

# Situating Cyberfeminisms

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**D**uring the 1980s, in the U.S., the second wave women's liberation movement which had swept the country in the late '60s and throughout the '70s became fragmented, de-centered, and beset by dissention and various forms of cultural and political backlash. While more nomadic and de-territorialized feminisms allowed many new voices and tactics to flourish often in regard to local concerns, it became harder to organize coalitions and concerted action regarding issues which affect large groups of women globally. Currently, there is no longer a vocal, visible, public feminist movement in the U.S.—though there are many local pockets of feminist practice—but there is pressing need for a renewed vision and engagement in local and global feminist action. Much of this need is created by the dramatic effects of digital media on multiple areas of communications, knowledge and lived experience. The scientific understanding of what constitutes a human being, the ways in which we're conceived and born into the world, our education, socialization, work, health, illness, and death are mediated by digital technology (as a presence or a lack). This is an important moment for the re-examination of historical feminist issues and their relation to the condition of women in “the integrated circuit”—a term coined by Rachel Grossman to “name the situation of women in a world [so] intimately restructured through the social relations of science and technology.”<sup>1</sup>

## **CYBERFEMINISM AND FEMINISM**

Historically, waves of feminism have often accompanied technological expansion, and feminists have both embraced and contested technological developments. At the beginning of the twenty-first century the advancing global

hegemony of U.S. information and communication technologies (ICT)—that make the overwhelming success of pan-capitalism possible—presents radically new challenges for feminist theory and practice.

An early response to these conditions has been the emergence of the eclectic formation of cyberfeminism. In the last ten years, cyberfeminism has become a significant field in contemporary cultural practice. Cyberfeminist web sites and electronic publications have increased from a handful in the early nineties to nearly two thousand in 2002. Yet at present, cyberfeminism functions more as a label to grant currency to a panoply of positions than as a political movement. The importunate question of feminism in cyberfeminism still haunts virtually every discussion of cyberfeminism.<sup>2</sup>

Heir to both postfeminism and poststructuralism, cyberfeminism has neither welcomed a definition nor a clear political positioning within feminisms. For example, in discussions at the First Cyberfeminist International at Documenta X, in Kassel in 1997, definition of cyberfeminism was declined in favor of the declaration that cyberfeminism was a practice which embraced a gamut of attitudes towards art, culture, theory, politics, communications and technology—the terrain of the Internet. This was a tactic presumed to attract women from diverse backgrounds and orientations, particularly young women unwilling to call themselves feminists. Instead of a definition, the participants (including Wilding) devised the 100 anti-theses—definitions of what cyberfeminism is not:

4. *cyberfeminism is not ideology*
10. *cyberfeminism ist keine praxis*
18. *cyberfeminism is not an ism*
19. *cyberfeminism is not anti-male*
24. *cyberfeminism nije apolitan, etc.*

The anti-theses included the statement “Cyberfeminism is not a-political” but the politics remained unspecified. The creation of a label or identity as a signature for various kinds of tactical political interventions and cultural productions has been used as an activist strategy. For instance, “Luther Blissett” lends its name to anyone who wants to use it. This has resulted in a

prolific and diverse production attributed to the fictional character Luther Blissett. While this strategy allows activists and artists to remain anonymous and intervene in ways that would otherwise be met with brutal retribution by disciplinary agencies and institutions, the issue of anonymity does not seem to play a part in the pluralistic tendencies of cyberfeminism. To the contrary, as competence in theoretical and technological discourses have become professional requirements in the arts and in academia, women artists and academics are increasingly eager to be identified as cyberfeminists. Clearly, it is necessary to negotiate between tactics that might attract support from a wide variety of people, and devising radical political strategies to challenge and disturb the patriarchal status quo.

The question of how to negotiate the crucial link of cyberfeminism to feminism is at the heart of the often-contradictory contemporary positions of women working with the new technologies. It has been the subject of heated debates both on and off-line as many women like the name “cyberfeminist” but do not want to be identified with feminist politics. As one contributor to an all-women mailing list put it, “I like the ‘cyber’ it’s sexy, but I do not like to be called a feminist. It gives people a bad impression.”

In the introduction to the *First Cyberfeminist Reader* Cornelia Sollfrank writes, “The ‘feminism’ in Cyberfeminism is obvious, it cannot be overlooked. And that’s as it should be. Feminism’s heritage is our life-blood, but its institutionalization in public life and in the academies makes it inaccessible to most women today. In addition, the mass women’s movement of former years has been fragmented into a bewildering variety of feminismS. Identifying oneself as a woman is no longer enough to serve as a productive connecting link. We have to find new strategies for political action.”<sup>3</sup> Sollfrank implies that the Internet (cyberspace) can make feminism more accessible to an entirely new audience of diverse women immersed in technology. But the strategies of how to do this are still to be invented and tested. The ambivalence many wired women still have to what they perceive as a monumental past feminist history, theory, and practice must first be negotiated. Sadly, some manifestations of this ambivalence stem from ignorance of even very recent feminist histories and

the falsification and disregard of the great differences within feminisms' theory and practice and their relevance to contemporary conditions.

Our experience teaching in various institutions of higher education in the United States suggests that many young college women (ages 18–23) of various classes and backgrounds know little of the history of feminist thought and action. They talk incessantly about the tyranny of the fashion world and mass media, the pressure to be thin, pretty, nice, and to get a boyfriend, as well as the high incidence of eating disorders and sexual violence experienced by themselves and their friends. When asked for a definition of feminism they most often say that it means equal rights for women, and they are quite sure that in the United States we have these. When they encounter the radical demands of early feminists, for example, the abolition of the State, the Church, and the Family, many of them are shocked and affronted. They have grown up with a vague belief that as women in the United States they can do anything they want to do. They are invariably surprised to learn that the Equal Rights Amendment has never been ratified by enough states to become constitutional; that despite narrowing gaps in higher education very few women reach the upper levels of education, science, and business; and that in most of the developed world women still earn less than men. It is evident that these women don't identify feminism as a strategy or philosophy that they could use to help deal with the obvious sexism and gender discrimination that they still encounter in their own lives. Ignorance of feminism is by no means limited to the U.S. Many younger cyberfeminists world-wide are alienated from a feminist past they perceive as irrelevant to their own situations.

## SHARED TERRITORIES

Despite its ambivalence toward historical feminism, cyberfeminism shares multiple aspects with second wave feminism. Cyberfeminist practice has already adopted many of the strategies of avant-garde feminist movements, including strategic separatism (women only lists, self-help groups, chat groups, networks, and woman to woman technological training), feminist cultural, social, and language theory and analysis, creation of new images of women to

counter rampant sexist stereotyping (feminist avatars, cyborgs, trans or non-gendered figures), feminist net critique, strategic essentialism, and the like. Cyberfeminism began with strong techno-utopian expectations that the new electronic technologies would offer women a fresh start to create new languages, programs, platforms, images, fluid identities and multi-subject definitions in cyberspace; that in fact women could recode, redesign, and reprogram information technology to help change the feminine condition. This is reminiscent of many of the goals of the 1970s feminist art movement and cultural feminism which worked to create new images, identities, and subjectivities for women within the art world and mass media as well as the real world. In much the same way as '70s feminist artists appropriated non-traditional media, technologies, and techniques (such as performance, installation, video, and media interventions) to present a new content in art, wired women are now beginning to appropriate digital technologies that do not yet have an established aesthetic history. This is an exciting and promising moment.

Still, there are many problems and pitfalls and it is precisely a knowledge of past feminist history and its mistakes and omissions which can be instructive here. For example, although cyberfeminism presents itself as inclusive, cyberfeminist writings assume an educated, white, upper middle-class, English speaking, culturally sophisticated readership. Ironically, this attitude replicates the damaging universalism of "old-style feminism." There is little mention of the crucially different conditions—be they economic, cultural, racial or ethnic, geographic, or environmental—under which women worldwide experience sexuality and pleasure, aging, menopause, motherhood, child rearing, ecology and the environment; or of alternative ways of living and working that may preclude ICT. These subjects, central to postcolonial feminist work in theory, literature and the arts, remain peripheral to the core of cyberfeminist writing.<sup>4</sup>

The marginalization of postcolonial studies within cyberfeminism is due to various factors including the inconspicuousness of postcolonial theory in most of Europe, and inherited, often unquestioned attitudes towards ethnic and racial difference. As is common in new fields, cyberfeminists adopted aspects

of a previously established body of theoretical work in electronic media. Despite the theoretical eclecticism evident in this field, during the last twenty years, the impact of postcolonial studies on electronic media practice, theory, and criticism has been negligible.<sup>5</sup>

In cyberfeminism, the difference most celebrated and discussed (apart from sexual orientation) is the often-narcissistic construction of the self as Other by adopting the cyborg and the monster as figures of liberation and self-representation. To be sure, the transformation to “cyborgs” of bodies previously cast as “unfit” has been uplifting and enabling for numerous individuals. Yet, a cyborg identity is primarily claimed by those categorized as the norm in previous colonial and eugenic taxonomies: If you are white, educated and affluent, the cyborg is your ticket to difference.<sup>6</sup>

## OLD AND NEW CYBERFEMINISM

Distinctions can be made between two overlapping waves of cyberfeminism: An initial wave that celebrated the innate affinities of women and machines, and a second, more critical, wave. The first current is best articulated by British cultural theorist Sadie Plant and the Australian artist collective VNS Matrix, both indebted to Donna Haraway’s influential article, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs.” Sadie Plant’s position on cyberfeminism has been identified as “an absolutely posthuman insurrection—the revolt of an emergent system which includes women and computers, against the world view and material reality of a patriarchy which still seeks to subdue them.”<sup>7</sup> A humorous and self-ironizing illustration of this can be found in VNS Matrix’s “Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century” which declares: “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...”<sup>8</sup> Julianne Pierce of VNS Matrix describes the first wave of cyberfeminism, “Cyberfeminism was about ideas, irony, appropriation and hands-on skilling up in the data terrain. It combined a utopic vision of corrupting patriarchy with an unbounded enthusiasm for the new tools of technology. It embraced gender and identity politics, allowing fluid and non-gendered identities to flourish through the digital medium. The post-

corporeal female would be an online frontier woman, creating our own virtual worlds and colonising the amorphous world of cyberspace.” Pierce then describes how cyberfeminism has changed, “somehow ‘feminism’ is the problem, some of the old guard see it as a vacuous fashion statement...and the young guard don’t need feminism any more. By contrast, Pierce describes the “new” cyberfeminism as being “about confronting the top-down with the bottom-up, creating a culture where the info heavy cyber babe can create her own space within a clever info society. It’s about creating foundations to build upon, so that in the next millennium we can carve our own paths, create our own corporations...in the words of VNS Matrix—‘unbounded, unleashed, unforgiving, we are the future cunt.’” This statement certainly has sobered up from the *jouissance* of the first manifesto (perhaps sadly so for we sorely need utopia and *jouissance*). Yet in the compressed statement “confronting the top-down with the bottom-up” we have what amounts to a radical political strategy for cyberfeminism, one that is reminiscent of classic Marxism/socialism.

More critical orientations to cyberfeminism and ICT were also evident in various presentations at the Second Cyberfeminist International in Rotterdam in March 1999, and in recent work by Caroline Bassett, Susanna Paasonen, Renate Klein and Susan Hawthorne among others.<sup>9</sup> These cyberfeminists have critiqued the a-political stance of previous theorists and advocate the development of an embodied and politically engaged cyberfeminism. Current debates among “new” cyberfeminists are only now beginning to emphasize the importance of feminist difference and colonial and postcolonial discourses to an engaged feminist net theory, politics and practice.

## AREAS FOR INTERVENTION

Although recently cyberfeminists have critiqued fundamental predicates of earlier cyberfeminism including the desirability of a cyborg future and the presupposition of women’s universal access to computers, some celebrate the impending development of a “universal sisterhood” forged through electronic communication. The utopian promises so often associated with the new technologies demand our sharpest critical attention, for it is foolish to believe

that major social, economic, and political issues can be addressed by throwing technology at them. As radical net critics have repeatedly pointed out, cyberspace is not an arena inherently free of the old feminist struggle against a patriarchal capitalist system. The new media are embedded in a framework of pan-capitalist social relations and economic, political, and cultural environments that are still deeply sexist and racist. Pan-capitalism is predicated on imperialism and domination. Historically, the goal of economic expansionism, has brought about the exploitation and destitution of natural resources and third world populations—the majority of which are women. In this context, a crucial question to be posed by cyberfeminists is whether non-specificity of purpose and politics are viable strategies for survival, resistance, and for a more just distribution of resources and power which is one of the central goals of feminism. subRosa proposes that it is time a politically radical, activist cyberfeminism take the lead in critiquing Net-culture and politics, and challenging Net-practices through tactical texts, artworks, and contestational projects.

Far from being obsolete, feminist political philosophy and analysis can be fruitfully brought to bear on the new conditions that ICT has created for women. For example, we need much more research on the specific impact of ICT on different populations of women whose lives are being profoundly altered by the new technologies, often in ways that lead to extreme physical and mental health problems. This is as true for highly educated professional women in academia, the sciences, medical, and computer industries, as it is for clerical and factory workers in the just-in-time telecommunications and home-work industry, as well as rural and urban women working in chips factories and assembly sweat-shops.

Since most women are already doing a “double shift” (production and reproduction) the demands and pressures of the high-speed, just-in-time economy affect them differently than it does most men. The high levels of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, depression, and stress disorders even among professional women (the most documented group) attest to the high human costs of our economic and cultural systems of productivity. In order to strategize action we



must examine the impact of the new technologies on women's sexuality and subjectivities; the conditions of production and reproduction—always already linked for women; gender roles, social relations, and public and private space; and we need to contest the naturalized value placed on speed and efficiency when they take no heed of the limits and needs of the organic body.

Pan-capitalism has blurred the distinctions between developed/underdeveloped, first world/third world as these conditions coexist in almost all geographical locations. In the aftermath of colonialism, there are more migrants, refugees and exiles than ever before and many of these migrants are women. These people have tremendous impact on the urban environment, the home, the careers, the language, culture, diet, and, ultimately, the subjectivity of people from the traditional imperial centers. As women from developing countries increasingly become the home-service and child-care labor employed by wealthier families—as well as the world's electronic parts manufacturers, assemblers, and data maintenance workers—the lives of white women and women of color are mutually reliant. This interdependence stresses the relevance of postcolonial studies for critical cyberfeminisms. Far from being subjects irrelevant to electronic media and cyberfeminism, migrants often result from devastations caused by the interventions of empire. We must begin de-colonization in our own networks and embodied relations.

Developments in biogenetic technologies that will profoundly affect environmental and human futures must be a major focus of cyberfeminist concern, particularly since much cutting edge medical technology is being developed and tested by the military, with the proviso that there be lucrative civilian applications. Some of these military technologies are already having far reaching effects on women, as for example in ultrasound pregnancy monitoring, tele-surgery, robotic medical monitoring and care, and invasive imaging techniques. Organic bodies and bodily processes—particularly those of women and fetuses—are being invaded at the molecular level and re-engineered to meet the cyborgian and eugenic needs of the global market place. Cyberfeminist scientists and technicians—as well as artists—working with these technologies are well positioned to expose and subvert the ideologies and practices of the new

flesh, reproductive, and genetic technologies, and assess their particular political, economic, social and eugenic impact on different groups of women globally. In the '70s the Feminist Women's Health Movement challenged the medical establishment in the U.S. by establishing its own clinics, new abortion procedures, alternative healing practices, and feminist sexual counseling. These tactics subverted patriarchal medical authority and eventually forced women's health care providers in the U.S. to change some of their standard gynecological and obstetric practices. Similarly, cyberfeminists could spearhead activism and education about Assisted Reproductive Technologies and new eugenics to expose how profoundly traditional conceptions of women's bodies and gender roles are implicated in the deployment of these technologies.

A contestational cyberfeminism must also address the circumstances of young women now entering the technocratic class. As Wilding and CAE have written in a previous essay: "We do not support a reductive equality feminism, i.e. support the existing system, but believe there should be equal gender representation in all its territories. We do not support pan-capitalism. It is a predatory, pernicious, and sexist system that will not change even if there was equal representation of gender in the policy-making classes. Our argument is that women need access to empowering knowledge and tools that are now dominated by a despicable "virtual class" (Kroker). We do not mean to suggest that women become part of this class. To break the "glass ceiling" and become an active part of the exploiting class that benefits from gender hierarchy is not a feminist goal, nor anything to be proud of."<sup>10</sup> In this context, bell hooks' definition of feminism proposed almost two decades ago, remains relevant to cyberfeminists: In her words, feminism "is not simply a struggle to end male chauvinism or a movement to ensure that women will have equal rights with men; it is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels—sex, race, and class to name a few—and a commitment to reorganizing U.S. society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires."<sup>11</sup>

## DOMAIN ERRORS, CYBERFEMINIST PRACTICES

Cyberfeminists have begun to open the contested territory of the Internet for interrogation, play, and pleasure—as well as for new feminist political campaigns, education, critique, tactical interventions, activist alliances, and all manner of collaborations both local and international. New cyberfeminism has just begun to scrutinize, publicize, and contest the complex effects of technology on many aspects of women’s lives; and to fashion a politics of presence and embodiment that insists on full engagement with the discourses of technology and power. The foregoing delineates a terrain for a politically active contestational cyberfeminism. This anthology can but touch on a few of the issues raised here for there is much work to be done. Our purpose is to go beyond general critiques of cyberfeminism and to open areas heretofore repressed in cyberfeminist discourses, criticism, and practice. We conceive of each piece in this book as an intervention, both textual and performative, and as an invitation to future performativity and elaboration. ★

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- 1 Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 165.
  - 2 Faith Wilding, “Where is the Feminism in Cyberfeminism?” *n.paradoxa 2* (1998): 6–12.
  - 3 Cornelia Sollfrank, “Introduction,” *First Cyberfeminist International Reader* (Hamburg: Germany, 1998), p. 1.
  - 4 A notable exception here is the group Les Penelopes which has addressed many of these issues in their work. Yet, Les Penelopes neither identify themselves as cyberfeminists nor do they figure prominently in electronic media culture. Les Penelopes’ web site <<http://www.penelopes.org>> features a section on cyberfeminism among other subjects.
  - 5 For a more detailed analysis on the intersection of postcolonial studies and electronic media theory see Maria Fernandez, “Postcolonial Electronic Media Theory,” *Third Text* (Summer 1999) and expanded version in *Art Journal* (Fall 1999).
  - 6 Susan Hawthorne, “Cyborgs, Virtual Bodies and Organic Bodies: Theoretical Feminist Responses,” in *Cyberfeminism*, eds. Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein (Melbourne: Spinifex, 1999).
  - 7 Caroline Bassett, “With a Little Help from Our (New) Friends?” *mute* (August 1997): 46–49.
  - 8 All quotes in this paragraph from Julianne Pierce, *First Cyberfeminist International Reader*, p. 10.
  - 9 Caroline Bassett, “A Manifesto Against Manifestos,” and Maria Fernandez & Faith Wilding, “Feminism, Difference, and Global Capital,” *Next Cyberfeminist International Reader* (Hamburg: Old Boys Network, 1999); Hawthorne, “Cyborgs,” and Susanna Paasonen, “Digital, Human, Animal, PLANT: The politics of Cyberfeminism,” *n.paradoxa 2* (1998).

- 10 Faith Wilding and CAE, "Notes on the Political Condition of Cyberfeminism." *First Cyberfeminist International Reader*, p. 23.
- 11 bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), p. 194–195.