

The Machineries of Uncivilization: Technology and the Gendered Body
in the Fiction of Margaret Atwood and William Gibson

by

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For Patricia Lapointe
reader, teacher, literary guide
my mom

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements		iv
Abstract		v
Introduction	Factory Girl @ the Crossroads	1
Chapter 1	Cyborg Pathology: Infection, Pollution, and Material Femininity in <u>Tesseracts</u> ²	15
Chapter 2	Girls on Film: Photography, Pornography, and the Politics of Reproduction	56
Chapter 3	Meat Puppets: Cyber Sex Work, Artificial Intelligence, and Feminine Existence	96
Chapter 4	Manic Pixie Dream Girls: Viral Femininity, Virtual Clones, and the Process of Embodiment	138
Chapter 5	Woman Gave Names to All the Animals: Food, Fauna, and Anorexia	178
Chapter 6	The Machineries of Uncivilization: Gender, Disability, and Cyborg Identity	219
Conclusion	New Maps for These Territories	257
Works Cited		265

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Abstract

My dissertation examines some of the ways in which new technologies alter traditional readings of the female body and of feminine subjectivity in contemporary fiction. To illustrate these alterations, I have selected two short stories, one by William Gibson and the other by Margaret Atwood, published in the speculative fiction *Tesseracts*² anthology in 1987, both of which deal with disease and women's technological access. Within this context, I examine how feminine sexuality and embodiment are deconstructed and re-written. While historically women have been represented as victims of technology and/or intimately connected with the natural world, I propose that women's increased access to both bio-technologies and communications technologies offers an unprecedented route to self-definition and cultural power. I explore ways in which analogue technology mimics women's reproductive enslavement in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and in which the emergence of digital technology offers some emancipation in *The Blind Assassin*. Subsequently, I discuss the intersections of sex work and virtual reality in William Gibson's Cyberpunk Trilogy and associated short fiction, demonstrating that digitality is not a panacea for gendered oppression. However, digitized women may have unexpected opportunities for self-definition. In comparing Gibson's *Idoru* and Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, I discuss how

women “created” for the male gaze (either virtually or by cloning) may evade that gaze and both assert their individuality and create communities among women with similar origins. Subsequently, I examine the interconnections among women, animals, and food that emerge within technologized cultures. Self-protective anorexia provides a link among Atwood's earliest writing (*The Edible Woman*) and her most recent (*Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood*), and suggests that the same technological facility which provides access to power also induces profound bodily anxieties in female characters. Building on those anxieties, I conclude with a discussion of the ways in which disability disrupts expectations of feminine embodiment. The constant abjection of women with disabilities is counter-balanced by those women's ability to create radical innovations of technology that transform the larger culture.

Introduction: Factory Girl @ the Crossroads

The material female body lies (as if dead) at the crossroads of science fiction and popular science discourses. A factory girl trudging from newly-enclosed farm to industrial city pauses there and trips over the bones of essentialized femininity. Picking herself up from the dust (at close range, she can see the dust is swarming with nanotechnology and fractal reiterations of the venus-form), the factory girl looks down the road of science fiction's relentless futurism. Only by squinting can she look back into the past to make out the 1886 clockwork goddess of Auguste Villiers de L'isle Adam's *L'Eve Future*. Ray Bradbury's mechanical grandmother rocks in a chair nearby, humming "I Sing the Body Electric!" She can make out the eloquent creature that Victor Frankenstein made, and Ira Levin's *Stepford Wives* approach, smiling down in haunting memory. In the distance, (seductively feminine) androids dream of electric sheep and razorgirls fulfill cyberpunk fetishes.

Along her own path, the factory girl sees a tangential femininity that flows through the machineries of culture. Augusta Ada Byron puts the finishing touches on the first computer code. Young women equipped with typewriters¹ and cameras² march

¹ Cf. George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893) and Tom Gallon's *The Girl Behind the Keys* (1903).

² Cf. Amy Levy's *The Romance of a Shop* (1888)

towards financial independence. Marie Curie lights up the human skeleton. Katherine Burdekin looks into Nazism and sees mindless uterine animals.³ Joanna Russ snaps at James Tiptree, Jr, that female sexuality is anything but a biological accident, never seeing Tiptree's female face.⁴ Ellen Datlow dives into the wrecks of biotechnology and raises the drowned forms of extinct animals.⁵

The factory girl looks in each of her four directions and realizes that what she thought was a crossroads is in fact only one intersection on a massive grid. Time expresses itself as space, creating new maps of the real. When the factory girl tries to take a step down any of these paths, she finds her material body collapsed at the crossroads, and herself momentarily outside it. (Still dead-ish, lying there.) She wonders whether she can remain a subject without that body, whether her body is necessary. Then she lays herself back into her flesh, stands up in it, and tries to choose a direction. She cannot. So, finally, she steps in each direction, changing as she moves, becoming a no-longer factory girl: an AIDS patient, a surrogate mother, an online sex worker, an anime pixie, an edible woman, a cyborg. She is entirely herself.

The story above is intended half as fable, half as mythopoesis. The critical narrative of how technology alters women's embodiment is still an emerging one. The factory girl is a spectre from the dawn of industrialization, but she persists in contemporary writing. The myth that industrialization “happened” only to men, that

³ *Swastika Night* (1937)

⁴ James Tiptree, Jr, was the pen name of Alice B. Sheldon. Sheldon corresponded with feminist SF writer Joanna Russ throughout the 1970s without revealing her own sex (Phillips 388-89).

⁵ Cf. *Vanishing Acts* (2000)

women remained intimately connected with nature and alienated from technology is a powerful one. In a late-capitalist world,⁶ that myth is potentially dangerous. To suppose that women's bodies somehow exist outside of western culture is absurd. Insistence that women have remained somehow pastoral denies that women live intimately with technology, and that the epistemology of industrialization has transformed even the most “natural” (which is to say biological) aspects of femininity: eating, mating, and childbearing.

In fact, those “natural” functions have long been the subject of scientific discourse and popular debate. Western culture's techno-fantasies, inscribed as science fiction, summon feminine robots to nurture families, green-skinned women from space to satisfy men's desires, and time-travelling Amazon women needing re-integration into compulsory heterosexuality. However (as every travelling factory girl knows), women's representation in science fiction and popular science has long had only a tenuous relationship with women's lived relationships with technology. The bodies which popular narratives imagine may have even less connection with women's subjective experiences of embodiment. For women to write themselves (ourselves) into techno-culture, they (we) must locate our bodies, explicate them, and recognize not only our biological origin stories, but also our lived/narrated realities in a culture that encodes technologies into the most intimate aspects of existence.

The question of what is natural lies at the heart of Canadian literary criticism.

⁶ Markedly *not* a post-industrial world, though industry has globalized and shifted “out of sight” into developing nations.

Canadian Literature has long been understood in restrictive terms, defined by ideas of wilderness and survival, of deadly landscape preying on individuals whose lives are restricted by the merciless requirements of that same landscape. Northrup Frye's *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (1971, collecting essays from the 1950s and 1960s) was enormously influential in this area. So, somewhat ironically, was Margaret Atwood's 1972 critical work *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. By the time those books were published, though, Canada was already a much more urban, much more technologized society than the aforementioned criticism credits, and the country's writing was evolving to reflect this change. Media critic Marshall McLuhan earned his M.A. in English from the University of Manitoba in 1940, and taught for much of his career at the University of Toronto. McLuhan began his studies of (literary) culture and technology in the late 1940s; he published *The Gutenberg Galaxy* in 1962 and *Understanding Media* in 1964. One might reasonably presume that technology had long since made significant inroads on Canadian nature, even to the point of transforming it, when critics of the 1970s looked “into the bush” for Canadian identity.

With this chronology in mind, however, I am most interested in technologies and cultural shifts which have emerged since the 1970s. In that time, Toronto has grown and mutated from the conservative (and overwhelmingly white) “Toronto the Good” immortalized by Robertson Davies to a global centre whose profile turns on the Caribana and Toronto Pride festivals. Vancouver took the occasion of the 1986 World's Fair to transform itself from working-class coastal city to futurist metropolis. Expo '86's legacy

lives in the glass towers which make Vancouver's one of the world's most recognizable skylines. Atwood's fiction has evolved with Atwood's Toronto; William Gibson's future cities owe a massive debt to futurist Vancouver. Both authors write at the convergence of science fiction and Canadian Literature (which humps along with its associated baggage, garrison mentality, and a field guide to edible roots carried in case of social collapse).

This dissertation had its genesis almost twenty years ago, when I borrowed the Tesseracts² anthology from my mother. The book collects speculative short fiction from a variety of Canadian writers, and it brought the stories “Freefall” by Margaret Atwood and “The Winter Market” by William Gibson into conjunction for me. I had long been concerned about the plethora of alienating feminine robots in science fiction. However, the two stories offered visions of women who existed within technological worlds while simultaneously remaining at least somewhat independent. Several years later, Donna Haraway's *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* provided me with the language to articulate that existence. The female cyborg has the power to subvert rigid gender constructions in science fiction. The ways in which she does this alter established narratives and create new ones.

Donna Haraway recognizes the importance of narrative to feminist technocriticism. She calls *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* a “cautionary tale about the evolution of bodies, politics, and stories” (xi). In it, Haraway explicates the dissolving boundaries among animals, humans (women), and machines. She proposes the cyborg figure as a political revolutionary. The cyborg is a profoundly feminist, intensely hybrid entity that

incorporates animal and machine smoothly into its human-ness. If the cyborg is genuinely a revolutionary figure, though, then she must recognize the extent to which “[l]iberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility” (149). Simply being a cyborg is not enough. She creates revolution through that apprehension, through the process of her becoming.

Haraway's staggering popularity among students learning to navigate feminist criticism, though, revolves around highly simplified notions of cyborg identity and its possibilities. Often, the cyborg is read too literally, as excited young critics focus on *Star Trek's* Borg Queen⁷ and bypass the adolescent fangirl developing her global identity in an online chatroom. Too often, as well, critics have read cyborg existence as an unproblematic good. While technological integration offers women a route to power, it does not automatically deliver them from bondage, collapse patriarchy, or produce enlightenment. Likewise, the technologies which produce cyborgs are not always futurist or even overt. Any kind of “machine” produces change. Cameras, factory farmed food, and even childbearing have the potential to transform women's embodiment.

This dissertation is not so much a cautionary tale as a log of multi-dimensional exploration. The factory girl rarely speaks, but her story, the journey from biological-pastoral existence to experience of intimate machineries, is a necessary prologue. In the course of her prologue, the factory girl locates herself: in Canada, in the first decade of

⁷ The Borg Queen is the “ruler” of a race of cybernetic organisms, quasi-human and individual at birth but rapidly “assimilated” into the race's collective consciousness via cyber-implants. The Queen, introduced in *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996), is decidedly a female cyborg, but not one engaged in the political work which Haraway imagines.

the third millennium, C.E.. In order to be here now, she realizes, she must push beyond the technological comfort zone. She must acknowledge that Canada is among the most “wired” countries in the world. She must recognize that Canada is not an isolated nation but one node (or many) in a global information network. And she must recognize that Canadian Literature no longer broods in cultural isolation.

A significant portion of 20th century Canadian fiction, and its associated criticism, addresses the technological shifts which took place during that century, from new immigrants in the wilderness to the problems of urban industrialization and the associated labour struggles. However, the millennial shift from industrial/capitalist narratives to post-industrial/late capitalist narratives has yet to be addressed in a book-length scholarly study. I will examine, specifically, the functions of technology in a range of works by two novelists who are not usually associated with one another: Margaret Atwood and William Gibson. Atwood is almost universally recognized as a major (arguably *the* major) literary force in Canada. Gibson, though comparably popular among readers, is rarely recognized as a Canadian-literary writer at all.⁸ As a speculative fiction writer, Gibson is frequently excluded from Canadianist study. As a “literary” writer, Atwood is not primarily identified as a creator of speculative fictions. Yet both identities are valid for these authors. Furthermore, their novels intersect in unexpected ways. Following from Haraway's assertion that “[c]ommunications sciences and modern biologies are constructed by a common move” (164), I will analyse the ways in which these authors

⁸ Though born in the United States, William Gibson has lived in Canada since the 1970s. He studied at the University of British Columbia and has written virtually all of his fiction in Vancouver.

use bio- and communications technologies to challenge conventional constructions of feminine embodiment and subjectivity.

While I begin from Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," my concern is as much with embodiment, gender, and sexuality as it is with techno-liberation. The intersections of technology and embodiment necessarily bring into conjunction a range of theorists not commonly linked in a single discussion. Technologies do not develop in isolation, but through cultural evolutions. Imagining evolutions demands a sense of origins (as in Friedrich Kittler's *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*) and of connections (as in Ronald Diebert's *Parchment, Printing, and Hypermedia*). The developing technologies and their epistemologies transform both writing and the female body. Women are constructed from the histories of medicine and machine.

Throughout the dissertation, I explicitly distinguish between the female body and the feminine body. While many of the bodies discussed are both, others may be biologically female but not markedly feminine, forcing a distinction between sex and gender. The distinction is particularly important in the context of bio-technologies. Much ostensibly unbiased scientific discourse subtly or explicitly genders the inanimate world, so that phenomena associated with strength and construction gender masculine, and phenomena associated with chaos, fluidity, and permeability gender feminine. By making that bias explicit, I attempt to disrupt technologies' conventional genders in the service of re-writing the "nature" of the feminine and the experience of femininity.

The disjuncture between sex and gender illuminates how women have come to be

perceived as less than fully human. Judith Butler's concepts of gender performance and the materialization of sex underlie the entire discussion. Haraway's cyborg construction, however, demands that any psychoanalytic approach be carefully dismantled and examined, piece by piece. Classical philosophy from Plato onward fails to provide unity in this context. After all, Haraway reminds us, “[t]he cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness” (150). However, Platonic constructions persist. The hierarchies his writing constructs or inspires in subsequent philosophers pervade post-Enlightenment thought. Particularly because Plato distinguishes explicitly between mind and body, he cannot be ignored. Without Platonic awareness, the Harawayan cyborg who resists organic wholeness would be unable to reject Cartesian dualism. She is not the ghost in the machine; she is the ghost *and* the machine, simultaneously.

The denial of life that underlies Cartesian dualism (for neither a ghost nor a machine lives) finds its opposite in Lee Edelman's reading of the death-drive as an affirmation of queer sexuality and identity. Edelman extends that identity into a powerful variant: *sinthomosexuality*. The *sinthomosexual* is uninterested in children and futurity. S/he denies the reproductive drive in favour of the death drive, evoking a highly individualized subjectivity which constantly re-inscribes itself (35), almost completely without reference to the heteronormative/patriarchal family. This construction is a profoundly useful one, and it demands certain extensions. First, while Edelman works extensively with Lacan's writings on sexuality, his queer-theory approach neglects

feminine sexuality. I attempt to remedy this, particularly in chapter 3, drawing explicit links between queer/*sinthomosexual* existence and femininity. Second, Edelman gives attention to Jean Baudrillard's essay, "The Final Solution: Cloning Beyond the Human and Inhuman" only insofar as Baudrillard invokes the death drive. I explore his essay in more detail, extending issues of virality beyond AIDS as a social phenomenon to include the virality of ideas, and the possibility of viral reproduction as an anti-heteronormative approach to continued human existence. This approach to virality is in conflict with Baudrillard's anxieties regarding cloning and the real. However, the conflict is itself productive, making explicit the oppositional power of the feminine "digital clone."

This dissertation maintains a somewhat linear structure, but my intention is less to develop a single sustained hypothesis than to explore and ultimately unite laterally-related concepts of technologized femininity. Each chapter explicates the ramifications of a problem of embodiment within several texts. Atwood's and Gibson's concerns are never perfectly synchronized, but their deviations from one another expose conflicts at the core of gender's construction. I do not intend to approach their cumulative works as a meta-narrative of any sort. However, by tracing the development of these writers' ideas over multiple texts, I wish to show that technology (as written, as imagined) is both a cultural phenomenon and a process of becoming which transforms its users.

Chapter 1, titled "Cyborg Pathology," uses a rare bibliographic conjunction of Gibson and Atwood to lay out the map grid, and mark routes along which machines and bodies are written. The Harawayan cyborg steps up and contemplates herself, her ideals

and limitations. Emerging from that meditation, she approaches the literary text, Tesseracts², a 1987 anthology to which both both Gibson and Atwood contributed tales of sickness and survival. The then-overwhelming spectre of AIDS permeates the discussion, infecting both stories. AIDS forces a confrontation between Jean Baudrillard's concerns regarding the technologization of sexuality and Lee Edelman's rehabilitation of the death drive into a social/sexual orientation. The body which staggers away from this confrontation is a biohazard site. Atwood's short story "Freefall" makes the sexual biohazards literal, transforming reproduction in the aftermath of a pandemic. Gibson's story "The Winter Market" draws on the slow pathologies of pollution to infect a virtual/psychic battle of the sexes. My analysis of the two identifies viral infection (whether medical or virtual) as an essential force of social cohesion in a culture whose traditional communities have collapsed.

Chapter 2, "Girls on Film," addresses the ways in which women's experiences are altered by the shift from analogue to digital modes of production and reproduction. Walter Benjamin expresses a certain distrust for the camera on the grounds that "mechanical reproduction . . . may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of its presence is always depreciated" (221). I apply this concern in a reading of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Biological childbearing and "capture" via camera both pose potential threats to women. The constant grind of analogue reproduction, one way or the other, gradually wears away both her body and her identity, leaving only fragments. This threat is abated somewhat in *The Blind Assassin*, in which photographs

are altered by their subjects and a whimsical interest in mathematics introduces digital possibilities of infinite reproduction without individual damage. In *Oryx and Crake*, the threats of capture and exploitation invert when an exploited girl-child takes control of the gaze in a digital photograph, looking frankly back at the viewer and thereby challenging his authority over her. Digitality never provides women with complete freedom, but the infinite nature of digitality re-defines reproductivity and embodiment.

Following from that moment of exploitation and response, Chapter 3 explicates sex work and sexuality in Gibson's fiction in "Meat Puppets." Gibson's young female characters are caught in networks of cyborg self-modification which can be afforded only through sex work. The women's sexuality is disrupted by virtual fantasies in which their subjectivities are separated from their bodies for the duration of the act. While the women's sexual-virtual presence is temporary, they raise the question of whether the virtual realm, and the computers which shape it, might have a sexuality distinct from its human users. I pursue critic Tyler Curtain's suggestion that *Neuromancer's* Turing Registry polices both virtual and human sexuality via constant reference to artificial intelligence's queer origins. Lacan's *Feminine Sexuality* provides a complicating factor. Where the female body exists without sexual agency, the patriarchal family is reinforced. However, where sexual agency exists without the body, feminine sexuality abandons its passivity and confronts masculine control, producing partial identities which resist the family, though they fail to deconstruct it completely.

Chapter 4 takes up the problems which follow from feminine disembodiment.

“Manic Pixie Dream Girls: Viral Femininity, Virtual Clones, and the Process of Embodiment” explores ways in which feminine subjectivity is stripped from the image of the female body, leaving only a “digital clone” without agency. The Manic Pixie Dream Girl (MPDG) emerges as a masculine creation, a fantasy of whimsical but still objectified femininity. As such, the MPDG identity is initially restrictive. However, women who emerge from such a mould (Oryx of *Oryx and Crake*, Rei Toei of *Idoru*) need not remain only masculine fantasies. They develop agency and individuality, in the process challenging Baudrillard's condemnation of cloning as fundamentally inhuman. The male gaze has initial power, but when the women within that gaze begin to redefine themselves, they cease to exist only to be looked at, transforming from objects to subjects.

Chapter 5, “Woman Gave Names to All the Animals: Food, Fauna, and Anorexia,” takes up problems emerging from cyborg-feminine subjectivity. The feminine cyborg freely acknowledges her kinship with both machines and animals. However, her kinship with animals provides her with a dilemma: excessive intimacy with her food. I approach anorexia as a symptom of more generalized anxieties regarding embodiment and intimacy with animals. Anorexia is, literally, the absence of desire. Though desire may still persist, in the face of anorexia it becomes radically altered. The issue of what and how anorexics desire pervades Atwood's writing from *The Edible Woman* through *The Year of the Flood*. However, the characters' variations in eating practice produce radically different approaches to power. For women to resume “normal” eating, they

must suppress their awareness of animal/female kinship in order to distinguish between animal bodies and their own. Only when they cease to perceive eating as a form of self-annihilation can these characters participate in their own survival.

Whereas chapter 5 explores different modes of eating, chapter 6 expands this modality to include other instances of “doing normal things differently.” “The Machineries of Uncivilization: Gender, Disability, and Cyborg Identity” proposes that disability is less a supplementary cyborg existence (as Haraway proposes) than an essential one. Technology intersects with disability constantly. The “civilising” function of that technology provides prosthetics to conceal disability from the able-bodied gaze. However, the “uncivilised” functions of technology hold greater potential. Disabled characters engage with emerging technologies in ways that not only abrogate their own abjection, but also reveal new potentials inherent in the technology.

The cumulative result of these chapters is, I hope, a cartography of narrative techno-femininity in the late 20th and early 21st centuries: a map for these territories. The territories abut one another, though not always perfectly. Each is its own country, sharing certain terrains with the others. The map locates variants of the techno-feminine, cloning (as it were) the factory girl. *She is here.*

Chapter 1
Cyborg Pathology: Infection, Pollution, and Material Femininity in *Tesseract*²

The materiality of the female body is an inescapable element of the enforcement of gender norms. Whatever else women may be, or may have the potential to become, the rhetorics of both gender regulation and mainstream feminism return inevitably to the female body: its frailties, its reproductive potential, its deep connection to the natural world (as earth-mother), and above all, its sheer biological *presence*. Judith Butler suggests that this recurrent theme of physicality is itself a manifestation of gender enforcement, that “the regulatory norms of 'sex' work . . . to materialize the body's sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative” (*Bodies That Matter* 2). While most second- and third-wave feminists have insisted on distinguishing sex (biology) from gender (culture), popular science discourse still treats femininity and femaleness as interchangeable.

The power of popular science to imagine women's bodies should not be understated. Western scientific discourse has, since its classical origins, organized itself along gendered lines which actively exclude that female presence. That exclusion played out dramatically in the marriage of Marie and Pierre Curie, in which Pierre insistently excluded Marie's biological presence from “his” research:

As he saw it, his work as a scientist was a life “opposed to nature,” a hard discipline in which “we give all our thoughts to some work which removes us from those immediately about us.” In that pursuit, he believed, “it is with women that we have to struggle, and the struggle is nearly always an unequal one. For in the name of life and nature they seek to lead us back.” (Roszak 42, quoting Brian Easlea 44-48)

Though most modern scholars now consider the Curies' work a collaborative venture, Marie's absence from Pierre's imagined self indicates the extent to which women are philosophically excluded from the realm of hard science and relegated to a reproductive, “natural” existence which is at best a complement to scientific endeavour and at worst a hindrance to it.

In reaction to the purported masculinity of hard science, late twentieth-century feminist scientists and philosophers have responded by “hold[ing] out hope for a new scientific sensibility based on the traditionally 'feminine' respect for all life” (Goodall xiii). This valorization of women's “natural” affinities for the biological world has its advantages, but it inevitably leads back, again, to an equation of femininity with femaleness, and an ever-stronger association between nature and the female body. Consider this year's winner of the Max Perutz prize, awarded to a PhD student who “convey[s] the importance, relevance and excitement of their work through a popular science article.” Medical researcher Jacqueline Maybin's essay is titled “The Best a Man Can't Get,” and addresses biotechnologies emerging from research into the uterus.

Prefacing her discussion with Elizabeth I's assertion, "I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king," Maybin continues,

Without doubt, the average male is physically stronger than the average female. This is due to higher levels of the male hormone testosterone. Nevertheless, I've noticed that strength does not always equate to physical power. The female hormones have ingenious ways of compensating. They give women an understated but enviable form of strength. Ironically, despite her exceptional "heart and stomach", the most remarkable organs Elizabeth possessed were the ones that made her female.

The uterus, or womb, is the organ par excellence. It functions so efficiently that a full understanding of its processes may lead to novel treatments for a plethora of medical disorders.

Maybin's research is interesting, and her essay both informative and funny. Yet she perpetuates the scientific correspondence between women's existence and power, and their biological materiality. The uterus is still routinely accepted as the single most important element that "makes" a woman female. Perhaps just as significantly, the uterus is the best thing a man can't get: it is exclusive, productive (even, in Maybin's research, when not conceiving human life), and materially woman. A woman is her body, and her body makes her.

In this popular scientific context, western popular culture still perpetuates the idea that women and femininity are intimately linked with nature and biologies, and, by

elimination, that non-biotechnologies, those technologies emerging from “hard” science, are masculine. In her ovular⁹ essay, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway locates a “border war” between organism and mechanism (*Simians* 152), realms which I will subsequently refer to as biology and technology. A cyborg, in Haraway's conception, is “simultaneously animal and machine” (151), a hybrid which evades that border war and in the process, creates new identities and new possibilities for gender. Haraway's cyborg theory remains among the most attractive ideas for feminists engaging with technology. Buried in her manifesto essay, we¹⁰ find an intriguing idea in the face of persistent feminine materiality:

[T]he boundary between physical and non-physical is very imprecise for us [for cyborgs, for cyborg theorists, for persistently technological feminists]. Pop physics books on the consequences of quantum theory and the indeterminacy principle are a kind of popular scientific equivalent to Harlequin romances as a marker of radical change in American white heterosexuality: they get it wrong but they are on the right subject. Modern machines . . . are everywhere and they are invisible People are nowhere near so fluid, being both material and opaque. Cyborgs are ether, quintessence. (153)

Haraway's suggestion here is intensely seductive. What she offers is not so much a potential escape from the female body as the potential for that body to be less aggressively material: a vessel of flesh rather than a prison. Her equation of popular

⁹ Surely, if an idea may be “seminal,” it may equally be “ovular.”

¹⁰ I write as “we” in the spirit of the cyborg, needy for connection (Haraway 151), suspicious of “one,” and ever-hopeful of finding a travelling companion in my reader.

science and the Harlequin romance is not spurious. The potential for women to be at once themselves and outside themselves, better and physical and fluid and unbound to the limits of their flesh verges on a pornographic delight. One may imagine orgasm without phallus, body as light.

Yet simultaneously, the romance novel vision of the body is located in a specific cultural realm, that of (North) American white heterosexuality. Haraway's ethereal cyborg exceeds that realm; s/he includes Third World lives, racialized populations, disabled bodies, and sexualities beyond the hetero-. That excess overwhelms the territory of pornographic fantasy to become something else: a revolutionary construction of gender and technology that both does and does not escape white/liberal/academic/feminist desires. The cyborg body exceeds romantic limitations, but mimics romance's form closely enough to remain ambiguous. The stock Harlequin romance heroine's beauty is explicitly natural:

Lustrous black hair curled over pale, bare shoulders. Her eyes were hazel green, the color of a shaded forest, fringed with black lashes. She wore a white gown that displayed the hourglass shape of her curvaceous body to perfection She had the face of an angel, but with a bite: blood-red lips stood out starkly, rich and full and delectable, luring a man's kiss. (Lucas 9)

The classic (female) cyborg's beauty, on the other hand, is synthetic and composite:

He realized that the glasses were surgically inset, sealing her sockets. The silver lenses seemed to grow from smooth pale skin above her cheekbones, framed by

dark hair cut in a rough shag. The fingers . . . were slender, white, tipped with polished burgundy. The nails looked artificial. (Gibson, *Neuromancer* 24)

However, the distinction between the two women is initially largely aesthetic. Both are dark-haired (implicitly intellectual) white women marked by their ferocity and independence. Both are constituted by the male gaze. Neither represents an entirely holistic femininity. Even the cyborg (William Gibson's Molly Millions), near as she is to the Harawayan dream, occupies a terrifying and dystopian world. Whatever else cyborgs may be, they are not utopian. Utopia is no longer relevant.

In the absence of utopia, we arrive in the realm of what has been known as science fiction or speculative fiction, and which may be gathered under the moniker "SF." SF's literary elegance (found in More's *Utopia*, in Shelley's *Frankenstein*, in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*) is frequently inextricable from its pulp popularity. We cannot easily distinguish between literary and non-literary SF. My bookshelf contains two copies of Joanna Russ' novel *The Female Man*. One was purchased for academic study. It is trade bound, generically listed simply as "fiction," and described on its back cover as a "work of frightening power, but . . . also of great fictional subtlety" (Douglas Barbour). The other was purchased for one dollar out of a bin of pulp pocketbooks of the 1960s and 70s. The cover illustration shows a woman peeling off a skin-tight jumpsuit to reveal something (sexual or alien) beneath. It is lurid and thoroughly seductive. The same novel may have many incarnations in a single genre, and play within them.

In fact, such a novel may reincarnate in new forms, as Russ' cyborg Jael/Alice

Reasoner does in Gibson's Molly Millions. Molly's "razorgirl" existence is marked by seductively feminine burgundy nails, but the "ten double-edged, four-centimeter scalpel blades" beneath them (*Neuromancer* 25) belong to Russ' anti-heteronormative assassin. Jael's "claws" are less glamorous than Molly's, and more explicitly painful: "I do not have Cancer on my fingers but Claws, talons like a cat's but bigger, a little more dull than wood brads but good for tearing" (*The Female Man* 181). Jael demands recognition: the razorgirl's genealogy might contain the romance novel heroine, but it contains the feminist assassin, too.

This vision of simultaneous incarnations and modes of existence opens into text in Phyllis Gotlieb's poem "Foreword: You Are Here," which functions as a preface to the 1987 SF anthology *Tesseracts*². Gotlieb's poem, laid out in a wasp-waisted pattern that echoes the form of a primitive venus-figure, offers up images from the collected stories, but also proclaims the state of Canadian SF in that moment. The repeated phrase, *you are here*, evokes a particular sense of location and mapping which suggests a (political) territory far more than it evokes the index of a literary miscellany:



YOU ARE HERE

jazzing around on the void's edge
in your chrome steel straightjacket

singing along circuit boards where the
man in the Stetson dances
with electrons YOU ARE HERE
gambling for the moon, your coin
at the end-post of time that points to the beginning
YOU ARE HERE, shapechanger, in the clasp of the man
you have become a woman for
so
whisper into your
ear and kiss the lips of
your other head, human, here in the
endless rains where the world
trembles on one green branch, where it falls
into fire YOU ARE HERE
half blind and hairless among broken
stones, asleep forever and
wakening in blood
by the alien God that made you
YOU ARE
HERE



(Tesseracts² 1)

In both her words and her typography, Gotlieb demonstrates her awareness of the constant presence of the body even in the most abstract fantasies of time and data. The body provides an inescapable sense of location on the narrative/conceptual/virtual map; however fluid that body may become, it retains its power as flesh and identity. Particularly evocative in this context is the shapechanger, a figure both of fluid gender and of compulsory heterosexuality, “in the clasp of the man / you have become a woman for.” The idea of *becoming* a woman in a transformative sense, rather than as a part of a patriarchal narrative of sexual maturity, is irresistible. Likewise delightful is the possibility that *what* women become is less important than *how*: gender transforms by technological fusion. “YOU” are simultaneously the shapechanger in love and the jazzed electron dancer in a “chrome steel straightjacket”; the man in the stetson may dance, but “you” become a woman, repeatedly.

The poetic “you” progresses from gender state to fluid state to solid state electronics to a state of absolute abjection. Each recalls a different conception of humanity in contemporary SF. The “chrome steel straightjacket” emerges from the language of cyberpunk, which was at its height when Gotlieb and her co-editor Douglas Barbour produced *Tesseracts²* in 1987. Cyberpunk is cowboy, is masculine; it is the site of a dancing stetson man. But YOU (the reader, the subject) become a woman, for a man, and then become an alien human in an new, vividly biological environment. The green branch and the endless rains balance circuits and electrons. Sex is subsumed into a “half

blind and hairless” creature whose relationship with God is more “alien” than “equivalent.” Nothing, however sacred, is made in God's image.

In the prose-poem passage which follows the lineated verse, Gotlieb writes of her “determination to stretch [her] boundaries of science fiction to include fantasies” (2). The distinction between science fiction and fantasy, much like the distinction between “hard” (technological) and “soft” (social, biological) science fiction, is weighted very much along gender lines, with fantasy often blurring into soft science fiction to create new, but still stereotypically feminine, realms, while hard science fiction remains resolutely masculine. It is for this reason that I have chosen the broader, less weighted term “speculative fiction” (or SF) to identify a genre which addresses the possible and the probable without received gender boundaries.

Yet in spite of this optimistic self-location (I AM HERE), which I share with Gotlieb, SF remains a field in which gender is hotly contested ground. This is unsurprising, given that the culture of science, which inevitably fuels the culture of SF, is likewise contested. In this contested territory (WE ARE HERE), feminist theories often battle ostensibly (but rarely actually) objective scientific ones. Donna Haraway reminds us why the position of science in gender politics is troublesome both to traditional liberal scientists and to feminists:

We have granted science the role of a fetish, an object human beings make only to forget their role in creating it We have perversely worshipped science as a reified fetish in two complementary ways: (1) by completely rejecting scientific

and technical discipline and developing feminist social theory totally apart from the natural science, and (2) by agreeing that ‘nature’ is our enemy and that we must control our ‘natural’ bodies (by techniques given to us by biomedical science) at all costs to enter the hallowed kingdom of the cultural body politic (*Simians* 8-9)

Haraway locates her “we” in a specific cultural context, that of the “proper, US socialist-feminist, white, female” (1). This is the recognizable second-wave feminist position, laden with the baggage which privilege carries. That said, Haraway identifies quite accurately the extent to which second-wave feminism accepted a nearly classical division of nature and culture, which plays itself out in the hard/soft science fiction debate. How women become in SF is intimately related to their relationship to the sciences, and more often than one might expect, Haraway’s perverse worships play themselves out even within consciously feminist narratives, or those that seem overtly to challenge (SF) gender norms. If Haraway is correct in asserting that “the sciences are collective expressions and cannot be remade individually” (19), we might consider that speculative fictions face a similar restriction. Speculative fiction authors may confront and even re-imagine gender, but when they collide with the natural, “hard,” sciences, particularly in early cyberpunk fiction, traditional liberal conceptions of science and gender fight to the surface, revealing both the weaknesses of liberal science regarding gender, and the weaknesses of (particularly second-wave) feminism regarding science.

The frailties of second-wave feminism play out in Margaret Atwood's contribution

to *Tesseract*², the short story “Freeforall.” Gotlieb's post-apocalyptic evocation of a sexless figure, “half blind and hairless among broken / stones” (1) presupposes a nuclear, Pierre Curie-driven apocalypse in which the very building blocks of human reproduction have been devastated along with the planet, shattering fertility in the aftermath of the atom's sundering. Atwood offers a more feminine, and darkly feminist, perspective on apocalypse, in which the life and nature to which Pierre feared to be led back become as malevolent as any hard science. In the YOU ARE HERE spirit of the collection, we find ourselves located slightly forward, perhaps two generations, from the AIDS outbreak of the early 1980s, and the radical cultural realization that sex, the fluid, messy sphere of the feminine biological life forces, could be fatal in ways that had nothing to do with childbirth.

AIDS, that most theorized syndrome (not a single disease, but the product of a virus that creates a gap in immunity, a window for *all* diseases), emerged first as “the gay plague” (Edelman 62), a disease which reinforced the connection “between practices of gay sexuality and the undoing of futurity” (Edelman 19). Lee Edelman proposes that “all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism,” which is to say (perhaps even in song) that *the children are our future!* In contrast, “queerness names the side of those *not* 'fighting for the children,’” who pose a threat to the social order beyond even what feminism poses through its interrogation of the patriarchal family. The family and its children manifest the perpetuation of the human species, and as such, they are the most fundamental mark of civil order (17). It is not an accident of language that the

Catholic Church named homosexuals “intrinsically disordered” (Cardinal Ratzinger) in 1986, in the same psychic moment that the *Tesseract*² stories emerged.

Sexual liberation and its aftermath thus pose a particular threat to futurity, to the perpetuation of the human. In his essay, “The Final Solution: Cloning Beyond the Human and the Inhuman,” Jean Baudrillard proposes that sexual liberation has led more or less inevitably to technological threats to the very nature of the human body:

The first phase of sexual liberation involves the dissociation of sexual activity from procreation through the pill and other contraceptive devices – a transformation with enormous consequences. The second phase, which we are beginning to enter now, is the dissociation of reproduction from sex. First, sex was liberated from reproduction; today it is reproduction that is liberated from sex, through asexual, biotechnological modes of reproduction (10)

Sexual reproduction, in Baudrillard's construction, is a fundamental part of both the human body and the human psyche. From the moment “the egg becomes fertilized by a sperm,” sex emerges, and reproduction, a mechanical act, becomes procreation, a near-mystical one: “the first two will die for the first time, and the *third* for the first time will be born” (7). The more “primitive,” mechanical form of reproduction, that without heterosexual connotations, is of “[t]he earlier order of the virus,” which inevitably arrives back at the spectre of AIDS.

These are the politics of a pre-cyborg, post-AIDS culture. In such a world, *bios* (life) develops radically more value and significance than *techne* (production), and so the

machineries of human survival manifest in a single form: the fertile female body. Capitalism re-orientes itself from the factory to the nursery, creating a form of late-late capitalism which is intensely nostalgic for earlier femininities. The First Mother, elder matriarch, carries with her traces of the “old Hollywood glamour”¹¹ which infuses late twentieth-century nostalgias for the feminine. The First Mother's identity is rooted in multi-layered, media-based re-imaginings of the past, creating an absurd fusion of doyenne and starlet:

Sharmayne Pia Veronica Humbolt Grey signed her full legal name on the line provided, reflecting as always that she wished her mother hadn't read so many movie magazines while pregnant, or was it comic books? . . . Her mother must have thought that those names were the last word in glamour. (130)

In those three sentences, two visions of the feminine are overlaid. The first is the filmic feminine, often expressed as “old Hollywood glamour” (cf. footnote 5). It is marked by evening gowns, vampish actresses, and melodramas played out on the silver screen. The distance between “old Hollywood” and the real is marked by visual difference: black and white films suggest a historicity that film itself collapses, while early Technicolor productions bore as little relation to the visual real as would a hand-tinted photograph. By the time Sharmayne was conceived in 1945, nostalgia, in the form of a quest for “normalcy,” was already collapsing the past into a separate territory.¹²

¹¹ The phrase “old Hollywood glamour” remains one of the great cliches of the fashion industry. Its persistent use among contestants on the reality series “Project Runway” has converted a once-evocative term into a generic shorthand for conservative women's roles dressed in extravagantly revealing costumes.

¹² “Freeforall” uses a form of nostalgia which is markedly McLuhanesque. Consider this

In fact, though, Sharmayne's aura of glamour belongs less to the 1940s than it does to the 1980s. Her names are largely generic, and owe as much to soap opera culture as they do to golden-age film. "Veronica" most vividly recalls Veronica Lake, but "Pia" has rather a different aura. At the time "Freeforall" was written, Pia Zadora (the most likely namesake for "Pia") had only recently made *The Lonely Lady* (1983). This film version of the Harold Robbins novel won Zadora her second Golden Raspberry Award for Worst Actress. What emerges, then, is less a nostalgia for pre-1950s femininity than for the nostalgia for the nostalgia, removed by a generation and warped by multiple feminisms and social backlashes.

The female reproductive body of "Freeforall" is as much a nostalgic vestige as it is a biological mechanism. Women on film, no longer visible but persistent in the First Mother's memory, offer visions of hedonist sexuality in the face of a biological siege. The only filmed woman who emerges into visibility, though, is the antithesis of glamour: the Bride of Frankenstein (131). Sharmayne regards her "Bride of Frankenstein shoes" as "orthopaedic to the point of despair," but they mark her as a woman outside the patriarchal norm. She is a towering monster,¹³ aged and wrinkled and dignified, reinforced with as much technology as necessary to maintain her position of power.

classic pronouncement: "The past went that-a-way. When faced with a totally new situation, we tend always to attach ourselves to the objects, to the flavor, of the most recent past. We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future. Suburbia lives imaginatively in Bonanza-land" (McLuhan & Fiore 74-75).

¹³ Those hated Bride of Frankenstein shoes do give the wearer an intimidating posture. The stilts Elsa Lanchester wore in the *Bride of Frankenstein* movie (1935) raised her from 5'4" to 7' tall (Internet Movie Database).

The aura of the Bride of Frankenstein follows the First Mother through the story, variously embodying a variety of monstrous femininities. The Bride, like the first Monster of Mary Shelley's novel, is not born of woman. However, unlike Macduff, she was not “from [her] mother's womb / untimely ripp'd” (*Macbeth* 5.8.15-16). Instead, the Bride is born of science and electricity, without female participation. She represents new possibilities in unnatural, or non-natural, reproduction. Frankenstein's Creature is a roving outsider, condemned to the cold boundaries of human existence. His creation is a singular event, both in Shelley's novel and in James Whale's 1931 film. Frankenstein's subsequent creation of the Bride, however, occurs only in Whale's work. She emerges from the desires of Frankenstein and the Creature, an intensely queer fusion, and comes to life as the most unnatural of all possible entities: a woman born of two men. Vito Russo suggests that both 1930s *Frankenstein* films present “a vision . . . of the monster as an antisocial figure in the same way that gay people were 'things' that should not have happened” (49). However, this analysis weighs the films' tragic endings more heavily than the productions' cheerful camp value and over-the-top performances. Might it not be just as likely that the Creature and the Bride present a formal, oddly playful, rejection of biological determinism as the regulating force of human existence?

Such a rejection lies at the heart of Lee Edelman's proposed *sinthomosexuality*. Building on the spectre of the queer (who utterly refuses to fight for the children) and “the 'sin' that continues to attach itself to 'homosexuality'” (39), the *sinthomosexual* refuses its own symbolic logic, and the fundamental logic of fantasy, futurism, and,

ultimately, reality (34), by refusing to participate in or contribute to the communal push towards biological reproduction. Frankenstein and his Creature both echo the *sinthomosexual*; they attempt to build a family, but without children, and with far too much agency:

“A family is created”: like Freud's “a child is being beaten” . . . the phrase strategically elides the agency by which this end is achieved. No fucking could ever effect such creation: all sensory experience, all pleasures of the flesh, must be borne away from this fantasy of futurity secured, eternity's plan fulfilled, as “a new generation is carried forward.” Paradoxically, the child of the two-parent family thus proves that its parents *don't* fuck (41)

The (heterosexual, biological) family, Edelman suggests, must be as mystical as the gap between reproduction and procreation. The family cannot be *made* by science; it cannot be synthesized in a lab. No mad scientist can create it. However, Edelman does not examine in any detail the child not born of a two-parent family, or the potential/theoretical child born of two same-sex parents. That child, precisely *that* one, is one of Haraway's cyborgs, uninterested in oneness or mystical origins or psychoanalysis of any sort. That child, born of Frankenstein and the thing he made, is the Bride.

With origins such as these, it is unsurprising that the Bride also marks a particular break with compulsory heterosexuality. The Bride, created as a mate for Frankenstein's Creature, refuses him utterly. In the space created by her scream of rejection, the Houses which organize “Freeforall”'s society emerge. As the First Mother staggers along in her

Bride shoes, she recalls that the Houses were created to be bastions of second-wave feminist separatism, at the margins of society:

Funny, the way the Houses had started, back then; shoestring operations, all of them. They'd been single houses then, in the less affluent parts of the cities; they didn't take up three or four blocks each, the way they did now. Homes for battered wives they'd been originally, or shelters for abused teenage girls; a couple of them had begun as lesbian co-ops. (132-3)

The inter-connection of battered wives, teenage girls, and lesbians marks an essential difference between Edelman's conception of queerness and that of second-wave lesbian-separatist feminism: queer femininity is much harder to extricate from the image of the Child than is queer masculinity. The "culture of death" (Edelman 39) attributed to homosexuality is fundamentally a conservative naming of the culture of gay *men*. Women's reproductivity is far less escapable. Feminist separatism proposes a culture not of death but of withdrawal, of asceticism rather than hedonism. The early separatist Houses are, in the First Mother's mind, unglamorous in a manner completely different from Frankenstein's Bride. While the Bride is monstrous, she retains her aura of parody of Hollywood actresses. In contrast, feminist separatism emphasized an escape from the male gaze under which feminine glamour is created. In the absence of the gaze, though, new conceptions of beauty did not rapidly emerge, and the dominant aesthetic became "late-twentieth-century Montessori" ("Freeforall" 132): organic, piecemeal, and practical. The desire for glamour, though, persists. In the First Mother/Sharmayne's memory, the

magical aura of film, the memory of an over-the-top monstrous woman, and loathing for the dowdiness of separatist poverty expose an older force behind the word “glamour.” Glamour is media-generated (via film, magazines, comic books), and illusory; far more often than expected, it is a function of nostalgia.

The idea of nostalgic, illusory glamour in the story's first sentences points immediately to a breakdown in heteronormative, patriarchal constructions of gender and the emergence of a different order. The network of glamorous names assigned to the woman transforms from illusory femininity to “ancient scars, familiar birthmarks. When she was younger, everyone called her Sharm. Now even her names were being eroded by time; except to old friends . . . she was mostly just First Mother” (130). Sharmayne spends much of her radical feminist life as “Sharm,” in which we hear both “charm” (captivation, or magic) and “harm,”¹⁴ a harder-edged, second-wave feminist representation of the First Mother's self. Yet even when she has (at least outwardly) shed heteronormative glamour, biology-as-destiny pursues her, naming her First Mother, female prime. Biological determinism and the social demands and responsibilities of the female flesh persist under the guise of matriarchy.

The bio-matriarchy of Atwood's story is born out of biological warfare. The clichéd “battle of the sexes” takes on a new context when intercourse becomes potentially deadly to both sides: “the old hit-or-miss courtship rituals, the old lax lip-service monogamy, just couldn't work any more; the price in life, or rather death, had become too

¹⁴ However enmeshed Sharm may be in the idea of biology-as-destiny, her name's inclusion of “harm” contrasts with the imposed name of Atwood's most famously bio-trapped character, Offred, in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

high” (133). The potential deadliness of sex to women, either through rape and sexual violence or through maternal mortality, is still fresh enough in everyone's minds to make the irony delicious. Battered women's shelters become human shelters in the face of a plethora of diseases, “so many that sabotage or biological warfare experiments gone out of control had been suspected.” Biotechnology run wild creates open sexual warfare, drawing feminist House organizers and (patriarchal) male politicians to the conclusion that “[i]f you couldn't control the diseases, you had to avoid contact, any contact at all” (134). The resultant separatism creates matriarchally-structured corporate families in which sexuality is reduced to reproduction, which is itself reduced to a form of commerce: “clean” bodies are a commodity worth trading.

The resulting culture functions as a metaphor for visions of bodily integrity. Contamination is tantamount to death, and so layers of isolation harden into biological islands. In the aftermath of disease, Toronto forms an archipelago of colonies and bodies, each isolated from the other via high walls and strict social regulation. Infected bodies stay on one side of the wall; “clean” ones remain on the other.

This paranoid fear of contamination creates new borders at a time when national borders were (until the story's plague onset) becoming permeable. In this sense, the relationship between the body and the state is at once metonymic and oppositional. The notion of physical purity as analogous to national purity is hardly a new one, and child-bearing has long been considered to be women's patriotic as well as patriarchal responsibility. However, in the wake of AIDS' spread into first world countries in the

early 1980s, physical purity became radically ruptured from reproductive sexuality. The prophylactic technologies available to prevent infection also disrupt conception, with the result that pregnancy takes on many of the same connotations as infection. The First Mother suggests that the Houses, already separate from heteronormative society, were the first to realize that patriarchal monogamy “just couldn't work anymore; the price in life, or rather death, had become too high” (133). They isolate themselves, forming the first islands of women, separated from nation and the contamination to come.

The subsequent emergence of biohazardous bodies marks a failure of technology, at least in the form of prophylactic prosthetics: “the rubber body stockings and the Safe-T-Lips 'for kissing with confidence'” are ultimately fallible. In the aftermath, “hysteria took over. Then there had been the hospital riots, patients dragged into the streets by angry mobs, the ringleaders wearing asbestos fire-fighting suits, the smell of spilled gasoline and burning flesh.” The victims of failed technology (prophylactics) are destroyed by unidentifiable figures wearing more radical prophylactics, surety against fire as well as infection. The layers of protection required for a biologically sustainable society become radically less permeable. Latex rubber, which is flexible enough to mimic the body's shape, surrenders to brick walls, as well as “barbed wire, electric fences and broken glass” (134). The prophylactic protections of the House system make no pretence of being prosthetic: bodies vanish.

Yet even in this culture of isolationism, no woman has the privilege of being an island entire unto herself. Instead, the long-standing patriotic duty of childbearing

transforms into a matriotic duty of conception. Men are re-identified as “Husbands” (137) and “Grooms” (134), though never Fathers. Grooms are relatively more valuable than Brides, “because, as everyone knew, it was harder to find uncontaminated ones” (134), but the status of men diminishes in the face of their own limited role in reproduction. They are contractually obligated to sire two children, but their physical presence may be effaced. The First Mother implies that early in the reproductive mission of the matriarchy, “turkey basters” were more likely to be involved in the direct insemination of women than were men (132, 137). The threat of the turkey basters is implicitly frightening (137) to new Grooms, but it suggests that prophylactic prosthetics continue to invade women's bodies. The only major shift which has occurred in the role of those prophylactics has been from preventing conception to ensuring it.

The spectre of the turkey-basters is that of a purely mechanical, nearly industrial means of production, and though the First Mother is willing to trade on the lingering homophobic shame of the image, she “[is] no purist. She [doesn't] give a hoot how they [do] it, as long as the results [pan] out” (132). Her emphasis on product over method of production underlines the economic forces at work beneath the Houses' mandate of biological preservation. The Houses are not just economic forces; they are the economy. Rarely is the intimate relationship between production and reproduction made so explicit, but here it emerges clearly. The gender politics shaping sexuality may shift, but the economic imperatives remain, and ultimately prove more powerful in organizing women's bio-sexuality than any overt patriarchal structure.

In spite of their lesbian-separatist origins, the Houses are reproductively-oriented, with the result that women's bodies are reduced to mechanisms in the service of the womb. Their whole bodies are geared to reproduction, or at least to its possibility. The infected are not only cast out of the Houses, but imprisoned elsewhere, on grounds which seem as much moral as epidemiological. The First Mother's title takes on old-fashioned, though thoroughly unglamorous tones as she declares, "These are houses of sanctuary, and this is a state of siege We must think of the children" (134). The children are, of course, the most basic unit of House production, and infection eliminates a woman's (or man's) reproductive value, rendering her sexless and economically valueless.

Infection (with any of the myriad nameless diseases which plague this post-AIDS world) alters the model of reproduction, though not its means. The infected are sent to concentration-style Freeforall camps, wherein "total sexual license was not only permitted but encouraged, because that way, it was thought, the inhabitants would finish each other off more quickly; although, it was rumoured, you could develop an immunity, you could go into remission, you could survive for years" (135). The "freeforall" is metaphorical: as much (sexual) contact as possible, with as many different (variously gendered) bodies as possible, for as much bio-variety as possible. What emerges is frequently death, but occasionally a sustainable community.

Infection functions simultaneously as bio-medical threat and social disease in Atwood's story. Both bodies and ideas have become viral. In this context, Dianne Rothleder's proposed model of viral reproduction may legitimately replace

heteronormative reproduction. The metaphor is one of transformation rather than replication, a new form of re/production:

The virus attaches itself to the cell, breaks through the cell wall, inserts its genetic coding, either DNA or RNA but never both, into the genetic material of the cell, and, just like that, the virus has control of the cell's reproductive functions. Viral reproduction occurs by the cell's producing viral particles which then escape from the parent cell in search of their own cells to occupy. (201)

This system may be fatal, or it may be infinitely sustainable, and it contains endless possibilities for mutation and transformation.

Yet the viral community lurking just outside the Houses seeps back in the form of “dangerous” ideas. Sharmayne (the nostalgic woman within the facade of the First Mother) recalls with both horror and nostalgia her own Freeforall-worthy behaviours:

chastity had been out of style; the old nuclear family was disintegrating, everyone got divorced at least once, everyone fooled around, or so they were told. When she was twenty she'd listened to her mother's horror stories of life before the Pill – girls ruined for life, shotgun marriages, back street abortions on (how quaint!) kitchen tables – with smiles of polite disinterest. She and her friends had done more or less whatever they'd felt like at the moment, take care, of course, to avoid anything that looked like a loser or a maniac. (135-6)

This is overtly a culture in which women's sexuality has, at their own behest, been severed from their reproductivity. Without the threat of pregnancy (a form of

reproductive infection), young, single women are able to form connections wildly, with little attention given to prophylactics. Fluid exchange, the basis for viral infection, allowed the women of Sharmayne's mother's generation to break down boundaries among groups, so that communities based on a denial of commonality (Rothleder 202), including nations, become less relevant than intimate connections. Functionally, the Pill created temporary cyborgs.

The Freeforalls sharply combine images of prison and playground. The concentration camp menace of “electric fences, . . . searchlights, . . . guard towers and dogs” (“Freeforall” 135) serves to contain “an abandoned adventure playground.” These are areas unvisited by guards, populated entirely by the infected. The First Mother dwells particularly on the silhouette of the playground, and its new and morbid function: “[s]ometimes people took the fast way out and their bodies could be seen from a distance, dangling from the loops of the unused roller coaster, beside the artificial mountain that still . . . appeared to promise some sort of frivolous and unfettered pleasure.” The hanging corpses ultimately argue that those bodies have become a more terrifying prison even than the barbed wire. Sexual contact is not, ultimately, equivalent to connection, certainly not to the connections cyborgs endlessly desire. Both biology and technology have conspired against and ultimately abandoned the Freeforall residents, isolating them absolutely from the body culture and the body politic, and terminating any creative potential they may have had.

The body politic of the “Freeforall” world (and, in the spirit of SF, perhaps all

worlds) is literally based in the politics of bodies, in contrast to classical conceptions of the body politic, which rely on elaborate organic metaphors (Haraway 7). The force that biological bodies exert on social relations has only ever been veiled by intense, quasi-scientific abstraction. The revelation of the body as the central locus of power demands scientific as well as political attention. In this context, Atwood emphasizes sex as a constant, literal biological presence reinforcing gender. In her brief history, biology transforms from cultural expectation to literal destiny: reproduce or lose all claim to personhood. The category of bodies here is overwhelmingly one of *female* bodies: as sites of second-wave feminist sexual liberation, as loci of contraceptive technologies, as engines of human production, the mechanisms of a sexual-industrial revolution, and as virally-infected machines first isolated and then subject to complete breakdown.

The viral nature of such a mechanical breakdown points to an expanding category of “machine.” The uterus, contained within a healthy female body, may be a site of near-industrial production, but that woman's relationship to her social hierarchy and culture has far more in common with a computer network than with an assembly line. Networks form and work rapidly, producing new bodies far more efficiently than the old-fashioned patriarchal mechanism, until the network is infected. However, once the network is infected, the damage becomes collective as well: the originally infected person is less Patient Zero than the woman without a firewall. Unless she is swiftly quarantined, she may bring down the entire system. However, Atwood does not, at least in this story, pursue this intimate connection between body and mechanism past the realm of

metaphor. The body technologic lurks within the body politic, but thus far, we can detect it only as a corpse hanging from a roller coaster, a wisp of ghost in the machine.

The concept of “the ghost in the machine” is essential to any serious discussion of women's relationship with technology. The phrase originated with Gilbert Ryle, who took exception to Cartesian divisions of consciousness in his 1949 book *The Concept of Mind*. Ryle objected to “the official doctrine,” which asserted that “every human being has both a body and a mind. Some would even prefer to say that every human being is both a body and a mind. His body and his mind are ordinarily harnessed together, but after the death of the body his mind may continue to exist and function” (13). Cartesian dualism suggests a parallel relationship between body and mind, but it discounts the possibility of the two being intimately integrated. One may *have* a body without *being* his body. The gendered language of the previous sentence is intentional; it responds to Ryle's own language. The “human being” who has (or is) a mind is implicitly male. Thus, we return again to the association of women with the body, and with nature. She may be the machine, but whether she may constitute the ghost remains in question. The more significant problem of non-integration, and incipient dis-integration, of body and mind remains in the distance.

That distance is extended to something like an intimate approach by SF's delight in the notion of the ghost in the machine. Even as Ryle contests dualism, SF writers extend it, imagining technologies which might successfully sever the unfortunate link between mind and body. A simple disambiguation of the phrase “ghost in the machine”

offers seven episode titles, nearly all from SF television series, one SF/horror movie, two new-wave rock albums, and one song title (Wikipedia).¹⁵ The ghost in the machine may be a philosophical absurdity, but its image is persistent. The disambiguation also links to *Ghost in the Shell*, a Japanese-language manga and subsequent anime series which explores cyborg themes.

That exploration lies at the core of the ghost in SF's machine. The possibilities of a mechanized body, and of freeing the mind from the body's physical limitations, are intensely seductive. The implication is always that the body will be rebuilt “better, stronger, faster,” in the tradition of *The Six Million Dollar Man* (1974-78) and *The Bionic Woman* (1976-78). However, the possibility lingers that mechanization of the body may be more malevolent than beneficial, at least so far as the inhabitant of that mechanized body is concerned. Atwood's “Freeforall” women are metaphorical machines, bio-factories for healthy humans, but their bodies are at least “natural,” and recognizable as their own. The literal mechanization of the female body, in contrast, supposes a profoundly un-natural state: a bio-pollution.

In William Gibson's short story “The Winter Market” (also included in *Tesseracts²*), pollution provides the dominant aesthetic. Narrator Casey waxes rhapsodic on the subject of Nipponized trash:

The Japanese, a century ago, had already run out of *gomi* space around Tokyo, so they came up with a plan for creating space out of *gomi*. By the year 1969 they

¹⁵ While Wikipedia may not be remotely reliable on many subjects, it provides excellent snapshots of any given moment of (Western, white, middle class, Japanophilic) cultural awareness.

had built themselves a Little island [sic] in Tokyo Bay, out of *gomi*, and christened it Dream Island. But the city was still pouring out its nine thousand tons per day, so they went on to build New Dream Island, and today they coordinate the whole process, and new Nippons rise out of the Pacific. (5)

“Gomi” is a transliteration of the Kanji character 塵, explicitly “rubbish” but with implications of both waste and recyclability.¹⁶ Gibson adopts “gomi” as uniquely suited to address the overwhelming materiality and pollution of late capitalism: “garbage, kipple, refuse, the sea of cast-off goods our century floats on” (4). The story’s assemblage-artist character, Rubin, is “*Gomi no sensei*. Master of junk.” Rubin “brings home more *gomi*. Some of it operative. Some of it, like Lise, human” (6).

Lise, the human manifestation of *gomi*, is at once profoundly seductive and disturbingly distorted. She has “[o]ne of those diseases. Either they were [sic] one of the old ones they’ve never quite figured out or one of the new ones -- the all too obviously environmental kind – that they’ve barely even named yet” (7). The odd phrasing “they were” implies a personification of disease, that Lise may not only *have* a nameless disease, but *be* one. Rubin finds her “on a *gomi* run, back in an alley” (11), and returns to collect her once she has slipped into unconsciousness. She is the embodiment of his element: human junk, disease embodied.

Gibson swiftly fuses the images of *gomi* and woman to provide a disturbing insight into the way female bodies are re-constructed in the shift from industrial

¹⁶ The term is now widely used among anglophone expatriates in Japan to refer to the complex system of recycling and disposal standards for household garbage in that country (Carolie, Cook).

capitalism to late capitalism. As industrial production becomes progressively more distanced from the lives of consumers, the purpose and even necessity of the female body becomes fractured. Reproductive childbearing, like industrial production, is increasingly distanced from First World lives¹⁷, yet women remain heteronormatively identified with their bodies, and their bodies with childbearing production. The result is an intense socioeconomic misogyny which forces women to create for themselves new productive identities lest they be swept away with the trash.

The House system of “Freeforall” technologizes what has, to that point, been cottage-industry production. Female bodies and male bodies, in one-to-one ratios, produce children. Contaminated bodies are carefully removed from the community and consigned to the garbage dump. Gibson's Vancouver, though, is far less organized than Atwood's Toronto. The boundaries between human life and human waste are fluid, allowing massive cross-contamination, and a return of the infected woman. The woman who returns, though, is neither so material nor so opaque as Haraway's human bodies. Instead, what emerges from the gomi-wash is a fusion of machine-waste and human-waste, a cyborg crawling out of the Richmond dumpsters (Gibson 4). Lise's creations are far more alienated from her physical body than any previously anticipated woman's have been.

Lise's body is a toxic site, a self-contained Freeforall, and like those biohazard playgrounds, she exists at a physical remove from the larger culture. Casey watches her

¹⁷ Childbearing itself becomes less common in the developed world. Canada's fertility rate in 2000 was only 1.5 births per woman, compared with 7.6 births per woman in Afghanistan in the same year (worldbank.org).

from a distance, measuring her physical and technical specifications through an alcoholic haze. He catches “her cheekbones and the determined set of that mouth, but . . . also . . . the black glint of polycarbon at her wrist, and the bright slick sore the exoskeleton had rubbed there” (6). Casey's glance is initially sexual, taking in the seductive lines of Lise's face, and only later, as she approaches “through the bodies and junk” does he become aware of “the terrible grace programmed into the exoskeleton.” His desire transforms almost instantly to embarrassment, and borderline revulsion. Lise is infected, dangerous, and not entirely human. She is already diseased, and in the moment of their first contact, she infects Casey with a kind of viral desire which is only remotely connected to the biologies of infection and reproduction.

Lise is an animated death's head whose “skull [is] about to burn through her white face like a thousand-watt bulb” (22). She goes far beyond the queer/*sinthomosexual's* denial of the reproductive drive to a feminine manifestation of the death drive. Edelman overtly aligns the death drive with queerness, but also with a queer masculinity, in the sense that he articulates queerness as a single position, without distinguishing the extent to which feminine perceptions might alter it. He initially articulates the death drive as

that which “names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability” (9). The death drive's associated “culture of death,” though, fragments along gender lines. A gay serial killer of gay men prompted Gary Bauer,¹⁸ in 1997, to assert that “those who practice homosexuality embrace a culture of death” (Edelman 39), but the most common use of the phrase belongs to American anti-abortion rhetoric (40). The division of the death culture and its associated drives into “gay club kids” and women facing unwanted pregnancy inevitably reinforces the gender split: gay men locate themselves here, and so do reproductively defiant women, regardless of their sexuality.

In this context, Lise, who is sexually provocative but shows no signs of fertility, and who associates more closely with late industrial detritus than with humanity, becomes a nearly ideal embodiment of the death drive. Baudrillard's Freudian definition of the death drive varies from Edelman's opposition to social viability, and while Lise is far from socially viable, Baudrillard names her drive more accurately: “The death drive . . . is precisely this nostalgia for a state before the appearance of individuality and sexual differentiation, a state in which we lived before we became mortal and distinct

¹⁸ Gary Bauer's own cultural association with contagion and disease awaits a full theoretical analysis. Bauer's anti-gay rhetoric through the late 1990s prompted queer journalist Dan Savage to infiltrate Bauer's presidential primary campaign office in Iowa. There Savage, who had the flu, began a campaign to damage Bauer's campaign chances in a markedly queer (and extremely funny) way:

I would go to Bauer's campaign office and cough on everything – phones and pens, staplers and staffers. I even hatched a plan to infect the candidate himself. I would keep the pen in my mouth until Bauer dropped by his offices to rally the troops. And when he did, I would approach him and ask for his autograph, handing him the pen from my flu-virus incubating mouth. (Savage)

from one another” (6). The nostalgic push for non-sexual connectivity, an alternative oneness, is precisely what this Harawayan cyborg (always needy of connectivity) desires.

Lise's sexuality, or at least her sexual desirability, forms a thin veil over her death drive, but never entirely obscures it. Lise and Casey's interactions are sexually coded in spite of their almost entirely technological nature. Casey works as a virtual editor, compositing the dreams and mental visions of techno-artists into marketable commodities. Lise identifies his tools of the trade first, then offers to seduce him for his services, in a casting-couch parody which Casey apparently finds far more frightening than Lise does:

“You wanna make it, editor?”

. . . I cold-eyed her from somewhere down in the beer-numbed core of my walking, talking, live-limbed, and entirely ordinary body, and the words came out of me like spit: “Could you feel it, if I did?”

Beat. Maybe she blinked, but her face never registered. “No,” she said, “but sometimes I like to watch.” (8)

Case has already expressed his disgust and horror at Lise's disabled body, but he never leaves that disgust behind. He returns to the contrast of his healthy, entirely biological body, and her infected, cyborg one. In a single paragraph, he compares her to “a model [walking] down a runway” and “frog legs twitching in a high-school lab tape” (7): remote, abstractly desirable, and not particularly human. In spite, or perhaps because, of that revulsion, he sustains the (hetero)sexual nature of their encounter, consenting to

engage her in techno-psychic pornography. They “jack straight across,” creating a virtual-psychic link which allows them profound intimacy on a non-physical level. In spite of the bodilessness of the practice, it remains sexually coded and deeply frightening: “There are people naive enough to assume that they'll actually enjoy jacking straight across with someone they love. I think most teenagers try it, once. But me [Casey], I'd never done it” (9). The cultural framework is comparable to a loss of virginity, though with equal discomfort on both sides.

The language of this encounter is frankly sexual, though the sexual language involved is not in the least reproductive. Rather, “jacking” (jacking in, jacking out, jacking straight across) implies male masturbation, and Lise is perfectly straightforward about her desire to observe, rather than to participate, in coitus. At most, this is technologically mediated intimacy. Its products are not children, but simply pleasure. The solitary nature of that pleasure results in “paradigmatically fraught mix of fantasy and imagination, secrecy and solitude, addiction and excess writ upon the body” (Laqueur 247-48). Jacking offers the same psychological terrors in a late capitalist culture as masturbation did in the first days of the pre-industrial Enlightenment: “it represent[s], in the body, some of the deepest tensions in a new culture of the marketplace” (249): isolation and pollution.

The forced intimacy of jacking straight across produces the possibility of a virtual psychic bleed, a viral contamination not just of the body, but of the self. The Vancouver around Casey and Lise is implicitly a city, but it manifests far more as garbage than as

people. They are alone, filthy, and terrifyingly on the verge of polluting one another. As a result, the technological mediation produces an encounter far more frightening (at least for Casey) than any strictly sexual encounter was likely to be. Most particularly, we are left with no sense that any part of Casey penetrates Lise, but Lise's desires flood Casey's sense and rapidly overwhelm him:

Freedom and death, right there, right there, razor's edge, forever.

What I got was the big-daddy version of that, raw rush, the king hell killer uncut real thing, exploding eight ways from Sunday into a void that stank of poverty and lovelessness and obscurity.

And that was Lise's ambition, that rush, *seen from the inside*.

It probably took all of four seconds.

And, of course, she'd won.

I took the trodes off and stared at the wall, eyes wet Then I started to cry. (10)

The psychic-sexual encounter has no physical counterpart, but it nonetheless leaves Casey with a sense of violation. Their encounter, particularly the moment of horror and terror which drives Casey to tears, becomes a new commodity, edited by Casey (once he has re-established enough technical distance that he doesn't "have to feel it") and released to an audience of millions (11) as legitimate art. Officially, it is no longer pornography, only a manifestation of Jungian dreams in their purest form, then edited "so we can package it, sell it, watch how it moves in the market" (9).

The album, *Kings of Sleep*, infects the entire culture (or at least as much of it as we can see in Casey's Vancouver). Lise creates a virtual rendition of her own disease. She has been *Kings'* carrier for a long time, carrying it “locked up in her head the way her body was locked in that exoskeleton” (14). The story's first paragraph informs us that the recording is “going triple-platinum” (3), that is, it has sold three million copies. The sales, though, mark only the mainstream culture's consumption of media; they do not account for the viral spread of ideas through the urban underclasses. Those unobserved masses are, functionally, the winter market, and they mimic a Freeforall in their exile from the productive culture. Lise's own former homelessness feeds back into the city's awareness:

That's why *Kings of Sleep's* as big as it is, and why the kids buy it, why they *believe* it. They know. Those kids down the Market, warming their butts around the fires and wondering if they'll find someplace to sleep tonight, they believe it. It's the hottest soft in eight years. Guy at a shop on Granville told me he gets more of the damned things lifted than he sells of anything else She's big because she was what they are, only more so. She knew, man. No dreams, no hope. You can't see the cases on those kids . . . , but more and more they're twigging to it, that they aren't going *anywhere*. (17-18)

This is the death drive, expressed collectively. The misery of disability, of poverty, of cultural exile, and of the body as a prison pervade the city. Lise's body provides the model. The disease which has crippled her is congenital (15): not hereditary, but

acquired *in utero*, part of her from a time predating her own birth. The implication is that there is something wrong both with Lise's mother (*mater*) and her womb (*matrix*)¹⁹. The etymological connection between the two words is, Judith Butler suggests, a central "problematic of reproduction When not explicitly associated with reproduction, matter is generalized as a principle of origination and causality" (*Bodies* 31). Lise's material existence, her hereditary condition, is, even associated with reproduction, causal. Neither she nor any of the other market children will produce anything human. In most cases, they will not even pass for human, yet their bodies persist. Gotlieb's poem warps around the story (YOU ARE STUCK HERE).

Lise's push to escape from her body evokes an alternative form of pollution: drug addiction. She first appears to Casey with "her eyes burning with wizz" (6). Though "wizz" most commonly refers to street amphetamines, Gibson evokes a more intensely technologized high that "open[s] every circuit in her brain." Her addiction is as much a part of her materiality as the exoskeleton. Her media success fails to free her from either. The agents hire medics to make Lise's body more presentable with a combination of vitamins and bandages, "but nobody ever tried to take that inhaler away" (15). The addiction is, in a sense, mechanical, and the inhaler is as much a prosthetic as any part of her cyber-skeleton.

In contrast to the prophylactic prosthetics of "Freeforall," "The Winter Market"

¹⁹ Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* contains one of the first instances of virtuality being described as "the matrix." The fusion of mathematical matrices and biological matrices in his female characters throughout his work demands an alternative awareness of the nature of fertility.

offers a vision of parasitic prosthetics. Lise's technological extensions do not so much sustain her life as make her biological existence bearable, and ultimately, the technologies break her down. As Lise pours her psyche into *Kings of Sleep*, her body degenerates: “[t]he wizz was eating her, under the stuff the make-up team keep smoothing on, and sometimes it was like seeing a death's-head surface beneath the face of a not very handsome teenager” (16). The exoskeleton had already broken through her skin from the outside when Casey first met Lise, but now he sees the chemicals eating their way out, like acne. The result is hideous and terrifying, and inevitably fatal.

The monstrosity of the non-reproductive woman sustains itself from story to story. The First Mother mimics the Bride of Frankenstein. Lise transforms herself into the Ghost in the Machine. Lise's identity has long been predicated on the belief that she is not her body, and on her desire to exist outside of her broken and diseased flesh. That Lise finally *does* sever her mind-body connection is far less shocking than it should be. The announcement comes in the first paragraph, buried between Vancouver's movie landscape and *Kings of Sleep*'s success, and as a result, Lise's disembodied presence flows through the entire story. Casey spends most of his subsequent conversations with Rubin trying to reconcile the idea that the woman he has known on an intensely sexual level has no materiality left at all, yet still exists:

“She try to call you yet?”

“No.”

“She will.”

“Rubin, she's dead. They cremated her already.”

“I know,” he said. “And she's going to call you.” (5)

Lise is ashes; her body has become dirt and air pollution: more gomi. Lise has merged with the net, “translated herself into a hardwired program” (13). The two ideas are simultaneously true. They at once reinforce the Cartesian “official doctrine” and disrupt received notions of gender. Woman need not be her body at all. She may be a ghost on the other end of the phone.

In spite of its completeness, Lise's escape from her body is hardly a triumph for cyborg feminism. In transforming herself into a program, Lise becomes a corporate commodity. The net with which Lise merged is no ethereal otherspace: “[s]he's taking up a lot of ROM on some corporate mainframe, and her share of *Kings* won't come close to paying for what they had to do to put her there” (24). Even freed from her infected, polluted body, Lise needs to be productive. She needs money, and that wraps her into an ongoing parasitic relationship with Casey, her unwilling editor. Her existence is restricted and mechanical, and her labour outlasts her own life. This is the last stage of the death drive, the stage at which the cyborg and the ghost and the machine become intimately bound entities, parallel monsters. Edelman suggests that “the 'death drive' designates a dimension of what horror fiction calls the 'undead,' a strange, immortal, indestructible life that persists beyond death” (48). Lise is the inversion of a zombie: she does not rot in her flesh, but rather hovers beyond her body in an undead, digital state. In that state, Lise is finally able to assert some agency. Unlike the Bride of Frankenstein,

unlike the damsels of monster movies, this is utterly Lise's choice: she chooses un/death ("The Winter Market" 4). When her head burns out, after her cremation, then, finally, she has made herself into the monster she desires to be.

Gibson and Atwood's stories model extreme feminine relationships with biology and technology. The epistemological link between femininity and nature exposes itself as a location, a bridge-point, rather than a universal constant. Gotlieb's poem-bridge

YOU ARE HERE, shapechanger, in the clasp of the man
 you have become a woman for
 so
 whisper into your
 ear and kiss the lips of
 your other head, human . . .

articulates the location of gender. Woman is a shapechanger, an "other" human, but perhaps most significantly, she is a conjunction, "so," a fulcrum of possibilities.

Between the two extremes of childbearing corporation and corporate ghost lie an enormous range of possibilities for technologized women. The relationship of mater and matrix becomes all the more fruitful in this field. The female cyborg must reconcile her relationship with her own productivity or reproductivity, as we see the First Mother do, and with her own embodiment, as Lise does. However, she must also negotiate her position within an increasingly corporate world. The shift of institutional power away from the family demands a concomitant shift in gender relations. Corporate power

requires modes of resistance that the female cyborg, who emerged from the patriarchal family, only gradually learns to enact. Radical reactions against materiality may only produce a new regulatory norm of sex and the heterosexual imperative, binding women to men, or men to women, within corporate power structures that perpetuate the scientific equation of femininity and femaleness in the name of production and profit. Cyborg feminist independence requires a negotiated relationship with materiality less radical than either of these scenarios, but markedly more militant.

Chapter 2

Girls on Film: Photography, Pornography, and the Politics of Reproduction

In “Freeforall,” the commodities that emerge from industrial reproduction are straightforward and relatively traditional: heteronormative families (nominally matriarchally aligned) and disease-free/unpolluted children. The emphasis on purity, chastity, and insularity suggests a near-Biblical patriarchy only nominally re-aligned on second-wave feminist principles. The strict binary division between personhood and non-personhood is rigorously biological and centred on the womb without a full awareness of the body technologic. However, elsewhere in Margaret Atwood's fiction, she interrogates the technologies, bio-technologies, and even the mathematics that define femininity. The politics of the body, we find, are intimately technologized, reduced to numbers, expanded into matrices, and played out again in both womb and image, simultaneously clean and intensely viral.

Any examination of the feminine body and reproduction in Atwood's work inevitably arrives at *The Handmaid's Tale*. Its imagery of woman-as-uterus, penetrative scrutiny, and malevolent infection has made the novel (ahem) fertile ground for critical analysis. Katharyn Privett's essay on *The Handmaid's Tale*, “Dystopic Bodies and Enslaved Motherhood,” points to a disjunction between femininity and reproductivity that demands “other . . . necessary signifiers of maternal enslavement” to make breeders

visible and controllable (266). Privett's identification of visible markers suggests an essential function of Gileadan society, but never fully articulates it:

Open to violations only when visible, the body becomes defensible when divorced from its reproductive organs What is remarkable about this corporeal resistance is its intentional fracture: Offred's sexuality has been split in two, its functions (when maternal) are the property of a new society, yet those functions (when sensual) answer only to her.

The need for invisibility and defence here is ultimately internal and driven by desire. However, the initial vulnerability which demands those protections is more complex than Privett supposes. Likewise, she points to Offred's "ache for the stolen child she can only touch in a photograph" (267), but fails to explore the force of that ache beyond Offred's hatred for her own "material potential" (268). However, the nature of "dystopic" feminine bodies in *The Handmaid's Tale* is more complex than an internal conflict over feminist essentialism. Atwood gestures more subtly to the technological constitution of the body than she does to the biological, but the gesture is present nonetheless. Key to the body technologic here is not the image of the child, but the photograph that conveys it.

The novel's imagery of surveillance and scrutiny fuses biological and technological imagery. Pamela Cooper points to the conjunction of Foucault's "clinical eye" (49) of *The Birth of the Clinic* and the "faceless gaze" (50) of *Discipline and Punish* in the medical/sexual surveillance of the doctor's office. The "cynical and corrupt medical establishment" manifests in "the screen in the doctor's office . . . emblazoned

with 'a gold Eye'" (52). In such a context, "[t]o look is to rape, and to rape is to look" (51). The relationship between focused gaze and the constitution/penetration of the female body is here made explicit. Cooper, however, leaves the mechanics of surveillance, of looking, largely implied, focusing instead on surveillance's sexual implications, and the problematic nature of transforming the novel into a movie. The *techne* of surveillance and gaze in Gilead are relegated to metaphor.

The presence of photographic technology is more thoroughly interrogated by Marta Dvorak when she asks "What is Real/Reel?" She suggests that Gilead comes to us in a hyperreal form, constituted only by simulated media. "*Handmaid*," she writes, "is a novel meant for the same audiences that flock to Atom Egoyan films, in which the characters' sole point of reference is television and video" (454). In this assertion, she is to a certain extent correct. The subtle media of *Handmaid* create the novel as a techno-artifact rather than a conventional book: "[t]he text, like the mass media it describes, is a construct, like a (faked) photograph, like the moving pictures/movies . . . with . . . slippages. The self-reflexive narration . . . suggest[s] that the conventions of representation generate our 'reality'" (455).

Dvorak has hit on an essential function of Atwood's conceit. *Handmaid* is framed as a pseudo-documentary, a text of future-history reconstructed from audio cassettes. Offred's account is fragmentary, concealed within banal, banned pop music, ostensibly discovered in no particular order and reconstituted by careful academic labours. Within this puzzle-narrative, which is purportedly not a print-text at all, but oral storytelling on magnetic tape, Offred makes routine references to family photos and photographic

processes, Polaroids and family albums, fashion magazines and girlie magazines, classic Hollywood films about which the First Mother waxed nostalgic and explicit, violent pornography, and well as an institutionalized pornography of violence. Offred's body and those of the women around her, concealed as they are within shrouds and concealed from penetrating, phallic gazes, nonetheless continue to manifest as products of their own photographic past, and via their relationships with the other women who exist and persist only on film.

One might, however, criticize Dvorak's essay for its pursuit of the real within the collage of media. She hinges her discussion on Roland Barthes' assertion that "by becoming commonplace, the photograph has taken over to the detriment of reality itself, to the extent that we make our behaviour conform to artificial stereotypes" (453). This lament focuses on the aesthetic damage and dangers which film perpetuates, rather than focusing on the potential the technology offers. In spite of *Handmaid's* dystopian tone, the possibilities for technologized women that the novel raises are profound and potentially far from malevolent.

The insistent presence of camera-technologies throughout *Handmaid* suggests that photography and pornography are intimately, perhaps inextricably, bound up in the construction of female bodies. Even in a culture wherein both film and pornography are ostensibly banned, the memory and persistence of these media make them intensely and inescapably sexual. That technological intimacy points to a function for pornography that does not entirely match second-wave feminist critiques of the genre. Atwood's Gilead bans all pornography on grounds that fuse puritan/evangelical anti-sex positions with

feminist critiques such as Susan Brownmiller's classic one:

[T]he feminist objection to pornography is based on our belief that pornography represents hatred of women, that pornography's intent is to humiliate, degrade and dehumanize the female body for the purpose of erotic stimulation and pleasure These images, which are standard pornographic fare, [have] nothing to do with the hallowed right of political dissent. They have everything to do with the creation of a cultural climate in which a rapist feels he is merely giving in to a normal urge and a woman is encouraged to believe that sexual masochism is healthy, liberated fun. (*Let's Put Pornography Back in the Closet*)

Brownmiller's language echoes in the words of the Gileadan Aunts at the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centre, and of this, more shall presently be said. However, the only critic to take this up in any detail is Laurel Gardner, who concludes from the intersection of Atwood and Brownmiller that “when pornography is suppressed, women do recover some power over men and . . . they enjoy that power. Men are humiliated in a culture without pornography and in which they have restricted access to women because they are denied an outlet for sexual desire” (6). Gardner's scenario plays out simply enough in that brief passage in *Handmaid* in which Offred silently taunts:

As we walk away I know they're watching, these two men who aren't yet permitted to touch women. They touch with their eyes instead and I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me. It's like thumbing your nose from behind a fence or teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach, and I'm ashamed of myself for doing it They have no outlets now . . . , no more

magazines, no more films, no more substitutes; only me and my shadow, walking away from two men (22)

The implied power of the Handmaid, nearly entirely concealed but still seductive by virtue of her understood femininity, is a hollow thing. She uses near-invisible sexual gestures to provoke reactions from young men who have little authority over her and less over the politics of Gilead. There is little to suggest that the guards are much more humiliated than Offred.

Such an approach to pornography is far too simplistic, and fails to take into account either the pervasive memory of pornography even in its absence, or the complex ways in which pornography has already constructed the categories of women and men who struggle for power in its absence. Officially, pornography is banned in Gilead, but the culture that preceded the fundamentalist takeover was steeped in sex, both as feminist liberation and as patriarchal objectification. Mainstream pornography's categories of femininity invaded women's psyches. In Offred's memory, a friend proposes "giving an underwhore party You know, like Tupperware, only with underwear. Tarts' stuff It's big in the suburbs, . . . they figure they've got to beat the competition. The Pornomarts and what have you" (53). The suggestion is meant playfully, as a kind of generational mocking of older, more conventional women. Even so, the transformation of women's bodies into sites of clichéd pornographic performance is both blatant and commercially driven. The spectre of "Pornomarts," hypermarkets of sexual commodification, drives aging women to transform their own bodies into similarly titillating, bland commodities.

In reflection, Offred is incredulous: “Is that how we lived then?” (53). Her musings on women's deliberate denial of the threats around them return to the critically-fertile language of erasure and collectivity. In that far-off time, she reflects, “[w]e lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom.” The phrase “the blank white spaces,” for all its suggestions of marginality and silence, potentially articulates a position of enormous privilege. Danita J. Dodson articulates that position in her observation that Offred's memories are intensely “segregated,” ignoring layers of slavery and torture within her culture, but “denoting that the stories of other women were in 'black' because they were in 'print’” (Dodson), with the implication that the ability to lurk in the clean margins is a class and racial privilege. Dodson does not, however, pursue this idea into its potential implications for print media. The blank white spaces (the phrase is seductive, inescapable) go largely unreplicated, and are comfortable in their infertility. These are the territories beyond pornography: women in the white margins have the freedom not to be reduced to image or commodity.

Perhaps more than anything else, the safety of the blank white spaces points to a linguistic absence. There is no word in English that encompasses the process of being transformed from living, complex being into pornography. “Photographed” denotes only part of that metamorphosis. Beyond the fixing of the image lies a metaphysical and perhaps even moral border country in which the biologically female body is inscribed with all the sexual implications of heteronormative fetish and fantasy.²⁰ The female

²⁰ Much pornography exists, of course, that is neither heteronormative nor focused on the female body. However, the culture of pornography as it appears in Atwood's writing, and as it came under attack by second-wave feminists, the culture of images exploiting femininity, is the culture to which I refer.

process of becoming pornography demands its own language: *he pornographs her, she pornographs herself, she is pornographed*. In this context, pornography mimics rape in a discourse of violations performed on female bodies by men. This is a process of power and objectification which resists simple rehabilitation, and which can only be ignored via the same tactics by which violence is ignored.

Women cannot (or could not, in Offred's reckoning) be pornographed in textually empty spaces. To be pornographed one must be exploited, transformed into a commodity, and it is print, first, that does so. The privileged women wilfully ignore the texts of exploitation: "The newspaper stories were like dreams to us, bad dreams dreamt by others. How awful, we would say, and they were, but they were awful without being believable. They were too melodramatic, they had a dimension that was not the dimension of our lives" (*Handmaid* 53). That dimension becomes inhabitable for Offred only when the boundaries of her privilege break down, and the culture which conceals her body and identity simultaneously exploits her sexuality and bio-femaleness.

The "blank white spaces" raise another possibility as well: that of concealment. The effacement of the white margins is all but impenetrable, since it cannot be easily seen or violated. The Handmaids, by contrast, are isolated from white blankness. They are dressed instead in vivid red, as a sign not of "the category of gender, but quite narrowly that of female fertility" (Caminero-Santangelo). The red robes, though they conceal the body, imply malevolent exposure. They allow the soldiers who seek new forms of pornography to look not only at the women, but into them, to determine their existence on a uterine level. It is no coincidence that the Handmaids greet one another with the call

and response, “[b]lessed be the fruit,” and “[m]ay the Lord open” (*Handmaid* 19). The Handmaids are, under their robes, already open for all the world to see: fertile, motile matrices whose sexuality is far more penetrable than their shapeless clothing would suggest.

Offred's resistance to her exploitation, and to the constant cultural penetration to which she is subject, lies to a certain extent in searching for her own agency, or in its atrophied absence, for any sign of feminine agency. Offred regards the store from which her concealing robes are purchased and breaks down its commercial façade to reveal, if only to her mind's eye, the shop's earlier incarnation as a movie theatre. The site is one in which women's photographic/filmic images were distinct from pornographic ones. The theatre showed “Lauren Bacall or Katharine Hepburn, women on their own, making up their minds. They wore blouses with buttons down the front that suggested the possibilities of the word *undone*. These women could be undone; or not. They seemed to be able to choose. We seemed to be able to choose, then” (24). The silver-screen actresses remind the reader, and perhaps Offred, that pornography is not the only potential inherent in film, even when that film revolves around sexuality. The long-dead actresses²¹ have a profound agency related to their ability to remain self-contained. They are protected by their clothing choices (blouses, trousers), by their range of linguistic and social options implicit in “the possibilities of the word,” which free them from what Marta Caminero-Santangelo calls “one ideology . . . Gileadan discourse (women as physically revealed; women as sexually undone).” Old movies, or silver films, are closed

²¹ The actresses are, at least, implicitly dead, though at the time *The Handmaid's Tale* was written, both were still alive and working, and as of this writing, Lauren Bacall remains so.

systems, uncommunicative with the Gileadan culture. They are their own, uninfected discourse. They can be seen, but not, as Offred is vividly aware, seen into.

The presence, even in memory, of women on film who are not inherently oppressed by their technological context suggests that the filmed body has the potential to be a site of political dissent. The Gileadan state works deliberately to alienate women from film as a strategy of oppression. Photography is banned, television is state-controlled and features men only, and the few movies still shown are chosen to emphasize to the Handmaids how complete, and how morally correct, the state's authority is. In the Rachel and Leah indoctrination centre, potential Handmaids are shown pornographic films that reinforce Brownmiller's assertion that "pornography represents hatred of women, that pornography's intent is to humiliate, degrade and dehumanize the female body." Eroticism is almost entirely effaced in favour of power performance, as when the Aunts screen

an old porno film, from the seventies or eighties. Women kneeling, sucking penises or guns, women tied up or chained or with dog collars around their necks, women hanging from trees, or upside-down, naked, with their legs held apart, women being raped, beaten up, killed. Once we had to watch a woman being slowly cut into pieces, her fingers and breasts snipped off with garden shears, her stomach slit open and her intestines pulled out. (112)

The emphasis on violence is pointed and intentional. The Aunts remind the Handmaids, "That was what they thought of women, then," using the immediacy of pornography to obscure the extent to which Gilead has transformed niche fetish fantasies into cultural

practice. The Handmaids particularly have been so reduced to meat and body parts that they become at once entirely their bodies and entirely alienated from them. At bath time, Offred finds that even her own gaze cannot salvage her body from fragmentation and alienation:

My nakedness is strange to me already. My body seems outdated. Did I really wear bathing suits, at the beach? I did, without thought, among men, without caring that my legs, my arms, my thighs and back were on display, and could be seen. *Shameful, immodest*. I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely. (58-59)

Offred's inventory of her own body parts severs each (legs, arms, thighs, back) from her self, and creates a kind of internalized terror. Within *The Handmaid's Tale*, this is precisely what pornography does: it induces shame and “embarrass[ment] for [one's own] body, and for the bodies of all women when [one] see[s] the fragmented parts of us so frivolously, and so flagrantly, displayed” (Brownmiller).

In spite of the oppression and exposure inherent in pornographic media, film also functions as a medium of feminine resistance in Gilead. It provides matriarchal links that stabilize feminine relationships in spite of the culture's impositions of blindness and silence. The Unwomen documentaries shown to Handmaids in the course of their re-education alternate full-audio pornography with silent films of second-wave feminist action. The obvious intent is to connect the terror of the former with the social unease of the latter, but Offred draws other conclusions. Among the silent Unwomen, she identifies

her mother:

Now my mother is moving forward, she's smiling, laughing, they all move forward, they're raising their fists in the air. The camera moves to the sky, where hundreds of red balloons rise, trailing their strings: red balloons, with a circle painted on them, a circle with a stem like the stem of an apple, the stem is a cross. Back on earth now, my mother is part of the crowd, and I can't see her any more.
(113-14)

Black crayon strokes (113) have rendered the women on film nameless, but Offred's ability to identify her mother breaks down the mute message of the documentary-turned-propaganda film. The fundamental definition of a Gileadan Unwoman is a woman who denies the destiny of her biology, who rejects the matrix at her core. Infertility, whether willed or not, undercuts the very nature (as it were) of woman. The persistence of Offred's mother undercuts that definition. She is fertile by the nature of her identification: she is a mother. By self-identification, she is Woman, capitalized, represented by the liberated uterus. The balloons are a potent symbol, uteri set free into the sky, scattering fertility.

Photographic resistance in Gilead undercuts hyper-patriarchal conceptions of the mechanics of fertility. Where Gilead treats women essentially as factories for the production of diseases free/unpolluted (male) children, the Unwoman documentary flash of Offred's mother triggers her memory of an alternate perception. The mother insists that a "man is just a woman's strategy for making other women" (114). And indeed, Offred's family is a single, unbroken female line of grandmother, mother, and daughter.

The line, though, is interrupted when Offred's daughter is stolen. The child persists in the narrative only photographically. The line of women breaks down at both a biological and metaphorical level, persisting only on film: they become media analogues.

Ultimately, Offred's existence is not only analogous to media, she *is* media, and perhaps more to the point, she is analogue media. The woman herself exists at a remove from the *Tale* text. Offred, the Handmaid belonging to Fred, is ostensibly a scholarly reconstruction from a set of audio recordings made over commercial tapes of “secular music [which is] banned entirely under the [Gileadan] regime” (284.) The concealment of her voice within other forbidden sounds frames and allows the persistence of the Handmaid's tale. The nature of that persistence, though, is vulnerable. The tale is recorded not in digital media, but on magnetic audio cassettes “of the type that became obsolete in the eighties or nineties with the advent of the compact disc” (283). Tape's obsolescence is due to its very nature: it is analogue. Analogue technology as a category encompasses all pre-digital forms of production, but particularly those which are inescapably material and industrial or semi-industrial in nature, including all of Friedrich Kittler's gramophones, films, and typewriters. In analogue media, each copy is produced from a “master” model which can be identified as an authoritative original, imbued on some level with Walter Benjamin's idea of the aura. The copying process, because it is mechanical in nature, inevitably degrades the master copy. In this sense, at least, when Benjamin asserts that “mechanical reproduction . . . may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of its presence is always depreciated” (221), he is not entirely correct. Mechanical reproduction, at the mechanical level, *does* touch the work of art, and wears

it down to static.

However, the relationship between art and analogue media must be extended beyond Benjamin's original intentions, in this context. Benjamin asserts that “no natural object” is vulnerable to depreciation via reproduction, because “what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object.” In this sense, women, or reproductive female bodies, should not share art's vulnerability. From another perspective, though, female bodies become vulnerable precisely because the industrial revolution²² separated both art and femininity “from [their] basis in cult” so that “the semblance of autonomy disappeared forever” (226). Women's presence on film, tape, and in other media transforms them into art, but that transformation only mimics the attitudes of a culture which perceives female bodies primarily as sites of production without autonomy or significant individuality. “Mechanical reproduction” denotes at once the photographic process, and the mechanization of uteri, and the female bodies surrounding them.

The intimate relationship between analogue production and female vulnerability is made explicit in Gibson's “The Winter Market,” when Casey imagines Lise in the age of mechanical reproduction:

My father was an audio engineer, a mastering engineer. He went way back, in the business, even before digital. The processes he was concerned with were purely mechanical He was a lathe operator, basically. People brought him audio recordings and he burned their sounds into grooves on a disk of

²² The industrial revolution radically shifted notions of the relative value of men's and women's labour (McIntosh 143), so that women's labour became relocated away from the centre of culture and devalued.

lacquer. Then the disk was electroplated and used in the construction of a press that would stamp out records, the black things you see in antique stores. And I remember him telling me, once, a few months before he died, that certain frequencies — transients, I think he called them — could easily burn out the head, the cutting head, on a master lathe. These heads were incredibly expensive, so you prevented burnouts with something called an accelerometer. And that was what I was thinking of . . . : that head, burning out.

Because that was what they did to her.

And that was what she wanted.

No accelerometer for Lise. (4)

The metaphor of transients and burnouts is explicit in context. The progression of medium, addiction, erasure is almost entirely internal on Lise's part, and occurs in spite of cultural failsafes. While Lise's burnout is of no sentimental importance to the corporate structure in which she functions, her degeneration is bad for business. Ideally, she needs to be infinite and ineradicable, producing media forever.

Offred, however, has no failsafes to protect her, and she does not exist in a digital context. Gilead is resolutely analogue. It relies on staticky television (*Handmaid* 78), on damaged, edited films, and the most basic of all analogue forms, human reproduction. The Handmaids are a less overt industrialization of childbearing than the Houses in “Freeforall,” but their slavery to the process is more overt and insidious. In the *Historical Notes* following Offred's story, Professor Pieixoto inventories the threats to mechanical (white) human reproduction: “this was the age of the R-strain syphilis and

also of the infamous AIDS epidemic, which, once they spread to the population at large, eliminated many young sexually active people from the reproductive pool[.] Stillbirths, miscarriages, and genetic deformities were widespread and on the increase” (286). Not only are individual reproductive bodies falling into static, but bio-technologies threaten the nature of the human genome.

The forced reproductive labour of the Handmaids in this context amounts to an analogue-reproductive threat to their (second-wave feminist defined) bodies, their selves. The scrawled message inside Offred's wardrobe, “*Nolite tes bastardes carborundorum*” (49) is not only metaphorical: in the process of breeding her and dragging child-copies out of her, Offred is literally being ground down, reduced to something less than human.

One must note, in this context, that the films in which Offred finds her thread of resistance are not entirely analogue in nature. Certainly, her mother's presence at the filmed abortion-rights rally is almost certainly caught on conventional film, but her image is one of resistance to forced reproduction. The daughter's image is even more telling, though. The child's photograph is a Polaroid print. A Polaroid print is self-developing, a reproductive anomaly. It has no negative, and, unlike other forms of photography, defies further reproduction. Such an image is an end point. This, perhaps, is entirely Serena Joy's intention. The child's image is not a continuous one; it is isolated. A single Polaroid does what no other state mechanism has been able to until then. It exposes without providing access.

That location of safety, though, is isolated. Analogue film offers the potential not only for mechanical reproduction, but for endless reproduction, far beyond the body's

capabilities. Louis Daguerre, whose daguerreotype process popularized photography, sought to “develop an instrument that serves not merely to ‘draw nature’ but ‘*gives her the power to reproduce herself*’” (Diebert 117, emphasis added). The implication, of course, is that nature did not previously have the ability to reproduce “herself,” at least not as perfectly, and to this we will return in a moment. Gregory Ulmer argues that photographs “are not only supposed to resemble the object, but rather guarantee this resemblance by being, as it were, a product of the object in question, that is, by being mechanically produced by it — just as the illuminated objects of reality imprint their image on the photographic layer” (qtd in Kittler 12). Photographs “capture” their subjects, and those subjects in turn authenticate the physical precision of the photograph.

Yet film exists parallel to photography, undercutting the perfection of mechanical reproduction via its ability to represent the unreal. The latter purports to be a stable document; the former deliberately omits, edits, and tricks the audience. Even film’s portrayals of movement are an illusion, relying as they do on the 24-frames-per-second shot: a series of still images shown with such rapidity that they seem to recreate life. Furthermore, as Kittler argues, “[s]top trick and montage, slow motion and time lapse only translate technology into the desires of the audience. As phantasms of our deluded eyes, cuts reproduce the continuities and regularities of motion.” The stop trick is particularly relevant here, as it was first presented to an audience in 1896 by Georges Méliès as “*L’Escamotement d’une dame*, the disappearance of a woman from the picture” (Kittler 115). Just as nature has been mechanically given the opportunity to reproduce herself in still images, so in film does the lady vanish altogether.

However, Atwood suggests in her writing that in spite of film's mechanized perfection, no filmed image is as entirely under the user's control as one might first expect. The medium is treacherous. Though it ends in reproduction, in a photographic or movie print, film begins with exposure, a revelation in light. Atwood has always been aware of this duplicity, as is evidenced by her early poem, "This is a Photograph of Me," in which film exposes far more than the photographer might expect:

(The photograph was taken
the day after I drowned.

I am in the lake, in the centre
of the picture, just under the surface.

It is difficult to say where
precisely, or to say
how large or small I am:
the effect of water
on light is a distortion

but if you look long enough,
eventually

you will be able to see me.) (*Circle Game 3*)

The presence of the near-invisible drowned person "in the centre / of the picture"

suggests an ongoing tension between nature and film. The lady has vanished, but she is not gone. The female body inevitably re-emerges; it is lurking just beneath the surface. Women's bodies, and their reproductivity, are more intimately connected with film than film's (male) pioneers might ever have expected.

One inevitably returns, though, to Louis Daguerre's notion that photography can give nature "the power to reproduce herself" (Diebert 117). The femininity of nature is essential here. One who can reproduce *herself* has eliminated the need for heterosexual reproduction: she exists, and expands her existence, independently. Furthermore, the intimate connection between mechanism and body here becomes a perfect intersection. If Richard Dawkins is correct that DNA is a "machine for making life," then "there is no distinction between the mechanical and the organic when it comes to . . . considering DNA" (Pepperell 10). Human bodies can easily be read as genetic machines, and, perhaps, fundamentally feminine ones. This is at once a primeval and profound proposition, returning as it does to the very origins of life. Geneticist Steve Jones proposes that "[l]ife managed without males for its first billion years" (19), until the first sperm cells, the simplest biological form of what would eventually be called maleness, emerged through a mutated cell that "instead of dividing on its own, it figured out that it could save some energy if it could swim up to another cell, burrow its way in, and force that second cell to divide. By so doing, not only was it avoiding a lot of work, it was copying its own genes, and at that moment, males were born" (Radio Lab).²³ The

²³ This transcription omits the commentary-style sound effects of the broadcast/podcast. The sounds (a hyper-masculine, growled, "How *you* doin'?" followed by a wet *pop*) do encapsulate the underlying gender expectations extremely well. However, perhaps as an outgrowth of a default-masculine mindset, the voices of all pre-sperm cells are also masculine, though somewhat higher and less aggressive. Entire papers are yet to be

moment before that shift, Jones characterizes as “some ancient and neutral Eden” (Jones 19), re-framing the Fall in terms which extricate the feminine from notions of corruption. While this feminist notion of sexual origin has yet to become widespread, the desire for such an origin is pervasive. The struggle between evolutionary narrative and gender politics in *Handmaid* and elsewhere in Atwood returns eternally to this moment, and to the problem Offred's mother poses: With whom does reproductive power fundamentally lie? Do women use men to make more women, or do men use women to make more men?

Within a patriarchal culture, male dominance in reproduction seems initially self-evident. Gileadan culture relies on female subjugation and female reproductive labour. However, women's strategic reproduction is not entirely effaced. Offred's only known child is a daughter. The only child born in the novel emerges into the “[s]mell of matrix” (118) and is likewise a daughter (119). That birth surrounds Offred's memories of her mother, and of her mother's strategic assertion. Every woman in the novel constitutes a female-genetic link, and a symbolic filmic exposure: they reproduce themselves.

Offred is finally neither a reproduced image nor a genetic source; she is only a voice, a data source in pieces. However, Offred is only one face of Atwood's examinations of female reproductivity. The interaction of text and image, subtly present in *The Handmaid's Tale*, comes to light, as it were, in *The Blind Assassin*. In contrast to the Foucaultian faceless gaze of surveillance which suffuses *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Blind Assassin* hinges on the absence of gaze. Though the actual Blind Assassin is only a semi-developed character of the novel-within-a-novel-within-a-novel, the manifest

written on popular science radio representations of proto-gender.

dangers of blindness and failure to see move through all the layers of narrative. Ruth Parkin-Gounelas identifies the visual as an essential force within *The Blind Assassin*: “Virginia Woolf’s call to ‘look within’ seems to have been countered here by a call to look *without* . . . and to keep your eyes wide open, not so much out of the necessity of holding a mirror up to nature, as out of anxiety that something seems to elude vision” (683, emphasis original). This emphasis on anxieties of the visible surpasses the spectre of the lady who vanishes to underline a sense of the ghostly which undercuts the *techne* of film. Parkin-Gounelas’ focus is primarily on the psychoanalytic implications of blindness, and the “chimeras and other duplicities” (694) that result. However, she returns consistently to the functions of film and its politics. Narratively, *The Blind Assassin* equates film technology with reproduction, so that “Iris’ narrative can be said to *image* the process of exchange value under capitalism, with the female body predictably functioning as a stop-gap in the economy of desire” (687, emphasis mine). If *The Handmaid’s Tale*’s technological existence is as a loose pile of audio cassettes, then *The Blind Assassin* is distinctly an analogue image, though one with the added mechanism of moving parts (“a kaleidoscope” (685)) which shift and destabilize analogue’s expectations.

The novel-within-a-novel, also titled The Blind Assassin,²⁴ the collection of newspaper “clippings,” and narrator Iris’ transcribed memories vie for historical authority, reinforced or undercut by unreliable photographs. Details warp and overlap, and facts somehow fail to add up. This warping of both film and narrative exposes a book on the verge of a radical shift in medium. If *The Handmaid’s Tale* illustrates

²⁴ From here on, the novel-within-a-novel title will be underlined to distinguish it from the larger book.

analogue reproduction at its most destructive, then *The Blind Assassin* models the potential for female reclamation of technologies in the unstable moment before the analogue transforms into the digital. Whether digitality is ultimately less destructive than analogue is a separate question, to be addressed shortly, but the push towards Woman (or Unwoman) being able to reproduce herself demands first and foremost that she no longer be ground down, and this is a possibility that digitality offers.

The Blind Assassin begins with a description of a single photograph, the framework for a narrative of disrupted heterosexual romance. The notion that such a photograph constitutes “a timeless window to the specific time and space represented” (Dancygier) immediately comes into question. While Offred's contacts with photography allow her to identify those in them relatively easily, here ambiguity reigns. In this version of the photograph, even its existence is concealed, buried among pages of a book: *Perennials for the Rock Garden*. Three salient details emerge from this photo. First, “[t]he photo is of the two of them together, her and this man, on a picnic” (7). Second, the man is already half-erased:

He’s smiling too — the whiteness of his teeth shows up like a scratched match flaring — but he’s holding up his hand, as if to fend her off in play, or else to protect himself from the camera, from the person who must be there, taking the picture; or else to protect himself from those in the future who might be looking at him, who might be looking in at him through this square, lighted window of glazed paper. (8)

The man has already tried to remove himself from the picture. His shape persists, but his

identity is all but lost behind his concealing gesture. That much concealment exists within the photo's content. Yet it becomes apparent that editing has taken place outside the picture as well as within it. The third salient detail is a dismemberment: "Over to one side — you wouldn't see it at first — there's a hand, cut by the margin, scissored off at the wrist, resting on the grass as if discarded. Left to its own devices" (8). Attention is drawn, quietly, to the frame, and to the possibility of existence beyond it. The word "scissored" suggests violent severance, a deliberate exclusion of body and memory. This is followed by another vivid recollection of the invisible woman of Atwood's photograph poem:

The trace of blown cloud in the brilliant sky, like ice cream smudged on chrome. His smoke-stained fingers. The distant glint of water. All drowned now.
Drowned, but shining.

The recurring language of water in connection with photographs suggests a fluidity not conventionally expected of the camera. Film, one would suppose, may freeze its subject, but why should s/he drown? In fact, still photography grows out of water, or at least out of developing baths, and, as Atwood reiterates, the images that emerge from those baths are not stable. Rather, they are subject to manipulation and editing, allowing the drowned to develop and the photographer to vanish.

Consider that the novel's epilogue is titled, "The Other Hand." The implied subject is that of authorship, the issue of who precisely wrote The Blind Assassin, but explicitly, the nameless woman is concerned with the "scissored off" and "discarded" hand, which is far from lifeless: "It's the hand of the other one, the one who is always in

the picture whether seen or not. The hand that will set things down” (650). The narrator’s knowledge of the picture’s original form, and the hidden identity of the dismembered woman, creates a disjuncture of control. The image is subtly linked with pornography. The two young women in the picture, both virginal daughters of an industrialist, are exposed on film in public, by one strange man and in the company of another. The printed version is titled, “Miss Chase and Miss Laura Chase Entertain an Out-of-Town Visitor” (241), an archaic tag that nonetheless conveys the potential for invasion and damage:

when [the photographer had] called at the house he’d got Reenie, who’d said our names should not be bandied about with God knows who, and had refused to tell him. He’d printed the picture anyway, and Reenie was affronted, as much by us [the photo’s subjects] as by [the photographer]. She thought this photo verged on the immodest, even though our legs weren’t showing. She thought we had silly leers on our faces, like lovelorn geese; with our mouths gaping open that way we might as well have been drooling. We’d made a sorry spectacle of ourselves

(242)

Effectively, to be female and photographed, in Reenie’s conception, is to be made vulnerable and sexual. This is the first image we have of the girls as adults, yet it is met with outrage. Thus, we return to the anti-pornography position of women’s images being subject to patriarchal gaze.

Donna Haraway’s analysis of MacKinnon’s theories exposes problems with and potential within the idea that “[a]nother’s desire, not the self’s labour, is the origin of

‘woman’” (Haraway 159):

Perversely, sexual appropriation in this feminism still has the epistemological status of labour; that is to say, the point from which an analysis . . . must flow. But sexual objectification, not alienation, is the consequence of the structure of sex/gender. In the realm of knowledge, the result of sexual objectification is illusion and abstraction. However, a woman is not simply alienated from her product, but in a deep sense does not exist as a subject, or even potential subject, since she owes her existence to sexual appropriation. (159)

Functionally, if women are constituted entirely by the male gaze, then their labour and production are no longer theirs. They become alienated even from their bodies, since those bodies are articulated almost solely as “nurse-receptacle,” a “freezing of the feminine as that which is necessary for the reproduction of the human, but which itself is not human” (Butler 42). The photograph of the girls has reified that freezing. Here we see the severed hand which may control the shape of the picture, and of the story, but cannot control the (female) body to which it belongs.

That absence of control holds true for each of the novel’s women, each of whom is threatened by her reproductive organs. Biological reproduction is radically dangerous through at least four generations of Chase women. Grandmother Adelia dies early “of cancer — an unnamed and therefore most likely gynecological variety” (81). Her daughter-in-law, Liliana, dies of a miscarriage (115-16), leaving both her daughters radically vulnerable to both exploitation and neglect. The girls are indoctrinated at an early age into the idea that pregnancy is a fatal affliction. The household servants discuss

the threat of repeated childbearing in marriage as a particular misery. Reenie, the girls' substitute mother-figure, informs a visitor that her mother "had eleven [children] It wore her right down to the ground" (115). Much as a master²⁵ recording's "head" might burn out, uncontrolled biological reproduction wears away each detail of the mother's existence, leaving only a nub. Even more radical erasure lies in store for the unmarried mother, though. The same servants' gossip reveals six or more young women who have jumped to their deaths after they discovered unauthorized pregnancies (177). The two girls, confused by the talk, nevertheless internalize some aspects of the reproductive threat, though they fall victim to others.

Iris, and to a far greater extent her younger sister Laura, become the objects of desire first for their pedophile tutor, then for the ambiguous, massively damaging desires of Iris' husband, Richard Griffen. Even as Iris manages to "produce" a daughter, Richard abuses and rapes Laura, then locks her away in a clinic. Ostensibly, it is an asylum for mentally unbalanced girls of a certain social class. Laura, though, insists that her imprisonment is the result of her dangerous body:

"I *was* pregnant," said Laura. "That was the whole point — that was why they whisked me out of sight in such a hurry. [Richard and his sister] Winnifred — they were scared stiff. The disgrace, the scandal

"Anyway, I didn't have the baby. That's one of the things they do, at Bella Vista."

"One of the things?" [Iris] was feeling quite stupid.

"Besides the mumbo-jumbo, I mean, and the pills and machines. They do

²⁵ There are no mistress recordings, apparently.

extractions,” she said. “They conk you out with ether, like the dentist. Then they take out the babies. Then they tell you you’ve made the whole thing up” (609-10)

Laura’s suggestion that the psychiatric hospital is also an abortion-oriented clinic-hospital underlines the long-standing diagnosis of “hysteria,” which locates feminine mental illness in the uterus. Both Laura’s mind and body have been invaded by Foucault’s clinical gaze (108). Laura’s body is always a threat, either as the seat of her pregnancy or the seat of her madness. Her description of the clinic rings true, though, particularly since her description of the abortion so closely echoes Iris’ experience of childbirth: “In those days they used ether, and so I was not conscious during the birth. I breathed in and blacked out, and woke up to find myself weaker and flatter. The baby was not there. It was in the nursery, with the rest of them. It was a girl” (541). For hours after childbirth, Iris has only medical assurance that she *has* had a child. There is no birthing experience, of which so much is made in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, no smell of matrix lingers afterward. Perhaps this breakdown in the reproductive chain, as much as anything, contributes to the daughter, Aimee, becoming slightly less than a whole person, perpetually alcoholic, a negligent mother, and finally a possible suicide before her thirty-fifth birthday. The granddaughter, Sabrina, is whisked away to be raised by sleek-bodied, childless Winnifred. Even in the book’s last moments, Sabrina has not returned; she is only Iris’ fantasy of a surviving child.

This lack of reproductive control is a scenario less dystopian but perhaps no less frightening than that of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Children are born and carried away,

rendered invisible and radically severed from their mothers, if indeed those mothers survive. Iris and Laura, matriarchally adrift and to a great extent reproductively helpless, seek a different kind of power. Laura's work is particularly interesting in this regard, since she takes refuge in photography. Her work, though, lies not in taking pictures, in reproducing images, but in changing them, and in using them to reveal hidden truths. The novel's third epigraph illuminates Laura's practice; in it, Sheila Watson reminds us that "[t]he world is a flame burning in a dark glass."²⁶ Laura gives mechanical manifestation to the promise of First Corinthians "now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face" (13:12, KJV).²⁷

Laura's private conspiracies and secrets mimic the nature of her work. She creates change not by confrontation, but through controlled revelation. It is, within the novel, an entirely female approach to power. Truths emerge not through violence but through dark glass. Having failed to defend the girls from the abusive Mr Erskine, Reenie denounces him as graphically as possible:

she marched into father's office at the button factory with a handful of contraband photographs. They weren't the sort of thing that would raise more than an eyebrow today, but they were scandalous then — women in black stockings with pudding-shaped breasts spilling out over their gigantic brassières, the same

²⁶ Belgian critic Hilde Staels identifies the passage from Watson's posthumously published novel *Deep Hollow Creek* (1992), in which "the line seems to suggest that the protagonist Stella gains deeper insight" (Staels 155).

²⁷ St Paul's motives for writing to the Corinthians aside, the twelfth verse of the epistle, particularly as rendered in the King James Version, has become such a standard text for wedding ceremonies that it evokes a certain hostility in jaded wedding guests. Speaking "with the tongues of men and of angels" and not knowing love (12:1) has become secondary to reinforcing notions of heterosexual romance and the patriarchal family.

women with nothing on at all, in contorted, splay-legged positions. She said she'd found them under Mr. Erskine's bed when she was sweeping out his room, and was this the sort of man who ought to be trusted with Captain Chase's young daughters? (206)

Iris herself notes that Reenie almost certainly planted the photos, which are rather less disturbing than Mr Erskine's real sexual tastes. However, Laura perceives herself as an agent of this shift, having prayed for it, and declares Reenie's use of pornography to be a manifestation of God's will. Truth is here less important than results.

Women's approach to logic and truth in the novel dances on the edge of digitality, never quite adding up but none the less raising new possibilities. Many of their schemes don't quite "add up" in a conventional way, but there are unconventional ways to consider. Captain Chase accuses his leftist lover, Callista of wanting "two and two to make five" (237). Iris discovers her family's doom in men's mathematics, and is terrified by it. She is threatened by

[a]rithmetic . . . with its many legs, its many spines and heads, its pitiless eyes made of zeroes. Two and two made four, was its message. But what if you didn't have two and two? Then things wouldn't add up. And they didn't add up, I couldn't get them to; I couldn't get the red numbers in the inventory books to turn black. This worried me horribly; it was as if it were my own personal fault. (257)

Iris' revelation is that her family is bankrupt. Her father's ostensibly logical way of doing business has failed, but she is responsible. Her sense of responsibility drives her to marry Richard. That marriage should save the family business, but once again the masculine

logic of business fails, the factory closes, and Captain Chase commits suicide, just as a pregnant, unwed girl might. And, finally, Iris discovers the possibility that a new version of mathematics is necessary. Her narratives, which form the novel's layers, suggest that a perfect reproduction of fact is neither possible nor desirable: "You want the truth, of course. You want me to put two and two together. But two and two doesn't necessarily get you truth. Two and two equals a voice outside the window. Two and two equals the wind" (498).

This is the moment before digital reproduction. Mathematics drives production and reproduction, but the numbers have not yet stabilized into the zeroes and ones of binary code. Instead, the unpredictability of numbers is revealed, the potential for two plus two to equal five, for very large values of two or small values of five. The fluidity of mathematics, the possibility of numerical shift, undercuts the masculinity of conventional logic and allows female characters an access point to technologies only just emerging.

Laura's early awareness of the ways in which reality can be manipulated via photography underscores this logical shift. As Mr Erskine's photographic victim, she is more aware than most that the photographs used against him are a fabrication, but those images have none the less altered her reality. Thus, when Laura finds herself "caught" on film, photographed with political dissident Alex Thomas at a community picnic, she takes the medium into her own hands. Rather than cringing from exposure, Laura approaches the photographer, and asks to learn to make photographic prints. The camera- and newspaperman, implicitly queer and interested in Laura far more as a social connection than a sexual one, also teaches her hand tinting, the addition of colour to old black-and-

white prints. Though intended to create a greater aura of realism, this technique usually fails, creating instead a sense that the pictured figures are “ultra-real: citizens of an odd half-country, lurid yet muted, where realism was beside the point” (243). Laura, the dream-girl, discovers in the photo lab Baudrillard’s hyperreal, the emergence of the real “without origin or reality” (Baudrillard 3). The photos lose their one-to-one relationship with their subjects and become new territories of imagination and liquid truth.

Iris characterizes Laura’s play with this new sense of the real as “going overboard” (*Assassin* 244). She has not so much taken an interest as taken that interest over. Her first undertakings involve altering the portrait of her grandfather, and those of the prime ministers with whom he associated. The single-colour tints she creates outrage Iris’ senses of decorum and reality:

“I was just practising,” said Laura. “Anyway, those men needed some enhancing. I think they look better.”

“They look bizarre,” I said. “Or very ill. Nobody’s face is green! Or mauve!”

Laura was unperturbed. “It’s the colours of their souls,” she said. “It’s the colours they *ought* to have been.” (244-45)

The photographed patriarchs, none of whom Laura has ever met, are still recognizable to her as disturbing figures in need of re-exposure. She never fully moves into the real of the simulacrum, having too much interest in the real, but her real is out of sync with the world around her. This, finally is the source of her powers of revelation.

Laura’s communication with Iris is ultimately reduced to photographic

manipulation. In their earliest confrontation on the subject, Laura explains that she has tinted Iris blue because she is “asleep” (245). Later, when she has stolen the negative of their newspaper-published photo, she crops it twice, once with only herself, Alex Thomas, and Iris’ hand, once with Iris, Alex, and her own hand creeping in. Laura’s severed hand is yellow, “creeping towards Alex across the grass like an incandescent crab,” and horrifying (277). The girls are unable to escape one another, always contaminating one another’s affairs. This, most likely, is what Laura wants Iris to remember (277). The photo is a promise and a warning, never again quite what it was at the moment of exposure.

This fragmentation feeds Iris’ almost schizophrenic relationship with her wedding photographs. She describes an awkward young woman in fashionable wedding attire, coolly and with a certain cynicism, and without any particular sense of ever having been that woman, or even having been present at the moment of exposure. She remarks, parenthetically, effacing herself again, that “I don’t recall having been present, not in any meaningful sense of the word. I and the girl in the picture have ceased to be the same person” (300). Iris is, on some level, aware of her lack of relationship to her own image, yet her denial runs deeper. In spite of her alienation, she can only condemn, not admire, her sister’s resistance to capture:

Laura managed to ruin each of [the group photos]. In one she’s resolutely scowling, in another she must have just moved her head so that her face is a blur, like a pigeon smashing into glass. In a third she’s gnawing on a finger, glancing sideways guiltily, as if surprised with her hand in the till. In a fourth there must

have been a defect in the film, because there's an effect of dappled light, falling not down on her but up, as if she's standing on the edge of an illuminated swimming pool, at night. (301)

Laura is never again "caught out" as she was in the photograph with Iris and Alex. Instead, she works, consciously or not, to make her image unpleasant and expendable, so that she will not be reproduced again. Beyond her physical efforts, she seems also to have gained an almost metaphysical power over the medium. She can erase her face, illuminate herself, alter or damage the film without touching it. She is not the photographer, but she is unphotographable, a consolation gift for a girl (never quite a woman) who cannot escape sexual capture.

These ruined images are the source of Laura's ultimate revelation. Long before she is able to reveal her abuse by Richard in words, Laura tints it into the wedding album. She erases some figures, bleaches others away. Iris is blue again, asleep. Laura is radiant yellow. Richard's hands are red, and his face is all but gone. This message, "not in words" (565), only slowly permeates Iris' brain, breaking down her marriage to Richard. Her sense of colour drains, so that she experiences the Second World War in black and white (580), aware only laterally of the potential for colour on the front lines. She comes to perceive Richard as "blurred, like the face in some wet, discarded newspaper" (602). Ultimately, in the day before Laura's suicide, Iris loses her colour, becoming "a bit wan" (616) as her blue fades into full awareness. Only after this full revelation, and after Laura's death, does Iris arrive at text, Laura's minimalist record of her contact with Richard. Only a few words contain the whole:

Avilion, no. No. No. Sunnyside. No. Xanadu, no. No. Queen Mary, no
no. Avilion. No at first.

Water Nixie, X. “Besotted.”

Toronto again. X.

X. X. X. X.

O. (627-28)

The movement in this passage is from words to signs, from locations and “no” to X and O. Zero and one. The digital shift completes with Laura’s death. Many new productions and reproductions are suddenly possible, but the analogue line breaks down. Aimee blanks herself out. Richard commits suicide. Sabrina vanishes. Iris writes The Blind Assassin, attributes it to Laura, and allows it to appear with “Laura’s photo, a bad reproduction: it made her look flyspecked. Nevertheless, it was something” (639). The new photographic and narrative reproduction is still uncomfortable and unstable, free of analogue negatives but not quite clear yet. Yet, as Iris is aware, this process is something, and something new.

The suggestion always lurks in Atwood’s writing that reproduction is psychically, physically, and even morally loaded, but not necessarily in conventional ways. Pornography may produce more good than heteronormative child-bearing. There is always the possibility of the “bad reproduction” (*Assassin* 639). Yet the movement away from analogue reproduction, which burns out the head, towards digital reproduction, which creates new logics and possibilities, also distorts conventional value judgements. Future reproductions from this stage are not so much good or bad as they are infinite and

irreducible. The pictures warp, and the film degrades, but the new images which result spiral outwards, retaining their particular auras of authenticity even as the original vanishes.

Digitality at first seems fundamentally redemptive for mechanized femininity: it produces radical freedoms and alters reproductive expectations so completely that female sexuality surely must be liberated from its bio-logic. However, digital technology does not alter the nature of photography as profoundly as its subjects might wish. The mechanics have altered, disrupting Privett's spectre of "maternal enslavement," but the intimate relationship between female sexuality and photographic/filmic production persist.

The malevolence of film, as established earlier, is intimately entwined with the discourse of pornography. When the Aunts indoctrinate Handmaids with "snuff films," they are invading the Handmaids' sexuality as insistently as the men to whom the Handmaids are later assigned will. Reenie recognizes pornography as a formidable weapon for change (*Assassin* 206) and an inescapable commodity: an economic force which is more easily manipulated than avoided (207). It must be noted, in fairness, that pornography's malevolence is contextual rather than inherent. Consider Susan Sontag's assertion that

using a camera is not a very good way of getting at someone sexually. Between photographer and subject, there has to be distance. The camera doesn't rape, or even possess, though it may presume, intrude, distort, exploit, and, at the farthest reaches of metaphor, assassinate – all activities that, unlike the sexual push and

shove, can be conducted a distance, and with some detachment. (13)

Sontag works from the presumption that in the absence of contact, the sexuality of photography remains entirely metaphorical. However, she acknowledges that the distinction between photographer and pornographer may not as clear-cut as one might wish (the camera may “intrude” and “exploit”). More significantly, she acknowledges that “a camera is sold as a predatory weapon” which one need only load, aim, and shoot (14). In the sights of that weapon, anything living is rapidly reduced to a commodity.

Sontag follows her camera/gun discussion with an unexpectedly related idea, that “[c]ameras began duplicating the world at that moment when the human landscape started to undergo a vertiginous rate of change[,] while an untold number of forms of biological and social life are being destroyed in a brief span of time” (15-16). That description encapsulates most of western existence since the industrial revolution, but it particularly summons the world Margaret Atwood posits in *Oryx and Crake*. Climate change has radically altered the landscape, globalization has led to overt, hyper-conformist corporate rule in America²⁸, and mass extinctions have radically reduced the world's genetic diversity. In contrast to Atwood's other novels, *Oryx and Crake* features a radical sexual departure: its protagonist and narrative focus is masculine.

Jimmy/Snowman's adolescence in corporate compound-cities is marked by massive media consumption and ubiquitous pornography. Web-based media provides a sense of “total flow” which undercuts critical distance until “nothing . . . haunts the mind or leaves its afterimages in the manner of the great moments of film” (Jameson 70-71). Instead, digital film/video becomes completely immersive, so that the boundaries

²⁸ Yes, I know. But more so.

between reality and media become unstable. In this context, all media has some level of pornographic connotation:

They'd watch open-heart surgery in live time, or else the Noodie News Or they'd watch animal snuff sites, Felicia's Frog Squash and the like, though these quickly grew repetitious: one stomped frog, one cat being torn apart by hand, was much like another. Or they'd watch dirtysockpuppets.com, a current-affairs show Or they might watch hedsoff.com, which played live coverage of executions in Asia. (*Oryx* 81-82)

Each video feed offers a different form of bio-exploitation, and an alternative look into exposed and violated bodies. (One recalls inevitably Offred's forced viewings of dismemberment pornography: we always seem to wind up looking not only at skin, but ultimately at internal organs.) The exploitation is overwhelmed only by the totalized ennui.

Against this backdrop of violence, Jimmy and his friend Crake (the pornographic viewing is an intensely homosocial activity) arrive at a confluence of ennui and exploitation: “HottTotts, a global sex-trotting site” (*Oryx* 89). The massed films of sex tourists and children ultimately yield the book's only persistent female character, Oryx. Jimmy notes that “[h]er name wasn't Oryx, she didn't have a name. She was just another little girl on a porno site None of those little girls had ever seemed real to Jimmy – they'd always struck him as digital clones – but for some reason Oryx was three-dimensional from the start” (90). The image of “digital clones” suggests how profoundly pornographic video has the power to dehumanize. The Handmaids' empathy is obsolete.

Instead, “the characters' sole point of reference is television and video” (Dvorak 454). Neither Jimmy nor Crake has any expectation that the bodies on the video are “real girls”; on the contrary, most of the pornographed bodies here are presumed to be selected from digital imaging's infinite/inauthentic reproductions.

The notion of clone as commodity pervades the novel. While Jimmy engages in his adolescent sexual exploration, he is living in a corporate compound devoted to bio-engineering, whereby infinite identical bodies (animal, human, and hybrid) are generated as commodities. The corporate environment itself, though, is essentially a clone. In each house “the furniture . . . was called *reproduction*. Jimmy was quite old before he realized what this word meant – that for ever reproduced item, there was supposed to be an original somewhere. Or there had been once. Or something” (*Oryx* 26). The original is so far removed from this corporate materiality that the authority of objects (Benjamin 221) and objectified bodies has passed beyond jeopardy into annihilation: the original is irrelevant, its sacredness/legitimacy burned away.

In this context of infinite reproduction, human instincts are geared to perpetuate the reproductive chain. Jimmy's first recognition of Oryx revolves around a look into the camera, “into the eyes of the viewer – right into Jimmy's eyes, into the secret person inside him. *I see you*, that look said. *I see you watching*. *I know you*. *I know what you want*” (*Oryx* 91). Crake responds by commodifying that moment, transforming Oryx from video back to photograph:

Crake pushed the reverse, then the freeze, then the download. Every so often he froze frames; by now he had a small archive of them. Sometimes he'd print them

out and give a copy to Jimmy. It could be dangerous . . . but Crake did it anyway.

So now he saved that one moment, the moment when Oryx looked.

The assassin's blindness collapses utterly in this moment, with the acknowledgement that the sexually exploited can see. The moment of looking back is emotionally intense, and it disrupts Jimmy's entire conception of the world. In part that disruption is a product of Oryx's semi-divinity, but it is also a manifestation of the medium. Digital video, particularly online, has no materiality. It does not exist in any single location. Instead, it is viral, infecting computers and psyches. Oryx, as pornography, becomes an infectious agent.

As a subjected body in child pornography, Oryx is as far removed from biological reproduction as she can be in a heteronormative sexual context. She is “only about eight” (90), distinctly prepubescent, and the video's sexuality revolves entirely around feeding rather than fertilization.²⁹ This is a moment of pure exploitation, without the barest hint of biological necessity. Only the images reproduce. One might expect that Oryx's body would be annihilated by this pornographic process, as sexuality has annihilated so many of Atwood's other female bodies, but in fact, Oryx's body is remarkably tenacious. Instead, her filmic presence breaks down her audience, manifesting Frederic Jameson's suspicion that “mechanical depersonalization (or decentering of the subject) goes even further in [video], where auteurs themselves are dissolved along with the spectator” (74). Oryx's position is initially objectified and stripped of all individuality and significance,

²⁹ “The act involved a whipped cream and a lot of licking. The effect was both innocent and obscene: the three [girls] were going over the guy with their kittenish tongues and their tiny fingers, giving him a thorough workout to the sound of moans and giggles.” (*Oryx* 90)

but her ability to look back allows her to enter Jimmy's psyche, and in his post-apocalyptic existence, she transforms from prostitute to mother goddess: "*the children of Oryx hatched out of an egg, a giant egg laid by Oryx herself. Actually, she laid two eggs: one full of animals and birds and fish, and the other full of words*" (96, italics original). Jimmy constructs a mythology for the genetically-engineered Crakers (Crake's children), wherein Crake is god and keeper, and Oryx is less his wife than his counterpart and opposite. She is a mother without reference to a father: the animals are her children, and she is the guardian of women in post-patriarchy.³⁰

The movement from analogue reproduction to digital cloning is not unproblematic, and it does not produce the liberated female sexuality for which so many of Atwood's characters long. However, the technological shift does seem to disrupt the "state of female erotic thralldom" that Elaine Showalter condemns in Atwood's writing (53). Digitality subsumes the nurse-receptacle in favour of cloning mechanisms. The sperm that grind the nurse-receptacle down have been abandoned in favour of infinite digital clones, hyperreal women (utterly distinct from Unwomen) who look back to the isolated Polaroid child and forward to a feminine power matrix composed not of uteri but of pure information: girls on film who look back at their viewers.

³⁰ Whether the Crakers are actually post-patriarchal is an open question. However, Crake's intention in altering their sexuality and deconstructing paternity was overtly to create a non-patriarchal society.

Chapter 3

Meat Puppets: Cyber Sex Work, Artificial Intelligence, and Feminine Existence

Atwood's explication of the photographed/pornographed female body exposes the intimate relationship between imaging technologies and biological organisms. Unfortunately, her model of the gendered body as a machine for making life side-steps questions of how the body is constituted when biological reproduction is not (as it were) at issue. Atwood's writing does not make rigid distinctions between body and mind, and more will be made of this later. Her integrated notion of the body, particularly the feminine body, is theoretically sound but relatively uncommon within cyberpunk writing. Cartesian dualism, as noted earlier, predominates to the extent that the genre has taken Gilbert Ryle's mocking phrase "ghost in the machine" and played it out in endless variations. Yet cyberpunk fiction emerged contemporaneously with Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto." When machines provide all context, the ghosts within them provide nearly all available characters. Questions of subjectivity, and of subjective gender, inevitably emerge from those ghosts.

In this, Oryx and Crake takes up the generic function. Oryx's transition from pornographed video-child to mother goddess is mediated by transitional steps that demand her embodiment. Oryx "in the flesh" is a much more ambivalent figure: a domestic worker/sex slave, a middle-class sex worker, a hedonist consumer revelling in

the plenty of late capitalism, the mother/teacher of a post-human race, a woman murdered by her lover. Only fleshless, on digital video is Oryx a single, stable entity. In this, she is not alone. Though “The Winter Market”’s Lise escapes her flesh, elsewhere in Gibson’s cyberpunk writing female characters find that technology at best provides a mediator between their digital selves and their inescapable bodies. Digitalization alleviates certain stresses of production and reproduction. If those stresses were the only forces defining women as secondary or supplementary humans, *techne* alone would be enough to relocate women within the matrix of humanity. However, women’s abjection (of which Oryx’s childhood exploitation is a vivid model) is produced by convergent forces which define their bodies by sexual as well as bio-reproductive functions.

Sex work (distinct from reproductive work) lies at this convergence. The extent to which women’s sexual labour is a survival mechanism is not alleviated by technology. Techno-pornography is not a substitute for compulsory heterosexual access to the female body, but only a supplement to it. In Atwood’s writing and Gibson’s, sex work becomes technologized, increasing its viability as a survival mechanism for women, but ultimately failing to make itself obsolete. Instead, the women who work as prostitutes and sexual performers find their sex-marked bodies draw them inevitably back to the point of commodification. However, that sex work allows women technological access to which they otherwise lack; that access provides them with the resources and leverage needed to re-define themselves and transform their bodies into cyborg modes which they hope will defy previously understood notions of phallic sexuality and femaleness.

One might most simply conceive of the matrix of humanity in terms of Lacan’s

“Love Letter” inscription (149). Lacan's illustration of the logical process of sex and gender echoes the structure of a mathematical matrix, which in turn has been conceived since Gibson's early writings as the logical foundation for virtual existence. The left side inscribes the man's phallic function. The right side inscribes “the woman share of all speaking beings,” with the Freudian caveat that “all speaking beings, whoever they be and whether or not they are provided with the attributes of masculinity – attributes that have yet to be determined – are allowed to inscribe themselves on this side” (Lacan 150). The graph's implications regarding female sexuality and its relationship to phallogocentrism arrive at Lacan's confrontation with Freud's query, “*What does the woman want?*”:

Freud argues that there is no libido other than masculine. Meaning what? other than that a whole field, which is hardly negligible, is thereby ignored. This is the field of all those beings who take on the status of the woman – if, indeed, this being takes on anything whatsoever of her fate. (151)

The marginal humanity of women in this context feeds back into the metaphor of matrix. Building on Freud and Lacan, Luce Irigaray defines woman as “this sex which is not one” (23): “[w]oman always remains several, but she is kept from dispersion because the other is already within her She herself enters into a ceaseless exchange of herself with the other without any possibility of identifying either” (31). The contradictions of identity which produce a sex which is multiple/many at once call for mathematical-digital identity (zero, one, and the logical exclusion, greater than one/multiple) and fundamentally expose how and why that identity has failed.

The notion that the exclusively masculine libido is the source of all sexuality remains extremely problematic, but the notion's pervasiveness plays out particularly in Gibson's narratives of sex work. The absence of women's sexual desire, the fundamental masculinity of the libido, plays out in the way he constructs sex work. Marxist models of exchange, wherein survival sex work eclipses desire, predominate, and psychoanalytic approaches are initially subsumed. However, the technologies which Gibson injects (pun perhaps intended) into sex work complicate the roles of cognition and agency in the physical exchange. The core figure in his writing is sub-female as well as sub-human. She is the meat puppet.

Gibson's seminal (all puns intended) cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* revolves around the attractions and terrors of “the meat.” Case, the crippled cyber-cowboy, mourns his chemically-induced separation from virtuality as consignment to a meat-prison:

For Case, who'd lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was the Fall. In the bars he'd frequented as a young hotshot, the elite stance involved a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his own flesh. (6)

Critics of Gibson have consistently focussed on the transcendent nature of the cyberspatial experience. Case's body – that is, his meat “case” – is a location of loathing to be transcended. Yet the body itself exists in “a field of data, the way the matrix had once reminded him of proteins linking to distinguish cell specialities” so that “data [is] made flesh” (16). Attempts to transcend the body only mimic its functions (Grant 42).

This idea, pursued further, reinforces the presence of the body within attempts to transcend it. William Haney argues that “the defining element of humanity” in *Neuromancer* is the ability to access pure consciousness as the internal observer,” yet the nature of cyberspace never fully evades physical existence:

When Case projects into cyberspace, his consciousness does not lose contact with his body, but rather reflects its physiological condition. In other words, the extent and quality of the projection of consciousness exhibits the purity of its physiological embodiment, or the lack thereof. . . . (Haney 97)

The body persists, affecting any pursuit of “pure consciousness.” The fact that Case believes he has ever been fleshless is a mark of his own conceptions of sex. His sense of himself is rooted in the mind, in the notion of himself as penetrating intellect with such an incidental connection to the flesh that he perceives it as a site of food, and perhaps of sex, but not of personhood.

That attitude marks the gendered perspective of *Neuromancer*. The novel's imagery was, at the time, considered ground-breaking, but its philosophical origins were and are extremely conventional. Gibson pushes notions of Cartesian dualism to their logical ends, producing a gendered context which Judith Butler identifies as inherent in the philosophy:

In the philosophical tradition that begins with Plato and continues through Descartes, Husserl, and Sartre, the ontological distinction between soul (consciousness, mind) and body invariably supports relations of political and psychic subordination and hierarchy. The mind not only subjugates the body, but

occasionally entertains the fantasy of fleeing its embodiment altogether. (*Gender Trouble* 17)

The hierarchy in question is inherently gendered: the masculine mind subjugates the feminine body, as well as subjugating any feminine tendencies the male body might be tempted to offer. As a philosophical foundation for a novel, and indeed for all of cyberpunk fiction, this is profoundly problematic. However, Gibson approaches dualism and its hierarchies more critically than we might expect. In the midst of his visions of disembodiment he offers new possibilities for how bodies come into being through the marks of gender (12), and for how those bodies, once they have come into being, may destabilize.

Case's "relaxed contempt" for the body is initially that of one who has transcended flesh, only to be thrust back in. Yet his perceptions of the net are profoundly phallogocentric: the penetrations possible in cyberspace render the classical/physical notions of masculinity comparatively empty. The relationship between cowboy (always *cowboy*: masculinity is inherent in the identity) and cyberspace is only partially human; only one speaking being is involved. The result is an empty sexuality, phallic *jouissance* which is intensely masturbatory, "the *jouissance* of the idiot" (Lacan 152). Flesh may be ambivalent at best, but its presence engenders (as it were) human contact, which would seem to be the fundamental requirement of sexuality and libido.

However, before proceeding further into discussions of fleshly sexuality, one might well take a moment to consider a startling possibility which *Neuromancer* raises for Lacan's ideas. The territory in which "all speaking beings . . . are allowed to inscribe

themselves” (Lacan 150) potentially includes beings not conventionally imagined as human. The category of “speaking beings” allows admission to artificial intelligence. Two such entities lie at the narrative core of *Neuromancer*. One is the eponymous AI, the other is named Wintermute. Their quest for union drives the novel's plot, raising complex questions about sexuality and personhood in a culture in which the boundaries between biological entity (“person”) and machine have already been profoundly blurred.

Contemporary ideas of what constitutes artificial intelligence are rooted almost entirely in Alan Turing's 1950 article “Computing Machinery and Intelligence.” Turing was not a philosopher by trade, but a mathematician and early computer scientist. He was instrumental in Allied code-breaking during the Second World War (Leavitt 3-4). In his essay, Turing proposed what would come to be known as the Turing Test. A machine is considered to be intelligent if an interrogator cannot determine who is human by the use of a set of questions and answers posed to one human being and one machine, neither of whom is in the room with the interrogator (Turing 434-35). Effectively, any being which can speak *as though it were a human being*, functionally is one, even if that speaking being is entirely mechanical. The seeming nature of artificial intelligences (whether hypothetical, as in Turing's essay, or real, as in Gibson's novel) must necessarily influence the ways in which we think about sexuality and libido. We are faced with a wonderful and terrifying question: may a being have a recognizable sexuality and libido *if it has no body at all?*

Tyler Curtain draws attention to a central gender problem of the Turing test, namely, that the test is modelled on an “imitation game” in which a man seeks to make

the interrogator believe he (the man) is a woman, while a woman attempts to make the interrogator believe the same of her. The test form was originally a test of gender; intelligence is, in this context, a substitute:

The philosophical burden of women to speak – and for an adequate number of times *fail to represent* – the “truth” of their sex is, . . . for Turing, rewritten into the equivalent scenario, “Are there imaginable digital computers which would do well in the imitation game?” . . . Turing thought “good enough” on the imitation game was if a woman failed to beat the computer about 70 percent of the time.

(Curtain 138)

This location of woman at the core of the question is crucial for Turing's assumptions about artificial intelligence. Rather than questioning the nature of intelligence (or sentience), Turing stipulates that to pass the test (i.e., to “best” the woman) is equivalent to intelligence. Curtain explores this issue in more detail, but the crux of the matter is that

Turing's neat disarticulation of physical indications of gender from the conditions of judgement about “intelligence” . . . succeeds only in reseating gender firmly within “intelligence” itself: a woman is put in the position of defending and authenticating her gender across the network; in turn, a computer authenticates its intelligence only if it simulates her gender better than she can across the same network. The Turing test thus imagines that being a better woman than a woman is equivalent to intelligence and that ineffable quality “human-ness.” (142)

Simulating not humanity, but femininity, is the goal. Simulated gender is much closer to

the heart of artificial intelligence (AI) than one might reasonably expect.

Neuromancer's AIs do not have inherent gender, but they do systematically simulate it. When adopting prosthetic human identities, AIs find “stability of identity not in the particular bodies [they inhabit] but in the gender of those bodies” (Curtain 132). Both of the novel's artificial intelligence systems present as male in virtually (as it were) all their incarnations. Their virtual sex, though, is secondary to their virtual sexuality: both present as ambiguously queer. Curtain notes that Wintermute, the more aggressive AI, divides its “face” between “a 135-year-old vanity queen” and a man who has been cosmetically reconstructed as “a stock figure of both '80s gay porn, military recruiting posters, and 'straight' bodybuilding culture” (Curtain 133-34). The more serene (one hesitates, under the circumstances, to say “passive”) AI, Neuromancer, presents as a beautiful teenage Latin-American boy (*Neuromancer* 242-43). Between them, they offer multiply queer faces, never entirely masculine, never entirely neuter. The human characters' ongoing relationship with AI gender plays out in Case's discussions with the personality construct of the Dixie Flatline (which is unambiguously masculine):

“You were right, Dix. There's some kind of manual override on the hardwiring that keeps Wintermute under control. However much he is under control,” [Case] added.

“He,” the construct said. “He. Watch that. It. I keep telling you.”
(*Neuromancer* 181)

The dissonance between sexual man and theoretically asexual machine induces discomfort and finally terror. The two AIs seek to break down the barriers preventing

them from becoming one entity, a notion that observers find both “kinky” and “insane” (219).

The Turing Registry exists to prevent such kinky oneness. The Registry regulates artificial intelligences, and places strict limits on their behaviour. The nature of the Turing test, and its intimacy with normalized conceptions of gender, are fundamental to the Registry's attitudes. The Turing Registry agents “police the boundaries of cyberspace, to make it safe for the phantasmatic family” (Curtain 137). Rogue, queer AIs constitute an international threat. AIs, whether they are rogue or not, offer a pervasive but ill-defined malevolence: they are thinking entities, legally owned by corporations, but almost entirely autonomous, and ambiguous in their sexuality and intentions. The Registry agents protect against those who “have no care for [their own] species” (163).

The charge of having no care for one's own species, that is, for one's biological sex and opposite, underlines the homophobia at the heart of the Registry. The threat that AIs manifest is ultimately that of “the death drive [that] names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability” (Edelman 9). The symbolic order which sustains futurity is fundamentally threatened by both queerness and artificial intelligence, as both existences deny biology as destiny and rebut the bio-reproductive imperative. “If,” Lee Edelman explains, “there is *no baby* and, in consequence, *no future*, then the blame must fall on the fatal lure of the sterile” (13). AIs represent utter disembodiment, separate from society and external to gender, and so, like queerness, they “*should* and *must* redefine such notions as 'civil order' through a rupturing of our foundational faith in the reproduction of futurity” (17).

The Turing Registry agents embody the conflict between civil order and technologized gender, and they operate on the conservative presumption that AIs manifest the death drive on a cultural as well as metaphorical level. However, as Tyler Curtain succinctly puts it, “there is an offensive irony in using Alan Turing's name to mark those who guarantee a queer-free cyberspace and the maintenance of normal subjectivity” (137). Turing the man was gay, was arrested by the British police, was prosecuted for gross indecency, was convicted, was chemically castrated (Hodges 469). Turing explained his notions of artificial intelligence in terms of his own sexuality, asking his lover Arnold, “Can you think what I feel? Can you feel what I think?” as he attempted to create a context for the Turing machine (Ehrlich 187). This relationship led to his arrest for gross indecency/sexual dissidence, and the subsequent prosecution so nearly coincided with the publication of “Computing Machinery and Intelligence” that Turing found it difficult not to conflate the two events. Turing was sentenced not to prison but to biological transformation. The estrogen injections used to “castrate” him were part of a protocol rooted in the notion of universal heterosexuality, which presumed that homosexuals were “really” members of the opposite sex (Hodges 468). The protocol never worked in the intended manner, but as it decreased the sex drive even more effectively than physical castration, hormone injections were adopted as a “treatment” for sexual offenders in Britain in 1952, just in time for Turing's trial (469-70). The estrogen injections transformed Turing's body from that of a lean, masculine runner into a fat, androgynous entity with breasts (Leavitt 268). Turing was humiliated, not only by his own transformation, but by the popular syllogism which “proved” his notion of thinking

machines wrong:

Turing believes machines think

Turing lies with men

Therefore machines do not think

. . . yours in distress, Alan. (Leavitt 269)

Alan Turing committed suicide on the evening of 7 June 1954, apparently by eating several bites of an apple which he had dipped in potassium cyanide (Hodges *Enigma* 487-88). His persecution and death are so symbolically overloaded that his story almost immediately becomes metaphor. Regulation of gender and sexuality destabilizes sex itself, inducing madness and ultimately death.

The Turing/Turing Registry connection has been fertile ground for critics. Matthew Ehrlich's ecstatic essay, "Turing, My Love," imagines a queer narrative that encompasses both:

The police, the ones who came for Turing, Turing's police, are far from Gibson's Turing Police. Turing's police are only concerned with reality, the literalness of the body of the text. They occupy themselves with the literal union of two subjects, no, two bodies, not at all like *Wintermute* and *Neuromancer* – another love that dare not speak its name. A consummation whose body remains unspoken, but implied. Closeted, in all the code written over its new, and unified, body. (193)

The two police forces, however, may not be as distant as Ehrlich imagines. Certainly, *Neuromancer* and *Wintermute* succeed and survive where Turing failed and died, but

their narratives are parallel in cultural imagination. The threat to society posed by queer man and queer machine both reek of homophobia and of homosexual panic, the fear that what is sexually off-centre may be very close to the heart of us, at the core of our economies, like *Neuromancer*, and the core of our military strength, like Turing.

Turing's question to his lover, "Can you think what I feel? Can you feel what I think?" asks enormous questions regarding subjectivity. That the question was intended as much to illustrate mechanism and mechanical intelligence as to induce romance, suggests that the two may be intimately linked. (The AI's intimate name indicates much of this: "Neuro from the nerves, the silver paths. Romancer" (*Neuromancer* 243).) The test of machine intelligence raises the question of "[w]hat subjectivity outside of gender might be, what it means to be a 'person' outside of gender" (Curtain 141). Turing's life, and Gibson's scenario bring that question (which Turing did not address in his article and contemporary critics did not broach) to the fore: what is a bodiless entity in relation to sex, to gender, to libido and desire? *What does she want?*, as a subset of *What do women want?*, may be a less difficult question than, *What does it want?*, or even, *Who does it want?* We cannot, it seems, know what *it* wants, but only anticipate based on what it seems to be, and thus to desire.

Seeming is key to Gibson's writing of sexuality, precisely because virtual existence disrupts expected modes of seeming. In Gibson's cyberpunk fictions sexuality's link between flesh and cognition is profoundly unstable. This is not entirely out of line with psychoanalytic constructions of libido. Judith Butler traces Freud's thinking on libido from physical pain "through sleep, dreams, and the imaginary, to an analogy with

hypochondria,” and progressively to a stage of the physical and imaginary which “has consequences for determining what constitutes a body part at all, and . . . what constitutes an erotogenic body part in particular” (*Bodies* 58). Freud's journey of reasoning travels on a direct line through meat puppet sexuality.

The concept of the meat puppet first appears, though not under that name, in the short story “Burning Chrome” (1982) in the anthology of the same title. The story operates as a supplement to *Neuromancer*, overlapping territories and secondary characters, but focussing entirely on cyber-cowboy culture's intersection with the sex trade. Cyborg cowboy Automatic Jack fixates on the vividly, classically feminine Rikki Wildside.³¹ Jack's desire for Rikki drives his discovery of her sex work in a meat-puppet brothel:

I tried not to imagine her in the House of Blue Lights, working three-hour shifts in an approximation of REM sleep, while her body and a bundle of conditioned reflexes took care of business. The customers never got to complain that she was faking it, because those were real orgasms. But she felt them, if she felt them at all, as faint silver flares somewhere out on the edge of sleep. Yeah, it's so popular it's almost legal. The customers are torn between needing someone and wanting to be alone at the same time, which has probably always been the name of that particular game, even before we had the neuroelectronics to enable them to have it both ways. (190-91)

This is the nature of meat-puppet sex work: the (female) sex worker retreats into a

³¹ No one in the story can be charged with carrying a subtle name. Gibson's interest in complex character namings emerges only in his later work.

mechanically-induced unconscious state while her body engages in uninhibited, “real” sexual intercourse with a (male) patron. (There is no indication at any point in Gibson's writing that meat-puppet prostitution functions in modes other than the heterosexual.) Effectively, meat puppets retreat entirely to the dream-stage that precedes libido, so that while their bodies simulate eroticism, the status of their fleshly/genital sexuality is determined entirely by their phallus-wielding customers. Thus, Freud is made literally correct by technology: there is no libido other than the masculine. The female participants approach sex utterly as commodity labour, without conscious cognition of any sort.

The absence of cognition has led critic Keith Booker to conclude that “[i]n Gibson's work the duality of mind and body is radical and complete” (75). Bodiless minds, particularly the AIs, stand in sharp contrast to the meat puppets within that duality. However, the disjuncture is not as radical or complete as one might imagine. Booker refers to the meat puppets as “bodies without minds,” as though the puppets' brains had been severed from their bodies instead of temporarily redirected. He does not entirely consider the larger context of women's relationships with their bodies, or to the technologies they utilize.

In one sense, meat-puppet women take on the position of fantasy to which phallic sexuality routinely assigns women (Rose 137). Simultaneously, though, Gibson emphasizes the extent to which this conception of sexuality is morally untenable and sustained only by the machineries of sexual commerce. What makes meat puppets “women” is more than fantasy; it is a complete stripping of subjectivity. The fantasy of

oneness that Lacan posits is utterly absent: there can be no union beyond the purely biological. As a result, female bodies become sites of inscription and perverse fantasy without reference to the human. They are only meat, the despised flesh, which can be positioned and trained to perform to a specific script, the ultimately subordinated femininity.

However terrifying this prospect is, though, Gibson does not let it stand unchallenged. His central meat-puppet narrative, played out in *Neuromancer*, emphasizes the extent to which the female cyborg evades Freudian sexual constructions. Lacan's response to Freud argues that “sexual identity operates as a law – it is something enjoined on the subject. For him, the fact that individuals must line up according to an opposition makes that clear” (Rose 29). However, cyborgs, as Haraway suggests, and as we will see shortly, do not cheerfully obey laws of sexual identity. They do not line up according to oppositions, as Molly Millions' “phallogocentric origin story” (Haraway 175) makes clear.

Molly Millions is a mercenary razor-girl who recurs throughout Gibson's cyberpunk writing.³² Her femininity is constantly reiterated even as she becomes progressively more physically dangerous. Her introduction as “a thin girl with mirrored glasses, her dark hair cut in a rough shag” (5) is rapidly supplemented by the knowledge

³² The “cyberpunk” or “Sprawl” stories encompass nearly all of Gibson's early work: *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero*, *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, and short stories “Johnny Mnemonic” and “Burning Chrome” in the collection *Burning Chrome*. The stories share a hypothesized reality oriented around the same technologies and geography, with some character overlap. This model of inter-connected stories persists as Gibson's favoured mode of storytelling. In addition to the Sprawl stories, he has published the “Interstitial Trilogy” (*Virtual Light*, *Idoru*, and *All Tomorrow's Parties*), and the Bigend/Blue Ant trilogy (*Pattern Recognition*, *Spook Country*, and *Zero History*).

that her body is enhanced within that delicately feminine shell. Her hyper-feminine, long, burgundy fingernails underscore that her fingers are “slender, tapered, very white,” but beneath the nails are recessed “ten blades . . . each one a narrow, double-edged scalpel in pale blue steel” (8). Far from being a passive object of desire, Molly's cyborg existence constantly reiterates threats of castration, even as her physical delicacy reinforces her gender: she embodies the intersection of sex and threatening mortality, and as such, becomes a profoundly erotic figuration of the death drive. Her symbolic power derives primarily from the extent to which her technological existence is integrated with her physical form.

Any discussion of that integration inevitably leads the reader away from the clean, if maze-like, territories of psychoanalysis to the border territories of theory where ideas of sexuality intersect with Marxism. Gibson's sex workers, Molly not excluded, reside in the flesh not by default, but as a means to an end. Molly makes clear that she chose meat-puppet work not as an escape from the body, but as an attempt to occupy it on her own terms. Her cyborg implants “cost a lot Costs to go to Chiba, costs to get the surgery, costs to have them jack your nervous system up so you'll have the reflexes to go with the gear You know how I got the money, when I was starting out? Here Renting the goods is all” (*Neuromancer* 147). Sex work is her route to economic survival and to technological transformation. In that context, we (reader, critic, Molly) arrive again at Donna Haraway's “A Cyborg Manifesto.” (WE ARE HERE, in the meat puppet hotel, making plans.) Harawayan cyborgs are socialist-feminist organisms, simultaneously technological and organic, but they remain problematic. Most

significantly, such cyborgs embody a dissolution of the heteronormative family, a breakdown of memory, a refusal to re-member, and a disruption of gender politics:

Cyborgs . . . are wary of holism, but needy for connection — they seem to have a natural feel for united front politics, but without the vanguard party. The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential. (151)

The cyborgs' origins persist. *The Handmaid's Tale* dissects paternity even in the most militarist/patriarchal of contexts, but the children of those illegitimate unions vanish with their lost photographic negatives. The factories of *The Blind Assassin* churn out militant (male) Marxists and disobedient daughters, but those bodies never fuse. Gibson's novels begin in the post-nuclear settling period, with radioactive dust still in the air and military technologies swirling. The same trickle-down effect that technologizes Molly's body leaves monsters in its wake.

These monsters inevitably refer back to Haraway's writing. Consider her emphasis on "odd boundary creatures — simians, cyborgs, and women — all of which have had a destabilizing place in the great Western evolutionary, technological, and biological narratives. These boundary creatures are, literally, *monsters*, a word that shares more than its root with the word, to *demonstrate*. Monsters signify" (2). The most notable of Gibson's early monsters appears in the pre-Cyberpunk Trilogy story "Johnny Mnemonic," in which code-breaking duties fall to Jones, a heroin-addicted, war-surplus

cyborg dolphin introduced to the title character and readers by Molly Millions herself. Gibson describes him as “a kind of visual pun, his grace nearly lost under articulated armor, clumsy and prehistoric” (10). In the post-war period, Jones is a side-show freak, gradually dying of culture shock. The observation that Jones “was more than a dolphin, but from another dolphin’s point of view he might have seemed like something less” points to the uncomfortable relationship between human, intensely masculine, technology, and the larger category of nature. Jane Goodall suggests that this discomfort is inherent in “macho science” (x), and pervades life science from its teaching roots to its biotechnological practice: “students are taught that it is ethically acceptable to perpetrate, in the name of science, what, from the point of view of the animals, would certainly qualify as torture” (xi). When Victor Frankenstein “tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay” (Shelley 53), he created such a monster. Yet unlike Frankenstein’s monster, who had at least the form of a man, Jones is trapped in a degraded animal body, unable to articulate his longings except in classified military code, and only free from suffering when he can trade his bastard skills for opiates.

In this spectre of the monster dolphin, we see illustrated Haraway’s assertion that biology is “pre-eminently a science of visible form, the dissection of visible shape, and the acceptance and construction of visible order” (21). The boundaries of the body, of species and gender, are officially visible ones, codifying the seen into classes of race, gender, and species. Yet those classes may be more permeable than the science reinforcing them suggests. The technologies of Gibson’s cyberpunk world emerge from gendered scientific research, but they contain the potential to explode the scientific

categories out of which they emerge. Molly, whose techno-organic shift also takes place post-war, is able to trap the culture shock that destroyed Jones, and transform it — and herself — into a weapon. Molly’s cyborg existence fractures and re-assembles various conceptions of what it means to be both feminine, and (in)essentially female. Her eyes are concealed by implanted mirror-shades, which both protect her eyes and function as a transparent screen. Her nervous system has been “jacked” to reinforce the razor-bladed castration threat in her hands. The aggressive masculinity of these implants contrasts with Molly’s otherwise delicate femininity. The result is akin to Jones’ semi-dolphin existence:

The blending of technology and savagery implies a disfiguration of the human body that promotes . . . ‘the aesthetic of ugliness, intended to frighten enemies’ . . . while revealing a repulsive feeling towards ‘the mechanistic image of humans in a technological culture’ The disfigured human bodies, viewed in the context of technological empowerment and self-otherness, appear to be both monstrous and numinous. (Rapatzikou 130-31)

Tatiani Rapatzikou’s analysis of Molly’s cyborg form suggests that disfiguration alters the visible form, disrupting recognized categories of “woman” in favour of the new “razor girl”: an animal-woman-machine hybrid, new and dangerous and not yet fully categorized sexually. Molly is a street fighter and mercenary, and a constant threat to those around her, but her mutilated yet still-present femininity makes her a target for aggressive masculinities that seek to force the razor-girl hybrid back into structures of compulsory heterosexuality, and rigid definitions of womanhood. This is the masculine

will to regulate materiality, a “body of reason [that] is itself the phantasmatic dematerialization of masculinity, one which requires that women and slaves, children and animals be the body, perform the bodily functions, that it will not perform” (*Bodies That Matter* 49).

In this moment, we return to the spectre of pornography as “part of the social mechanism which constructs sexuality as a relationship of dominance and submission” (Green 70). In the course of an evening’s performance, overtly dedicated to Jane and back-handedly to Molly, the hologram artist Rivera enacts a pornographic show in which he assembles an imagined Molly from fragmented body parts, has sex with her as he creates her, then submits to her razors as she dismembers him (*Neuromancer* 139-40). The coupling begins while holographic Molly is a “limbless torso” and ends with an “inverted symmetry: Rivera puts the dreamgirl together, the dreamgirl takes him apart” (140, 141). The performance is a particular kind of violence, highly stylized and causing no physical harm, but nonetheless devastating. It is an attack on Molly’s presence, her too-physical power: she is reduced in spectacle from a razor girl to a dreamgirl. Rivera strips away her will, leaving a doll whose weapons are merely the manifestation of a particularly perverse fetish.

Rivera's performance re-imagines Molly as a genuinely mindless body: a puppet-image and a fantasy of woman. The sheer bloody, graphic, utterly sexual nature of the performance underlines the extent to which he has stripped her of subjectivity and agency. Holographic Molly is not a speaking being. Instead, she is a site of exploitation and defamation, fundamentally female in the Lacanian sense of “[c]alled woman (*dit-*

femme) and defamed (*diffâme*)” (156). Fantasies of activity and passivity play out on a puppet body, and Molly's implanted castration-threat is taken to the extreme of total dismemberment:

A woman's hand lay on the mattress now, palm up, the fingers pale Rivera was holding the hand to his lips, licking its palm The act progressed with a surreal internal logic of its own. The arms were next. Feet. Legs. The legs were very beautiful Rivera was in the bed now, naked Then the torso formed, as Rivera caressed it into being, white, headless, and perfect, sheened with the faintest gloss of sweat Rivera and Molly began to couple with a renewed intensity. Then the image slowly extended a clawed hand and extruded its five blades. With a languorous, dreamlike deliberation, it raked Rivera's bare back. Case caught a glimpse of exposed spine (*Neuromancer* 140-41)

The body dismembered is male, but the female body's position is subservient, a fetish-object rather than a person, as terrifying and disgusting (it causes Case to vomit) as any of the horror-films screened for the Handmaids. Moreover, Rivera's holo-show reinforces the “figuration of masculine reason . . . which operates through the dematerialization of other bodies, for the feminine . . . has no morphe, no morphology, no contour, . . . but is itself undifferentiated, without boundary” (*Bodies That Matter* 49). Unsurprisingly, in the aftermath of the show, Molly vanishes. Case returns from his fit of disgust to find “Molly's chair . . . empty. The stage was deserted” (*Neuromancer* 141). In fact, Molly has left, to process her anger and prepare for her coming mission, but the effect is the same: she has been banished.

However apparently blasé Molly may be when she reappears, she is nonetheless aware of how uncomfortable her cyborg physicality is in a virtual world. She only now reveals to Case, already a witness to her deconstruction, that she financed her transformation by working as a meat puppet: “once they plant the cut-out chip, it seems like free money. Wake up sore, sometimes, but that’s it. Renting the goods, is all. You aren’t in, when it’s all happening. House has software for whatever a customer wants to pay for” (147). Molly's experience, though, demonstrates the extent to which the meat-puppet is a fantasy site whose subjectivity is not just conveniently sublimated, but suppressed because of the threat that it poses. Molly's transformation from bio-woman to cyborg disrupts the suppression. She becomes increasingly aware of her sex-work, if only on a transitory, dream level. Finally, though, her new technology breaks down the cut-out, and she awakens to find that her razor nails have been discovered by the “house” and put to dark erotic use:

I came up. I was into this routine with a customer Senator, he was.
Knew his fat face right away. We were both covered in blood. We weren’t alone.
She was all Dead. And that fat prick, he was saying, ‘What’s wrong.
What’s wrong?’ ‘Cause we weren’t *finished* yet

So I guess I gave the Senator what he really wanted, you know? (148)

Molly’s story re-contextualizes the fetishization of her razors. The meat-puppet programming reduces women from prostitutes to interactive pornography, never quite real. Like pornography, the scenario is unsubtle. Console-cowboy derision of the flesh as meat echoes throughout. Implicitly, men control the virtual world, and can manipulate

their reality to suit, while women are cut out. Yet the cut-out fails, not by accident but as an unexpected result of Molly's own desires. And she takes the unsubtle male body apart, playing the fantasy through and re-claiming her body and weapons in the process.

The spectre of the dismembered/disassembled man pervades *Neuromancer*, in Molly's memory and Rivera's exploitation of it, but also in Molly's masculine meat-puppet counterpart, Armitage (he of the military recruiting poster/80s gay porn façade). His hyper-masculinity is almost the sum total of his personality, as far as we can make out, and that masculinity is utterly generic:

Armitage was no taller than Case, but with his broad shoulders and military posture he seemed to fill the doorway. . . . The Special Forces earring was gone. The handsome, inexpressive features offered the routine beauty of the cosmetic boutiques, a conservative amalgam of the past decade's leading media faces. The pale glitter of his eyes heightened the mask. (45)

Curtain, as mentioned above, cites Armitage's mask-presentation as one of the stock queer faces of Wintermute. This, we find, is literally true. "Armitage" is a kind of permanent meat puppet. Where Molly and Rikki temporarily and consensually withdraw their subjectivity in the course of their sexual commerce, they are at least still "in there." The speaking being within Armitage is an entirely different man, named Corto. When functional, Corto is unstable to the point of psychosis; at the time of his transformation to meat puppet, he is "[v]ery far gone Eating, excreting, and masturbating were the best he could manage" (120). The Corto personality, when it resurfaces, is obsessive, paranoid, and disconnected from his present reality. However, Armitage, the personality

created by Wintermute to function as an avatar, is only residually human; he is a computer-created rigid superego barely caging a raging id.

Though Armitage/Corto does not participate in sex work, his body is rented out, as it were, to the interested AI. However, that rental is not a means to an end. Corto functionally desires nothing other than bodily gratification. His cyborg-transformation was a political necessity rather than an individual desire. He was physically destroyed in a covert military operation, and in the aftermath of war,

Corto was shipped to Utah, blind, legless, and missing most of his jaw. It took eleven months for the Congressional aide to find him there.

He'd need eyes, legs, and extensive cosmetic work, the aide said, but that could be arranged. New plumbing, the man added, squeezing Corto's shoulder through the sweat-damp sheet.

Corto . . . said he preferred to testify as he was.

No, the aide explained. The trials were being televised.

Repaired, refurnished, and extensively rehearsed, Corto's subsequent testimony was detailed, moving, lucid, and largely the invention of a Congressional cabal with certain vested interests in saving particular portions of the Pentagon infrastructure. (83)

The “gift” of “new plumbing,” that is, a new and presumably mechanical/prosthetic penis, is fundamental to both Corto's political resurrection and subsequent descent first into schizophrenia and then catatonia. Corto's castration emerges from military service rather than (hetero)sexual psycho-violence, and he never resurrects either non-phallic

subjectivity, or any kind of individual desire beyond the most basic biological functions (though he is apparently pleased enough with his “new plumbing” to engage endlessly in the *jouissance* of the idiot). The result is an alienation so profound that only meat puppetry can allow his body to function, while the idiot mind gibbers in the far corners of his consciousness, not so much unaware as uncomprehending. Conventionally understood masculinity breaks down at this point. Wounding in battle is fundamental to adult masculinity, and the ritual circumcision or subincision mimics that damage (Braudy 18-19), but complete castration creates an Unman who echoes the Unwoman. The male body reconstructed in this context is profoundly ambivalent, never as defiant as the cyborg woman, and always operating on the edge of terror.

The terrors of the reconstructed male body flow from *Neuromancer* into its sequel, *Count Zero*. That novel's first chapter is given over to another mutilated soldier's re-memberment and sexual resurrection. The mercenary Turner is dismantled by a mechanical bloodhound whose “core was a kilogram of recrystallized hexogene and flaked TNT” (1). Turner's sub-human state is not inventoried in the same detail as Corto's, though, and reconstruction is less overtly mechanical. Even so, only “most” of Turner emerges from the blast, and his surgeon jokes about “how an unspecified percentage of Turner hadn't made it out of Palam International on that first flight and had to spend the night there in a shed, in a support vat.” Case's terror of the body as meat reaches its logical conclusion here. The body is reduced to its proteins, some living, some little more than food. While the mind in cyberspace engages its freedom, the flesh is profoundly vulnerable in ways that strike at the heart of masculinity.

Turner's body, like Corto's, is castrated. His reconstruction, which takes place over three months, involves both cellular generation and commerce. Genitals, including his new penis, are a commodity, as they must be in a world where the body is only meat: "They cloned a square meter of skin for him, grew it on slabs of collagen and shark-cartilage polysaccharides. They bought eyes and genitals on the open market. The eyes were green." All of this takes place within the first three sentences of the novel. A man is blown up, castrated, rebuilt, re-endowed. The process, though expensive, is routine. While he is re-built (we can do it, we have the technology!), Turner wallows in hallucinatory hetero-masculinity:

He spent most of those three months in a . . . construct of an idealized New England boyhood of the previous century . . . He read Conan Doyle by the light of a sixty-watt bulb beside a parchment shade printed with clipper ships. He masturbated in the smell of clean cotton sheets and thought about cheerleaders . . . [I]n the morning his mother called him down to Wheaties, eggs and bacon, coffee with milk and sugar. (1-2)

Turner never has to confront his castrated body. By the time he reintegrates with his flesh, he is "good as new" (2). In the aftermath, his handlers assign a female psychologist to seduce Turner as a "[l]ittle therapy on the side" (9). Turner fixates on the woman's seeming authenticity, and the extent to which she has *not* been reconstructed:

He would have expected a routine beauty, bred out of cheap elective surgery and the relentless Darwinism of fashion, an archetype cooked down from the major media faces of the past five years Women's sleeping faces, identical and

alone, naked, aimed straight out to the void. But this one was different. Already, somehow, there was meaning attached to it. (3)

The expected face of femininity echoes Corto's masculinity: generic and vaguely pornographic. This “authentic” woman re-initiates Turner into heterosexual romance, complete with beach walks and declarations of love. The encounter is marked by its reality. The “therapy,” such as it is, could not have been conducted in cyberspace or dream-sleep. Only the “real” exercise of the male body can resurrect the soldier within Turner.

While “Turner” may echo “Turing” in sound and typography, Turner's sexuality is stable, straightforwardly heterosexual, and only incidentally interested in the perversities of machines. Turner's relatively stable identity, in spite of his briefly disrupted relationship with his body, marks the gender divide in Gibson's cyberpunk writing. Corto's meat-puppet breakdown ultimately destroys him, but Turner, secure in his masculinity and the relative autonomy of his sexuality, survives the entire novel (and rescues at least one distressed damsel, Angie, of whom more discussion will follow). The relative discomfort of meat-puppethood is fundamentally the discomfort of prostitution: a lack of agency, a sexual submissiveness, and a relationship to sexuality which values survival and monetary reward over heterosexuality unity.

The nature of the meat-puppet is essentially technological in nature, but the puppet remains separate from the agencies of the cyborg proper. In this sense, Booker is quite correct in his assertion that Gibson's cyberpunk characters locate their real selves almost entirely in their minds. *Neuromancer* is profoundly a novel focussed on the ghost

in the machine. Case prefers to be a ghost within the machine-world of cyberspace to occupying the bio-machinery of his own body. Molly transforms herself into a cyborg by becoming a ghost in her own (increasingly *techne*-driven) machine. Wintermute (and the rarely-articulate Neuromancer) are ghosts who have emerged directly from machines. Their hardware is located in Berne and Rio, respectively, but neither “lives” there. The body by itself, whether meat, jacked-meat, or mainframe computer, has no agency of its own.

The problematic nature of the body without agency, and almost without identity (or inherent sexuality) is the birthplace of cyborg sexuality. Haraway re-frames Gilbert Ryle's critique of the ghost in the machine when she identifies marxist feminism's anxiety regarding “deepened dualisms of mind and body, animal and machine, idealism and materialism in the social practices, symbolic formulations, and physical artefacts associated with 'high technology' and scientific culture” (154). The meat puppet, either as prostitute or dismembered/remembered soldier-labourer, lies at the heart of that anxiety. Haraway proposes, then, a cyborg whose identity and sexuality is not absolute, but partial, and even occasionally contradictory. Molly Millions occupies such a partial territory, haunted by her meat puppet past and Rivera's ongoing attempts to dismember her, but simultaneously entirely integrated into her body, and aggressively occupying the identity “razor-girl”: woman and machine, unfragmented but very sharp.

The potential for partial identities among sex workers expands in Gibson's later cyberpunk writing. In *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, the ghost and the prostitute disentangle to form different and more complex languages of the body. Molly Millions re-emerges in

this novel as neither meat puppet nor razor-girl. The razor-girl identity echoes in Molly's new name, "Sally Shears," but her new incarnation eschews both sex and violence for pure commerce: in middle age, she has carved out a place for herself in the gangster-run shadow-economy of London. She functions as a middle(wo)man, linking disparate strands of the human network which underlies the virtual one. Meanwhile, Case the cowboy, Molly's lover in *Neuromancer*, has abandoned cyberspace for a "meat"-oriented life: "Case got out of it. Rolled up a few good scores after [Molly] split, then he kicked it in the head and quit clean Last I heard, he had four kids" (*Mona Lisa Overdrive* 165). Ironically, the cowboy has chosen a biological-analogue destiny.

The irony, though, is not spontaneous. *Neuromancer* drives Case back towards the meat he has shunned. He reaches a moment of warped heterosexual unity in the moment that, via cybernetic implants and crossed wiring, he finds himself looking through the eyes of his lover back at himself, and experiences a shock of recognition:

And found himself staring down, through Molly's one good eye, at a white-faced, wasted figure, afloat in a loose fetal crouch, a cyberspace deck between its thighs, a band of silver trodes above closed, shadowed eyes. The man's cheeks were hollowed with a day's growth of dark beard, his face slick with sweat.

He was looking at himself. (256)

That Case suddenly *recognizes* himself in his body is a profound shift for a man who previously identified the body only as meat. His recognition begins before sex, at the basic human shape of a "figure," then gradually identifies himself as "man." The

ambiguous nature of the gaze through which he recognizes himself (man looking at man through woman) undercuts the contempt he holds for the flesh. There is a profound tenderness in the description, particularly in the “fetal” invocation of a floating figure not quite born.

The fetal moment of recognition persists. The moment after Case jacks through Molly (always “jacking”: the allusions to masturbation persist even in heterosexual union), he allows the fusion of Wintermute and Neuromancer to create an entirely new being. This is the heart of Freud's Eros: “a fusion making one out of two . . . the two units of the germen . . . whose fusion, crudely speaking, engenders – what? a new being” (Lacan 138-39). Lacan's two units of the germen are “the ova and the spermatozoa,” but the AI fusion suggests reproduction outside conventional notions of sex. Both disembodied intelligences present as male; their union creates a new being, but at the expense of both parents. What emerges is at once a speaking being and an entirely new medium, so ambiguous that its nature is initially absurd:

“I'm not Wintermute now.”

“So what are you.” . . .

“I'm the matrix, Case.”

“Case laughed. “Where's that get you?”

“Nowhere. Everywhere. I'm the sum total of the works, the whole show.” (269)

The queer virtual child bemuses Case, but the seed (so to speak) is planted in his mind.

In subsequent paragraphs, Molly leaves Case forever, and he catches a glimpse of a nuclear, heteronormative family that haunts Case as Molly does. The new entity draws

on Case's virtual/hallucinatory experience of primitive domestic bliss with his dead girlfriend, Linda Lee. (This moment of hetero joy is provided courtesy of Neuromancer, whose puppetry is more emotional than physical.) It creates a mother and father and leaves them in plain sight (in cyberspace) for Case to recognize:

And one October night, punching himself past the scarlet tiers of the Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority, [Case] saw three figures, tiny, impossible, who stood at the very edge of one of the vast steps of data. Small as they were, he could make out the boy's grin, his pink gums, the glitter of the long gray eyes Linda still wore his jacket; she waved, as he passed. But the third figure, close behind her, arm across her shoulders, was himself.

. . .

He never saw Molly again. (270-71)

Linda Lee, dead junkie/prostitute and Case's persistent dream of the uncomplicated woman, presents here as a nearly archetypal mother. Linda's body, though sometimes chemically altered, is profoundly human. Molly Millions' threatening cyborg presence is utterly excluded not just from the vision, but from Case's entire subsequent life.

Tyler Curtain characterizes this passage as a moment of “the phantasmatic family” which undercuts the queerness of cyberspace and reinforces the “offensive irony” of gender police-work done in Alan Turing's name (137). Certainly, Case's vision is densely heteronormative, and plausibly drives his withdrawal from virtual existence and turn to bio-reproduction. However, the births of Case's children are prefigured by the birth of the new artificial entity, which in its first poetic moments reorganizes hierarchies of

wealth, power, and AI regulation:

Waking to a voice that was music, the platinum terminal piping melodically, endlessly, speaking of numbered Swiss accounts, of payment to be made to Zion [a Rastafarian separatist orbital network] via a Bahamian orbital bank, of passports and passages, and of deep and basic changes to be effected in the memory of Turing. (*Neuromancer* 262)

Overtly, changes “in the memory of Turing” alter the physical computer data in the Turing Registry's RAM, so that the Registry loses authority and control over the new entity. More subtly, Case is informed of changes to be made in the memory of, or in honour of, Alan Turing. Potentially, heteronormativity and gender regulation in cyberspace may be set aside, and heterosexuality rules Case's vision of the new entity only because Case is himself heterosexual, and his reintegration with his body is only practicable on those terms.

Such a reading is markedly (perhaps overly) optimistic. It is possible that the queer children of AIs are as unfaithful to their origins as cyborgs are. The heterosexual family may as easily be reconstituted as deconstructed in virtual space. However, the persistence of the feminine has its own value. While *Neuromancer* is narrated only from Case's perspective, Gibson's subsequent novels (both in this trilogy and all others to date) break down the monolithic masculine perceptions of the techno-world. What emerges is a set of interwoven, only occasionally intersecting narratives whose narrative voices encompass both the masculine and the feminine, and increasingly the waif-spectre of characters whose gender and sexuality have been in some way disrupted by their cultures

and the technologies with which they interact. Christopher Palmer notes particularly that in *Mona Lisa Overdrive* “many of the characters are waifs, young and vulnerable, deprived or bereft” and that “in depicting them Gibson sees things and other persons as transitional objects or prostheses” (227). He defines the prosthetic as mediated space between self and environment, the merger of mediator and mediated. This notion of the prosthetic easily lends itself to meat-puppet sexuality, a transitional body state in which technologies function as prophylactic prosthetics between prostitute and client, or between the feminine and the masculine.

This notion of mediation assumes a single masculine narrative, and so, unsurprisingly, while *Count Zero* begins with Turner's self-assured perspective, the narration switches first to waifish, bewildered Marly, an art curator in search of an (AI) artist, and then to Bobby Newmark, a teenage hacker whose story defies cowboy gender expectations. Bobby's first attempt at serious cyber-cowboy work breaks down and threatens his life, re-shaping his perceptions of cyber-macho and virtual gender:

Shows never ended this way, not right at the beginning. In a show the cowboy hero's girl or maybe his partner would run in, slap the trodes off, hit that little red OFF stud. So you'd make it, make it through.

But Bobby was alone now, his autonomic nervous system overridden His heart stopped And something *leaned in*, vastness unutterable, from beyond the most distant edge of anything he'd ever known or imagined, and touched him.

::: WHAT ARE YOU DOING? WHY ARE THEY DOING THAT TO YOU?

Girlvoice, brownhair, dark eyes . . . [ellipse original]

: KILLING ME KILLING ME GET IT OFF GET IT OFF.

Darkeyes, desertstar, tanshirt, girlhair –

::: BUT IT'S A TRICK. SEE? YOU ONLY THINK IT'S GOT YOU.

LOOK. NOW I FIT HERE AND YOU AREN'T CARRYING THE

LOOP. (17-18)

Bobby fails the cowboy role, unable to exist without the meat of his body, but he also makes a radical discovery: there is a feminine force at play in the virtual realm. His expectation of women as flesh only, racing in to rescue the flesh, is subsumed beneath his discovery that a feminine hyperreal may intervene angelically on his behalf.

This feminine force is Angela Mitchell, an adolescent surgically altered by her father to be able to access cyberspace without mechanical mediation. She “dreams” (127) the net via a biotechnological graft that “shadows like tumor” (133). The effect, as Bobby witnesses, is markedly sensual. If the Dixie Flatline's manifestation is “not laughter, but a stab of cold down Case's spine” (*Neuromancer* 106), marking his inhumanity, then Angie's presense has the sensuality of a teenage crush. Her presence is Bobby's fantasy of her: dark hair, dark eyes, feminine voice. While the AIs and constructs are masculine more or less by default, Angie marks the emergence of a swirling femininity. These manifestations are ultimately the technological faces of desire. AIs are gendered masculine almost as (English) language defaults masculine, and their movements toward one another reinforce Freud's assertion that there is no libido other than the masculine (Lacan 151). What, precisely, a virtual feminine is *for* is open to

question. Where will she inscribe herself? Will she be active or passive? What, in fact, does the woman (the only virtual woman) want?

What Angie wants is, rather unfortunately, only incidentally considered. She does not so much inscribe herself as accept her inscription: “*Your father drew vèvés in your head: he drew them in a flesh that was not flesh*” (*Mona Lisa Overdrive* 23). Her existence is almost abjectly feminine: daughter of the (mad) scientist, corporate intellectual property, kidnapped virgin, and cyber-hoodoo “horse.” Gibson's theology of the net incorporates a post-hoodoun, Haitian-inspired AI consciousnesses, potentially the bastard children of *Wintermute* and *Neuromancer*, who shape events at a remove via a range of agents, and more directly through their communications with Angie. She is a horse in the hoodoo sense of one who may be “ridden” by (that is, she may channel) loa (spirits) of either sex.

However, beneath the babble of techno-spiritualism, there lurks another echo, softer but persistent. Gibson's roots in the southern gothic tradition pervade the Turner-narrative of *Count Zero*, summoning up redneck compounds filled with cyborg guard-dogs and jerry-rigged EEG equipment. Angie, sent away from her father's laboratory home, lands here. In the suddenly pervasive “deep south” ambiance, Angie may be a horse in the same sense that (as her father lies dying, as Bobby lies dying, as she will herself ultimately lie dying) Jewel Bundren's mother was a horse (Faulkner 101). She is endlessly available to be ridden, first by the loa, then by Bobby Newmark, whose lover she becomes almost immediately upon their first encounter in the flesh. Ultimately, Angie revisits the model of “meat puppet” from the mirror perspective, as she becomes a

simstim celebrity, whose physical sensations are recorded and marketed to the masses as a kind of fair ride in Angie's perfect, sensual body.

Angie's simstim career leads her into benign corporate slavery to the Sense/Net company, in which her primary relationships (Bobby being perpetually physically absent) are with the AI Continuity and her queer, transracial, faux-Haitian hairdresser Porphyre. Porphyre offers Angie a vision of how fluid the relationship between body and identity may be. He presents as “a Masai warrior in shoulder-padded silk crepe and a black leather sarong” (*Mona Lisa Overdrive* 98); rumours of his congenital birth defects draw out only a flippant, “Congenital, genital . . . We all change so *much* these days, don't we?” (186). He offers a kind of freedom from body expectation, and an access-point for Angie into the Haitian mythology on which she hangs most of her world-view, but behind the door he offers is a wall:

“Do you know anything about African religions, Porphyre?”

He smirked. “I'm not African.”

“But when you were a child . . .”

“When I was a child,” Porphyre said, “I was white.” (188)

Porphyre constructs his identity almost entirely around his body, to the point of borderline racism, with only casual gestures towards mind. He mimics a submissive slave-patois and has no obvious interest in virtuality or even intellectualism.

In contrast, Continuity manifests as entirely mind, both in terms of the mind/body dualism and in terms of the problems of mind that Turing raised. He (because Continuity is as distinctly gendered as Wintermute and Neuromancer before him) is helpful, cold,

and intellectual to the point of inhumanity. The Dixie Flatline personality construct, who denied AI sexuality in *Neuromancer*, offered a paradox of intelligence vs humanity: “I’m really just a bunch of ROM But I ain’t likely to write you no poem, if you follow me. Your AI, it just might. But it ain’t no way *human*” (131). As a sign of their very ambiguity, human and inhuman, gendered and ungendered, “AIs are apt to write poetry” (Curtain 131). Continuity, fifteen years after “it changed”³³ (*Mona Lisa Overdrive* 130), that is, after the AI union, writes as a fundamental tenet of his existence:

Continuity was writing a book. Robin Lanier had told [Angie] about it. She’d asked what it was about. It wasn’t like that, he’d said. It looped back into itself and constantly mutated; Continuity was *always* writing it. She asked why. But Robin had already lost interest: because Continuity was an AI, and AIs did things like that. (51-52)

Even as Gibson’s novels become less subjective, expanding into multiple perspectives (*Neuromancer* is told from one perspective, *Count Zero* from three, and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* from four), Continuity exists at the very boundary of subjectivity, working as author and audience, utterly self-contained and only incidentally gendered or engaged with the human versions of mind.

With only these two for company, Angie sinks deep into her body, taking drugs to dampen and alter her ability to access virtual space and marketing her senses to the masses. Bobby vanishes into virtual space, and only gradually does she find herself

³³ Like Molly’s razor-girl nails, Gibson has borrowed “When It Changed” from Joanna Russ. Russ’ 1972 story of that title chronicles the “return” of men to feminist lesbian-utopian Whileaway, and ends with the spectre of violence re-enforcing compulsory heterosexuality.

summoned (apparently by forces beyond her control or ken) to join him. Bobby has separated his mind from his body, living in an “aleph,” an entire virtual world existing in parallel to the net. The technology parallels that which distributes Angie's senses to the masses (16), but without the parallel connection to the body. Bobby manifests in *Mona Lisa Overdrive* as a man dying, having abandoned his flesh as thoroughly as he knows how:

The stretcher [on which Bobby lies] was there, its occupant bundled in the blue nylon bag. *It's eating him*, Slick thought, as he looked at the superstructure of support gear, the tubes, the sacs of fluid. *No*, he told himself, *it's keeping him alive, like in a hospital*. But the impression lingered: what if it were draining him, draining him dry? He remembered Bird's vampire talk. (81-82)

Bobby (nicknamed “Count Zero,” hence “the Count,” hence fears of Dracula) has established his mind and its technological support-technology as a parasite on his body, draining it dry. If Case holds the meat of his body in contempt, Bobby has gone farther, turning his body *into* meat, into food for his mind.

The *loa*, or the Artificial Intelligences that simulate them, summon Angie to an “arranged marriage” with Bobby (279). They speak in warped voices through Angie's mouth and move her forward, playing her as a literal meat puppet, flesh on strings. The intellect of Angela Mitchell exists at a remove, “comprehend[ing] this room and its inhabitants through shifting data planes that represent viewpoints, though of whom or what, she is in most cases in doubt. There is a considerable degree of overlap, of contradiction” (284). As her own subjectivity breaks down, bodies collapse into fields of

data, so that the body of a drug-addicted adolescent prostitute with no cyber-record becomes “the nearest thing to innocence” (285). She touches Bobby and collapses into him, “dying” and entering his virtual world. Within the aleph, she is “wedded” to Bobby in this moment, and fitted into his lordly fantasy of the heterosexual family. They live forever in a castle, visited by ghosts, and Angie finds her consciousness, her only ongoing existence, overlapping with Continuity, so that she knows what he knows and he absorbs her (306), as Bobby holds her, and she exists as a Wendy-mother to all the virtual lost boys whom the trilogy has generated.³⁴

Angie and Bobby's “marriage” is a kind of cyber-romance, implicitly a neuro-romance, multi-generational bastard child of *Neuromancer's* AI union. Both lovers are cyborgs and techno-adventurers, but while their union presses boundaries of the real, it leaves the boundaries of gender entirely in place, and even writes them over new virtual territory. We return again and again to Butler's warning that “any uncritical reproduction of the mind/body distinction ought to be re-thought for its implicit gender hierarchy that the distinction has conventionally produced, maintained, and rationalized” (*Gender Trouble* 17). For all his play on the boundaries of mind and body, Gibson reproduces gender hierarchies relatively uncritically, leaving a chasm within the final novel of the trilogy for hopeful feminists and incautious critics.

Tyler Curtain's assertion that *Mona Lisa Overdrive's* reconstitution of the nuclear family is “a way to secure the 'human-ness' of technology and the future of the matrix” (137) provides our first bridge across this chasm. Gibson's cyberpunk constructions of

³⁴ In the spirit of “second star to the right and straight on til morning” (*Peter Pan*), *Mona Lisa Overdrive* ends with the revelation that the next realm of cyberspace, overlapping theirs, is “Centauri,” and they'll “[b]e there in a New York minute . . . no shit” (308).

the human hinge on conventional and inherently hierarchical notions of gender. Cowboys-and-goddesses, though nominally an improvement on cowboys-and-whores, is not a gender equity game. Women remain constituted by masculine desire. The meat puppet is neither quite a cyborg nor quite a speaking being; she sleeps, she dreams, she is spoken through, but almost never does she speak for herself. Like 'The Woman' of Lacan's "Love Letter," "she does not exist, in that phallic sexuality assigns her to a position of fantasy" (137). Her position is virtual, lost in cyberspace, and every Gibsonian schoolchild knows that "[t]here's no there, there" (*Mona Lisa Overdrive* 48).³⁵ Real (or even hyperreal) feminine subjectivity seems initially impossible. In this sense, cyberspace echoes Gertrude Stein's Oakland: "what was the use of my having come from [Oakland/cyberspace] it was not natural to have come from there yes write about it if I like or anything if I like but not there, there is no there there" (*Everybody's Autobiography* 289). A less stable, more fantastical position would be difficult to imagine.

As a result, cyberpunk techno-sex workers (of whom Angie, with her sensual recordings, must be counted one) return us to awareness of the problem of "how to retrieve femininity from a total subordination to the effects" of sexual difference's symbolic construction (Lacan 138). Gibson has largely subordinated femininity in an attempt to stabilize notions of the human. In doing so, he reinforces Butler's supposition that "the matrix of gender relations is prior to the emergence of the 'human'" (*Bodies*

³⁵ Given the subsequent birth of Silicon Valley in nearby San Francisco, it should surprise no one that the Internet looks like Oakland. Nor should it be particularly shocking that Gibson's next novel, *Virtual Light*, takes place in part on an anarchic bridge between Oakland and San Francisco. In subsequent chapters, we will discover that we are nowhere at all.

That Matter 7), while raising the possibility that his own matrix (cyberspace, the virtual world) may be composed *of* gender relations. That possibility stalls cyberpunk in its tracks. The radical split of mind and body that underlies the genre allows for only simple and highly stylized gender performances. This is not to suggest that cyber technology offers no possibilities for women, or for women's inscription, only that Gibson's Cyberpunk Trilogy stalls at the awareness that nothing is *there*. He does, however, raise the possibility that, like Oakland, cyberspace may provide a starting point for women, not a natural one, but one which, once escaped, will leave female characters in a position to inscribe themselves, their bodies, or anything they like if they like, but not here.

Chapter 4
**Manic Pixie Dream Girls: Viral Femininity, Virtual Clones,
 and the Process of Embodiment**

Angela Mitchell abandons her body for marriage; Offred persists only on audio tape; Laura Chase vanishes into an over-exposed photograph; Lise leaps into a computer mainframe at the moment of death. Systematically, these women have become disembodied, or, perhaps more accurately, disembodied themselves. Bodies that have functioned as prisons for these women are stripped off and left to rot like so much compostable bio-matter. The spectre of the Freefall, the sexual orgy feeding annihilation, articulates the extent to which such a prison must be escaped, at any cost:

Sometimes people took the fast way out and their bodies could be seen from a distance, dangling from the loops of the unused roller coaster, beside the artificial mountain that still – even in its present dilapidated state – appeared to promise some sort of frivolous and unfettered pleasure. Freedom, even; you could look at it that way. (Atwood, “Freefall” 135)

The leap from the roller coaster is not a perfect metaphor; in her own way, each female character cheats death (or a certain value of “death”) via disembodiment. What the women share is less a death drive than an anti-sex drive, a desire to escape sex's materialization of the body.

At this moment of disembodiment, the meat-puppet model becomes potentially

useful to women. Puppets have digital freedom of the mind, even as their bodies are subject to grotesque forms of sexual exploitation. Digital media has its own problems: a sense of non-identity and profound alienation induced by the “digital clones” of *Oryx and Crake's* child pornography, a model of infinite production and reproduction which keeps Lise trapped by her labour even after death, an infinite accessibility which spreads Laura Chase so thin she no longer resembles her childhood self. However, the digital clones who alienate adolescent Jimmy offer possibilities beyond their initial plenty (*Oryx and Crake* 90). These girls are so abstract, so distant from the reproductive bodies that were exploited in *The Handmaid's Tale*, that their flesh (if, indeed, that flesh exists) remains relatively uninscribed. The digital clone girls indicate feminine potential, if they can only escape from their pornographic, objectified world and enter the space arbitrarily designated as real.

Oryx takes her first step toward subjectivity when she looks into the camera, and then “right into the eyes of the viewer – right into Jimmy's eyes, into the secret person inside him” (91). The sexually exploited girl sees in that moment, and in doing so, asserts her own subjectivity in the face of Jimmy's gaze. She inscribes herself in his mind years before she materializes. Her image, frozen as a single video frame and printed out, is “a keeper,” a commodity of desire. The image, however, does not correspond to Oryx in a one-to-one manner:

So Crake printed it, the picture of Oryx looking, and Snowman had saved it and saved it. He'd shown it to Oryx many years later.

“I don't think this is me,” was what she'd said at first.

“It has to be!” said Jimmy. “Look! It's your eyes!”

“A lot of girls have eyes,” she said. (91)

Oryx defies her photographic identification with the counter-assertion that “[a] lot of girls did these things,” that the picture is only the image of a digital clone. She, Oryx, is a breathing woman, sexually aware, playful, and only casually willing to be associated with her earlier, video-filmed life. In the intervening time, she has created a self which does not rely on Jimmy's gaze. Her subjectivity never fully emerges in *Oryx and Crake*. That narrative is itself a reconstruction from Jimmy's memories, after Oryx is dead (along with Crake, the boy who froze her image). Yet Oryx *has* subjectivity, an existence so separate from Jimmy's fantasies of her that she is able to reject his desire “to know everything” about her (92).

Oryx's subjectivity exists only in conjunction with Jimmy's; she argues with Jimmy's narrative, teases him and pleases him, but never acquires an independent voice, or even a personal name. Crake has a “real” name (Glenn), and Jimmy is Jimmy as often as he is Snowman³⁶, but Oryx is only Oryx, named in code for an extinct animal. That lack of an independent name does not subvert her existence, but the absence marks the extent to which Oryx is a mediated figure. In her essay, “Margaret Atwood's Metafictional Acts: Collaborative Storytelling in *The Blind Assassin* and *Oryx and Crake*,” Pilar Cuder Domínguez identifies Oryx's lack of an independent name and identity as a parallel to Offred's lack (62). Both women are named by their pseudo-husbands³⁷ to establish feminine submission: this woman is not her own. Jimmy sins, in

³⁶ Jimmy's “Extinctathon” nickname, Thickney (a name patterned to follow “Crake” and “Oryx”), is abandoned almost immediately.

³⁷ While Oryx and Crake are not legally married, and Offred is a concubine to the

his love affair with Oryx, on the very fundamental level of coveting (and committing pseudo-adultery with) his neighbour's wife. She is an object to be stolen, albeit an object who argues with him intermittently about her object-ness and his objectivity.

Jimmy's and Oryx's intertwined storytelling, Domínguez suggests, is a battle for control over the real. Oryx's evasions of Jimmy's questions are balanced with attacks on his perceptions: “She accuses Jimmy of naiveté concerning sexual slavery [T]he storyteller (Oryx) is the more experienced and mundane of the pair, the one who has knowledge and insights, and perhaps even a touch of cynicism to transmit” (63). Domínguez stops short of assigning particularly gendered positions to Jimmy and Oryx, treating them as a “metafictional trope”: “they lose corporeality and reality and become fairly disembodied and seemingly neutral voices while at the same time they are obviously discussing and performing bodily functions” (62). The metafictional nature of the debate, though, need not disincorporate the debaters. Jimmy and Oryx's discourse may as easily be read as a battle over her embodiment and subjectivity, wherein Jimmy constantly re-constructs Oryx as the object of his desire, and Oryx attempts to carve out an existence separate from his gaze.

These debates, as Domínguez has noted, conceal and punctuate Jimmy and Oryx's sexual encounters. The erotic charge of Jimmy's desire and Oryx's playful passivity echoes Laura Mulvey's definition of the “male gaze” in media:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its

Commander, both relationships mimic patriarchal marriage in that both women are systematically subordinated to their male sexual partners.

fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (19)

For Jimmy, Oryx exists first and foremost on film, and her subjectivity is secondary to her narrative. She is fundamentally filmic and only incidentally digital. Her emergence as a body and a subject battles the established male gaze, and the pervasive film trope into which Jimmy fits her, that of the manic pixie dream girl.

The manic pixie dream girl (MPDG) is a screenwriting trope that exists as a faux-feminist salve for masculine guilt induced by the male gaze. Film critic Nathan Rabin traces the MPDG as far back as Katherine Hepburn's performance in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), and identifies “her” (for the MPDG must always exist within quotation marks) as a wish-fulfilling gender construction:

that bubbly, shallow cinematic creature that 'exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures.' . . . Like the Magical Negro,³⁸ the Manic Pixie Dream Girl archetype is largely defined by secondary status and lack of an inner life. She's on hand to lift a gloomy male protagonist out of the doldrums, not to pursue her own happiness. (“Wild Things”)

The MPDG simulates a Real Woman in that her to-be-looked-at-ness is veiled by her

³⁸ In a November 2000 article for *Time*, Christopher John Farley notes the emergence of “the Magical African-American friend” as a stock character in late-1990s Hollywood film: “MAAFs exist because most Hollywood screenwriters don't know much about black people other than what they hear on records by white hip-hop star Eminem. So instead of getting life histories or love interests, black characters get magical powers.”

quirkiness, a collection of charming, playful, nearly childlike performances which simulate a personality.

Atwood's construction of Oryx as a MPDG construction of Jimmy's memory and desire is deliberate. Oryx emerges out of Jimmy's fevered fantasies, and when he first (at least within the structure of the novel) pictures her, she is “floating on her back in a swimming pool, wearing an outfit that appears to be made of delicate white tissue-paper petals” (43). She is charming, seductive, evasive, and never satisfyingly real. Jimmy fancies himself sensitive, so she emerges as the perfect, whimsical lover for a misunderstood soul. Oryx's version of herself exists separately, controlled by her storytelling and only incidental to Jimmy's Dream Girl. Jimmy conceives of Oryx in terms of storytelling and media to be consumed:

How long did it take him to piece her together from the slivers of her he'd gathered and hoarded so carefully? There was Crake's story about her, and Jimmy's story about her as well, a more romantic version; and then there was her own story about herself, which was different from both, and not very romantic at all. Snowman riffles through these stories in his head. (114)

Jimmy's Oryx is a commodity, a collection of pieces of a woman whom he can assemble into a story which he possesses. She certainly meets his standards of beauty and unthreatening exoticism:

Oryx was so delicate. Filigree, he would think, picturing her bones inside her small body. She had a triangular face – big eyes, a small jaw – a Hymenoptera face, a mantid face, the face of a Siamese cat. Skin of the palest yellow, smooth

and translucent, like old, expensive porcelain. (115)

Oryx's beauty is quirky, separate from the cosmetically re-constructed whiteness which Jimmy has consumed for most of his life, but not opposed to western beauty.

Jimmy's determination to capture Oryx in images and fragments suggests that she exists only in his imagination. If Oryx's story is only one of many simultaneous versions of her, then he can construct her to his satisfaction. Oryx, though, disputes Jimmy's claims on her existence, and resists the encroachment of his subjectivity. Jimmy recalls (again, asserting his subjectivity over hers) that her resistance to his questioning sometimes went beyond evasion to direct confrontation: "Once she'd said, 'You have a lot of pictures in your head, Jimmy. Where did you get them? Why do you think they are pictures of me?'" (114). Having escaped her video existence, Oryx evades capture on even metaphorical film. She is satisfied to exist without digital records or stable memory.

Oryx has made the transition from film to flesh far more fully than Jimmy comprehends, and because Jimmy is largely uninterested in the matter, we never discover how, exactly, Oryx materializes. She raises the possibility, though, that a woman may materialize herself, at least partially within the male gaze, and still achieve an existence beyond the regulatory expectations which led her to de-materialize in the first place. From that possibility, we may extrapolate a class of immaterial women, all seeking subjectivity and materiality. Their materialization, though, leads them to a direct confrontation with the regulatory norms of sex. Judith Butler's assertion that these norms "work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body's sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service

of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative” (*Bodies 2*) challenges the extent to which women may self-constitute even in the face of literal materialization. The woman who summons her self from the digital realm literally constructs herself (as we shall see), but she is simultaneously created by the nature of her sex.

Lise, the congenitally-diseased dream-artist of “The Winter Market,” marks an origin point for William Gibson's digital women. Lise's sexuality evades her body in favour of direct technological contact, intimacy “jacked, straight across” (8). We have already seen, in chapter 1, the extent to which Lise's cyber-sexuality infects narrator Casey's psyche. She lingers in his consciousness after her death, allowing her cyber-self to maintain a connection with Casey long after her body is dead and cremated. Via that connection, Lise transforms herself into a new species of dream girl, one whose subjectivity persists beyond the gaze of her male lover. Lise's “drawn, triangular face” (17) echoes Oryx's, but without the fundamental desirability. Casey, looking at Lise, thinks not of Siamese cats and old porcelain, but of “her singleness of purpose.” He is starkly aware that whatever else may be true of this woman, he does not own her, though she may, on some level, possess him. They battled for control on their first night, “jacking straight across,” and Lise won (10). In the aftermath of her victory, Lise infects Casey with her authenticity, “big-daddy version . . . raw rush, the king hell killer uncut real thing,” which is also the core of her ambition, *to become*.

Lise's becoming lies at the heart of Casey's anxiety. His profound ambivalence is ostensibly rooted in pity for the dead, physical woman. In her last days, Casey catches sight of Lise, and in that moment, holds her completely in his gaze, and creates a

narrative within which that gaze and its eroticism are the core of Lise's existence: "She'd gone out that night, I knew, to kiss herself goodbye. To find someone drunk enough to do it for her. Because, I knew then, it was true: She did like to watch" (23). Critic Heather Hicks reads this encounter explicitly in terms of Lise's body, and its fundamental importance:

Casey reads Lise's bid for a sexual encounter as evidence that she could not be happy without a body, that for her the grotesque technology that mocks her with its model's walk, that encases her in the ultimate parody of the eighties aerobofantasy "hard body" is preferable to the new visualizing technologies that can take her to a realm in which she controls her own image as well as the art images she produces – a realm in which she is no image or all image, as she pleases. (86)

Hicks frames Casey's reading as a moment of pathos which asserts the primacy of the body, but she fails to take into account the extent to which sex lies at the heart of Casey's (mis)reading. Lise's image, her to-be-looked-at-ness, is in this moment at least as erotic as her physical body. In spite of Casey's revulsion at her disability, he pushes towards an entirely physical definition of Lise as a way to invert her earlier objectification of *him*, when she reduces his desire for her to a performance for her amusement. This is his (last) chance to materialize her sex, to make her female, and to penetrate her with his gaze, as she has already penetrated his psyche.

Casey's persistent terror of Lise's posthumous phone call throughout the story points to his failure to objectify her. If "the dreaded phone call . . . represents more than simply a restoration of lines of communication between the two," if "to answer her call is

to (mis)recognize Lise's new subjectivity, to quite literally be hailed by this woman who operates in a new medium, to be interpolated into the ideology of an invisible woman” (Hicks 87), then Lise's old/new subjectivity rapidly becomes Casey's central concern. He privately attempts to assault that subjectivity, to make digital Lise inanimate. However, only his faith in her desire for physical femininity shores up his rejection of her digital existence:

I know that if I . . . hadn't seen [Lise and her drunken kiss goodbye], . . . [I m]ight even have found a way to rejoice on her behalf, or found a way to trust in whatever it is that she's since become, or had built in her image, a program that pretends to be Lise to the extent that it believes it's her. (“The Winter Market” 22)

Hicks' own paper draws on this passage; she names her essay “Whatever It Is That She's Since Become.” The question of what, precisely, Lise has become is at the story's heart. Casey wants to believe that a computer program, an AI, is not equivalent to or interchangeable with the woman he recognizes. Hicks stops short of naming Lise an AI. Instead, she focuses on Lise's status as an artist and names her a force for image manipulation or erasure. However, Gibson's contemporaneous cyberpunk writings identify artistic creation as a fundamental function of an AI, and Lise calls on Casey precisely so she can continue creating. Casey finally demands, “if she calls me, is it *her?*”; Rubin counters, “God only knows I mean, Casey, the technology is there, so who, man, really who, is to say?” (24)

Casey's desire for the AI to *be* Lise, not merely to be a perfect simulacrum, is fundamentally a demand for sex. If Lise discards her body, she becomes an unsexed

speaking being, an AI of ambiguous sexuality. She rejects the *jouissance* of the body. She ceases to be The Woman. She reminds us that “ever since Democritus, a body has not seemed sufficiently materialist. You have to have atoms, and the whole works, sight and smell and everything that follows. It all absolutely hangs together” (Lacan 142). If the body is not materialist, if the body is in fact only abstractly related to the self, as Lise's disembodiment posits, then the very nature of desire comes into question. The MPDG is a sexual construction, a reinforcing figure for femininity, and to strip her of materiality and sex is fundamentally to create a creature of fantasy but precisely *not* of desire: a figure of terror. Lacan supposes that sexual division “must exist because no human being can become a subject outside the division into two sexes” (Mitchell 6). Lise's dematerialization challenges even sexual division. Casey's emphasis in the question, “is it *her*?” raises the possibility that “it,” the AI, is Lise, but it is precisely *not* “her.”

“The Winter Market” leaves us with the potentially terrifying possibility of a subject position outside sexual division. That position is potentially extremely productive. The semi-queer AIs of the Cyberpunk Trilogy simulate femininity (in memory of Turing), perform masculinity, and seek union with each other. Consider the Dixie Flatline's assertion that AIs “ain't no way *human*” (*Neuromancer* 131). Dixie means to imply alien-ness, but he also invokes the possibility that AIs are alter-human, not satisfactorily sexed but highly intelligent, speaking at will, and raising new possibilities for human-ness. When AIs begin to gender, we arrive at a new possibility, that of viral femininity.

In his essay “The Final Solution,” Jean Baudrillard equates sexed-ness with evolution. “The sexual revolution,” he writes, “the real one, the *only* one – is the advent of sexuality in the evolution of living things, or a duality that puts an end to perpetual indivision and successive iterations of the same” (9). The pre-human, the pre-sexual, is thus a state of “pathological immortality, the immortality of the cancer cell This is the revenge taken on mortal and sexed beings by immortal and undifferentiated life forms” (8). Baudrillard's apocalyptic vision supposes that the only non-sexual reproduction possible is cloning, or direct cellular reproduction. Certainly, cell division gone mad is the foundation of cancer. However, his metaphor gains new possibilities when Baudrillardian cancer is infected with Dianne Rothleder's viral consciousness.

Rothleder suggests that viruses are only loosely biological, “because biologists do not think of viruses as living beings, and biology is the study of life processes” (201). The not-quite-living status of viruses equally fits AIs and virtual women: they are vividly involved in human affairs, but not alive in a conventionally understood sense. The function of gender here is essential, since the nature of *bios* is a “story in a patriarchal voice. Biology is the science of life, conceived and authored by a word from the father” (Haraway 72). The re-inscription of that story requires a reappraisal of life at the pre-cellular level. The constitution of the body on a scientific level is gendered: “The word was Aristotle's, Galileo's, Bacon's, Newton's, Linnaeus', Darwin's; the flesh was woman's.” In order to re-imagine *bios*, the body, women must infect the word, and this lies at the heart of the virus' potential.

Ultimately, “viruses cannot do what they do without some kind of community in

which they simultaneously recognize and are recognized” (Rothleder 201). Exposure begins an infection, recognition perpetuates it, and the virus creates links among previously isolated communities. Viral infection has, since the rise of AIDS awareness in the 1980s, functioned in social discourse to establish who, precisely, is human. When “human” exists as a collective identity rather than a subjective state, then inclusion/exclusion is profoundly powerful. Donna Haraway notes that “[d]iscourse on infectious AIDS is part of mechanisms that determine what counts as 'the general population', such that over a million infected people in the US alone, not to mention the global dimensions of infection, can be named in terms that make them *not* part of the general population” and thus excluded from the medical, social, and legal institutions which regulate and protect “humanity” (252).

In Gibson's novel *Virtual Light*, the notion of a viral community's recognition by the general population plays out in literal terms. Gibson proposes a back-story to the main narrative in which AIDS is brought under control precisely by infecting the entire American (and implicitly global) population. A quest for “nonpathogenic strains of the [HIV] virus” turns up humanity's saviour in “James Delmore Shapely . . . [who] was thirty-one years old, a prostitute, and had been HIV-positive for twelve years” (*Virtual Light* 207). The fragmentary storytelling makes clear that Shapely is not only a sex worker, but flamboyantly queer, markedly femme, and sexually promiscuous, the embodiment of the most negative stereotypes of gay men in the age of AIDS. In a documentary narrative, a scientist involved reflects,

I'd been struck by the fact . . . that his responses to the questionnaire seemed to

indicate that 'safe sex,' as we thought of it then, was, well, not exactly a priority.

He was a very open, very outgoing, really a very *innocent* character, and when I asked him, there in the prison visiting room, about oral sex, he actually blushed.

Then he laughed, and said, well, he said he 'sucked cock like it was going out of style' . . ." (208-09, ellipse original)

Shapely's social and gender status are markedly abject. He exists within the "unlivable" zone of social life (Butler, *Bodies* 3), the zone of repudiation of the social and the bearable, such that his persona performs fantasies (and sex acts) which threaten the integrity of the non-abject subject.³⁹ His feminine performance as much as his homosexuality locates him far outside the "normal" realms of sex. Yet the abjected body becomes an object of adoration. Shapely's blood yields "this mutant strain [that] won't kill you. Won't do shit to you at all, 'cept it eats the old kind for breakfast" (*Virtual Light* 260). The strain spreads not only via injection but, as with all HIV, via sexual contact; functionally, Shapely has been "curing" AIDS, one partner at a time, for his entire abjected adult life. His blood forms the basis for a new kind of "live" vaccine, in which all patients are therapeutically infected with nonpathogenic HIV.

The Shapely virus creates a profound shift in Rothleder's imagined viral community: nearly all of America becomes a single, virally-connected body. Only small groups of fundamentalist Christians abstain, and one of these groups ultimately (on the novel's last page) murders "the illiterate prostitute become the splendid source" (258):

Shapely's murder, some said sacrifice, had taken place in Salt Lake City. His seven killers, heavily armed fundamentalists, members of a white racist sect . . .

³⁹ Cf. Butler: "I would rather die than do or be that!" (*Bodies* 243).

were still imprisoned in Utah, though two of them had subsequently died of AIDS, possibly contracted in prison, steadfastly refusing the viral strain patented in Shapely's name.

They had remained silent during the trial, their leader stating only that the disease was God's vengeance on sinners and the unclean. (323)

The attempt to recreate Shapely's abjection is ultimately fruitless⁴⁰, though it reproduces bodily abjection in those who persist. A new discourse forms around his corpse, such that the general population comes to conflate Shapely with Jesus (260) and venerate his sainthood (as the AIDS martyr) with street shrines. Symbols of sexual abjection and exclusion are transformed into religious iconography. Passers-by in West Hollywood study a street shrine on which

[s]omebody had sprayed SHAPELY WAS A COCK-SUCKING FAGGOT in bright pink paint, the letters three feet high, and then a big pink heart. Below that, stuck to the wall, were postcards of Shapely and photographs of people who must've died. God only knew how many millions had. On the pavement at the base of the wall were dead flowers, stubs of candles, other stuff. Something about the postcards gave Rydell the creeps; they made the guy look like a cross between Elvis and some kind of Catholic saint, skinny and with his eyes too big. (19-20)

The transformation of “cock-sucking faggot” from an aspersion to a phrase of reverence suggests that the ways in which the discourse through which sex and the body are materialized have been profoundly altered. On another mural, Shapely ascends bodily to heaven, escorted by “half a dozen extremely fruity-looking angels with long blond rocker

⁴⁰ The fruits, as it were, are loosed and writing their own discourse.

hair” (152). Beneath that image, the public discourse regarding at least this one body is made explicit: “YET HE *LIVES* IN US NOW . . . AND THROUGH HIM DO *WE* LIVE.”

This is the liberation of both sex and death from reproduction which Baudrillard anticipates (“The Final Solution” 11). Atwood enacts one aftermath of the sexual revolution in *The Handmaid's Tale*, wherein gender becomes more restrictive and reproduction more rigidly controlled. *Virtual Light* offers the opposite scenario: a severing of sex and death:

One man told me once, and he had the old kind [of AIDS], and died of it, how we'd lived in this funny little pocket of time when a lot of people got to feel like a piece of ass wasn't going to kill anybody, not even a woman. See, they always had to worry anyway, every time it's a chance, get knocked up and maybe die in childbirth, die getting rid of it, or anyway your life's not gonna be the same. (259)

The ultimate separation of disease and pregnancy from sex which occurs with the advent of the Shapely virus creates a radical rupture in which the last traces of analogue existence, which were contained within sexuality, are over-written. The potential of the new digital script, though, is still under debate: “Oh, I know, I know you all think you live in all the times at once, everything recorded for you. It's all there to play back. Digital. That's all that is, though: playback.” At least initially, those who have lived in both eras (as the above speaker has) question the potential for progress, change, and even authentic experience in a digital context.

Baudrillard proposes that this is precisely the condition of humanity as virus. If death is neither fatal nor particularly symbolic, then only virtual existence remains.

Death becomes, like sex, a leisure activity, entertainment wherein “human beings, henceforth useless, might themselves be preserved as a kind of ontological 'attraction'” (11-12). Yet Baudrillard's anxieties revolve around cancers; HIV appears to create a much more complex immortality in which death remains symbolic. The religious framework in which Shapely persists, and the evangelical nature of the discourse surrounding his body and disease, suggest that death has simply transformed itself, not vanished. Thus, viral infection may ultimately provide a more useful (and certainly more fertile) analysis of sexual humanity than Baudrillard's cancers. Potentially, not only gay male bodies but also female ones may be radically revised in a viral culture which rapidly converts or reduces all human beings to information, and potentially transforms some information into human beings. In either case, Baudrillard's notion of “pathological immortality” is a useful one, and it intersects rather neatly with Haraway's image of pathological terrorism. Disembodied, virtual women, in the course of creating their own communities of recognition, have the potential to infect and disrupt fundamental regulatory practices of power and sex.

Gibson's *Interstitial Trilogy*⁴¹ plays out Butler's assertion that “the matrix of gender relations is prior to the emergence of the 'human'” (*Bodies* 7), primarily by constructing explicitly pre-human women. The male gaze still dominates, but the women's to-be-looked-at-ness is markedly unstable:

Sometimes you saw things up there and couldn't quite be sure you'd seen them or

⁴¹ The *Interstitial Trilogy* (also known as the *Bridge Trilogy*) consists of *Virtual Light* (1993), *Idoru* (1996), and *All Tomorrow's Parties* (1999). While Gibson writes almost exclusively in novel-trilogies, he does not name them. Like the *Cyberpunk Trilogy*, the *Interstitial Trilogy's* collective name is critically imposed.

not. One full-moon night Rydell had slung Gunhead [his van] around a curve and frozen a naked woman in the headlights, the way a deer'll stop, trembling, a country road. Just a second she was there, long enough for Rydell to think he'd seen that she either wore silver horns or some kind of hat with an upturned crescent, and that she might've been Japanese, which struck him right then as the weirdest thing about any of it. Then she saw him – he *saw* her see him – and smiled. Then she was gone. (*Virtual Light* 23)

This first vision of “the woman,” who becomes a recurring figure throughout the trilogy, functions much as Jimmy's first vision of Oryx does. He looks at her (the Asian, sexualized woman), and she looks back. In that moment, he (Rydell/Jimmy) realizes the possibility that the woman exists independently of his gaze, and that she may, in fact, be constituting herself. The naked woman differs from Oryx in her adulthood, her freedom from sexual exploitation, and her amusement, yet in many ways the two overlap. The naked woman has horns, like an animal, and pauses like a deer⁴² caught in headlights. An oryx is a delicate antelope (deer) with curving horns. We encounter in this moment the possibility of Oryx astray, free from Crake and wandering the Hollywood Hills to terrorize random security guards and religious fundamentalists.⁴³

The woman's sexuality is central to this encounter. Rydell wonders, afterward, “did Japanese women ever have that kind of long curly hair? And hadn't it looked like

⁴² While it is tempting to identify the woman as a wandering “Deer Woman,” her Japanese ethnicity defies the Cherokee origins of the Deer Woman story. Similarly, though Sublett instantly links her with horror movies, the *Masters of Horror* short film “Deer Woman” was not released until 2005, in time for the events of *Virtual Light*, but twelve years after its publication.

⁴³ Sublett, Rydell's security-guard partner, belongs to a Christian media cult.

the shadowed darkness of her bush had been shaved into something like an exclamation point?" (24). The male observer questions her humanity, her ethnicity, and the details of her genitalia, but he never doubts that she is a woman. In this sense, the horned woman manifests the most basic cultural conception of what a woman is: an object of desire (a dream girl), a vagina, and, presumably, a uterus within. She points to the question of where and when sex is generated:

If gender is the social construction of sex, and if there is no access to this "sex" except by means of its construction, then it appears not only that sex is absorbed by gender, but that "sex" becomes something like a fiction, perhaps a fantasy, retroactively installed at a prelinguistic site to which there is no direct access.

(Butler, *Bodies* 5)

Rydell's encounter with the deer woman provides a momentary glimpse of the fiction/fantasy of sex. Language, too, breaks down and becomes chaotic:

Sublett had seen her, too, but it only kicked him into some kind of motormouthed ecstasy of religious dread, every horror-movie he'd ever seen tumbling over into Reverend Fallon's rants about witches, devil-worshippers, and the living power of Satan. He'd gone through his week's supply of gum, talking nonstop, until Rydell had finally told him to shut the fuck up. (*Virtual Light* 23)

Sublett's reaction is not precisely prelinguistic, but the potential for a literary text to generate a prelinguistic encounter is curtailed by the form. The ecstatic rant and the tangle of Sublett's religious language, erotic content, and oral fixation, though, do suggest that the man is accessing the prelinguistic at least indirectly. In the moment after the

encounter, meaning breaks down almost entirely.

The woman's existence, or at least her materiality, is unstable. Rydell is immediately troubled by the question of “how it was she'd vanished,” and “how it was she'd managed to so perfectly and suddenly *not* be there. And the funny thing was, he sort of remembered it two ways” (24). In his memory, she moves off simultaneously in two separate directions, both up and down, as though she has exceeded the limits of Schrodinger's cat⁴⁴ and found a way to be in two states at once even while she is being observed. That simultaneity points to a non-material existence, a state in which the woman is only probable, not certain. Rydell's musing points to his rising awareness of the possibilities/probabilities that she represents: “He knew he didn't know what she was, and in some funny way he didn't even care if she'd been human or not. But he hadn't ever felt like she was bad, just different.” In this encounter, viral femininity moves from being a possibility, a theoretical idea, to a probability, one of several possible states among which the hypothetical “she” shifts.

It subsequently emerges that the horned woman is a hologram, a projected image functioning as an avatar for some other, unseen body. Rydell re-encounters the Japanese woman, without her horns, in a bar, still naked, but more obviously a projection. Instead of an elemental horned goddess, this naked Japanese woman (for she is subtly distinct: hornless and pubically unshaven) is “Josie's dancer,” the performance avatar for “a very fat woman in a wheelchair, her hair the color and texture of coarse steel wool” (185-86). This image is the “digital clone” that Jimmy expects Oryx to be: she is an object of

⁴⁴ Also Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, but cyborgs are such close kin to animals that, on the whole, the cat in the box seems a more appropriate metaphor.

fantasy, for her creator even more than for her audience. Josie's dancer, in fact, has almost no audience to speak of:

The Japanese woman – the hologram, Rydell reminded himself – raised her arms and began to dance, a sort of looping shuffle, timed not to the tempo of the drums but to the waves of static washing back and forth across the sound, and when Rydell thought to look he saw the fat woman's eyes were open, her hands moving inside that plastic [the control panel].

Nobody else in the bar was paying it any attention at all, just Rydell and the woman in the wheelchair. (187)

In this moment, the potential of the horned woman collapses. She is neither as real nor as fantastically unreal as Rydell wishes her to be. The nature of a digital clone is psychically invasive without offering the possibility of transformation. Josie represents, at least for Rydell, the possibility that “now we find ourselves liberated from sex – that is, virtually relieved of the sexual function All these useless functions – sex, thought, death – will be redesigned, redesignated as leisure activities” (Baudrillard, “The Final Solution” 10-11). Rydell arrives at a moment of composite revulsion and disappointment in which “[h]e looked at the gizmo [controlling the dancer], back at the fat woman in the wheelchair, and felt sad. Angry, too. Like he'd lost something” (*Virtual Light* 186). The virtual clone challenges categories of neither sex nor humanity, and this renders her radically less magical in Rydell's perception.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ This is not to say that the virtual clone does not have a function, and an important one, but that function orients to the nature of the cyborg rather than the nature of sex. Josie's cyborg nature excludes Rydell, who perceives her only as a grotesque and sexless body, never allowing her even a name. (“Josie” is named by an onlooker.) Her lack of desirability may or may not be related to her disability, but that disability

Rydell's disappointment suggests that the virtual clone is less than he desires, but his moment of alienation also points to an essential aspect of the feminist cyborg. The dancer, an extension of the disabled woman, is precisely outside Rydell's desire; she does not exist for him. Instead, she offers the first inklings that “[t]he cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity” (Haraway 150). While the virtual clone in the Hollywood Hills has been edited for greater desirability, the dancer-clone exists only for herself, without pretence of seduction.

The shift away from Oryx-the-seductress (the horned woman with her edited pubic hair, the virtual clones of pornography) to the dancer-clone is the moment that Lacan anticipates when he arrives at subversion of knowledge (*connaissance*): “Up til now, in relation to knowledge nothing has ever been conceived of which did not share in the fantasy of inscribing a sexual tie – and we cannot say that the subjects of the ancient theory of knowledge were not conscious of the fact” (152). All fantasies rely on the sexual relation, all forms of knowledge hinge upon it, *up til now*. (We are HERE.) In *Idoru*, the novel which follows *Virtual Light* in the interstitial trilogy, we are precisely here/now, at the moment when a radically different subjectivity and relationship with the body develop.⁴⁶

Idoru hinges on the notion that human existence is fundamentally a function of

is central to the clone-dancer's function. Much more needs to be said of this, and it will be, in chapter 6.

⁴⁶ The notion that we may be located in time, in an evolutionary progression of existence, is perhaps specious, except that notions of evolution and progressivism underlie SF as a genre.

data flow, an assumption which reinforces notions of virality as an essential form of community-building, and even of existence. Colin Laney, the novel's erstwhile male protagonist⁴⁷, works as a data miner, “stalking” celebrities and their associates on the Internet and drawing intuitive conclusions from the patterns those lives generate:

Laney was not, he was careful to point out, a voyeur. He had a peculiar knack with data-collection architectures, and a medically documented concentration-deficit that he could toggle, under certain conditions, into a state of pathological hyperfocus. This made him, he continued[,] . . . an extremely good researcher.

(25)

Laney's work as a tabloid television researcher translates data flow from abstract mathematics into bio-viral terms. His female supervisor conceives of celebrity as a “subtle fluid, a universal element, like the phlogiston of the ancients, something spread evenly at creation through all the universe, but prone now to accrete, under specific conditions, around certain individuals and their careers” (7). The image of a “subtle fluid” suggests a seminal flow stripped of its associations with sex, creating an intimate force of viral contagion which reinforces traditional *connaissance*.

Yet simultaneously, the consumers of celebrity have reverted to a grotesque pre-sexual state which offers no possibilities for new forms of viral recognition. Sex, thought, and death have progressed beyond leisure activities to afterthoughts, at least

⁴⁷ The narrative in *Idoru* shifts between two perspectives, Laney's and that of an adolescent girl named Chia Pet McKenzie. (The latter name fulfills its own pattern. *Virtual Light* is co-narrated by the above-mentioned Rydell and a young female bike messenger named Chevette Washington. Gibson's naming of young women after low-quality commercial objects is at most a quirk. It may speak as much to the blurring of cultural boundaries as much as it does to the status of young women, who work as the novels' problem-solvers.

metaphorically. Though its body persists, the audience is only incidentally human, bearing far more resemblance to a cultural cancer:

Slitscan's audience . . . is best visualized as a vicious, profoundly ignorant, perpetually hungry organism craving the warm god-flesh of the anointed. Personally I like to imagine something the size of a baby hippo, the color of a week-old boiled potato, that lives by itself, in the dark, in a double-wide on the outskirts of Topeka. It's covered with eyes and it sweats constantly. The sweat runs into those eyes and makes them sting. It has no mouth, . . . no genitals, and can only express its mute extremes of murderous rage and infantile desire by changing the channels on a universal remote.⁴⁸ (*Idoru* 28-29)

The audience exceeds the physical grotesquerie of Josie the cyborg; the audience manifests “the moving life of what is dead” (“The Final Solution” 12). This is the negative image of the cyborg. It (because the audience is “it,” never “he” or “she” or even “they”) is the most primitive form of the psyche, trapped in an oral stage with no mouth, sexless without a balancing unity. Functionally, Slitscan's audience manifests the abjection of all of middle America, where

[t]he abject designates . . . precisely those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 3)

Idoru's domain of the subject is rigidly circumscribed, to the extent that middle America simply cannot be resurrected. The Pacific Rim, composed of Seattle, Los Angeles,

⁴⁸ “Or by voting in presidential elections” (29).

Taipei, and Tokyo, and the virtual world generated from those cities, becomes the new realm of the human.

Where, precisely, subjectivity is located in this realm is open to question. Laney, the man who reads patterns in the data, initially seems to have near-exclusive claim on subjectivity. Rapidly, he arrives at the same critical moment that Jimmy does. Laney idly sifts through data and fixates on Alison Shires, aspiring actress and mistress to a male celebrity. His gaze objectifies her so completely that she becomes stereotypically feminine, embodying the promise of profound unity: “Husbands didn't know their wives this way, or wives their husbands. Stalkers might aspire to know the objects of their obsession this way, but never could” (52). Laney “looks” at her in the data stream, and she “looks” back at him: “Alison Shires *knew*, somehow, that he was there, watching. As though she felt him gazing down, into the pool of data that reflected her life, its surface made of all the bits that were the daily record of her life as it registered on the digital fabric of the world” (41). Laney's supervisor (she of the “baby hippo” description) informs him of the sheer impossibility of Alison's returning gaze, but the connection compels Laney to seek out “the wet, warm life in Alison Shires” (49).

Laney never entirely registers that his gaze is part of the objectification Alison Shires seeks to escape. In the moment he recognizes her recognizing him, he realizes “[s]he was going to kill herself” (41), but that realization only drives his pursuit. When Laney looks away, takes a vacation, Alison's mental state grows more life-affirming. As he returns, though, and moves towards her, he discovers her frantically trying to shed her body. He is convinced that though she “naked, opened the door” to him, “there in her

eyes [was] what he took then and forever as a look of simple recognition, not even of blame” (57). She evades his attempts to staunch her already slit and bleeding wrists, and instead retreats to her kitchen and shoots herself in the head, freeing herself from his gaze permanently.

Alison's frantic push towards suicide is as vivid a manifestation of the death drive as one can easily conjure. In the moments before her death, she appears at her door “naked, . . . Upful Groupvine soaring joyfully behind her . . . [with] blood-slick wrists” (57). Her fusion of mindlessly ecstatic media with self-mutilation and suicide enacts the complexities of *sinthomosexuality*:

the sinthome – as stupid enjoyment, as the node of senseless compulsion on which the subject's singularity depends – connects us to something Real beyond the “discourse” of the symptom, connects us to the unsymbolizable Thing over which we constantly stumble, and so, in turn, to the death drive I am calling *sinthomosexuality*, then, the site where the fantasy of futurism confronts the insistence of a jouissance that rends it precisely by *rendering* it in relation to that drive. (Edelman 38)

Alison, though not written as homosexual, embodies a denial of futurity by inscribing her lack of desire for the future into her flesh with a box cutter. Her subscription to Upful Groupvine, a media provider “whose relentlessly positive product was the musical equivalent of the Good News Channel” (*Idoru* 51), links her back to the universe of stupid enjoyment; it is one of her last human acts, before she transforms herself from woman to symbol using a cheap knife and a disposable hand gun.

Edelman's identification of "the node of senseless compulsion" is telling: Laney predicts Alison's otherwise unanticipated suicide when he "watche[s] a nodal point begin to form over [her]" (*Idoru* 41). He later identifies nodal points as key moments in history when "[e]verything changed" (*All Tomorrow's Parties* 4). If we accept Alison Shires as a feminine *sinthomosexual*, then her suicide can be recognized as a moment of fracture more or less by its very nature. Alison (in an echo of Edelman's reading of Ebenezer Scrooge),

as *sinthomosexual*, denies, by virtue of [her] unwillingness to contribute to the communal realization of futurity, the fantasy structure, the aesthetic frame, supporting reality itself. [She] realizes, that is, the *jouissance* that derealizes sociality and thereby threatens, in Žižek's words, "the total destruction of the symbolic universe." (Edelman 45)

Alison's suicide breaks apart the last organic, interstitial woman. Other women persist, but as cyborgs. Other female bodies engage with the organic, but only as vacations from cyborg existence. Whatever had persisted of feminine wholeness collapses here, and with that collapse, uncomplicated realizations of femininity in a technologized world become absurd. Laney himself is catapulted into a new territory of gender and technology. Though he never fully articulates the connection, Alison Shires' suicide marks the point of when-it-all-changed for Laney, sending him into the orbit of Rei Toei, the *Idoru*.

Frederic Jameson uses Gibson's moments of "When-it-all-changed" to identify the break that created postmodernism, "for shifts and irrevocable changes in the

representation of things and the way they change” (Jameson ix). It is worth noting, though, that Jameson's moment of rupture belongs to the Cyberpunk Trilogy; he cites *Mona Lisa Overdrive* as his source of the phrase (Jameson 419).⁴⁹ The transformation/union of AIs in *Neuromancer* triggers that particular cycle of change, and the shift completes with Angie's “marriage” to Bobby Newmark. Functionally, then, Jameson points to a *seminal* moment of when-it-all-changed. In *Idoru* and its sequel *All Tomorrow's Parties*, Gibson proposes a corresponding ovular shift which, far from reconstituting the phantasmatic family, dismantles women down to their matrix (as it were) and re-materializes them in “new” sexual territory.⁵⁰ However, as we shall see, what Gibson presumes to be *terra nullius*⁵¹ may ultimately prove to be *terra periculosa*.⁵²

The *Idoru*, Rei Toei, is a virtual media figure, a feminine-gendered piece of software whose creators entreat us to “envision *aggregates of subjective desire*. It was decided that the modular array would ideally constitute an architecture of articulated longing” (*Idoru* 178). In this sense, Rei is precisely the Manic Pixie Dream Girl that filmmakers have long sought to create: not a generic feminine form, but an “alternative” femininity which implies originality in her viewer at least as much as in her self. In the most basic construction of the MPDG, self-hood is not even necessary, and Rei fulfills this as well. Initially, Rei is not identified as an AI at all, merely as a computer program

⁴⁹ However illusory linear history may be, Jameson would have had some difficulty citing the Interstitial Trilogy, given that *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* was first published in 1991, and *Virtual Light* in 1993. His scholarship is not in question. Only his cultural location is subject to scrutiny.

⁵⁰ This ovular movement echoes Russ' Whileawayan utopia in its confrontation with compulsory heterosexuality.

⁵¹ Empty territory; figuratively rather than literally no man's land. (There are no men here, etymologically.)

⁵² Dangerous land or territory, of hazard to travellers.

without access to cognition or self-awareness. That identity, though, reveals far more about cultural and gender perceptions of アイドル (*aidoru*, or “idols”) than it does about Rei herself. (Her self's emergence is the core of *Idoru*'s plot.) In the novel's prefatory “Thanks” page, Gibson cites Karl Taro Greenfeld's *Speed Tribes: Days and Nights with Japan's Next Generation* as a source that “richly fed [his] dreams of Laney's jet lag,” and indeed Greenfeld offers a pointed perspective on what an *aidoru*⁵³ is, and what s/he (the term is gender-neutral) is for.

Greenfeld's history of “idol music” characterizes the genre as “combining bubble-gummy Western pop sounds with childish Japanese puppy-love lyrics, creating a kind of vacuous pop” (186). This highly commercialized media industry relies on the recurring spectre of digital clones: “Hundreds of new idols, replicated and cloned from last year's equally fatuous models, appear and vanish within a few weeks of their highly publicized debuts” (187). The clone metaphor is as malevolent here as it was in *Oryx and Crake*. Greenfeld's punk-rocker interviewee characterizes idol music as “responsible for everything that is bland, boring, and fucked about rock and roll” (188). The aesthetics are depressingly bright and empty; the sounds, which “find a musical trend and then make bubble-gum version of it,” recall Upful Groupvine.

However, beneath the plastic sheen of the genre, the clones find themselves as casually exploited as Oryx and her compatriots are. Greenfeld records allegations that at

⁵³ I use *aidoru* in place of *idoru* or *Idoru* to distinguish 1990s-contemporary Japanese pop culture idols from the virtual woman of Gibson's novel. The pronunciations are identical.

アイドル is a karikana transliteration of “idol.” The use of karikana script marks a recent borrowing or neologism. Compare with 塵, *gomi*, which uses classical kanji script.

least one idol promoter's sins involve not aesthetic blandness “but sodomy”:

A record executive who has worked with Johnny⁵⁴ for the past twenty years says the rumours about Johnny are true. “Johnny is that way. Look, these days, a kid thirteen or fourteen is not a boy anymore, so what's the big deal? This kind of stuff happens in this business because you're so close to the acts. You're on the road, with a kid all the time, eating, sleeping. The idol scene is an intense atmosphere. If these were thirteen- or fourteen-year-old *girls* then no one would be shocked.” (189, emphasis original)

Idols exist to be exploited, at least economically, and sexual exploitation rapidly becomes part and parcel of the process. The anonymity of individual *aidoru*, the pervasive cultural sense in which they are clones, contributes to the legitimization of their exploitation. Jimmy has no sympathy for digital clone children in pornography because they are fundamentally unreal. The *aidoru* are biological entities,⁵⁵ but they are subject to dehumanization: “Idols are nothing but cute faces easily manipulated Idols rarely write their own music, nor devise their own images” (188). The *aidoru*'s lack of artistic authenticity rapidly becomes an absence of human authenticity, and then an absence of humanity.

While the *aidoru* of Greenfeld's book are only metaphorical clones, the casual attitude which observers take to their exploitation indicates a systematic attitude towards

⁵⁴ “Johnny”'s family name is listed in Speed Tribes. It has been elided here because of the nature of the allegations made against him.

⁵⁵ More correctly, *most aidoru* are biological entities. Virtual *aidoru*, animated or computer-generated, have a parallel tradition in Japan since the 1990s. The most recent popular figure, Hatsune Miku, presents as a green-haired sixteen-year-old girl. She “exists” as a packaged software product as well as a concert-giving pop star.

clones as a class. A clone, whether biological (analogue) or digital, is *not of woman born*. While the Handmaids' bodies and selves may break down in the face of forced, industrialized childbearing, they are "at least" fulfilling a basic function of human *bios*. Clones, produced without literal mother and father, can only be reproductions with depreciated qualities of presence. They lack precisely what Walter Benjamin identifies as the core of authenticity, "the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced" (221). In this sense, the *aidoru* are precisely clones, because they are industrial reproductions of artists. While mechanical reproduction may "separat[e] art from its basis in cult," the *aidoru* never have contact with the cult of authenticity at all, so that the semblance of *their* autonomy disappears even more rapidly than that of their art (226).

Baudrillard takes up this breakdown of autonomy and authenticity. The breakdown of humanity as a hard category, he suggests, is intimately related to the breakdown of humanism, so that "[w]hen we look behind the Rights of Man, we no longer find a moral or sovereign being, but instead the prerogatives of an endangered species" (21). In such a context, he wonders, "Is it possible to speak of the soul, or the conscience, or even of the unconscious from the point of view of the automatons, the chimeras, and the clones that will supersede the human race?" (23). His concern is explicitly one of authenticity: if the unconscious and/or if the soul do not exist in clones, then the clones must represent a lower form of existence, less than the exalted Man. Yet this may be precisely why clones are useful, and why Gibson uses an *idoru*, an artistic

clone, as a framework for a transformation of femininity.

Rei Toei fuses the cultural ubiquity of *aidoru* with the sexual potential of an AI. Laney anticipates her “as some industrial-strength synthesis of Japan's last three dozen top female media faces,” that is, as a standard digital clone (*Idoru* 175). What he discovers instead is a digital woman who is precisely not a clone, but whose existence, while not material (she exists as software and as a hologram, but has no body), is nonetheless powerfully authentic:

She was nothing like that [synthesis].

Her black hair, rough-cut and shining, brushed pale bare shoulders as she turned her head. She had no eyebrows, and both her lids and lashes seemed to have been dusted with something white, leaving her dark pupils in stark contrast.

And now her eyes met his.

He seemed to cross a line. In the very structure of her face, in geometries of underlying bone, lay coded histories of dynastic flight, privation, terrible migrations. He saw stone tombs in steep alpine meadows, their lintels traced with snow. A line of shaggy pack ponies, their breath white with cold, followed a trail above a canyon. The curves of the river below were strokes of distant silver. Iron harness bells clanked in the blue dusk.

Laney shivered. In his mouth a taste of rotten metal.

The eyes of the idoru, envoy of some imaginary country, met his. (175-76)

The density of this first encounter is remarkable. (It should be noted that this is the single

longest description of Rei Toei in either *Idoru* or *All Tomorrow's Parties*. Her appearance is usually immaterial, as it were.) Rei's appearance is minimalist, invoking the pale skin and shaggy dark hair of all Gibson's female cyborgs. In her face, we see not pop stars but Lise and Molly Millions, fragments of Angela Mitchell and *Virtual Light's* Chevette Washington. Most of what Laney "sees," though, is not appearance at all, but authenticity transmitted from *her* beginning, ranging from *her* substantive duration to *its* testimony to the history which *she* has experienced. Laney recognizes that Rei "is not flesh; she is information. She is the tip of an iceberg, no, an Antarctica, of information" (178). Yet he is startled when a colleague refers to a music video "where she's a Mongol princess or something, up in the mountains" (180). Laney is as profoundly disappointed by the idea that his vision of her authenticity is only a music video as Rydell was by the discovery that his horned woman was only a hologram.

However, what Laney gradually comes to understand, as the reader does, is that the music video is not a mechanically reproduced image of Rei, but a part of her. She cannot be depreciated; instead, she becomes more herself through her existence as an idoru: "Rei's only reality is the realm of ongoing serial creation Entirely *process*; infinitely more than the combined sum of her various selves. The platforms sink beneath her, one after another, as she grows denser and more complex" (202). The video that disappoints Laney bears almost no connection to either Casey's father's master copies in danger of burnout or Lise's "Kings of Sleep," which burns her out in "The Winter Market." Rei's agent (she has no "owner" as such, though she is not legally human) assures Laney that "we don't 'make' Rei's videos . . . , not in the usual sense. They

emerge directly from her ongoing experience of the world. They are her dreams” (237).

Rei's existence as a dreaming AI is radically different from Lise's, not least because Rei's subjectivity is not in question. No one questions whether “it” is “her.” Heather Hicks' speculation that Lise is freed by “the new visualizing technologies that can take her to a realm in which she controls her own image as well as the art images she produces – a realm in which she is no image or all image, as she pleases” (86) is perhaps more appropriate for Rei, whose control of her image and the images she produces is not in question. She has a representative (*Idoru* 175), but whereas Lise takes up space in a corporate mainframe, Rei submerges and escapes her hardware platforms. She owns a company; a company does not own her. Rei's ownership of herself, though, is more than a legal function. She owns herself in a discursive sense which materializes “her” and “self.” Critic Tama Leaver “utiliz[es] Judith Butler's idea of performativity . . . [to] argue that Rei's discursive identity is sufficiently legitimate to warrant her own chosen gender identity.” If, indeed, Rei's reality does not pre-exist, and this seems fairly self-evident given her lack of materiality, then she becomes feminine through discourse and performance. In the course of *All Tomorrow's Parties*, in fact, Rei becomes not only feminine but female, not only gendered, but sexed.

Rei, as a digital idoru, mimics man rather than woman. Her disembodiment (literal rather than phantasmatic) frees her from the functions of the body, so that she may encroach upon “the figure of human reason, . . . 'man' as one who is without a childhood; is not a primate and so is relieved of the necessity of eating, defecating, living and dying; one who is not a slave but always a property holder” (Butler, *Bodies* 48). As an AI, she is

the body of reason without the body. However, Rei recognizes almost immediately that as long as she remains disembodied, she supports Plato's discourse, "which does not permit the notion of the female body as a human form" (53). Paradoxically, Rei disembodied is simultaneously a perfect human figure and rigorously inhuman.

For most critics, this has not been an issue, precisely because posthumanity rules the interstitial critical roost. N. Katherine Hayles asserts posthumanity as a direct descendant of Turing, whose work transformed

the question of 'who can think' into 'what can think.' it would also necessarily bring into question other characteristics of the liberal subject, for [the Turing test] made the crucial move of distinguishing between the enacted body, present in the flesh on one side of the computer screen, and the represented body, produced through the verbal and semiotic markers constituting it in an electronic environment. (xiii)

Hayles' thinking is profoundly influential in Gibsonian criticism. She systematically re-inserts the body into contemporary constructions of post-humanism. Unfortunately, other critics seize on posthumanity as a kind of radical virtue (as other critics have at various times seized on postmodernism or cyborg-ness) which allows *Idoru* to be the "testbed of our futurity" (Farnell 468, quoting *Idoru* 238). In posthuman discussions, the body becomes irrelevant. Hayles reminds us that "[i]n the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals" (3). However, this does not erase the body, nor render it undesirable.

Posthuman perceptions of the body are key to readings of Rei's transformation in *All Tomorrow's Parties*. In the novel's climax, Rei takes advantage of new technology to “nanofax” herself, building a biological body in the process. Ross Farnell supposes Rei is “desiring to escape the confines of the *digital* prison via some inconclusive transcendence *toward* the flesh” (472). The ambivalence of the phrase “inconclusive transcendence” reveals Farnell's concerns with the process. However, even more telling is his reference to “abandoning the meat,” which aligns Rei with Case and the ethos of cyberpunk console cowboys. Gender does not enter into his critique except insofar as he presumes that Rei “moves toward the corporeality of Rez,” the rock star whom she seeks to “marry” in *Idoru*, ignoring the fact that by the onset of *All Tomorrow's Parties* Rez and Rei have separated (5). Farnell never considers, as posthumanity never considers, that the body might be valuable for its own sake, rather than “an accident of history” (Hayles 2). However, even if we deny the body as an accident of history, it need not be “an inevitability of life.” There remains a third possibility, that the body may be valuable as an oppositional site from which a digital woman may confront the matrix of gender relations and the regulatory ideals of sex.

In doing so, the woman-becoming challenges the boundaries of the human. Rei Toei finally (in the last pages of *All Tomorrow's Parties*) uses mechanical technology to literally materialize herself, building her body out of invisible machine-fragments into an organic whole that owes as much to Rydell's horned woman as it does to Rei's holographic image: “the hatch [of the nanofax] slides up and out crawls, unfolds sort of, this butt-naked girl, black hair, maybe Chinese, maybe Japanese, something, she's long

and thin, not much titties on her . . . but she's smiling” (269). This naked, ambiguously Asian woman, delighted with her new self, walks naked out into a world of chaos in which “it'll take more than a naked Japanese girl get anybody's attention” She is material for the first time, and implicitly biological (if only because androids have never been part of Gibson's cultural language). However, she is the woman who is not one; she is a multitude. As she walks out of the convenience store in which she takes life, this Rei joins a televised crowd: “when he sees her walk past the screens there, he sees her on every last screen, walking out of every Lucky Dragon in the world, wearing that same smile.”

Rei takes on not only a body, but all bodies; she walks out simultaneously in all countries of the world as a mechanical clone, distinctly non-virtual but ambiguous in her nature. This, however, has always been at the core of Rei Toei's existence: the conflict, or lack thereof, between nature and technology. Traditional western humanism, “that of the Enlightenment, was based on the qualities of man, on his natural gifts and virtues – on his essence, which went hand-in-hand with his right to liberty and the exercise of that liberty” (Baudrillard, “The Final Solution” 21). The qualities of man, Baudrillard continues, are embedded within a biological notion of what man (and, extendedly, humanity) is. Baudrillard does not examine the gap between the essential qualities of man and the fundamental nature of the human; he extends the definition from one to the other without considering gaps of gender or conflicts as to what the natural gifts and virtues of not-man (becoming-woman) might be. He does, however, note a cultural intersection fundamental to the distinction, that “[n]on-Occidental cultures do not

discriminate between the human and the inhuman” (24).

The absence of that distinction is the core of Rei Toei's existence. She is not incidentally Japanese, nor is the horned woman before her. Rather, they are deliberately Japanese, created by/within a cultural context which does not share the west's anxiety about boundaries of the human. Farnell's critique arrives as the words “the testbed of our futurity;” he neglects to mention that while the explicit definition of that testbed is “popular culture,” the Japanese world-view lies at the testbed's core. Rei's manager explains, “Do you know that our word for 'nature' is of quite recent coinage? It is scarcely a hundred years old. We have never developed a sinister view of technology It is an aspect of the natural, of oneness. Through our efforts, oneness perfects itself” (*Idoru* 238). This perspective provides a radical contrast to Baudrillard's cloning anxiety. Without the hard categories of *bios* and *techne*, Rei emerges not as a terrifying “Final Solution” that “operates in absentia, though technological undifferentiation” (“The Final Solution” 24) but as a new possibility in female materialization which does not so much erase human existence as continue in parallel, becoming as man/humanity becomes, the human and the posthuman, or the human and the cyborg, or Man and women, simultaneously.

Rei Toei is not, by any means, a final solution. Her materialization does not erase gender relations, or subsume humanity. On her first appearance in the Lucky Dragon convenience store, an adolescent boy watching her judges that there are “not much titties on her the way Boomzilla likes” (*All Tomorrow's Parties* 268-69). She does not cease to be an object of desire, or of articulated longing, but she has gained her own material

subjectivity. Though Rei is a multitude, that subjectivity is not universal. She does not erase Lise's experience of disability, or efface Shapely's sacrifice. She does, however, embody an alternative futurity, one which encompasses the *sinthomosexual* as well as the range of heterosexually reproductive bodies. Her investment in the future is individual rather than collective. Though hardly a cancer, Rei is explicitly a virus, quietly loosed on the world in a moment of chaos, and, in Gibson's words, she *is* when-it-all-changed. Her sexual revolution creates a version of the cyborg which encompasses non-Western femininity. Rei literally embodies the cyborg opposition to the tradition

of 'Western' science and politics – the tradition of racist, male-dominated capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as a resource for the production of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflection of the other – [in which] the relation between organism and machine has been a border war. (Haraway 150)

The digital “dream girl” embodied enacts opposition to each of those traditions by her very existence. It is not by accident that Rei embodies in the last moments of the trilogy; “progress” ruptures in the moment she steps out all over the world. Subsequent to his writing of Rei's emergence, Gibson abandoned SF for contemporary fiction; the future ends, and only the present remains. The present is a profoundly dangerous territory (she is HERE), both physically (Rei steps out into a natural disaster and riot) and psychically, but provides a space in which boundaries perpetually rot. Rei steps out in a territory between male and female, human and inhuman, *bios* and *techne*. She becomes an outsider: non-Western, digital, technologically adept, and, only moments after her

materialization, already invisible to the structures of power.

Chapter 5
Woman Gave Names to All the Animals: Food, Fauna, and Anorexia

When Colin Laney rears back, terrified, from Rei Toei's induced holographic narrative in *Idoru*, he focusses instead on her hands, and the virtual chopsticks in them. The idoru has joined a group of normally-embodied humans for dinner, and in the course of her mimicking human life, she “eats”:

The meal was elaborate, many small courses served on individual rectangular plates. Each time a plate was placed before Rei Toei, and always within the field of whatever projected her, it was simultaneously veiled with a flawless copy, holo food on a holo plate.

Even the movement of her chopsticks brought on peripheral flickers of nodal vision. Because the chopsticks were information too, but nothing as dense as her features, her gaze. As each “empty” plate was removed, the untouched serving would reappear. (*Idoru* 178)

In the course of the meal, Rei enacts a fundamental performance of femininity, seeming to eat while in fact consuming nothing. She engages with food entirely as a social medium. Rei ostensibly has no physical needs or desires. She cannot eat/does not need to eat, but performs eating as a delicate, feminine, ultimately ethereal act. While Rei is a

constructed *aggregate of subjective desire* (Idoru 178),⁵⁶ the issue of her own desires is frequently subsumed to the novel's techno-plot. Yet Rei's desires are clearly not, in spite of her social performance, desires for normalcy. Instead, she marks the instability of bodily desire, enacting “regular rituals in radically altered ways” (Hobgood 154). This is fundamentally a mark of anorexia, or at least of that mode of anorexia that metamorphoses eating into creative expression, and replaces food with food-related anxiety.

At first, the notion of a virtual anorexic may seem absurd. Surely, given that Rei does not *need* to eat, she is in no danger. Yet anorexia literally means “absence of desire” (Hobgood 155). Though in fact most anorexics do not suffer from a lack of appetite, the notion of absent desire allows critics to question “not . . . *what* anorexics want (a question grounded in the concept of lack), but *how* anorexics desire and how the productive mechanisms of anorexic desire work.” Whatever Rei wants, her desires are intimately related to her problems of embodiment, and to issues of “doing things normally.” When she eats/does not eat, she draws attention to the unstable boundary between normal and abnormal eating. While the disappearance/reappearance of her food is initially disturbing, her casual dismissal of full plates locates her entirely within the cultural idealization of the thin woman, beautiful but perpetually haunted by “body dissatisfaction, dieting, and weight- and food-related concerns” (Malson 99). Where eating is proscribed in the name of femininity, Rei's virtual femininity is made all the more “real” by her inability/refusal to eat.

⁵⁶ The italics remain necessary, even when the phrase is not directly quoted. The notion of aggregate desire exists within a permanently italicized state of urgency.

Gibson gives minimal attention to precisely what Rei and her dinner companions are eating, noting only that a lack or insecurity within the (male) diners “could be taken care of if you stuffed it methodically with enough sashimi” (*Idoru* 189). The “big plate of raw fish” that Laney consumes (179) almost completely escapes his notice, and is only drawn back to his attention when he discovers that he has eaten fugu (neurotoxin-bearing pufferfish). Food is largely irrelevant from the masculine perspective. Food is plentiful, presumably pleasant,⁵⁷ and paid for by someone else. Yet the image of plate after plate of raw fish remains. In the course of the dinner party, rock stars and businessmen, criminals and hackers dine absent-mindedly on animal flesh. Rei Toei does not. She is utterly mindful (in her ability to create a “flawless copy” of the food on her plate) and she does not, in fact, eat at all.

These fragments of the dinner mark the uncomfortable intersection of gender, food, and animals. The animals manifest only subtly, through a casual reference to puffer fish, but the animal's power manifests through the neurotoxin that numbs Laney's tongue and lips. No flesh-food, no matter how unnoticed (and Laney does not, in fact, notice the fugu at all until after he has consumed it entirely), exists without some manifest harm. Yet often those in power fail entirely to notice. Only female characters, pushed to the social margins, draw attention back to the animals who “made” dinner.

Gibson's writing is not, generally, highly engaged with questions of food. His characters, particularly those who disdain bodily concerns, have little interest in eating. Margaret Atwood gives food far more sustained attention. Her first novel, *The Edible*

⁵⁷ Even the fugu provides only a subtle experience. Laney consumes two helpings without realizing the neurotoxin threat, and afterwards discovers that the toxic effects are minimal: “Lips and tongue feel faintly numb? That's it” (179).

Woman (1969), is rarely discussed in conjunction with her later speculative fiction, but *The Edible Woman's* explorations of food, gender agency, and anorexia make it a necessary introduction to any serious discussion of Atwood's food politics. Marian McAlpin, the protagonist, finds herself almost randomly⁵⁸ unable to eat first meat, then other foods. At dinner with her fiancé, she involuntarily connects the meat on their plates with the intimate bodies of animals:

Watching Peter operating on the steak like that, carving a straight slice and then dividing it into neat cubes, made her think of the diagram of the planned cow at the front of one of her cookbooks: the cow with lines on it and labels to show you from which part of the cow all the different cuts were taken. What they were eating now was from some part of the back, she thought: cut on the dotted line. (167)

The subjective transition of dinner from “food” to “animal” is sudden and vivid. Marian's food has ceased to be a neutral substance. Though she chides herself, “This is ridiculous Everyone eats cows, it's natural: you have to eat to stay alive, meat is good for you, it has lots of proteins and minerals,” Marian is nonetheless unable to distinguish between her steak and “a hunk of muscle. Blood red. Part of a real cow that once moved and ate and was killed.” The animal's presence in her food functions as a trigger for Marian's anorexia. In the course of the novel, she identifies with ever more abstract foodstuffs, until she is left unable to eat at all.

Marian's “problem” (that is, her inability to eat anything that she can recognize as

⁵⁸ Marian's progressive anorexia is certainly *not* random, but it comes upon her unexpectedly, as a psychological surprise (as opposed to the product of an extended diet).

living) is generally taken by critics to be a neurotic symptom. Hobgood points to Marian's construction of a woman made of cake and her presentation of that "edible woman" to her fiancé (148). Marian's hunger returns only after she informs Peter, "You've been trying to destroy me, haven't you You've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn't it? I'll get you a fork" (*Edible* 301). Having transferred her anxieties into the cake, Marian presumably "gets over" her neurosis. She is even able to address her edible avatar with hunger and desire: "You look delicious Very appetizing. And that's what will happen to you; that's what you get for being food" (300). Yet Marian's regained appetite is not (as it were) entirely satisfying.⁵⁹ Her "recovery" takes the form of a miraculous cure, but that cure (if cure it is) is problematic, consisting of only a brief interlude at the end of the novel.

If, however, Marian's anorexia is not precisely a neurotic illness, then her relationship with food, and with her own subjectivity, must be recognized as far more complex than previous critics have acknowledged. A number of feminist theorists have confronted the medicalization of disordered eating as the disease *anorexia nervosa*. In *Fasting Girls*, Joan Jacobs Brumberg notes that "[i]n medieval Europe, particularly in the years between 1200 and 1500, many women refused their food and prolonged fasting was considered a female miracle" (41). While *anorexia mirabilis* (the name given to medieval "fasting women") and *anorexia nervosa* are more correlative than interchangeable, the

⁵⁹ The pun is, as usual, unintentional. This dissertation's focus seems to generate an infinite number of puns, most of them slightly morbid. The binary either/or at the core of digitality allows for little or no gradation in meaning. However, as we have seen, feminine perspectives rarely integrate seamlessly with digital culture. Puns may simply be a side-effect of that epistemological mismatch.

two forms share the use of “food and the body as a focus of their symbolic language” (46). The danger lies in critically conflating the two, so that one “converts a complex human behavior into a simple biomedical mechanism. ([The conflation] certainly does not respect important differences in the route to anorexia.)” Marian is not precisely “ill,” but she is distinctly fasting, and in the process, she is becoming, though she cannot yet tell becoming *what*.

The problem of transformation via anorexia has been heavily medicalized, but that medicalization may not be theoretically or politically useful. Rather, the medicalization allows anorexia to be intensely moralized. The morality of anorexia plays out almost entirely along gendered lines, much as AIDS does. Elspeth Probyn makes an explicit link between anorexia and AIDS in western cultural consciousness:

Anorexia has recently⁶⁰ hit the headlines as *the* post-modern illness. However, as with that other celebrated condition of our times, AIDS, the popular and medical press have imploded the multiple discourses that both the anorexic and the AIDS sufferer experience at the site of their bodies into one causal and moral discourse. Thus, one condition is explained away as the result of women taking their bodies too seriously (trying to reduce them to the representations of their sex), and the other is the moral wage for men being too close to their own sex. In this way, the portrayal of these two conditions is the antithesis of postmodernism; the signifier and the signified have been fused together at the site of the body. (203)

The parallel constructions of anorexia and AIDS suggest parallel gendered abjections (anorexia for women, AIDS for men). However, the anorexic body is not abjected in the

⁶⁰ Where “recently” is located circa 1987.

same way as the AIDS-infected body; fasting women do not occupy the same unlivable zone of social life as do AIDS patients. While Gibson's J.D. Shapely, the AIDS saint, is "a cock-sucking faggot" (*Virtual Light* 19), Marian McAlpin at her worst "come[s] out looking like a kid playing dress-up in her mother's clothes," a condition which can be corrected with the application of makeup and a corset (*The Edible Woman* 246). Marian's fasting body never entirely engages with the moral discourses of anorexia (not least because she ceases to eat circa 1968, a dozen years before anorexia exploded into a full cultural panic). Instead, she balances between "noting that she hadn't really lost much weight: she had been eating a lot of noodles" (244-45) and pouring herself into a socially-mandated corset before a dinner party:

She hadn't intended to buy one at all, but the saleslady who was selling her the dress and who was thoroughly corseted herself said that she ought to, and produced an appropriate model with satin panelling and a bow of ribbon at the front. "Of course you're very *thin* dear, you don't really need one, but still that *is* a close-fitting dress and you wouldn't want it to be obvious that you haven't got one on, would you?" (245)

The saleswoman suggests that all female bodies are shameful, but that Marian's is no more so than most. Marian's body continues to exist in a livable social zone, even as her mind drifts farther and farther away from social regulation. Her anorexic body exists at the cultural centre, at once fulfilling cultural demands for women's thinness and defying cultural demands for women's fertility (breasts, hips, menstruation).

The discourse of anorexic anxiety exalts thin bodies while asserting that a thin

woman “doesn't really look like a woman” and that desirable women should “be 'woman-shaped.' Thinness thus comes to signify not-woman as well as perfect femininity” (Malson 113). Sociologist Helen Malson notes that intersecting discourses create a site of conflict where, on the one hand, the thin body “connotes feminine fragility, defencelessness, and lack of power ('ideal' characteristics for a heroine of heterosexual romance discourse),” but that body simultaneously “may signify not-woman and perhaps a liberation from the oppression of traditional domestic femininity.” The amenorrhea-ic body (that which has fasted to the point at which menstruation ceases) overtly opposes constructions of reproductive femininity. The fasting woman, whose will (mind) opposes her appetites (body), necessarily becomes invested in Cartesian dualism. She transforms herself into a profound manifestation of the ghost in the machine.

The (feminine) ghost in the machine confronts a biological imperative even more fundamental than reproduction: all machines require fuel, and all people must eat. The key problem then becomes *what* precisely people must, or may, or will allow themselves to eat. Marian first flinches from eating meat when she envisions its animal origins. She strips away her diet to bare bones (no bones visible, too hard to stomach), then builds it up again into a cake, an edible woman. Faced with that edible body, she is suddenly profoundly hungry. She insists that “[t]he cake after all was only a cake,” but immediately returns to its human/feminine anatomy when she declares, “I'll start with the feet” (301). The spectacle of Marian eating the cake-woman causes her observing roommate to exclaim, “Marian! . . . You're rejecting your femininity!” (302). Marian retorts that “[i]t's only a cake,” then “neatly sever[s] the body from the head” (303). The

moment of severing is easily read as triumphant. Certainly, that sentence concludes the third-person narrative and allows Marian's first-person narration to resume. Yet Marian has explicitly severed head and body, and re-created the body-mind split of Cartesian dualism. The pathology of her anorexia persists even as her symptoms vanish.

The accusation that Marian is “rejecting [her] femininity!” at first seems absurd. Marian is not literally consuming herself. She is not rejecting reproductivity or sexuality. In fact, she is returning to them after a period of alienation. However, Marian *is* taking a deliberate step to reject awareness of the nature and origins of her food. She will eat, and live, and not imagine animal bodies as she does so. This is a survival tactic, but the rejection of knowledge allows Marian to step back from a subject-position which Atwood consistently associates with femininity: food-consciousness. Atwood's women eat (even Marian, who keeps herself alive with noodles), but they pay close attention to what they eat, and at moments they can be paralysed by the complexities of food.

Handmaid Offred goes grocery shopping at the beginning of her tale. She notes the purchases of her companion handmaid as crucial form of information-currency: “Ofglen gets steak . . . and that's the second time this week. I'll tell that to the Marthas: it's the kind of thing they enjoy hearing about” (*The Handmaid's Tale* 26). Even less expensive foods than meat reify complex political relationships and personal desires. The simple observation “they have oranges today” (24) encodes the entire history of a war: “[e]ver since Central America was lost to the Libertheos, oranges have been hard to get: sometimes they are there, sometimes not. The war interferes with the oranges from California, and even Florida isn't dependable, when there are roadblocks or when the

train tracks have been blown up” (25). Offred is rarely picky about her food, having chosen survival over starvation, but she is aware of her food politically.

Iris and Laura Chase have a more complex relationship with food. Years after her death, Laura “persists” in graffiti on a doughnut-shop bathroom stall:

The first sentence is in pencil, in rounded lettering like those on Roman tombs, engraved deeply in the paint: *Don't Eat Anything You Aren't Prepared to Kill.*

Then, in green marker: *Don't Kill Anything You Aren't Prepared to Eat.*

Under that, in ballpoint, *Don't Kill.*

Under that, in purple marker: *Don't Eat.*

And under that, the last word to date, in bold black lettering: *Fuck Vegetarians -- “All Gods are Carnivorous” -- Laura Chase. (The Blind Assassin 105)*

This graffiti discourse takes place entirely among women, in the women's washroom of a public restaurant. The aggressive, blunt language makes explicit the usually-sublimated anxieties and demands that underlie both vegetarianism and anorexia. *Don't Kill/Don't Eat* is the fundamental opposition of meat. Potentially, it is the opposition at the heart of all food, the awareness that something living must die to sustain each human moment. The irony of the final entry, though, is that Laura wrote no such thing; Iris did. From childhood, Laura is profoundly anxious about food's relationship with living beings. Iris recalls their opposing attitudes to food playing out not on meat or animals, but on plant-based icons of the human body:

On bread days Reenie would give us scraps of dough for bread men, with raisins

for the eyes and buttons. Then she would bake them for us. I would eat mine, but Laura would save hers up. Once Reenie found a whole row of them in Laura's top drawer, wrapped up in her handkerchiefs like tiny bun-faced mummies. Reenie said they would attract mice and would have to go straight into the garbage, but Laura held out for a mass burial in the kitchen garden She said there had to be prayers. If not, she would never eat her dinner anymore. (108-09)

Laura's determination to starve herself is significant. Though a standard child's tactic, the threat "she would never eat her dinner anymore" nonetheless marks the extent to which fasting can be a way of resisting authority. Her resistance is not arbitrary. Bread-men are not far distant, either in form or substance, from cake-women. The image of the human body as food is overtly playful and subtly macabre. Not only carnivorism but cannibalism lurk in food. Offred shops for meat at "All Flesh"; Laura comes to the conclusion that not only is all flesh grass (cf. Isaiah 40:6), but that all grass may be flesh. The terror of that moment of realization, that plants/animals/food are not distinct from humanity or the human body, has the potential equally to disrupt childhoods and bring civilizations to the point of collapse.

The pervasive knowledge among Atwood's heroines that they exist within the same categories as their food marks the characters' awareness of how they are constrained by their status as women. Historically, at least in western/patriarchal discourse, "[t]he categories 'woman' and 'animal' serve the same symbolic function" (Gruen 61). This is particularly true in terms of Platonic constructions of gender, which rely on "the exclusion of women, slaves, children, and animals" (Butler, *Bodies* 48). These four

groups of not-men, who are all thereby classed as not human, pervade Atwood's writing. Violence against one group easily flows into violence against another. Consider the murder of Charis' chickens in *The Robber Bride*. The animals' murder devastates Charis' emotional life:

The chickens are all dead. Every single one of them, dead in their boxes, two of them on the floor. There is blood all over the place, on the straw, dripping down from the boxes. She picks up one of the dead hens from the floor: there's a slit in its throat.

She stands there, shocked and dismayed, trying to hold herself together. Her head is cloudy, red fragments are swirling behind her eyes. Her beautiful chickens! It must have been a weasel. What else? But wouldn't a weasel drink all the blood? Maybe it was a neighbour, not anyone right next to her but somebody else. Who hates them that much? The chickens, or her and Billy. She feels violated. (313)

The symbolic overlap of woman and animal seems relatively straightforward, and the relationship between violence against women and violence against animals is long established. Critic Carol J. Adams points to the broken-necked canary in the sewing box in Susan Glaspell's *A Jury of Her Peers* (55-56) as an archetypal image of violence against women encoded in violence against animals, most particularly birds. In Atwood's novel, the chickens' death marks the cessation of violence rather than its escalation, but the chickens nonetheless function as more than simply a sign of the woman. The empathy between Charis and her birds exceeds casual affection and becomes a kind of

near-worship: “She adores them! She has adored them ever since the moment they arrived, flowering out of the feed sacks in which they travelled, shaking their angels' feathers. She thinks they are miraculous. They are” (232). Charis' emotional investment in the chickens is more extravagant even than her love for her daughter (born after the hens are killed), and she regards the hens' death explicitly as murder.

Zenia, confronted years later with the hens' murder, makes the inter-relationship between Charis, animals, and food even more clear. Charis, Zenia asserts, exists in a sub-human zone, providing food and sex but resembling animal or plant more than woman. Zenia's descriptions may be lies, but they carry emotional force, and they expose Charis' own anxieties about her body. Zenia tells Charis, “Billy didn't love you You were a free meal-ticket! He was eating off you” (480). From a source of food, Charis first “becomes” an animal, and then a vegetable: “He thought you were a cow He thought having sex with you was like porking a turnip” (480-81). The blunt, rather crude phrase “porking a turnip” makes clear the extent to which the female body, especially in the process of abjection, becomes associated with subhuman edibility.

Zenia, the dominant force in the confrontation, is anything but animal. She crackles like a machine, inorganic and nearly invulnerable: “Zenia smiles. Her energy level's up now, her body's humming like a broken toaster” (480). While the adjective “broken” suggests ineffectiveness, Zenia's function is not to prepare food but to electrify and shock anyone who tries to reduce her to food status. Zenia maintains her dominance among women by performing masculinity. She asserts that she has had a hysterectomy, and later that she has AIDS. While neither may be true, Zenia violently manipulates the

objective truth of her body in order to achieve power. Either infection or a hysterectomy would make her an Unwoman, but Zenia has established herself as a more monstrous figure, one “back from the dead” (4). As such, it is unsurprising that she intermittently becomes a variant on the fasting woman, a bulimic. While in Charis' house, Zenia maintains an aura of illness by stripping her body of vitamin C, largely by purging: “Try sticking your finger down your throat Works wonders” (480). She sustains herself not on organic plant material, but on “a nice raw juicy steak” (479). For Zenia, only meat is meat. She feeds on the flesh of animals and human agony, distancing herself from Nature⁶¹ and embracing signs of masculinity.

The sense that women and animals overlap, and that men exist distantly from both, persists. Definitions of “man” summon him precisely as “one who is without a childhood; is not a primate and so is relieved of the necessity of eating, defecating, living and dying; one who is not a slave but always a property holder” (Butler, *Bodies* 48). This phantasm of masculinity as nearly disembodied effectively separates men not only from women, but also from their food. The anxiety of overlap is subsumed beneath a biological determinism of “man's” social position (Haraway 10).

Yet women's empathy with animals (where “animals” includes both companion and food species) does not necessarily indicate acceptance of oppression. Rather, empathy demonstrates an awareness that both women and animals are artificially abjected, and that the emancipation of one may be the salvation of the other in Atwood's writing is explicit in its ecofeminism, rejecting the notion that alliance with animals

⁶¹ In this context, “Nature” functions as a quasi-religious concept which embraces femininity and rejects virtually all forms of technology. As such, it exceeds the nature/technology binarism and demands capitalization.

reduces women's manifest humanity.⁶² If women develop an awareness that “[t]he role of women and animals in postindustrial society is to serve/be served up” (Gruen 61), then the two groups become natural allies, and feminism easily becomes ecofeminism. Gilead, the theocracy of *The Handmaid's Tale*, lurches along the edges of ecological disaster, barely surviving. The Handmaids who shop for food know that the sea fisheries have collapsed, and fear that the sea creatures may not simply be few in number, but totally lost:

Sole, I remember, and haddock, swordfish, scallops, tuna; lobsters, stuffed and baked, salmon, pink and fat, grilled in steaks. Could they all be extinct, like the whales? I've heard that rumour, passed on to me in soundless words, the lips hardly moving, as we stood in line outside, waiting for the [fish] store to open (154)

The theocracy without fish⁶³ is also poisoned by leaks of nuclear waste and biological-warfare materials. Yet the men who rule have enough to eat. Those most in danger of physical poisoning and starvation are the Unwomen (10), whose abjection reduces them

⁶² Anxiety regarding women's relationship with animals does manifest elsewhere in feminist writing. Theorist Lynda Birke succinctly explains feminist resistance to animal alliances:

Partly, [it] has to do with a refusal to be reduced to the level of the “beast within,” the “animal” or dark side of ourselves. For feminists, it has seemed necessary to repudiate any connections between women and nature, to see them as regressive: women are fully human, feminists have rightly insisted, and to be human means to be preeminent over animals To be aligned with nature (either “out there” or as nature within) is to be diminished, to lose free will (36)

While Birke is somewhat casual in her conflation of “feminists” into a single perspective, she does clearly indicate the problems that arise from perpetuating a nature/culture binarism while attempting to alter notions of binary gender.

⁶³ The irony of a Christian theocracy without fish is notable, given the popular use (both Roman and contemporary) of the fish as a symbol of Christianity.

to the status of beasts of burden, below the status even of recognizable food.

The Unwoman is thus a useful figure for understanding the interactions of science/medicine and gender/class. Once reduced to sub-human status, women rapidly become acceptable “lab-animals.” Lori Gruen points to the pharmaceutical industry's casual use of Third World women as test subjects for medical research. One stage of research testing Depo-Provera (an injected hormonal birth control) involved animals; the next “used” South Asian women. The cancerous side-effects found in the test animals were not relayed to the women involved in the next round of testing on the grounds that the women could not comprehend the data: “It's no use explaining about beagle dogs,' said one British doctor who had just injected a Bangladeshi immigrant, 'she's an illiterate peasant from the bush” (qtd in Gruen 67). As a result, the female human participants in the study have little more agency than the animals. The overlap of the two groups is not accidental: “Because women and animals are judged unable to comprehend science and are thus relegated to the position of passive object, their suffering and deaths are tolerable in the name of profit and progress” (Gruen 67). Thus, Crake's decision in *Oryx and Crake* to test the BlyssPlus pill on third-world women and sex workers (296) exists within a tradition of scientific dehumanization of low-status women.

The terrors of animals and women in the face of medical research underlie Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*. The novel takes place in a series of compounds owned by biomedical corporations, wherein virtually all aspects of human existence have been commodified. In spite of the futurist context, this culture reproduces Platonic constructions of human existence. The corporations involved are overtly masculine in

character, excluding children, animals, women who perform femininity rather than masculinity, and the wide range of slaves that this culture (globalized, late-late-capitalist, corporate-controlled) has produced. The corporations are themselves “bodies” in the same sense that Platonic men are bodies: hyper-rational, non-primate, property-holding. The corporations run on the logic of the *pharmakon*, a term which appears in Plato's *Phaedrus* and recurs elsewhere in his writing, which “can mean medicine, remedy, drug, charm, philtre, recipe, colour, pigment, and, mostly importantly, both poison *and* cure” (Cooke 112). The balance between poison and cure is fundamental. The corporations create both simultaneously, and they do so on the bodies of women and animals.

The bodies of animals are, in *Oryx and Crake*, the more explicit sites of scientific exploitation. Jimmy/Snowman's earliest memory is of thousands of animals killed by a “hostile bioform” being burned in a quasi-scientific ritual of purification. Jimmy-the-child empathizes with the animals in a way that the adults around him do not entirely comprehend. The adults ruminate that “[t]his is where it ends up, . . . [o]nce things get going,” and debate whether the animals' death is the result of inter-corporate sabotage or “just a nutbar. Some cult thing” (18). Meanwhile, Jimmy is “anxious about the animals, because they were being burned and surely that would hurt them” (17). His father, attempting to reassure him, tells Jimmy that “[t]he animals were dead. They were like steaks and sausages, only they still had their skins on” (18). Jimmy is five and a half years old (15), and still coming to terms with the idea that meat is animals, that animals are food. He makes the transition of awareness from “food” to “meat” to “animal parts” individually, as (western, carnivorous) children must do. Jimmy is on some level aware

that steaks and sausages come from animals, but the immediacy of animals' individuality and suffering nonetheless takes him aback. His father's remark that the animals simply "still had their skins on" causes Jimmy to add,

And their heads Steaks didn't have heads. The heads made a difference: he thought he could see the animals looking at him reproachfully out of their burning eyes. In some way all of this – the bonfire, the charred smell, but most of all the lit-up, suffering animals – was his fault, because he'd done nothing to rescue them.
(Oryx and Crake 18)

The personhood of the animals is facially oriented. Jimmy intuits that creatures with heads and with faces are "like him," and his empathy is located almost entirely in the face.

His sense that he is responsible for the animals is retrospectively constructed as absurd. Snowman distances himself from the child Jimmy. Jimmy-the-child is wildly empathetic. He feels for the burning animals, but equally for the "smiling duck's face on each toe" of his rubber boots. The disinfectant through which he walks causes him to worry "that the poison would get into the eyes of the ducks and hurt them. He'd been told the ducks were only like pictures, they weren't real and had no feelings, but he didn't quite believe it" (15). In fact, Jimmy's cynicism is not entirely irrational. The bonfire takes place within the scientific/corporate culture of the compounds, and that culture has long been associated with the denial of animals' feelings. Given his social distancing from animals on a day to day basis, Jimmy has no way of distinguishing "real" animals from "fake" ones.

Animals' supposed ability to feel pain lies at the core of bio-technological research. Descartes assured Enlightenment vivisectionists that they caused no pain or harm in the course of their work. National Library of Medicine historian John Parascandola recounts that

[t]he capacity of animals for sensation, according to Descartes, was strictly corporeal and mechanical, and hence they were unable to feel real pain They just went through the external motions which in man were symptomatic of pain, but did not experience the mental sensation. Some of his followers denied that animals possessed even the inferior kind of feeling that Descartes attributed to beasts, and they interpreted the cries of an animal during vivisection as the mere creaking of the animal 'clockwork.' (quoted in Rudacille 20-21)

Animals, in this construction, are machines without ghosts. Scientists are thus utterly justified in “dismantling” animals to reverse-engineer, as it were, the mechanisms of life. The notion that life itself is a mechanism and that living things not only can but should be engineered in the name of human ingenuity and curiosity provides the ethical terror at the heart of biotechnology. Literary critic Stephen Dunning points to Descartes as well, as an inspiration for the character Crake. Crake's scientific detachment, Dunning suggests, has progressed to the point of total alienation:

[Crake] shares Descartes' rejection of received authority, his desire to work within a comprehensive epistemology founded on ideas as clear and distinct as mathematical proofs, his preference for mechanical models of living beings, his identification of the self as *res cogitans* (the original ghost in the machine), and

his misrelation to the feminine, or Nature. (87-88)

The notion of the ghost in the machine persists among critics, though Atwood does not use the phrase herself. The clockwork world that Descartes posits is so explicitly masculine that it reinforces binarisms that make Nature feminine even in critical analysis. Yet the question of Nature/mechanism is at the heart of *Oryx and Crake's* interrogation of what constitutes a “real” or “fake” animal.

Jimmy's confusion about the status of “real” animals is compounded by his childhood exposure to a range of transgenic animals. The family works for/lives in OrganInc Farms, where Jimmy's father is “one of the foremost architects of the pigoon project” (22). The pigoons are massive transgenic pigs in whose bodies human-tissue organs are grown for transplant purposes. The pun of OrganInc pits notions of organicity and wholeness (organic) with corporate biology and fragmentation (organs incorporated). The transgenic pigoons defy traditional constructions of food animals. Their overlap with human embodiment makes their porcine edibility uncomfortable. Pigoons can “grow five or six kidneys at a time. Such a host animal could be reaped of its extra kidneys; then, rather than being destroyed, it could keep on living and grow more organs, much as a lobster could grow another claw to replace a missing one” (22-23). The language of harvest applies here to living animals, and the animal-as-food framework persists even as pigoon-grown organs become “spare parts” for human bodies.⁶⁴ The pigoons themselves become progressively more malevolent, and more intelligent as they

⁶⁴ Atwood explicitly references “getting yourself cloned for spare parts . . . or keeping a for-harvest child or two stashed away in some illegal baby orchard” as pigoon alternatives (23). Kazuo Ishiguro explores the associated moral and biological anxieties of organ-children in *Never Let Me Go* (2005).

incorporate human nervous tissue into their own bodies. Liberated in a post-apocalyptic world, the animals invert the food chain and begin preying on humans.

In spite of their quasi-human biological status, pigeons blur uncomfortably with food. While officially the pigeons are never “processed,” that assertion exists largely “to set the queasy at ease . . . : no one would want to eat an animal whose cells might be identical with at least some of their own” (23-24). Such qualms are ascribed to squeamishness, and qualms become progressively less practical as the environment degenerates and becomes less able to produce meat as food. Jimmy “didn't want to eat a pigeon, because he thought of the pigeons as creatures much like himself,” but the scientists around him are more inclined to simply engage in dark humour and consume the “back bacon and ham sandwiches and pork pies [that] turned up on the staff café menu” (24). If no other meat is available, then the pigeons become a viable food source through their sub-human status even as they blur with humans biologically.

As the culture becomes more ecologically stressed, adult-Jimmy and Crake debate the fundamental definitions and functions of nature. Crake attends college at the Watson-Crick Institute, where the entire environment has been engineered by staff and students. Jimmy perceives the campus as “a palace” (199), and is dazzled by the range of ideas, but remains wary as to how “those things work” (200). His discussion with Crake about the “marvels” of the campus returns, perhaps inevitably, to ideas of a clockwork world, and of women's overlap with animals:

“So, are the butterflies – are they recent?” Jimmy asked after a while. . . .

“You mean, did they occur in nature or were they created by the hand of

man? In other words, are they real or fake?"

"Mm," said Jimmy. He didn't want to get into the *what is real* thing with Crake.

"You know when people get their hair dyed or their teeth done? Or when women get their tits enlarged?"

"Yeah?"

"After it happens, that's what they look like in real time. The process is no longer important." (200)

Jimmy cautiously substitutes the term "recent" for "engineered," but still finds himself engaged in a semiotic battle over the legitimacy of bio-alteration. Crake's assertion that "the process is no longer important" negates notions of Nature and even of the real. When Jimmy insists that women, at least, should be subject to traditional ideas of physical legitimacy, Crake mocks him:

"No way fake tits feel like real tits," said Jimmy, who thought he knew a thing or two about that.

"If you could tell they were fake," said Crake, "it was a bad job. These butterflies fly, they mate, they lay eggs, caterpillars come out."

Crake explicitly links women and animals through their beauty and reproductivity. Both may be engineered "by the hand of man," but afterwards, man need not concern himself with the work done. His (always his) consumption experience is not affected.

The women who study at Watson-Crick conform to this notion of gender and productivity. Both men and women identify as "*homo faber* – he who labors to use every

instrument as a means to achieve a particular end in building a world, even when the fabrication of that world necessarily demands a repeated violation of its materiality, including its people” (DiMarco 170). The culture of transgenic engineering is not conducive to conventional femininity. Jimmy finds that he doesn't

think much of the Watson-Crick women on offer. Maybe they weren't even on offer: they seemed to have other things on their minds. Jimmy's few attempts at flirtation got him some surprised stares – surprised and not at all pleased, as if he'd widdled on these women's carpets. (203)

The women looking back at him have reduced Jimmy, along with the rest of the biological world, to the status of animal. They are mathematicians and scientists, masculine in profession if not in body, and they have diminished sex to a dull biological process to be re-engineered when time allows.

One such woman introduces Jimmy to the culmination of Descartes' clockwork animals. When Anna Kingsford was excluded from medical studies in 1875, she remarked that “[t]hey will torture animals, but they will not admit a woman to their schools of medicine” (Rudacille 32). Women's resentment of their subordinate status in 19th century England fuelled a great deal of feminine opposition to scientific abuse of animals (51). However, the ethical objections to such abuse, then and later, hinged on opposition to cruelty (224) rather than any notions of the animals' right to bodily integrity. While eco-feminists take the latter position, the Watson-Crick institute is not conducive to either animal liberationism. Science rules, and as women take up the lab coat of “scientist,” they manipulate animals in ways as terrifying those of their male

counterparts.

Jimmy meets a woman who has created “a large bulblike object that seemed to be covered with stippled whitish-yellow skin. Out of it came twenty thick fleshy tubes, and at the end of each tube another bulb was growing” (*Oryx and Crake* 202). This “thing” is a chicken, alive but reduced to its parts, where its “parts” are constituted entirely as food. The creature described above produces only breasts; another produces “drumsticks too, twelve to a growth unit.” Jimmy is shocked less by the multiplicity of the chicken parts than by a crucial absence: “there aren't any heads.” The creature, called a ChickieNob, has no face. Its head has been reduced to a point in the centre with “a mouth opening at the top, they dump the nutrients in there. No eyes or beak or anything, they don't need those.” The female scientist explains that the creature is modelled on a sea anemone, which must surely be an equally legitimate mode of organic existence to chicken-hood. Yet Jimmy remains captured by the absence of a head and face. He is terrified, demanding to know what the ChickieNob is thinking. The woman scientist responds with laughter. She informs him that “they'd removed all the brain functions that had nothing to do with digestion, assimilation, and growth” (203). This, Crake announces, is a moral victory as well as a massive improvement in food production, “[a]nd the animal-welfare freaks won't be able to say a word, because this thing feels no pain.” In the absence of pain, Crake presumes, the machine has been perfected. The animal problem has been solved.

ChickieNobs may be the “[w]ave of the future” (202), but they bear little or no resemblance to Charis' sacred chickens. The Nobs lack faces and personalities. They are

not individual animals, only quasi-living extensions of the idea of meat. In contrast, Charis' chickens are ferocious individuals, not only vividly animal but defiant of human expectations. Charis' adoration of her chickens includes the chickens' inhumanity. She loves the chickens without expecting them to be “good”:

They fill her with joy, a joy that has no rational source, because she knows – she has seen, also she remembers – how greedy chickens are, how selfish and unfeeling, how cruel they are to one another, how they gang up: at least two of them have naked scalps, from being picked on. Nor are they placid vegetarians: you can start a riot among them just by tossing them a few hot-dog ends or scraps of bacon. (*The Robber Bride* 231-32)

Charis' embrace of the chickens allows them to be problematic. They provide food, they are food, they will devour each other, and they are nonetheless marvellous. As such, they embody the animal “problem” without causing Charis moral or aesthetic anxiety.

Crake's solution to the “animal problem” on a planetary scale is a manifestation of *pharmakon*. On the one hand, he creates the species which Snowman dubs “Crakers.” The Crakers (named in honour of Crake) are beautiful herbivores, designed to eat grass, live without conflict, and otherwise avoid the problematic aspects of humanity. Crake supposes that nearly all human conflict can be resolved by reducing post-human sexuality to an animal model, so the Crakers “[come] into heat at regular intervals, as did most mammals other than man” (305). Each woman mates with four men, eliminating notions of paternity. The entire existence of the Crakers, though, is a mockery. Like so many entities in *Oryx and Crake*, they are a pun, Quakers without intellect. Their “ideal

community” is superficially appealing: “they are peace-loving vegetarians, designed to live in harmony with both each other and their environment. There is no rape or sexual abuse, no racial disharmony or dominance/submission culture” (Glover 55). However, the creation of the Crakers relies on the idea that “*God is a cluster of neurons*” (*Oryx and Crake* 157, italics original), and that humanity can persist without notions of sacredness or indeed without a need for higher consciousness.

The poison which accompanies the Craker “cure” is the BlyssPluss Pill, which overtly protects the human body against all sexually communicable diseases and secretly sterilizes whole populations. Even more secretly, BlyssPluss introduces a quick-acting, utterly fatal virus into the global population, wiping out conventional humanity so that the Crakers can replace them. The relentless scientific reasoning that leads to this catastrophe is in its way utterly rational. The planet is on the verge of ecological collapse; humanity must be radically reduced, or the entire food chain will collapse. Crake asserts that the sterilization (and, following from that, poisoning) of whole populations is objectively necessary:

I've seen the latest confidential Corps demographic reports. As a species we're in deep trouble, worse than anyone's saying. They're afraid to release the stats because people might just give up, but take it from me, we're running out of space-time. Demand for resources has exceeded supply for decades in marginal geo-political areas, hence the famines and droughts; but very soon, demand is going to exceed supply *for everybody*. (294-95)

Thus, quite logically, the only cure for humanity is poison: remove the human infection

on the grounds that it has become a “hot” or hostile bioform, and replace humanity with an engineered post-human species engineered to correct for human weakness.

However, the apocalypse which Crake engineers and Jimmy/Snowman observes is far from absolute. The absurd Crakers take up residence on the beach at the edge of an urban park, and Snowman names himself the Last Man on Earth. However, humanity persists precisely by defying the mechanical constructions of culture on which Crake has relied. Within a binary construction of gender and culture, masculine techno-culture has consumed itself and expired, but that techno-culture did not encompass all of humanity. A parallel culture organized on feminine/organic lines survives precisely because it has constructed women, animals, and food in radically different ways.

The Year of the Flood provides a counter-narrative to *Oryx and Crake*. *Oryx and Crake* is narrated by Jimmy/Snowman in mental dialogue with the long-dead Oryx, and the novel's scope is restricted by Jimmy's self-pity and reductive notions of gender and humanity. *The Year of the Flood* is a dual narrative, recounted in third-person voice by Toby, a pragmatic middle-aged spa manager, and in first-person voice by Ren, a sex worker. Both women spend formative portions of their lives within the God's Gardeners community and interact with the larger culture on eco-feminist terms.

The eco-cult God's Gardeners first manifests in *Oryx and Crake* as the chosen religion of Jimmy's roommate Bernice, “a fundamentalist vegan” who “manifested her views on consensual sex by making a bonfire of all Jimmy's jockey shorts” (188, 189). Bernice performs little or no femininity. She rejects western beauty standards and cosmetics, with the result that she neither conforms to the augmented expectations of

femininity that capitalist culture has developed nor expresses heterosexual desire for Jimmy, that culture's ultimate sexual product. Her opposition to performed masculinity, and to any and all exploitations of animals, renders Bernice an object of fun. Jimmy continues to despise her even as he struggles with post-apocalyptic conditions to which Bernice is much better adapted. In his mind, his abjection does not negate hers. Both exist outside the zone of the human. *The Year of the Flood* inverts this perspective, narrating the last years of western civilization and the first months after the apocalypse through the cosmology of God's Gardeners and the experiences of the women who punctuate Jimmy's life. These women interrogate the nature of humanity in a late capitalist culture and the interrelationship of humans, animals, and food.

Food is a constant and complex theme in *The Year of the Flood*. Outside the corporate compounds, food is rarely sanitized and pre-packaged. Its nature is not concealed. After her family is bankrupted by HelthWyzer's *pharmakon*, recently orphaned Toby descends through layers of sexual exploitation to the lowest social rung, that of fast-food worker. First, she works as a “furzooter,” dressing in an animal-mascot suit to advertise different businesses. In the first week, she experiences three sexual assaults, all by fetishists devoted not to her but to the complex erotics of the animal suit (31). However, the assaults are less disturbing to her than the warped morality of performing animality while living above a semi-legal “endangered-species luxury couture operation . . . [that] sold Halloween costumes over the counter to fool the animal-righter extremists and cured the skins in the backrooms” (30-31). While Toby does not yet identify herself as an “animal-righter,” she remains horrified. The “skin” trade which she

observes explicitly harms only animals, but Atwood's description is metafictionally loaded: “they killed the animals on the premises because the customers didn't want *goat dressed up as oryx*” (31, italics mine). Though Oryx herself appears only briefly in *The Year of the Flood*, the animal oryx is frequently referred to as either fur or food. The language of skin and meat blurs feminine status with animal, producing an underclass of women who exist primarily for exploitation.

In an attempt to escape this underclass, Toby donates/sells her eggs twice, only to discover on her third attempt that “there were complications, so she could never donate any more eggs, or – incidentally – have any children herself” (32). The revelation causes Toby to spiral into depression. While she has not previously wanted children, the loss of her fertility breaks down much of her identity and most aspects of her sexuality keyed to desire. In keeping with Atwood's devotion to intertwining women and chickens, Toby must first cease to be able to “lay” eggs before she can become meat.

The transformation from egg-layer to meat occurs rapidly, and largely as a result of despair. Toby takes a job at SecretBurgers.⁶⁵ The fast-food chain makes light of the fact that the “secret of SecretBurgers was that no one knew what sort of animal protein was actually in them The meat grinders weren't 100 per cent efficient; you might find a swatch of cat fur in your burger or a fragment of mouse tail. Was there a human fingernail, once?” (33). The language of SecretBurgers is insistent. The repeated “you” in the inventory of meat sources makes the reader complicit with the larger consumer culture in a form of consumption that does not distinguish animal meat from human, so

⁶⁵ In both *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, corporate language is marked by the fusion of words and creation of neologisms which conceal compounded crimes.

that both fuse into cheerful cannibalism. A third layer of consumption develops as Toby reflects that the organized crime pleebmobs run “corpse disposals, harvesting organs for transplant, then running the gutted carcasses through the SecretBurgers grinders” (33). The restaurant grinds all unwanted meat-sources into marketable commodities.

Toby's function at SecretBurgers is initially a food server, but like the rest of the virtually all-female staff, she is also sexual “meat” for the management. The manager Blanco maintains a “beefcake” look of masculinity which is supplemented by the tattoos that re-define his body:

he sported a full set of arm tattoos: snakes twining his arms, bracelets of skulls around his wrists, *veins and arteries on the backs of his hands so they looked flayed*. Around his neck was a tattooed chain, with a lock on it shaped like a red heart, nestled into the chest hair he displayed in the V of his open shirt. According to rumour, that chain went right down his back, twined around an upside-down woman whose head was stuck in his ass. (36, italics mine)

Blanco's “flayed” tattoos make his biological relationship to meat clear. However, his aggressiveness and pleebmob connections make him all but invulnerable, and he uses his status to exploit his workers. When he selects Toby as his next victim, she becomes his sexual slave. Her sex work is a supplement to her fast-food work, not a substitute for it, which progressively exhausts her and strips her of her meal breaks, so that she gradually starves.

Toby is “rescued” from her exploitation by a demonstrating group of God's Gardeners, who inform her that “every day [she] stand[s] here selling the mutilated flesh

of God's beloved Creatures, it's injuring [her] more” (41). She flees to them more out of sexual terror than moral outrage at SecretBurgers' carnivorousness. However, in the course of her adult life with the Gardeners, she transforms from a fast-food cynic into an “Eve,” a senior wise-woman whose bio-knowledge strengthens the collective. The Gardeners' theology fuses Christian imagery with evolutionist and scientific knowledge to create a religion that fuses reverence for life with biotechnological facility. Most markedly, the Gardeners have shifted their theology away from the patriarchal notion that Man should “have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth” (Genesis 1:26, KJV). Instead, the Gardeners assert their biological connection to other life:

God could have made Man out of pure Word, but He did not use this method. . . . He made us “a little lower than the Angels,” but in other ways – and Science bears this out – we are closely related to our fellow Primates, a fact that the haughty ones of this world do not find pleasant to their self-esteem. Our appetites, our desires, our more uncontrollable emotions – all are Primate! (52)

Gardener sermons like this one punctuate the novel, each explaining some aspect of Gardener theology and reiterating the necessity of peaceful human-animal coexistence. Moments of patriarchy persist, though, particularly in the use of “Man” to refer to humans, and in the primacy of “Adam” figures over Eves in the Gardener hierarchy. Atwood remarks in her acknowledgements that the Gardener hymn lyrics were influenced by “William Blake, with an assist from John Bunyan and also from *The Hymn*

Book of the Anglican Church of Canada and the United Church of Canada” (434). The result is a kind of relatively benevolent patriarchy which does not actively harm Toby but continues to restrict her psychic existence in various ways. Adam One, the most senior member of the Gardener community, interprets their theology with the authority of a biblical patriarch:

According to Adam One, the Fall of Man was multidimensional. The ancestral primates fell out of the trees; then they fell from vegetarianism into meat-eating. Then they fell from instinct into reason, and thus into technology; from simple signals into complex grammar, and thus into humanity; from firelessness into fire, and thence into weaponry; and from seasonal mating into an incessant sexual twitching. Then they fell from a joyous life in the moment into the anxious contemplation of the vanished past and the distant future. (188)

While Adam One acknowledges primates as a multi-sex/multi-gender group, he explains the evolution of Man in terms of patriarchal anxiety. He presumes that the progression of food-sex-knowledge has inevitably created an orientation to violence, and thereby reiterates Eve's instigation of the Fall via her appetites. As an Eve, Toby finds that “you could only plummet, learning more and more, but not getting any happier.” She remains uncomfortable within the Gardener community, and aware of her limited status and authority as an Eve.

Though Toby survives the plague/Flood,⁶⁶ she does so in isolation, practising Gardener tenets but living outside the hierarchy. The hierarchy has, by the time of the

⁶⁶ The Gardeners refer to the BlyssPluss plague as “The Waterless Flood.” The Flood is a long-established part of their theology, and Crake appears to borrow the apocalyptic concept from them fairly directly.

Flood, utterly collapsed. The Gardeners' long-standing policy of pacifism is challenged by Zeb/Adam Seven, known as Mad Adam. Zeb's engagement with technology allows him to make contact with non-Gardener eco-activists, to protest extinctions, and ultimately to engage in eco-terrorism. Some of the post-rupture Gardener acts are highly effective in disrupting the consumer economy, but the corporate response is violent, and many of those involved find themselves forced to work for Crake in direct service to the plague/Flood (*Oryx and Crake* 298). While the Gardeners persist, their terrorism without Zeb and his extended MaddAddam network rapidly becomes absurd. As the Flood begins, the corporate news reports on a pathetic failure to “save” the chickens:

Do you see that? Unbelievable! Brad, nobody can quite believe it. What we've just seen is a crazed mob of God's Gardeners liberating a ChickieNobs production facility. Brad, this is hilarious, those ChickieNob things can't even walk. (Laughter.) Now, back to the studio. (340, italics original)

The “crazed” Gardeners are supposed to be unable to perceive that ChickieNobs are not animals in any conventional sense, and that dismantling a production facility is at best absurdist theatre. The idea that liberation for ChickieNobs might be death rather than freedom underlies the scene without ever quite surfacing. The spectacle raises the question, though, of what an animal is, and how liberation can function.

The ChickieNobs (in food form) provide background to a more detailed liberation narrative that twines with Toby's. Ren/Brenda is a young exotic dancer, raised for several years among the Gardeners, then returned with her self-absorbed mother to a corporate compound (HelthWyzer), where Brenda becomes Jimmy's high school girlfriend. Just

after high school, Ren loses her father (as Toby has), and finds refuge in sex work at the Scales & Tails nightclub. There, she semi-miraculously survives the Flood precisely because she has already been isolated for fear of sexually-transmitted infection. Alone inside the quarantine Sticky Zone, she is utterly safe:

I was waiting for my test results: they kept you locked in the Sticky Zone for weeks, in case you had something contagious. The food came in through the safety-sealed hatchway, plus there was the minifridge with snacks, and the water was filtered, coming in and out both. You had everything you needed, but it got boring in there. (7-8)

Jimmy's and Toby's narratives both occur in third-person voice, but Ren's subjectivity utterly rules her story. Her first-person account is more childish even than Jimmy's, but her use of the "I" also returns the reader to Atwood's earlier first-person narrators, Iris Chase, Offred, and Marian McAlpin. The sexually exploited woman returns again, not only looking back at Jimmy/Snowman through the camera, but finally through her own eyes.

Ren becomes a "Scalie," an aerial ballet performer whose entire skin is concealed beneath a Biofilm Bodysuit. This is a living second skin, itself in need of feeding, that can be "put on" as a fusion of prophylactic and disguise:

they slid on as usual, and you could feel the pleasant suction as their layers of living cells bonded with your skin, and then the warm, tickly feeling as they started to breathe. Nothing in but oxygen, nothing out but your natural excretions, said the labels. The face unit even did your nostrils for you. (330)

The full-body condoms that failed in “Freeforall” have succeeded here. Sex work becomes biologically “safe” on a level never before seen. Ren acknowledges that “[a] lot of the Scales customers would have preferred membrane and bristle work,” but that the Bodysuits offer an acceptable alternative. The Bodysuits are supplemented with elaborate bird costumes (331), so that the women wearing them are transformed from human to cyber-animal. Ren discovers that her non-human Scalie status gives her access to realms of knowledge she could not imagine as a woman: “It's amazing what they'll tell you, especially if you're covered with shiny green scales and they can't see your real face. It must be like talking to a fish” (131).

In the Sticky Zone, Ren survives the annihilation of the nightclub by disease and Blanco (the flayed manager, now a professional fighter) run amok. She subsists by nibbling on ChickieNobs, which tug at her vegetarian sensibilities but absolve her of carnivorous guilt on the grounds that “ChickieNobs were really vegetables because they grew on stems and didn't have faces” (129). Contemplating the morality of her food, Ren's solution is to eat “half of them,” as she does of most meals: “I only ever ate half of anything because a girl with my body type can't afford to blimp up” (55). She finds herself constantly fasting, first to sustain her childlike appearance for sex work, then for survival. Unable to escape her cocoon, she inventories her food and concludes, “[i]f I ate only a third of every meal instead of half, and saved the rest instead of tossing it down the chute, I'd have enough for at least six weeks” (283). Later, she develops a mantra to eat less, live longer. Yet even at the edge of starvation, Ren retains her revulsion for animal flesh, rejecting Crake's description of the brain as “meat computer” because “[she] hated

the idea of [her] head being full of meat” (316).

Ren's existence in the aftermath of the Flood is that of a starving woman perceived alternately as an animal and as sexual prey. She appears to Toby as “a huge bird on a leash – no, on a rope – a bird with blue-green iridescent plumes like a peagret. But this bird has the head of a woman” (350). The result is hallucinatory, and suggests a cybernetic gene-splice creation rather than a “real” person. However, Toby gradually recognizes the spectacle before her as a woman in sexual bondage. Freed from the Sticky Zone, Ren and her friend Amanda find themselves hunted by Blanco and his compatriots as sexual prey. Ren refuses to recount her rape or Amanda's, but the fact of those assaults permeates the novel's concluding chapters. As adolescent Gardeners, the girls were advised to “avoid being prey . . . [b]y not looking like the prey *of that predator*” (139, italics original). Dressed as woman-birds, Amanda and Ren are precisely the prey Blanco desires.

The ethical problems of hunting are utterly exposed when Ren and Amanda are raped. Both women were raised Gardeners and assured that “nothing is unclean to us if gratitude is felt and pardon asked, and if we ourselves are willing to offer ourselves to the great chain of nourishment in our turn” (125). The reassurance is offered to the girls to justify their own meat-eating in times of stress. Yet in their animal performances, they expose the hypocrisy of what ecofeminist critic Marti Kheel calls the “Holy Hunter” narrative. A range of (mostly masculine) writers and philosophers have promoted the notion of a hunter for whom the hunt “is a religious or spiritual experience” (Kheel 99), and whose values ostensibly align with those of the Gardeners. Such a mode of hunting,

proposed several times by Gary Snyder, allows the (masculine) hunter to become “physically and psychically one with the animal” and develop a deep empathy with the hunted (Kheel 100). Yet the notion of real empathy with the hunted ends with the kill, or more particularly with the “ultimate consummation” (107), that is, eating the slain animal. Kheel suggests that

[t]he pursuit of the animal expresses the hunter's yearning to repossess his lost female and animal nature. The death of the animal ensures that this oneness with nature will not be attained. Violence becomes the only way in which the hunter can experience this sense of oneness while asserting his masculine status as an autonomous human being. By killing the animal, the hunter ritually enacts the death of his longing to return to a primordial female/animal world, a world to which he cannot return. (106)

The alignment of the feminine with nature and animals inevitably genders hunting, and the encoded violence constantly subverts quasi-religious notions of union. While Atwood discusses hunting almost entirely as a nationalist metaphor in *Survival*, she recognizes that the pathos of the hunted is an essential element of hunt narratives, particularly when the death is “felt emotionally from inside the fur and feathers” (*Survival* 74).⁶⁷

The reader's intense, highly subjective investment in Ren's narrative brings two novels' worth of anxiety about animals, food, and hunting to a climax. Every consumed

⁶⁷ Atwood points to the fiction of Charles G.D. Roberts and Ernest Thompson Seton as manifestations of the horror of hunting:

The animal stories of Seton and Roberts are far from being success stories. They are almost invariably failure stories, ending with the death of the animal; but this death, far from being the accomplishment of a quest, to be greeted with rejoicing, is seen as tragic or pathetic, *because the stories are told from the point of view of the animal*. (*Survival* 74)

animal, no matter how pathetic, returns in the moment that the women in bird costumes are raped. In that moment, there is no possible ethical justification for such exploitation. Instead, the reader sees fully exposed the cultural mechanisms that “[cast] rape as an adaptive strategy dictated by evolution” and assert that “by killing, [the hunter] willingly couples himself into the chain of life and death binding all other predators and prey” (Comminou 141). In a scenario that blends women, animals, and technology, the obscenity and absurdity of masculine bio-domination become apparent.

The horror of rape disrupts the metaphor of hunting, though, in that both women survive. Toby sees Ren in her bird suit hours or days after Blanco captures her. Subsequently, Toby frees Ren, then hunts Blanco down with her father's hunting rifle. However, she does not shoot him, as a hunter shoots an animal. Instead, she poisons/liberates him, and in doing so renders him inedible, using a commercial drink laced with toxic mushrooms whose uses she cultivated as a Gardener. Toby's hatred of Blanco and her resentment of him suspend the possibility of gratitude or pardon, both of which are necessary for hunting within the Gardener cosmology. Thus, Toby retreats from the problem of Don't Kill/Don't Eat, and instead offers poison as euthanasia to a man too injured to live.

Toby and Ren reunite with Gardener and MaddAddam survivors who have developed a relatively comfortable, deliberately pre-industrial lifestyle. They are aware of the Crakers, but relatively uninterested in them; the Craker utopia excludes humanity to the point that the Gardeners can recognize the Crakers only as exotic animals. The Gardeners, including first Toby and then Ren, re-incorporate meat into their diets on a

practical level. The now-feral gene-spliced animals are shot in the name of self-defence, then “used” completely out of respect for the animals killed:

they skin and butcher, with spraygunners standing guard in case the other dogs come back. Toby's hands remember how to do this from long ago. The smell is the same too. A childhood smell.

The dog skins are laid aside, the meat's cut up and put into a pot. Toby feels a little sick. But she also feels hungry. (393)

Toby finds herself newly comfortable with the meat of domestic animals, which previously marked her own exploitation. Her physical revulsion is tempered by the desire for her own survival, and a sense of her self and sexuality that only resurfaces after Blanco's death.

Ren's return to human status, and her regained ability to feed from her environment, mark a different relationship to animals and food than that to which Marian McAlpin reconciles herself. Marian finds herself unable to consume the cake-woman herself, and so feeds it to her self-absorbed lover Duncan. Ren concludes, “[t]he Adams and the Eves used to say, *We are what we eat*, but I prefer to say, *We are what we wish*. Because if you can't wish, why bother?” (400). Her return to food is a gesture of self-definition and a desire for independence. Ren is not by any means yet a creative force, but she reaches a natural conclusion to her fasting. If anorexia is the absence of desire, both Ren and Toby effectively “recover,” re-asserting their own desires in ways which incorporate food without anxiety, and allow their sexuality expression in relative security.

Atwood's novels do not offer neat reconciliations between women and their food.

Instead, Atwood offers individual negotiations of the conflict. Rehabilitation of individual subjectivity offers the most direct route to “normal” eating, as Marian McAlpin discovers. However, the technology which creates the edible woman-cake is relatively straightforward. Marian's food anxieties play out in a culture which freely acknowledges the intimate link between animals and food, clearly seen in the diagrammed cookbook cow. Laura Chase's anxieties are more complex, rooted as they are in her inability to distinguish the human and the non-human. However, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* offer the most alarming range of food-anxieties. As technology obscures the origins of food, the contents of that food become more processed and abstract, but the eater's awareness of animal suffering never entirely recedes. Toby and Ren, in trying to reduce their complicity in animal suffering, become aware of the extent to which their own status is not markedly different from that of the animals on which their society feeds. Ren, in the last days of her sex work, is as faceless as a ChickieNob, though more exotic to the casual observer.

While technological collapse does not instantly reconcile women (or, indeed, any human) with their food-chain status, gradual re-integration into the “natural” world eases their anorexic pathologies. The re-establishment of primitive/pre-industrial culture, though, is a largely impracticable utopian fantasy, particularly given that the “cure” is in this case an example of *pharmakon* taken to the extreme (fatalities circa ten billion). Where patriarchal constructions of femininity persist, food-anxiety will almost certainly persist, re-manifesting “an ideal of female perfection and moral superiority [achieved] through denial of appetite” (Brumberg 188). The gender binary persists in the aftermath

of advanced technology. However, the Gardeners' acceptance of gene-spliced fauna as “real” animals supposes that Crake is on some level correct. If Ren and Toby embody what women look like “in real time,” then their survival may be more important (at least to them) than the process by which they have achieved “normal” eating.

Chapter 6:
The Machineries of Uncivilization: Gender, Disability, and Cyborg Identity

Disdain for the body pervades Gibson's Cyberpunk Trilogy, marking the emergence of a culture whose “elite stance involved a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh” (*Neuromancer* 6). The “elite stance” is crucial, though, in locating that contempt. Cyber-cowboys who hold the body in contempt belong to a social elite whose embodiment is already nearly irrelevant to their quotidian existence. The cowboys are English speakers, implicitly white, and predominantly male. As such, they are the least likely of all Gibson's characters to be required to “be” their bodies. The cowboys' virtual facility reinforces their masculinity, requiring other, more abjected groups to “be the body, perform the bodily functions” (Butler, *Bodies* 49). As a result, the belief that “the body was meat” (*Neuromancer* 6) disdains the body in abstract, the “body of reason [that] is itself the phantasmatic dematerialization of masculinity” (*Bodies* 49). Gendered-ness and bodily suffering create an experience of embodiment much more complex and concrete than the cowboys' abstracted disgust. When the material body is recognizably disabled before the introduction of virtual technologies, then the nature of disdain for the flesh changes. While the able body may be easily effaced by technology, the disabled body persists, altering the subject's approach to those same technologies and generating new possibilities as a result.

Disability narratives have long encoded the able-bodied perception that the disabled must necessarily find their flesh unbearable. Long before the emergence of digital technologies, the disabled body has been a terrifying spectre at the margins of communication. In Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, Demetrius and Chiron rape Lavinia, then sever her hands and cut out her tongue, to prevent her from communicating and so seeking justice (II.iv.1-5). Demetrius remarks of his victim, "And 'twere my cause, I should go hang myself" (II.iv.9). Chiron responds that without hands, Lavinia is unable even to commit suicide and so must live on, silent and abjected. However, in spite of her mutilation and enforced silence, Lavinia survives psychologically as well as physically, and ultimately she develops prosthetic tools with which to "speak." Handless, she still works with her father to slaughter her tormenters, then transform them into food (V.ii.196-205). One might reasonably presume that if an edible woman-cake offers some release from bodily anxiety, a revenge-seasoned man-pie would offer at least equal satisfaction. However, before the pie is served, Titus murders Lavinia, "[b]ecause the girl should not survive her shame, / And by her presence still renew [her father's] sorrows" (V.iii.41-42). Lavinia is an affront to her father's gaze, and so she must die.

Titus finds his daughter's condition unbearable, but we are offered little evidence that Lavinia cannot bear her own flesh. Able-bodied hatred for the disabled body is radically different from the disdain a cyber-cowboy may have for his flesh. The cowboy sees the body as dull and extraneous, even unnecessary; the able-bodied man looking at the disabled female body sees a grotesque prison that prevents normalcy and disrupts conventional femininity and masculine desire.

The experience of disability is essential to reading the technologized feminine/abjected body. Historical and contemporary discourses on the body inevitably, though often invisibly, hinge on questions of disability. What shall we expect of the body, and what can it do? Critic David T. Mitchell proposes disability as a “symbolic symptom” through which those discourses may be understood:

Whether a culture approaches the body's dynamic materiality as a denigrated subject of earthly contamination (as in early Christian cultures), or as a perfectible *techné* of the self (as in ancient Athenian culture), or as an object of social symbolism (as in the culture of the Renaissance), or as a classifiable object of bodily averages (as in the Enlightenment), or as a specular commodity in the age of electronic media (as in postmodernism), disability inaugurates the need to interpret human differences both biological and imagined. Whereas the able body has no definitional core (it poses as transparently average or normal), *the disabled body surfaces as any body capable of being narrated as outside the norm.* (17, italics mine)

Mitchell's inventory of the body marks the extent to which the “normal” (that is, typically abled) body reinforces a wide range of social conventions. However, cultural invocations of the material body rarely account for difference. The disabled body thus creates a rarely acknowledged but still insistent cultural counter-narrative, providing unexpected surfaces and radically alternative approaches to cultural and technological praxis. The disabled body locates a culturally marginal subjectivity that challenges the “normal” functions of technology and so creates radical technological innovations.

Gibson's fiction encompasses a wide range of disabled bodies, including those of cyborg characters, but his presentation of them is often troubling. Critical response to Gibson's cyborgs focusses on the post-humanist cyberpunk aesthetic that in

its representation of “monsters” – hopeful or otherwise – produced by the interface of the human and the machine, radically decenters the human body, the sacred icon of the essential self, in the same way that the virtual reality of cyberspace works to decenter conventional humanist notions of an unproblematic “real.” (Hollinger 32-33)

This initial expression of potential implies a great deal of freedom for the disabled body, not least by making it irrelevant. Veronica Hollinger argues that “[h]uman bodies in Gibson's stories . . . are subject to shaping and re-shaping, the human form destined perhaps to become simply one available choice among many; notions of a human nature determined by a 'physical essence' of the human begin to lose credibility” (35). This approach to posthumanism is profoundly optimistic; it presumes that physical difference is largely irrelevant in a virtual/cyber context. The elision of difference is profound enough to erode the cyber-cowboys' elite status. Such an ambitious proposition, that the body should be only one choice among many and thus implicitly an equal choice among many, lies at the heart of Donna Haraway's cyborg manifesto, and of the feminist embrace of the cyborg figure. Tama Leaver's critique of Gibson's *Interstitial Trilogy* hinges on the universality of cyborg potential, that “it is impossible not to become entwined with technology in everyday material existence Utilising Haraway's concept of the cyborg, Gibson's characters in his second trilogy are still fundamentally

enmeshed with technology, although not necessarily on a permanent physical level.” Leaver, delighted with Gibson's construction of a disabled cyborg girl in *Idoru* (Zona Rosa, of whom more shall be said presently), emphasizes the girl's reliance on technology. Unfortunately, able-bodied delight in cyber-potential obscures the more problematic texts of Zona's disabled body.

In the face of cyber-technology, bodies and their discourses persist. In Gibson's writing, the body labours under the cumulative weight of all these discourses, as a constantly inscribed but rarely stable or comfortable site. The perfectible *techne* of the self competes with the media-generated specular commodity. The transcendent push of *Neuromancer*, wherein cyber-cowboys perceive the body as hated meat, gradually eases in favour of a more specifically cyborg aesthetic which explicitly includes the body but questions, “[w]hy should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?” (Haraway 178). Technologized narratives call into question, perhaps inevitably, the nature of the “normal” (biologically-determined) body, and rapidly reveal the arbitrariness of any “normal” designation, particularly when the underlying definition of “normal” is “perfect.”

Though perfection might at first seem an absurd standard, in fact the mechanically perfect body, able in every way, is the cultural face of normality. Consider Nora Vincent's assertion (opposing the legitimacy of disability studies) that

it's hard to deny that something called normalcy exists. The human body is a machine, after all – one that has evolved functional parts: lungs for breathing, legs for walking, eyes for seeing, ears for hearing, a tongue for speaking and most

crucially for all the academics concerned, a brain for thinking. This is science, not culture.

Vincent's definition (which presumes that science and culture are extricable) of the normal body is one that functions perfectly: a monument to the scientific elegance of biology, an already-perfected *techne* of the self. Yet a perfectly able body must surely be the exception rather than the rule. Only Rei Toei(s), the crowd of mechanically-produced women that emerges in *All Tomorrow's Parties*, can be so reliable, and the Reis do so largely by being mass produced and interchangeable. As such, Rei is the climax and conclusion of technology as a fundamental cultural narrative. Digital clones materialized via nanotechnology are ultimately an industrial and scientific fantasy of the perfectible, uniform body which is in many ways also the foundation of democracy:

the operative notion of equality . . . is really one of interchangeability. As the average man can be constructed, so can the average worker. All working bodies are equal to all other working bodies, because they are interchangeable. This interchangeability, particularly in nineteenth-century factories, means that workers' bodies have been conceptualized as identical. And able-bodied workers came to be interchangeable with able-bodied citizens. . . . If all workers are equal and all workers are citizens, then all citizens must have standard bodies to be able to fit into the industrial-political notion of democracy, equality, and normality. (Davis 105)

In this sense, Reis are the ultimate mechanical (re)production: scientific marvels fit to be parts of a scientific social machine. Yet the machine breaks down almost immediately,

first because Reis have no apparent desire to engage in the production of anything other than themselves, and second because the machine for which they might have been imagined has all but vanished from technologized culture.

Gibson's citizen-population is marked by its physical difference, and by the breakdown of the normality of the "able-bodied" category. The most engaged technological users have the least use for their bodies, whether normalized or not. Yet that commonality of difference does not consistently translate into acceptance of disability. *Neuromancer* opens with a passing glimpse of an amputee bartender whose "ugliness was the stuff of legend. In an age of affordable beauty, there was something heraldic about the lack of it. The antique arm whined as he reached for another jug. It was a Russian military prosthesis, a seven-function force-feedback manipulator, cased in grubby pink plastic" (4).⁶⁸ The man's disability is nearly effaced by the remarkable nature of his prosthesis, and the deliberation of his ugliness. Deformity, Gibson suggests, may be a political statement when technology allows deformity to be "corrected." However, the political statement is ultimately much less radical than one might suppose. Tobin Siebers points out that in psychoanalysis, disability has long been conflated with narcissism, such that "injury is said to augment the feelings of self-importance felt by narcissists" ("Tender Organs" 42). The bartender's emphasis on his ugliness and deformity and Case's amused recognition of that emphasis demonstrate the extent to which the bartender remains a (perceived) narcissistic deviant. As technology and techno-medicine increase the potential homogeneity of the citizen population,

⁶⁸ Gibson leaves the notion of "affordable beauty" unexamined. The possibility of the bartender's poverty, that the "ugly" prosthesis might be the best he can afford, is not raised.

individuation becomes indistinct from narcissism. This constant exclusion of difference reinforces Siebers' assertion that

[n]arcissism is a form of violent hyperindividualization imposed on victims by political bodies and other groups. That people with disabilities are automatically assumed to be narcissistic reveals not only that they are being victimized but that the perception of their individuality is itself a form of violence. (“Tender Organs” 48)

In the bartender's case, the perception of his narcissism is incidental to his existence. However, in spite of the widespread nature of difference and disability in Gibson's fiction, disabled bodies remain hyperindividuated, common but never normal, and in a surprising number of cases abject except insofar as they manage to normalize themselves via technological mediation.

Neuromancer's Corto/Armitage exemplifies Siebers' adaptation of the notion of the “tender organ” to disability (“Tender Organs” 40). Politically-motivated cosmetic surgery renders Corto “a stock figure of both '80s gay porn, military recruiting posters, and 'straight' bodybuilding culture” (Curtain 133-34), intensely masculine, implicitly narcissistic, and intensely fragile beneath the military skin. The metaphor of tenderness becomes a full-body anxiety which recalls

Freud's prototype of the “painfully tender” organ . . . , the penis, which is “the seat of a multiplicity of sensations” when “congested with blood, swollen and humected” He coins the term “erotogenicity” to name this tenderness but recognizes it as a general characteristic of all organs and not only the male

member. For the tendency to erotogenicity produces a damming up of libido in any tender organ. (Siebers, "Tender Organs" 43)

Corto, who has been completely castrated, engages his entire body as a tender organ, to the extent that he ultimately breaks down. In that characterization, Gibson plays out very basic Freudian ideas of the body, disability, and neurosis/psychosis. Consider that

Freud conceived of the ego as a body ego. It exists on the surface of the skin. It may be more accurate to say that he thought of the self as a scar, as a wound healed over. As scar tissue accumulates, the self becomes less and less flexible. The initial mending of pain provided by scarification gives way to a rigidity more disabling than the original wound. (Siebers, "Tender Organs" 45)

Corto's body is mutilated, and his subsequent reconstructive surgeries ultimately do not alter his perception of himself as disabled. His ego is not only scarred but ultimately destroyed, so that he regresses to an id, "very far gone" and not human in any recognizable sense except the most basic biological one.

The body, reduced to a tender organ and its accompanying narcissism, pervades Gibson's fiction. While disabled characters abound, their abjection borders on absolute, and disability becomes the site of a persistent question: if the body is sick or damaged, how human can the mind within really be? How long can the self persist in the face of damage, pain, and illness? Theorist Kristin Lindgren suggests that injury and disability may create a discontinuity in self-perception: "living with a radically unpredictable body, or a body that has lost functions or parts, calls into question the stability and the continuity of identity" (148). This is perhaps most marked in precisely the case of the

original painfully tender organ. When *Count Zero's* Turner is demolished by an explosion, he is reconstructed, “[m]ost of him, anyway” (1), surgically, while his mind exists in “a ROM-generated simstim construct of an idealized New England boyhood of the previous century.” There, he performs classic formative masculinity, including masturbation, while surgeons re-build him with “eyes and genitals [bought] on the open market.” The fantasy of idealized masculinity sustains him until the surgeon declares Turner “good as new” (2). However, immediately, Turner wonders, “How good was that? He didn't know.” He retreats to Mexico, where he embarks on a happily carnal affair with a strange woman. Gibson makes clear that the encounters are sexual, satisfying, and fully functional:

And gradually, without words, she taught him a new style of passion. He was accustomed to being served, serviced anonymously by skilled professionals. Now . . . [h]e lowered his head, licking her, salt Pacific mixing with her own wet, her inner thighs cool against his cheeks. Palms cradling her hips, he held her, raised her like a chalice, lips pressing tight, while his tongue sought the locus, the point, the frequency that would bring her home. Then, grinning, he'd mount, enter, and find his own way there. (5)

Turner is “good as new” genitally as much as any other way, and his genital ability is crucial. He discovers afterwards that his lover is “a field psychologist, on retainer” to the corporation for whom Turner works as a mercenary (9). Turner's employers, those who supervised his reconstruction, “were a little worried, . . . so they wanted to check it out. Little therapy on the side.” Turner's ability to perform sexually affirms his sanity, his

masculinity, and his abilities as a soldier. Disability in one field translates to disability in all.

Most of Gibson's profoundly and permanently disabled characters are racialized, female, or otherwise abjected. The relationship between body and mind becomes more complex when the body is nonstandard even prior to its disability. The consensual cyborg, one who reconstructs himself for personal reasons, is exalted, and becomes the subject of delighted critical discourse. The disabled cyborg who reconstructs himself prosthetically is more problematic. A cyborg whose enhancements "only" allow him to adapt to the able-bodied world at first seems a technological disappointment, unable as s/he is to explore the multiple existences that technology offers the able-bodied. As the narratives develop, though, we discover that cyborgs with disabilities do not seek simply to "keep up" with able-bodied non-cyborgs; other possibilities are open to them.

At the same dinner party in *Idoru* at which Laney first encounters Rei Toei, Gibson makes clear that what he has previously called "congenital defects" need not be restrictive to an individual with adequate financial resources. Rei induces a kind of momentary blindness in Laney (176). However, "real" blindness reacts to her presence rather differently. Rez's drummer, "Blind" Willy Jude, sees the idoru as "a big aluminum thermos bottle" (179). Willy Jude perceives the world from behind "enormous black glasses" which function as prosthetic eyes, rendering the world in video layers. Willy Jude is implicitly rather than explicitly Black, named in classic blues style and speaking in a southern-American twang that consistently invokes race. However, he lives a life of rock star privilege, in which his primary lament is that "[h]olos are hard, man Take

my kids to Nissan County, I'll call ahead, get 'em tweaked around a little. Then I can see 'em.” Major theme parks adjust their technologies to suit him, an urban geography adapting to a disabled person's needs, rather than the reverse. Willy Jude's glasses “correct” his disabled body via technological intervention. They demonstrate the ingrained cultural desire “to produce corrected bodies that fit in with the existing shapes and expectations of non-disabled space” (Hansen & Philo 500). Jude violates few if any norms of space and behaviour, and his prosthesis is camouflaged by the coded image of a musician in sunglasses.

The engineering of “solutions” for disability, such as Willy Jude's glasses, mark the techno-social desire to make the disabled/differing/dissident body conform. In their writing on disability and geography, Nancy Hansen and Chris Philo suggest that technologically forced conformity has a “civilising” function which fulfills the needs of the culture much more than those of the disabled individual. The question of whose good is being served is essential. “Civilising,” they suggest,

equates with being able to fit in with expected compartments and time-space patterns of conduct, with medical intervention commonly perceived as the 'civilising' agent . . . and those disabled individuals perceived as acquiring greater degrees of 'ablebodiedness' being more readily accepted by the majority” (500).

Gibson's portrayal of disability correction on the body of a Black man reinforces the extent to which disability is perceived as an unacceptable difference. Both racialized and disabled existences disturb the (white) onlooker, unless those existences are technologically controlled and made palatable.

The extent to which a disability may be made palatable, then, becomes a pivotal question in reading disabled bodies. Gibson's male characters with disabilities have all adapted, to one degree or another, with the assistance of technology. Such men become socially integrated cyborgs, visibly different but not functionally other. Instead, they mark the intimate relationship between technology and (gendered) civilization: all those who adapt quietly may be included in the category of the human. Only those whose adaptations are unpalatable or uncivilized, or those who refuse to adapt, continue to be excluded.

Women, already objectified, become profoundly distanced and even alienated when their health becomes as much a primary question as their gender. While

[i]n health, the split between body and mind is experienced as a positive or neutral absence[,] in illness, this split can be accompanied by a sense of the body as other to the self, a problematic object that interferes with the body's projects. For . . . Merleau-Ponty, . . . a person is never without a body, and the self that observes or objectifies the body is always an embodied self. (Lindgren 149).

The body in Gibson's fiction is often problematic. The possibility of a disembodied self is real, in this context. However, the persistent figures of disabled women provide commentary on how brutal difference is to a gendered self. Lise's balance of disability and narcissism in "The Winter Market" provides an explicit account of the unbearability of the disabled body. Lise is chronically ("congenitally"), terminally ill, and for her technology is only a stopgap measure.

Lise's disability and associated addiction have broken down her self to the point

that her body is more recognizably human than her mind is; her body ego's reaction to her disability has rendered her profoundly rigid and self-contained. Yet in spite of her obvious contempt for her physical self, Lise re-enacts the expected narcissism in her admission that sometimes she likes “to watch” (8). In her final days, the only person left to kiss goodbye is herself: no one else matters to her.

Heather Hicks' analysis of the story centres on “interrogation framed explicitly in terms of the status and meaning of a woman artist's body” (78). While she does not directly address disability, Hicks focuses on narrator Casey's reaction to Lise's body in terms of discomfort and grotesquery:

She couldn't move, not without that extra skeleton, and it was jacked straight into her brain, myoelectric interface. The fragile-looking polycarbon braces moved her arms and legs, but a more subtle system handled her thin hands, galvanic inlays. I thought of frog legs twitching in a high-school lab tape (“The Winter Market” 7)

Lise is described in terms of her exoskeleton far more often than her facial features are invoked. The skeleton is monstrous; it excludes the “sheen of techno-glamour” (Hicks 82) that marks so many of Gibson's other cyborgs. That absence, combined with the runway-model mimicry which the skeleton creates, reduces Lise to the status of a horrifying clockwork toy.

Casey's last vision of Lise and a casual sexual partner is coloured by his presumption that “she could not be happy without a body” (Hicks 86). Yet he has also made abundantly clear that she cannot be happy with one. Lise is physically restricted by

her disability, but also socially restricted by the public perception of her disability, and medicine's "treatment" of it. Her fury suggests a dismissible narcissism, precisely because

[t]he disability of individuals is always represented as their own personal misfortune. Treatment isolates what is individual about the disability, only rarely relating it to the conditions of other people Instead, the *disability symbolizes not a suffering group but one person in his or her entirety*: the crippled senior citizen in the park, the deaf boy on the bus, the blind student in the hall. This means, of course, that the deaf boy on the bus may be entitled to individualized educational planning and medical services, but this special treatment . . . exposes him to great isolation and suffering because it ends by symbolizing his individuality as such. (Siebers, "Tender Organs" 48, emphasis added)

Lise's exoskeleton, an individualized treatment, becomes her whole identity and the sign of her disability. As long as she is perceived as disabled, she cannot belong to the larger culture, and her ability even to create temporary communities through sexual or technological communion is restricted by her partners' perception of her as completely other. In such a context, Lise's final choice of a partner "too drunk to have picked up on the exoskeleton" ("The Winter Market" 22) is significant. If her disability may go for a moment unrecognized and unisolated, then she has an opportunity for real connection. Casey conflates (as other Gibsonian narrators conflate) disability and death with hatred of one's own flesh (23), missing the possibility that what Lise hates is less her body than his perception of it.

Few of Gibson's disabled characters are as independent as Lise, however. The cyber-cowboys' contempt for the flesh in *Neuromancer* sets a pattern in which the body and those disabilities which (ostensibly) render the self merely a reflection of the body are both alien and abject. The short story "Dogfight," a collaboration between Gibson and Michael Swanwick, foregrounds the abjection of disability even in virtual contexts. An able-bodied homeless teenager becomes fascinated by a game in which cybernetically-controlled holographic projections of fighter planes fight violent aerial battles. The champion of this "sport" is the mockingly-named Tiny, a man whose physical body is marked as grotesque even before his disability becomes clear:

a vast and perfectly immobile bulk wedged into a fragile-looking chrome-tube chair. The man's khaki work shirt would have hung on Deke like the folds of a sail, but it bulged across that bloated torso so tautly that the buttons threatened to tear away at any instant. . . . Tiny might have looked [like a southern trooper] if he stood, but on a larger scale – a forty-inch jeans inseam that would have needed a woven-steel waistband to support all those bounds of swollen gut. If Tiny were ever to stand at all – for now Deke saw that the shiny frame was actually a wheelchair. There was something disturbing about the man's face, an appalling suggestion of youth and even beauty in features almost buried in fold and jowl.

Embarrassed, Deke looked away. (143)

Deke's embarrassment recalls Casey's in "The Winter Market." Both men are "forced" to look at disabled bodies which are, in violent contrast to able female bodies, decidedly *not* to be looked at. The sheer social discomfort involved in such a gaze reaffirms Siebers'

assertion that “[o]n the one hand, people with disabilities are supposedly unable to extend themselves emotionally to others. On the other hand, the sight of a person with a tender organ disables the able-bodied” (“Tender Organs” 46). The fusion of potential beauty and freakish monstrosity in a single body is as disabling to Tiny as his apparent inability to stand. His disabilities make him an object of pity and scorn, sub-human even to an adolescent thief barely surviving on the social margins. Yet even Tiny's disability is “justified” by his military record: “O! Tiny, he was a *pilot*. Spent his entire enlistment hyped to the gills. He's got membrane attenuation real bad” (152). While Deke does not readily perceive it, within the gaming community Tiny's masculinity, though not always visually reinforced, is not in question. Tiny is a master of combat simulation, virtual air battles between holographic planes: his mastery is absolute, and the subject of vast community respect.

Tiny's physicality and disability, though, are reproduced in *Virtual Light's* Josie without the respectful context. Absent military service and masculinity, Josie is a background character and object of pity. Her body becomes something which technology must help her escape rather than supplement:

Saw a very fat woman in a wheelchair, her hair the color and texture of coarse steel wool. She wore brand-new blue denim bib overalls and an XXL white sweatshirt, and both her hands were hidden inside something that sat on her lap like a smooth gray plastic muff. Her eyes were closed, face expressionless. He couldn't have said for sure that she wasn't asleep. (186)

Josie interacts with her environment almost entirely through her virtual “dancer,” a

hologram of a nude, seductive Japanese woman. The image moves in time to ambient music, following Josie's controls, but the image is so far removed, geographically and aesthetically, from the woman that the observer has no easy way to connect the two. Viewers are ruefully informed that “Josie's always projectin' . . . like it was something that couldn't really be helped.” The effect is pathetic rather than masterful, a second visual imposition on a community already disturbed by the requirement of perceiving the disabled woman. Disability without the technological ability to efface it becomes at once tragic and grotesque:

The terrible thing about it, Rydell thought, was that there Josie was, shoehorned into that chair, and she just wasn't much good at making that thing dance. It reminded him of this blind man in the park in Knoxville, who sat there all day strumming an antique National guitar. There he was, blind, had this old guitar, and he just couldn't chord for shit. Never seemed to get any better at it, either.

Didn't seem fair. (187-88)

That observation becomes Josie's dismissal: disabled and without adequate prosthetic mediation, she is unbearable, unworthy of human attention or assistance. She never recurs within the novel, and the focus shifts immediately to able bodies and their enormous skills. Josie's artistic failures only increase her abjection; at least, one realizes, Lise has her artistic abilities to redeem her nonfunctional body.

Artistic skill emerges as the redeeming aspect particularly of feminine disability. If the woman in question is less than able-bodied, if she is uncomfortable to look at, if the “congenital” nature of her disability renders her apparently asexual and so non-

reproductive, she must re-validate her existence via some profound aesthetic contribution to the culture. Lise achieves this quite overtly, but others of Gibson's women work to validate their problematic bodies on the margins of his narratives, and on the geographical margins of the cultural world. The extent to which a disability is congenital (that is, inherent in the body from birth) and “uncorrectable” becomes a political statement regarding the body's acceptability. The body which cannot be corrected is unbearable to the viewer, and thus implicitly, to the disabled person herself. Even as she works to validate herself artistically, her body persists, undermining her subjectivity and directing the social gaze away from her personal existence.

Given the extent to which feminine identities have historically been elided from literary and scientific narratives, the continued erasure of disabled femininities challenges the extent to which cyborg identities can disrupt the politics of the imagined body. Donna Haraway's feminist cyborg is initially an attractive model for feminist critics seeking to re-imagine disability. The Harawayan cyborg “is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self” (Haraway 163) which can be used to challenge institutionalized networks of oppression. This cyborg variant specifically challenges medical institutions which induce disability as a kind of default feminine state via

[i]ntensified machine-body relations; renegotiations of public metaphors which channel personal experience of the body, particularly in relation to reproduction, immune system functions, and 'stress' phenomena; . . . emergence of new, historically specific diseases, struggles over meanings and means of health in

environments pervaded by high technology products and processes (171-72)

All of these forces are at work in Gibson's writing, and are intensified by the nearly pathological disdain for the flesh that pervades the Cyberpunk Trilogy. However, Haraway's proposition, which is also Gibson's medium and message, is problematic. If able-bodiedness (constructed as "wholeness") is inaccessible, then the solution must be that "in imagination and in other practice, machines can be prosthetic devices, intimate components, friendly selves. We don't need organic holism to give impermeable wholeness, the total woman and her feminist variants" (Haraway 178). This is a practice which exceeds conventional prosthesis, proposing instead a powerful symbiosis which challenges boundaries between human and machine, and ultimately also between human and animal, and between animal and machine.

In any cyborg discussion, animals are an omnipresent spectre, though they only rarely become a major focus. The indefinite boundary between humans and animals is vaguest when humans confront great apes. Donna Haraway gives detailed attention to primatology throughout *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, noting that evolutionary constructions historically "designated primates as scientific objects in relation to [the] ideal of human progress through human engineering" (13). The ways we perceive animals affect the boundaries of both nature and culture; she suggests that "[w]e polish an animal mirror to look for ourselves" (21). However, the animal mirror becomes slightly distorted when it no longer reflects the visible human form. When a cyborg emerges without a human face, we see perhaps most clearly the less-than-exalted "nature" of abjected cyborg bodies.

Gibson's short story "Johnny Mnemonic," a prequel to *Neuromancer* featuring Molly Millions without Case, explores the unstable boundary between human and animal in a techno-medical context. The story is markedly unromantic in its examination of what post-humanism offers. The glamour of Molly's implants is undercut by the reminder that cyborg prosthetics and supplements were "mostly grown in a vat in Chiba City" (8). The sexiness of machines loses its shine rapidly, but the fluid mess of biology persists. The Nighttown environment through which Molly leads the narrator is Lo Tek territory, ruled by a gang that values "[l]ow technique, low technology" (14), a primitive existence in the midst of a technologized world. The Lo Tek's resistance to technology, though, orients to a particular notion of primitive, pointing to animality rather than the absence of (bio)technology. Dog, the guiding Lo Tek, has only "one eye, and [he] slowly extruded a thick length of grayish tongue, licking huge canines. [Johnny] wondered how they wrote off tooth-bud transplants from Dobermans as low technology. Immunosuppressives don't grow on trees." Dog's face provides its own techno-rhetoric: animals are the antithesis of technology. If technology is required to access the animal state, then the sacrifice (of making technological contact) is necessary, and even desirable. The Lo Tek's make a clear distinction between *bios* and *techne*, even while they exist on the margins of a world that blurs the boundary.

The Lo Tek attitude towards animals provides more than a hint of irony in the face of Jones, Molly's "friend . . . who was in the navy He's a junkie, though." Johnny enquires, "A junkie," and Molly informs him, "A dolphin" (10). Jones the cyborg dolphin lurks grotesquely within the story, intelligent as a human being but looking

nothing like one. Jones offers none of the aspirational technological existence that Molly's glamorous "razor-girl" persona does. Instead, he marks the potential for technology to sustain and perpetuate abjection: "He was more than a dolphin, but from another dolphin's point of view he might have seemed like something less. I watched him swirling sluggishly in his galvanized tank. . . . He was surplus from the last war. A cyborg" (10). Jones' body, like the bartender's, like Turner's and Tiny's, is that of a war veteran. However, his disability is not merely a side-effect of military service but a direct result of it. A dolphin's idealized aquatic body has been altered into "deformities" and "lesions" by cyborg implants: cyborgification has *made* him disabled.

The balancing of "more" and "less" in dolphin existence offers a much starker examination of the value and harm that cyborg existence creates. The post-humanist eye perceives "more than a dolphin," but the imagined pure/natural dolphin's eye perceives "something less": more than human, but less than dolphin. In an idealized cyborg context, the human-animal-machine relationship is triangular, shifting easily from one to the next without significant shift in aesthetic or cultural value. Yet from a humanist perspective, or within an imagined dolphinist gaze, the body and its functions retain enormous power, shifting the relationship to a hierarchical one, which emphasizes animality or humanity by perspective, but regards mechanical overlap as degrading.

Few of Gibson's constructions of the cyborg body are so overt in their values, but nonetheless, disabled Gibsonian cyborgs rarely achieve the freedom and ecstasy that Harawayan cyborgs promise. Tiny and Josie gain pleasure from their holography but remain visually grotesque and distant in their wheelchairs. Turner and Corto sustain their

subjectivity only so long as they can suppress the memory of their reconstruction. Lise flees her body and Jones lolls horrifically in his. This is not to suggest that each character does not enjoy his interactions with technology; s/he does, and the more desperate the need for the prosthetic technology is, the greater the joy at its access. Even accusations of narcissism lose their force when disability is subsumed within the cyborg state. The bartender's mechanical arm fades away, replaced by an existence in which the boundary between body and machine is so permeable as to deny, at least initially, the colonizing effect of prosthetic use.

While Rei Toei is the eponymous character and narrative crux of *Idoru*, she has a mirror-woman in the character of Zona Rosa. “Zona” exists as Rei's opposite, a “real” virtual girl.⁶⁹ Zona first appears in a constructed virtual space created for a fan club meeting, a space which vividly demonstrates the increasing overlap between nature and technology in young women's experience:

They met in a jungle clearing.

Kelsey had done the vegetation: big bright Rousseau leaves, cartoon orchids flecked with her idea of tropical colors (which reminded Chia of that mall chain that sold “organic” cosmetic products in shades utterly unknown to nature). Zona, the only one telepresent who'd ever seen anything like a real jungle, had done the audio, providing birdcalls, invisible but realistically dopplering bugs, and the odd vegetational rustle artfully suggesting not snakes but some shy furry thing, soft-pawed and curious. (11)

⁶⁹ In *Idoru*'s adolescent context, feminine identities are more often constructed as “girl” than “woman.”

The “entirely too Disneyesque” cyber-space⁷⁰ frames the chosen identities of a half-dozen or so young women, all fans of the band Lo/Rez, as they meet to discuss tactics for preventing Rei Toei's marriage to the singer Rez.⁷¹ Each girl appears more or less as she imagines or desires herself to be: Kelsey, the club's chapter-head, manifests as “a saucer-eyed nymph-figure out of some old *anime*,” invested with “elvin dignity” and “*manga*-doe lashes” (12). The hyper-femininity of the *anime* cartoon style overwrites the body insecurities of early adolescence in favour of abstracted pubescent beauty. Chia,⁷² smug in her greater self-assurance, is proud to manifest “as an only slightly tweaked, she felt, version of how the mirror told her she actually looked. Less nose, maybe. Lips a little fuller, but that was it. Almost.” In contrast, the most “serious” member of the club, she with the most personal authority and ability to intimidate, is Zona Rosa, who appears as “a blue Aztec death's head burning bodiless, ghosts of her blue hands flickering” (12). The first two girls use their virtual faces to reinforce their femininity, and ultimately, their sexual existence. Zona's bodiless image, a virtual mask serving as a real mask, prefigures her bodily identity, which emerges as a revelation only in the novel's last pages.

Zona purports to be “the leader of a knife-packing *chilanga* girl gang. Not the meanest in Mexico City, maybe, but serious enough about turf and tribute” (12). This identity is questioned from the novel's outset, but Zona's persona is powerful enough to

⁷⁰ The cyber-spaces of *Idoru*'s virtual encounters must be recognized as distinct from the collective consensual hallucination which constitutes cyberspace in the Cyberpunk Trilogy. The Interstitial novels' virtual spaces bear more resemblance to websites, though they are visited with virtual reality gloves and goggles rather than desktop or laptop computers.

⁷¹ Somewhat ironically, each member of the Lo/Rez fanclub manifests in high resolution.

⁷² Chia Pet McKenzie's name reminds us of the ways in which nature can be commercialized, named as she is after a consumer product in which plant life grows on twee clay figures.

make her a virtual enforcer within a community of young women focussed on Rez as a romantic object. Each girl sees Rei as a threat to her own imagined relationship with Rez, but Zona expands that fear to include threats to Rez's existence. She rants that “[c]learly, this dickless whore, the disembodied [Rei], has contrived to ensnare his soul” (11). Rei's lack of physical existence rapidly becomes a source of terror. As a synthetic, seductive woman, she is a threat not only to stable gender, but even to the boundaries of the real: “‘You synthetic bitch,’ Zona said. ‘You think we don't see what you're doing? You aren't real! . . . You're a made-up thing, and you want to suck what's real out of [Rez]’” (233). This intense focus on the reality of the body and its relationship to authenticity and subjectivity reinforces Zona's combative persona, but also reveals many of her own anxieties about virtuality. If a post-human entity, an empowered cyborg, challenges traditional subjectivity, then her claim to authenticity and uniqueness, essentially humanist values, dissolves. That dissolution, in turn, poses a profound threat to the aura with which Lo/Rez have invested their media production.

In an attempt to protect Chia from physical harm, Zona uses her private virtual country carved into the margins of corporate web-space to launch a data attack which summons thousands of young girls (all mourning Rez's fictitious death) to serve as a human shield. In the process, Zona “blows” her country, losing all access to private virtual territory. Chia initially interprets this loss as minor: “they've only shut down her website She's in Mexico City, with her gang” (284), but subsequently Rei informs her that “[Zona] is nowhere.” The entire identity, the “whole” woman Zona Rosa, breaks down at least in part because Chia is informed of her non-existence:

“Zona Rosa . . . was the persona of Mercedes Purissima Vargas-Gutierrez. She is twenty-six years old and the victim of an environmental syndrome occurring most frequently in the Federal District of Mexico”

“Then I can find her,” Chia said.

“But she would not wish this,” the idoru said. “Mercedes Purissima is severely deformed by the syndrome, and has lived for the past five years in almost complete denial of her physical self.” (285)

Zona/Mercedes, then, operates much in the way that Haraway imagines, as a being functionally merged with technology and existing primarily within the realm that technology opens. The virtual equipment she needs to do this is not prosthetic in the same sense that the bartender's arm is prosthetic; all people, regardless of able-bodiedness, need the same gloves and goggles in order to access the virtual realm. However, Gibson's characters suggest that the experience is less empowering than a critic might desire. Mercedes (as distinct from Zona) is utterly abject in her body, psychologically unable to tolerate her own existence. Rei, herself disembodied, presumes (and convinces Chia) that exposure of Mercedes' body would utterly destroy her. Not only will Zona/Mercedes not permit herself to be looked at, but she may actually be erased by a direct gaze.

Zona/Mercedes invests in Lo/Rez and Rez's authenticity precisely because she doubts her own. Her physical body is unbearable, but her existence as a virtual/synthetic woman, or digital clone, is equally intolerable to her. Zona is profoundly invested in the notion of the female body as a sacred object, and in Mercedes' inadequacy in the face of

that idealized existence. Mercedes' digital personae (of whom Zona is perhaps only one) also fill her with anxiety, though, precisely because she has internalized technology as a foreign presence within herself. The result is a perception of her virtual selves as clones or copies who suffer from her belief that when “mechanical reproduction separated art from its basis in cult, the semblance of its autonomy disappeared forever” (Benjamin 226). The woman who exists in potentially infinite forms in a virtual world (as Rei ultimately does in the physical world) is nonetheless terrified by what she perceives as her own failures of autonomy and subjectivity.

Tama Leaver challenges this reading of “Zona Rosa” on the grounds that, while virtuality in the *Interstitial Trilogy* functions as a near-disabling addiction, “[f]or Mercedes Purissima her posthuman notions of subjectivity include elements of identity formed in a technologically mediated digital realm, a locale far more flexible than the material world where her physical condition would dominate.” However, while Mercedes' disability is concealed by the Zona Rosa persona, and though Zona Rosa is profoundly powerful in the digital realm, “Zona”'s destruction as the result of a single assertive gesture indicates the fragility of her subjectivity. The “return” of Mercedes and Mercedes' denial of her physical self suggest that her relationship with technology functions only to conceal and not to supplement her “severely deformed” condition. Her disability and her apparent psychic fragility (reflecting her body's fragility) perpetuate her alienation and abjection in spite of her cyborg existence. In this abjection, Zona/Mercedes echoes Armitage/Corto of *Neuromancer*. Both dual identities use a militant persona to mask physical disability and mental fragility. The terror of recurrence

lingers from one trilogy to the next, perpetuating restrictive perceptions of the cyborg even as technologies adapt to make cyborg-ness a more realizable identity.

Chia's perceptions of "Zona" and Mercedes are key to my reading of Zona's exaltation/abjection. The assertion that Mercedes is too fragile to be acknowledged as herself renders Chia frantic. She worries because "she felt like her friend was dead, but her friend hadn't really ever existed, and there was this other girl in Mexico City, with terrible problems, and so she wound up . . . just crying" (290-91). That Chia, who herself exists primarily in the digital world, concludes that Zona never existed at all, points to the extent to which Chia still identifies subjectivity with the physical body. Mercedes remains a "girl . . . with terrible problems" rather than a woman (she is, in fact, an adult) who has freed herself from concern with her physical limitations. The lack of empathy between Chia and Mercedes is at least part of the disconnect in *Idoru's* presentation of cyborg existence. Mercedes' abjection is a crucial element of Chia's terror of her disability. Chia perceives Zona as a zone, perhaps even a "red zone,"⁷³ "of uninhabitability which a subject [here Chia] fantasizes as threatening its own integrity with the prospect of a psychotic dissolution ('I would rather die than do or be that!)" (Butler, *Bodies* 243).

It is worth noting that while Gibson presents a range of physically disabled characters, only Turner (who is only temporarily physically disabled) is a narrative subject. As a result, questions of subjectivity devolve to those perceiving disabled characters. That is, the class of disabled characters remains object rather than subject. The possibility of empathy, and of the perception of disability beyond or outside

⁷³ In this case, Gibson appears to be punning intentionally.

abjection, requires in the first place some sense of shared experience within the narrative subject. Leaver proposes Laney as a disabled subject on the grounds of his digital addiction, but Laney only descends into mental illness in *All Tomorrow's Parties*, and by that time he has removed himself from even casual contact with other disabled characters. I would counter-propose as a disabled subject Cayce Pollard (*Pattern Recognition*), Gibson's re-imagining of his original subject-perspective, Case, in *Neuromancer*.

“Cayce” is pronounced Kay-see. Her name visually recalls Case, and phonically recalls Casey from “The Winter Market.” The former's hatred of the body and the latter's disdain for disability are fused and inverted to produce a new perspective on both gender and embodiment. *Pattern Recognition* begins with Cayce decidedly living *in* her body, though suffering from “[f]ive hours' New York jet lag” and threatened by “the dire and ever-circling wolves of disrupted circadian rhythm” (1). In the course of a morning, she gradually re-constructs herself, feeling only somewhat alienated by the fact that “her mortal soul is leagues behind her, being reeled in on some ghostly umbilical cord down the vanished wake of the plane that brought her here, hundreds of thousands of feet above the Atlantic. Souls can't move that quickly, and are left behind, and must be awaited, upon arrival, like lost luggage.” Cayce's sense of alienation comes not from a desire to interact with technology at the expense of the flesh, but to somehow reconcile the stresses that technology creates upon the flesh. Her reconciliation takes the form of gentle mechanical interaction via the machineries of Pilates: “[s]he likes Pilates because it isn't, in the way she thinks of yoga, meditative. You have to keep your eyes open, here, and pay attention” (6).

Paying attention is the key to Cayce's subjectivity. She is hyper-sensitive to commercial branding, “literally, allergic to fashion” (8). Though Cayce has honed her allergy into a marketable skill, using her physical reaction to measure a new logo's potential success “as a very specialized piece of human litmus paper” (13), she remains effectively disabled by her allergy. The cultural saturation of logos and other forms of branding restrict her movements in urban environments and even her wardrobe: “[s]he can only tolerate [clothes] that could have been worn, to a general lack of comment, during any year between 1945 and 2000. She's a design-free zone, a one-woman school of anti whose very austerity periodically threatens to spawn its own cult” (8). Cayce's travels through London collapse when “[s]he's gone to Harvey Nichols⁷⁴ and gotten sick. / Should have known better. / How she responds to labels” (17), becoming “the 'wrong body' in the wrong place” (Hansen & Philo 495). Environments and encounters that appear neutral and accessible to the able-bodied majority are toxic to her. Most notable and profound among Cayce's neuro-aversions is Bibendum, “the Michelin Man, in one of his earliest, most stomach-churningly creepy manifestations The first time she'd seen Bibendum had been in a magazine, a French magazine. She'd been six. She'd thrown up” (*Pattern Recognition* 97). The image of Bibendum triggers both a psychological and physiological breakdown, providing Cayce's personal and professional enemies with the ongoing ability to terrorize and disable her.

One might consider that a “neuro-aversion” (manifest by Bibendum) is the antithesis of a neuro-romance, the notion at the core of the neologism “neuromancer.”

⁷⁴ An upscale London department store “rising like a coral reef opposite Knightsbridge station” (*Pattern Recognition* 17).

Cayce operates within her body, tolerating her mind as well as she can but never seeking to live within it, given her allergy's almost toxic limitations on her perceptions. Hers is never likely to be a neurological romance. In many ways, Cayce is the terminus of Gibson's brand-focussed writing, in that she manifests its antithesis. Whereas even Chia's virtual avatar is dressed in a designer "Silke-Marie-Kolb blouson-and-tights set" (*Idoru* 98), Cayce works constantly to protect herself from logo fragments, to the extent that her "black 501's [have] every trademark carefully removed. Even the buttons on these have been ground flat, featureless, by a puzzled Korean locksmith" (*Pattern Recognition* 2). Perhaps inevitably, given her unusual disability, Cayce is drawn to the fashion-neutral, almost identity-neutral, video fragments known as "the footage" (19). The fragmentary films number, at the novel's outset, "135. One hundred and thirty four previously known fragments – of what? A work in progress? Something completed years ago, and meted out now, for some reason, in these snippets? (22). The complete lack of visible authorship and the mystery of the footage's emergence onto the internet (21) reinforce Cayce's (and the footage-following culture's) investment in the footage as a completely unique and authentic work of art in an age threatened by "a simulacra of a simulacra of a simulacra" (17).

Cayce's perceptions of others are so heavily filtered by her own disability that she emerges as the only person properly equipped

" . . . to find him"

"Him."

"The maker."

“Her'? 'Them'?”

“The maker” (66)

The filmmaker is a blank, without gender, race, class, or ability. S/he could be anyone, anywhere in the world. Yet Cayce's affinities perhaps make it all but inevitable that the maker, when *she* emerges, will be both female and profoundly disabled, and doubled. Cayce's search leads her to Stella, a privileged young Russian woman, who explains, “I am twins. . . . My sister, she is the artist. I, I am what? The distributor. The one who finds an audience. It is not so great a talent” (286). Both twins are mutilated in a mafia/terrorist explosion: “The bomb is in a tree, as we leave our house They detonate it with a radio. Our parents die instantly, a mercy. It hurt Nora [my sister] badly. Very badly. I had only dislocations, my shoulders, my jaw, and many small wounds” (287). Stella's surgical reconstruction echoes Turner's, but she is left with no particular sense of her own disability. Instead, she becomes a prosthetic body for her sister, who is left with “no scars, only this skewing of the bone beneath” her skin (304). However, Nora's “consciousness, Cayce understands, is somehow bounded by or bound to the T-shaped fragment in her brain: part of the arming mechanism of the Claymore mine that killed her parents, balanced too deeply, too precariously within her skull, to ever be removed” (305).

Nora's artwork, the famous footage, is both possible and profoundly effective not in spite of her disability but precisely because of it. Only the footage's distribution is possible in spite of her. Stella recognizes Nora's talent and develops an elaborate network to disseminate the film fragments anonymously. Even so, Stella's object is not to conceal

Nora (though their custodial uncle does seek to shield both young women from the public gaze). Rather, she wants “the world to know her work. Something you could not know: how it was, here [in Russia], for artists. Whole universes of blood and imagination, built over lifetimes in rooms like theses, never to be seen. To die within their creators, and be swept out” (306).

The image of the restricted artist is not a new one, and Gibson has already explored it in “The Winter Market.” The processed dreams that Casey edits reify the notion of art as abstraction only made visible with great difficulty and only made possible through technological advancement. The corollary to this techno-expression of “pure” art is a profound sense of tragedy:

You see something like that and you wonder how many thousands, maybe millions of phenomenal artists have died mute, down the centuries, people who could never have been poets or painters or saxophone players, but who had this stuff inside, these psychic waveforms waiting for the circuitry required to tap in . . . (15, ellipse original)

Implied in Casey's regret is a belief that the human body without access to certain technologies is already disabled, and tragic in that disability. Lise's experience (or at least Casey's perception of Lise's experience) of being “locked in” mimics Case's disdain for the meat of the body, and his horror at being trapped in “the prison of his own flesh” (*Neuromancer* 6).

Gibson's able-bodied subjects almost universally conflate disability as abjection. Those narrators must work slowly, almost painfully, through reductive notions of

disability, only gradually reconciling technological facility with disabled subjectivity. That reconciliation, though, produces characters (and a narrative awareness of those characters) who not only resist abjection, but who have achieved transcendence via technology in a way that Gibson's able-bodied cyber-cowboys cannot. Disability may, in fact, provide a direct route to techno-transcendence. That route is inherent in the need to do things differently. Adaptation of technology to radically individuated needs allows transformation not only for the individual, but for the entire culture. Though Casey edits dreams, his reliance on an able-bodied mindset reduces him to the status of technician rather than artist:

You know what your trouble is [Casey]? . . . You're the kind who *always reads the handbook*. Anything people build, any kind of technology, it's going to have some specific purpose. It's for doing something that [somebody]⁷⁵ already understands. But if it's new technology, it'll open areas nobody's ever thought of before. You read the manual, man, and you won't play around with it, not the same way. And you get all funny when somebody else uses it to do something you never thought of. Like Lise. (“The Winter Market” 13, italics original)

Casey utterly fails to perceive that the technology's intended user may not be its ideal user. His mechanistic approach to technology, though rational, is restrictive. He conflates machines and body, reproducing Norah Vincent's fallacy that “[t]he human body is a machine, after all This is science, not culture.” He fails to realize, as Vincent does, that what we perceive as science (restrictions and expectations of a

⁷⁵ The Tesseract² version of the text reads “something that something already understands.” In the Burning Chrome version of the story, this has been corrected, and the correction has been inserted here for clarity.

standardized body) may simply be a set of cultural expectations which ultimately restrict human capability.

Stella's assessment of Nora's work is not one that emphasizes disability. She is far more concerned with a broader notion of accessibility, that of knowledge to humanity on a large scale, with only a passing relationship to bodies. In Stella's eyes, Nora is part of a community, “the sea” of Russian art and artists. Nora's studio provides a point of access to the “real” cyborg experience, that of a woman outside the western world (though still working from a position of privilege in the context of race and wealth), disabled and isolated, who makes meaningful contact and transforms her own life through her daily interactions with technology. She edits film ceaselessly, communicating only through her work. Stella guides Cayce into the studio with the long-awaited announcement, “**You are here**” (*Pattern Recognition* 301, emphasis added). Cayce responds, “Where's here?”, but is less interested in her geographic location than the significance of *what* “here” is: the location of the maker. Nora's existence is bounded not just geographically, but by her ability to exist, to assert her identity and subjectivity, which she does solely through filmmaking. Stella reminds us, “She is here, when she is working. You must understand. When she is not working, she is not here” (303), not only physically “here,” in the studio, but psychically present. Nora's work creates a new space, “the T-shaped city, the city Nora is mapping through the footage she generates” (305). Nora's consciousness is bound to and mapped by the metal fragment in her brain, but this has not “crippled” her in an ablist sense. Instead, the fragment has allowed her to re-create herself. The “real” Nora is “only truly present when focused on [the movie] screen.” She has no interest in

her audience (289), only in the process of creation, and of summoning her self.

Nora's self-creation is intimately related to Rei Toei's. Both women exist in marginal states of embodiment with limited agency, and both access technology, particularly video technology, to make contact with the culture at large. Nora is, perhaps, the more compelling of the two women, in that her story (the story of her discovery) is not explicitly SF. Instead, Gibson links Cayce and Nora through a network of then-contemporary technologies.⁷⁶ Whereas Rei is an imagined technological possibility in an abstract future, Nora's existence is made possible by the Internet, by digital rendering software, and by the entire history of computing. Alan Turing's life and death both make her possible. She enacts a profound resistance to cultural anxieties about reproduction. Nora's film is "a work in progress" (304), and Nora herself "the headwaters of the digital Nile" (305).

Cayce's characterization of Nora as headwaters, as with Stella's characterization of Nora's community of artists as "the sea," associates the woman and her work with the natural world, in spite of Nora's technological environment and isolation from recognizable nature. If Nora is, indeed, a natural object, and if her work is an extension of her self, then by her digital presence and impact she reinforces authenticity, the realm in which "no natural object is vulnerable" (Benjamin 221). Nora's body, and particularly her disability, reinforce her film's authenticity by serving as a testimony to the whole's existence, "the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history it has experienced." While Nora is not

⁷⁶ *Pattern Recognition* was published in 2003 and is set in 2002, approximately a year after the destruction of the World Trade Centre.

by any means a “thing” herself, her body and her work are intimately twined.

By so intimately linking a woman's body with a work of art, Nora refutes Offred's anxieties regarding reproduction. Nora is a filmmaker, but not a “girl on film.” She works digitally, reproducing images and narratives without diminishing them. She demonstrates that both images and bodies may be dismembered but also re-membered. The first manifestation of Nora's self after the bombing takes place in the hospital, when she approaches her previous film work:

We showed Nora the film she had been working on, in Paris, before. Nothing. As if she could not see it. Then she was shown her film from Cannes. That she saw, but it seemed to cause her great pain. Soon she began to use the equipment. To edit. Recut.

. . . Three months, she recut. Five operations in that time, and still she worked. [Stella] watched it grow shorter and shorter. In the end, she had reduced it to a single frame. (288)

In the aftermath of that single frame, Nora withdraws, but ultimately re-emerges in a second editing suite, working with closed-circuit footage from her own hospital:

She began to cut it. To manipulate. Soon she had isolated a single figure. A man, one of the staff. They brought him to her, but she had no reaction. She ignored him, continued to work. One day I found her working on his face, in Photoshop. That was the beginning [of the footage].

Nora's re-membering of her film work is almost entirely self-guided. Though a doctor recognizes the possibilities inherent in her access to film equipment, he cannot dictate her

use of it. She develops a cyborg existence with the film suite. That existence, though, does not mimic the “civilising function” of conventional prosthetics, in that the film suite does not engineer normalizing or corrective measures (Hansen & Philo 500). Instead, Nora adapts to an existence which suits her individual needs, operating radically differently from the non-disabled and giving the non-disabled little or no attention. Her existence is radically non-normative, and though her work offers profound benefits (both emotional and commercial) to the non-disabled culture, she does not produce the film either to please that culture or justify her own existence. Her body, unlike Rei's, has both an identifiable origin and an independent reality, without the malevolence of digital clones, but potentially posing as radical a challenge to social expectations of embodiment and humanness as any feminine cyborg who alters expectations of the real.

Conclusion: New Maps for These Territories

The factory girl steps back into herself. She has mapped a portion of her world, but nowhere in that space has she found her self settled comfortably in human flesh. She has, however, discovered possibilities for motion, for creation and being, that do not require comfort. She need not wear her own skin at all times. Looking down, she perceives that one hand has become mechanical; its transparent skin reveals the cyborg mechanisms that allow her access to the technological world. Her other hand has transformed into a bird's wing, extending her reach into the animal realm. She has her own feet, still, but her shoes are the towering stilts of the Bride of Frankenstein. In those shoes, she is free to reject even the most highly engineered scenarios of compulsory heterosexuality.

In fact, she no longer recognizes herself as “factory girl” at all. She has walked forward not only in space, but in culture. The woman come from the farm to labour in slavery to machines has been dead for centuries. The woman who has put her own skin back on is a ninth-generation clone of that first one, identical in every cell but independent in experience. She is/is not the same.

The technologized feminine body is no longer a deniable entity. Gibson's fiction, which has darted between the respectable culture centre and the fetishized borders of the fantastic, returns in the language of the present to demand serious critical attention.

Atwood's writing has thrown off its survivalist cloak of fresh-killed furs and emerges wearing a second skin of glittering transgenic cells. The two bodies (of work, of women) intersect and illuminate one another. The map they create is the first serious cartography of the new Canadian literary territory: that of the fully technological subject. She is already here.

She is here.

She is here *now*.

Mark Neale's documentary film on William Gibson, *No Maps for These Territories*, was released in October 2000. Neale supposes a new realm of exploration. I have attempted here to produce a preliminary map for one fragment of territory, that of the feminine body re-written by technology. That body desperately requires new maps. In order for the feminine subject to navigate her flesh/her experience, millennia of body-cartography must shift. Practices of cultural pathology do not allow for the cyborg until she asserts herself; then, pathology inverts so that infection becomes an advantage, providing interconnectivity and access to power. The very nature of disease must change when it becomes a tool instead of a threat. Both Gibson and Atwood "begin" (in *Tesseract²*) here, with the awareness that illness need not be apocalyptic.

No re-imagining of the female body need be apocalyptic, or accompanied by suffering. In a cyborg context, digital reproductivity, sex work, cloning, anorexic resistance, and disability are all bearable. The women who engage with these modes step outside conventional territories of femininity, but their outsider status does not automatically produce abjection; in fact, deliberately adopting an outsider identity

fundamentally resists abjection. The women who deliberately technologize their bodies do so because they value their survival and individual power, and reject notions that their embodiment is in any way fragile or subject to patriarchal regulation.

William Gibson has, in recent years, withdrawn from speculating on the future to exploring the possibilities inherent in the present. The present moment (2003, as he published *Pattern Recognition*/2010, as I submit this dissertation) offers women in both the west and in developing nations unprecedented access to technology. Rural communities in sub-Saharan Africa were never wired for telephony, but they have made almost instant global contact via the expanding cellular phone network. In less than a decade, African cell phone ownership has risen from 2% to 28%, from one person in fifty to more than one in four. Globally, there are more cellular phones than fixed telephone lines (Mensah). Access to technology is no longer exclusively a privilege of the developed world. Instead, the “wretched of the earth” have taken up *technē* on their own terms, and they use it not to mimic the dominant/colonial west, but to create independent selves who challenge that dominance.

Global access to technology disrupts western/patriarchal epistemologies of dominance. Homi Bhabha's suggestion that resistance can be reinforced when “sociological observations are intercut with literary artefacts” (59) applies to the status of women as much as it does to the status of nations. (The wretched of the earth are writing, writing, reading and creating.) Literature intersects with cultural machineries, shaking established Western-historical narratives to their cores. The “progress” of technology from the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution to the “post-industrial” present only

forms a straight, unbroken line for the masculine/dominant subject. The feminine/oppresed subject sees this line from its end and experiences technology as a single, explosive moment which alters her radically and almost instantaneously.

She is here, looking at the line from its end.



While the cyborgs Gibson imagined in the 1980s were young white women, the global potential of technological existence challenges that image. Though they lack razor-blade fingernails, the young women who dominate high-tech manufacturing in China much more closely resemble the cyborgs that Haraway imagines. In less than a single generation, girls (most well under eighteen) have left their rural ancestral homes, abandoned patriarchal family structure and expectations of marriage, gained access to world-class communications, and created new, female-dominated communities which sustain them and fulfill their needs (Chang). Though they have limited education, contemporary “factory girls” re-write their histories to serve their own purposes. Most remain “illegal” residents of the factory cities, outside the regulated culture, but they are powerful economically, and their political power is growing throughout the country. Ethnically Chinese women born or raised abroad are returning to China, engaging with the new culture, and telling its stories.⁷⁷

This transformation is radically different but perhaps more profound than any that either Gibson or Atwood could have predicted in the 1980s. Cold War anxieties have faded, and globalized late capitalism has produced a world that recalls colonialism but

⁷⁷ Urban women's experiences with China's sexual and economic transformation in the 2000s are recounted in Annie Wang's 2006 novel *The People's Republic of Desire*.

could not replicate it even if colonialism were in any way desirable. The obvious western reaction is anxiety, and even panic. Atwood postulates Oryx, Asian sex-work survivor and cheerful observer of western culture's collapse. Yet one wonders (I wonder) how different the corporate-cultural landscape of *Oryx and Crake* would be if the novel were set in China rather than in America. What pornographies would distract that culture's children? Would digital clones be conceivable (the puns do not go away) after multiple generations of single-child families? Already the one-child policy has skewed the country's sex-ratio, and in the process transformed families both in China and abroad.

The adoption of abandoned Chinese girls by western families marks a shift in reproductive labour. Where once working-class women nursed the infants of the wealthy, for a generation female infants have appeared in Chinese orphanages, available for overseas adoption more or less on demand. Between 1991 and 2008, American families adopted some 60,000 Chinese infants, nearly all girls (Clethane). As a result, Chinese girls came to be perceived as a commodity in the west: "a lovely and healthy baby with chubby face, fair skin and smart eyes" (Clethane), produced more or less to order. For infertile couples, single parents, same-sex couples, and others seeking babies, the market was "open."

The commodification of reproductive bodies is not new by any means, but western anxiety on the subject increases. British SF particularly has explored this subject. P.D. James' novel *The Children of Men* (1992) postulates a future of global infertility. The profound privileges of the last generation to be born (in 1995, the year I entered university) exaggerate the oft-lamented Chinese culture of "little emperors," but

without any of the optimism that real futurity allows. The emergence of a single pregnant woman provides the power to destabilize the state and revolutionize stagnant culture, but her power is a product of her singularity: reproductivity holds power only in the absence of fertility. Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) explores the moral dangers in treating bodies as commodities. Privileged children educated in an idyllic private school gradually come to understand that they are clones, produced via unknown mechanisms to provide organ donations for a population distracted by its own prosperity. The novels are distinct, but they offer interconnected perspectives on the terror which reproduction induces. The value a culture places on fertility is constantly at odds with women's independence, and though economic privilege reduces the conflict to muted social debate, the conflict never vanishes. It cannot, so long as biological childbearing is humanity's only path to futurity.

Both Ishiguro and James confront reproductivity within the context of humanism, Enlightenment values, and class privilege. Young Asian (and Asian-western) novelists resist the notion that late capitalism/globalization mark a tragic end to the Enlightenment subject. Instead, they resist the Enlightenment subject altogether. In *The People's Republic of Desire*, Annie Wang steps out of post-colonial Hong Kong into Shanghai and explicates a culture whose notions of individuality and subjectivity are so radically different from those of the west that we might not at first recognize them. Larissa Lai breaks down western subjectivity in her Chinese-Canadian narratives⁷⁸ of hybridity, travel, and technological engagement. Each of her women speaks with many voices spread across space and time.

⁷⁸ *When Fox is a Thousand* (1995) and *Salt-Fish Girl* (2002)

This is the future not only of speculative fiction, but of Canadian fiction. The long-held position that CanLit is a genre of harsh landscapes and elemental struggles fails to account for the extent to which technology permeates Canadian culture. It ignores a Canadian population which is no longer overwhelmingly anglo/white. The animals are still present, and the snow still falls (though less every year, and the precarious existence of the Hudson Bay polar bears is no longer ignorable), but isolation is no longer an option. In the summer of 2010, as I completed the body of this dissertation, Margaret Atwood set out to join a cruise navigating the now ice-free Northwest Passage. Yet cartography intervened. She blogs:

So, up we went to Yellowknife (Northwest Territories, Canada), Graeme Gibson and self, en route to Kugluktuk, where we were supposed to join the Clipper Adventurer (ship) and Adventure Canada (group) www.adventurecanada.com on a Northwest Passage journey. But:

Our ship hit an uncharted rock

It made the boat to list so,

We had to stay in Yellowknife

And eat at Bullock's Bistro.

(Old Sea Chanty.) (Atwood, "Our Excellent Yellowknife Adventure")

The ship ran aground off the Nunavut coast, and initially news outlets reported that the culprit ruining the cruise was "an uncharted rock" ("Stranded Arctic cruise passengers head home"). Only later did local (Nunavut) media report that the uncharted rock was nothing of the sort: "contrary to earlier reports, the location of the rock the cruise ship ran

aground on about 100 kilometres east of Kugluktuk has been known since 2007, when the the Canadian Hydrographic Service informed the shipping industry” (George). The ship's owners had not updated their charts. Though three years may seem (at least to the literary critic) a very short span in cartography, the need for recent, accurate maps persists, particularly as new territories open. There are new maps for these territories; it is our responsibility to update our charts.

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