I'm a Cyborg, But That's OK: The Boundary Blurring Work of Lynn Hershman Leeson

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1972: Roberta Breitmore is born. This birth was different than most: Roberta emerged, a fully grown woman, from a bus in San Francisco, on her way to check in to the Dante Hotel. She didn't live a very long life - only about five years - but during her time on Earth she undertook activities like opening a bank account, renting an apartment and seeing a psychiatrist. Roberta "had her own clothing, signature makeup, walk, gestures, speech mannerisms, and handwriting."[1] In 1977, one Roberta became four, and then three, and then none when she was exorcised in the crypt of Lucrezia Borgia in 1978. Was Roberta Breitmore a real person? From one point of view, Roberta Breitmore was nothing more than a performance put on by artist Lynn Hershman Leeson who conceptualised and executed the character. But from another perspective, Roberta's existence as an embodied individual with her own tendencies, will and living situation justify positioning her as a subject independent from those who enacted her. Participating in this conversation demands that difficult questions be asked, chief among them being, what qualifies identity? In the case of Roberta Breitmore, the essence of her identity exists not within the mind, but within each specific instance of her embodiment across many different actresses. This notion of conceptualising selfhood as being necessarily embodied, extended widely, disrupts large swaths of cultural and scientific narratives involving how the quintessence of self is dissociated from the body.

The performance of Roberta Breitmore serves as an example of how blurring boundaries functions as a *disruption*, with Roberta embodying a blurred line between self and other, immaterial and material. In her essay, "A Cyborg Manifesto", Donna Haraway argues that, in

the tradition of Western science, the history of boundaries (mind/body, culture/nature, self/other) is the history of domination.[2] Furthermore, boundaries are not for everyone: non-Westerners are not able to define themselves - they are always other; women's bodies are never distinctly their own - they are always subject to the touch, gaze and scrutiny of people around them. Thus, the act of blurring boundaries functions as a radical disruption of oppressive constructions of subjectivity. Haraway proposes that the cyborg is the image that makes this boundary blurring possible, as the cyborg blends concepts that are usually in opposition - organism and machine, material and immaterial, etc. In this way, technological advancements potentially offer opportunities for creating new identities, spaces and maps of meaning. This was, incidentally, the goal of "cyberfeminism" - the 1990's movement inspired by Haraway's essay - concerned with new worlds made possible by women's blending with technology. While this movement was diverse in thought and action - and intentionally avoided easy description - it was common for cyberfeminists to regard the internet as a "feminist utopia" in which the body and its subsequent burdens (race, gender, sexuality, etc.) could be left behind.[3] This sect of cyberfeminism ignores one of the main tenets of "A Cyborg Manifesto" which is the fusion of organism and machine, materiality and immateriality - not the abandoning of one for the other. I'm curious: is there another approach?

Could the internet spell freedom from the material conditions that burden us? If our bodies are just machines which decode the raw data of reality, then why not do away with the flesh and let our minds enter into a more pure realm of information? In 2022, this "utopia" is closer than ever and yet, practically inconceivable. Furthermore, cyberspace is not devoid of many of the social dynamics which made the idea of abandoning the body so attractive for certain populations: the contemporary digital landscape no longer resembles the "wild west" that it

may have in the 90's. In many ways, the internet reflects material power dynamics, "holding a somber mirror up to the world around us": internet users are tracked, surveilled, and mined for their personal information (data) in order to be successfully advertised to.[4] This social reality undermines early cyberfeminist visions of "being anyone they wanted to be" online: we are now all being forced into boxes regardless of whether or not they serve us. Legacy Russell notes this in her book, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, yet maintains that "the Internet still provides opportunity for queer propoitions [sic] for new modalities of being and newly proposed worlds."[5] I intend to emphasise this sentiment, underscoring ways that existence on digital platforms can contribute to queer experimentation and boundary breaking despite (and in spite of) frameworks which force users into rigid categories.

How can digital technologies be transformed into a tool for experimentation and disruption rather than power and control? In this essay, I will examine how the goal of blurring boundaries can be actualized through the arrival of the digital in our everyday lives. These technologies, I will argue, can allow for freedom and *playfulness*. This project will proceed in three parts: origins, fictions, and applications. In "origins," I focus on the early work of visual artist and filmmaker Lynn Hershman Leeson, alongside Haraway's highly influential "A Cyborg Manifesto," drawing comparisons between the two theorists' idea of the cyborg. In "fictions," I hone in on Leeson's 2002 film *Teknolust* which has its finger on the pulse of how identity functions within digital spaces, and provides examples about the ways in which virtual existence blurs boundaries. Finally, I move to "applications", in which past and present movements engaging with a digitally literate feminism are discussed. My analysis of these movements will focus on ways in which everyday digital media can be utilized for the purposes of queer experimentation. I hope to, ultimately, advocate for an approach to gender politics which flows freely across spectrums rather than being stuck inside of binaries.

origins

"The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world."[6] This idea from "A Cyborg Manifesto" inspired droves of women in the 1990's to link up over the internet, exhilarated by the possibility of entering a space where gender needn't be a consideration. Nearly thirty years later and a "post-gender" internet is still not a reality: cyberfeminists may have overestimated the simplicity with which this space could be created. Nonetheless, they brought into the public sphere discussions involving how gender and identity *could* function online. Before diving into those conversations, though, I would like to spend some time focusing on two figures that will lay a foundation for my inquiry: Donna Haraway and Lynn Hershman Leeson. Operating in very different fields (academia and multimedia art, respectively), the works of both of these women often focus on one question: what are the implications of humanity's continued fusion with technology on gender and identity? As I will show, their responses to this question revolve around the image of the cyborg: a being who is neither machine nor organism; neither material nor immaterial; neither female nor male.
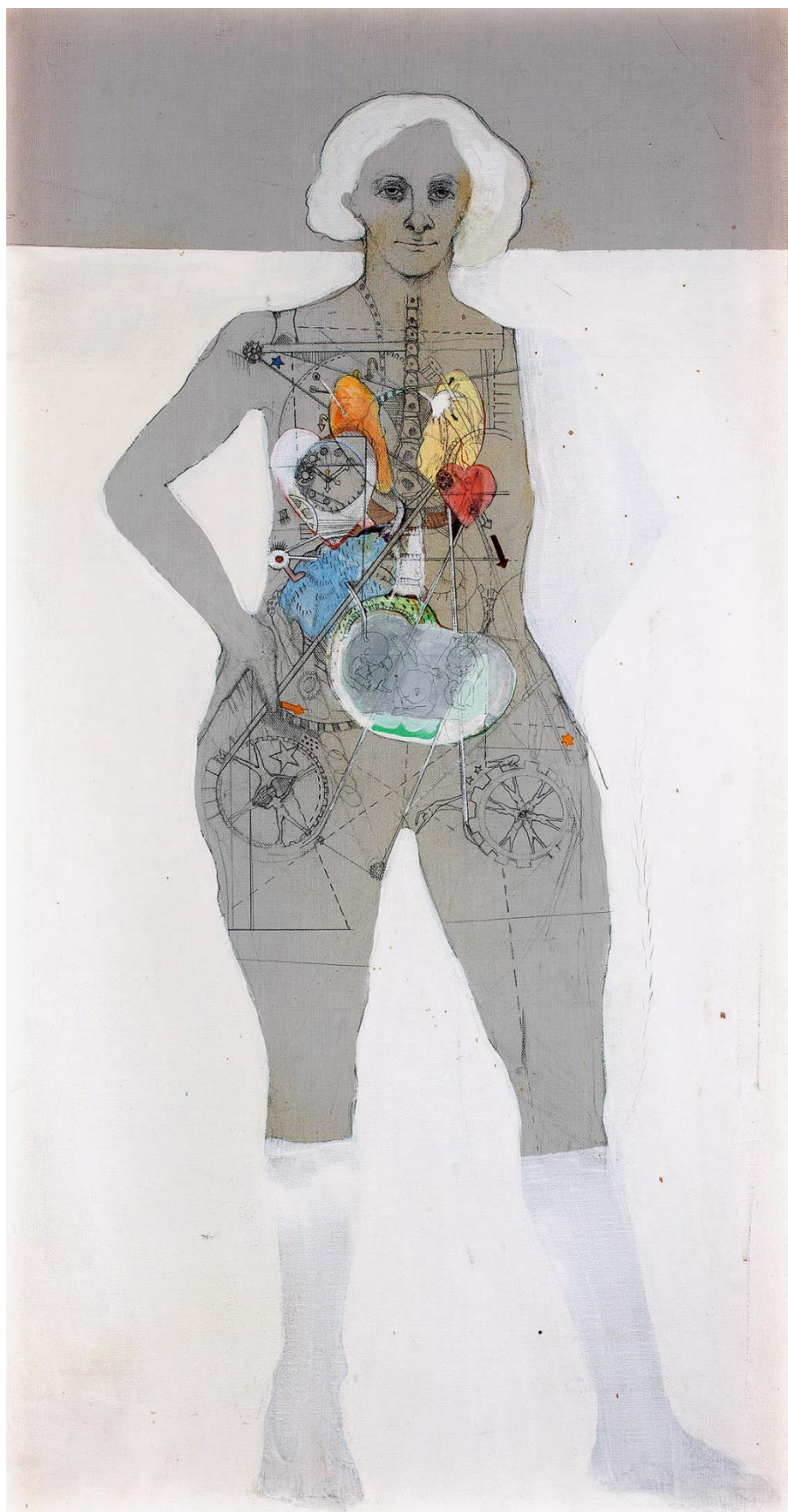
Figure 1. Lynn Hershman Leeson, X-Ray Woman, (1966). Published with authorisation from the author. Available at: https://www.lynnhershman.com/project/drawings/ Copyright Lynn Hershman Leeson.

Lynn Hershman Leeson has been making statements about humanity's relationship with technology and that relationship's implications for our future selves since the 1960's, but has only recently become famous for her prescient work exploring artificial intelligence, digital spaces and fractured identities. Although her work spans these themes and more, the nexus of her pieces' focus is usually on how our relationship with technology affects our relationship with our bodies. Examples of this can be found in her early drawings, like X-Ray Woman and Cyborg with Heart Transplant (1968),[7] which stand out as examples of a scientific narrative that Katherine Hayles chronicles: that is, how the human body became conceptualised as a machine that processes information.[8] In these images, the body is no longer a singularity; it is broken down into bits of machinery which allow it to function. And while one is labelled "cyborg" and the other is not, the distinction between organic human and machine is no longer important here, since, whether or not the heart is actually composed of cogs and gears or valves and blood, our subjectivities are already inseparable from machines.

It is this confusion between have-been and becoming that Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" explores: is the cyborg, as she says, an "ironic political myth," or is it already a social reality?[9] Either way, Haraway positions the cyborg as a revolutionary concept, since it confuses boundaries, primarily the boundary between organism and machine. Boundary confusion is described as *pleasurable* in Haraway's vision because the tradition involving the construction of boundaries is "the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other."[10] Here, Haraway is referring to the liberal humanist subject, who is unified, individualistic and autonomous; whose history is primarily centred around white men.[11] Thus, the cyborg emerges as a potent image for feminists, as it threatens boundaries that do not exist to serve

them. This is why the prevalent cyberfeminist goal of escaping the body online is not what we should be aiming for: it merely reproduces a dualism that is only beneficial for the few.

Although I don't see her cited explicitly by cyberfeminists as an influence, Leeson was a pioneer of feminist digital art which was, for groups like VNS Matrix, the nexus of their activism. Scrolling through her online back catalogue, I noticed that, although there are pieces such as Cyborg Man (1969) and X-Ray Man (1970), the overwhelming majority of drawings which feature mechanised views of the human body depict women.[12] This could be merely an aesthetic preference, but in the context of Leeson's later work, she seems to be preoccupied with the many specific ways in which women and technology interact: from methods of birth control which, most recently, involve inserting small, hormone-releasing devices into the upper arm - literally, binding biology with machinery - to the ways in which cameras are disproportionately trained on feminine bodies - using shutter mechanisms to penetrate and dissect our sexualities; our individualities. In many of her pieces, Leeson anticipated how digital media would exacerbate already existing dynamics between women and the construction of identity. I do not believe that Leeson is arguing for the rejection of new technologies - let alone a return to "nature", that imaginary utopia - instead, her work acknowledges the reality of technologies and how they are formed: within social frameworks which do not afford women the same rigid boundaries of selfhood as men.

Figure 2. Lynn Hershman Leeson, Dress Me 1, 2, 3 (3 plates), (1965). Published with authorisation from the author. Copyright Lynn Hershman Leeson. Photos by Marc Brems Tatti. via https://rhizome.org/editorial/2015/mar/19/lynn-hershman-leeson-origins-species/.

Leeson's artwork has consistently made the feminine experience of living with "permanently partial identities" a primary focus.[13] One example comes from the series of drawings entitled *Dress Me 1, 2, 3* (1965) comprised of three plates, one depicting a woman's body with "DRESS ME" across her chest, one depicting a garment of clothing, and the last depicting a deconstruction of a body made up of words like "HEAD", "BODY", "SHADOW" alongside cogs and gears.[14] Another comes from an interactive videodisk installation from 1984, *Deep Contact*, in which users are presented with a digital representation of a woman named Marion, whose body they are invited to touch. Depending on which body part they choose, a series of episodes unfolds: "Touching Marion's head, for example, activates a series of TV channels that give brief, witty accounts of reproductive technologies and their effects on perceptions of women's bodies."[15] Both of these pieces explore the idea of how technology both creates and exacerbates a pre-existing condition of womanhood: bodily partiality. While there are many examples of the female-specific experience of merging with technology, these pieces refer mainly to technologies of vision which are particularly adept at cutting up women's bodies. Video and still cameras have the ability to focus on specific, desirable areas

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of women's bodies while excluding others. In many cases, this has led to a disruption of bodily autonomy, as in the case of ultrasound technology, which, as Anne Balsamo notes, created a discourse in which the foetus as an entity is divorced from the pregnant body.[16]

Women are not only affected by technological innovations in unique ways, but are subject to specific, gendered cybernetic visions of the body. Haraway notes this, saying that "the close ties of sexuality and instrumentality … are described nicely in sociobiological origin stories that stress a genetic calculus and explain the inevitable dialectic of domination of male and female gender roles. These sociobiological stories depend on a high-tech view of the body as a biotic component or cybernetic communications system" (this imagery is visible in Leeson's above drawings.)[17] Women are defined by their evolutionary backgrounds in terms of "maternal" instincts, being out of control during certain phases of their menstrual cycles, and being less physically capable than men in general. And while these evolutionary stories affect men, too, they are often used to justify the domination of women ("How could a woman be president? What if she started a war during her period?") Donna Haraway urges readers to recognize origin stories for what they are: stories. We can either reject the stories that turn us into machines, incapable of betraying our coding; or we can accept our cyborg biology and make it our own.

Lynn Hershman Leeson's *Teknolust* (2002) opts for the second option: fully embracing the convergence of modern women with new technologies, this movie tells the story of three female cyborgs and their creator who use their state of being highly mediated by technology to create new maps of meaning in their lives. The movie stars Tilda Swinton as four different characters: Rosetta Stone (fully organic), Ruby, Marinne and Olive (cyborgs), and revolves around the outbreak of a mysterious virus in all of the men that Ruby has had sexual relations

with. While certain aspects of the cyborg's construction are made clear - a sequence Rosetta calls "looking at baby pictures" describes them as 50% human, 50% software (a rather murky distinction in a cybernetic world) - whether their existence is purely virtual or physical; mechanical or organic is left pleasingly opaque.

fictions

In her explanation of Artificial Life research, Katherine Hayles describes three ways that research is typically divided: Wetware, Hardware and Software.[18] Wetware is characterised by the creation of life by building components of organisms in test tubes; Hardware by the construction of robots; and Software by the creation of computer programs that mimic evolutionary processes. Each of these methods tend to be distinct projects and do not overlap. This is not the case with Rosetta Stone's work in *Teknolust*, which utilises all three divisions of Artificial Life. Stone's cyborgs are created using both her own DNA (Wetware) and computer programming (Software). While this process is never truly explained, from a certain standpoint, the blending of these methods make sense: DNA sequences - strings of signifying information which correspond to signified realities in the body - are conceptually identical to sequences of computer code which create visual changes to web pages when edited. Using these definitions of DNA/software coding, it is almost intuitive to combine the two methods of developing Artificial Life the way *Teknolust* does.

Almost intuitive: where DNA diverges from code is materiality. Although it is easy to talk about DNA as if it were immaterial (as language), it is a molecule that has physical existence. Wetware is material; Software is not. So, if the Artificial Life in question is composed of both DNA and computer code, then will it consist of flesh and blood, or ones and zeroes? *Teknolust* shies away from a clear answer to this question: Ruby, Olive and Marinne exist, for

most of the movie, in what seems to be a virtual set of rooms in which Rosetta can communicate with them through the screen of her microwave. This dynamic is confused when it becomes clear that Ruby regularly ventures into the physical world to collect semen for her and her sisters to drink, complicating the perceived immateriality of their bodies. This shifting back and forth between material and immaterial existence is emblematic of Ruby, Olive and Marrine's existential movement between organism and machine: their virtual existence aligns with their software origins, while their physical existence aligns with their wetware origins.

This shifting back and forth serves another purpose: it equalises the comparative value of either physical or virtual existence, as both of them are necessary and desirable for the three cyborgs. Nonetheless, the tension between being at once human and nonhuman is evident. In one scene Ruby, Olive and Marinne are in their virtual room watching history videos, leading to vitriolic observations on human nature: "they can't repair themselves, they age, they die, they live in perpetual self-doubt. They hurt each other, they even kill each other… We are such an improvement! Why aren't there more of us?" Although the pronoun "us" here is placed as if in opposition to humanity altogether, they acknowledge that they *are* partially human: to Marinne's rant, Ruby replies that "When you sound defensive and regressive, you seem completely human. That's a recessive trait, remember?". During this scene, it appears as if the three cyborgs do not recognize anything valuable about being human, and yet, as the movie progresses, it becomes clear that Ruby, Olive and Marinne would not give up their chimeric existence if they could. Rosetta foregrounds this in her description of them, noting that "they crave physical contact", a point that is emphasised by Ruby's eventual romance with a local copy shop worker. Despite their renunciation of human qualities, the cyborg characters in this movie are just that - cyborgs; they are defined by their partiality.

In "A Cyborg Manifesto," the project of blurring boundary lines is revolutionary not merely because it destabilises authority, but because it implies that these boundaries are not essential, but constructed. In failing to clarify whether Rosetta's cyborgs are mechanical or biological, immaterial or material, *Teknolust* acknowledges that the body itself is an ideological construct that is far from static. Gregory Bateson, a cybernetician, acknowledged this dynamic definition of the body in the 1970's when he asked whether or not the blind man's cane was a part of his body.[19] This question refers to the shift, mediated by the development of homeostatic machines, from conceiving the boundaries of the body as "epidermal surfaces" to "flows of information".[20] Once the traditional, physical boundaries of the body are deconstructed in this way, we can shift the ways in which we face questions concerning the traditional mind/body dualism: instead of discussing the implications of abandoning our bodies when we fully immerse ourselves into cyberspace, we can use technology to recognize that we can never abandon embodiment, only reconceptualize what embodiment means.

To re-envision the limits of the body is, by extension, to re-envision the limits of the self. Since traditional concepts of selfhood point to an original unity which cannot contend with bodily enhancements such as hearing aids, prosthetic limbs, or any vision of the body which is defined by informational inputs and outputs, cyborg subjectivity must be reckoned with. *Technology can be used to break down boundaries that do not serve us.* The concept of the self is constructed through demarcation and subjugation - of the other, of the body, of nature. The cyborg emerges as a myth that incorporates bits and pieces of broken shards of categories into itself; the cyborg embraces its partial identity in the same way that those who have been excluded from the unified liberal humanist subject have had to exist alienated from wholeness.

Ruby, Olive and Marinne resist the concept of clear and contained notions of self in multiple ways: they are part code, part human; they are both material and immaterial; they are both themselves and other (Rosetta). More on this last point: Haraway states that "it is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine."[21] This is certainly true for the characters in *Teknolust*. Since Ruby, Olive and Marinne are made with Rosetta's DNA, they could be considered copies of her, and yet, she remarks that "each one has her own identity," destabilising traditional notions of selfhood. This destabilisation happens again when Ruby is seen "downloading" information about how humans act by watching movies. Although the language is different, this process reflects how our identities are made up from a variety of different sources. *Teknolust* discards our conceptions of wholeness and creates space for something new.

Figure 3. *Teknolust* (Lynn Hershman Leeson, 2002).

For Lynn Hershman Leeson, the project of reenvisioning identity began much earlier than *Teknolust*, extending all the way back to 1973, when she began her performance as Roberta

Breitmore. After three years, Leeson hired three other actors to play Roberta alongside her, and eventually stopped performing the character herself altogether. This project reinforces the questions concerning the constructedness of selfhood at play in *Teknolust*: what are the processes that create our identities? If those processes are outside of ourselves, can we ever truly claim to be a singular person? The performance of Roberta Breitmore was also extremely prescient of what it means to have versions of oneself that exist online: it is not clear who or what creates them (it doesn't always look like me but *who else could it be?*) or how many of them exist. If we weren't whole before, we certainly aren't now. But salvation lies within the cyborg, not outside of it; we should not reject being technologically mediated if we want to break down restrictive dualisms. In the next section, I will consider bits of the history of the cyberfeminism movement which spawned from the foam of cybernetic theory and digital art, before moving on to contemporary viewpoints. Ultimately, I intend to outline the theoretical basics of a digital feminism which is inspired by Donna Haraway and Lynn Hershman Leeson, focusing on characteristics inherent within new technologies that have the potential to promote liberation for queer and transgender people. This will serve as more of an overview of *potentialities* than a guidebook for queer liberation online, with the hope of opening up this conversation for future research.

applications

Just as Roberta Breitmore was born in 1972 - fully formed, yet partial and dispersed - cyberfeminism was born in 1991 with a single declaration: "we are the modern cunt."[22] This is at least one story of its genesis, from the cyberfeminist art collective VNS Matrix, who plastered billboards, chat rooms and magazines with their "Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century" (a nod to Haraway). But, like Roberta Breitmore, the movement was not grounded in one space: the term "cyberfeminism" was apparently coined spontaneously by

VNS Matrix, Sadie Plant and Nancy Paterson in Australia, Britain and Canada respectively. With their disparate locations comes, unsurprisingly, disparate philosophies, but they all revolve around the relationship between gender and new technologies. In the 1990's, the use of computers and the internet was viewed as a boy's club - personal computers were marketed specifically to men[23] - and cyberfeminists sought to change that: as Virginia Barrat of VNS Matrix put it, "we want to encourage women to use technology and take it in different directions".[24] These directions were many: some cyberfeminists focused on activism and the creation of digital art, others focused on writing and research into the gendered possibilities of new media.

One of these possibilities, extolled by cyberfeminists, was "escap[ing] gender online", or the idea that internet users could leave their bodies (those frustratingly marked sacks of flesh) behind.[25] As I mentioned above, there are many reasons why divorcing the body from the mind should not be the goal of feminism, chief among them being that adherence to the dualistic concept of mind/body (material/immaterial) reinforces ideologies of domination which give primacy to the "rational" mind over the "irrational" body. And since women are not granted traits that are divorced from their bodies, cyberfeminist's escape into the immaterial reproduces a dualism which they are excluded from. It is unsurprising, though, that oppressed groups would be attracted to narratives of disembodiment, given that their identities are always defined by narratives surrounding their bodies. Moreover, there are aspects of how identities are formed in digital spaces that can be particularly liberating for queer and transgender individuals. Is it possible to have the best of both worlds? It is not necessary to abandon the concept of cyberfeminism, if we reconstruct it with an eye towards boundary blurring: a feminism that is neither focused solely on the material nor the immaterial, but one that prioritizes blurring the boundaries between these modes.

The digital blurs boundaries; the digital can be used as a *tool* to blur boundaries. How does this take place? Devices like smartphones offer instantaneous access to cyberspace (traditionally conceptualised as a realm of the immaterial, the mind); but yet, they remain, as objects, stubbornly material. Digital devices (Virtual Reality technologies, in particular) are false portals: I am transported into the immaterial, yet I am anchored always in my body. This same process happens during everyday interactions with smartphones and social media. On the one hand, social media reinforces the dualism between a virtual and physical world through the sheer fact that people behave differently online, creating a divide between the two realms. Social media platforms like Twitter invite users to craft alternative identities ("The second thing that happened online is everyone got new names, and these names began with @").[26] These online identities do not stop with names, though; on certain platforms (Twitter and Reddit, for example), it is not uncommon to abstain from posting photos of oneself, or to craft an avatar that bears no resemblance to one's physical body. Thus, not only through action but through name and appearance, there is a stark divide between online and offline realities.

On the other hand, the ubiquity of smartphones, which offer entrance into the virtual realm hundreds of times per day - far from the burden of "jacking in" - create an environment in which it becomes difficult to distinguish between the virtual and the physical world. Legacy Russell notes this unstable boundary in her book, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, opting for the term "AFK" (away from keyboard), as opposed to "IRL" ("in real life"). Paraphrasing Nathan Jurgenson, from whom she borrowed the AFK framework, she writes that "the term IRL … is a now-antiquated falsehood, one that implies that two selves (e.g., an online self versus an offline self) operate in isolation from each other".[27] Russell contends that the relationship between our online and offline selves more accurately resemble a loop, both

influencing the other. Under these circumstances, the way that Lynn Hershman Leeson leaves ambiguous the physicality of Ruby, Olive and Marinne seems realistic: human life, heavily mediated by technology, can be defined as a constant, seamless fluctuation between cyberspace and physical space, virtual bodies and material bodies.

There are other ways in which the digital blurs boundaries that I'd like to mention, with caveats: dispersal and malleability. These are features of how identity is created and performed on digital platforms, which offer opportunities for *alternatives* to the liberal humanist subject's linear, singular origin story. Malleability refers to the ease with which one can affect how they are perceived online: usernames, profile pictures and bios can be altered instantly, or remade altogether. Dispersal refers to the bits and pieces of data about each of us that are in existence across different platforms online. These two characteristics of how identity functions online are hostile towards rigid structures of selfhood, spitting on linearity and singularity. Following my analysis of Roberta Breitmore, which contends that each instance of Roberta's performance *is* Roberta, I do not suggest that each bit of information about an individual collectively constitutes a wholeness; on the contrary, each bit of information represents a distinct version of that person. This description of identity departs from traditional notions of personhood which understand an individual as whole, sealed off and singular, and instead imagines a cyborg subjectivity founded on partiality. Both dispersal and malleability can potentially be beneficial for queer and transgender individuals: by reconfiguring the boundaries of the self as partial and constantly in flux, the pressure to adhere to origin stories disappears, and opportunities for experimentation open up.

Unfortunately, within the context of mass data collection online, the goal of malleability and dispersal of our identities feels like a cyberutopian demand. I may feel dispersed across my

differing (and shifting) profiles online, but I am always anchored by my IP address. Whether we like it or not, a version of each of us - whole, but never complete - exists in cyberspace, and this version of us must be in a neat box (man, woman, gay, straight, etc.) in order to be properly understood and advertised to. Is it possible, still, to prioritise identity-in-flux both on and offline? Legacy Russell suggests that certain bodies are encrypted (glitched) and rendered unreadable by surveillance and tracking systems.[28] A "glitched" body is "a body that pushes back at the application of pronouns, or remains indecipherable within binary assignment."[29] Thus, glitch feminism suggests that by refusing to engage with rigid labels - shoving ourselves into boxes (identities) - we can cease to be useful as subjects of capitalism. "In rejecting binary gender, can we challenge how our data is harvested, and, in turn, how our data moves?"[30] Here, a loop is created: digital technologies in themselves blur boundaries, but we must put forth effort, too, to blur boundaries away from and at the keyboard in order to ensure our multiplicity.

It is not easy to resist singularity online; it is easy to be shoved into a box. But there are ways to prioritise dispersal and malleability as users (not used) of the internet. By using virtual private networks (VPN), we can encrypt our IP addresses (making them unreadable), and disperse our traces across different locations. We can resist the urge to be singular by creating a multiplicity of profiles on the same platforms - radically accepting the different versions of ourselves - and letting them die and be born again. We can refuse to conform to identities that make *sense* to advertisers by abstaining from choosing a gender identity when prompted, or by refusing to click the same one each time. We can say no to cookies. Still, there is much more that we have no control over than we do, but this conversation needs to continue and progress in order for the internet to be a space for experimentation rather than control. I hope

to offer some examples of how digital technologies can be moulded into forms that are beneficial, and invite this discussion to continue beyond this essay.

To guide part of my discussion on ways that the digital can help us blur boundaries, I turn to Laboria Cuboniks' *The Xenofeminist Manifesto* (2018). Xenofeminism (XF), founded in 2014 by "Laboria Cuboniks" - both a six-woman collective and an independent avatar - is indebted to and intertwined with cyberfeminism, yet makes important departures from it, most obviously in name. This is partially because, for one, by 2014 when internet communication had ceased to be novel, there was no feminism without technological intervention, a reality which XF acknowledges and wishes to use to its advantage. So, the "cyber" of cyberfeminism is no longer meaningful; it is a given. "Xeno" *is* meaningful for XF, though: in an interview with Ágrafa Society, Laboria Cuboniks explains that xenos can be understood as "an inherent uncertainty or ambiguity as to the status of an unknown entity" or "the Ancient Greek protocol for obligatory hospitality."[31] I understand xenofeminism, as opposed to cyberfeminism, as accepting our technologically mediated reality as a fact, but not without criticism. Thus, XF does not fall into the cyberutopian trap that cyberfeminism does, while still recognizing what technology can *do* for feminism.

One way in which technological advancements can be used to blur boundaries is described in *The Xenofeminist Manifesto*: "We ask whether the idiom of 'gender hacking' is extensible into a long-range strategy, a strategy for wetware akin to what hacker culture has already done for software".[32] Here, Cuboniks is referring to developing a platform free and open source Hormone Replacement Treatment (HRT) which would allow individuals to circumvent restrictive medical systems and take control of their bodies. This platform would almost certainly exist online, as Cuboniks states that it is following in the footsteps of things

like DIY-HRT forums. While it is necessary to flag that this process of self-administering hormones without the supervision of someone with medical knowledge can be extremely dangerous (and possibly fatal), I was excited to read about this idea as it presented itself as a practical solution in a sea of political texts where those are often absent. Gender-hacking using online platforms has been happening for years, and, if properly regulated, is a way in which the internet could positively contribute to a disruption of traditional binaries between gender and sex, male and female.

Another way that technological advancements can help queer people prioritize malleability in digital spaces (and eventually, maybe - AFK spaces, too) is Augmented Reality (AR). Unlike Virtual Reality (VR) - which creates a "second" reality - AR just augments the preexisting one. A popular and accessible example of AR is snapchat filters, which allow users to add elements to their faces: dog ears, flower crowns, etc. And while some of the more popular filters have been criticised for reinforcing harmful beauty standards - "beautifying" filters make eyelashes fuller, shrink noses and jawlines, and make lips bigger - there are AR makeup designers going in the opposite direction. Ines Alpha is an example of one of these artists. She makes 3-D makeup, and has recently ventured into the world of making abstract snapchat filters. What is interesting (and exciting) about her work is that it does not adhere to any preconceived beauty standard; instead, she uses the human face to craft three-dimensional landscapes of organic and inorganic shapes that barely resemble makeup. What differentiates AR filters and 3-D makeup (and digital fashion!) from traditional modes of self expression is that they have the potential to be far more malleable than what we are used to. It would be possible to change one's makeup or outfit (or turn it off completely) with the touch of a button (just like turning off a snapchat filter). "Imagine that, wearing 3D makeup in the streets?"[33]

On the conceptual side of things, a feminism that is inspired by the way identities *can* function online could radically alter the way discussions around identity operate. Specifically, a digitally informed feminism of which I fantasize is opposed to recent waves of feminism which have seen, alongside the creation of new gender and sexual identities, an insistence that these identities are given by nature and thus static. From Laboria Cuboniks: "If 'cyberspace' once offered the promise of escaping the strictures of essentialist identity categories, the climate of contemporary social media has swung forcefully in the other direction, and has become a theatre where these prostrations to identity are performed."[34] Instead of escaping gender online, internet communities have created tens of new genders and sexualities to conform to. From Legacy Russell: "If a body without a name is an error, providing more names, while proffering inclusivity, does not resolve the issue of the binary body. Rather, it makes and requires a box to be ticked, a categorization to be determined".[35] This situation is all too real, and is in direct opposition to freedom of expression and identity, which should be at the forefront of feminist interests. Static identities, even if they are queer identities, do not offer freedom of experimentation, freedom to present differently based on setting, and reinforce a heteronormative binary.

Ultimately, the project of boundary (binary) disruption coupled with prioritising malleability and dispersal, taken to its extreme, leads to rejection of the system of categorisation altogether. Haraway: "We are responsible for boundaries; we are they."[36] Through revealing binaries to be inessential, we can disregard their role in our lives; through disregarding binaries, we open ourselves up to newness and freedom. In this way, boundary blurring is adjacent to xenofeminism's goal of gender abolition described by Cuboniks: "we advocate for the system of rigid gender difference to be abolished via the proliferation of fluid sex and gender differences."[37] Traits like long hair, breasts, dresses, makeup, etc. no longer need to

exist within a binary of male versus female; instead, gender abolition offers an opportunity for all people to experiment and play with various forms of expression. As soon as the boundary between male and female is dissolved, identity shifts from static states, trapped by convention, towards endless fluctuation and transformation. The same happens for the boundary between material and immaterial: we exist, glitching, in both worlds at once.

This process has already begun: for dualisms like organism versus machine, the boundary has been dissolving for as long as it has existed. To conclude this essay, I'd like to meditate upon, for a moment, the term "gender hacking" and its implications. For, just as *Teknolust* nonchalantly obliterates distinctions between wetware, software and hardware, "gender hacking" obliterates distinctions between organism and machine, nature and culture, sex and gender. Because if we can "hack" gender through hormones - usually associated with sex - then how can we any longer claim a difference between a biological body and a cultural mind? And if the notion of hacking gender (as software) makes any sense at all, then we have already dissolved any perceived distinction between organism and machine. In this way, it is clear that the project of blurring boundaries can be achieved through many avenues: by utilising technologies in novel ways, yes, but also through the simple act of manipulating language. Boundaries are created and upheld through language - *the way out is the way in*[38] - consequently, boundaries can be dissolved through language. What would happen if we ceased to worship the shrine of origin stories and rigidity in our language, and instead privileged experimentation and fluctuation? How can we, AFK, be inspired by the potential for malleability and dispersal inherent in the internet? There is much more to say on this topic, and I hope this discussion continues far and wide, but for now, let us begin to speak of ourselves differently, and eventually, live differently.

Notes

[1] "Roberta Breitmore," Lynn Hershman Leeson, accessed April 18, 2022, https://www.lynnhershman.com/project/roberta-breitmore/.

[2] Donna J Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 150.

[3] "100 anti-theses", Old Boys Network, accessed April 18, 2022, https://obn.org/obn/reading_room/manifestos/html/anti.html; Jessica E. Brophy, "Developing a corporeal cyberfeminism: beyond cyberutopia," *New Media & Society* 12, no. 6 (2010): p. 930.

[4] Legacy Russel, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2020), p. 108.

[5] Russell, *Glitch Feminism*, p. 123.

[6] Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, p. 150.

[7] "Early Drawings," Lynn Hershman Leeson, accessed April 18, 2022, https://www.lynnhershman.com/project/drawings/.

[8] Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 11.

[9] Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, p. 149.

[10] Ibid., p. 150.

[11] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, p. 4

[12] "Early Drawings," Lynn Hershman Leeson.

[13] Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, p. 154.

[14] Kerry Doran, "Cyborg Origins: Lynn Hershman Leeson at Bridget Donahue," March 19, 2015, https://rhizome.org/editorial/2015/mar/19/lynn-hershman-leeson-origins-species/.

[15] "Deep Contact," Lynn Hershman Leeson, accessed April 18, 2022, https://www.lynnhershman.com/project/deep-contact/.

[16] Anne Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 93.

[17] Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, p. 169.

[18] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, p. 225.

[19] Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), p. 251.

[20] Hayles, Katherine, *How We Became Posthuman*, p. 84.

[21] Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, p. 177.

[22] "The Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century," VNS Matrix, accessed April 25, 2022, https://vnsmatrix.net/projects/the-cyberfeminist-manifesto-for-the-21st-century.

[23] Steve Henn, "When Women Stopped Coding," October 21, 2014, https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2014/10/21/357629765/when-women-stopped-coding.

[24] Lisa Pears, "Hysteric," *Temper magazine*, 1992, p. 30.

[25] Izabella Scott, "A Brief History of Cyberfeminism," Artsy, Art.sy, Inc., Oct 13, 2016, https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-how-the-cyberfeminists-worked-to-liberate-women-through-the-internet.

[26] Joanna Walsh, *Girl Online: a user manual* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2022), 70.

[27] Russell, *Glitch Feminism*, p. 52.

[28] Ibid., p. 84.

[29] Ibid., p. 8.

[30] Ibid., p. 68.

[31] Ágrafa Society, "Interview with Laboria Cuboniks: New Vectors from Xenofeminism," *Zineseminar, Zineseminar*, Vol. 1, 2019, http://www.zineseminar.com/wp/issue01/interview-with-laboria-cuboniks-new-vectors-from-xenofeminism/.

[32] Laboria Cuboniks, *The Xenofeminist Manifesto: A Politics for Alienation* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2018), p. 81.

[33] Rachel Brooks, "Ines Alpha - Conceptualising an iridescent and fantastical future," Metal Magazine, March 15, 2021, https://metalmagazine.eu/en/post/beauty/ines-alpha#.

[34] Cuboniks, *The Xenofeminist Manifesto*, p. 47.

[35] Russell, *Glitch Feminism*, p. 161.

[36] Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, p 180.

[37] Ágrafa Society, "Interview with Laboria Cuboniks."

[38] William S Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 208.

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