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ABSTRACT: Hey Siri, What Are the Rhetorical Implications of Feminized A.I.?

In this presentation, I will explore the way harmful rhetorics of feminization are reproduced through the anthropomorphization of machine learning technology. In particular, I will argue that the feminization (through naming and voicing) of personal assistants like Siri and Alexa not only draw on misogynist rhetorics that figure the feminine as servile, but also reinforce them through continued use. This double action is a result of a humanist notion of rhetorical subjectivity: if an interlocutor needs to appear humanlike in order to be engaging to human users, then the *type* of human it mimics reveals not only that a hierarchy of humanness exists, but also where that type of human sits within that hierarchy.

Scholarship combining cultural criticism and technology studies has demonstrated that implicit biases of developers are both reproduced in their A.I.-driven algorithms and magnified through the rapid processing afforded by machine-learning (Criado Perez 2019; Noble 2018; Wachter-Boettcher 2017). This is particularly dangerous when these technologies operate within systems that are already imbricated in gendered and racialized injustice (Costanza-Chock 2018; Eubanks 2018). Existing literature accounts for the encoding of these biases, though it does not frame that process as rhetorical. I will use the example of feminized AI to argue for an expansion of our understanding of rhetorical agency and for the importance of working toward that expansiveness.

This presentation will follow the efforts of scholars who understand subjectivity as a mutable, shared condition allowing human interlocutors to engage in rhetorical relations with each other and with nonhuman entities (Barnett and Boyle 2016; Rickert 2013). Their insights support my description of the way our interactions with feminized AI objects (re)produce oppressive rhetoric. Viewing feminized smart technologies through a posthuman rhetorical lens not only contributes an example of nonhuman subjectivity in rhetorical intra-action, it also underlines the urgency of the posthumanist project more broadly.