



COVER SHEET

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Becoming Angels: Women Writing Cyberspace

Nicole Bourke

The body...works in Euclidean space... It sees in a projective space....feels in a topological space...suffers in another... This intersection, these junctions always need to be constructed. And in general whoever is unsuccessful...is considered sick. His body explodes from the disconnection of spaces. ([Serres 44](#))

As virtual technology evolves and its uses become more widespread, particularly in western communities, women are moving from the virtual spaces of their cultural bodies to the virtual habitats of their cyber-bodies. What makes this migration interesting is the familiarity with which women begin to inhabit their virtual bodies. What seems to be occurring here is the recognition of a virtual existence and of women's learned capacity to inhabit absence. In virtual spaces virtual bodies are downloaded, mirrored, uplinked, morphed and mutated. Their existence as information strings makes them amenable to all kinds of virtual manipulations and manifestations which, in the external/real world are impossible. Perhaps what makes this less confronting for female subjects is their learned capacity to inhabit culture - where their subjectivity has long been overwritten by the male subject - from a position which is not of their own devising. In a culture which renders them as objects women have long since learned many and varied ways of subverting their liminal cultural positions. While male users often express a fear of the dissolution of the body/self, women have known all along what it means to be only virtually real ([Wise](#)). We know, furthermore, how to participate in a culture which is the site of our negation.

Cyberspace is an emerging frontier. It is, however, a man-made frontier and like many other manifestations of culture it is by no means intrinsically neutral. Since it has been constructed, especially initially, on a purely scopic model, cyberspace is a site where the specularity of western culture is accentuated. In cyberspace, what you cannot see does not exist and since subjects of cyberspace are only 'male or gender neutral simulacra [which] take the place of the self' ([Flynn 13](#)) the 'absence' of women from culture has been translated into virtual culture. Unable to see ourselves, we do not exist. In order to take (a) place, women who participate in cyberspace will need to consider further these notions of specularity given that:

all of western discourse and culture displays the structure of specularization, in which the male projects his own ego on to the world, which then becomes a mirror which enables him to see his own reflection wherever he looks. Women as body/matter are the material of which the mirror is made...the tain...and so never see reflections of themselves. ([Whitford 34](#))

While the possibilities for feminist interventions in these manipulations and explorations of virtual spaces and virtual bodies are being examined what may need to be addressed are the ways in which these explorations are always already governed by the environments in which they occur. In the discourse surrounding the development of cyberspace women's bodies have become the metaphoric hardware and software. The functional associations of our bodies have been subsumed, as Sofia observes, into a space she names as Jupiter Space, in which feminine associations are 'depicted as conceptions of a masculine, rational and (increasingly) artificial brain' ([Sofia 1992:15](#)). It is imperative to note, however, that in this metaphoric feminisation what is translated onto cyberspace are women's biologies and their status as objects. The feminine associations extend to such things as hardware and software, not to personification of designers or users. Women are, furthermore, being constructed as the means by which the male subject may design and manipulate his virtual environment. The association of the female body with that of hardware and software is distressingly

similar to the association women's biology has long had with cars and boats. You're a bitch whether you sink, roll or crash. Either way he will polish and reconfigure your faults till he can see his face in your gleaming surface.

In the mythic and purely imaginative world of cyberspace the world begins and ends at the edge of sight. In what has become one of the purest manifestations of patriarchal western culture, the bodies of women, as a reflection of the masculine ego, have been subsumed in the body of information which is cyberspace. Cyberspace has been designed by men, based on a specularly which has been one of the more powerful instruments of women's oppression - the positioning of the woman as the tain of the masculine subject's mirror, as the object of his gaze, as incapable of ever seeing her own reflection. That is, as absent from, as well as for, herself.

Despite the fact that recent investigations are seeking to expand the experience of cyberspace to include senses such as the tactile, these remain secondary to notions of seeing so that 'the full range of senses (including olfactory and tactile) is subordinated to visual, and to a lesser extent aural, perception' (Sofia 1992:13). The body is merely an image of itself; it does not smell, sweat, blink or bleed. The virtual/cyborg body which the user inhabits in cyberspace has only tentative and incidental links with the body outside the mechanism of virtual reality. It is often in these links between the real body, the mind and the virtual body that the utilisation of cyberspace becomes envisioned as potentially dangerous.

At the point of entry into cyberspace the Cartesian split between mind and body becomes manifest. In cyberspace, however, the cyber-body is immortal whilst the external animating 'soul' is mortal. The mind of the user is, at least partially, removed from the real body and transplanted into its cyber-body. What results is a cyborg whose existence must constantly be monitored and controlled by the user. If this regulation is not maintained, the mind loses conscious control of its own cyborg manifestation. A matter of:

sheer luck could put you over the line before you know it. Walk carefully. Guard your mind. ([Pondsmith 20-21](#))

Cyberspace becomes a site where the real body is also problematised because of its inability to operate without its cyborg counterpart. This results in cyberspace users or theorists who fear the body in comparison to its neat cyborg counterpart, whose 'terror revolves around the appearance of the body's interior, and the connection of all manner of evil with excretory fluids, [which] act only as an exaggerated form of the fears of the organic body' ([Kroker 213](#)), or disdain the external flesh altogether, preferring cyborg bodilessness, as does William Gibson's cybernaut, for whom:

the bodiless exultation of Cyberspace... the elite stance involved a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his flesh. ([Gibson 6](#))

What this fear of the body relies on is a kind of denial of reality in which the user can escape the flesh by accessing a cyborg reality. However, the user, unlike cyber-technology, is not reverse compatible. The manipulations and heady freedoms of morphing and mutating are not translatable to non-cyber bodies, regardless of the fact that 'we are telling ourselves stories all the time, tidier stories than the evidence warrants' ([Hudson 35](#)). No cyber-body will ever escape the historicity of its inception. No matter how elegantly configured or beautiful no cyborg will escape or protract the impending death of a user suffering from cancer or AIDS. However, once the user enters cyberspace they can become like an angel; 'an object of thought, an angel is a purely spiritual being, an incorporeal substance, a mind without a body and one not associated with a body that is its own' ([Adler 115](#)). The user becomes a virtual subject of virtual culture which, despite the disassociation, is nevertheless always linked to a body.

Not only has the specular been made central to the design of cyberspace, many manifestations of cyberspace focus on the 'real' experience of the human body. Hence in a virtual reality arcade game the user may inhabit, temporally, the humanoid body of the visual illusion. This assumption of corporeal manifestations in cyberspace may be predicated on our need for them in external/real spaces and may even, by extension, be limiting the ways in which we participate in virtual space. Given the appropriation of women's virtual bodies as objects it may be appropriate for women to consider the subversive possibilities of by-passing, or reducing to secondary status, the function of sight and the representation of women's virtual manifestations as images.

This is not to say that current manifestations are static. Rather, that while women move into virtual culture, while the female imagination joins the electric flux of cyberspace, we must be aware of this negation of our bodies, of our images, of our selves as subjects, which pre-dates our entry into cyberspace. After all, the vision which has constructed cyberspace is:

deeply deformed by this lack... Women's vision is what is lacking and this lack not only creates a vacuum but it perverts, alters, annuls every statement. ([Forrester 182](#))

While the absence of images of women as subjects of cyberculture is easily perceived, commented on, deconstructed and corrected, the absence or negation of women's subjectivities and their effects on cyberspace manifest in far more insidious and less easily addressed ways. The world of cyberspace is becoming colonised, even before it is fully manifested, by men and for men and with men in mind. We need to consider very carefully what the implications of design and implementation might be for women who wish to engage with cyberspace.

How then, are women, and other 'Others' to construct and participate in cyberspace? In what ways can they pursue cyber-subjectivities which are useful in terms of 'reverse compatibility', that is, which will be useful in non-cyber applications? What possibilities may unfold when we remove the understanding of cyberspace as necessarily Euclidean, architectural space and begin to imagine it as non-spatial, or at least as not principally governed by its spatiality? Or when we begin to imagine our own points of entry into cyberspace as non-Euclidean, as without bodies?

BEING

At the point of entry into cyberspace the user assumes an identity. This act of Being is circumscribed by the external user as well as the site conditions or environment in which the cyborg is situated. In this way, the cyborg manifests itself in direct opposition to its external body, much in the way that:

each gender is at once the antithesis of, and the complement to, the other... Each is deeply complicit in maintaining not only her or his own body-image, but also that which it assumes: the body-image *of the other*. ([Gatens 39](#))

In cyberspace, this other is the meat, the flesh, as well as the embodied experience of the user. The cyborg, therefore, defines itself in reference to the body and embodiment of the other - the flesh. For women, this position as the negative other by which a central subjectivity is formed is a familiar one. What is not familiar, however, is the doubled otherness - the reflected reflection - of the cyber-angel.

As far as your senses can tell you you are in a real world... If you like, you may live in a computer-created world all day and all night. You will be able to try out a Virtual life with a Virtual lover. You can go into your Virtual house and do Virtual housework, add a baby or two, even find out if you'd rather be gay. Or single. Or straight. Why hesitate when you could simulate? ([Winterson 97](#))

Such a simulation:

threatens to deconstruct the hegemonic character of all binding representations, of all hierarchy. This is its magic - a strategic prize for all players in any game of power. (Pfohl 164)

No objects, and by extension no subjects, can exist in cyberspace. There are only attributes named by users. These attributes are inconstant and emerging; any movement or recalculation causes the objects/subjects to melt and reform, much like the deterritorialization and reterritorialization which [Deleuze and Guattari](#) discuss in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Form is ruled by its representation as streams of data. The appearance of any object or subject is merely a consequence of patterns which co-exist or interact with other patterns of information. Possibilities include: multiple selves as well as multiple spatial realities; the occupation of a single spatio-temporal site by two or more information streams (subjects); the combination of data from two or more subjects and/or objects; cyber-bodies; info-bodies. Cyberspace itself does not, in and of itself, govern or preclude any manifestation of information. There is no inherent logic of evolution or necessity, no specular object or subject position which is more or less viable than any other. In cyberspace, subjectivity has no pre-existing parameters, no arbiters of sense. Rather it makes arbitrary the delineations between subject, object and environment.

If space is to be perceived it must have reference, delimitation and modulation. Cyberspace makes nonsensical the distance between subject and object which is necessary for it to be defined as (architectural) space. Without this distance cyberspace cannot be defined as delimited and modulated. Since in cyberspace at least two of the requirements for architectural space are problematised, space becomes absence and being nothingness. There is no sense to be made of why, or how, or when, any particular subject position might emerge. By denying any physics of spatiality cyberspace denies presence - even the presence of absence. The existentialism of cyberspace requires of us a 'being there' where both the 'being' and the 'there' are problematised. For women this means that the point of entry into cyberspace is the entry into the absence of our absence. Simulacra of a simulacra.

Absen(s)e does not seem to diminish us at all. Women log on and become the seamless, timeless, frictionless existence of cyberspace. An existence which is, we get there, but which has no location. The cyber-angel does not exist in space or time; space becomes absence, being becomes nothingness. The shells of her existences float off as the absen(s)e of their presence begins to rupture and swell.

The category of between is fundamental in topology and for our purposes here: to interdict in the rupture and cracks between varieties completely enclosed upon themselves. (Serres 45)

Armed with an understanding of the ability of information strings to co-exist, collide and elide women may well be able to rupture the seemingly seamless and enclosed virtual world. If they can begin to define themselves as Between - between objects, between spaces, between subjects/subjectivities - women may well have found a way to take (a) place as always evolving, always in transition. A cyber-angel has no body, rather she inhabits and expunges all spaces and times contiguously, 'dematerializing the medium and conquering ... space and time' ([Benedikt 9](#)). Rather than reduce themselves, women can explode and expand their subjectivities into cyberspace and 'evade control by the men who have become peripheral to their functioning' ([Sofia 1993: 51](#)).

Rather than confronting the illusion of control which many designers of cyberspace posit, in which 'some may take experiences in the controllable co-ordinate form as a serious sexual pleasure,' suggests that:

the unwelcome reduction of their body to such abstract space is the more familiar experience of women confronted by issues such as sexual consent and abortion. The determination of the body as a negotiable territory is an attempt to address this

conceptualisation. ([Vasseleu 167](#))

Do not attempt to see me, to read me, I will not exist inside or against your eyes, inside or against your presence. I will navigate absence without sense, with absen(s)e.

THERE

The privileging of sight seems a particularly masculine proclivity, especially given the centrality of vision to psychoanalytic readings of psychosexual development; where the child sees itself before becoming aware of itself in any other way so that the act of seeing is the beginning of a sense of separate and complete identity. For the girl, in particular, this moment of seeing is critical since it is the moment at which she begins to read her body as lacking:

she makes her decision in a flash. She has seen and knows that she is without it and wants to have it. ([Freud 146](#))

In cyberspace, however - since the cyber-angel *is* objects, subjects and spaces - what she both 'sees' and desires is herself. Although she may well read her body as lacking in cyberspace, the lack is definitive both of her body and of her environment. An absence where objects and subjects and other information strings interdict and collide in an artificial space. A space which is artificial not because of the way it has been constructed, or because of the materials which have been used in its construction, but because it does not exist.

Everything is reduced to attributes/attribution and because of this, objects with similar attributes are expected to act in the same way. An object with a height-attribute which exceeds a certain limit can be used as a hat-stand. Then again, she might not. She might be a pair of shoes, or something else; something without a name. The cyber-angels are locations in themselves and are capable of revealing both within and through themselves still more spaces or information; more cyber-angels. The cyber-angel is capable of attributing to itself any and all attributes pertinent to its wants, needs, or whims. They may even choose to occupy the same space as other cyber-angels, pass through each other. Inhabit each other. Swallow each other, or any other object. Any other space.

As these cyber-angels move and interrelate, knowledge, or at least the interplay of information, flexes and billows. The movement Between causes ruptures, seepages, spillages. This movement without movement in a space without space becomes a knowledge dance in which each *plie*, each *pirouette*, reveals another attribute. Another cyber-angel.

As well as space, cyberspace both contains and is an infinite potential of time, all held contiguously in the bodiless entity of the cyber-angel, ready to be concretised. Time exists in an infinite patternless absence; potential time. Time exists in batches and splinters that flex and fold, programmes which open out like nested butterfly wings or loop and curl in other programmes like sharply folded origami. Slow dumb splinters slip between the frames of flamboyant rushes. Things are always the same, except when they're different.

Information is the matter which constitutes cyberspace, but it is also the tool which destructures and restructures itself. The cyber-angel both *is* cyberspace and is the means by which she delineates her own absence. She manufactures herself, moves and slips and collides with herself. She tunnels through the substance of her own realities, pushing against her own limitless skin, enfolding herself, holding herself. Being becomes nothingness becomes information becomes starburst patterns of time and space and absence. Collisions and collusions between cyber-angels become possible. Boundaries or distances become surreal as she disgorges and swallows herself. And swallows herself. And swallows herself.

Given the absence of sense, the absen(s)e of cyberspace, tools such as logic and control become

nonsensical, neurotic. Intuition, premonition, dance and poetry become the tools for navigating absen(s)e.

Sense flies off - her wings spread wide - mythical as Garuda. The cyber-angel/s combine and re-combine cellves. The division between Being and There becomes nonsensical, implausible, inconceivable. There is no difference. I am information. There is information. Information is information. Information slides and slips and swallows and billows and narrows and transgresses and inside outs itself.

In the mythical sites of cyberspace you cannot ever 'be', there is only ever 'being'. The differentiation between 'there' and 'being' does not exist. Everything is simply information, data to be combined and recombined endlessly in enfolding and emerging strings and curls and floods of information.

There is no 'being there', there is only 'beingthere', which does not exist.

Nothing is forgotten, everything is constant.

Cyber-angels are everywhere - a silent, invisible concert of the mind.

Cyber-angels glitter, flow, cramp, flex, surface, contract, rebound, reflect, immerse.

A silent butterfly exploding realities.

Chaos outside my cellves.

Chaos inside my cellves.

Cyber-angels are Cyberspaces.

Cyber-angels becoming Chaos.

BEINGTHERE

To navigate where there is no space; no differentiation between space and object, between object and subject, between presence and absence. The illusion of the whole and self-contained (I) no longer exists. But women have never existed, never taken place. So to inhabit absence, particularly their own absence, is a little like coming home.

In the post-nuclear hush of Hiroshima and Nagasaki the streets were empty. There were no women, men or children to amble or lean or run in the streets. I once saw a film, a black and white documentary filmed very shortly after the blasts. It showed a window, a floor, a broken toy, a wall. In the black and white haze of that illusory reality the wall was a pale grey but as the camera moved closer you could see - faintly because the shot was not clear, because the cameraman stumbled in the rubble - the faint edge of another shade of grey. Imprinted on the wall by the blast were the ashen shadows of people. The cameraman lifted a hand and touched a grey finger to the ash. The ash fell away from the wall in a soundless powdery cloud. Destroyed. The bodies of those people were gone, leaving nothing but their flat images, but '...lived spatiality includes the phenomena of imaginary anatomies...which indicate the symbolic dimensions of any corporeal schema' (Vasseleu 161). The ashen shadows of their lived spatiality grew and grew. No matter how many times the walls have been dusted or the floors swept, the shadows have not been removed. The fragmentary re-structuring of Hiroshima and Nagasaki did not remove the ghosts.

Absen(s)e has not diminished them at all.

Absen(s)e has no centre, no determinate point of origin that resembles the site of be(ginn)ing. There are only ghostly shadows on the wall which shift and crumble at a touch, at a word. In cyberspaces and cyber-angels there are no centres - no nuclei.

Cyber-angels are post-nuclear.

Cyberspaces/cyber-angels do not construct themselves since their complete absence of materiality denies construction. In a spatial vacuum cyber-angels constantly and permanently de-structure themselves. Each interaction of one information string with another involves a de-struction of the previous manifestation of cyber-angels. Since cyber-angels are non-linear, they are a timeless, frictionless medium in which everything - all spatial and temporal dimensions - exist all at once. Because of this simultaneity there is no movement across time or space and hence the de-struction of cyberspaces/cyber-angels are always already occurring.

Cyber-angels are de-struction.

Cyber-angels are post-nuclear.

Cyber-angels are post-nuclear de-struction

Cyber-angels are absen(s)e.

Absen(s)e is post-nuclear de-struction.

Women have not taken (a) place in culture. Their existence is therefore defined by their absence. They are the negative other by which man has defined himself. A woman's lived spatiality, her embodied existence, is for man the manifestation of man's own desire/s. When women become the tain, the hardware and software of cyberspaces, they are for man the material via which he expresses his non-corporeal desire for immortality. Like the angels, women have no existence in culture other than those assumed bodies which men choose to perceive. 'The bodies they appear to have are not really bodies or indispensable to their life...(they are) merely assumed' (Adler 12). When women enter/become cyber-angels they come home to absen(s)e. Cyber-angels are their home.

The position of the writer in culture has long been much like that of the woman. The existence of writers is purely textual. They have no existence in culture other than that which a (male) reader perceives. A writer has no body. They are, rather, the lived spatialities of a fleshly desire, the imaginary anatomy or prosthesis of a non-corporeal existence. The text is the impression of the writer, the shifting and crumbling shades of grey which a writer leaves behind. They are ghosts. Shadows. Absen(s)e/s. Ghosts and angels are the bodiless, shifting, emergent inhabitant/habitats of cyber-angels, of absen(s)e.

Cyber-angels are their home.

Our home.

As a writer and as a woman I am well used to inhabiting absen(s)e. I inhabit absen(s)e with ease. I would even go so far as to say I *am* absen(s)e. I *am* post-nuclear de-struction. I *am* a cyber-angel. When I write about cyberspace I am confronting an ominous task best defined by [Marcus Novak](#): 'the greater task will not be to impose science on poetry, but to restore poetry to science' (in Benedikt 226).

When I write it is a peculiar thing - an act of absen(s)e speaking of and for itself. But this is not an absen(s)e which men would recognise. It is a pure absen(s)e. An absen(s)e which does not require presence to define itself. I plunge in, having lost my way, having never had a way, and begin to navigate absen(s)e. Navigate myself. Although I have never been here before, I know I am coming home.

I set out to find a place to start. I come without precedents. My arrival is ongoing and unexpected, as I starburst patterns of time and space and absen(s)e.

I expand and explode into and out of my existence in order to find the means to reconfigure reality. I will design my explosions with reverse compatibility so that I might refigure culture.

I will begin in silence. Deaf and Dumb and Blind and without skin - in absen(s)e.

That would be a glorious life, to addict oneself to perfection, to follow the curve of the sentence wherever it might lead, into deserts, under drifts of sand, regardless of lures, of seductions; to be always and unkempt; to be ridiculous in Piccadilly. ([Woolf 625](#))

I will begin *in absentia* and I will - I will - reconfigure his reality.

Something inside is broken/breaking as I slip, shift, sweat and slide. I tunnel into absen(s)e, into cyber-angels, into my(cell)ves. My absen(s)e calling forgotten angels, a ligament of sound surrounding Jericho and the walls will go. The walls will come down.

A ligament, an instrument, a war machine of sound....

santa annael, santa annachor, santa anilos, santa israfel, santa agobel, santa azrael, santa maria, santa teresa, santa susannah, santa cecilia, santa copelia, santa domenica, santa angelica, santa uriel, santa sophia...

Many years back
a woman of strong purpose
passed through this section
and everything else tried to follow.

([Grah, 'The Work Of A Common Woman.'](#))

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