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Book Review of *Feminist Technical Communication: Apparent Feminisms, Slow Crisis, and the Deepwater Horizon Disaster:* Erin Clark, Utah State University Press, 2023.

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Feminist technical communication: Apparent feminisms, slow crises, and the deepwater horizon disaster.
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https://upcolorado.com/utah-state-university-press/item/6501-feminist-technical-communication

Erin Clark's *Feminist Technical Communication: Apparent Feminisms, Slow Crisis, and the Deepwater Horizon Disaster* theorizes a flexible and temporary feminism for technical communicators based on an expanded framing of efficiency as the cornerstone of effective technical communication. As the first book of its kind, *Feminist Technical Communication* situates feminism as imperative to ethical and efficient technical communication and as equally supportive of the social justice turn within the field. An expert in technical communication, investigative journalism, and rhetoric and composition, Dr. Erin Clark interrogates issues of gender and feminism that intersect with risk communication and the rhetorics of health and medicine. This specific case study of the Deepwater Horizon Disaster, published in 2023 but first written about by Clark in 2010, examines just one of many crises that impact human health far beyond the boundaries of the data collected, reports written, or public statements made. Her study uncovers the influences, impacts, consequences, and results that are often overlooked in the name of efficient crisis response. In doing so, she highlights the prioritization of economic and ecologic concerns over human health results in short- and long-term impacts that are disproportionately experienced by marginalized communities. The current political, social, and technological landscape is fraught with hegemony and misogyny intertwined with power. Feminism's cause is seen as resolved. Technology increasingly seeps into all facets of communication. Apparent feminisms can draw attention to problematic power dynamics and hidden agendas. This book calls for technical communicators to critically analyze and learn from slow crises with a feminist orientation that values embodiment and dynamic movement to improve their contributions to health communication before, during, and after crises occur.

In *Feminist Technical Communication,* Clark argues that feminisms are necessary for all technical communication, not simply as an add-on or special issue consideration. Technical communicators often find themselves involved in producing or analyzing documentation related to crises. However, there is a long-standing misconception of technical documentation as objective, which obscures biases, misogyny, and oppression behind a mask of neutrality. Apparent feminisms stretch technical communicators to reconsider what counts as a crisis in environmental or health disasters and how to approach risk, prevention, and disaster responses. Clark claims this methodology is needed because it offers inclusivity, reflexivity, and constructive criticism, all of which increase usefulness and efficiency and invite technical communicators into feminist practices without needing to call themselves "feminists." Apparent feminisms are flexible, permeable, and temporary – the goal is transformative action. To accomplish that, intervention is needed to make apparent interdisciplinary feminisms and then to contribute to them. *Feminist Technical Communication* documents feminist work within technical communication and introduces a new framework of efficiency that critically analyzes oppressive strategies within crisis communication and uplifts the voices of those most impacted by social injustices like the Deepwater Horizon Disaster.

In the first half of the book, Clark makes apparent the problems with relying on certain origin stories within technical communication. She reimagines a partial history through an apparent feminist lens to highlight the contributions women have made to the field. In doing so, she expands ideas about core concepts, such as expert, technical, and documentation. From there, Clark draws connections between anti-choice legislation and reproductive justice issues leading up to and following the Deepwater Horizon Disaster. This move exemplifies how apparent feminisms can be "methodologies that seek to recognize and make apparent the urgent and sometimes hidden exigencies for feminist critique of contemporary technical rhetorics" (p. 39). Such methodologies are needed for technical communicators to intervene in unfair, unequitable, or oppressive documentation perpetuated as objective. Clark shows this through analysis of the Texas Women's Right to Know Act and similar laws, suggesting interventions that support reproductive justice and other social justice issues. The main goals of apparent feminism are to show that feminist intervention is needed, and where, to foster connections and coalitions with non-feminists, and to make apparent the relation that feminism and efficiency have (p. 41). This approach builds on the feminist work already undertaken in technical communication, as well as interdisciplinary support from rhetorical studies, Indigenous environmental studies, cultural theories, anthropology, queer theory, and transnational feminism. When technical communicators focus less on low time and energy rate and more on people across diverse identities and how they can interact with the communicative deliverables being produced, interventions for social justice can be made.

Building on this foundation, readers are introduced to the notion of slow crisis as "an event that produces exigences but that unfolds on a temporal basis" (p. 75). Through a rhetorical view of risk, Clark critiques mainstream analysis of and engagement with risk, which often fail to recognize the connections between ecology, economy, and human health. Recounting the story of Peggy Stewart, who killed her abusive husband in fear for her life, Clark rhetorically interrogates at what point an event is deemed a crisis, for whom, for what reasons, and with what implications. By expanding or queering how time is considered, a crisis becomes a slow manifestation of crises and extends accountability for agents of violence. Queer time, paired with queer, feminist, and rhetorical theories of embodiment, shifts efficiency from a panic to quickly "fix" a crisis to a genuine care for the embodied experiences that happen over the span of a crisis.

In the second half of the book, Clark analyzes the Deepwater Horizon Disaster of 2010, the fifth largest oil spill in history. Traditional technical documentation's reliance on removing materiality from crisis in the name of expediating efficiency is juxtaposed with an apparent feminist's concern for the embodied experiences of people most impacted by crises. In this multi-method research study, Clark gathered information through archival research, performed textual analysis, and incorporated experiential and community knowledges to map communicative events after the oil spill in Dauphin Island, Alabama. Artifacts across genres represented differences in local, national, and international responses to the disaster. International and national responses focused on spreading information and narratives to residents. Alternatively, local responses sought to share their experiences with national and international audiences by more ephemeral medias that were less likely to be archived. On Clark's second research trip in 2013, her investigative journalist techniques were met with resistance and an audience's lack of knowledge. Her findings suggest that information about

potential health impacts of the oil spill and public health services for those impacted were hard to find, absent, and/or inaccessible. Critical exploration of these transcultural flows of communication (p. 95) revealed the value placed on economy first, then on ecology, leaving value for human health far behind. This allowed for an appearance of efficient crisis management and removed long-term blame or responsibility.

Following this, Clark applies an apparent feminist approach to analyzing the flows of communication to make apparent the connections between human health, ecology, and economy. In doing so, she solidifies the need for an efficiency model that centers people, not time. This transcultural analysis by Clark lays out the complicated relations between local and non-local communications, values, and identities and decenters corporate or government communications. It also makes apparent the experiences of residents that are largely missing from the documented communication that happened before, during, and after the Deepwater Horizon Disaster. Transcultural analysis of divergent flows of communication contextualizes technical documentation as subjective and steeped in cultural values. It also redistributes power across communicative acts by diverse agents with various purposes, cultural values, and perspectives. Clark concludes with a call to action for apparent feminists: we must actively contribute to pursuits for social justice and prepare for the risks that come along with being a feminist. She answers her own call by tracing new potential "origins" of the Deepwater Horizon Disaster and by documenting some of the women working with residents' health issues. Both in pursuit of social justice and in modeling efficiency, those with greater agency are called in to do more work and to make apparent the work of those with lesser agency.

This study adds a unique layer to healthcare and risk communications by considering how risk and human health issues are, or are not, communicated in relation to ecological and economic impacts of environmental disasters. By applying an apparent feminist efficiency model, technical communicators can expand the concepts focused on and the language used to communicate for the best results from the intended audiences. Clark is not claiming an objective framework. She is seeking a more flexible and dynamic framework for responding to crises and disasters that would be concerned not only with restoring economic or ecological balance, but also with restoring human health. Clark's soundness of methods and scholarship mirrors the overall approach of apparent feminism in the balance of field-specific information and methods with inter- and extra-disciplinary knowledges and practices. She gathers artifacts across local, regional, and international contexts in a transcultural and interdisciplinary approach that offers a more complicated, and thus more accurate, mapping of a crisis event. Throughout, she signals her own perspective, privileges, and potential shortcomings as an imperfect human being. This move signals to technical communicators that objectivity is not the goal: transparency is. Clark carefully includes many perspectives while being transparent about the impossibility of delivering justice to everyone and everything. It is not easy to attend to all voices across related disciplines; however, *Feminist Technical Communication* does significant citation justice work, representing feminists in and out of academia and representing marginalized and underrepresented scholars in and adjacent to technical communication.

Some readers may question Clark's references to feminism and to reproductive justice. Scholars from feminist and gender studies may question some of the citational stories told here, or what is still not made apparent. For instance, limiting feminism to waves is often a move that garners

critique from Black feminists and Transnational feminists. Still, the choice may be helpful to an audience less familiar with feminism as it offers a basic understanding of feminist work as it intersected with technical communication over time. Other readers invested in reproductive justice may question Clark's connections to the movement in this book, especially as she claimed to "[take] up reproductive justice as a way to show where apparent feminisms came from" (pp. 36-37). There could have been a clearer connection between the Deepwater Horizon Disaster and the impacts on reproductive or sexual health and wellness for residents. Yet, Clark does note that the lack thereof is at least partially due to the limited attention paid to human health overall, and to women specifically, other than as carrying containers for fetuses (p. 125). If time or space allowed, this might be attended to, given her other work related to reproductive justice issues. A tone is clearly struck throughout the book to call potential allies in as opposed to calling people out.

Overall, *Feminist Technical Communication* provides important work for the field of technical communication by situating apparent feminisms as an efficient model for moving towards more socially just technical communication. Drawing attention to feminism already happening in technical communication and the need for continued feminist work by all technical communicators is a unique and practical approach. Beyond the case of the Deepwater Horizon Disaster, this book critiques sexual and gender-based injustices that occur in technical documentation and calls for a shift in how technical communicators engage with terms like crises, urgency, and efficiency. Clark challenges readers to question: what counts as a disaster or a crisis? When does a crisis begin and end? Who makes these decisions and how do they get communicated? By writing in terms and values that technical communicators understand, she urges them to do what they claim to do regarding efficiency: produce the best result for the most audience groups. Additionally, instead of calling scholars out for a lack of feminist action, she calls them in, deftly describing the actions that create more efficient and effective communication without requiring the label of feminist. This book is well-suited for technical communicators – whether students, teachers, or those in industry. *Feminist Technical Communication* offers critical interrogation of communication practices related to health issues, slow crises, and disaster events and challenges technical communicators to increase their efforts for socially just communication through their everyday actions.