CyberFeminism

Connectivity, Critique + Creativity

Editors
Susan Hawthorne
+ Renate Klein

SPINIFEX

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and Creativity

edited by

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CyberFeminism is not a fish
CyberFeminism is political
CyberFeminism is not an excuse
CyberFeminism has many tongues[1]

Cyber Words

'Cyber' has become a catch-all prefix in the last decade. It started with cybernetics in the 1960s (Wiener 1968), and William Gibson invented cyberspace in the 1980s (Gibson 1984). We live influenced by cyberculture. You can go cybershopping and pay all your bills through cyberbanking. Your car can be located by cybersurveillance. You can log on and have cybersex. You can become a cyborg, get involved in Cyber-Rights, cyberdemocracy, cyberpunk, cyber-drama. An entire cyberworld. And women are portrayed as cyber-Barbies, cyber-*femmes-fatales* (Millar 1998: 106) and cybersex objects. Women can call themselves cybergrrls or cyberfeminists.

Cyber comes from the same Greek (κϋβερ) word as 'governor' or 'gubernatorial'. Its original meaning is to steer, as a ship's helmsman steers a boat. Its connections to information technology are in the area of <u>navigation</u>, mapping, steering one's way through the World Wide Web. But perhaps, more sinisterly, the govern aspect should not be overlooked. And here the important issue is who is governing?

Arnold 11

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[1]. These four lines are adapted from the 100 Antitheses 'What Cyberfeminism is not', developed at the First Cyberfeminist International 1997 at Documenta X, Kassel, Germany, 27 September. <<u>http://duplox.wz-berlin.de/people/s/fem.htm</u>>

The US military invented the Internet, allowed it into the open, no doubt initially encouraged its spread. A myth about the Internet is that it is a self-governing entity. But there are many questions to be raised about this.

CyberFeminism takes up these issues. For although cyberfeminism, itself, has many faces, there are perspectives which we have focused on in this volume. CyberFeminism is a philosophy which acknowledges, firstly, that there are differences in power between women and men specifically in the digital discourse; and secondly, that CyberFeminists want to change that situation. How precisely the power differences are played out, and which elements are highlighted depends on context. Similarly, the strategies chosen by CyberFeminists to challenge this system depends on the interests and expertise of the women engaged in the work. CyberFeminism is political, it is not an excuse for inaction in the real world, and it is inclusive and respectful of the many cultures which women inhabit.

VNS Matrix, an Australian-based group of media artists were among the first to use the term 'cyberfeminism' in the early 1990s. One of the members of VNS Matrix, Julianne Pierce, writes of their origins:

> At the same time as we started using the concept of cyberfeminism, it also began to appear in other parts of the world. It was like a spontaneous meme which emerged at around the same time, as a response to ideas like 'cyberpunk' which were popular at the time. Since then the meme has spread rapidly and is certainly an idea which has been embraced by many women who are engaged with techno theory and practice. <http://www.aec.at/www-ars/matrix.html>

Namjoshi
17

Cyberfeminism, like feminism itself, is a developing philosophy. Three years ago, when this project first started, a Web search brought up ten or twenty items. A search done a month before this book went to press turned up 300 items. Just as there are liberal, socialist, radical and post-modern feminists, so too one finds these positions reflected in the interpretations of cyberfeminism. In the 1970s Shulamith Firestone proposed that reproductive technology would free women from the burdens of childbirth. Reproductive

technology, however, did not create more freedom for women, but rather made it easier for the medical profession to further medicalise women's lives (Klein 1989; Hawthorne and Klein 1991). In a similar vein, cyberfeminists such as Sadie Plant (1997: 42–43) suggest that women, because they are 'better culturally and psychologically' prepared for the work habits of the new millennium, will do better than their male counterparts in a more highly technologised world.

Melanie Stewart Millar (1998: 200) defines cyberfeminism critically as:

> A women-centred perspective that advocates women's use of new information and communications technologies for empowerment. Some cyberfeminists see these technologies as inherently liberatory and argue that their development will lead to an end to male superiority because women are uniquely suited to life in the digital age.

Thus Sadie Plant (1996: 182) gestures in the direction of political advancement through uncritical feminist encounters with the cyberworld:

> Cyberfeminism is an insurrection on the part of the goods and materials of the patriarchal world, a dispersed, distributed emergence composed of links between women, women and computers, and communications links, connections and connectionist links.

But libertarian approaches—such as those espoused by Sadie Plant (1997: 37-44)—work only for the privileged. Plant also puts forward the idea that roles defined by gender will become superfluous, resulting in a collapse of the status quo.

The VNS Matrix *Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century* epitomises this view:

> we are the virus of the new world disorder/rupturing the symbolic from within/saboteurs of big daddy mainframe/the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix. <sysx.apana.org.au/artists/vns/>

The manifesto is reminiscent of what was euphemistically called 'central core imagery', otherwise known as cunt imagery, which began to emerge from feminist art movements of the 1970s. As Faith

Wilding (1998b) points out, our loss of historical knowledge—in this instance, the loss of knowledge of the history of feminism and of feminist activism—tends to result in repeating known patterns, whether it be Plant's reification of technology (in a way analogous to Firestone's reification of reproductive technology) or the VNS Matrix use of imagery. If cyberfeminism is to be useful politically for women from diverse cultures and regions, it will need to go further than this.[2]

Nancy Paterson takes up some of these issues in her efforts at definition:

> Cyberfeminism as a philosophy has the potential to create a poetic, passionate, political identity and unity without relying on a logic and language of exclusion. It offers a route for reconstructing feminist politics through theory and practice with a focus on the implications of new technology rather than on factors which are divisive. <http:// echonyc.com:70/0/Cul/Cyber/paterson>

Similarly, Sheryl Hamilton in a 1995 essay writes:

> . . . cyberfeminism is beginning to explore, and more importantly, beginning to create new worlds, in part through, and in conversation with, digital technologies.[3]

Creativity is indeed an important component of cyberfeminism, but once again, needs further discussion.

What appears to be missing from many considerations of cyberfeminism is the critical aspect.[4] Feminism relies on the ability to critique social norms and constructs. It relies on the ability to see injustice and oppression when they occur, and, importantly, to do something to change these injustices. When sexism or racism occur, feminists expect themselves to speak up. When class, sexuality or ableness are barriers, feminists expect to go into bat for groups who

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[2] For critiques of Plant's position see Wilding (1998b), and Rechbach (1998).

[3] The URL had vanished by 1999, and Sheryl Hamilton had no record of its address.

[4] Exceptions include Wilding (1998a, 1998b), Millar (1998), Klein (1996).

are discriminated against. Cyberfeminism needs to take on all these challenges in order to become CyberFeminism.

CyberFeminism brings together a range of writers across three main fields in the cyberworld. Activists, who by linking up locally or internationally, create the possibility for co-ordinated political campaigns, or for sharing of knowledge or resources between the women involved.

Critics of cyberculture, or of particular aspects of the cyberworld, make up the middle section of the book. They look at the hype surrounding the technologies, weighing up positive as well as negative aspects. They take on post-human bodies as well as the trading in real women's bodies through electronic prostitution and electronic colonisation.

The third section includes contributions by writers and developers who reflect on the new electronic challenges for creativity in fields as diverse as poetry, virtual reality, fiction and multimedia.

Connectivity

If I had to characterize one quality as the genius of feminist thought, culture, and action, it would be connectivity (Morgan 1990: 53).

An essential component of the emerging global culture is the ability and freedom to connect—to anyone, anytime, anywhere, for anything (Conners 1997, cited in Millar 1998: 151).

Is it possible to be too connected? Perhaps. Perhaps not. But we should be the ones to decide when, how and if we become wired (Millar 1998: 173).

Connectivity is at the heart of feminism. In the 1970s we rallied around the concept of sisterhood, and challenged the patriarchal ideology of women as enemies of one another. We connected the personal to the political. We talked in consciousness-raising (CR) groups, connecting through understanding our similarities and our differences (Wilding 1998b). And despite the fragmenting forces of

postmodernism (Brodribb 1992; Klein 1996), economic rationalism and globalisation, women around the world have continued to explore those issues which we have in common, while recognising our diversity. As we have come to understand, focusing on difference alone, fragments us, separates us and disenfranchises us politically.

In the era of CyberFeminism, connectivity has a new meaning. For activists and networkers it is a boon. Emails can be sent to dozens of recipients at once. Internet Relay Chat (IRC) can be used to discuss important issues without having to meet physically, while LISTSERVs can be used to spread information quickly to thousands of subscribers. On the downside, organisations can become the victims of electronic carpet bombing.

Cyberfeminists have taken to the Internet with great alacrity. Numerous guides have been written for women (Senjen and Guthrey 1996; Cherny and Weise 1996; Gilbert and Kile 1996; Penn 1997). In addition, several early general guides to Internet use were authored by women (Phelps 1995; Lowe 1996; McGuire *et al.* 1997). Some became famous for noting its potential in changing the culture (Spender 1995), some were involved in creating the culture of geekgirls,[5] surfergrrrls (Gilbert and Kile 1996) or netchicks (Sinclair 1995), while yet others were discussing the new opportunities for activists (Pollock 1996). This is because it is possible to get campaigns moving at both international and local levels. Our own awareness was prompted by its use at a conference in Bangladesh in 1993. At this stage we had heard of the Internet, but had not had an opportunity to use it. The conference covered issues raised by the forthcoming UN International Conference on Population and Development. Each day reports from the conference were posted to news groups around the world, and by breakfast the following morning there were responses from people all over the globe. We were impressed by the speed of this, as well as the ability to reach targeted groups. As anyone who has ever tried to maintain an accurate mailing list knows, reaching the right people takes dedication and time.

Korenman 4
Pollock and
Sutton 2
Pattanaik 1

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[5]. <http://www.next.com.au/spyfood/geekgirl.html>

Every campaign feminists have ever thought of, is present on the Internet. From what to do and who to contact for help in the case of sexual assault, to networks of women living in remote areas, to campaigns about education or violence, to networks of lesbians, Women's Studies scholars, women's organisations, environmentalists; and the possibilities are endless.

In 1996, Spinifex began a project to develop an electronic network between feminist publishers in Australia and in <u>Asia</u> (we have since extended this to include feminist publishers in other parts of the world). Bandana Pattanaik took on the task of developing the network. Initially, we faced many delays—snail mail was living up to its name. But after three or four months we began to get responses and established a Home Page on Feminist Publishing in Asia/Pacific. We put up information about the publishing houses and on any books we could get our hands on. Then, after establishing sites for particular publishing houses, Bandana began to do Internet searches and to contact people at the other end of networks focusing on Asia, and as a result the site now includes information on women's organisations in many countries. We set out to establish the Home Page because we felt the need, as feminists, to be involved as activists. Because we had had previous connections with <u>feminist publishing houses in Asia</u>, we knew that the difficulties we faced in promoting our books internationally were more than compounded for many independent publishers in Asia (Butalia and Menon 1995).

But there are downsides to connectivity. Information overload can become a major problem (one friend had more than 4000 emails waiting for her after a three-week holiday). Overload can mean that nothing can ever be effectively completed. Connectivity can result in disconnection from the local and the real. Your community becomes your link to virtual worlds, where you can no longer trust experience, since it is all mediated by text or image (Hawthorne 1996b).

The activist potential for the Internet is huge. Activism on a global level, and solely in cyberspace, however, is a rarefied activism if it is not connected with activism on the ground in the <u>local</u> region.

Pattanaik 1

Hawthorne 6

Pattanaik 1
Pollock and
Sutton 2

Without the local, one loses the connection, the heart that makes us become activists. It is comparable to the political without the personal. It is a testing ground for how things work in the real world.

New information technologies can be used in ways which consciously subvert the dominant knowledge system, but it involves knowing that knowledge and being able to participate in it. It has its uses, but only when it is combined with politics, knowledge and passion for the local, a creative approach and an understanding that any information loaded on to the Internet is public property and can be used or misused by anyone. Such an awareness creates boundaries.

Korenman 4
Stafford 7
Guymer 3

The Internet is a powerful force for networking, and for sharing of knowledge and resources. But it is also a technology originally intended for the military and for global domination. In our communities we are faced with the question of whether to use the technology or not. There are many benefits, so long as we bear in mind some of the downsides. Critical is a resistance to total immersion in the technology which results in detachment from the world, rather than an engagement with it.

Mont-
gomery 5
Stafford 7
Hawthorne 6

When connectivity becomes the speed of your modem, or the number of Internet sites, or chat rooms or mailing lists you subscribe to, then disconnection from the real is not far away. The frustration is that just as we are beginning to consolidate the 'connectivity' to which Robin Morgan refers—the collective remembering of women —along comes a technology which threatens to annihilate it.

Critique

Cyberfeminists are offering important critiques of the medium. As Dale Spender has noted, 'for every feminist issue in the real world, the same issues apply in the cyberworld' (Spender 1996). And more. For cyberspace raises new issues as well as old. Issues to do with the allocation of resources for the poor and the marginalised, the experience of time and space, of what is public or private, of the

Mont-
gomery 5
Hawthorne 6

body, the community and global economics. And where issues overlap, cyberspace gives them a new twist.

Although cyberfeminists love their computers, they are not content simply to play with the new toys, but to make use of them for political purposes and to develop critiques of their abuse and problems. Bandana Pattanaik notes in her page on Networking with Asia that:

Klein 9
Hughes 8

> When I did a net search of Filipina women, all that came up was thumbnail pictures of Filipina women who 'like American men'. I was angry and disgusted. If you do a search now and get to see our pages on Isis and Gabriela[6] we would feel that our voice of protest has been heard. This is the political purpose of the project (Pattanaik 1997).

Donna Hughes analyses some of the many sites for prostitution on the Internet, and develops a critique on how these new cyberpimps operate. Her analysis points to the systematic sharing of information, spread via the Internet sometimes immediately after the man's use of a prostituted woman or child.

Developing critiques involves understanding the forces shaping the new technologies, knowing the ways in which cyberspace is being colonised, and knowing the ways in which these systems, like any other in global patriarchy, can be used to trace the movements of new political forces, of subversion among the citizenry, and of any individual who has ever logged into the system. Big Brother (or Sister) no longer needs to watch you with cameras, instead you type in all your personal information and they come and browse whenever they like.

Arnold 11

Another concern is the extent to which moral detachment becomes the norm, that the Internet is mistaken for the community and that the newest information is treated as 'truth'.

Detachment may be prefigured by a confusion between self and machine, a troubling confusion if it is taken out into the real world. Haraway (1991: 180) proposes that the machine is 'an aspect of our

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6. The Isis and Gabriela pages can be found on the Feminist Publishers in Asia/Pacific website at:
   <http://www.spinifexpress.com.au/welcomeasia/htm>

embodiment' and as a result Haraway sees the machines as thoroughly benign.

This position is challenged, by us. The machines may threaten our Selves, they may require us to be other than we are. And we already have too long a history of this. The cyborg may not be a figure of liberation, since it does not create an embodied and localised ethic (Klein 1996). Christine Boyer asks:

Klein 9
Haw-
thorne 10

> Why, in these postmodern times have we failed so completely to arrive at a 'politicization of aesthetics'. . . ? Why have we refused to develop a new political awareness suitable to an age of electro-optical reproduction—an engaged, embodied position that would utilize our new technology in a liberating and critical manner? (Boyer 1996: 120).

Could it be because the destructive trajectory of the twentieth century war-machines and war-driven economic theories and practices (the Bretton Woods institutions of the IMF, World Bank and GATT) is taking us down a one-way path which leads to further and further fragmentation of bodies, individuals, families, communities, nations and the globe (Klein 1996; Hawthorne 1996a; Millar 1998)? Could it be that post-modernism in all its incarnations as an intellectual movement has glorified this fragmentation?

This trajectory has resulted in wholesale destruction of the environment, of knowledge systems and of people, in its disregard for heart and its valorisation of ersatz experience, simulations, virtuality, and machines which tell us of things we once gauged by listening to the body, the air, the atmosphere. Our physical lives in the well-off parts of the world are better, but the level of consumerism we participate in has its price. And immersion in the Internet, virtuality and cyberspace also have their price.

Mark Dery finishes his insightful book on cyberculture with the following reflection:

> . . . a shadow of a doubt remains, nagging at the edge of awareness—the doubt that once our bodies have been 'deanimated', our gray matter nibbled away at by infinitesimal nanomachines and encoded in computer memory, we might awake to discover that an ineffable something had gotten lost in translation. In that moment, we might discover ourselves

thinking of Gabe, in *Synners*, who unexpectedly finds himself face-to-face
with his worst fear while roaming disembodied through cyberspace:

> *I can't remember what it feels like to have a <u>body</u>. . . .* He wanted to
> scream in frustration, but he had nothing to scream with (Dery
> 1996: 319).

Klein 9

Creativity

Cyberfeminism is a new concept made possible by the development
of the new electronic culture. It is a field which has a huge impact on
the <u>educational</u> and publishing sectors.

We became excited about the possibilities of the electronic
medium in 1991 when Dale Spender first spoke about the research
which led her to write *Nattering on the Net*. By the time we, at
Spinifex, had published the book we had also developed an interest
in multimedia and CD-ROMs. Throughout 1995 we were part of a
small group which developed a concept for a feminist CD-ROM[7] and
tendered this for funding on two occasions to the then Federal
government's program, Australia on CD. We were shortlisted twice,
but not funded. Indeed, no CD-ROM on women was. In spite of this,
the development process served as a useful learning experience as
we were thrown in to come up with workable solutions. Concept
development turned out to be a thrilling experience. Interactive
multimedia conceptual structures were exciting and mind-
stretching. It was associative, lateral, and the pathways and matrices
of connections created the possibility of a <u>multidimensional</u>
approach. The project had an organic feel and the group interactions
and processes involved were endlessly fascinating.

Guymer 3
Korenman 4
Westwood
and Kauf-
mann 15

Mueller 13
Bird 16
Westwood
and Kauf-
mann 15

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7. The group consisted of Lorna Hannan, educationalist, political and arts activist; Heather
Kaufmann, ESL teacher and researcher, multimedia developer from Protea Textware; Renate
Klein, Women's Studies researcher and academic, activist, writer and publisher at Spinifex
Press; Virginia Westwood, scientist, information technology analyst, self-taught computer
programmer and multimedia developer from Protea Textware; and Susan Hawthorne, writer,
arts activist and performer, academic and publisher at Spinifex Press. The project we developed
was entitled, The Community of Women.

However, since we didn't get funded, the project had to be shelved and we began to think of other possibilities. We were soon convinced that Spinifex Press needed to get a Home Page operating, and to do so quickly.

In 1996 we developed our Home Page so that it would include all the titles in our catalogue, as well as news, events, and links to authors' Home Pages. In addition we had committed to presenting the final chapter of Suniti Namjoshi's *Building Babel* (1996) on our Web site.[8] This chapter invites readers to contribute their ideas and responses to the novel. The novel explores the notion that the Internet is an analogue of the process of developing culture. This is an important insight and one which feminists—and cyberfeminists— are constantly engaging with. It is important because the culture we develop—whether it be electronic or political or economic— determines the way we interact, and so the invitation to readers asks them to engage with the concept of culture and suggest some of its components. To date we have received poems, stories about political action, music, visuals, animated text and a range of other responses. What we hope for is a continuing stream of creativity which challenges viewers/readers to consider how they might take responsibility for the future.

Namjoshi
17, 18

The beauty of the Internet is that it allows creative responses from readers around the world, and this gives a certain unpredictability and excitement to the project.

The electronic medium opens up possibilities for new forms of writing. Hyperfiction and hypertext poetry are developing, and like any new art form the quality is still very uneven. But in our imaginations the hypertext novel already lives. As a matrix of carefully woven ideas which one could shake out like a quilt, filled with colour and detail, some of which emerges only slowly, and only if the reader/viewer/listener engages with the work, spends time following the links. There are programs such as Storyspace, Storyvision and

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8. The Home Page can be visited at <http://spinifexpress.com.au/babelbuildingsite.htm>

Inspiration which can provide a structure for creativity, but Internet hyperlinks are still the most flexible and open-ended form. Or the writer can move to creating multimedia-based stories using programs such as Macromedia Director, Cosmoworld, Shockwave, Real Media, Quicktime3.
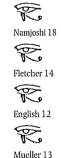
Hypertext can incorporate text, visuals—both still and moving—sound and virtual elements. It promises to bring a new generation of art forms. The question of whether these art forms will speak to feminists depends on the extent to which we are involved in developing the electronic culture.

Hypertext allows the writer to create a multilayered, nonlinear narrative. You need a computer to read hypertext, but the writer does not need a computer to create it—it's done in the mind. The only difficulty is getting it across to others. But oral traditions—the Bible, the Talmud and fictions like those of Monique Wittig, Suniti Namjoshi, Susan Griffin, Nathalie Sarrault, Virginia Woolf—have long ago explored the terrain that hypertext is entering through a new medium. What the electronic medium allows for is trans-parency of process, not readily transmitted through other forms of text (e.g. print, spoken, sung).

Namjoshi 17
Bird 16
Haw-thorne 19

There are also Virtual Reality Modelling Language (VRML) programs available on the Internet, which, with some time, we could all learn. A knowledge of VRML would allow us to put our ideas, images and representations into the virtual world. We could create the virtual worlds of our imaginations. Imaginable things could be produced: Suniti Namjoshi's (1996) Babel could be built,[9] or Beryl Fletcher's (1996) computer game of Alice's life as invented by Pixel could be developed. We could invent avatars and the worlds of our imaginations; we could invent games, play a wide range of roles, and immerse ourselves in other personae.

Namjoshi 18

Fletcher 14

English 12

But even here, in the world of creativity, a critical perspective is necessary. The idea that anything goes in electronic media, is a

Mueller 13

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[9]. For more on this, visit the Babel Building Site on the Spinifex Home Page at <http://spinifexpress.com.au>

popular one. But as with any medium, it can be put to negative use. Ray Bradbury in his 1954 novel, *Fahrenheit 451*[10] imagines the possibility of every household being fitted with huge screens in which the populace immerse themselves. Their friends are screen friends, and these screen or virtual friends keep the people distracted from the real and terrifying events of their culture. That such outcomes are possible, has recently gained momentum in discussions around violence, the use of guns, and ready access to information and games on the Internet. Kathy Mueller's discussion of games and Miriam English's invention of worlds tread this line between immersion and reality, and perhaps, like Brenda Laurel (1998), they can create an alternate vision, one which does not rely on violence for its existence.

Cyberculture is only as diverse and interesting, or as violent and boring, as the people who contribute to it. It's about numbers and critical mass. In its best form it can provide direct interaction between like minds, potentially bypassing the main routes of the male-dominated media and without interference from the gatekeepers. It can promote communication across cultures, and between people of very different social groupings, because they meet as minds first, and only later, if ever, begin to reveal aspects of their identity (age, sex, country, culture, religion, race, sexuality, ability, etc.).

Connectivity provides us with the means for communicating, acting together in the real world, and for sharing information and resources. Critical engagement enables us to develop discernment, to rise above the hype and seductiveness of this new and powerful medium. And creativity should not be underplayed in the electronic culture, as it could be an important source and sustenance for social change in the future.

[10.] 451 degrees Fahrenheit is the temperature at which paper burns. Books have been banned in this dystopic society and replaced by a centrally-controlled screen culture.

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