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ABSTRACT A Life of Its Own: Gender, Humanism, and Hospitality

This presentation is part of an ongoing project examining the trend of assigning gender to artificial intelligence (AI) technologies through naming. As feminized AI objects like Siri and Alexa become ever more integral to daily digital life, and as headlines warning of the dangers of AI-powered surveillance and automation become ever more prominent front-page fixtures, an inquiry into the rhetoric of these technologies is timely and urgent. Furthermore, human attitudes and actions toward AI offer an interesting lens through which to evaluate, and ultimately reject, long-held tenets of humanism. In this presentation, I will explore a genealogy of forced feminization that begins with a Classical myth, moves through an Edwardian-era drama, and ends with an early AI. Using the concepts of conditional and absolute hospitality laid out by Jacques Derrida in his 1996 lecture “Foreigner Question,” I argue that gendering technology through naming not only reinforces dangerous hierarchies of humanness, but also points to humanism’s transhistoric and unjust reliance on discrimination.

The genealogy I explore starts with the mythological Pygmalion who prays to bring the idealized feminine sculpture Galatea to life. George Bernard Shaw then uses the name *Pygmalion* as the title of his 1913 play in which working-class woman Eliza Doolittle learns to alter her diction and enunciation in order to assimilate into the middle class under the tutelage of Dr. Henry Higgins. Finally, Eliza Doolittle’s name is picked up in 1966 by Dr. Joseph Weizenbaum when he unveils ELIZA: an early natural language processing program. The computing breakthrough that ELIZA represents is the ability to translate between machine language (based on a binary system) and human language (with its tangled grammars and syntaxes).

This is a genealogy of learning to speak while being dehumanized within a rhetoric of feminization. Galatea, Eliza Doolittle, and ELIZA are all forced into language by their creators/teachers in order to be discriminated against. Pygmalion’s Galatea has no agency in Ovid’s account; she is brought to life as a domestic and sexual servant to her creator. When Eliza Doolittle’s linguistic acumen starts to rival her teacher’s, they argue violently, and she leaves his house. When the conversations that ELIZA has with human experimenters begins to foster affective connection unforeseen by Weizenbaum, he promptly shuts down the program.

In this presentation, I will draw upon the experiences of these feminized entities, linked through naming practices, to argue for a posthumanist approach and to illustrate two realities: feminization is used as a method of oppression within a humanist framework, and absolute hospitality--as described by Derrida--is not possible if “humanness” is a standard by which we decide which Others to welcome and which to exclude.