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# Academic Feminist Activism on a Traditional STEM Campus: The Case of a Feminist Newspaper at MTU

Katie Snyder

*Michigan Technological University*, [ksnyderm@mtu.edu](mailto:ksnyderm@mtu.edu)

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ACADEMIC FEMINIST ACTIVISM ON A TRADITIONAL STEM CAMPUS:  
THE CASE OF A FEMINIST NEWSPAPER AT MTU

By

Katie L. Snyder

A DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In Rhetoric, Theory and Culture

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Department of Humanities

Dissertation Advisor: *Dr. Patricia Sotirin*

Committee Member: *Dr. Ann Brady*

Committee Member: *Dr. Elizabeth Flynn*

Committee Member: *Dr. Audrey Mayer*

Department Chair: *Dr. Ronald Strickland*

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## ***Abstract***

This study addresses the problem of gender hostility on a STEM-focused university campus. I engage with current debates over the definition and purpose of feminism, in order to argue for the necessity of feminist activism in engineering education, with a particular focus on applications for Michigan Tech. Theoretically, I locate gender hostility in a long-running rejection of “the feminine” in STEM-based ways of knowing, curricula, and academic institutions. Drawing on Dorothy Smith’s conceptualization of “ruling relations,” I trace the discursive construction of femininity and the masculine/feminine dichotomy as seen in institutional forms, web pages, and student writing on social media.

I consider the efficacy of undergraduate student activism on STEM-focused campuses in countering hostility toward the feminine. Specifically, in this project, I focus on the founding and accomplishments of a Michigan Tech feminist student newspaper: *Beyond the Glass Ceiling*. I set this newspaper within a history of student-initiated feminist publications at Michigan Tech, including *The Technobabe Times* and UNDER\_WIRE. In chronicling the experiences of the students who wrote, designed, and edited the eponymous newspaper, I analyze how they understood and responded to institutionally embedded, textual, and contextual discourses about gender and feminism. My analysis admits the limitations but asserts the potential of undergraduate women’s counter-hegemonic struggle against the gendered ruling relations governing a STEM education.

In the conclusion, I argue for Martha Nussbaum's philosophical articulation of justice and gender as a useful platform for developing strategies to address gender hostility in STEM education for the good of all students.

## ***Chapter 1 – “Texts are the primary medium of power”***

“The relations of ruling in our kind of society are mediated by texts, by words, numbers, and images on paper, in computers, or on TV and movies screens. Texts are the primary medium (though not the substance) of power” (Dorothy Smith, *Texts* 17).

### *Introduction*

In the fall of 2009, I was assigned to teach two sections of HU 3120, Technical and Scientific Communication. That semester marked my second year in Michigan Technological University’s master’s program in Rhetoric and Technical Communication and the second time I had taught a course in technical communication. Most of the students were third and fourth-year engineers trying to satisfy humanities, arts, and social science (HASS) credit requirements. Also, most of the students were male. About ten years separated us in age, although I may have appeared younger than my age at the time. This course was not structured around daily lectures. Rather, I asked students to read and write outside of class and then come together to ask questions, participate in writing workshops, and have discussions. My approach was influenced by Paulo Freire’s critique of “narrative” education—where students are “listening objects” and instructors are “speaking subjects” (52)—and by bell hooks’ assertion that everyone in the classroom matters and can participate in creating a communal space for learning (*Teaching* 8). This style of teaching works well if students are engaged in the material – it fails miserably when they are not engaged or when they refuse to read and write.

At Michigan Tech, two-thirds of all students enroll to study engineering. The approach to engineering education, which evolved since its inception in the military context, tends to embrace a hierarchical model of education, where the instructor is the central fount of information, and students are peripheral receptacles (Hacker, *Pleasure*



60-63), often vying against one another. Engineering education encodes hierarchy as both masculine and as necessary to impart the “hard” or serious knowledge of the field.

Gender hierarchy has long been a component of engineering education, such that women have been either excluded entirely, or funneled into positions with less authority, pay, and prestige (Layne 11-30). At the same time, considerations of social and personal circumstances, or anything not “calculable” (Bucciarelli 8), are not typically relevant to the engineering classroom. Sociologist Sally Hacker describes a kind of pleasure derived from the individual pursuit of success in the rigid structure of this context (*Pleasure* 42-43). In her fieldwork as an engineering student, she discusses her experience of winning respect from others, and the sense of importance she felt when she turned down their offers to “go out” because she had to work on her “problem sets” (42).

Still, much work has been done to modify this style of teaching and learning environment. Numerous journals for the study of engineering education have appeared in recent decades. Research in engineering education touts the value of asking students to work in groups on design projects, and from the beginning of their education, to better prepare them for the realities of work in a professional engineering firm (Bucciarelli 82-83). As Hacker notes, engineering students sometimes work in groups because there was simply not enough time to finish the volume of coursework on one’s own. The group divided a set of problems between themselves and worked separately to find solutions (41-42). Thus, group work was mandated as a matter of survival, not as a matter of collegiality or collaborative learning.

Recent revisions to the Michigan Tech curriculum include specific guidelines for providing students opportunities to learn and practice their communication skills.

Students have long participated in senior design and enterprise projects where they work in groups to perform original research or solve an engineering problem. The enterprise program specifically stresses the importance of developing “competence in written and oral communication” (“The Enterprise”). Unfortunately, my claim, to my technical communication students, that communication skills might be central to these students’ careers seemed to fall on deaf ears. Certainly we discussed ways that communication can be critically important in an engineering context. We studied communication failures in professional engineering settings, like the 1986 Space Shuttle Challenger disaster. I also raised the issue of humanitarian engineering, where technology and design projects center on solving problems for people who suffer from poverty, environmental degradation, or forms of oppression. In one assignment, I asked students to write recommendation reports proposing long-term engineering projects designed to address problems of infrastructure (roads, sanitation, or energy, for example) in locations prone to earthquakes or other natural disasters. At universities across the globe, including Michigan Tech, engineering education increasingly is set in the context of humanitarian concerns (Amadei and Sandekian 84). Students here can participate in the Peace Corps Master’s Program, and in other locations, students engage in service learning projects where they create technological solutions to local problems (Amadei, Sandekian, and Thomas 1091-92). Engineers Without Borders is also represented as a student organization at Michigan Tech. But in this technical communication class, and in many of my classes, the students were unmoved. Their primary point of concern seemed to center on my gender and age, including my attire and personal habits. I won’t enumerate their comments, but the following excerpt from one of my teaching evaluations summarizes the students’

perspective on the class and me: “Keep wearing unpadded bras. Staring at your nips is the only way I could get through this class.”

I begin my dissertation with this story because it marks the moment when I could no longer ignore the daily influx of subtle and not so subtle sexism that shapes social relations on this campus. Despite installing formal definitions and protections, feminist efforts have failed to stem sexual harassment, assault, and discrimination on university campuses. Academe is still run by men, especially in engineering education. Popular culture provides abundant arguments for treating women as sexual objects. Religious dicta corroborate the idea that women are secondary to men—some argue that women should not teach men. Postfeminist attitudes, or the idea that equality between the sexes has been won, are common on campus, among male and female students. Even more confusing is the fact that some female students on campus are vocally antifeminist, and (curiously) often anti-woman. A 2009 article from *Michigan Tech Magazine* provides an interesting example. Meant to address the gender imbalance on campus, “Where the Boys Are” includes comments from female students stating that they are not interested in bringing more females to campus and that they question other females’ willingness to take their education seriously (Goodrich).

Still, until receiving this written confirmation of sexism, it had been possible for me to rationalize campus culture and, more importantly, to rationalize my students’ disrespect. Because, in the words of Gloria Steinem, I had “internalized society’s unserious estimate of all that was female—including myself” (25). I told myself I was misinterpreting students’ sexist behavior and comments ... and maybe I was a terrible teacher ... and maybe communication classes weren’t that important.

But this student comment marked the end of all that rationalizing. I make this point at the risk of being accused of making a mountain out of a molehill, and certainly I am aware that far worse forms of harassment have taken place in the world, and on this campus. But this comment is inexcusable, and it is not an outlier. I experience, and usually ignore, sexism in social relations on this campus all the time. This process of ignoring daily and sometimes subtle forms of sexism is work that involves rationalizing negative or abusive words and behavior, blaming myself for the same, or making the decision to accept and participate in sexism as normal to social relations in my life. This kind of work takes its toll for a number of reasons, but namely because it requires continual relinquishment of subjectivity and self-worth. Perhaps for this reason, Michigan Tech has a history of student-initiated feminist publications. In early 2013 I decided it was time to revive this tradition by co-founding *Beyond the Glass Ceiling* and gathering a small cohort of like-minded students to write and edit the publication. This dissertation provides a case study of that experience. My purpose is to show that sexism is maintained and perpetuated in student writing and other texts that circulate on campus. I argue that radical feminist activism can and has intervened in campus culture by talking back to sexist discourse and disrupting the gender dichotomy where femininity is disparaged, and masculinity is esteemed. But much work remains.

### *Women, Men, and Femininity in Michigan Tech Campus Culture*

While university initiatives and organizations have long been aimed at addressing problems of sexism here, campus culture continues to support the idea that females and femininity are for entertainment and not to be taken seriously. More troubling is the openly misogynist discourse used to describe female students' bodies and abilities.

Regular stories from the student weekly, *The Daily Bull*, make this attitude explicitly clear—as does a perusal of social media. A student zine distributed in April 2014 includes a 20-page collection of these comments, including a page from the *Urban Dictionary* that lists “snow cow” as a female student at Michigan Tech who was “somewhat attractive and petite,” but then gains weight over the course of her education at Tech (Ryan). The “300-rule” holds that female students at Michigan Tech either weigh 300 lbs or they have 300 male students “chasing” them. Further, if a female student is attractive in the traditional sense, then she is not serious about her education—in other words, she can’t be both attractive and a good engineer.<sup>1</sup> These students are described as in pursuit of their MRS degree, meaning they are enrolled at Michigan Tech to find a husband with good career prospects.<sup>2</sup>

Two of the most popular campus events, the bra show and the drag show, are exhibitions mocking femininity. In these events, male students and other performers parade about in over-sexualized attire for the entertainment of the campus community. The drag show has run for sixteen years at Michigan Tech and is usually organized by Keweenaw Pride, a student organization providing support, events, and activist opportunities for LGBTQIA students and allies. Drag performers engage with the audience as they dance and sing, and audience members whistle, cheer, and “tip” the

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<sup>1</sup> Isis Anchlee’s #Ilooklikeanengineer campaign is a recent example of this assumption. Anchlee is a full stack engineer at OneLogin, and the company recently put together a promotional campaign featuring Isis and several other employees. The reaction in social media was immediate, with many people questioning whether or not she was a real engineer, suggesting the ad was meant to appeal to men, and characterizing her smile as a “sexy smirk.” After the ad appeared, Isis was solicited for sex by some male engineers, while others actually throw dollars bills at her while she was at work (Anchalee).

<sup>2</sup> Not only is this sexist, it’s also heteronormative.

performers, as one would do at a strip club. The Society of Intellectual Sisters (SIS) sponsors the bra show each year to raise money for breast cancer research and to raise awareness about the prevalence of breast cancer among women. Students design bras according to a new theme each year. Typically, female students design the bras, and male students model them. In 2014, the theme was “Disney,” which, unfortunately, served to infantilize women’s sexuality—and at the same, sexualized childhood characters.<sup>3</sup> These events are two of three moments where students are encouraged to participate in public displays of femininity—the third event is the annual contest for Winter Carnival Queen, a tradition the began in 1928, “judging women on their beauty, ice skating, and skiing skills” (“Winter Carnival”). Efforts to rebrand the event in recent years include a January 30th, 2014 post by “Women of Michigan Tech” on their Facebook page that states “This is no ‘beauty pageant’ -Michigan Tech’s Winter Carnival Queens are fierce, smart, strong,

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<sup>3</sup> Equally troubling is that black women’s sexuality has long been exploited in a way that Evelyn Hammonds describes “as simultaneously invisible, visible (exposed), hypervisible, and pathologized in dominant discourses” (93). Discussion from black women about their sexuality has been limited or silenced even though, in popular discourse, they represent “the embodiment of sex” (94). How, then, do we think about the MTU bra show? On one hand, black women are organizers of the event. They do not model the bras or put their bodies on display. The bra show mocks traditional conceptions of femininity, which are strongly associated with white women and presented as oppositional to black women. But SIS is known on campus for the bra show, even though they provide other events and support for black women, like sponsoring student attendance to professional and academic conferences. Funding for SIS is provided primarily by USG. In 2013 and 2014 they received a fraction of their funding request, and in 2014 USG noted that their funds could “ONLY” be used to organize the bra show (“Undergraduate”). In both cases, more money was needed to organize the event than was anticipated in total donations at the event. On their involvement page, SIS acknowledges that raising awareness about breast cancer is not as critical as it once was (Fueri). All of which suggests that the bra show is primarily about providing an opportunity for the predominantly white male campus community to play with, and also to mock, femininity. The fact that Black women organize this event is both troubling and empowering. The fact that USG, an almost entirely male organization, provides support to SIS only for their bra show is a point of concern.

and proud" (this post has since been removed). But, like any other beauty pageant, Michigan Tech queen candidates dress in formalwear, they answer silly questions, and they perform a "talent" for an audience. Taken together, this issue and those I have cited above are tangible evidence of entrenched sexism of Michigan Tech's campus culture and the gender dichotomy where femininity is posed as the less worthy opposite to masculinity.

### *Sexism as Sexual Assault*

Michigan Tech is not alone in its sexist orientation to campus events and social relations. A quick perusal of the national news shows that incidents where male students assert sexist and often abusive authority over females and others on college campuses are ubiquitous. The subject of this dissertation is not sexual harassment or assault on college campuses, but my research takes place in the context of extremely tense political, social, and academic environments surrounding this issue, and this context is central to my argument. As college administrators rush to communicate new federally mandated policies and resources to students, reports of incidents new and old continue to emerge. To date, one hundred six colleges are under investigation for mishandling reports of sexual assault on their campuses (Kingkade). In September, Columbia senior Emma Sulkowicz put a face to this issue by vowing to carry her mattress to class as a way to protest her alleged 2012 rape by a classmate who continues to attend the same school (Jacobs). While Sulkowicz is not the only student activist addressing this issue (Heldman and Dirks), the Obama administration has also played a significant role in bringing it to the fore. Over the past three years, the White House has issued or affirmed several sexual assault documents, including a "Dear Colleague Letter," addressed to federally funded

schools by the Department of Education on April 4, 2011, the Reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in 2013, the launch of the notalone.gov website, and the “It’s On Us” campaign. These efforts emerged after a two-year study funded by the US Department of Justice found that 1 in 5 college women experience sexual assault (Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, and Martin). The report provides documentation for two overarching concerns; first, that sexual assaults are significantly underreported, and second, that this type of violent sexual behavior may be embedded in campus culture. Report writers belabored the point that excessive alcohol consumption was the primary risk factor for assault, while the secondary factor is being a freshman or sophomore female. Thus, the “Dear Colleague Letter” mandated that schools do more to address the problem of sexual assault by requiring policies that comply with Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. Russlynn Ali, the letter author and Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, argues that sexual assault or risk of assault puts victims’ equal access to education in jeopardy. Institutions that fail to address sexual assault complaints and implement appropriate policies could lose their federal funding. In addition, the reauthorization of VAWA affirms the 1994 federal commitment to recognize domestic violence and rape by an intimate partner as a crime—this recognition is a significant issue for college women who often know (or are dating) their attackers. More specifically, VAWA now includes the Campus Sexual Violence Elimination (SaVE) Act, which mandates that schools take a preventative approach to assault. Similarly, the “It’s On US” campaign is aimed at men or others who can prevent an assault or intervene before it’s too late. These efforts mark a shift in how policymakers are thinking about sexual assault.



That is, rather than focusing on treating or arming potential victims, they are publicly encouraging or mandating policies aimed at prevention.

All federally funded universities are required by the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Crime Statistics Act to alert students to official reports of sexual assault in a timely matter. They must also keep a daily, public log of criminal events, and provide students with an annual security report. Schools should educate students about how and where to report an assault and provide other information about related services, policies, and resources. While Michigan Tech claims to be one of the safest universities in the country (“Ranking”), there have been eight officially reported “forcible” “sex offenses” here since 2012 (“Annual Security”), and numerous stories of unreported assaults circulate among students and alumni (*SEX-ISM*). This system was tested last November when an assault was officially reported as taking place outside Walker Arts and Humanities Building on November 15, 2014. Shortly after that, an update was sent to students noting that the location of the assault was not on campus, but at an undisclosed site in downtown Houghton. A feminist student news blog, UNDER\_WIRE, addressed this issue in their blog, much to the ire of many readers. This article was the most read and most commented on post of the year. Not only did students comment on the emails about the incident itself, but both male and female students commented supportively on an administrator’s decision to send an email to the undergraduate student body entitled “A Season of Thanks” at the same time that the notification of the assault was released (Walsh).

An examination of sexual assault policy and its implementation on campus reveals the relationship and points of engagement between feminist activism and

academe in the context of Michigan Tech's unique campus culture as shaped by tenets and traditions of engineering education. For decades, Michigan Tech has worked to bring more females to campus as students and as faculty. The programs have been diverse and multi-pronged, including mentorship programs, online courses to address sexual harassment and assault, special hiring initiatives including interdisciplinary positions and dual career support and educational initiatives to address unconscious bias. Most of these programs have originated as a top-down, or near to top-down approach, meaning that they were initiated by the administration. The university's approach to sexual assault and harassment provides a sense of what I mean by a top-down approach. The problem is necessarily addressed from a legal standpoint, but this without any sense of the real struggles students may face. On the webpage where Michigan Tech provides information about sexual assault resources students can access, there is also a picture of a group of male students playing broomball – as if to downplay the seriousness and the risk of assault students face on campus.

The UNDER\_WIRE blog post provides that missing perspective – the human element – that shows what these policies mean for and to actual students. The SEXISM zine, produced by student writers for *Beyond the Glass Ceiling*, does the same. The zine, for example, includes several short stories from students about their experiences of harassment or sexism on campus. In one story, for example, a student is harassed, intimidated and stalked online because she did not respond positively to a male student who identified her as a “hot chick.” In another story, the first question that's asked (by a male student) to a new instructor on the first day of class is, “are you married?”

Sexism remains pervasive on this campus, even as institutional forces collude to create a sense that all is well. Where do we go from here? I argue that this problem must be addressed from the bottom-up as well as top-down. In other words, students must call for change in campus culture. Student activism is one approach, including forming campus organizations, organizing educational events, and distributing publications that detail students' attitudes about, and experiences of, sexism on campus. As mentioned above, Michigan Tech has a history of feminist activism, along with faculty-initiated programs designed to educate and promote discussion about gender issues.<sup>1</sup> An early example is Copper Country Women's Heritage Week, organized in March 1981 by a cohort of local scholars, including emerita professor of reading and composition Beth Flynn. The program was award-winning, and some felt, at the time, that it might mark the beginning of a women's studies major or program at Michigan Tech. Flynn, along with co-organizers Ann Brady, professor of technical communication, and Patricia Sotirin, professor of communication, also brought the 2005 Feminisms and Rhetorics conference to Michigan Tech. The conference featured leading scholars in feminist studies, like Jacqueline Jones Royster. In 2013, Professor Sotirin co-organized the annual conference for the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language and Gender, along with Victoria Bergvall, associate professor of linguistics, and Diane Shoos, associate professor of visual studies and French language. A featured speaker included Michigan Tech alum and well-known feminist author Roxane Gay. Interest in feminism among faculty remains strong, as marked by the annual feminist literature reading event, organized by Professor Sotirin and supported by the Department of Humanities. Unfortunately, much of this history is unknown to new students. In *Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, Adrienne Rich writes

that one of the challenges of feminist activism is that the history of feminist thought and action has not been well preserved. In her words:

The entire history of women's struggle for self-determination has been muffled in silence over and over. One serious cultural obstacle encountered by any feminist writer is that each feminist work has tended to be received as if it emerged from nowhere; as if each of us had lived, thought, and worked without any historical past or contextual present. (11)

In this dissertation, I begin to document the history of students' feminist activist writing at Michigan Tech, in hopes that this work will provide a seedbed of inspiration for future students with activist intentions. Specifically, I will provide a history of student-initiated feminist publications, beginning with the *Michigan Technobabe Times*, including *Beyond the Glass Ceiling*, the SEX-ISM zine, and finishing with UNDER\_WIRE. I provide analysis of these texts, with attention to embedded sexism and sexist discourse.

#### *Theoretical Framework: Ruling Relations*

Sexism is an ideological form. It persists because it is embedded in our social structures and institutions. Sociologist Dorothy Smith argues that sexism, and other oppressive ideologies, are disseminated largely through "texts" that we encounter and engage with every day (*Texts* 163). From clothing advertisements to student loan applications to social media forums, these texts organize our daily lives and social relations as much as they serve to disseminate dominant ideologies that preserve power for those who hold it. Smith describes this process as a system of "ruling relations." This system is pervasive and largely invisible, lacking a center or single point of origin. She

argues, however, that researchers can expose ruling relations by taking everyday texts as objects of study. This orientation to research provides a way to examine how ruling relations shape individuals' activities, as mediated by texts and discourse. Smith's interest is in mapping these everyday activities to understand how people participate in these relations and, at the same time, are ruled by them. This conceptual framework serves as a methodology that can inform a variety of methods, from interviews to observational studies. In this dissertation, I will use discursive analysis as my primary method of study, and I will orient my work within the context of Smith's theorization of ruling relations.

One benefit of this approach is that it allows a form of inquiry that doesn't objectify research participants. Rather, the texts become the objects of study and serve as windows in social life and social relations. Notably, this research project originated with my interest in "studying" female engineering students at Michigan Tech. After much thought and a series of project proposal iterations, it became clear that significant research has been done and continues to be conducted, on women in engineering education. The Feminist Research in Engineering Education (FREE) group out of Purdue is one such example. The Society of Women Engineers (SWE) has long produced valuable research on this topic, and The White House Council on Women and Girls, formed in 2009, is also beginning its investigation (Smith and Jarrett). Hacker has written extensively about her first person experience as an engineering student, and Wendy Faulkner has done extensive research on gender, masculinity, and technology in engineering culture. These are important issues, but my greater concern was not with those who inhabit the social category "woman" as much as it was with the denigration of

“femininity” in campus contexts and the dichotomous construction of masculinity and femininity in campus discourse and student practices.

*Femininity and the Gender Dichotomy*

Femininity is difficult to describe, although many feminists scholars have taken on this task. Some have explored the concept of the “the feminine,” or the “Eternal Feminine,” the later being the case in Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. Here she describes the feminine as a “Mystery” or the “Absolute Other” (292). For de Beauvoir, this mystery is a myth created in religion, literature, and culture more broadly. The myth creates women’s dependence and frailty, but also a kind of power derived from feminine sexuality. Femininity as myth is wildly inconsistent, and its narratives, when gathered together, are rife with “incoherencies” (286). De Beauvoir writes, “[t]he saintly mother has for correlative the cruel stepmother, the angelic young girl has the perverse virgin: thus it will be said sometimes that Mother equals Death, that every virgin is pure spirit or flesh dedicated to the devil” (287). Taken in sum, she repeatedly asserts that femininity is a kind of mutilation (456). It is the dichotomous *other* to the powerful capability and authority that defines masculinity. Specifically, in her chapter on young girls, de Beauvoir characterizes femininity in the following way:

To be feminine is to appear weak, futile, docile. The young girl is supposed not only to deck herself out, to make herself ready, but also to repress her spontaneity and replace it with a studied grace and charm taught her by the elders. Any self-assertion will diminish her femininity and her attractiveness.” (376)

She is not alone in her negative characterization of femininity. Susan Brownmiller, in her classic study of the concept, writes the following description, “the feminine principle is

composed of vulnerability, the need for protection, the formalities of compliance and the avoidance of conflict ... Whimsy, unpredictability and patterns of thinking and behavior that are dominated by emotion, such as tearful expressions of sentiment and fear, are thought to be feminine precisely because they lie outside the established route to success” (16). Femininity is the soft hip of home, embodied in mothers’ skirts, their warm embrace, and their nurturing care. It is also, as Brownmiller describes, “an effective antidote to the unrelieved seriousness, the pressure of making one’s way in a harsh, difficult world.” (17). Like de Beauvoir, Brownmiller operates on the premise that femininity is inherently paradoxical, but her association of emotion with femininity is important to consider, given that males in American cultural are largely discouraged from *being* feminine or having feminine characteristics. Importantly, feminist philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues that emotional expression is a “central human functional capability” (41) and society should be directed according to the protection and cultivation of human capabilities, for all people. This characterization of emotion brings femininity into the definition of that which makes people fully human, rather than that which makes females *not quite human* or makes males *weak*.

Thus, many feminists have argued that the masculine/feminine dichotomy impinges from multiple angles on all people, of all sexes and genders (Butler, 1990; Lorber, 1995; Halberstam,1998). If masculinity discourages men from expressing a full range of human emotions, and if femininity discourages women from acting authoritatively or taking control in the public sphere, then both genders face limitations to developing the breadth and depth of their human capabilities. If we place this statement in the context of college education, it is easy to make the argument that the gender

dichotomy may create problems for educating students in a way that is supportive of these capabilities.<sup>4</sup> In the case of Michigan Tech, my goal is not simply to bring more women to campus or to make life “better” for the women who are already here.<sup>5</sup> Rather, it is to contribute to the on-going conversation about engineering education by revealing the gendered and sexist nature of everyday discourse that shapes and is shaped by students—and to suggest that this discourse is damaging for students and for US culture more broadly because it supports ruling relations that seek to preserve systems of (gender) oppression. By extension, I am calling for Michigan Tech to take a leading role in education by creating educational programs that equip students to bring meaningful change to those who are suffering and struggling under current systems of power.

In this study, I examine femininity as discursively constructed and communicated with/in texts created by students and the university on campus and, at the same time,

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<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, college education is an increasingly an exercise in training students to fill specific roles or accomplish certain tasks for the corporate sector—engineering education in particular. College education, in this construction is about perpetuating systems—economic, corporate, governmental, and cultural—that have been immensely successful in providing water, food, and shelter to certain people. Engineering has played in significant role in these successes. But we’ve now come to this moment in US history where our basic infrastructure is in need of significant repair or upgrade (Nixon); where 22 percent of all US children live in poverty, including 38.2 percent of black children (“National Poverty”); and where the real wages for the bottom 25 percent of workers has fallen 3 percent since 2000, but wages for the top ten percent has increased 9.7 percent (Desilver). From this standpoint, it does not seem advantageous to continue equipping students to contribute to a system that perpetuates disrepair, inequity, and injustice. It seems more prudent to equip students to envision new systems: to see and empathize with the real struggles that people face, and to use their experience and education to meet those needs.

<sup>5</sup> Olin College of Engineering achieved gender parity, hoping it would resolve persistence sexism on their campus. They discovered that even with 51% females as part of the student body, sexism remains a problem. Their work uncovered the importance of identifying unconscious bias to successfully address this problem (Chachra 017).



consider the extent to which this discourse is positioned in opposition to dominant forms of masculinity. In conducting this inquiry, I consider the possibilities for feminist intervention in this process by way of student activism and as exemplified in a student-run feminist newspaper. The goal is to query the conditions under which expressions of femininity, and the feminine more broadly, might cease to be disparaged, mocked, or dismissed. Rather, that femininity would be valued as centrally relevant to learning, to identity, and to social relations on Michigan Tech's campus. In tandem, I argue for approaching this problem from a modified radical feminist perspective.

*Feminism, a brief history of the word and the movement*

Feminism is a long-running academic and activist project that continues to engage the feminine as problematic, and is aimed at the destruction of feminine-based exploitation. Under this umbrella definition, there are *feminisms*, a diversity of movements meant to overturn feminine-based exploitation, discrimination, and oppressions in their myriad overt or covert forms. Responding to feminist critique (hooks, 1996; Lorde, 1984; Mohanty, 2003; Spelman, 1990), feminisms today attend differently, and with specificity, to feminine exploitation as embedded within racism, classism, imperialism, heterosexism, and religious persecution. Again, I use the term "feminine" (instead of "sex" or "gender") because it most precisely identifies what is at issue. That is, as feminist scholars have well-articulated, women's long-running struggle is rooted in mutable cultural constructions of femininity, and these as originally derived from reproductive physiological "peculiarities," that is, the ability to gestate and birth new humans (de Beauvoir xviii). Following de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray, we see that the feminine has been defined as an object of fear and revulsion, reverence and adoration.

The Feminine Other is a mysterious “not self,” given that masculinities (some more so than others) are normative (Irigaray 64). Characteristics or skills associated with the reproductive labor of children, home, and wifedom have been defined as feminine, though we recognize that femininity is constructed differently depending on social/cultural contexts (Spelman 66-71).

In the United States, the movement emerged as a way to voice concern for women’s right to vote and their right to life in the public sphere. In *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, Nancy Cott draws a distinction between feminism and the “woman movement.” The woman movement was synonymous with the call for suffrage, and also in calling attention to women’s confinement to the home. The word feminism was meant to be provocative and was used in news articles to raise the alarm about women who were rejecting the status quo. At the same time, female activists in the woman movement started to realize the paradox of their situation, which is that they were advocating from a standpoint that all women were similar and shared a unifying set of experiences and social location as “woman.” But as women entered into professions from which they were previously prohibited, the argument that all women shared the same oppression started to unravel. Feminism emerged as a way to advocate against gender hierarchy and allow for the multiplicity of women’s experience and social locations (13-50). Feminism, the word and the movement, struggled to gain traction again until after mid-century when the struggle for equal rights, both in the context of race and gender, drew center stage in the social and political milieu. Radical feminism emerged during the 1960s, in part, as a critique of liberal feminism that was working for women’s to have equal opportunity in the public sphere (Echols 3-4). Radical feminists argued that women should not seek

equality in systems that are embedded in sexist, racist, and classist ideology. Instead, women should work to end male supremacy and seek to re-envision and recreate social life and political structures. Radical feminism lost ground to culture feminism, a movement that celebrated women's "difference," and to equality (or liberal) feminism that argues for men and women to be exactly equal in law and life (Echols 5-6). Still, the promise of radical feminism remains apparent in more recent visions of feminist revolution, including feminists who engage social justice projects with an interest in the intersectionality of oppressions, including race, class, sexuality, religion, and ethnicity. The feminist project has been about "women," as an identity and social category. But the turn toward intersectionality, combined with research in queer studies, reveals that feminism is not exactly about women. Feminism is also about femininities—as transacted, enacted, enforced, differed/deferred, conferred, ignored, and exaggerated—in culture. While women are typically associated with the feminine, the reality that feminism reveals is that women aren't only feminine, and men aren't only not feminine, and there are persons quite feminine or not, that cannot (or do not wish to) locate themselves in this gender dichotomy. But. Socially, culturally, we ask females to be feminine and males to be masculine to preserve our opposing sexual/social categories. While it might be acceptable for women to be a little more aggressive in certain contexts, and for men to be a little more sensitive in other contexts, generally (although this desire may be changing<sup>6</sup>) we want nothing to do with the ambiguity of being in-between or

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<sup>6</sup> In a recent story on NPR, the author writes about perceived changes in gender roles. The overarching argument is that the so-called "millennial" generation is not as interested in preserving gender stereotypes, and in many cases is resisting them in promising ways (Kott).

without the gender dichotomy. Gail Rubin explains the gender dichotomy as a function to preserve economic systems and to preserve male authority. In this case, a woman is a socially produced commodity. She is available for transactions at the behest of her father, brothers, or husband (depending on cultural context) (166). Rubin's claim might sound primitive until we consider our typically very expensive American marriage ceremony, wherein a woman is "given away" to a husband by her father. This way of thinking leaks into every aspect of American life and characterizes social life in most cultures since the beginning of civilization (Engels 65). From pop culture to politics, from sports to academe, people, practices, and objects are defined as more or less feminine or masculine. While femininity is put on a pedestal in certain contexts (and this has been the case historically), those people deemed more masculine tend to have greater recourse to power. Importantly, many activities and spaces in the public sphere are marked as masculine-- including government, the corporate sector, and higher education. Within academe, some spaces are perceived as more masculine than others. Engineering education is largely characterized by its masculine ethos—the preservation of this masculinity plays a significant role in social life at Michigan Tech.

*Engineering education culture in historical context*

Campus culture at Michigan Tech is largely defined by engineering culture. Engineering education has been studied from a number of perspectives, particularly in the past two decades as government and corporate forces collude to create incentives to study engineering, and for engineering education and practice to engage more directly with specific social or economic concerns. As described above, arguments for humanitarian

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approaches to engineering education and professional practice are becoming more common. Bernard Amadei, a professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder and founder of Engineers Without Borders, has written extensively about this issue, advocating that engineering programs should do more to engage their students in humanitarian projects over the course of their education. Likewise, Louis Bucciarelli, emeritus professor of engineering and technology studies at MIT, highlights the need for engineering education to be more responsive to human needs, and to engage reflectively and philosophically with his assertion that engineers design the world (Bucciarelli 1-3).<sup>7</sup> He describes the conventional engineers' perspective of the world as compartmentalized and limited in scope, often failing to consider the social repercussions of engineering work or, alternatively, the social needs that could be ameliorated with creative application of engineering concepts. Bucciarelli exposes a paradox in engineering practice, which is that on the one hand, engineering practice is rigid and structured and orderly, while, on the other hand, the process of designing a technological object or process is fraught with mistakes and the messiness of uncertainty. He argues for changes in delivery and format of engineering concepts, such that students can begin to see and experience the structured but messy design process early in their education. But he also stresses that there are limits to how much engineering education can change because of the volume (and ever-increasing volume) of knowledge and complexity of the concepts students must master (86).

Several feminists have examined engineering education in the contexts of masculinity, technology, and power. As mentioned above, Sally Hacker spent more than

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<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Michigan Tech's tagline is "Create the Future."

a year as an engineering student in order to study the culture and experience. While she experienced some benefits and enjoyment from doing the work, she ultimately decided to leave the program because she found the engineering coursework had a significantly negative effect on her patience, her ability to empathize with students, and her willingness to engage with them interpersonally. This discovery speaks to some of the challenges and deficiencies she uncovered in engineering education, namely that (usually male) students often trade a relationship with technology or technological objects for interpersonal relationships with others (usually women). Hacker traces the history of engineering as a practice and field of study as it emerged as part of early military operations. In this case, engineers designed and improved objects for purposes of success in war, or framed differently, for purposes of maintaining the peace. Either way, military precision became central to engineering practice and education, as did its association with masculinity and men. The founding of West Point marked the beginning of formalized engineering education in the United States (*Pleasure* 62-63). Women were largely excluded from earning engineering degrees, until the late 19th century. They were grudgingly admitted to engineering programs, or they were allowed to apprentice and practice under the sponsorship of men who were renowned in their field. Women made significant inroads during World War II but were quickly replaced when men returned from war (Layne 47-55).

### *Society of Women Engineers*

The society of women engineers (SWE) is a significant point of consideration in this project because it is an example of women engaging in engineering in particular ways that are indicative of the problem I seek to address. Historically, SWE was formed

for the advancement of women in engineering at a time when almost no one believed women could do the work, much less that they would be allowed to try. Females were in certain cases, given the opportunity to be “engineeresses” with reduced responsibilities, or they were given work doing calculations in the office. A significant part of engineering culture was not only prowess in math and the sciences but also the ability to work in the field. Engineering sites were deemed not appropriate spaces for females in that they were too dangerous; further, women were considered not strong enough for the work, and their appearance in these homosocial spaces would ruin the (male) sense of community (Layne 46). The goal of SWE was to show that females could be every bit as good as men in all engineering fields while at the same time remaining appropriately feminine. Their ambition was not to change engineering practice or engineering goals. The women of SWE focused on being excellent – and better than excellent – engineers so that they would have a chance of making it in a man’s profession. Their mission was not explicitly feminist, and some of the earliest well-known female engineers were openly hostile to the feminist movement. Others also harbored racist attitudes that would not have been congruent with the abolitionist stance of most early women’s rights advocates (Layne 134). Today, SWE professes a vision and mission that roughly aligns with equality feminism, or feminism that argues females should have exactly the same rights as males. This approach continues today with the mission and practices of Michigan Tech’s chapter of SWE, which has grown in recent years, including now at least one male member. In personal conversation, a SWE member explained to me that the Michigan Tech Chapter of SWE is no longer exclusively interested in supporting female students. Rather, their interest is in supporting students who need it, regardless of sex or gender. While their

inclusivity is to be applauded, it can also be read as the persistence of male privilege on this campus.<sup>8</sup>

### *Patriarchy and More*

Feminist theorists have long used the term patriarchy to describe a system of power where a male figurehead is the central authority figure, and all others are subservient to him. This system describes relations in a traditional heterosexual family, although some argue that it extends beyond the family to relations in the public sphere. In this family structure, a hierarchy exists where older males have greater recourse to power than younger, and all males have more status than girls and women. Birth order is of significant importance, with land and other property often being passed to the first-born male. Friedrich Engels traces the origin of this system as a result of classed society, which emerged as humans begin to settle in specific locations, cultivate animals and accumulate other items of value (64-66). A semblance of this system is apparent in workplaces where older men have, traditionally, had a tendency to mentor and promote younger men, over and above women who might be equally qualified or exhibit greater potential. Research shows the same is true in academe, where female students might excel in their coursework and campus organizations, but male students are more likely to be mentored and selected for opportunities to research and publish (Milkman, Akinola, Chugh 28).

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<sup>8</sup> Privilege exists when one group has an advantage over others in political, economic and social systems. Privilege does not guarantee an easy or perfect life, but it allows some people to avoid obstacles and enjoy benefits that may not be available to other groups (*Angry* 8-10).



Still some feminists argue that patriarchy does not describe the entire problem of sexism as it exists both in and outside the home. Cynthia Cockburn, for example, suggests that “andrarchy” is a more apt term to describe the relations of power in the workplace. In her study of the evolution of printing press technology, she shows that it is not a law of the father that determines power and authority, but it is the fact of being male and masculine. Men, as a social category, are associated with technology, or technological skill, as much as they are with physical prowess. Cockburn shows, for example, that women in the printing trades were systematically excluded from work by their lack of association with physical power and technological skill (177-195).

Whether or not women have physical strength or technical skills is, as many researchers have shown, entirely dependent on context. Judy Wajcman points out women working in munitions during the First World War completely redesigned their product with substantial improvements (*Feminism Confronts* 22). Women’s ability to invent, design, and manipulate technology is not based in biology. Female athletes continue to prove the same point in sports. For example, as resistance to women’s participation in long-distance running has decreased and women’s participation has increased, some women now win ultramarathons outright (Ashby, Mock). We can make a similar argument in the context of engineering professions where women have achieved much less than men in the professional sphere, but the overall number of women in engineering is also much lower, and resistance to their participation remains entrenched. Currently, about fourteen percent of all engineers are female, with significant variation according to engineering specialty. For example, women earned 44.3 percent of the environmental engineering degrees in 2011, but only 9.4 percent of degrees in computer engineering

(Yoder 12). Historically, women were steered into engineering fields that were less identified with masculinity, which would mean less work in the field or less work with heavy equipment and fewer requirements for technological skills. In addition, a field like environmental engineering is often perceived as a helping profession. The desire to help, of course, is broadly understood to be a feminine characteristic, and so it is easy to see the way that concepts of femininity and masculinity shape career ambition and participation in engineering fields for males and females. From my own experience, I can easily say that my teachers and mentors encouraged me to pursue a career in education, in part because of my interest in helping others. Notably, I was also very successful in math and science, but no one encouraged me to pursue engineering or any type of STEM career.

### *Feminist Writing as Activism*

I am not a female engineering student at Michigan Tech. But, returning to my story at the beginning of this chapter, my teaching experiences have been strongly shaped by my work with engineering students in the class in the context of Michigan Tech's misogynist campus culture. In 2013, I decided to try to voice my concerns and make space for other students and instructors who might have shared similar experiences by starting a feminist newspaper on campus. As an undergraduate English major at Albion College, I had researched feminist newspapers and news writers. I was also a writer and managing editor for our college newspaper, and I completed an internship writing for a weekly newspaper, *The Villager*, in Greenwich Village. I had learned from research and from first-hand experience about the power of press and the importance of its role in addressing social justice issues and providing a forum for free speech. Writing and

distribution of feminist newspapers, magazines, and other serial publications have long been central to feminist activism. Some of the serial publications of the 1970s era of feminist academic activism included *Ms. Magazine*, *Off Our Backs*, and *Ain't I a Woman?* These publications complemented a form of personal radicalization known as consciousness-raising (CR) in local, national, and sometimes global contexts. They also provided vital information for women in terms of resources for escaping abusive relationships, participating in activist events, or learning about reproductive health. For example, the first issue of *Ain't I a Woman?* was published in 1971 with instructions for performing a “menstrual extraction,” or self-induced early abortion. Local printers originally declined to publish this information and the writers of *AIAW?* make note of the conflict in their publication (Beins and Enszer 186-87). *AIAW?* Eventually found a printer willing to work with them, and the proceeded to publish more or less consistently for several years. Beins and Enszer write that this publication is important in feminist history for at least two reasons. One, it represents a moment when there was no strong divide between feminist community and lesbian community, contrary to what was typically described in broad histories of the women’s movement.<sup>9</sup> As the group evolved, most of the members of *AIAW?* identified as lesbians and feminists, so there was little struggle to define the terms of their agenda within the bounds of heteronormativity. The second point of importance is that *AIAW?* provided a forum for women to write about their experiences as feminist activists. While some of the articles were “news” stories,

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<sup>9</sup> Feminists worked for years to mend the schism that widened with Betty Freidan’s infamous characterization of lesbian feminists as “the lavender menace” (Gilmore and Kaminski 96).

and early issues included news from across the country, later issues mainly contained accounts of women's personal experiences, including their reflections on their engagement in local activist events. Beins and Enszer write, "*The AIAW?* collective devoted so much space to exploratory, reflective, and self-critical pieces written by the collective members, that the paper itself often resembled a transcript of a CR group meeting" (193). The publication ran for 4 years (186).

*Off Our Backs (OOB)* was a monthly paper published out of Washington D.C. by a non-hierarchically organized collective of women who made all decisions by consensus. While *AIAW?* mainly focused on local issues, *OOB* sought to address feminist concerns across the globe, although taken in local context. In their inaugural issue, they describe the rationale and objectives for the paper, noting a lack of equal pay for equal work, along with women's higher rates of poverty, lack of reproductive control, and their objectification via the sexual "revolution." They go on to discuss the name of the publication, saying,

[I]t reflects our understanding of the dual nature of the women's movement. Women need to be free of men's domination to find their real identities, redefine their lives, and fight for the creation of a society in which they can lead decent lives as human beings. At the same time, women must become aware that there would be no oppressor without the oppressed, that we carry the responsibility for withdrawing the consent to be oppressed. We must strive to get off our backs, and with the help of our sisters to oppose and destroy that system that fortifies the supremacy of men who exploit the masses for the profit of the few. Our position

is not anti-men, but pro-women. We seek the liberation of women, the liberation of all peoples. (*offourbacks*)

Unfortunately, a lack of funding forced *OOB* to stop publication in 2008. Articles still exist in college libraries and can be accessed via *JSTOR* and *Project Muse*. The website remains in place, and some original content is available there as well.

*Ms. Magazine* is still in publication, and it is perhaps the most well known feminist magazine. It was first produced as an insert for *New York Magazine* in 1971 (“Ms. HerStory”) and few traditional journalists believed it would succeed at the time. Founders Gloria Steinem and Peggy Pitman Hughes went on to publish first and early articles on a number of issues that remain critical to feminist activists today, calling for legalization of abortion, and demanding protections from sexual assault and harassment. Today *Ms* serves as a print and online resource for feminist educators and activists worldwide. The tenor of its articles remains strongly political, with some focus on pop culture. Other current feminist magazines like *BUST* and *BITCH* are primarily engaged with pop culture. I highlight these differences in focus among the publications above because they mark a transition in the orientation of feminist print media, with less focus on social justice issues and more focus on the right to self-expression and the experience (and critique) of pop culture. As I will explain later, this focus on pop culture was also a central point of concern for students as we formed a feminist newspaper at Michigan Tech.

#### *Overview*

The purpose of the dissertation is to examine campus culture from the standpoint of a feminist activist student engaged in producing a feminist publication on campus. It is

also to consider the possibilities for a bottom-up approach to intervening in the sexist and misogynist discourse as seen in institutional and student-produced texts on this campus. I have proposed Dorothy Smith's concept of ruling relations as the methodological orientation to my analysis of the discursive construction of femininity and the masculine/feminine dichotomy in campus texts. Following Smith, I argue that this discourse is part of a larger system of power that serves to organize people's activities and ideas, and at the same time engage their participation in making themselves according to the status quo. Chapter two provides a discussion of Smith's conceptualization of ruling relations, this in the context of academe, femininity, and activism. The goal is to provide a theoretical framework for a study of texts produced on this campus. In chapter three, I analyze textually mediated discourse about women and femininity on campus. I begin with examination of teaching evaluations, and then go on to frame evaluation comments and practices in the context of institutional and student texts, including campus publications and social media. In chapter 4, my analysis turns to feminist texts and feminist activism on campus. In this chapter I ask, "Is the masculine/feminine dichotomy a primarily text-mediated discourse," and "What happens when students attempt to create texts offering alternate or disruptive approaches to this dichotomy?" In other words, can feminist student activism be deployed in a way that changes social relations, or changes how people (namely, students) interact with one another on campus and, just as importantly, how students think about one another? This last question is necessarily framed in the context of institutional practices that students are subject to as students. This question also alludes to the "tempered" feminist radical, questioning to what extent sexism has been institutionalized within academe, this at the

expense of its original activist orientation. I ask these questions about activism because it is what the students (and I) actually did, or what actually happened. But our work was not without its struggles, even among those who were supportive of us. Still, student activism has been successful in bringing change to campus communities and practices. Certainly there are limitations to this approach, and there are other ways to intervene. I will address alternatives and limitations as I conclude in chapter 5. As described in the following chapter, there are reasons for hope and reasons for concern about the plausibility of student-initiated feminist writing to disrupt sexist discourse on campus.

## ***Chapter 2 – Ruling Relations***

### *Introduction*

In this chapter, I provide the theoretical framework for my research project. I begin with a discussion of Dorothy Smith's work in creating an "alternate sociology," (*Everyday* 45-100) where research begins in the lives of people's "everyday/everynight" worlds to create a ground for discovery from inside institutionalized systems of power and objectified knowledge (*Everyday* 88-97). While Smith's work is designed for sociological inquiry, her theorization of institutions, power, and knowledge, particularly her conceptualization of "ruling relations," lends itself to qualitative methods in communication studies and is central to my analysis of student publications. Smith grounds her perspective in Marxist concern with people's actual lives and material realities. Further, she extends this interest in people's actual lives to include thinking as an activity or thinking as "social consciousness" (*Writing* 77-78). In this case, Smith is building the foundation of what will later become her signature mode of inquiry, "institutional ethnography" (*Everyday* 151-78)

In the second portion of this chapter, I will consider Smith's work in the context of feminist theory and the women's movement. My interests here are two: first, to explore her conceptualization of femininity, and second, to consider her discussion of the relationship between women's movement activism, feminism, and academe. Specifically, her discussion of activism, combined with her discussion of texts as a way to investigate social consciousness, provide a unique approach to exploring student publications as feminist activism in the context of what Sally Hacker has described as a military-industrial approach to engineering education (*Pleasure* 8-13).



Throughout this chapter, I employ Smith's language by using the phrase "the women's movement" rather than "feminist movement." Frequently (but not always), she applies feminism/ist when she is writing about theory or academic work on women's oppression or exploitation. She tends to use "women" or "women's" when she is writing about activist work. The distinction points to an evolution in the women's movement, from social activism to academic research. Importantly, Smith does not pose academic feminism and women's movement activism as oppositional, but she suggests that we should consider the historical and political forces that shaped the movement and its institutionalization in the academy. Specifically, she expresses concern about the consequences of doing feminist work that may not be grounded in women's local, embodied and everyday activities.

Smith's engagement with feminist standpoint theory, her initial resistance to postmodernism, her questioning of identity categories in her later work—all of these are tied to her interest in ruling relations as discoverable in women's (and in her later work, peoples') everyday worlds. To be sure, Smith writes a particular version of the history of the women's movement and the development of feminist theory. She lived this history and so her narrative emerges from her experience in a particular location. In this chapter, I contextualize Smith's work within the history of the women's movement and feminist theory by choosing a particular orientation to both.<sup>10</sup> The story I tell will emerge from my particular location, my education, experiences, and motives. Clare Hemmings argues that feminist academics should be careful with the stories we tell about the history of feminist

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<sup>10</sup> Noting, again, that these two entities are not exactly separate or dichotomous. Rather, they are two strands in a shared thread.

theory, about our characterizations of the current moment and our projects for the future. Her study of hundreds of articles from feminist journals reveals authors' tendency to make sweeping generalizations about the type of work being done in a given era. She suggests that these stories tend to overlook the complexity of theorization, creating silences and opening up the door to misappropriations. Certainly "stories matters" and I am aware that the authors I cite and omit, and the affective tenor I employ, will congeal to tell a particular kind of story here (1-27). My references to feminist theory's past will, as much as possible, attend to its complexity in cultural and historical context.

*A sociology for women*

In 1987, Dorothy Smith published *The Everyday World as Problematic*, a critique of sociology proper. As a trained sociologist, Smith realized early in her career that sociological methods and concepts, in fact, the entire disciplinary orientation to the social did not account for a variety of perspectives and experiences, including the everydayness and actualities of most people's lives. Moreover, she argued that sociology operated from men's perspectives; it was men's interests that defined credible research topics, and it was often men's experiences that were deemed appropriate for social scientific investigation. Smith discovered this problem in the context of her life where, as a single working mother, her sociological toolkit provided no way to account for the actualities of her life outside the public sphere. She experienced a "fault line" between her "doings" as an academic and her doings as a mother at home. At the same time, Smith was engaged with the burgeoning women's movement during the 1960s and 70s and drew on a feminist articulation of women's systematic exclusion from the public sphere and "from the making of ideology, of knowledge, and of culture." If women have had limited

participation in the shaping and making of the public sphere and its components, then a sociological study of these locations fails to understand the social as women experience it. Further, under this construct, sociology fails to understand a significant portion of social life. The goal here is not to find “the truth,” but to give an account of embodied knowing of how to do in a particular context. For this reason, Smith created an alternative approach to sociological inquiry, calling it “a sociology for women.” Research from this orientation retrieves women’s knowing and experiences from invisibility and allows for a richer understanding of the social in given contexts. Further, it reveals the way that women’s work on the particularities of life—the business of food and cleaning and emotional care—make possible the systems of power that oppress them. Her assertion is that this approach to research can provide a starting point for discoveries that could not be made otherwise.

*Relations of ruling: a definition*

Smith followed this line of inquiry, that is, a sociology for women, in tandem with another research interest—what she calls “relations of ruling.” In this case, she is referring to “that total complex of activities, differentiated into many spheres, by which our kind of society is ruled, managed, and administered” (*Conceptual* 14). She explains that there is no single ruler or point from which ruling takes places. But there are activities and discourses and texts that governments, businesses, and educational institutions use to participate in and coordinate ruling. Specifically, Smith indicts sociology as a creator and purveyor of “objectified knowledge,” arguing that it is removed from the local, or from people’s actual everyday activities. Further, she argues that sociologists participate in ruling by designing research projects from a top-down

perspective (*Conceptual* 19). By her account, researchers are trained to go out into the field with a limited set of concepts in hand and apply them to research sites appropriate to the field and its disciplinary boundaries. These concepts, she argues, are “administratively” relevant to those who hold power—to corporations interested in turning profits, to governments and disciplines interested in maintaining the status quo—but they are not relevant to people in the actualities of their everyday lives. At the same time, her interest is in studying people’s everyday lives to see how they engage in, or are “hooked in,” to ruling relations. This engagement, according to Smith, is typically by way of texts—forms, applications, reports and so on. These texts order our activities as much as they mediate our social relations and our personal identities. Texts transmit values and ideologies that we affirm as we interact with them at work, at play, and at home. Research that begins in people’s everyday lives provides an insiders’ view to knowledge-production and systems of power. At base, Smith argues that research should be useful for the people in their everyday lives; it should give voice and visibility to their actual, embodied experience; and it should be useful for making a more just world. For example, “third world” feminists like Chandra Mohanty have taken up the concept of ruling relations as a way to investigate the intersectionality of oppressions. Mohanty argues that Smith’s concept avoids the typically singular constructions of race, sex, and class. Instead, the relations of ruling provide a way to map the interconnectedness of these issues. Also, it provides a way to see these systems as processes, not as “frozen” social indicators (56-58).

Smith’s concern is that sociology creates concepts that have been detached or dislocated from actual people in sites of research. Further, this kind of knowledge is

written up and transferred in texts. It provides a discourse—a body of language and symbols—that creates a view of the world and a way of seeing the world based on concepts about society and social relations instead of actual accounts of the social (*Everyday* 2-3). Texts then become conduits for transferring power and maintaining structures of authority—this, without any one entity making explicit claims to power or knowledge. According to Smith, the system is everywhere in our society, and everyone participates in it, even feminists with the best intentions. In creating a sociology for women, Smith is endeavoring to find her way out of that participation. At the same time, as an academic, she wonders if her escape is possible. That is, does academic feminism necessarily participate in these relations of ruling? I explore this question later in the chapter.

#### *Feminist standpoint theory and women's standpoint*

Smith was not alone in her proposal to begin research in the lives of women's everyday experience. Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, Nancy Hartsock, Patricia Hill Collins, and Hilary Rose are some who also played a significant role in this effort. Feminist theorists drew on Hegel's theory of relations between the master and the slave, which argued that the slave would be more motivated than the master to develop an understanding of reality. Marx and Engels used this concept to develop theories of social relations in economic systems ("Harding Response" 26), and Marxist feminists applied these concepts to social relations in gender systems. Feminist standpoint theorists argue that women are oppressed under patriarchy and as such, have more objective views of the relations of power in society. Their knowledge about these relations is not "the truth" in any finalized way, but it provides a less partial account of how oppressive power regimes

work, about how knowledge is produced (and subjugated), and how these forces play out in the actual lives of people. Harding described this approach as “strong objectivity.” By Harding’s account, strong objectivity is a more rigorous application of empiricism’s rules of objectivity. This concept arises out of feminist empiricists’ critique that empiricism is fundamentally flawed because it does not adhere to its own standards of non-bias.

Significant research suggests that science has been partial in ways that are sexist, racist, ethnocentric, classist and homophobic (Gould, 1981; Harding, 1986; Haraway, 1990; Fox Keller, 1996). Typically, the understanding is that scientific research must proceed in a way that is strictly impartial and without bias. Further, the problem with standpoint theory, from an empiricist’s perspective, is that knowledge can’t be produced in specific social locations. Rather, this kind of knowing might best be classified as experience or worse, as opinion. The traditional argument is that knowledge inheres beyond a social location; it transcends “original ties to local, historical interests, values, and agendas” (“Rethinking Standpoint” 50). More realistically, however, Donna Haraway argues that knowledge must be “situated” and, to be strictly objective, it cannot pretend at the possibility of transcendence. She writes, “So, not so perversely, objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment, and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility. The move is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision” (190).

Haraway writes her critique in the midst of postmodernist critiques of foundational premises in science and the world more broadly, including the possibilities for truth, describing reality, and abiding in meta-narratives. While feminist researchers continue to find FST useful in their work, it came under some critique with the

emergence of postmodern feminism. In Susan Hekman's controversial article, "Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited," she raises these critiques, including accusations of essentialism, the difficulty of using individual experience as a claim to truth, and the instability of identity categories that delineate sex, gender, race, and so on. I make note of Hekman's article because of the questions she poses and because the article drew heavy criticism from Smith, Harding, Collins, and Hartsock. Each theorist provided a response to Hekman's critiques of FST in different ways, but all refute her assertion that it was meant to provide a way to verify the truth of women's oppression. Smith argues that truth is not at issue and that the need to verify claims as true harkens back to the "law of the father" in academic theory and research ("Smith Response" 393). Further, she points out that she developed *women's* standpoint, which is different from FST in several respects. The primary difference lies in the fact that women's standpoint is not a theory. It is, as Smith says, like an arrow pointing to a map that says, "you are here" (393). The theory, for Smith, emerges in her conceptualization of ruling relations—of how ruling relations "rule," and of how they are revealed from women's standpoint. Even then, relations of ruling, for Smith, are discoverable in the specific "here" of the everyday and its texts.

#### *Women, a category*

Still, postmodern and poststructural conceptualizations of identity created a discursive problem for anyone working with "women" as a category or social group. While not alone in this endeavor, Judith Butler (1990) is well known for arguing that gender and sex are socially constructed, discursive practices that necessarily destabilize identity and complicate the possibility to make claims based on experience. Postpositive

realist and third world feminists like Paula Moya and Mohanty respectively, argue that the problem with postmodernist feminism is that it argues away “woman” as a stable category from which to make political arguments. Activism aimed at winning rights and preventing oppression of those who identify, or are identified, as women, is impossible if women don’t discursively or actually exist. Smith also (initially) rails against postmodernism because it questions the relevance and possibility of speaking from experience, or of using experience as a foundation for knowing (*Writing* 24). Elizabeth Flynn argues, however, that Butler’s work doesn’t reject identities as much as it critiques the modernist tenets from which concepts like identity emerged. In Flynn’s view, Butler is trying “to determine what feminist politics might mean once we move beyond the categories of identity that have constrained them” (Flynn 39).<sup>11</sup> Still, Moya, Mohanty, and Smith are interested in the here and now. Right now we have—and some of us identify as—women. Mohanty argues that identity is critical to social justice movements because it serves as “a source of knowledge and a basis for progressive mobilization” (6). She advocates FST as an orientation to research, suggesting not only that we begin in the lives of women, but also that we take a “transnational, anticapitalist” approach to research projects. The issue is not that we determine who is most oppressed to find the “least partial” view of the world, but that we admit the biases of feminism as it emerged from the so-called Western world. In addition, according to Moya, “an individual’s understanding of herself and the world will be mediated, more or less accurately, through her cultural identity” (43). Moya argues, for example, that her identity as a “Chicana”

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<sup>11</sup> A survey of Butler’s more recent work supports the assertion that she is deeply interested in making political argument to address injustice in locations across the globe.



may actually be “truer” than her identity as Mexican American. To identify as Chicana is to be politically aware of one’s social location—it is to be aware of the politics of the border and to occupy a position in that contested terrain (42). Alternatively, to identify as Mexican-American is to position oneself in the context of others like Italian-American or Irish-American and so on.

Categories matter. For Smith, women exist. Her thinking about women, gender, and the gender dichotomy evolved over the course of her career. Her early work depends upon the dichotomous construction of men and women. But an account of the gendered nature of work in the public and private spheres reveals her concern for this issue, as she seeks to understand origins of, or reasons for, the gender dichotomy. For example, Smith draws on Marx’s concept of alienation to show how women are oppressed by the dichotomous construction of gendered work after the introduction of the public and private sphere. She explains that women’s adroitness in “mediating the world of concrete particulars so that men do not have to become engaged with ... that world” serves to strengthen the regime that subordinates them. At the same time, it strengthens “[t]he dichotomy between the two worlds organized on the basis of gender.” The result is both an estrangement between worlds and consciousness and also a “silencing” of women (*Conceptual Practices* 19). Indeed, history shows that women have been peripheral in the public sphere, and they occupy the pages of history books as aspersions or anomalous angels. Feminist historians and scholars from a variety of fields have shown that women played a greater role in the development of nearly everything that we have been led to believe. For example, Margaret E. Layne’s edited collection on the history of women in engineering chronicles the work of Emily Roebling, who supervised the construction of

the Brooklyn Bridge (123-30), and Lillian Gilbreth, whose book *The Psychology of Management*, was revolutionary for studies in industrial engineering (109-17). This kind of research is useful because it can disrupt the “gendered organization of subjectivity” that Smith describes above. Still, feminist historian Joan Wallach Scott argues that much of this recovery work does not pursue a critical line of inquiry. That is, how are men and women discursively constructed in a given historical context? Scott’s concern is with posing “gender” as a question and as an orientation to historical research. Her argument is “that ‘men’ and ‘women’ are historically variable categories,” (Fantasy xii) and posing the question of gender in historical context serves as a way to challenge the “status quo” (Fantasy 4). The overarching argument of the collection I mentioned above, on the history of women in engineering, is, “See? Women can be engineers, too.” Considerations of how we came to understand engineering as masculine, for example, are not a part of the collection. Notably, Sally Hacker’s work does examine the how of gender in the context of engineering histories. Moreover, her work draws a relationship between technology and eroticism, arguing that these concepts/practices “arise from similar wellsprings of pleasure learned in cultural context” (*Hard Way* 205). While technology is gendered masculine, and eroticism is gendered feminine, Hacker shows parallels between the two and shows how both continue to be enmeshed in similar cultural practices and contexts. Her work, in sum, is disruptive of the gender dichotomy in thought-provoking ways.

#### *The feminine as discursive*

Smith also finds possibility in approaching gender as discursively constructed. She writes that the category “women” serves as a concept, “not so much an organizer of

experience as an opening in a discursive fabric through which a range of experience hitherto denied, repressed, subordinated, and absent to and lacking language, can break out” (*Conceptual* 12). Central to her inquiry is an examination of the relationship between ruling relations, capitalism, and femininity. Again drawing on Marx, Smith describes femininity as an effect of social relations, although she extends her analysis beyond “the relations and organizations of the economy” (*Texts* 160). Smith argues that femininity, as a homogenizing concept descriptive of the category “women,” is distributed in popular texts like novels, magazines, and other forms of media. Women are discursively constructed by their participation with these texts, which is to say that women are not passively constructed. Rather, “they create themselves” (161). At the same time, their bodies become texts that others can decode according to the popular discourse on femininity. Through a series of textual analyses, including magazine articles and romance novels, Smith illustrates this process. For example, in analyzing an excerpt from a popular novel, she describes how the female character is dressed – her aim is to show that the character participates in making herself into a text coded as feminine by selecting attire that is soft, muted in color, is semi-transparent or has blurred edges. The reader understands the character’s actions, but also applies an understanding that the character does not intend, which is that this version of femininity or feminine attire is often read as an invitation to sexual engagement (180). Women participate with these texts to make their bodies legible as *woman* in their cultural context.

Smith also addresses the economic component of femininity, giving consideration to women’s engagement with fashion and cosmetics (199-204). By some estimations, Smith’s analysis in this chapter is not groundbreaking (Pringle 108). Many feminists have

engaged these topics, albeit from different orientations or fields of study. One interesting aspect of the analysis is her discussion of a female who resists gender norms. As much as this resistance marks a break in organizing the homogenizing force of feminine discourse, it also soon becomes incorporated into the discourse itself. That is, being a female who rejects feminine attire or make-up becomes a type, becomes a part of the discourse – in part because the market readily appropriates it. Nonetheless, Smith’s interest is in revealing that femininity is always being constructed in social relations, and those social relations are mediated by texts and the discourse they carry. Gender is defined with/in texts and we define ourselves as gendered by way of our participation with them. Marketing texts, among others, create desire to participate, and as a result, conform to current (but ever-changing) gender norms.

*But gender is different*

Much later in her career, in 2009, Smith revisits the concept of gender as a category for sociological inquiry. In a brief comment published in *Gender and Society*, she argues that the concept of “difference” is not sufficient to contain the categories of race, sex, and class. She makes this argument against claims that race, sex, and class-based oppressions are similar in that the root of oppression lies in the fact of “difference” or being different from what is considered socially or culturally normal. In American culture, for example, some have argued that white, middle-class, able-bodied, young, heterosexual men are “normal.” When a body or bodily experience deviates from that form, then it is marked as different, and may be subject to oppression. Still, many argue (as Smith and Scott have done with gender) that difference is discursively constructed. Smith points to books like West and Fenstermaker’s *Doing Gender, Doing Difference:*

*Inequality, Power, and Institutional Change*, which unites race, sex, and class under the umbrella term “difference.” Her argument is that these forms of difference are *different* from one another as far as how they operate in social relations.

Further, she argues that while gender is discursive, there is a biological component contained in the fact of birth and childcare that should not be ignored. She takes pains to distinguish her argument from biological determinism reminding us that her interest is in the *actual* of people’s lives. She cites her actual experience of childbirth and nursing as an experience of difference that is not comparable to difference due to race or class. She admits that her interest in using the term and category *gender*, early in her career, was to push the question of biology out of the conversation. But if feminist researchers ignore this issue, (what Smith calls our “human species being of doing gender”) we risk preserving forms of sexist oppression because “we have no way of recognizing just how biology enters into the relations among men, women and children” (“Categories” 76-77). Her claim here is definitive,

But whatever the mediating levels of organization, any inequality between women and men must always, I suggest, be tied in some way or another to the presence, care, and control of children (a curious omission from the concepts of gender and gender difference). (78)

Notably, she also draws distinctions between race-based oppression, which she describes as ideological, and class-based oppression, which in her estimation, has increased in recent decades. Still, she affirms the need to understand oppressions intersectionally, consistent with my discussion below. Taken in sum, her proposal affirms the notion that feminism, and feminist research, is not just about *women* and the social forces that

construct them. The biological component is relevant and the fact of other forms of oppression is relevant, but neither is causal (of behavior or identity) in any way that is universal or predictable.

*Feminist interventions/interventions in feminism*

Not surprisingly then, Smith revises her “sociology for women” after critiques that the women’s movement was making claims on behalf of all women, assuming that all women’s experiences were similar and shared.<sup>12</sup> Lesbian and black feminists were among the first to describe this problem and call for attention to the diversity of women’s social locations and experiences (or call for forming their own movements, as was the case with womanism and lesbian separatism). Black women writers of the “Combahee River Collective Statement,” for example, put forth in their opening paragraphs that “the major systems of oppression are interlocking” (Schneir 177). This was in 1977. More than a decade later, Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” in her critique of antiracist politics and feminist theory. In her work, Crenshaw describes how antidiscrimination law operates along a “single axis,” meaning that it does not consider the way that some people, black women for example, experience multiple forms of oppressions simultaneously. Further, she argues that this experience is wholly different from the experience of sexism or racism singly. Thus, current theories of racism and sexism lack a full consideration of those affected (57-60). In her later work, Smith also expands her research to consider multiple systems of oppression. Toward this end, she reframes her alternative sociology as “a sociology for people,” with the understanding

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<sup>12</sup> As mentioned earlier, feminist standpoint theory came under similar criticism (Hartsock, 1983).

that many groups of people, not exclusively women, are marginalized and overlooked by traditional research agendas.

*Institutional Ethnography: a sociology for people*

The research in this dissertation is guided by the tenets of institutional ethnography. What is critical for this appropriation is the focus on the textuality of cultural experience and the evidence of ruling relations that can be gained from a situated perspective on texts and their usage. So while this study does not engage in ethnography per se, it does describe landmarks and outlines of a textually mediated terrain that constitutes campus culture at Michigan Tech. For Smith, institutional ethnography is not a method, and this fact is important because the traditional social scientific tenets of “method” conflict with the spirit and ambition of Smith’s research interests. While her book, *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People*, contains a glossary of terms as uniquely applied in institutional ethnographic study, she rejects the idea that this orientation has “a group of insiders who know how to talk and write it” (*A Sociology* 1). Institutional ethnography is about discovery, and not in the theoretical sense. Smith means to discover the actual, everyday world and the “knowledge work” people do in their worlds. She means to discover “how things work,” and her use of the term “things” means to imply the openness of possibility (*Institutional Ethnography as Practice* 1-2). As with her conceptualization of ruling relations, texts are centrally important to institutional ethnography. She argues that texts have a “thereness” that is essential to study of the actual world, particularly because texts are organizers of everyday activities. Texts are active, but people must activate them. By engaging with the text, you are activating the “social” that’s been embedded in it (subjectivities, subconsciousnesses),

and at the same time your activities are coordinated by, with, and beyond the text itself (*A Sociology* 65).<sup>13</sup> Further, this approach is meant to reveal how the everyday world is “hooked” into relations of power and knowledge production. It is a way to describe the embeddedness of our “doings” in ruling relations (*A Sociology* 39-40).

*The women’s movement, activism, and academic feminist*

I posed the question earlier of whether or not academic feminism participates in ruling relations by way of its institutionalization as a discipline in the academy. Many feminist scholars have addressed this issue (Hemmings, 2011; hooks, 2000; Messer-Davidow, 2002; Mohanty, 2003; Orr, Braithwaite, and Lichtenstein, 2011; Scott, 2008). The arguments are various, and most explore the fact that the women’s movement, which was meant to transform institutions like the academy, had to make itself in the image of its oppressor – or perhaps better to say, use the “master’s tools” (Lorde 112). Not surprisingly, some radical and third world feminists struggle against this approach, arguing that feminism, academic feminism in particular, has lost its way. Mohanty has identified three concerns related to feminism as it has evolved in the United States. One is what she describes as “a kind of careerist academic feminism;” the second is that academic feminists are too concerned with securing women’s financial equality to men; and third, that postmodernism has made identity politics “either naïve or irrelevant.” In all three cases, she argues that we seem to have lost the original, local, and activist

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<sup>13</sup> Notably, and as previously mentioned, Smith draws much of her theorization from Marx, but often departs from his work by pointing out that his world was not mediated by texts in the way that ours is today. She argues that this shift is significant and has dramatically changed the way that knowledge is produced, power is circulated, and social relations are constituted and engaged (*Texts* 160-161).



impetus to do feminist work (6). Smith struggles with this issue and readily admits that academic feminists “are hooked into the ruling relations—professions, public service, political life, scholarly careers, and so on.” She argues that these activities force scholars to detach from the world of activism outside the academy, that is, from “independent sources of resistance” (*Writing* 21). Still, she argues that the research that’s taken place in feminist studies have given women a voice (or voices). Women’s lives and experiences are no longer invisible and women have benefited from this research in significant ways, for example, legal protections for women’s rights—right to vote, right to employment, right to education, right to our children, right to control our own bodies; protections against sexual harassment, abuse, and violence. To say that the gains are significant is to dramatically understate the success of the women’s movement and feminist research. Feminist activism and research have brought significant changes in policy and practice, which are written into mission statements and legal documents and public policies. All of which raises the question, as much as it has resisted ruling relations, must feminism also participate in ruling? Or can we find another frame for social organization?

Still, Smith has hope for the academy because she sees in it “the hidden radicalism of the Enlightenment.” She believes teaching is powerful, as is research meant to find “stored knowledges” that would not be discovered otherwise (*Writing* 27). Many researchers who employ ethnographic methods operate in an activist orientation to their projects, particularly feminist or social justice-oriented ethnographers. The work that Patti Lather and Chris Smithies (1997) did with HIV support groups is an excellent example of ethnography guided by feminist theories. Studies that employ an institutional ethnographic approach often have an activist orientation, for example, Alex Wilson and

Ellen Pence's study, "US Legal Interventions in the Lives of Battered Women: An Indigenous Assessment." This study finds significant failings in the US legal system in this context and was able to make recommendations for improvement (*Institutional Ethnography as Practice* 199-225). Certainly Smith's interest is in doing research that is grounded in people's actual lives and is useful to them. Institutional ethnography, then, is a way of keeping activism in academic feminism. It keeps feminist research grounded in a literal way and it can provide a way to connect with local women to better understand social organization and relations of ruling in their communities.

#### *Ruling relations at Michigan Tech?*

My aim then, is to examine ruling relations in the context of the discursive construction of femininity and the masculine/feminine dichotomy within the Michigan Tech community. This kind of study calls for an examination of texts produced within the Michigan Tech community. Thus, acknowledging that ruling relations operate from multiple and diverse sources, I will conduct a discursive analysis of teaching evaluations, pages from the Michigan Tech website, student-run publications, and student comments in social media. My variation from Smith's approach is that the student writing I examine does not exist on forms generated by Michigan Tech, but on digital texts generated by various designers of social media. Earlier I cited Smith's assertion that texts organize social life in a way that is unique to our time, or the time period following the invention of the printing press. Certainly Smith's conceptualization becomes even more profound at this moment in history when, for many of us, most of our social relations are now textual. Text messages, instant photos, social media forums, and email—these are not innocent forms. Digital technology is coded as masculine in our culture and sexism remains a

significant problem in this space (Miller). The sexist comments that pre-social-media students wrote on desks and bathroom walls now appear in the *everywhere and all the time* of digital culture. Students, male and female alike, engage with digital texts daily, sometimes nearly every minute of the day, and their comments circulate as texts in a community of readers, not the unlike newspaper advertisements, novels, and television programs that Smith includes in her analysis of femininity. My interest is in understanding why sexism persists on this campus, despite significant efforts to counter it.

### **Chapter 3 - Ceiling Makers**

"These are some of the forms in which silencing and exclusion of women have been practiced. Some have arisen inadvertently as a concomitant of women's location in the world; some have been a process of active repression or strong social disapproval of the exercise by women of a role of intellectual or political leadership; others have been the product of an organizational process. It is this last form of exclusion I shall focus on now, for in our society we see less of the rough stuff (though do not assume that it is not there) and more of a steady institutional process, equally effective and much less visible in its exclusionary force" (Dorothy Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic* 25).

#### *Introduction*

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the institutionally embedded, textual and contextual discourses to which student-initiated feminist publications at Michigan Tech have provided counterpoint. Certainly sexism is a problem on campuses across the United States, but the situation at Michigan Tech is different from most because of its gender demographic and its large proportion of engineering students. Therefore, my analysis is shaped by feminist theories of gender, drawing on Michael Kimmel's masculinity studies (2008, 2010, 2013), Judith Butler and J. Halberstam's work on gender performativity, studies of engineering education following Sally Hacker (1989, 1990), and Angela McRobbie's (2004) conceptualization of postfeminism. My underlying theoretical framework is Dorothy Smith's work on femininity and the capitalist function of the gender dichotomy; accordingly, I consider the economic consequences of Michigan Tech's gendered and sexist campus culture. Smith's study of ruling relations and femininity is centrally concerned with capitalist economy as far as how its power is distributed and enforced in texts. She writes, "The discursive relations of femininity are vested in texts designed for and distributed on a mass market, and the production and distribution of those texts coordinates, differentiates, and regulates the market and

production of clothes, cosmetics, etc." Her interest is in "grasping the relationship between aspects of masculine domination and capitalism as specific relations organizing and organized by the local practices of women and men as they participate in the discourses of femininity and masculinity" (*Texts* 208). I am proposing that textually-mediated discourse related to femininity and the gender dichotomy, including marketing documents, social media, and student publications at Michigan Tech are implicated in an economic capacity in that they "inscribe" femininity literally as economically worth less than masculinity. This creates an economic disincentive to embrace femininity in campus culture and engineering education. Those people who enact femininity or those who embrace or engage feminine actions or artifacts as aspects of their identities and activities are understood to be worth less.<sup>14</sup> This phenomenon affects students and teachers alike, in campus life. For students, the fact of being a woman or exhibiting stereotypically feminine characteristics is often held against them when working on group assignments. I will address this issue below. Femininity or being a woman, is also a negative factor on evaluative forms used for purposes of promotion or finding a new job.<sup>15</sup> Like most universities, Michigan Tech includes student teaching evaluations in their decisions for tenure and promotion, even though it's well know that women tend to receive lower evaluative scores than their male colleagues. I begin my analysis by discussing in more detail the normative and generalized nature of teacher evaluation forms below.

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<sup>14</sup> The wage gap, where women continue to receive unequal pay for equal work (in spite of the Equal Pay Act of 1963, prohibiting wage discrimination on the basis of gender) and where women and men are penalized for taking time to care for children, is one result of this phenomenon.

<sup>15</sup> Michigan Tech has started to address this problem by providing training on implicit bias for new faculty hires.

### *Sexist Teaching Evaluations*

Student teaching evaluations have been in place in US colleges for nearly 100 years. Interestingly, they were not widely implemented until 1960s student activists called for a means to voice their concerns about their education (Calkins and Micari 10). Unfortunately, multiple research studies suggest that students' evaluations are not indicative of instructor quality or student learning (Stark and Freishtat, 2014; Braga, Paccagnella and Pellizzari, 2014). Moreover, several studies show that evaluations are biased in a way that puts female instructors at a disadvantage when applying for tenure or for tenure-track employment (Basow, 2000; Anderson and Miller, 1997; MacNell, Driscoll and Hunt, 2014). My own teaching evaluations, as described briefly in chapter 1, are indicative of the problem. Despite the fact that my scores are generally high, and that I recently won a teaching award, negative students' comments are common—and they often reference my gender or gender stereotypes. For example, one student remarked, "Don't be such a Debbie Downer." Another wrote, "You should probably teach kindergarten." In addition to the obnoxious comments, students also tend to provide female instructors lower scores than male instructors-- even in a study where male and female instructors assigned the same work, engaged with students in the same way, and provided similar feedback (MacNell, Driscoll and Hunt, 2014). Male students especially, are likely to rate female instructors lower than male instructors. Thus, as a female graduate teaching instructor at a school where three-quarters of the students are male, even if I am an exceptional teacher, I am at a distinct disadvantage when employers ask to see my evaluations.

Returning to Smith's conceptualization of ruling relations, the real problem with teaching evaluations is that they obscure the knowledge and actual activities of teachers and students by generating an averaged and quantified account of the actual and individual teaching and learning that takes place in a college course. A more accurate approach to assessing student learning would be a qualitative study of student experience, including ethnographic accounts of teaching and learning in the classroom and beyond. This is not practical, but it is a better approach if our goal is to understand if, how, and what students are learning.<sup>16</sup> Conversations between students and teachers about their progress in the course are also beneficial in providing a view of how students are learning and responding to course material and teaching strategies. Instead, teachers and students engage with the evaluation form separately, students sharing their comments and ratings anonymously, and teachers encountering this information after the course has ended. The institutional text mediates the student-teacher relationship and quantifies and disembodies the experience. Scholars of education, from Plato to Paulo Freire to bell hooks, have written about education as having to do with love, liberation or freedom, respectively. Today, the dominant narrative about education is a story of its economic value and the value that students can bring to corporations and the global market. College is so expensive, very few students can "afford" to go to school for the love of learning, self-actualization, or the pursuit of social justice.

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<sup>16</sup> However, in one way at least, the student teaching evaluation score is a genius way to quantify the ubiquitous yet ineluctable operations of sexism. For example, a recent study shows that ratings for male professors were higher than the rating for female professors, sometimes by .6 points on a five-point scale. Importantly, in this study, male and female professors administered the same assignments and engaged with the students in the same way.

From Michigan Tech's perspective, the purpose of education is to fit students into high-paying jobs in industry. A 2011 headline from Michigan Tech News makes the university's objective very clear, "Education in Tune with Industry Raises Michigan Tech's Job Placement Rate to Nearly 95 Percent" (Donovan). The current placement rate for undergraduates stands at 96 percent and "Michigan Tech graduates have the tenth-highest starting salaries in the country among public universities, according to payscale.com" ("Careers"). Students at Michigan Tech work very hard in school for these high-paying job placements. Recently, however, when I raised the issue of the wage gap in my classes, students are often quick to assert that female engineers are more highly sought after than males at career fairs, and they are sometimes offered higher starting salaries. Students use this anecdotal evidence to argue that males are being oppressed. This is a curious assertion to make at a school where 80% of the engineering students are male -- and in the context of professional engineering where almost half of all graduated female engineering majors leave the profession due to a hostile work environment (Fleur). Still, some male students (and even some females) are angry at what they perceived to be a great injustice. This anger is an important part of the campus climate at Michigan Tech and it is manifest in textually-mediated discourse that circulates on campus.

#### *Angry white male students*

Sociologist Michael Kimmel has devoted most of his career to the study of masculinity in American culture. His work traces the evolution of masculinity in the context of the feminist revolution, and increasingly, he tries to uncover reasons for a seeming rise in frustration and anger that many American men are beginning to express



on social media and in other public forums. In his work, he has studied male social movements in the US, including the evangelical Christian men's group, Promise Keepers (*Misframing* 163-172), and the openly misogynist men's rights movement (*Angry* 99-134).<sup>17</sup> He also writes about school shootings in the context of male entitlement (*Misframing* 131-142), and examines portrayals of men in television and film (*Misframing* 38-49). Notably, Kimmel is an avowed feminist and has written, for example, about the history of feminist men in the United States. He has also written articles in tandem with *Ms. Magazine* founder Gloria Steinem, and is a regular voice in the debate about sexual assault on college campuses. Kimmel practices an applied feminism: he is concerned with how we can reshape social practices in ways that address sexism and strife between men and women. One of his recent articles from *Time* magazine proposes, for example, that sororities take over the hosting of parties on college campuses, instead of fraternities. Frat parties, in his view, should be banned and frats should be prohibited from offering alcohol. A drawback of this proposal, as Kimmel notes, is that this approach doesn't intervene in rape culture, and it puts the responsibility

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<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, Kimmel provides a brief history of the men's rights movement in *Angry White Men*. Here he traces the movement's origin to a call for men's liberation from the traditional "male sex role." Men's liberation ran in tandem with the women's liberation movement, namely during the early 1970s. Proponents argued that social norms had men "exiled from the home, turned into soulless robotic workers, in harness to a masculine mystique, so that their only capacity for nurturing was through their wallets" (103). Kimmel argues that many men's libbers quickly "departed" when women's libbers moved from critique of traditional sex roles to "critique of actual behaviors done by actual men," including "rape, sexual harassment, and domestic violence" (104). Still, some remaining advocates went on to argue that men were oppressed and discriminated against—they identified the male obligation to register for the draft at age 18 as evidence, for example. This movement has become increasingly "toxic" in its description of the so-called "harm" feminism has done to men, including the creation of double standards, inequity in education, public services, and legal rights, and negative portrayals of men in the media (122-23).

of sexual assault prevention primarily on the shoulders of sorority sisters ("Ban Frat Parties"). Also, with Steinem, he has been an advocate of the "yes means yes" campaign on college campuses, arguing that "yes" or the giving and grant of consent is erotic and not prohibitive of sexual expression or restrictive to sexual encounters, as many opponents of the policy have argued (Kimmel and Steinem).

Still, to call Kimmel a "feminist" may be misleading given that his focus is primarily on men; many have called him a leading figure in the emerging field of "men's studies."<sup>18</sup> Notably, Kimmel ties masculinity to men and does not significantly consider what some have termed "female masculinity" (Halberstam 1-45) or the ways women or others who do not identify as male express or embrace masculinity. His work seems to rest on the assumption that the gender dichotomy can and should exist, but that we need to offer different narratives for learning how to be a "man," and/or reconceptualize what counts as masculinity in American culture. Toward this work, Kimmel directs his work toward the following questions, "What does it mean to be an American male? How do men learn how to be men? What is masculinity today and how (and why) has it evolved over time?" The answers to these questions are critically relevant to the gender dichotomy as constructed in popular culture and, for my purposes, as purveyed in texts and in social practices on Michigan Tech's campus. In *Guyland*, for example, Kimmel describes how young males police one another to adhere to standards of masculinity, which include the objectification of women and glorification of violent sex. In order to be a "guy," one also has to hide or reject emotions, eschew personal responsibility for relational management, and hold interpersonal commitments only to "the guys" (1-23).

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<sup>18</sup> Perhaps it is more accurate to say he supports or advocates feminism.

His most recent work, however, traces an increasing sense of anger and frustration among American men, something he calls "aggrieved entitlement" (*Angry* 18-21, *Misframing* 10). Aggrieved entitlement emerges out of what Kimmel calls the greatest affirmative action program ever known -- "world history" (*Angry* 8). His point is that white, middle- and upper-class men have, for most of history, created systems that were to their own advantage, built on the backs of women, minorities, and low-income men. The American dream, as this narrative was expounded after World War II, is that if men work hard they'll be rewarded with a good job, a nice family, and a generally successful life. Fortunately, the civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s and 70s initiated significant changes in education and political policy that allowed women, minorities and low-income men to go to school and compete in the job market against middle- and upper-class men. The dream was not usurped--the "old boys club" still exists. And significant inequity still exists -- the numbers of women and minorities in politics and corporate positions of power are still very low. Nonetheless, white men of a certain class are no longer guaranteed the jobs (or the lifestyle) they've been taught to believe they deserve. As noted above, this kind of anger is visible among some Michigan Tech students, where some white male students will complain about the inequity of policies or programs meant to bring more women to campus. For example, in Fall 2013, *Michigan Tech News* featured a story about our feminist newspaper, *Beyond the Glass Ceiling*. Writer Kevin Hodur focused the article on how the paper might help bring gender balance to campus life. In response to the article, a student left the following comment on the website:

I feel that women should get the same opportunities as (sic) men, but shouldn't (sic) that do vice versa? I say this because my sister applied to tech, and she received more aid than I (sic) did, and when she didn't (sic) reply they offered her even MORE aid. She had a lower gpa and a lower ACT score than I. Is that not extremely biased?? (Andrew)

Similar examples from Michigan Tech students appear more than daily on the social media app Yik Yak.<sup>19</sup> On Yik Yak, users within a shared 10-mile radius can anonymously post text and images in a continuous thread. Posts are upvoted or downvoted for popularity. Comments receiving five downvotes will disappear from the discussion thread—so users regulate the discourse, and unpopular perspectives are quickly disappeared. Importantly, no comments on Yik Yak are permanent. Also, each user receives a unique icon that serves as their identity in Yik Yak conversations, such as an acorn or a sailboat. Over the course of one week in October 2015, I took screenshots of the discussion thread and recorded all comments related to gender, sexuality, race, and politics.<sup>20</sup> One particularly popular post included the following comic from "AntiFem

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<sup>19</sup> There is no guarantee that these comments are made by actual Michigan Tech students, although many Yik Yak posters and social media commentators cited in this chapter identify themselves as Michigan Tech students in their texts. Still, as one Yik Yak user, a red acorn, claims: "All women on the internet are men. Rule #29" < 12 > (13 Oct. 2015, 1:20 p.m.). This skeptical comment is worth noting because it is a reminder that digital and actual identities are not always congruent. Also, as I describe in the pages below, the comment is indicative of the fact that drag performance remains an area of interest (for reasons I cannot entirely explain) for many Michigan Tech students.

<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, because Yik Yak comments appear and disappear so quickly, there is no way for me to quantify the number of comments, or the percentage of comments, that fall into sexist, racist, or homophobic categories. The best I can say is that this kind of commentary is routine.

Comics."<sup>21</sup> The comic features three panels. In the first panel are three female college students faced with the decision of signing up for a major in “STEM Fields” or for a major in “Gender Studies.” A male student is featured behind the sign-up both for STEM, and a female student is featured behind the sign-up booth for gender studies. In the second panel, all three women sign up for gender studies, and the male STEM student is pictured scratching his head. In the third panel, the three female students are holding signs of protest, reading “More women in STEM,” “Science is sexist,” and “STEM is a boys club!” The male student is pictured holding both hands up a shoulder level in a gesture suggesting, “I don’t get it.” The caption for the comic reads, “The gender disparity in STEM fields explained.”

This comic received more than 50 upvotes and was the subject of nineteen comments over the course of five hours, which is a fairly high number (most comments receive a couple upvotes, if any). The first portion of the debate proceeded as follows:

Blue Hockey Mask – “It’s funny because it’s true!” < 19 upvotes >

Black Turkey Hand – “AntiFem Comics’. Don’t get baited.” < 6 >

OP (Original Poster) -- “That’s a bunch of malarkey though. STEM fields want women, and so they are easier to get into if you are a woman. The fact is that women aren’t going into STEM is because of their own choices.” < 16 >

Black Turkey Hand -- “I haven’t met one female here at Tech that wasn’t studying for a STEM degree. I’m sure they exist but not in huge numbers.” < 8 >

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<sup>21</sup> This is a twitter feed with nearly 6,800 followers, self-described as “anti feminist, pro-women, original content plus classic cartoons that point out the absurd and hypocritical.”

OP -- "I have met a few, but not too many. But this is a tech school, so that proportion matches up anyways. What is your point?" < 9 >

Black Turkey Hand -- "The gender studies booth that gets all the girls doesn't exist at Tech, which is the audience of this yak." < 7 >

OP -- "The audience of this yak are citizens of a larger population, who are constantly told that women aren't going into STEM and it's the fault of men. It's just not true" < 5 >

Black Turkey Hand -- "It's the fault of society telling girls that they should be dainty & not worry about getting the best grades in 'hard' sciences. Generally, little boys are encouraged in STEM activities, girls are not" < 5 >

OP -- "That's not true though. That is a fantasy world that doesn't exist for the bulk of the population. I want you to really think of time that you have actually witnessed that." < 0 >

Black Turkey Hand -- "I am a female. My whole life is testimony." < 8 > (19 Oct. 2015, 11:18 a.m.).

The original poster repeatedly asserts common attitudes about gender and STEM, including the claim that getting into STEM is "easier" for women because they are more sought after by colleges and engineering firms—which, of course, serves to undermine and minimize women's accomplishments in those fields. Also, the speaker argues that women don't go into STEM because they don't want to—which is akin to saying women are not curious about built and natural worlds, and that they don't want money or job security or prestige. Importantly, the visual and written discourse in this comic is part of a very old and embedded system of gender oppression, or a relation of ruling, where

women are stereotyped as incapable of rational thought and men are characterized as unbiased, rational beings. It is an example of the everydayness of ruling relations, and the ways that sexism is made to seem funny, clever, justified, or simply innocuous.

It is the everydayness, or the subtlety of sexist discourse that makes it so insidious and difficult to counter. In my brief survey, for example, discussions about gender equality and STEM appeared repeatedly on Yik Yak, and one person finally commented, "Dear God not this thread again" < 2 > (14 Oct. 2015, 3:12 p.m.). Still, the antifeminist comic included above is so popular among Michigan Tech students that a group from my composition class used it as part of their presentation on gender and STEM earlier this semester. The class received the comic with laughter and the students presenting didn't have much to say about it. When I asked them to identify the author's argument, they had difficulty explaining it, and felt its message was self-explanatory. In this way, the visualization of sexist discourse served as a way of silencing conversation, in the classroom—because, according to the students, the image said it all. Still, I pointed out to the class that the comic advances a logical fallacy where *either* women join STEM and become a part of the solution, *or* they join women's studies and become a part of the problem/create the problem. The comic ignores the fact that feminist critique of STEM often emerges from women who are scientists, engineers, technologists, and mathematicians. Donna Haraway, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Karen Barad are just three of many. Further, and most importantly, the comic's narrative does not acknowledge unconscious bias, sex role stereotyping and hostile learning and work environments that persist in STEM. Again, my students had little response to my commentary in class. But under the protective anonymity that Yik Yak provides, they are able to participate in and

perpetuate this kind of sexist discourse with little fear of reprisal. Because social media is participatory, students can shape the discourse, and at the same time, create themselves according to ideologies they encounter in the online community. Smith notes that this participatory aspect is an important feature in the conceptualization and perpetuation of femininity as a discursive construct. To make this point, Smith shows how some women create themselves in the image of—or according to the visual discourse of—advertising images for cosmetics or women’s clothing. In this sense, they are willing participants in ruling relations—they are agreeing to be ruled—even as the advertisements instill a sense that they are creating themselves according to their own desire and sense of self. The advertisements put a price on certain kinds of femininity, drawing femininity into an intersection with class, and oftentimes with race. For Yik Yak users, the disparaging discourse about women and femininity serves as a way to devalue femininity and those who embody or enact it.

For other students, the concern is not so much about equality in STEM as it is about women invading a space that has long been the preserve of men. Kimmel writes about this issue in *Guyland*, in terms of the need to maintain a space that is not *feminized*, where they don't have to be concerned about being *politically correct* (1-23). These spaces are often characterized by hostility toward women—and it is easy to see hostility toward women's "invasion" of Michigan Tech in some of the students' comments on social media. Evidence of this sentiment is common in social media. College “confession” forums like [collegefession.com](http://collegefession.com) and [college-confessions.com](http://college-confessions.com)—where students anonymously post about politically incorrect perspectives, drinking habits, misdeeds, and sexual exploits—are common places to find this kind of commentary.



Also, two Twitter feeds, including MTUConfessions and MTU Crushes, often feature the same, or cross-posted, comments. One example from MTUConfessions is the following comment: "Dear girls...you'll never be 'one of the guys.' You'll just be the girl that hangs with all the guys and usually sleeps with them to [sic]" (MTUConfessions). Another comment from the same feed, accompanied by a photo of a Michigan Tech license plate, "TCHGRL," reads, "Is this really something to be proud of? @MTUProblems @ConfessionsMTU" (JAHLBORN). Both comments serve as a way to police who is allowed to participate in the Michigan Tech campus community, or who is a legitimate member of the community. These comments, in short, perpetuate the "old boys' club." As I female Michigan Tech student, I can also say that this later comment creates a sense of not wanting to be, or to be associated with, a "TCHGRL." And again, because these words appear in informal spaces, and as part of everyday experience (assuming that most students inhabit social media as part of their everyday experience), they are readily absorbed or woven into the discursive fabric of the Michigan Tech online community. If the comments were violent or overtly menacing in some way, perhaps they would stand out or draw more attention. Their power is in the fact that these kinds of comments are routine, or part of everyday experience.

The problem is ongoing. For example, in a recent Yik Yak thread, two male students bullied a female soccer player, one saying he looked her up on Facebook (she provided identifying information previously in the thread) and that she "resembles a bowling ball" < -1 >. One of the speakers tells him to "back off" < -1 >, but the bully goes on to say, "I was simply warning all the guys that were about to add you [on Snapchat] that you were fat so they didn't have to deal with the embarrassment of talking

to a cow” (16 Oct. 2015, 2:56 p.m.). The other bully also commented after looking up her identity online, saying, "you may be muscular, but you also have a very significant amount of noticeable body fat. Nothing wrong with it, but you're in denial" (2:57 p.m.). This comment is in response to a soccer player's characterization of her body. She writes, "There's a big difference between being fat and having muscle. I'm definitely muscular and built different than twig bitches. I bet I could knock your ass out in one swing. Fight me asshole.” In each case, the male speakers are taking an authoritative position over the female, asserting that their knowledge of her appearance is truer than hers. One speaker claims to be "protecting" other readers from a "fat chick," which has a policing effect and serves as a reminder to the reading community that overweight women, and specifically this woman, is not worth dating. Sadly, this whole conversation started with the soccer player's post about wanting to find someone fun to go out with who wouldn't cheat on her.<sup>22</sup> The conversation goes very well initially, as several of the speakers express shared interests and then agree to contact one another via Snapchat and Kik. Once the woman shares her contact information, she is immediately attacked. Her attackers keep their identities secret and even point out that she knows nothing about them--their anonymity keeps them in a position of power. It's also worth noting that the soccer player participates in attacking other women (who are thin), even as she's being attacked. As with the license plate mentioned in the Twitter comment above, this exchange positions women against women another, while men preserve their position of power and control.

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<sup>22</sup> “Someone be cute with me and take me on dates and not cheat, thanks.” < 55 > (16 Oct. 2015, 2:55 p.m.).

*The Daily Bull*, a weekly student-run newspaper that features fake news stories, also runs a regular campaign against women on campus. For example, "The World of the Wild Snow Cow," (*SEX-ISM* 7) chronicled a term so popularly used to describe Michigan Tech women that it appears in the *Urban Dictionary* online.<sup>23</sup> Another article, "Money Talks, Women Listen," begins with the wildly offensive statement, "For you women out there lingering around the intellectual individuals around campus ... ." The writer goes on to say, "It's only acceptable to acquire an MRS degree if you are hot enough to be considered a trophy wife," and then encourages women to "use those super girl powers to get what you want ... a free lunch or a warm pair of UGG boots" (*SEX-ISM* 8). Hostility toward women is evident in both of these instances: in the first article, Michigan Tech women are disparaged as being desperately unattractive; in the second, they are characterized as unintelligent, manipulative, greedy, and incapable of supporting themselves financially. Students will claim that these stories are all in good fun--but taken in sum, a significant body of hateful discourse emerges, regarding women and stereotypical forms of femininity.

*All in good fun*

Sadly, sexism also appears in messages from administrative and institutional sources. To be fair, the Michigan Tech administration has gone to great lengths to improve the campus experience for women in recent years, namely by providing resources and trainings related to sexual assault and campus safety. In addition, an NSF

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<sup>23</sup> The following is the "top definition" of a snow cow: "A term describing a female who moves to the far northern reaches of Michigan, is somewhat attractive and petite at first but proceed to blimp up once the harsh UP winter hits. This is most evident at MTU where the cafeteria food is horrible for you and the professors stress you out so much that you start eating like a cow" (Ryan).

ADVANCE grant carried out research and implemented programs related to hiring and retention of female faculty. The Women in Science and Engineering group (WISE) provides mentorship for female faculty, and SWE and the many campus sororities provide resources and a sense of community for female students. To be sure, explicitly sexist comments from the administration are not common. Still, several recent comments suggest that embedded sexism may persist at the administrative level. For example, a campus-wide email welcoming students to Michigan Tech included the following comment about the area's cold weather: "I was actually a little worried that we were going to have to get Miley Cyrus here to melt the snow on Ripley!" (*SEX-ISM 6*). Then several months later in a message from a parody Twitter account of an MTU administrator, we find the following disparaging message, "Well I was gonna find a gf in 2014, but then I got this electric blanket. #cozy" (*SEX-ISM 5*). Yes, importantly, this second comment is not from the administrator himself. Rather, it is from someone (likely a student) who is trying to conjure this administrator's ethos in a humorous way. But the source of the comment is less important than the fact that it is meant to capture the attitude of a person of authority in the Michigan Tech community. In any case, both comments contribute to the discursive construction of women and femininity on campus. On one hand, then, women are useful for their sexual "hotness," and on the other hand, an electric blanket is preferable to an actual woman. This devaluing might explain why some female students at Michigan Tech have rejected or expressed ambivalence towards femininity, or being a *woman* on campus. As one speaker posted in the AntiFeminist Comic thread above, "Maybe women aren't as attracted to stem (sic) because of the culture of those within it? Take a moment to see all the subtle sexism on this campus,

what woman would want to be subjected to that? < 8 >”. And, “Women at Michigan tech are treated as something to be conquered, not as academic peers” < 11 > (19 Oct. 2015, 11:18 a.m.).

Thus, there is a real sense that the problem of gender inequity is not taken seriously from an administrative standpoint. Let me clarify: as I described in chapter 1, from a legal standpoint, it is taken quite seriously and according to the letter of the law. From an empathic standpoint—in terms of acknowledging that this is an actual problem for real women on this campus—more work could be done. For example, events for women's history month in recent years, instead of celebrating the storied history (or present) of women in STEM, have focused on fitness, fashion, and rape prevention. For many years, the campus bookstore did not carry women's business attire and students still comment about the difficulty of locating a female bathroom in some buildings across campus.<sup>24</sup> The Center for Diversity and Inclusion, by its name (this is not a critique of its work or necessity on this campus), is suggestive of the idea that women and minorities need to be “included” into the white males only club otherwise known as STEM education. A more revolutionary name would somehow acknowledge or recognize that “the club” is inherently sexist and racist and in need of transformation. Further, it would acknowledge the fact that *allowing* women and minorities into the club in its current state, is also a way of asking them to conform to embedded sexist and racist ideologies. Or consider the fact that the Michigan Tech's Dean of Students Early Intervention web page on sexual assault features a picture of students playing broomball on it (“Early

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<sup>24</sup> “Michigan Tech: where you might actually have to go to another building to find a women's bathroom” < 34 > (15 Oct 2015, 9:35 a.m.).

Intervention”).<sup>25</sup> The entire web page is worthy of analysis, both for its discursive and rhetorical features.

The early intervention page is meant to provide information and resources for students about sexual assault, both preventatively and after the fact. This page is organized into three columns with strong alignment toward the center column where sexual assault is defined, statistics are provided, and recommendations are listed. At left is a list of links to other pages in the Dean of Students section of the website. At right is a "Resource List," a box with "Related Topics," and an image of students playing broomball at night. The color scheme is neutral with a taupe background and teal, gold, gray, and white highlights. The font is a sans serif in black, not italicized or bolded except for section headings and the following quotation, "If you become aware that a student is a victim of sexual assault or has been the recipient of inappropriate and/or unwelcome physical contact." Bullet points call attention to the following relevant statistics: "Nearly 60 percent of the rapes on campuses took place in the victims' residences; and fewer than five percent of rapes and attempted rapes were reported to law enforcement officials." The "Do" and "Don't" lists are easy to access, with list items hidden until the user chooses to reveal them. Taken in sum, this page gives a sense of order and control. It is easy to navigate and it feels official and familiar. This web page looks and reads like every other page on Michigan Tech's website, and so its not "memorable" enough to inspire fear or concern--or any emotion at all. The familiar image

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<sup>25</sup> In fact, the same image (of broomball players) is featured at the bottom right-hand column of the early intervention pages for Trauma, Suicide, Sexual Harassment, Seasonal Affective Disorder, Grief, Depression, Anxiety, Aggression and Potential Violence. The uniformity is stunning, as is the lack of empathy.

of students playing broomball conveys the message that sexual assault isn't really an issue that Michigan Tech students need to worry about--because we're all just here to have some good, clean fun! More cynically, the photo might reveal that Michigan Tech is just "going through the motions," and would not address this issue if its federal funding were not at stake. Conversely, perhaps this photo suggests that we should be weary of broomball players. In any case, I would argue that, while there may be some logic in using a familiar image, it marks a failure to take sexual assault seriously.

Following the gender dichotomy, this webpage is stereotypically masculine, from its emotionless prose and rigid page design to the image of male broomball players in the dark of night on cold ice. The webpage is a rhetorical and discursive visual representation of the Michigan Tech ethos. It is orderly and structured, rule-bound but with a sense of play and serious fun, as appropriate. There is almost nothing that one might characterize as stereotypically feminine about this page, except for portions of the subject of its content. In fact, there is little about Michigan Tech campus culture that allows for open expression of femininity, and this is typical of a traditional STEM campus. It is also an important point for my analysis. As mentioned in chapter 1, there are moments where femininity takes center stage, if only as parodic and fleeting. The question is, why would femininity make any appearance at all, on a campus that, discursively, seems so determined to disparage women and femininity, and to preserve the gender dichotomy? The persistence and popularity of drag on this campus, including the annual Michigan Tech drag show, offers a point of analysis and a way to think through this issue.

*Michigan Tech and Drag*

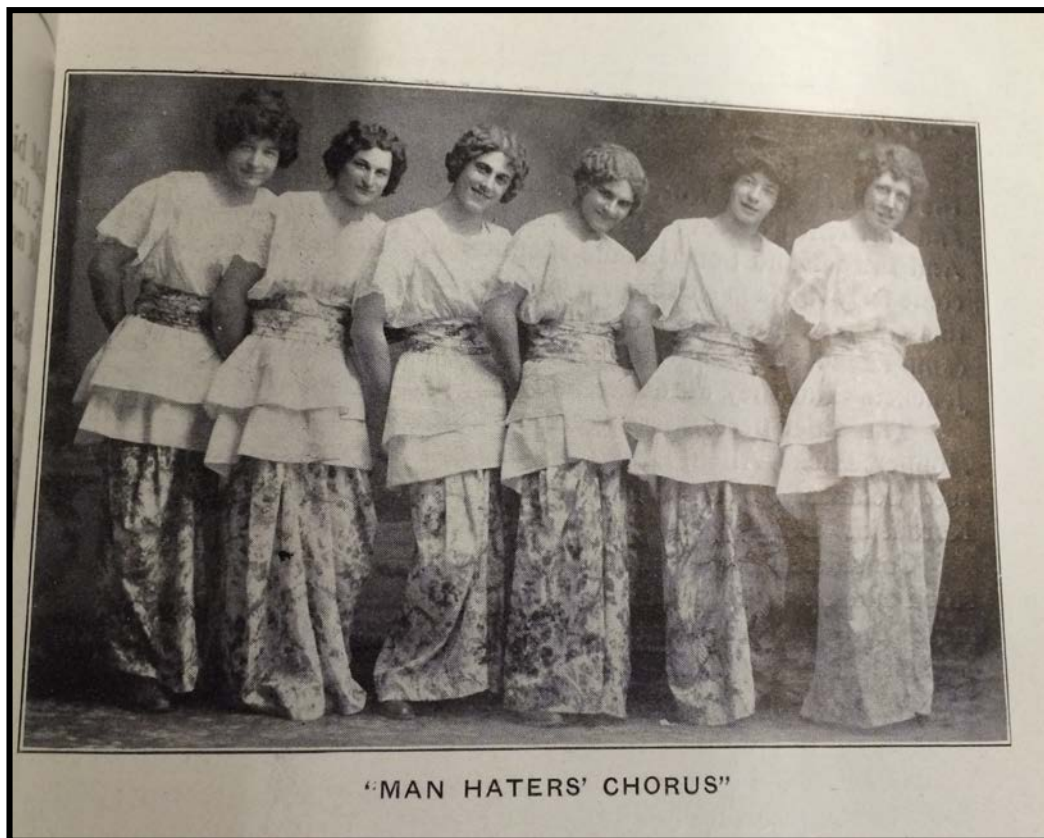
On Michigan Tech's campus, there is a long-running interest in gender bending in the form of drag performance. For example, an article from the April 1914 edition of the *Michigan College of Mines Alumnus* describes a troop of Michigan College of Mines (MCM) student performers who wrote and performed a musical comedy entitled "The Plaid Mackinaw." The show was met with much praise for performances in Houghton, Calumet, and Marquette. It was quite successful as an amateur performance, even by today's standards, bringing in \$800 from the Houghton show alone ("The Plaid Mackinaw" 75).<sup>26</sup> Importantly, the musical featured a performance by the "Man Haters' Chorus," although the writer gives no explanation for why the chorus is titled as such (Figure 1). The review article suggests, again that the performance was all in fun—well performed, but not to be taken seriously. Still, the chorus name cannot be arbitrary. Certainly, it could be read as an early indication of the gender hostility associated with engineering education, as described above and in chapter 2. Some women were engaged in engineering study at that time in the US, although their presence was met with significant resistance (Layne 55-59). And women have been in attendance at Michigan Tech since 1888, although the first women did not earn a degree from the university until 1933. So, it would be difficult to claim that these men performed in drag because there were no females available to fill the women's roles. Still, male performance in drag is a well-established part of the history of theater, often because women were prohibited or discouraged from public performance. Thus, it is more likely that female students at Michigan Tech were also discouraged from this type of activity. A 2009 *Michigan Tech*

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<sup>26</sup> The *MCM Alumnus* writer relates that the student troop planned to use the funds to "install either a swimming pool or a bowling alley in the basement of the gymnasium" (75).



*Magazine* interview with Jane Laird, the second female student to earn a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering from Michigan Tech, revealed that female students, even in the 1960s when Laird was a student, were subject to a host of rules that did not apply to male students (Goodrich).



**Figure 1 – MCM Micomi Club members in "The Plaid Mackinaw," 1914. Public Domain.**

More recently, Michigan Tech has served as host to an annual drag show for the past sixteen years, this being one of the most popular events on campus.<sup>27</sup> Admittedly, the performance is relatively tame, as far as drag shows can go. Many of the performers are older than one might expect, and/or are neither thin nor stereotypically proportioned. But, notably, at this year's drag show, the crowd was most excited (loudest) about the youngest and thinnest performer, who was doing his first show and danced to a song about cherries (alluding to having his cherry "popped"). Nothing new there. In other

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<sup>27</sup> The event is usually organized by Keweenaw Pride, a student and community organization providing support, events, and activist opportunities for LGBTQIA students and allies.

words, this particular drag performance serves as reinforcement of stereotypical characterizations of what counts as a beautiful or attractive feminine body. We can read the audience's reaction and the actor's performance as visual representations of feminine-based oppression, in the form of body policing and the perpetuation of stereotypes of femininity. Relations of ruling are implicated here in that they are literally enacted on the actor's body and carried out in his performance and the crowd's reception to his performance.

At base, drag queens are men performing exaggerated and hypersexualized versions of femininity--often in ways that highlight negative stereotypes of women. Of course, the purpose and social implications of drag have been subject to some debate in feminist theory. Judith Butler's work on performativity and materiality of the body are relevant in this context. Butler's 1999 introduction to *Gender Trouble* provides an overview of her writing about drag later in the book. She writes that the example of drag is meant to consider "gender reality" and its disruption, this in the context of "naturalized knowledge" and perception. That is, we read the body and its terrain, but drag makes the body unintelligible, even illusory, because of incongruity.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, it provides the opportunity for a new understanding to emerge. Butler writes, "The moment in which one's staid and usual cultural perceptions fail, when one cannot with surety read the body that one sees, is precisely the moment when one is no longer sure whether the body encountered is that of a man or a woman. The vacillation between the categories itself

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<sup>28</sup> Notably, this understanding of drag echoes Kenneth Burke's "perspective by incongruity," wherein two incongruous entities are brought together to reveal a meaning not otherwise possible (89).

constitutes the experience of the body in question" (xxiii). The assertion here is that bodies are produced and made intelligible, legible, by way of gender normativity--a system which Butler reveals as oppressive and violent.<sup>29</sup> She later goes on to acknowledge that feminist theorists tend to characterize drag as "either degrading to women, in the case of drag and cross-dressing, or uncritical appropriation of sex-role stereotyping from within the practice of heterosexuality" (175). While I embrace the theory that drag could be disruptive to the gender dichotomy, my experience of drag runs counter to this theorization. At a drag performance, performers often strip for money. Audience members wave dollar bills; the performers accept the money and give affection in return. In this way, femininity and feminine sexuality are for sale and for the audience's entertainment. I see very little that is not normative in this type of performance. Still, this vision of gender disruption is incongruous with Michigan Tech's masculine, homosocial culture. Part of students' interest in drag may have to do with the

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<sup>29</sup> Even in popular culture over the past year, particularly after Republican politician Mary Cheney compared drag to blackface and questioned why one is socially acceptable but not the other (Cracker). Her comments were met with anger and frustration from many in the drag community and from some scholars of theater. Ursinus College Professor of Theater Domenick Scudera wrote a response to Mary Cheney's question, arguing that drag is a celebration. He writes, "Today's drag queen is often a gay man who has embraced that part of himself that, as a child, was considered shameful and undeserving ... Drag is some of the best parts of who he is, magnified and impervious" ("Dear Mary"). Comparatively, black performers are "dressing up the ugliest parts of himself: the racist, belittling, superior parts of himself." Further, he cites the long history of men dressing as women in theater as an argument in favor of its social acceptability, and notes that blackface was very short- comparatively. He concludes by saying that drag queens don't hate women, and their performances are a celebration of community and diversity. Notably, Scudera is also a drag performer. Other responses to Cheney's comments were less emphatic. A drag performer writing for *Slate* admitted that her comments gave him pause. He noted that some drag performers are in fact hostile to women, and he had encountered women who explained how drag was hurtful to them and felt like mockery (Cracker). In my own view, I tend to see drag as mockery. I understand the argument about drag being celebratory, but it is not clear what is being celebrated.

very rigid lifestyle that engineering education demands of its students. As Sally Hacker describes, and as detailed below, denial (of certain kinds) of pleasure is part of the experience and the indoctrination into the brotherhood of engineers. Also, importantly, Butler reminds us that viewing drag is necessarily pleasurable--because of the spectacle and incongruity of it all (175). This moment of release, for some students, may make it possible to endure the rigid, masculine structure that is engineering education.

*Pleasure, technology and gender*

Sally Hacker's study of engineering education reveals the process by which engineering education was gendered. As mentioned in chapter 1, she traces engineering back to its origins in the military, and goes even further to argue that militarization may have arrived following a period of upheaval after men overthrew what some characterize as early egalitarian societies (*Pleasure* 5-12). Engineering emerged as a way to meet the technological needs of increased militarization, and so technology and engineering developed in a gendered way because women were generally not permitted into the military. Today, engineering students are trained into strict programs of analytic thought where self-reliance, conciseness and accuracy become a kind of discipline -- there is pleasure in this denial of sensual pleasure and self-control. There is also a sense of power in being able to create powerful objects and to control or (find easy justification to) ignore the blurriness, the gray areas and messiness of life and its problems. For Hacker, the pleasure of making and working with technology was generative, sensual, and exciting. It was not about power or control as much as it was about creativity and learning through experience.

Hacker makes an interesting assertion in that she finds a relationship between technology and the erotic. The relationship between education and pleasure was made explicit as early as Plato's Symposium, but Hacker adds another component to this equation. She argues that learning and making technology is pleasurable in ways that can be arousing or gratifying, and/or that share the same cognitive or experiential space as the erotic. Her assertion is that those who pursue an area of study or a career like engineering, for example, are pursuing a kind of personal pleasure that at the same time denies or even prohibits interpersonal relationships because of the intensity of study that engineering programs require. Hacker highlights the "steamy" relationship between "man and machine" as depicted in literature, and cites examples where male engineers comment on their preference for machines over women. In one excerpt, for instance, an engineer comments that he once fell in love with a woman, "but I shut myself up for a week, and worked at an air machine. Grew so excited I forgot the girl" (*Pleasure* 46, Florman 138). Hacker's work suggests that engineering students may find more pleasure in their work than in interpersonal relationships. If the possibility of dating is removed, the distractions of heterosexual interactions, relationships, and sexual encounters are removed as well and the promise of monastic discipline with its attendant pleasures is more palpable. What I don't know, and have long wondered, is how many male students come to Michigan Tech because they prefer homosocial spaces, and/or because they have -- or want to explore the possibility of having -- same-sex sexual relationships. In any case, a contingent of students at Michigan Tech continues to express an interest in studying above and beyond their interest in social life. The following Tweet from MTU Confessions highlights the issue, "I'd rather study my calculus than hang with girls ...

#sorrynotsorry" (@collegefession). This attitude is an important aspect of social life at Michigan Tech, as it denies the value of a central part of human experience—that is, interpersonal relationships or intimate relationships. Further, the discourse that conveys this attitude, as seen in the quotation above, tends to value science or technology above women. In other words, the discourse does not simply convey the idea that students love STEM. Rather, it conveys the idea that women are a distraction or a problem to be avoided.

Hacker also cites the complexity of technology as pleasurable, and the problem of pleasure as "dominance and control." Interestingly, she draws a link between pornography and certain kinds of practices of technology that "rouses the prurient interest, demeans the powerless, eroticizes domination, or offends along a moral dimension" (*Pleasure* 51). Technologies of war and environmental destruction fit this definition. And while many people rail against these types of technologies, Hacker notes, "Some, like the sex radicals, agree that such technologies are pornographic, but like it that way. Some have described to me the beauties of napalm ... or the curiosity about whether or not a bioengineered calf will be too large for live birthing" (*Pleasure* 51-52). The erotic has to do with arousal and pleasure, but Hacker argues that technology becomes pornographic when control, dominance and destruction become primary objectives, or directives, of the project. Her point here is that when we bring violence and destruction into the pleasurable or the erotic, its goodness and benefit is lost. Unfortunately, history reveals that technological advance often takes place in the service of war—which is largely defined by dominance, control, and destruction. As with

pornography, the erotic and the violence become conflated or fused to another, creating discourses of violence instead of discourses of shared pleasure.

In Hacker's view, however, technology can be "degendered." She wrote about the value of men and women working in cooperatives, or communities, to create technologies that are beneficial, or solve problems, in local contexts and communities. She argues that feminism "creates a different quality of work" (*Pleasure* 147), one that does not have dominance or control as its main objective. It is important to note that Hacker operates from a radical feminist perspective. In her work, she sought to study lived examples of alternative political and economic structures -- in the end, she advocates cooperative workspaces and communities, founded on egalitarian principles. Even in her study of existing cooperatives, however, she found that gender hierarchy and the gender dichotomy persist. She argues, reluctantly, for the temporary installment of women-only learning communities directed at technological education and discovery. Her assumption, of course, is that women would not act as men sometimes do in engineering education and the workplace. The act of bringing women together in community does not assure that they will carry with them stereotypically feminine attitudes and ideals—because, again, femininity is not innate. It is learned and performed. Women can and do unlearn or reject femininity all the time. There is also the issue of postfeminism, and its conflicted relationship with femininity, which I will discuss below. In the pages of this chapter, I analyze student texts that perpetuate postfeminism and weave another misogynist and antifeminist thread into the campus discourse on women, femininity, and the gender dichotomy.

*Postfeminism and Engineering Education*



Postfeminism is not easy to define, but the definition I apply for this analysis is taken from Angela McRobbie's critique of popular culture. McRobbie argues that postfeminism is a "complexification" of the 1980s backlash that followed the women's liberation movement in the 1960s and 70s. The postfeminist stance is that gender equality has been won, and popular culture narratives obscure the reality of women's continued oppression and discrimination. Another important component is that postfeminism is aimed at and typically adopted by young women, many who feel feminism is dated and does not speak to their concerns (255-56). And finally, under postfeminism, women often knowingly participate in their own objectification, and the objectification of other women. McRobbie cites young women's attendance at lap dancing clubs in the UK as one example of the phenomenon, where women show that they are "cool" with the exploitation of women, and up for anything the night will bring (259-60). Certainly there are students at Michigan Tech who adhere to traditional norms about dating and sexuality. Comments from Yik Yak confirm that some support celibacy until marriage, many feel that men should ask women out on dates (and not the other way around), and some are opposed to "sleeping around." This discourse supports the gender dichotomy and traditional gender roles, including heteronormativity. However, explicit illustrations of a postfeminist orientation are abundant in the descriptions students post about their sexual activities in online Twitter threads and Yik Yak. In many of these examples, students embrace porn culture. For example, one male student posted a picture of a pillow shaped as a pair of naked breasts, sent to him by his girlfriend. He writes, "Soooo I got this pillow in the mail today. I love my girlfriend's sense of humor" < 10 > (15 Oct. 2015, 9:32 a.m.). In the replies, one woman responds, "I would totally buy this for my

boyfriend if we were long distance" < -1 > (15 Oct. 2015, 10:26 a.m.). Another student posted about her success as an online stripper. She writes, "Just made 4 figures on my cam set this afternoon" < 0 > (18 Oct. 2015, 9:39 p.m.). Similarly, the issue of "slut-shaming" is a frequent topic of conversation, and usually emerges after posts like this one: "When you sleep with a guy and realize the next morning that you totally slept with his roommate about a month ago. Feeling awkward ..... opps" < 0 > (15 Oct. 2015, 3:46 p.m.). Or this, "I really like sex. That's doesn't make me a slut" < 67 > (19 Oct. 2015, 11:08 a.m.). With 67 upvotes and 71 replies, many people in the community supported this last comment, but the debate about the topic is heated, including the following exchange:

Red Cauldron— "I'm seriously only saying if you're looking for a legitimate relationship at any point in your life, what you're doing right now is fucking stupid. Otherwise, have fun" < -1 >.

OP— "If I'm a textbook slut then I'll happily embrace it." < 3 >

Notably, at Michigan Tech, there is also a variation on the word slut, based on the widely held belief that hockey players "get all the girls." One student characterizes the term in following way, "It sucks looking at a decent looking girl and then realizing half the hockey team fucked her #puckslut" (MTUConfessions 24 Jan 2014). While women tend to find the labels "slut" and "puckslut" offensive -- and rightly so--some women seem to be embracing it. For example, one women writes, "If I slept with 3 hockey players last semester, is that considered a hat-trick? #puckslutprobs" (MTUConfessions 25 Jan 2014). Admittedly, it is difficult to know how to interpret these comments. Sex-positive feminists might affirm this woman's willingness to express her sexuality, finding no

shame in the fact that she may have had multiple sexual partners. Also, the writer's use of the hashtag #puckslut could be read as an exercise in trying to "reclaim" a negative phrase. On the other hand, in *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, Ariel Levy provides significant research that suggests young women engage in promiscuous behavior, not for their own sexual pleasure, but as a way to cultivate a limited sense of power, with the primary objective being, to be like the sexually available women increasingly portrayed in television, movies, and music (139-196). For example, one student writes in a way that is reminiscent of the characters on *Sex in the City*: "Went to the bookstore and bought the Kama Sutra as a gift for my boyfriend. Looked the cashier dead in the eye. #noshame." (Anonymous). Again, she is rejecting the sense of shame that has long been associated with women's sexuality. But it is also possible that she is just filling a role she has observed, as the sexually adventurous young woman.

As a final example, women may also be using their sexuality against other women. One writer tweeted the following comment on MTUCrushes, "So I had sex with one of the fraternity guys, my sorority sisters fiancé [sic] .... In her bed and while she was in class .... On multiple occasions." (@MTUCrushes). This is nothing short of reality TV nonsense, but it also contributes to the narrative that no one values women at Tech, not even women who are supposed to be "sisters." Another quote from Yik Yak makes this claim quite literally, "Don't try to understand women. Women hate women and they understand each other. < 100 >" (13 Oct. 2015, 1:18 p.m.) My point with these examples is that the postfeminist narrative about women's own sense of sexuality is damaging and difficult to negotiate given the contrary injunctions: women's embrace of sexuality can be empowering and because this embrace often requires that they deny their own pleasure, at

the same time they enact "womanizing" or "adulterous" roles that are often associated with male infidelity. Femininity, in this case, is exploited—but it is exploited for purposes that are sometimes advantageous for women. Exploiting feminine sexuality in this way can lead to being considered “one of the guys,” which could, in theory, provide greater recourse to power in traditionally, stereotypically masculine settings.

Unfortunately, just as with the exploitation of femininity in drag shows, it does little to break the gender dichotomy or offer a new and affirmative understanding of femininity.

### *Conclusion*

In sum, the discourse about women and femininity on campus is disparaging from nearly every direction, and the gender dichotomy is preserved for the benefit of male students, and at the expense of female. The total circumstance provides a view of how ruling relations operate in/as everyday texts. Social media comments and narratives from students, male and female alike, express a general disdain for and hostility towards women, femininity, and/or women who are either insufficiently or overly feminine. At the same time, male student comments mock femininity and women. Female students participate in the same, but are also likely to invoke masculinity by asserting sexual prowess, STEM knowledge, or crude humor. And a contingent of students--mostly male, it would seem--express a preference for schoolwork over social life, which based on a broad survey of social media comments (and every movie that's ever been made about college life), is not an attitude commonly shared among college students. The texts collude to create a disheartening narrative about campus life and women's role within it. Because the texts are everywhere and at the same time disappear into the textuality of everyday life, it becomes very difficult for students—or for most people, really—to

pinpoint the problem. The result of textually-mediated campus discourse is that, for women, there is no respite from sexism, and its institutionalization serves as a way of normalizing the problem. This normalizing effect makes it difficult to call out the problem, and easy to say, “Boys will be boys” when institutional documents, student publications, and social media comments emulate and corroborate the dominant ideology. This is the power of ruling relations as textually-mediated discourse, and it is the circumstance to which our student-initiated feminist publications, described in the following chapter, were meant to disrupt.

## ***Chapter 4 – Glass Breakers***

### *Introduction*

In this chapter I trace the history of student-initiated feminist publications at Michigan Tech in the context of pop culture feminism and the ongoing evolution of feminist thought. I advance this argument based on my experience as co-founder and graduate student advisor for *Beyond the Glass Ceiling (BGC)*, a monthly feminist newspaper established at Michigan Tech in March 2013—which evolved in the *SEX-ISM* in April 2014, and then emerged as the feminist student blog, *UNDER\_WIRE* in August 2014. Importantly, the BGC project was a continuation of a prior feminist publication on campus, *The Michigan Technobabe Times (TBT)*. The purpose of these publications was to address not only the persistence of sexism on Michigan Tech’s campus, but also the insistence—among some students, faculty and staff—that sexism is not a problem here. The publications were an exercise in talking back to what Dorothy Smith characterizes as “the ruling apparatus,” (Texts, Facts, and Femininity 2) or the diffuse system of texts and discourses that perpetuate sexism and the gender dichotomy in social contexts.

The history of these publications also reveals some of the struggles students faced in trying to address sexism in campus culture and institutional practices. At the same time, there were conflicts within the community of feminist writers and supporters, in terms of how to articulate their project and even, on a basic level, how to define feminism. The conflict reveals the difficulty of defining feminist goals and projects across generations and, as discussed in chapter 2, the struggle for academic feminism to maintain its activist roots within academic institutions, where sexism and the gender

dichotomy are embedded in institutional processes and discourses. I begin to address these issues by discussing the histories and feminist orientations of Michigan Tech's three student-initiated feminist publications below. I compare articles and discourse across these publications, and also place them in context, including consideration of the social circumstances that took place during their publication. I then compare these publications to newspapers published on other campuses with strong engineering programs. While I had hoped to find a publication that would serve as a direct comparison to those published at MTU, I have not yet discovered a predominantly STEM campus where a feminist publication had been created.

#### *The Michigan Technobabe Times*

The Michigan Technobabe Times (TBT) was founded by Science and Technical Communication (STC) major Davina Palone in 1998. The project emerged out of her frustration with Tech's sexist campus culture and the lack of a forum to discuss her concerns. In an article published in TBT several years after her graduation, she described some of the experiences that led to its creation. She recalled a statistics professor who, in a class of 30 males and 3 females, advised male students to find someone "cute" and get her phone number in case they missed class and needed notes ("Re: Michigan"). In a personal communication to me she characterized the social dimensions of his request in this way, "Needless to say, we three women were instantly — and by order of the only authority in the room, no less! — under assessment for physical desirability by 30 men, in a setting ostensibly safe and reserved for academics" ("Re: Michigan"). As another example, she described the graffiti in the library study carrels where she would often sit to complete her work. "Many of these were graffiti'd with absolutely hateful words about

women-disparaging their looks, intellect and right to be at MTU as well as detailing the crude and sometimes violent sexual purposes they should be used for” (“Re: Michigan”). She went on to say that the misogynist articles in the *Daily Bull* also created a hostile environment. She writes, “After three years of the above plus ongoing male student jokes about MRS degrees, snow cows, and how ugly and stupid women at Tech were, I had truly had enough. It was like living in a time warp — it was the 90s, I’d think! but being a woman at MTU felt like living in the 1950s or earlier” (“Re: Michigan”). Finally, in her senior year, Palone enrolled in a newsletter class and was given the opportunity to create a publication on an issue of her choice. She decided to use the assignment to start a feminist publication on campus. The first issue was printed on broadsheet with pink ink and was distributed all over campus. Palone said it was met with a significant reaction from the campus community, and she explains that some students were eager for an opportunity to discuss sexism from a feminist perspective and thanked her for opening up the conversation. The negative responses, however, “were so hateful it was breathtaking.” She writes, “I was called bitch, cunt, ugly, stupid, dyke. I was told to withdraw from Tech, leave campus, and die.” Unexpectedly, she also ended up in a debate, via the Lode, with another female student who argued she “should have stayed quiet, because it was more respectable than showing that the constant degrading atmosphere was getting under my skin” (“Re: Michigan”). Palone said, as her senior year drew to a close, she couldn’t “go to the Doghouse or the Ambassador or any house party without having long, extended (but always friendly) debates, mostly with men, about feminism and tech. The campus seemed thirsty for the conversation, and I felt that people were learning, talking, sharing and growing in important ways” (“Re: Michigan”).



Palone kept the paper going for the remainder of her senior year, then graduated and TBT went out of publication. Three years later it was resurrected by another student, Anna Swartz, and Anne Wysocki served as the faculty advisor. This time the publication stuck. A small community of students, graduate and undergrad, came together to write and publish a monthly paper featuring news articles and opinion pieces from a feminist perspective. The scope of the paper was broad, including articles about campus news, reproductive health, sexual violence, and women's history. Each issue included a list of resources for students seeking protection from sexual abuse or assault, and for those needing reproductive services.

The overall tenor was political and activist. The newspaper covered Planned Parenthood's closing in 2003 (Keteri), it sponsored *The Vagina Monologues* in 2003 and 2004<sup>30</sup>, and it featured anonymous personal narratives from campus women who have faced unplanned pregnancy. TBT also challenged a marketing campaign sponsored by Mt. Bohemia and Michigan Tech ("Michigan Tech's New Recruiting"). In this case, TBT writer Kristin Arola wrote about an MTV-like infomercial promoting a bikini contest at a local bar, Uphill 41, and a Mardi Gras-themed event at Mt. Bohemia where a prize went to the woman who earned the most beaded necklaces (customarily, by exposing her bare breasts). The following year, TBT protested the bikini contest outside Uphill 41. Around

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<sup>30</sup> Some members of the campus and community were not pleased to see the performance arrive at Michigan Tech. Former TBT designer Cheryl Ball recalls that The Vagina Monologues posters they put up for the event were torn down repeatedly (Ball). Still more than 150 people attended the event, and \$800 was raised for the Barbara Kettle Gundlach Shelter. Also, a TBT article about the event was followed by several letters of "thank you" to TBT for sponsoring the event. One letter writer described the event as "an opportunity to feel a little more liberated" ("tbt Raises \$800").

the same time, MTU's Board of Control agreed that the marketing materials and events were degrading. The university pulled the advertising campaign and terminated their relationship with Mt. Bohemia ("A Report," Levine). Their activism called out sexist discourse circulated by and within Michigan Tech, thereby intervening in the relations of ruling—or the pervasive discursive construction of women and sexual objects. In writing up the actual and specific details of their experience and circulating their narrative in texts, they offered a counter-hegemonic discourse from within the institution that others could use to reveal and discuss similar instances of sexism on campus.

### *Beyond the Glass Ceiling*

Unfortunately, the openings that TBT created proved difficult to sustain over time. As student writers graduated and moved on, their activism and cultural critique went with them. When I arrived at Tech in 2008, TBT was out of print. In the fall of 2009 a group of students put together one edition, mainly featuring a lengthy personal narrative about sexual assault. Resources about sexual assault and related statistics were also printed on the pink 2-sided broadsheet. No subsequent editions followed. Having had some experience with news writing, I was interested in getting involved with the publication. But I didn't have significant motivation until two years into my degree, as described in chapter 1. As a graduate student and parent, I knew I would not have time to reestablish and run the publication on my own, so I approached several undergraduates from a research and writing course I had taught in fall 2012. In that course, I had used a gender studies theme to direct our research, and there were several people in the class who were very enthusiastic about this approach. The students, Katherine Baeckeroot and Anne Dahlquist were excited to get involved and they brought two other undergraduates,

Megan Walsh and Amber Kaufman, to our first meeting. My advisor, Professor of Communication Patricia Sotirin, encouraged the idea of restarting the publication and agreed to be the publication advisor.

Our original idea was to put TBT back in print. But the name of the former publication was a point of concern for the students.<sup>31</sup> The students did not want to be associated with the word “babe,” and I shared their perspective. Palone described her selection of the publication title as “deliberately chosen to establish a positive, strong definition of MTU and technology in relation to feminine self-image” (“Re: Michigan”). And while it was also clear to us that the name Technobabe was meant to reclaim a word that had been used to belittle women, we determined that this act of reclaiming was lost on most current Michigan Tech students. After some deliberation, the students decided that the title, *Beyond the Glass Ceiling*, was symbolic of what they wanted to achieve, and indicative of the struggle that women continue to face on Michigan Tech’s campus. For most of them, this was their first exposure to the idea of the glass ceiling—the fact that they found it both accurate and powerful some thirty years after it was coined is indicative of how far the feminist movement still has to go. Further, their decision to use a title reflective of workplace inequity was apt for this campus where most students enroll with the aim of securing a high-paying position in a company with room to climb the corporate ladder.

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<sup>31</sup> Choosing an appropriate name was important to the group, and from a feminist perspective, our language and identity were important components of our resistance to sexist and gendered ideology on campus. As bell hooks writes, “language is also a place of struggle” (48) -- this she writes in the context of Adrienne Rich’s reminder that “this is the oppressor’s language/yet I need it to talk to you” (hooks 49, “The Fact” 117).

Just as Palone had intended with TBT, the purpose of the new publication was to open up space for students to explore their concerns about sexism on campus. Most of the BGC writers were majors in STC and had limited exposure to feminist concepts. But we all knew what sexism and misogyny looked like, and it was primarily out of frustration and anger—and hurt, certainly—that students came to write for BGC. We talked regularly about how to express anger without losing our audience. Many students were also concerned about being associated with a feminist publication, and what would their friends think? We agreed to cover a wide range of topics and within local and global contexts. One of the students' biggest concerns, however, was about how to define "feminism." Many felt the word was powerful, but also maligned and misunderstood on campus and elsewhere. Significantly, at the same time in early 2013, feminism was becoming increasingly trendy in popular culture. By the end of the year, Beyonce would be making headlines with her "feminist" anthem. Young women artists—musicians and actors—would go on to describe themselves as feminists in popular interviews. Singer Katy Perry, for example, defined feminism as "... I love myself as a female and I also love men" (Stampler). Another singer, Lana Del Ray, told *Fader* magazine, "My idea of a feminist is a woman who is free enough to do whatever she wants" (Cooper). Sinead O'Connor, an artist well known for her political statements, claims that she is not a feminist because "I'm not interested in anything that is in any way excluding men" (Jonze). And actress Emma Watson, speaking on behalf of the United Nations initiative, HeforShe, offered the following definition, saying feminism is "The belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. It is the theory of economic, political,

and social equality of the sexes” (Watson). Taken in sum, the definition of feminism seemed so broad as to mean nothing at all.

But at the time, when we sat down to put together our first paper, the students were encouraged by burgeoning media interest in feminism and discouraged because many of their peers claimed that feminism was no longer needed. To address this concern, the first issue of BGC featured a collection of quotations from faculty, students and staff around campus offering a definition of feminism. The range of responses was diverse, but consistently addressed themes of equality and the need for social and/or personal change. As the responses poured in, the students were inspired by the number of people who were willing to participate, and I think they felt excited to push ahead with our first publication, even against some early negative responses from their peers. In our first issue, in fact, we ran a personal narrative about a student who was caught off guard by her friends’ very negative response to her participation in BGC. In this case, their hostility was largely in the form of the concerns Kimmel explores in *Angry White Men*. That is, many students on campus regularly assert that our culture is now dominated by and controlled by women. A personal narrative from a student in one of my recent classes expressed this point of view. The student argued that feminism should attend to the problems of the developing world, and that first world feminists were “greedy,” “selfish,” and “whiny” and they’ll stop at nothing to get what they want—which is everything.

#### *Successes and Discontents*

Subsequent BGC issues were organized thematically. We addressed ecofeminism, health, politics, media, writing, and women’s history. We included articles about coming out, eating disorders, and inspiring feminist writers. We also tried to feature female

faculty and include stories about local women. In our women's history month, we ran a story about women who "settled" on Isle Royale (Humphries). Our work may have affected some change in social media--shortly after running an article about the misogynistic messages on the Facebook page Tech Confessions (Baeckeroot), we received an E-mail from a Michigan Tech administrator applauding our work. Not long after, the Facebook page was taken down. In this way, like TBT before us, we called out dominant sexist ideology – this time as perpetuated in social media texts. Importantly, we also featured an article about a student who was killed as a result of domestic violence – this story was not initially covered in campus publications, I suspect because the university was not required to report it, given that the student had not been on campus at the time of her murder. If the incidence took place on campus, The Clery Act would require that the university report the incident—which would make domestic violence a part of the public narrative about Michigan Tech. Circumstances being as they were, the incidence was initially<sup>32</sup> ignored in official campus discourse.

Comparatively speaking, however, BGC was less political and carried fewer articles about sex and sexuality than did TBT. Admittedly, I was not interested in covering sexually explicit topics -- issues like slut-walks or the female orgasm, for example – for a variety of reasons. First, because everywhere we look in our culture women are hypersexualized and the pretense of their sexual availability and pleasure is for sale, for conversation, and for display. The situation is much different now than twelve years ago when TBT brought *The Vagina Monologues* to campus. As briefly

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<sup>32</sup> Following the article, there was a memorial service at the Union mounted by the Iranian student association and advertised on official campus venues (including faculty and student listservs & *Tech Today*).

described in chapter 3, I would argue that pop culture now requires young women to put their sexuality front and center. Pop culture has been influenced by the proliferation of pornography and its increased accessibility. In the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there were about 3,000 paid or subscription service pornography websites. But slow Internet speeds and cost of accessing the websites limited online availability. As Internet speeds increased, pornographic videos replaced stand alone images and pay for view sites were replaced with free content. Today there are between 700 – 800 million porn pages on the internet and 38% of porn traffic originated from the US in 2014 – more traffic than in the next four countries combined. In a 3-month study of AOL search data, “vagina” was among the top four words used to search for porn online (“Naked Capitalism”). In sum, students are most certainly viewing sexually explicit content, including live-streaming performances, on a regular basis. Suddenly, the idea of doing a monologue about one’s vagina seem less discursively subversive and more about fulfilling a socially constructed expectation that women must discuss their sexuality, sexual anatomy, and interest in sex.

Aside from distaste for sexually explicit content, the BGC writers had other reasons for not raising these issues on campus. Mainly, they were interested in addressing sexism as they experience it everyday on campus. Students wanted to talk about what it was like to be the only woman in an all-male classroom and as part of an all-male group where the conversations can be hostile or meant to exclude women and minorities. In other words, they did not see students’ private sexual practices and proclivities as central to the project of addressing sexism on Michigan Tech’s campus. Their preference, initially, was to engage the version of feminism that is interested in social change where masculinity and femininity are not limited to female and male bodies respectively, and

not assigned to products and actions and feelings in a way that limits what people can do or experience or study in college.

Gradually, however, some students came to feel that the newspaper was too “safe” or trying too hard to play by the (university) rules. With the success of the paper, including positive and negative feedback, they grew more confident and more restless. They wanted to see immediate change, and they wanted a more dramatic reaction from the campus community. Their anger increased after they discovered that someone was putting our papers in the trash and hiding them under issues of *The Lode* and *The Daily Bull*. At the same time, BGC received significant attention in the local media, with stories running in *Michigan Tech News* (Hodur), *The Mining Gazette* (Stilp), *CBS Detroit* (“*Michigan Tech Women*”), and *Michigan Public Radio* (Snyder). We also presented at an academic conference, The Organization for the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender, and were in contact with a well-known feminist spoken word poet, Lauren Zuniga, about bringing her to campus to do a writing workshop and reading. As an exercise in talking back to the sexist discourse that pervades campus culture at Michigan Tech, the publication and the organization were doing very well. It is worth remembering, of course, that relations of ruling are deeply embedded in the discourse and relations of social life, and as such, this system is incredibly resistant to change. The fact that we had secured such a wide audience, and that we had been able to insert anti-sexist discourse into the everyday experience of students on campus, were significant signs of our progress and success.

More than a year into publication, some of the students decided they needed to re-envision the publication. As it turned out, they wanted their feminism to be loud, sexually



explicit and, in sum—“kick ass.” Of course this rebelliousness is typical of college students. And I agreed with and supported their assertion that the newspaper was “tame.” But I was not confident that this new approach would work. I believed—and still believe—in making measured arguments and trying to foster debate, as opposed to stirring up anger and controversy. But I waived on this issue significantly and, as the students began to develop a new name for the publication—a name that identifies a component of a women’s bra—I wondered if I could continue to participate. At the same time, I silently called myself a “prude” and tried to make the argument that this sexually explicit approach was a better fit for the students’ voices and for the audience they were trying to reach.

### *The SEX-ISM ZINE*

In the midst of this struggle to find a new identity for the newspaper, the students were increasingly frustrated by sexist articles appearing in the *Daily Bull* and by the hateful comments about Michigan Tech women on social media (some of these articles and comments are described in chapter 3). At the same time, students were making disparaging comments to some of the BGC writers, saying that there is no sexism on campus and that they were just trying to stir up trouble. One student, who posted a series of hostile comments about the newspaper online, came to a BGC meeting to voice her concerns. We decided to talk back to these accusations by creating a publication showcasing the textual evidence of Michigan Tech’s sexism. Since the evidence came from a variety of sources, and because we also wanted to include some of our personal experiences, we decided a *zine* would be the best format. After weeks of collecting material, the students designed and assembled the publication, even sewing the binding

with a sewing machine. On the front cover of the zine, the students decided to print the word “SEX” (in order to get the audience’s attention), followed by “-ISM” on the following page. The BGC writers distributed zines to every building on campus, and the response was significant. Several students wrote personal emails thanking the BGC writers for acknowledging and speaking out about this issue. And some of the writers spent several days debating about feminism with male students who felt most of the comments were meant to be humorous, not offensive. The project was a success by any measure, and also provided a window into Smith’s assertion that ruling relations operate from multiple and various locations. We provided clear evidence that sexist discourse circulated in Michigan Tech’s social media, newspapers, and institutional texts, among others. Unfortunately, no subsequent zines followed.

### *Becoming UNDER\_WIRE*

After much debate, the students agreed to create a blog, renamed UNDER\_WIRE, that would mainly address pop culture issues. The move to UNDER\_WIRE was also a move to make sex and sexuality central to the publication’s identity. It was a different approach, but consistent with pop culture feminism, as defined above. Unfortunately, disagreement surrounding these issues was so contentious, several writers quit and there was a change in the faculty advisor. I continued to serve as the graduate student advisor for the organization, but I did not write, edit or otherwise participate in the creation of any articles published on the site.

Originally, UNDER\_WIRE was meant to be a newsmagazine focusing on feminism and pop culture. The design for the first issue featured frilly bras drying on a clothesline and including the phrase “Support the Ladies.” The students held an event to

generate interest and get feedback on the re-design, and the event was well attended, although students' reception of the re-design was mixed. Some wondered why we did not continue with BGC. In any case, the publication name was conceived in part with Lecturer and HDMZ Director Erin Smith, and she took over the faculty advisor role. The design to create a blog instead of a newsmagazine was based largely on the students' desire to write online and in a less formal style than they had done for BGC. As I see it, the entire project was strongly influenced by the pop cultural embrace of feminism at that time, and the students were inspired by its "I do what I want" message.

In the end, the blog did not include images of bras, and the range of article topics was similar to those covered with BGC, except for a few sexually explicit outliers. The publication was a success in that it allowed a core group of BGC writers to cultivate a publication they felt was reflective of their evolving feminist identities and objectives. This format allowed for shorter articles and immediate feedback from the audience, and it gave students a chance to address issues as they emerged on Tech's campus. For example, when a sexual assault was reported in November 2014, Vice President for Student Affairs and Advancement Les Cook sent a poorly timed email to the undergraduate student suggesting that we "Give Thanks" for the hockey team's #1 ranking in the NCAA. Writer Megan Walsh responded immediately with an article on the blog outlining her concerns about Michigan Tech's persistent insensitivity to sexual assault and women's safety on campus. The article received 36 comments and was hotly debated ("When a Sexual Assault"). Later that year, a group of writers covered a story about a professional clothing drive being held for women students because the bookstore did not carry women's clothing (Walsh, Roberts, Humphries). Perhaps not coincidentally,

the bookstore now carries women's professional clothing. For Megan and several other writers, this success, and the attention they received from both articles, were indications that the blog was "way more" successful than the newspaper, and they would often lament how silly the newspaper seemed in comparison. Again, this was part of their effort to distance themselves from academic feminism and/or feminism they perceived as too soft or subtle to make a real difference in the lives of Michigan Tech students struggling against sexism on campus. It was also part of aligning their feminist identities with the feminism that was emerging in pop culture at the same time.

### *Feminism and Porn Culture*

In working with undergraduates on these publications, I encountered several ongoing struggles in feminist movements. One is the generational divide, as described above. Another, in a similar vein, is the difference between feminism that is cultivated in pop culture—by celebrities and in television or other media—and feminism associated with academic theory, politics and social justice. Many of the BGC writers grew interested in advancing a kind of feminism that is best characterized by the ambiguity and (forgive me) solipsism of the quotations from celebrities provided above. To make my critique more specific, I will use the characters from the television program *Broad City* as an example. This Comedy Central series was a favorite of BGC writers; the show was widely heralded by (mostly) millennial female writers online as a triumph for the feminist movement because the characters reject many "feminine" stereotypes. The show's protagonists, best friends Abbi and Ilana, have few aspirations beyond hanging out and smoking marijuana. They engage in casual sex and are shown sexually objectifying others. They are generally unkind to most people and have little interest in pursuits that

are stereotypical of women. Their greatest love and loyalty is to each other – and this, along with their rejection of the age-old feminine obligations to housecleaning and husband-finding, are the most admirable features of the show. The fact that these “women” are “allowed” to behave as “men” can be attributed to the feminist movement, and many have argued that this show is the new face of feminism (Winston, Angelo). It defies the Sheryl Sandbergs of the world who say that women must “lean in,” in order to beat sexism and the patriarchy (Sandberg; 2013). Certainly the assertion that women can just work harder and everything will be fine is an insult to every workingwoman. And the assertion, often in the case of third world narratives, that women will “save” the world is unrealistic and alienates men in ways that are not useful for advancing opportunities for all people to express their capabilities. The difficulty I have with *Broad City* is that the old structures stay in place – there are people who behave in ways that are stereotypically masculine and people who behave in ways that are stereotypically feminine, and the systems of oppression remain unchanged. Different people, same positions, same systems. Ariel Levy makes a similar critique, as I described in chapter 3. That is, more women today are behaving in masculine ways, or as men have traditionally done—but those masculine practices tend to replicate existing systems of oppression.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> As another example: Writer Amber Tamblyn issues a love letter to Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, outlining many of her key rulings in favor of women’s and LGBT rights. Her letter published on Amy Poehler’s “Smart Girls” website is obviously meant to be humorous, as much as it is a celebration of Ginsburg’s work on behalf of women. The text, in the form of a free verse poem, begins by drawing attention to Ginsburg’s physical features in a way that is meant to mock love letters and poems that valorize women’s beauty and put women on pedestals. But it also sexualizes Ginsburg in a way that is consistent with pop/porn culture (post)feminism. She writes, “when I didn’t like your stance/ on church rights to picket gay funerals/ I still loved you,/ because the 1<sup>st</sup> amendment/ is your 1<sup>st</sup> priority,/ and that is so HOT to me” (Tamblyn). She concludes by

As a graduate student advisor to this organization, I was concerned about the BGC writers' increasing focus on pop culture. Not only is the definition of feminism in pop culture ambiguous—even meaningless—it also has a tendency to demand that women lead with their sexuality, to behave in ways that are sexually explicit, and/or to make themselves into sexual objects as a way to feel empowered. This demand is especially true of young, heterosexual women<sup>34</sup>. Certainly feminism's so-called "third-wave" might be characterized, in part, in terms of its interest in sexuality, or its interest in reclaiming women's sexuality from patriarchal narratives. The Riot Grrrl movement was part of this process, including punk bands like *Bikini Kill*, *Bratmobile*, and *Sleater-Kinney*. Again, Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues* is an example of feminist reclaiming, as was the Guerilla Girls' activist art interventions.<sup>35</sup> By many accounts, this movement was powerful and transformative for young women in the 1990s and early aughts (Marcus,

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asking Ginsburg to marry her, noting, "in case you haven't heard,/ it's legal now" (Tamblyn). At the risk of being called a prude, I have to ask, "Why do we need to sexualize Ginsburg, her legal commitments, and her advocacy for women's and LGBT rights?" I understand the multiple layers of this work—comedy, celebration, reclaiming—commenting on how ideas can be sexy, showing that women can openly express romantic love (however humorously) to other women. But this is also an exercise in bringing sex and sexual desire into an area where there is no pretense of either. Further, it is replicating a kind of sexual harassment that so many women struggle against. For example, Chrches lead singer recently ridiculed a man who called out to her at a recent performance, "will you marry me?" She identifies this experience as akin to other more hostile and aggressive forms of harassment – suggesting that it is not flattering or complementary to solicit someone in this way (advancedfirefly).

<sup>34</sup> And I wonder to what extent it is an issue among those who identify with other sexual orientations. In other words, do they feel an obligation to make their alternative sexuality visible?

<sup>35</sup> Feminist activist Rebecca Walker popularized the term "third wave" with her 1992 *Ms. Magazine* article, "Becoming the Third Wave," in the wake of the Clarence Thomas trials, where race and sexuality were central themes and points of debate (Walker).

2010; Ensler, 2001; Guerilla Girls, 1995). But, with the proliferation of digital media, and the subsequent infiltration of porn culture into pop culture, I would argue that this exercise in reclaiming has been co-opted by pop/porn culture celebrity icons and media discourse. So, while it was radical for punk singer Kathleen Hanna to perform in very short skirts and bikini tops, today this kind of attire—and even more explicit than that—is the norm. Miley Cyrus is an example of this phenomenon, where we are more likely to see her nearly naked, than not. This co-opting of feminine and/or women’s sexual empowerment and reclaiming is a function of the relations of ruling. The discourse of sexual empowerment has been commercialized, and it is now for sale. By way of purchasing clothing, make-up, music, and movies, women can embrace and enact homogenized versions of feminine sexuality. As such, what was once an act of defiance, or a way of talking back to ruling relations, is now a way of conforming to dominant ideologies, including the capitalist impulse to commodify everything.

This situation is a product of third wave feminists’ embrace of pop culture as a form of feminist expression, but also it is an example of the ongoing “sex wars” in feminism. The sex wars debate might be characterized as follows: On one side, there are sex-positive feminists who argue that women can reclaim their sexuality by becoming more outwardly sexual, and rejecting the shame that’s long been associated with feminine sexuality. Germaine Greer was a second wave advocate of this stance, specifically as seen her controversial text, *The Female Eunuch*. Lisa Marie Johnson and Inga Muscio are two examples from the third wave, the former advocating for women to express their sexual desires, even if they run counter to all conventions (including feminist tenets of objectification and exploitation); and the latter advocating for women to claim the very

derogatory word, “cunt” (Johnson, 2001; Muscio, 1998). On the other side of the debate, second wave feminists like Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, argued that women’s sexuality is necessarily exploited in sexist culture because of our cultural conflation of sex and violence, and cultural preference for domination over shared pleasure. (MacKinnon. 2005; Dworkin, 1991, 2006). In addition, Gail Dines continues to be outspoken against pornography and what she characterizes as “gonzo” porn. In her work, she reveals the many ways that porn culture has infiltrated everyday life, from “50 Shades of Grey” teddy bears on sale at Target, to increasingly sexualized attire that is popular among young girls (25-46). Even in some feminist education programs, pornography is becoming a central—and sometimes celebrated—topic. The CUNY Women’s Studies Press started a book club for university women’s centers featuring, for the inaugural text, “The Feminist Porn Book.” The program also included an opportunity for college women to engage in a videoconference with so-called feminist pornographer Tristan Taormino. This year’s book club selection is “\$pread: The Best of the Magazine that Illuminated the Sex Industry and Started a Media Revolution,” and there will be a similar videoconference opportunity (WSQ Associate).

Among BGC writers, we had a brief conversation about feminist porn at one of our meetings and considered whether or not this term was an oxymoron.<sup>36</sup> Our conversation was short-lived I think because I was so adamantly opposed to the idea that pornography could be feminist. The students were less convinced. My perspective was

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<sup>36</sup> There was no consensus among the group, and the conversation was one of the more challenging and contentious. This is a difficult topic and, in hindsight, I think the students lacked the depth of feminist theory necessary to discuss the issue. If the newspaper were published in the context of an advanced academic course, this would have been a great opportunity to examine the debate among feminists about this issue.



influenced by a significant body of research that articulates pornography as oppressive and damaging to human bodies, sexualities, and relationships. Again, Dines has written extensively on this issue and lectures frequently on what she calls “the commodification and industrialization of human desire.” Again, Dworkin and MacKinnon have also been outspoken against pornography in general, arguing that systems of oppression and abuse should not be protected under the First Amendment right to free speech (MacKinnon 299-308). Other feminists who identify as sex-positive, like Johnson, argue that women can and should enjoy porn, and that we should encourage women to express their kinky and exploitative sexual fantasies (1-12). To be sure, the issue of porn and feminism is multi-layered and fairly complex. But it seems like a poor choice of subject for students who are just beginning to learn about feminism and feminist activism. Further, the message it sends is that feminism is largely about personal pleasure and “fantasies of power” (Levy, 2005) – which are not useful platforms for making political arguments about the real struggles that women face. Certainly feminists should concern themselves with women’s sexual pleasure, but other issues, like work, childcare, personal safety, political stability, food security and environmental protection – which are strongly gendered in our culture and in most global locations – are more central to the radical feminist project of social and political restructuring. In addition, I think there may be limits to the success of feminist activism that leads with sexuality in the context of the Michigan Tech campus community. As I have discussed, the discourse on women and femininity here is disparaging. Embarking on a feminist campaign that uses bras as its emblem seems counterproductive. As an exercise in reclaiming, it doesn’t work if all your audience sees is “boobs.”

### *Comparatively Speaking*

As it turns out, student-run feminist publications are not typically produced on campuses where engineering is the dominant area of study. For this project, I surveyed schools with the top 25 engineering programs, as ranked by *US News & World Report* in early 2014, for examples of this type of publication (“Best Undergraduate”). I also surveyed the women’s studies email listserv with the same question, extending the invitation to anyone who might have worked on a feminist student publication in college. Finally, I conducted an online search for feminist student blogs, beginning with blogs that originate from the 25 schools noted above. While the survey results are preliminary, there are sufficient examples to draw comparisons and propose conclusions for the relevance and potential of feminist student publications to change campus culture where gender hostility is prevalent. The table below indicates which schools had student-initiated, feminist publications (or a history of said publications) and which had women’s studies programs, majors or minors.

**Table 1 – Top 25 Engineering Programs, Undergrad. *US News & World Report*, 2014**

School	Publication and Year	Women's Studies Program	Undergraduate Gender Ratio - 2014	Total Students - 2014
Massachusetts Institute of Technology	None	Women's and Gender Studies Program	46% female	11,319
Stanford	None	Program in Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies	47% female	16,136
University of California - Berkeley	<i>Effeminist</i> , 1971 <i>Equal Means</i> , 1991 - 1994 <i>Feminist Issues</i> , 1986 - 1997 <i>It Ain't Me Babe</i> , 1970 - 1971	Department of Gender and Women's Studies	52% female	37,581
California Institute of Technology	None	None	36% female	2,209
University of Illinois – Urbana-Champaign	<i>Pandora's Rag</i> , 1998-2003. Zine.	Department of Gender and Women's Studies	44% female	43,603
Carnegie Mellon University	None	Gender Studies Minor, Department of History	44% female	13,285
Georgia Institute of Technology	None	Center for the Study of Women, Science and Technology (minor)	34% female	10,461
University of Michigan – Ann Arbor	<i>Leaping Lesbian</i> – 1976-80 <i>What the F?</i> – 2012 - current	Department of Women's Studies	49% female	43,624
Cornell University	None	Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program	51% female	21,850
Purdue University – West Lafayette	<i>Feminengineer</i> <i>Womengineer</i>	Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program	43% female	38,770
Princeton University	One mention in the <i>Daily Princetonian</i> <i>Equal Writes: Feminism and Gender Issues at Princeton University.</i> Blog	Program in Gender and Sexuality Studies	49% female	8,125
University of Texas - Austin	None	Center for Women's and Gender Studies	52% female	51,313
Northwestern University	None	Gender and Sexuality Studies Program	51% female	20,333
University of Wisconsin - Madison	None	Department of Gender and Women's Studies	51% female	43,193

Johns Hopkins University	None	Program for the Study of Women, Gender, and Sexuality	53% female	21,726
Texas A&M University – College Station	None	Interdisciplinary Program in Women’s and Gender Studies	49% female	58,577
Virginia Tech	WomanSpace Feminist Student Community produced a zine in 2010 -- <i>To Earth, From Venus</i>	Women’s and Gender Studies program – housed in Sociology Department	42% female	31,224
Columbia University	<i>Sister</i> – “student journal published from 1993-1997 containing non-fiction and fiction by women or about experiences affecting them”	Women’s and Gender Studies Major	48% female	29,870
Duke University	None	Women’s Studies Program	50% female	14,850
Pennsylvania State University – University Park	None	Department of Women’s Studies	46% female	95,973
Rice University	<i>Engender</i> – feminist zine published monthly Feb – Apr 2015	Center for the Study of Women, Gender and Sexuality	48% female	6,621
University of California – Los Angeles	<i>Fem</i> – UCLA’s Feminist Newsmagazine Since 1973	Department of Gender Studies	56% female	43,239
University of California – San Diego	None	Critical Gender Studies	48% female	31,502
University of Maryland – College Park	None	Department of Women’s Studies	46% female	37,610
University of Minnesota – Twin Cities	None	Department of Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies	51% female	51,147

I want to specifically highlight three publications from the list above, including The University of Michigan’s *What the F?*, The University of California, Los Angeles’, *Fem*, and Rice University’s *Ungender*. I selected these publications because they represent three different approaches to feminism, feminist discourse, and writing as

counter-hegemonic activism. Feminism operates from multiple perspectives, and discursive interventions can proceed along a variety of feminist theoretical orientations—from radical to cultural to equality. But feminist projects must necessarily be invested in the actual experiences of women and others oppressed according to femininity and feminine stereotypes. Feminist writing operates against the relations of ruling by creating and disseminating counter-hegemonic narratives—including alternative ways of seeing and saying, or the view from the margins (“Choosing the Margin”). There are many ways to engage this project, and my interest is in considering if an approach different from what we tried with *BGC* might be beneficial at Michigan Tech.

*What the F? Your Monthly Periodical*

Since 2012, students at the University of Michigan have published a monthly magazine aimed at addressing “women’s issues” from a feminist perspective. Founded by two undergraduate health minors, the publication is called *What the F?* and its mission is to help women be “happy and healthy.” The broad objective is to address women’s health issues, but the range of articles suggests this is much more than a women’s health magazine. For example, one article carried information about political candidates running in an upcoming election. Another article offered a review of photographer Sally Mann’s collection *At Twelve*, and still another provides an intro to the 1990s Riot Grrrl movement. Most articles, however, focus on sex, menstruation and other issues related to the vagina. Founders Haena Kim and Lizzie Lane call the publication a “vagazine” and characterize their work with the following words, “Fresh. Funny. Fearless. Feminist. Fuck.” The publication is supported by the University of Michigan Women Studies Department, the Ambatana Multicultural Council, and the Resident Hall Association,

among others. It won the Women Studies Department's inaugural "feminist practice for undergraduates" award in 2012.

This publication differs dramatically from the approach taken with *BGC*. And, importantly, *BGC*'s professed mission was not to focus on women's health. But we did create an edition focused on women's health and wellness. In our case, we ran articles on meditation, diet culture, abortion legislation, inequality in women's pro cycling, advice on preventing STIs, and sleep as a gendered issue. The sleep article, of all things, caused significant frustration among some students on campus who argued that we were creating problems where none exist. According to one person commenting on a *BGC* writer Jen Pelto's blog, "You (sic) paper needs actual articles. With info dont [sic] go talking about how women need more sleep, then femenist [sic] this femenist [sic] that. As if men don't need more sleep, if you start this you leave the ground just as open for men to create a paper" (Alan). And another writer comments,

Also, if you would kindly provide better information about Beyond the Glass ceiling, I would be willing to work with the group to make feminist issues more accessible to the general public. I have read each issue as it come [sic] out, and am sorely disappointed at how it seems to be alienating people who would oetherwise [sic] support many of the same things ..." (Veronica).

Imagine if *BGC* had addressed issues like those covered in *What the F?* The articles in *BGC* are written from a feminist perspective, but many of them address issues and perspectives shared across genders. Of course, the purpose of a feminist publication is not to make its opponents feel good or comfortable. And the sleep article – which I wrote – was meant to encourage female students to quit this contest of who is the busiest and

most sleep deprived (“Sleep!”). It was also meant to point out that male students don’t have to work as hard as female students to be successful—certainly they are working hard, too—but as Michael Kimmel would say, male privilege means that the wind is at their backs in the race to academic and professional success (*Angry* xiii). The article I wrote doesn’t mention male privilege or explicitly call men out for their advantage. I was purposely cautious with my language, knowing “privilege” is a contentious subject among Michigan Tech students.

*What the F?* does not take the same approach. One of the articles that would, no doubt, prove particularly contentious on Michigan Tech’s campus was entitled, “My Feminism Doesn’t Give a Shit About Men” (Prasad). Here the author argues that equality feminism cannot achieve its goals because it is asking women to fill roles that exist within the current system of oppression. She makes the argument in the context of recent calls to make feminism “inclusive” of men and attentive to men’s struggle under patriarchal regimes that limit their ability to express a range of emotions. Her obvious critique is that men suffer far less than do women under patriarchy, and feminism should not strive to make its activism “comfortable” for its oppressors. This is a fair point to make, and I agree in part, but the author ignores the fact that men were born into male privilege. They didn’t create the system, and cultural lessons about masculinity teach them there is no system and nothing to question. In my experience teaching feminist issues in mainly male classrooms, it is important to lead with this assertion. Students are less defensive and more receptive to discussing feminist concepts with this approach. Still, there must be room for women to express this kind of anger and frustration.

*Fem*

Students at UCLA have been publishing *Fem*, a quarterly newsmagazine, since 1973. The publication has a broad scope, but the articles generally fall under the headings, “Current Events,” “Gendertainment,” and “Speakout.” The publication has a significant web presence, including a Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, Pinterest, and a website that is updated with new articles on a weekly basis (or nearly so). Print publications are distributed quarterly. The writing is sophisticated and well informed by feminist theory, including its current tensions and ambitions. One recent article for example offered an analysis of Rhianna’s “Bitch Better Have My Money” and considered the question of whether or not this song was feminist. The author frames her argument on the premise that there is a difference between what is feminist and what is moral. Under a feminist rubric, the song is successful because Rhianna transgresses gender stereotypes by being a violent aggressor and by demanding what she feels is owed to her. When women are portrayed in this way, it provides an opportunity to see them as multi-dimensional, as we would see men. In other words, because we’re allowed to see this character as murderously angry, this is a win for feminism (Varma). On the other hand, the author notes that Rhianna’s actions are morally reprehensible, and so we should acknowledge them as such. In other words, from a feminist standpoint, just because she’s a woman, that doesn’t mean she gets a free pass to do whatever she wants. I think this is a critical point of debate and feminism today—and the discourse on morality has traditionally been strongly sexist. Still, I think there is room for debate, and I’ll revisit this issue in chapter 5.

*Engender*



At Rice University, students have been publishing a feminist blog that addresses gender issues in campus and other contexts. The writing is not as polished as what one would see in *Fem*, but the range of articles is similar. Last spring student writers produced a series of three zines, each with articles addressing campus issues and/or applying feminist concepts to local issues, new events and pop culture. The articles include quotations from feminist scholars like Audre Lorde and Patricia Hill Collins, and they apply conceptions like agency and gender dichotomy. The first article in the Feb. 2015 edition reads like a rhetorical archeological analysis of the bathrooms around campus. The author describes how bathroom design changed over time, reflective of changes in the gender balance and in awareness of students and faculty with disabilities. The article concludes with the author's claim that the gender dichotomy is unconsciously and continually reinforced as students, faculty and staff select a "women's" or "men's" bathroom. The author makes her analysis based on *Ancient Bodies, Ancient Lives: Sex, Gender, and Archeology* (2009) by Rosemary Joyce (He). The students have clearly read feminist theory and are working under the direction of someone who is familiar with the field. In another article, a student argues for the importance of the term womanism, both as a critique of feminism and as alternative framework that better reflects attention to the diversity of women's experiences. Questions of definition are clearly important for the Engender writers, as they also feature a collection of quotations from people around campus in response to the question, "What does feminism mean to you?" or "Why is gender equality important" ("Interviews"). The writers also address pop culture issues, but these are not their primary concerns. Of course, there was the obligatory article about Miley Cyrus, questioning whether or not her performances were empowering for

women, or whether they reinforce sexism and patriarchal norms. The writer concluded that the situation is complicated, but again citing Hill Collins, said that Cyrus' was participating in structures of power, not disrupting them (Ho).

This zine is much like what I envisioned BGC might be when we first started the publication. At our weekly meetings, I would describe some feminist concepts in relation to their concerns about campus and sometimes encourage students to read a particular author or text—but this was not a class where I could assign texts and facilitate conversations. But, as noted above, their lack of familiarity with feminist concepts, and their reliance on pop culture feminism, was a problem and point of contention. On a related note, *Engender* is produced out of Rice's Women's Resource Center. The center is the result of student activism and is largely run by student volunteers.<sup>37</sup> The student volunteers are pursuing degrees in social justice or gender studies, but their majors represent a diverse cross-section of interests. The supervisor, Kate Hildebrandt, has a bachelor's degree from Rice in the study of women, gender and sexuality and is also a Title IX Navigator and Student Wellbeing Specialist at Rice Programs from 2014 include a "Consent is Sexy" week, a series of courses in self-defense, and a "popcorn and perspectives" night where students can meet to discuss women in politics. The center continues to be active this year and is currently seeking submission for the next zine (*Rice Women's*).

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<sup>37</sup> In 1995 a group of female students who had been meeting regularly to discuss gender issues on campus decided to approach the Dean of Students about establishing a women's center on campus. In 1995 the project was past to new Student Activities Director Mona Hicks. She was able to secure a very small budget and founded the Women's Resource Center in 1996. The center was up and running in time for women's history month and offered several programs in celebration (Hicks).

*Conclusion: Writing as Resistance*

Returning to Dorothy Smith's conceptualization of ruling relations – it is hard to get away from this system, even in feminist texts that are writing as/in resistance to the forces that rule. As described in chapter 2, Smith and many other academic feminists worried about the consequences of institutionalizing feminism in academe. By Smith's account, the successes have out-weighted the compromises and failures. Still, there is a sense that academic feminism has become a part of the system, by way of its pervasiveness and political success—and I wonder if we have all been inoculated, in a way, against the transformative power of feminist discourse and activism on college campuses. This, in combination with its appropriation in pop culture, may make it very difficult to define a feminist stance that is located outside relations of ruling.

With BGC, the writers tried to address their specific concerns, but ultimately came to feel that, in that process, they could not say what they wanted to say because they were writing from within an articulation of feminism that they felt was too restrictive. At the same time, in my view, the students' desire to focus on sexuality and sexual images was due to the influence of pop culture—in other words, they were working in accordance with ruling relations, not against them. If we made sex and sexuality the central focus of our feminist publication and our feminist activism on campus, we would be perpetuating the gender dichotomy and its oppressive regime. By engaging in feminist discourse that does not lead with sex, we are creating feminist discourse that opens up the possibility of discussing sexism from outside that dichotomy. On Michigan Tech's campus, it is not useful or powerful to remind your audience that you are female. While this is a fact that feminists on campus aim to change, it is still a

fact and a significant point to consider when developing a strategy to counter sexist discourse on campus and facilitate change in campus culture.

The postfeminist narratives are also dominant, including assertions that female engineers tend to get slightly higher offers for their first job out of college, and where it's rumored that female engineering students tend to receive better financial aid packages. And further, there are circumstances where women are aggressively participating in their own exploitation by attending the drag show, the bra show, participating in the Winter Carnival Queen competition, or bragging about having multiple sexual partners over the course of a semester, a weekend, or a single evening. At the same time, the institutional fear of sexual assault and the increased attention to addressing this issue with online and in person trainings and other programs creates a heightened sense of awareness about the risk and possibility of engaging in sexual activity as a college student. In the end, I stand by the approach we developed with BGC, and I think it would be worth bringing back the publication. This, in combination with an annual zine, would provide opportunities for feminist activism that is not centrally concerned with students' sex lives. Despite pop culture narratives, students have other interests, and these should be cultivated. Students' writing about these other interests and concerns would serve as a way of resisting relations of ruling. Remember that these relations create a shared or homogenized narrative, carried out in and organized by the texts we engage in our everyday experiences and social interactions. For these reasons, Dorothy Smith writes about the importance of valuing and paying attention to women's actual, everyday experiences as a way to resist relations of ruling. Writing from this perspective can open up space for powerful, potentially transformative stories that reveal how ruling relations operate, from

the inside out. Stories that emerge from students' actual and everyday experiences on campus are examples of what Dorothy Smith envisioned as a means to resist and expose ruling relations.

And finally, in the spirit of feminist reflexivity, there are at least two points to address in relation the BGC/ UNDER\_WIRE writing projects described here. First, I think the real success of these publications was the confidence and voice it gave to the core group of writers. When I first proposed the idea of restarting TBT, none of the students really believed it was possible—and they had even less confidence in their ability to raise their voices against the sexist ideologies that shaped their everyday experiences as students on Michigan Tech's campus. Our first meeting lasted several hours mainly because everyone was afraid to speak, and no one wanted to take the lead on a project that, while exciting, seemed doomed to fail. Ultimately Megan stepped up to lead the group, and the change in her confidence and sense of self over the course of those two years was significant and wonderful to see. In addition, several of the students were able to use their writing to find internships, jobs, and other opportunities they might not have been able to secure otherwise. This is what we do in education—at least, this is what I like to think I'm doing here—that is, we create opportunities for learning and personal growth, in communities of support.

The second point, and less promising, is that I doubted my own judgment on the proposed change from BGC to UNDER\_WIRE, and I didn't ask for an outside perspective until it was too late. As I note in chapter 1, Adrienne Rich writes about the difficulty of pressing forward with feminist projects without knowing or having access to our feminist past. For this reason, histories of feminism are important to maintain and

recover. Further, feminists must work to create intergenerational communities of activists and scholars, to support one another and talk out our differences. Feminism is reflexive, but this process often means critiquing past generations or movements and at the same time positioning oneself in opposition to the past (Henry 12-15). The BGC students readily positioned themselves against the university, including feminist faculty. They wanted to situate themselves outside the relations of ruling, to produce a counter-hegemonic discourse that would be disruptive—but also foundational to building an anti-sexist campus community. This positioning, on the outskirts of the institution, is powerful in theory. But it is also precariously difficult to maintain. Students are transient residents in campus communities. They are not here to stay. I believe that student activism, or a bottom-up approach to changing campus culture, is necessary and relevant to the situation at Michigan Tech. But the question is, “How do you inspire that kind of activism on a campus where relations of ruling create the sense, as I described in chapter three, that sexism is funny and/or is just not an issue here?” And, “How do you maintain and build on feminist counter-hegemonic discourse as students come and go?” The feminist publications that emerged at Michigan Tech were created because students were fed up the everyday sexism that defines campus life—we were fed up because we had an understanding of ourselves as human beings, with rights to be treated with respect. We were fed up because we understood that sexism isn’t *right*. And really, that’s the bottom line. It’s not right to treat women this way; it’s not right to disparage femininity. Women are human, and femininity is a culturally constructed concept that describes some aspects of human experience. These are simple truths, but I think they are becoming harder for students to see because of the pervasiveness of postfeminist discourses that corroborate

Michigan Tech's flippant attitude about sexism. For all these reasons, Michigan Tech desperately needs student-initiated feminist publications on its campus.

## *Chapter 5 – A radical liberal feminism for engineering education*

### *Introduction*

In this dissertation, I have shown that student-initiated feminist publications can open up a forum for conversation about sexism and other forms of bias on campus, and that this forum can bring positive, incremental change to campus culture. These publications serve as a counter-hegemonic discourse that identifies, disrupts, and talks back to sexist discourses that often inhere in engineering education culture and postfeminist ideology and popular culture appropriations. These discourses perpetuate systems of oppression by organizing social life according to the gender dichotomy, wherein femininity is alternately disparaged and idealized as the essential nature of woman (de Beauvoir xv-xxv). Dorothy Smith's conceptualization of ruling relations offers a way to investigate the textual nature of these social oppressions. I have argued that sexism is perpetuated in the texts students encounter and create in their daily lives at Michigan Tech. Smith argued that our everyday lives are largely organized according to our interaction with texts—textual discourse shapes our activities and identities, but we are often willing agents in this process. In other words, through our interaction with texts, we create ourselves. Social media complicates the situation because of the paradoxically permanent and impermanent nature of digital texts.<sup>38</sup>

The situation is further complicated by the fact that campus culture is not the only source of sexism that students encounter. Institutional structures of every sort are built

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<sup>38</sup> For example, comments on Twitter are archived and the discourse lives on, while comments on Yik Yak are fleeting, and promoted or disappeared according to their congruity with dominant ideologies shared among the community of users.



upon sexist economic, political, and cultural frameworks where the understanding was that women would do the unpaid work of house and childcare, where the expression of femininity was only allowed and valued in that context, and where men did the work of managing and building everything else in the public sphere. Women's economic disadvantage in these systems continues to be significant, even as men make claims of discrimination when a woman received "his job," or the job to which he felt entitled.<sup>39</sup> Men's anger, or sense of aggrieved entitlement, is palpable in conservative talk radio programs, gun shows, and men's rights conventions (*Angry* 1-3, 31-32, 122-23). At the same time, media and entertainment sources promulgate the pornification of popular culture, including hypersexualized images of women, and a reinvention of "feminism" as a solipsistic sense of entitlement to personal pleasure and self-expression at all costs.

Institutional, or top-down efforts to "improve" campus culture at MTU operate in accordance with narratives born of equality feminism and its call to make women and men entirely equal in law and life. The quest for gender balance on campus, and especially in engineering programs and computer science, is also guided by implicit assumptions about women and the so-called "civilizing" affect they have on social life. A study at Olin College of Engineering, conversely, shows that achieving gender parity on

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<sup>39</sup> Household management and childcare continues to fall largely on women's shoulders. The lack of corporate, governmental, or social accommodations for the realities of childcare and household management make it impossible for many women to advance in their fields at the same pace as men who have women at home to attend them. Recent trends in women's employment in the US show that the percentage of women working full time is now falling, and some have speculated that this is due in part to increasing costs for childcare and lack of alternative work schedules (Miller, Alderman). Women and men alike should have the opportunity to care for children and home, but again, financial realities and social mores continue to make that choice impossible for all but the wealthiest couples.

an engineering campus does not resolve sexist behaviors and ideologies in student life. Instead, a program to raise awareness of individual unconscious bias proved more successful (Chachra 017). Unconscious bias, of course, is due to biases embedded in our cultural practices, our institutions, and beliefs. We are not aware of these biases, as they persist in our language and patterns of thought—in other words, they are the internalized, embodied result of ruling relations. Michigan Tech provides training in unconscious bias for new faculty—this in tandem with continued bottom-up feminist student activism, may provide a useful framework for bringing real change to campus life.

In this dissertation, I have examined student-initiated feminist publications as a form of feminist activism against sexist discourse that circulates on Michigan Tech's campus. Specifically, this textually-based activism serves as a way to counter the relations of ruling—which are also perpetuated in texts. Unfortunately, this type of activism is difficult to maintain on college campuses. Students transition out of the university every four or five years, and the dominant discourses on campus and in popular culture make it difficult for many students to see that sexism is a problem here. The installation of a feminist studies program could provide a permanent home for student-run feminist publications. But the university has shown no interest in funding this type of program. Further, as shown in chapters two and four, there is some concern that academic feminism is tempered. In other words, by becoming an academic discipline it has lost its radical, activist edge. This concern is warranted, but it also ignores the fact that the classroom is a transformative space. Further, the feminist texts that we use in our classrooms—*Sister Outsider*, “Redstockings Manifesto,” *A Room of One's Own*, *This Bridge Called My Back*, and so many others—cannot be tempered. Yes, academic

feminism may participate in relations of ruling by way of the orthodoxy it has created—such that one can claim to be a good or, as Roxane Gay writes, a “bad feminist.” But I recognize, also, the power of the counter-hegemonic discourse that feminist studies courses and texts can bring to this campus. A feminist studies program can provide students with a better understanding of the successes in our past and projects we need to develop for the future—particularly in the contexts of women’s advance in STEM. As shown briefly in chapter two, there is a rich history of women’s invention and advances in the sciences, math, engineering, and technology. These women can serve as inspiration and as role models to current and future students—if students can have the opportunity to learn about them. A feminist studies program can serve as counter-hegemonic discourse to the co-opted, commercialized, pop/porn culture feminist discourse that is familiar to many students here and that creates so much animosity and misunderstanding between the sexes. In short, the establishment of a feminist studies program can serve as a catalyst for student activism that brings critical and lasting change to campus life.

*Implications for feminist theory, research method, and practice*

The larger implications for feminist theory are at least two. First, this research is suggestive of the need to critically examine the relationship between feminism and pop culture. My claim is that feminism has been co-opted in the media, and this cooptation has produced a version of “feminism” that seems inconsistent with its long-running liberatory and social justice-inspired goals. Rather than operating as a counter-hegemonic narrative, pop culture feminist discourse (or fictions of feminist discourse) has been incorporated in the relations of ruling. An examination of this issue need not wade into the debate about “what counts as feminism” or judge who is a feminist and who is not.

Rather, it would more usefully be directed at re-articulating feminist goals and ambitions and cultivating grassroots movements interested in actualizing those goals. Simple questions can drive this process. 1. Given what feminist movement has accomplished for people, what remains to be done? 2. How should feminists proceed? In addition, we need to consider the possibility that equality feminism may not provide a successful theoretical framework for ending sexist oppression. There have been, and continue to be good reasons to make feminist arguments on the basis of political equality. For example, women must have equal rights in suffrage and the right to equal pay for equal work. But applied more broadly, equality feminism has opened the door for women to become, in the words of Ariel Levy (2006), “chauvinist pigs.” Equality feminism holds that men and women should be entirely equal in all respects, legal and otherwise. This means an equal number of women in politics and an equal number of women in prison. It means an equal number of women in the boardroom and an equal number as pornographers. The call for equality overlooks radical feminists’ call to dismantle structural forms of oppression embedded in our economies, our politics, and our cultural practices. Again, for radical feminists, the goal is not to make the current systems better or more equal; it is to remake or build new systems—economic, political, cultural—that allow for the cultivation of human capabilities. The argument is that women will not find liberation from sexism in systems where sexism is foundational or fundamental to their operation. Still, the call to upend our cultural and social systems is, for lack of a better word, scary. More measured approaches may be warranted. Toward this end, a consideration of Martha Nussbaum’s liberal feminism is instructive. In *Sex and Social Justice*, Nussbaum advances a feminist vision based on a humanist sense of justice, including a call for individual rights to well

being (3-25). Hers is a not quite radical vision of feminism, calling for a “human capabilities” framework as the ground from which new and revised public policy could be advanced. Implementation of strategic policy change over time could eventually upend sexist institutions, but as a process and incrementally. In this sense, Nussbaum’s approach might be characterized as pragmatic. First, it recognizes that systems of oppression are, unfortunately, critical to everyday workings of our culture. It is not a good idea to suggest that we immediately dismantle or abandon our economic systems, or walk away from our current system of education. Many, many people would suffer if these systems are suddenly and dramatically dismantled. But we can create a feminist vision of what anti-sexist systems of economics and education, for example, would look like. This vision should not be utopian, but it should be grounded in the belief that each human has the right to basic human functioning, and the right to the development of all human capabilities.

The second advantage to Nussbaum’s approach is that it begins from an assumption of human sameness<sup>40</sup> that all people share—that is, the idea that all humans have “equal worth.” Equal worth is different from the *equal in everything* narrative that I find problematic in equality feminism. Instructively, Nussbaum characterizes her argument in this way: “Human beings have a dignity that deserves respect from laws and social institutions. . . . rich and poor, rural and urban, female and male, all are equally

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<sup>40</sup> The idea of sameness is problematic for many feminists, and necessarily so, because of the way it was applied in some contexts. Women of color, lesbians, and women living in poverty or in the developing world, have rightly identified that much feminist writing and theorizing orients from the position of white and middle or upper class women (Nussbaum 5-6). This kind of writing tends to assume that there is a singular “women’s experience” that all women share.

deserving of respect, just in virtue of being human, and this respect should not be abridged on account of a characteristic that is distributed by the whims of fortune” (5). The sense of equality, then, is concerned with human dignity and respect. The “characteristic” that has proved so problematic for women, that has challenged this sense of equal worth, is femininity. Femininity *as difference* is the cultural construct that has allowed for the oppression of women and others who embody or enact it. Importantly, we should acknowledge, again, that conceptions of femininity vary from culture to culture, and even within individual cultures, and across time. In that sense, there is no single conception of femininity and feminine-based oppression continues to manifest in myriad and differing forms. But the premise of *equal worth* can be applied across cultures and genders as a way to acknowledge the innate dignity of each person, as a way to make arguments for the protection of basic human rights and to envision a society that supports the development of core human capabilities. Specifically, Nussbaum’s outlines the following ten items as “central human function capabilities” that should be protected and made available to all people:

1. Life: “Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length.”
2. Bodily health and integrity: “Being able to have good health, including reproductive health ...”
3. Bodily integrity: “Being able to move freely from place to place; being able to be secure against violent assault ... having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choices in matters of reproduction ...”
4. Senses, imagination, thought: “Being able to use the senses; being able to imagine, to think, and to reason ...”

5. Emotions: “Being able to have attachments to things and persons outside of ourselves ...”
6. Practical reason: “Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s own life ...”
7. Affiliation: “Being able to live for and in relation to others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings ... Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation ...”
8. Other species: “Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature”
9. Play: “Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities”
10. Control of one’s political and material environment: “Being able to participate effectively in the political choices that govern one’s life ... having the right to seek employment on the equal basis with others ...” (41).

The protection of individuals’ rights to cultivate these capabilities, for Nussbaum, can form the basis of a just society. Further, this approach provides a checklist that we can use to gauge the extent to which individuals in our type of society are being treated with equal worth. For example, on Michigan Tech’s campus, many women lack the functional capability of affiliation—mainly in the sense that they don’t have “social bases” for self-respect and non-humiliation.” We know also, based on comments in social media and student-run publications on campus, that many women and black students here don’t feel secure against violence and other forms of aggression. From a methods standpoint, a researcher could apply this list to a given social context or event—to social life on Michigan Tech’s campus, for example—and then proceed with an analysis that can

provide specific, concrete evidence of instances where students' equal worth in not being protected. With this evidence, students and faculty could develop strategies to address the problems that have been identified. These strategies would necessarily include textual approaches and the creation of counter-hegemonic discourses, given that femininity and feminine-based oppression are largely constructed and circulated in texts, and given that many of the items on the capabilities list would stereotypically be characterized as feminine (including having *emotional attachment*, using sense and *imagining*, and *showing concern*). Feminist research, publications, and forums for debate are all essential to creating a campus culture that is infused with anti-sexist discourse and that supports human dignity and equal worth. In this way, and combined with Smith's conceptualization of ruling relations, the approach to improving Michigan Tech's campus culture for women extends far beyond the equality feminist argument or the assertion that we simply need to bring more women to campus.

*Implications for STEM education: The problem of inclusion*

If colleges really want to address sexism in academe and in campus culture, they have to change not only their policies, but also their educational philosophies and – gradually—the structure of the institution itself. Some attempts have been made at Michigan Tech and elsewhere, as far as providing on-campus childcare, parental leave, and private rooms for pumping breast milk or nursing on campus. Still, you cannot simply insert females into a sexist structure and assume that sexism is going to be eradicated. With the 1972 Education Act, women entered colleges in droves, and since the early 1980s, there have been more women in most undergrad programs than men. The realities of women's everyday lives, including care of children and household, are not



accounted for in many rigid programs of study. Certainly, if men had shared these responsibilities, or if women had been allowed a greater role in cultivating current systems of education, these everyday concerns might have been accommodated. As Virginia Woolf imagined Shakespeare's sister, feminists can and have imagined what an alternative education framework might look like. Two examples include bell hooks' discussion of her elementary school education as a practice of freedom and empowerment (1-3), and Adrienne Rich's vision of a "woman-centered university" (*Lies, Secrets* 125-155).

As an elementary school student, hooks was educated in an all-black school, mostly by black female teachers who were determined to help students experience learning as "revolution." For hooks, education "was fundamentally political because it was rooted in antiracist struggle." She writes, "We learned early that our devotion to learning, to a life of the mind, was a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization" (2). Part of the special character of her early education was also in the fact that her teachers knew each student individually, including their families and what their home life was like. The educational experience was comprehensive in the sense that it was linked to community and place, with the greater goals of liberation and revolution. Education was not a form of indoctrination, but it was a means to encounter challenging ideas, and challenging those ideas in the process of coming to understand yourself and your world more fully. hooks goes on to explain that her experience of education in a racially integrated school was utterly different—mainly in that education was disconnected from community and the cultivation of individuals' strengths and sense of self-worth. Instead, integrated education was about the sending and

receiving of information. Teachers delivered the information, students received it and sent it back in the form of tests and papers and presentations. hooks found the experience deeply disappointing—even more so because this style of education continued through her undergraduate and graduate studies. As a college professor, hooks endeavored to emulate her early elementary school teachers by getting to know each student, creating the classroom as a community of learning, and bringing the “excitement” and “danger” of challenging ideas into classroom discussions and assignments (2-12). Her articulation of “engaged pedagogy” applies very clearly to courses in the humanities. The question is, “Can we apply engaged pedagogy to the STEM classroom?” Specifically, can this approach to education be applied in engineering education? For one, I think the overarching frame that education should be about liberation, freedom, and revolution is applicable. As mentioned in previous chapters, engineering education is largely about equipping students to fill roles in the corporate sector. But this sector is plagued with embedded sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia. Moreover, its ambition and objective is mainly economic growth at almost any cost. But, also as mentioned earlier, engineering education has recently been directed at humanitarian projects. Michigan Tech is not a stranger to this concept, given its Peace Corps Master’s programs and its chapter of Engineers Without Borders. The Pavlis Honors College also supports students in the implementation of engineering projects in areas of need in several countries around the world. But, I would argue that a significantly increased portion of engineering education could be directed according to hooks’ philosophy of engaged pedagogy, in the form of addressing human needs. In this place, in Keweenaw County for example, almost 16 percent of people live below the poverty line (“Keweenaw County”). Consequently,

there are families and individuals who live in crumbling buildings with poor or no heat, others who have difficulty traveling to and from work because of snow and the cost of vehicle maintenance, and some who struggle to obtain food because of the high cost of groceries (due to transportation expenses)—and because the limited growing season poses challenges to farming. All of these problems could be studied and addressed from within the engineering classroom. Students could be set to work—learning about and applying engineering principles—to develop plausible solutions to these problems. This type of place-based education has the potential to build community among local residents and members of campus, and it could allow for education here to be revolutionary—rather preserving of systems of inequity and injustice.

As for Adrienne’s Rich vision of the non-sexist university, her articulation is similar to hooks in that she advocates replacing dominant ideologies that support oppression with non-sexist discourse and practices that fosters revolution. Rich makes specific recommendations to address what she characterizes as masculinist elitism associated with higher education—including the assertion that women from local communities should be invited into universities as students (141), as should the workingwomen (and men) who clean the buildings and serve student meals (150-51). Specifically, male and female staff should be given paid time off to audit university courses, to use the libraries, and to receive “academic counseling.” (150). The benefits of these strategies are multiple, including “a great deal of reciprocal education ... as women of very different backgrounds and shades of opinion beg[i]n to meet, hold discussions, and discover their common ground” (151). Again, returning to Michigan Tech’s campus and community, there certainly would be benefits to implementing these strategies. For

example, in conversation with a local resident recently, she remarked that it is not only the university that is sexist, but the greater community also shares many of the same ideologies. Also, speaking my personal experience of having lived four years in Michigan Tech's family housing, Daniell Heights, I know there are many women—wives of current students—who are very isolated in their homes. The Canterbury House, fortunately, provides language services and other community events, but the university could do more to welcome and provide communities of learning and support for these women.

Some of Rich's other recommendations are now in effect at Michigan Tech today, at least in part, and at other universities. She is significantly concerned with the extent to which the university can and should provide high quality childcare for student parents, and includes the suggestion that well-baby clinics and parent support groups should be among the services offered (149). She also imagines the usefulness of a law clinic and psychological counseling services—again, available to students, staff, and in some cases, members of the community. Perhaps in Michigan Tech's case, the university could provide a clinic for car or bicycle repair, with an enclosed space and tools to work on one's vehicle, either alone or in collaboration with an expert overseeing the project.

In any case, Rich's discussion of a woman-centered university is mainly a history and analysis of higher education as a masculinist, sexist institution. She writes, "What we have at present is a man-centered university, a breeding ground not of humanism, but of masculine privilege" (127). She goes on to discuss masculinity and femininity in this context, noting that femininity should be available to men, and citing Herbert Marcuse's predication that the men of the future will be more feminized (130). Specifically, she considers whether the "feminine principle" might be the "salvation of the species," or to

counter “the failure of masculine culture ... characterized by depersonalization, fragmentation, waste, artificial scarcity, and emotional shallowness, not to mention its suicidal obsession with power and technology as ends rather than as means” (130). In this way, a woman-centered university would help bring the feminine principle into culture incrementally and with each new graduating student. What is unclear in her analysis, however—and what is potentially problematic—is whether or not Rich aligns femininity with women and masculinity with men in some essential way. Certainly she sees femininity as favorable to masculinity—and she indicates, as seen above, that men can be either masculine or feminine according to personal choice or education. Likewise, she issues an injunction to women against conforming to the university’s masculinist culture of aggression and control. I think a wholesale rejection of masculinity is problematic. Some of the characteristics that are stereotypically associated with masculinity are on Nussbaum’s list of central human functional capabilities, including the right to *recreation*, to have *control* over one’s environment and personal property, and the use of *practical reason*. Like femininity, masculinity is a concept that describes part of human experience. Importantly, Rich argues that a shift away from male or masculine-centered education, “will ultimately mean an opening-out of intellectual challenges for men who are emotionally mature and intuitively daring enough to recognize the extent to which man-centered culture has limited and blindered them” (*Lies, Secrets* 128). This is the argument in favor of cultivating femininity or valuing femininity in the context of engineering education, and at Michigan Tech specifically—but not to the exclusion of the masculine.

*Cultivating emotional capabilities*

Feminism has shown us that women, like men, have a right to the development of their capabilities – which means we need to examine the ways we think about public life, including education. Changes to public policy can (and have, in part) address this issue, and discussion about how best to fund and design educational programs are ongoing—but usually the impetus for discussion is economic. Many policies address equity in education and the workplace, including the 1963 Equal Pay Act, the Education Amendments of 1972, and the 2010 Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act. From a radical feminist standpoint, however, the question is not, “How do we put women into positions traditionally held by men?” Rather, it is “How do we create new systems with new positions and new objectives?” As mentioned earlier, hooks argues that education must be about helping students and professors to develop as people, learning to transgress the boundaries of race, gender, class, sexuality and other forms of difference tend to separate us. In this conceptualization, professors are healers and facilitators of community. In working together toward what hooks characterizes as “self-actualization,” we become better equipped to address social inequity and other forms of oppression. Certainly this is an idealistic orientation to education, and she admits the difficulty of this approach to teaching (13-22). But it is a line of thought worth following because it offers a way to re-imagine college education and campus culture at Michigan Tech. Engineering education is about producing employable workers, but how could it be about equipping people to develop their capabilities and also to change the current systems of oppression? As mentioned above, Nussbaum provides a framework for developing public policy that allows people to develop their capabilities – which she conceives of as a human right.

She writes, “[t]he aim of public policy is the production of combined capabilities. This means promoting the states of the person by providing the necessary education and care; it also means preparing the environment so that it is favorable for the exercise of practical reason and other major functions” (44). Importantly, “Emotion” is a basic human capability, which means

being able to have attachments to things and persons outside ourselves; being able to love those who love and care for us; being able to grieve at their absence; in general, being able to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger; not having one’s emotional developing blighted by fear or anxiety” (41).

Education can be about cultivating this sense of self and community.<sup>41</sup> But in our culture today, in accordance with the gender dichotomy, care and emotion and working for the greater good—these are all feminine characteristics or values.<sup>42</sup> My point is that sexism is ruining our abilities—men’s and women’s—to cultivate our capabilities. Or, put more dramatically, to be fully human. Again, this problem is a function of our current inability to value women and/or feminine qualities anywhere but in the home or as a commodity for sale or trade. At heart is the cultural insistence that femininity must function as the dichotomous and subordinated other to masculinity (de Beauvoir xix). The dichotomy

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<sup>41</sup> But again—the system of education was for men, for the preservation of patriarchal systems, built on the backs of women and others who were excluded.

<sup>42</sup> Discussions about how to get more women involved in engineering routinely arrive at the assertion that engineering programs should market the engineering professions as “helping professions” because we continue to operate under the gender-based assumption that women innately harbor the feminine desire to help (or said another way, we have decided that helping is a feminine characteristic).

maintains the public and private, masculine and feminine, emotion and rationality, as distinctly separate. The reality of human experience is that men must be able to develop a depth of emotional capability, just as women can develop their reason and rationality.

*Justice: Feminism's Moral Center*

In chapter four, I briefly discussed an article written by a student at UCLA where she argues that there is a difference between what is feminist and what is moral—and I would argue this is another issue that feminists today need to give critical consideration. We know that feminists have a long-running suspicion of morality in the context of religious doctrine and philosophical inquiry, and rightly so. The abuses committed against women in the name of religion are, and continue to be, nothing short of barbaric. In Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (1985), she articulates a feminine spirituality that is usefully employed for women who seek an away from the almost ubiquitous construct of god as a male or masculine entity. Feminist philosophers like Luce Irigaray, Elizabeth Spelman and Simone de Beauvoir have tried to recover women from the obscurity and abuse they typically suffer in canons of philosophy. Still, some women struggle with potentially essentialist implications that emerge from some of these orientations; others are not interested in invoking a religious or philosophical framework for cultivating moral sensibility. Regardless, I argue against the assertion that feminism does not (or cannot) have a moral center. Feminism's central, critical project is to free women (and others) from oppression or discrimination on the basis of the gender dichotomy or feminine characteristics. In this sense, feminism has a moral ground – it is justice. Feminism is grounded in women's realization that they are oppressed because they are women—and that's not *right*. Feminism is grounded in this



recognition of justice if we trace back to its origin as the *woman movement* and the early struggle for the right to vote. An integral part of this movement was not only that women should win suffrage, but also that blacks should be freed from slavery. With justice at its core, feminism must necessarily critique and often run in opposition to neocapitalist oppression of women and others according to class, and pop/porn culture commodification of femininity. With feminist and civil rights movements, our understanding of human rights and social justice have changed significantly in the past 150 years, but our systems of government and economics and education have not changed enough. Nussbaum's call for a capabilities approach to changes in public policy, based on the assumption that all humans have equal worth, offers a plausible path for creating change. The radical vision of the future is one where femininity and masculinity are both valued as relevant and meaningful characteristics of human experience, and where they are not essentially or exclusively tied to female and male bodies respectively. In tandem, the liberal approach is one where we set out a series of accomplishable steps to achieve the radical vision. In universities, we can begin by acknowledging the problem—revealing the way power circulates and obscures oppression in textually-mediated discourse. This is one step. We can continue the process by calling for more courses in feminist studies, or bringing disciplinarily appropriate feminist texts into our classes. We can petition the university to take women's history month seriously—to bring in speakers and hold workshops for students to write and discuss gender in the context of their own lives and areas of study. We can support feminist activist writing, from our students and our colleagues, and present our writing and research at conferences here and elsewhere. We can request data from the Center for Teaching and Learning on

student teaching evaluations, to investigate whether women are receiving fair or gender-biased reviews. We can seek grants, or create an endowment, that would support professorships in feminist studies, and/or a feminist studies center—this as a way to have dedicated physical space for women on campus to gather, write, and learn together. The center could also have a library and serve as a repository of women’s history and feminist activism at the university. There are many more steps we can and should imagine—the road to revolution is long. Following this version of radical liberal feminism, however, it is not interminable.

#### *Potential for future research*

A future research project that might emerge from this research would be a nationwide study of student-initiated feminist publications. While I found few publications similar to BGC or TBT, I was inspired by the reception that I received among librarians when I posed the question of whether or not their campus had a student-initiated feminist publication, either now and at any point in the past. Most of the librarians went to great lengths to track down possible examples—most came up empty-handed, but there were several publications that would be worth pursuing in greater depth. Purdue’s *Femgineer* and *Womengineer* are two examples. Apparently these publications run for a number of years and are today preserved in the Purdue libraries. Out of twenty colleges surveyed, very few had feminist students writing as activists on their campuses. The question of when and why these publications emerge is important to consider and remains a critical question to which I do not have a clear answer. Davina Palone’s reasons for starting a feminist newsletter were clear, but many students face this kind of situation in predominantly male programs all the time, but they do not often opt to found a feminist

publication. Importantly, the circumstances at Michigan Tech may be different from many STEM campuses in that it houses a large humanities department with faculty and graduates nationally known for their work in gender studies. With Rich, I maintain that feminist research and teaching is critical to cultivating a sense that femininity is, or can be, a valued and central component to education and campus life. Further, a study of feminist texts could provide, using Smith's conception of ruling relations, a view into how power is organized, and potentially resisted, in those locations. For all its challenges and difficulties, the university remains a meaningful and powerful space to engage radical ideas and envision ways to solve the social problems that plague. Feminine-based oppression is among the most pressing issues that we face as a human society. Much work remains.

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