

My, is that Cyborg a little bit Queer?

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Abstract

This piece of work is a response to the following question: 'Critically assess the importance, or otherwise, of Donna Haraway's "manifesto" for early twenty-first century feminists'. Based on Stein and Plummer's outline of queer theory in their essay, *"I can't even think straight": "Queer" Theory and the Missing Sexual Revolution in Sociology* (Stein and Plummer 1996). This piece compares and contrasts different aspects of queer theory (sociological, ideological, political and ontological) with Haraway's 'manifesto' in order to investigate the possibilities of a cyberqueer theory: to 'queer' (as a verb) the 'cyborg'. Whilst attempting to interrelate both the notion of the 'cyborg' and 'queer theory', this piece explores feminist issues concerning gender, sexuality, identity, representation and the body. Ultimately, the piece argues how feminism might benefit from cyberqueer ideas in rethinking through these issues whilst being aware of its material ramifications.

Key Words: cyborg, gender, queer theory

I was nestling some popcorn between my legs whilst watching *Blade Runner* recently, a film I always watch with much delight. As I was drooling helplessly at the sight of Daryl Hannah, I caught myself thinking (guiltily) between each buttery nibble, *there's something wrong*. It started to dawn on me that although she is a cyborg, she's still a definite *she*: she is given a gendered skin-tight suit that accentuates her curves, and she depends on her 'male' counterparts who are wearing jeans and jumpers. The other 'female' replicants in the film are no different. The snake-holding belly dancer, a questionable role in itself, struts and runs around half-naked out of showers and into transparent suits. Rachel, another submissive 'female' replicant pathetically mutters, 'I want you' after she is told to say so by a (hu)man. As I cleared the pool of saliva beneath my feet, I concluded that *they all need to be a little more queer*.

This is where I would like to mount my rather queer spacecraft and embark upon a journey. I ask you to step in and to join me in my quest to explore the silver nooks and synthetic crannies of the Cyb(que)erworld. But I am also concerned with the pasty complexion of Pris, Daryl Hanna's cyborg, so let us take her in the backseat with us and show her the magnificent Cyb(que)erscape: maybe she will learn something from it, she is very real but needs some twenty-first century make-up to freshen her up. Whilst you are putting your seat belts on, I shall try and show you the map of Cyb(que)erland so you know what to expect. Cyb(que)erland is an illegitimate fusion of two twin cities: Cyberia and Queerdonia. Queerdonia has three areas with their Cyberian characteristics that shall catch your eye. The first area symbolises the "conceptualization of sexuality which sees sexual power embodied in different levels of social life, expressed discursively and enforced through boundaries and binary divides". The second area "problematizes sexual and gender categories, and identities in general". This area reveals that "identities are always on uncertain grounds, entailing

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displacements of identification and knowing”. The third and loudest area shouts the “rejection of civil rights strategies in favor of a politics of carnival, transgression, and parody which leads to deconstruction, decentering, revisionist readings, and anti-assimilationist politics” (Stein and Plummer 1996, p.131).

So now that we are all ready, let us shoot off into the first area of the Cyb(que)erland: *conceptualisation of sexuality which sees sexual power embodied in different areas of life*. Haraway writes that “a cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet, about the final abstraction embodied in a Star Wars apocalypse waged in the name of defence, about the final appropriation of women’s bodies in a masculinist orgy of war” (1985, p.154). The important words here are: ‘grid of control,’ and ‘appropriation of women’s bodies’. Foucault believes that power “produces things, it induces pleasure, it forms knowledge, it produces discourse; it must be considered as a productive network which runs through the entire social body much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression” (1979, p.29-50). Thus, in Cyb(que)erland, we are all subjects interweaving within and without this grid of power, no one entity holding power, only exercising it. The power of production, the power of sexuality, the power of knowledge and the power of discourse: they are all energies that ultimately come from the *body*. Therefore, I believe that it is of utmost political, physical and cultural importance for us women to place our *bodies* into the cybernetic domain. It is only then when we can claim a space within this infinite landscape that we shall have the power to create a cyborgian culture, to really enter the ‘grid of control’ that confronts the ‘masculinist orgy’. Only then can we anticipate real change, only then can we anticipate real liberation that, “rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility. The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women’s experience in the late twentieth century” (Haraway 1985, p.149).

Cyberspace is indeed a space that reflects and refracts culture. Thus for queer computer nuts like me, queering this space is important, for “cyberqueer spaces are necessarily embedded within both institutional and cultural practices, and are a means by which the lesbian/gay/transgendered queer self can be read into the politics of representation and activism” (Wakeford 2000, p.408). My body, the space it occupies and the power it transmits within the institutional and cultural practices will liberate me; my body will be the battleground and the conqueror. My body will become subject *to* and *of* cyborgian cultural construction (Boyd 1997, p.135).

But how can we put the body---so fleshy, physical and warm---into such an abstract and metallically cool world? Are we supposed to squeeze in through the screen like Alice, melting into the world beyond the looking glass of cyberspace? The answer lies within the key words: *read into the politics*. Wittig claims that writing is a “war machine” where “words are everything”(1984, p.69-71). In this age when emails, internet and other tools of the computer are becoming more and more common, we must take a look at the significance of words. The screen, a humming and quadratic space in front of us becomes a bed upon which we place our bodies comfortably between the cybersynthetic sheets of communication. We rely heavily, if not entirely upon the words we see in front of us---they are indeed, everything. Words typed in an email *become* the writer. We are not old crones living between two dusty covers, we are sexy cyborgs released into the screen through words that we click. By typing words (with)in the grid of the internet, we are in effect placing our bodies in the network of power and placing the network of power into our bodies; we can seize what Haraway calls, “our bodies...the maps of power and identity”(1985, p.180). Our body is power, and so the word that comes from it. Words are what “bind space and time in the service of new conceptions of

the human and the human body” (Tomas 1995, p.28). Haraway argues the importance we must place upon the ability to exercise this wordy, worldly body power, for words provide an “access to the power to signify writing is pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs...cyborg politics is the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the dogma of phallogocentrism.” (1985, p.176).

Language, codification, communication, and words are tools and/or problems that we must grasp in order to escape and destroy the ‘masculinist orgy.’ Language, according to Saussure, constructs our reality, not merely reflects it. Thus, the ability to name, code, interfere and create things will give us the power/freedom over our bodies and “anarchistic possibilities inherent in cyberspace that provide a wonderful opportunity for feminists to confront patriarchal structures” (Fletcher 1999, p.350). Where there is power there is resistance (Foucault 1979, p.29-48) and resistance there shall be from subjects living in Cyb(que)erland like me, trying to confront the dominant assumption of the normality of heterosexuality, whiteness and maleness.

The ‘war machine’ can also help us live another bodily reality: it will help us to ‘recraft’ and ‘appropriate’ our bodies. For “cyborg writing is about the power to survive...seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other. The tools are often stories, retold stories” (1985, p.175). Haraway mentions Wittig as being a “theorist for cyborgs” (1985, p.173), and indeed, Wittig provides a role example in *The Lesbian Body*. Wittig seizes the tools to re-write the lesbian body and in the process comes uncannily close to Haraway’s cyborgian argument for the connection between language and the ‘appropriation of the ‘body’ through a ‘retold story’:

I discover that your skin can be lifted layer by layer, I pull, it lifts off, it coils about your knees, I pull starting at the labia, it slides the length of the belly, fine to extreme transparency, I pull starting at the loins, the skin uncovers the round muscles and trapezii of the back, it peels off up to the nape of the neck, I arrive under your hair, m/y finger traverse its thickness, I touch your skull, I grasp it with all m/y fingers.....(1994, p.17)

The Lesbian Body is a ‘retold’ story that celebrates our sexuality and reclaims our bodies. But something seems to have happened, something very queer indeed that changes the entire concept of ‘recrafting the body.’ I can hear Pris at the back protesting that her body and self are supposed to be only “fiction mapping our social and bodily reality as an imaginative resource” (Haraway 1985, p.15) Well, this is where you need some make-up dear Pris, things have changed---you’re not a theoretical representation any more. Does Wittig’s stripping and reassembling of the lesbian body not echo a certain contemporary phenomena? Orlan, an artist who wanted to express the fact that there is no such thing as a ‘natural body’ and that it is “nothing more than a costume” (Klein 1999, p.200) made by society, underwent seven operations which changed and altered her body and face. Whilst I would not suggest such extreme measures, she is an example and postmodernist product of this technological phenomenon. Since Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto* in 1985, technology has advanced to a point where we can now literally, *really*, and physically change our bodies with a fluidity unknown before. Not only am I talking about artists incorporating bits of plastic in their bodies, or genetic engineering that clones sheep, but I am also talking about the graphical world of virtual reality, a land that exists beyond the screen.

We are thus already moving into the second terrain of Cyb(que)erland: *problematization of sexual and gender categories, and of identities in general. Identities are always on uncertain*

grounds, entailing displacement of identification and knowing. Ironically speaking (for cyborgs being “at the centre of ironic faith” love irony! (Haraway 1986, p.149)), although I have mentioned the body *being* the words upon the screen, a queer cyborg hates being embodied into anything. A queer cyborg wants to remain free, unleashed and left to roam, run wild and leap from one body into another. Be it a racial, ethnic, class, gendered or sexual body, you are sure to see the queer cyborg running away from it. Poor Pris, she has been encapsulated within a gender category, forever being the one whom power is exercised over. She is a cyborg who still lives in an engendered world that “denies women any claim of the abstract, philosophical, political discourses that give shape to the social body” (Wittig 1985, p.71).

In Dick’s novel, *Do Androids dream of electric sheep?*, the human protagonist lusts for a female replicant, a machine that represents a woman. This seems to highlight Butler’s view about gender being nothing more than a masquerade (1990, p.53); the (hu)man is only lusting the skin of ‘woman’ that Rachel wears. It is not the inside he wants, for if you remove her skin, she is an unengendered machine. She needs to remove her skin, layer by layer and leave her body hanging somewhere between the trees of Cyb(que)erland, a “monstrous world without gender” (Haraway 1985, p.181). Only then can she really be free from the agonies of a ‘masculinist orgy.’ In fact, Wittig’s belief that the lesbian figure stands outside the sphere of both the male and female gender comes intimately close to Haraway’s beliefs about cyborgs being in a ‘world without gender’. For the queer cyborg, like the lesbian, lives in a place that has made the class of ‘men’ and ‘women’ disappear altogether, where gender is completely destroyed (Wittig 1992, p.15).

But how can there be a world without gender? Butler suggests that “perhaps part of what dialogic understanding entails is the acceptance of divergence, breakage, splinter and fragmentation” (1990, p.14). These words seem to echo Haraway’s words: “*cyborgs might consider more seriously the partial, fluid, sometimes aspect of sex and sexual embodiment. Gender might not be global identity after all...*” (1985, p.180). Everything must become “fluid, being both material and opaque” (1985, p.153), like a film consisting of millisecond shots, all individual but somehow forming a chain(reaction) together. For it is in this method that we escape the ‘masculinist orgy’ closing its heavy lid upon us. Butler then asks “if gender is constructed, could it be constructed differently?” (1990, p.7). Haraway answers this by stating that “in the fraying of identities and in the reflexive strategies for constructing them, the possibility opens up for weaving something...” (1985, p.158). I do not think Haraway realised just how prophetic her words were. Cyberspace is indeed the possibility that has opened up to us; on/off-line queer cyborgs are (re)creating unconfined and unrelated genders challenging the preconceived ideas about man/woman, masculine/feminine. If an on/off-line masquerader wants to be a man one day, a woman the next, and a dildo-using sheep the following day, then he/she/it/he-she-it is realising and proving the fact that gender, and all other categories, are indeed just a parade. Divergence, breakage, splinter and fragmentation are not just dialogic understandings, they have become physical realities. We are truly becoming a ‘fluid, material and opaque’ race exploring a space that can “generate and store a plurality of alternative models of living, from utopias to programs, which are capable of influencing the behaviour of these mainstream social and political roles in the direction of radical change” (I quote Kaloski, quoting Albright quoting Tomas quoting Turner 1997, p.209). It is of prime importance to note that although it is ‘virtually’ real, cyberspace does seep into reality as it leaks and ‘influences’ our behaviours and ideas. How much more real can you get? Queer cyborgs are indeed ‘hybrids’ who surf through the waves of a ‘sexual landscape’ which might change and “create new opportunities for self description while transforming or eliminating existing possibilities” (1996, p.70). Tsang claims that virtual

reality and the on-line domain has allowed him to reconstruct his racial and ethnic identity which enabled him to explore different aspects of himself and the world from different angles. (2000, p.435). Being a confusing/confused and colourful Japanese-Spanish-English-speaking-male-female-loving drama queen, there are times in life when I cannot be Japanese, or Spanish, or English, or straight, or even gay. I love considering myself as an on/off-line queer cyborg who enjoys looking at the world through pink-tinted cyberspectacles. Although Haraway claims that a cyborg is a creature which “has no truck with bisexuality” (1985, p.150), I must disagree firmly on this point. As Herdt claims, “fluidity denotes that which is capable of flowing or is easily changed, not fixed or solid and bisexual identity is changeable in: gender role, sexual identity, object choice, erotic technique” (1984, p.162). What, may I ask is so un-cyborgian about bisexuality? Surely the fact that the bisexual is an “identity that is *not* an identity, a sign of the certainty of ambiguity, the stability of instability, a category that defies and defeats categorization” (Garber 1995, p.138) should mean bisexuality can be part of that cyborgian culture?

Let us continue riding the ray of hybridity, allowing it to take us smoothly into our last terrain of Cyb(que)erland yet to be explored: *the rejection of civil-rights strategies in favor of a politics of carnival, transgression, and parody which leads to deconstruction, decentering, revisionist readings, and anti-assimilationist politics*. Haraway constantly highlights the trans(ag)gressive, subversive, perverse and carnivalesque quality of the cyborg; she claims that cyborg “politics insist on noise and advocate pollution, rejoicing in the illegitimate fusions” (1985, p.176) and are about “transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities” (1985, p.154). How much queerer can we get here? The queer cyborg loves noise, pollution, excessive cybersynthetic make-up, walking and teleporting itself down the catwalks of society. The invincible, hybrid, queer cyborg dances in front of the nation, challenges authority. Valverde states that, “the hybrid acknowledges the part that the past has played in constituting new cultures and identities, and then displaces the dominant culture’s attempt to enshrine itself by...re-writing the future” (1999, p.134). Haraway highlights different laws and borders in society which the queer cyborg literally and symbolically re-writes, trying to deconstruct, decentre, revise the past to make way for the future. Haraway claims there are three boundary breakdowns happening within the cyborgian culture: the human/animal boundary, the organic/machine boundary and the physical/non-physical boundary (1985, p.151-3).

The human/animal boundary breakdown is a power(ful) strategy that the queer cyborg practices. The sexy, alluring and enigmatic mermaid is an early form and a good example of the carnivalesque, queer, animal/human cyborg. By subverting and emerging the animal with the human, the queer cyborg celebrates and relishes its transgression and acknowledgement of its bestial origins. The animalistic and illegitimate queer cyborg sucks the fruits of perversion and licks the juices of transgression upon its lips, glittery to the eye and wet with a purpose. Suleiman rightly states that “perversion is one of the essential ways and means...to push forward the frontiers of what is possible and to unsettle reality” (1990, 148). The queer cyborg, with a hand on its (in)organic crotch, ‘rejoices’ its perverse status/strategy and confronts authority whilst challenging the Western quest for innocence and origin.

The breakdown of animal/machine boundary allows queer cyborgs to a ‘rejoice in the illegitimate fusion’ (Haraway 1985, p.176) of machine and body. Not only does this signify the symbolic fact that there is a growing awareness amongst women to see their bodies as powerful machines, better than (hu)mans; but also, the body as the battleground, tool and escape from the ‘masculinist orgy’. Wittig’s ‘war machine’ seems to also have a place within this hybrid. The body

becomes not just the writing, written and (re)written, it becomes the 'war machine' that "utilizes strategies of parody and inversion for purposes of political analysis and protest" (Palmer 1993, p.99). On a physical level, the body and the machine are literally becoming more and more integrated. Wilson observes that, "you could never be certain where the edges are. Multiplicity is another way of not being sure where people's edges are, where their identity begins and ends" (Wilson 1995, p.243). Queer cyborgs would enjoy hearing that. The amalgamation of body and machine makes the queer cyborg monstrous, strong, sexy and powerful. In *Do Androids dream of Electric Sheep?* the human characters in the novel carry 'empathy boxes' which are mechanic extensions of the body that enable the carrier to feel empathy. In addition, they carry 'Penfield mood organs' which allow them to choose and set a mood they want to be in. Hawthorne expresses a concern over this matter, and wonders whether there will be a point where "we will no longer listen to our bodies...perhaps we will no longer feel sympathy?" (Hawthorne 1999, p.233). Whilst this might be a cause for apprehension, concern, and even fear, the 'soullessness' of a machine that Wilson describes, coupled with the bestiality of humans indeed, "evokes horror" (1995, p.246), the perfect confrontational tool for the queer cyborg engaging in the politics of provocation. In addition, Wilson argues that machines are "composed out of parts. They may be assembled and disassembled. They are open to modifications or 'retoolings'" (1985, p.247). Does this not sound like the physical realisation of what Haraway originally stated? A disassembled and reassembled, postmodern, collective and personal self (1985, p.163). She is right: the machine *is* us, our processes and an aspect of our embodiment (1985, p.180).

The final binary breakdown occurs between the physical/non-physical. Haraway claims that cyborgs are creatures that are "no longer structured by the polarity of public and private" (1985, p.151). As I have mentioned before, the queer cyborg is an entity that drifts in/out/on/off-line. As the screen which resides in the private home becomes a window to the public network of power, the distinction between private/public become more and more blurred. Haraway expands upon this point by mentioning the eradication of the 'public' and 'private' life through growing technology, such as video games (1985, p.168). Foster makes an excellent point in saying that the "virtual reality computer interfaces or telepresence technologies both restage and disrupt the distinction between inner and outer worlds" (2000, p.440). This means that we are in a position to embody the outside power, and also empower the outside body. Queer cyborgs can thus detach their public persona with their physical body, strengthening the argument that gender, and other categories are just a stage act, unlinked to the physical self. The parade continues on/off-line, noisy and garrulous; Bateson argues that "there must be a systematic relation between the internal and the external---the engineer's term for nonsystematic elements in codification is 'noise'"(1970, p.30). And this relation between the external and internal occurs because there is no barrier, no solid boundary that separates the two. Let the music be heard, loud and clear for there will be no inner closet with its door----queer cyborgs no longer need to come 'out' for they are already there.

So now that the engine is coming to a steady halt, it looks as though our journey is over. I hope that Pris has learned something from the beautifully camp Cyb(que)erlandscape. But just before you go, I want to tell you something. You have seen the fruits that grow on the cybertrees, the provocative and loud music played by the in(out)habitants of Cyb(que)erland. But there is something that is gnawing at the back of the mind. Haraway's words are becoming less and less symbolic, more and more real. I am worried not because of my fear of computers and technology, but worried because of the way we are applying them. Physically changing bodies and identities is all fine in a postmodernist way, but what happens if we fall into the same trap? What happens when

women start to alter their identities, only to become more appealing for the male gaze? Would we not by intensifying our old problems? And in addition, what about the identities that we strove hard to create? Lesbianism for example, worked hard to create its identity and space. Could the fluidity and interactive cyberspace potentially wipe this identity out? Or would cyberspace enable all women to experience lesbianism in one form or another during the course of their lives----like Rich's idea of a lesbian continuum?

I have nothing more to say. I hope to see you soon, bring a bottle of champagne the next time and we can really have some queer times together again in Cyberia.

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