in Gender Studies, Digital Anthropology, Computer Mediated Communications, or the sociocultural implications of science and technology, and is also highly recommended for readers new to the study of gender in culture.

References

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Haraway, D. (1991). *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York, NY: Free Association Books Limited.

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