Mirrorshade Women: Feminism and Cyberpunk

at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century

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Abstract

This study analyzes works of cyberpunk literature written between 1981 and 2005, and positions women's cyberpunk as part of a larger cultural discussion of feminist issues. It traces the origins of the genre, reviews critical reactions, and subsequently outlines the ways in which women's cyberpunk altered genre conventions in order to advance specifically feminist points of view. Novels are examined within their historical contexts; their content is compared to broader trends and controversies within contemporary feminism, and their themes are revealed to be visible reflections of feminist discourse at the end of the twentieth century. The study will ultimately make a case for the treatment of feminist cyberpunk as a unique vehicle for the examination of contemporary women's issues, and for the analysis of feminist science fiction as a complex source of political ideas.

Cette étude fait l'analyse d'ouvrages de littérature cyberpunk écrits entre 1981 et 2005, et situe la littérature féminine cyberpunk dans le contexte d'une discussion culturelle plus vaste des questions féministes. Elle établit les origines du genre, analyse les réactions culturelles et, par la suite, donne un aperçu des différentes manières dont la littérature féminine cyberpunk a transformé les usages du genre afin de promouvoir en particulier le point de vue féministe. Les romans sont examinés dans leurs contextes historiques; leur contenu est comparé aux tendances et controverses de plus grande envergure du féminisme contemporain, et leurs thèmes affichés comme images manifestes du discours féministe à la fin du vingtième siècle. L'étude présentera en fin de compte des arguments appuyant l'approche de la littérature cyberpunk féministe comme véhicule exceptionnel pour l'examen des questions féminines contemporaines et pour l'analyse de la science-fiction féministe en tant que source complexe d'idées politiques.

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Introduction

This project is a study of women's cyberpunk and cyberfiction in the 1990s and early 2000s. Through an in-depth thematic analysis of texts written by both men and women authors, it will examine how a science fiction subgenre has been tangibly marked by feminist concerns, and modified to occupy a cultural space very different from previous works. In examining these works of literature in terms of their status as communications media, I am primarily concerned with questions of messaging – with the treatment of prevalent themes within the genre, the changing nature of those themes, and the position such discussions occupy both within cyberpunk literature as a whole, and within broader feminist approaches to current technologies and social issues.

Cyberpunk is an excellent site for a study based in gender. Its first wave, written primarily in the 1980s, was almost exclusively the domain of male writers such as William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, and Rudy Rucker. The 1990s subsequently produced a broad range of works authored by women such as Marge Piercy, Lisa Mason, Melissa Scott and Lyda Morehouse. These two iterations of the genre are ripe for comparison. I have used such terms as "women's cyberpunk" and "feminist cyberpunk" interchangeably to indicate a subgenre within a subgenre, a portion of science fiction identifiable both as early cyberpunk's descendant, and as a series of works created within its own feminist paradigm. It is admittedly difficult to situate women's cyberpunk as a single, monolithic discourse; my explorations also reveal that these works are richly diverse, and reflect equally complex tensions in contemporary feminism. Nor is it my position that all women authors are feminist authors; rather, I argue that feminist discourses within women's cyberpunk may also spring naturally from woman's place in

Western society. In his study of women's science fiction, Brooks Landon focuses on "writers and works that, while not necessarily 'feminist' in any rigorous sense, have opposed or modified the genre's heavily masculinist tendencies" (Science Fiction 125); my approach is much the same. Women authors are writing from marginalized social positions, and this inescapably marks their work. While early cyberpunk is predominantly acknowledged as white male, heterosexual, and middle-class in its scope, and lauded mainly for its postmodern treatment of contemporary technology and identity issues, women's cyberpunk offers a more varied blend of issues, tinted with a distinctly feminist political lens. By reconfiguring the conventions of a genre often criticized as misogynist, women have re-created cyberpunk as a medium for feminist political voices; their works may be read as acts of participation in contemporary feminist discourse. By analyzing women's cyberpunk and cyberfiction in relation to science fiction, technology, and women's issues in the latter part of the 20th century, I intend to demonstrate how a sub-genre of science fiction may be read as part of a broader social dialogue, and as a forum in which writers have approached feminist topics with a rich degree of imagination.

In its original conception, this was meant to be a study of cyberpunk's influence on the formation of internet technologies and cultures; during the course of my research, several things became obvious that redirected my focus. It has been well remarked that the original cyberpunk authors, with the exception of Pat Cadigan, were almost uniformly white, middle-class men; it did not take long for me to begin wondering about women's voices, and whether they may have had any similar impact on new technologies, or whether cyberpunk could provide a forum for women, too, to present philosophies regarding globalization and postmodern identity. What became obvious in reading

cyberpunk works from the 1990s was that women writers had significantly altered the genre in order to accommodate feminist ideas – and that the same themes were cropping up again and again. Much as the original cyberpunk works were a loose cluster of novels lauded for their similar approaches to issues of alienation and postmodern identity, these next-generation works were a diverse array of texts that nevertheless managed to share similar approaches to issues such as environmentalism, reproduction, and family – in addition to putting new spins on old cyberpunk themes.

It should be acknowledged that the question of "generations" in cyberpunk can be a difficult one; as Landon, again, has said, "discussion of waves or swings must remind us of the futility of attempting a static description of science fiction in the twentieth century" (Science Fiction 154). My own investigative scope, comparing masculinist novels from *True Names* (1981) to *Snow Crash* (1992) with feminist works from *He, She and It* (1991) to *Messiah Node* (2003), treats the feminist wave of cyberpunk and cyberfiction as a second generation to the cyberpunk movement – an analysis that is distinct from some other arguments. Thomas Foster is already talking about third generations (Souls 86), and Brooks Landon has defined *Snow Crash* as a novel that wears its "cyberpunk ancestry" proudly (Science Fiction 154) rather than being part of the first wave. In this sense, my approach dovetails more with those of Karen Cadora and E.L. McCallum – Cadora, who in 1995 first defined "feminist cyberpunk" as the Movement's successor, and McCallum, who compares Cadigan's work to *Neuromancer, Islands in the Net,* and *Snow Crash* in the same breath (369). This is not to position myself contrarily to other frameworks of analysis; it is only to observe that the boundaries of cyberpunk are blurry at best, and there are multiple ways of viewing these materials. The next several

chapters should clarify my argument, particularly *Snow Crash*'s placement as a novel that both exemplifies the major traits of the cyberpunk genre and hints at the feminist ideas that were already springing to life within other works.

The works I have included as part of the feminist wave range from Melissa Scott's *Trouble and Her Friends* to Kathleen Ann Goonan's *Queen City Jazz;* they are admittedly diverse, but no more so than the eclectic mix of short stories found in the cyberpunk anthology *Mirrorshades* (a collection that includes both Greg Bear's "Petra" and William Gibson's "The Gernsback Continuum"). What I define as feminist cyberpunk are women's novels and short stories that show evidence of cyberpunk influence while simultaneously changing the paradigm – works that added a feminist slant to cyberpunk's themes of globalization, capitalism, embodiment and identity, while at the same time dealing with new ideas such as ecology, feminism, religion and queer rights. These texts have, for the most part, been omitted from studies of the genre; in straying too far from cyberpunk's strict formulas, some have been more commonly defined (and excluded) as "cyberfiction." I feel this is overly limiting, and have included them herein; extending and modifying cyberpunk structures, these works gave feminist twists to old themes, and introduced entirely new ideas. It may be that their dismissal from the movement's main body of work is one of the reasons for their academic neglect.

Which works are cyberpunk, and which cyberfiction? Fifty academics may offer fifty different answers. I am less interested in dividing lines than unions. I have sought out speculative, near-future science fiction by women – science fiction that is concerned with new technologies and the information age, and takes place within settings clearly influenced by cyberpunk ideas. I have looked for – and found – congruences between

these works, which, like the first cyberpunk wave, are loosely affiliated around a series of similar notions. I have also included Raphael Carter's novel *Fortunate Fall,* making Carter – who eschews gender identification – the one exception to my definition of "women's cyberpunk," much in the same way that Joanna Russ included Samuel Delany in her own discussion of feminist science fiction (134). Carter, who is also included in Thomas Foster's analyses of feminist and lesbian science fiction authors (Souls xxi), simply fits too well within these discussions to have been excluded, although the unique gender of the author – defined as neither male nor female – must be acknowledged. Obviously my categories are not carved in stone; I set out to look for ideas and congruences, with the hope that my thoughts will provide material for further exploration. Cyberpunk from any generation is difficult to pin down, but close examination reveals several definite threads running through what are, on the surface, quite varied works; in the case of women's cyberpunk, these threads reflect many primary feminist concerns at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Feminist cyberpunk and cyberfiction has proven a fascinating area of study. In his essay "Inside the Movement", published in 1991, Lewis Shiner wrote: "The novel must face the future. I'm not talking here about a sci-fiberpunk novel that offers escape into techno-macho insensitivity. I'm talking about a novel that presents new paradigms, works against prejudice and limited worldviews" (25). This literature exists, or at least has made a vigorous attempt at existing, in the form of works by women (and Carter). Feminist cyberpunk has been less successful commercially, but more successful in terms of presenting new ideas and challenging the patriarchal status quo. It is not just a pale imitation of first-generation writings; it still strives to create something original.

The study begins by offering a history and definition of cyberpunk in general, in order to give proper background and context for discussions of the genre's evolution. Ensuing chapters include an analysis of Pat Cadigan's work as it pertains to later feminist novels, and an analysis of women's work both in terms of alterations made to original cyberpunk themes and settings, and in terms of new ideas found only within feminist cyberpunk. Chapters 3 to 9 discuss how women have adapted the original cyberpunk tropes to accommodate themes that match concurrent changes in feminist politics, and the significance of their texts within a larger cultural discussion regarding issues such as women and technology, ecology, and spirituality. I examine how feminist treatments have been given to standard cyberpunk tropes of capitalist globalization, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence, thus placing women's work under the cyberpunk label and illustrating the differences in how the genre was treated by the two waves. Subsequently, I analyze how women have modified cyberpunk's less frequently noted treatments of environmentalism and mythology, and introduced entirely new themes such as reproductive technologies and queer rights. Finally, the cultural impact of first-wave cyberpunk – its influence on hackers, programmers, and the formation of today's communications technologies – is compared to the impact of women's cyberfiction, which uses similar genre conventions but occupies an entirely different niche, conveying its discussions of contemporary feminist issues to a smaller but more disparate audience. Authors such as Marge Piercy, Melissa Scott and Kathleen Ann Goonan have indeed used the cyberpunk mythos to work against prejudice and limited worldviews; they have expanded the genre far beyond its original tenets.

- Chapter 1 -
History and Definitions

Although the focus of this study is primarily on cyberpunk and cyberfiction written by women during the 1990s, I will begin by establishing a history and definition of the cyberpunk genre, and exploring critical reactions to the works of the 1980s. The science fiction subgenre known as cyberpunk has been both lauded as the quintessential example of postmodern narrative, and derided as a vehicle for adolescent male power fantasies. In the 1980s and early 1990s, it caused a flurry of debate regarding issues of technology, postmodernism and identity, and it was at least partly responsible for revitalizing academic interest in science fiction.

The term "cyberpunk" was originally popularized by a 1985 *Washington Post* article by Gardner Dozois, who borrowed the term from the title of Bruce Bethke's 1983 short story (Dery 75). In the article, "cyberpunk" referred to work by authors like William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, who were writing stories about isolated hacker heroes fighting against faceless international megacorporations in a gritty, high-tech near-future. The word was embraced as a marketing tool by science fiction publishers, and Sterling himself enthusiastically espoused it in 1986 by editing the "cyberpunk reader" *Mirrorshades*. However, Gibson, the crown prince of the cyberpunk movement, has acknowledged that the term "is mainly a marketing strategy – and one that I've come to feel trivializes what I do" (McCaffery interview 279). It is somewhat ironic that a genre movement claiming to deride the alienating nature of capitalism was, in fact, partly defined by the capitalist needs of its publishers; cyberpunk's borders and affiliations have always been blurred. It is a multi-faceted genre, a sub-genre of science fiction that has evolved and fragmented since its inception, leading to a host of different definitions. Paul

Alkon links it to realism, the Gothic, epic marvels, pulp fiction and film noir (75-76);

E.L. McCallum cites it as a continuation of the adventure/travel tale (349); Lewis Shiner

traces it back to western pulp heroes (23); and Gary Westfahl and Carol McGuirk both

argue that cyberpunk is instead a logical continuation of a lengthy science fiction

tradition (Westfahl 88, McGuirk 109). The precise moment of the movement's coalition

is difficult to pinpoint: Larry McCaffery, for example, traces the works influencing the

genre all the way back to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; Sterling gives credit to writers as

varied as H.G. Wells and Thomas Pynchon; and a great many critics mention

cyberpunk's pastiche of pulp/noir/Western styles.

Certainly the movement's themes as a whole emerged, not as a result of one

particular writer – though Gibson is the most famous – but almost simultaneously among

the works of several writers, including John Shirley, Vernor Vinge, Lewis Shiner, and

Rudy Rucker. Having acknowledged this, it is expedient to take as a general starting

point the publication of Gibson's *Neuromancer* in 1984; although it was not the first

cyberpunk work to see print, Gibson's novel is what garnered real critical attention and

encouraged the crystallization – whether publicist-motivated or otherwise – of cyberpunk

as a whole. Marked by a hard-edged narrative style, a technological world set in chrome

and neon, and a science fiction future solidly based in the social concerns of the present,

Neuromancer was the flagship for many cyberpunk works published in the 1980s and

beyond. Gibson, Sterling and their counterparts fleshed out the genre's pattern and

defined what they called "the Movement," an attempt to revitalize what they saw as

ailing and outmoded science fiction conventions. Its structures, intrinsically derivative in

nature but unique in final form, produced an exploration of capitalism, technology and

the human condition that appealed to sci fi fans and even some mainstream audiences. *Neuromancer* won major science fiction awards (the Hugo, Philip K. Dick Memorial, Nebula, Seiun, and Ditmar awards)[1] and has spawned several editions, a computer game, a graphic novel, an audio book, and continued rumours of film production. Cyberpunk author Bruce Sterling argued in his 1986 introduction to *Mirrorshades* that cyberpunk's appeal lay in its reflection of larger social undercurrents:

> Technical culture has gotten out of hand. The advances of the sciences are so deeply radical, so disturbing, upsetting and revolutionary, that they can no longer be contained. They are surging into culture at large; they are invasive; they are everywhere. The traditional power structure, the traditional institutions, have lost control of the pace of change.
>
> And suddenly a new alliance is becoming evident: an integration of technology and the 1980s counterculture. An unholy alliance of the technical world and the world of organized dissent – the underground world of pop culture, visionary fluidity, and street-level anarchy. (345)

According to Sterling, cyberpunk's commercial success during the 1980s could be credited to the fact that it both revolutionized science fiction and keenly reflected the voice of the age in which it was written. He was not the only science fiction author to feel that the genre's appeal lay in its novel style and address of key contemporary social issues; Pat Cadigan writes, "Popular culture in general is a reflection, warts and all, of what's going on in society. That goes double for science fiction; maybe even triple" (Ultimate Cyberpunk x). Timothy Leary was no less effusive:

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[1] As Samuel R. Delany has pointed out, *Neuromancer*'s receipt of both the Hugo and Nebula awards meant that it had the approbation of readers and writers alike (Cyberpunk 29).

Every stage of history has produced a name and a heroic legend for the strong,

stubborn, creative individual who explores some future frontier, collects and brings

back new information, and offers to guide the gene pool to the next stage.

Typically, the time-maverick combines bravery with high curiosity, with super-self-

esteem. These three talents are considered necessary for those engaged in the

profession of genetic guide, a.k.a. philosopher. (245)

Not everyone agreed with this enthusiastic appraisal, however. Paul Alkon suggested that

it was the familiarity of cyberpunk's derivations that resounded with the public, stating

that Gibson "offers the comfort of pulp literature's happy endings" (76); Kevin Robins

felt that the cyberpunk genre offered magical "fantasies of creative mastery" (143) to an

audience suffering a real-world postmodern crisis of identity; and author Lewis Shiner,

enthusiastic about the genre's beginnings, bemoaned the formulaic literature that later

emerged: "The console cowboy is a direct linear descendant of the western pulp heroes.

His is an adolescent male fantasy to ride unfettered on the consensual range of the matrix,

to shoot it out with the bad guys, and finally to head his chrome horse off into a sunset

the color of a dead television channel" (23). In short, many arguments made in the 1980s

to mid-1990s about cyberpunk's popularity with readers were split between two opinions.

The first position stated that the genre's revolutionary style and timely themes offered a

fresh revitalization of science fiction that spoke plainly about technological issues in

contemporary society. The counter-position argued that cyberpunk's liberal borrowing

from past successful genres allowed it to succeed through a shallow reliance on the

familiar and an appeal to simplistic power fantasies. It is likely that the truth lay

somewhere in between: cyberpunk in the 1980s was a new and timely twist on several

tried and true formats, both structured by convention and seeking to explore new ideas in a world of globalized communication and personal computing.

Cyberpunk stories are set in a future where globalization and capitalism have led to the rule of multinational conglomerates, while marginalized individuals live in a post-industrial setting defined by cold metal technology, virtual reality, and crime. Unlike some other varieties of science fiction, cyberpunk features no aliens, very few foreign planets, and no intergalactic space battles; there are few aspects of the cyberpunk environment whose existence cannot be, at least theoretically, traced back to the real world. The futuristic setting contains imaginative technological and societal extrapolations, presented in a realistic manner that provides a vibrant commentary, not on the future, but rather on the society in which the work was written. Much of cyberpunk's appeal lies in the fact that it deals with contemporary issues within a narrative structure that allows for dramatic extremes; in short, it possesses an exploratory ability to tease ideas to their theoretical conclusions in a manner that might be difficult to achieve in more realist mainstream fiction. High adventure combines with a critical cultural voice in a fashion that is both conventionally exciting and potentially insightful. In 1992, breaking down the specifics of cyberpunk, Frances Bonner described the "four Cs" of the genre as computers, corporations, crime and corporeality (191):

Corporations and crime: Bonner correctly notes that these two elements are often blended together. Any crime in the cyberpunk world tends to be directed against corporations, as corporations are often the only remaining law. The corporate/crime syndicates, as well as being commentaries on the ultimate effects of global capitalism, serve as excellent tools for illustrating the marginalization (and glorification) of the

individual protagonist, who for the most part tends to be an outlaw hacker living on the fringes of society. According to John Huntington, this illustration of marginalized class anger in cyberpunk's "sympathy with the attitudes of a dominated and alienated subculture" (141) – in essence, the "punk" element of the story – is what first configured the genre as new and exciting, rather than any pretensions toward insights into actual technology and its consequences. The existence of corrupt multinational powers is a prevalent part of the cyberpunk setting; being perpetrated against a faceless enemy, the protagonist's crime is reconfigured as a hero's journey of rebellion. Ultimately, the "corporations" and "crime" within cyberpunk are combined, and the result utilized both to promote the individual over the masses, and provide a dramatized commentary on the societal implications of the capitalist economic system.

Computers and corporeality: Cyberpunk settings are relentlessly technological, often occurring post-environmental disaster; there are very few trees in the world of the mirrorshades, and nature is inescapably marked by machine. As the famous first line of *Neuromancer* states, "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel." Although most cyberpunk technology has its logical basis in modern developments, the precise accuracy of the technological predictions themselves is not as important as the themes these technologies are used to explore; as Huntington notes, science fiction "is less a prediction than a rendering of somebody's possibilities of hope" (134). Deborah Lupton has written on the unique cultural meanings surrounding personal computers in contemporary society, observing in 1995 that computers "constitute sites that are redolent with cultural anxieties around the nature of humanity and the self" (108). Reflecting contemporary cultural concerns about technology, the breakdown of

community and the alienation of the self, cyberpunk as early as the 1980s was using computers and corporeality to explore the same anxieties that Lupton detailed.

As the genre's fictional technology gains artificial intelligence, it also calls the nature of humanity into question by its own claims to thought and feeling – or simply by its ability to mimic human mannerisms. The Librarian in Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992) frequently notes that he (never referred to as "it") is not human, while at the same time exhibiting the same cognitive abilities that he claims not to possess. In *Neuromancer*, artificial intelligences possess citizenship; in Rudy Rucker's *Software* (1982), they stage a revolution of emancipation. More frequently, human characters may be "copied" by computer, such as the Dixie Flatline in *Neuromancer*, or Cobb Anderson in *Software*. This exploration of the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy is a central theme of cyberpunk, and the area where "computers" and "corporeality" begin to blend. Human characters are rendered as machines, or simply divested of their "meat" as they project themselves into virtual reality worlds; cyberpunk narratives often seek to separate mind from body in a quest for a utopian cyberspace environment that is under the hacker hero's control. These blends of computers and corporeality in cyberpunk have attracted the most critical attention, either through depictions of virtual reality environments, or through portrayals of cyborg characters. In fact, "cyborg" might be postulated as a fifth "C". One of the additional staples of cyberpunk fiction is characters whose bodies have been physically modified by technology, either with computer-interface implants, weaponry, or prosthetics. These lend themselves as well to examinations of identity and human nature. In her 1995 discussion of contemporary cyborg cinema, for example, Samantha Holland states that cyborg film "uses images of the technological body to investigate

questions of 'self'-hood, gender, the 'mind-body problem' and the threats posed to such concepts by postmodern technology and AI (artificial intelligence)" (157).

Admittedly, questions regarding the nature of mentality and mental stability, as well as the limits of the body, are not unique to cyberpunk; Francisco Collado Rodriguez, for example, has related them to mythologies of vampires, werewolves, and more recently serial killers. However, he goes on to note that cyborg subjects offer an ideal site from which to pursue these themes: "flesh and machine fuse their matters into new beings that lure readers and spectators while also generating their innermost fears of and disgust towards the posthuman results that such fusion brings about. Into this dispute postmodernism has invited that other current motif of our culture: the instability of the self, a motif that problematizes a previous one: the importance of the individual" (70). If corporations and crime are used to expand on capitalist economics and the marginalization of the individual, computers and corporeality are used to question the individual's basic nature with regard to concepts of "humanity" and structures of identity.

While Bonner's definition is necessarily simplistic, it does provide the framework for what many authors and critics view as the main structural components of the genre. Conversely, it might similarly be considered to outline the framework for subsequent publications that Lewis Shiner came to deride as "sci-fiberpunk," pale imitations of the original creative works: "Within science fiction [the term 'cyberpunk'] evokes a very restricted formula; to wit, novels about monolithic corporations opposed by violent, leather-clad drug users with wetware implants" (17). Shiner's assertion was that cyberpunk was supposed to be about more than black leather and head chips; the Movement, he claimed, was about making science fiction modern and real, rock and roll.

With such a difficult revolutionary spirit to live up to – the same spirit Bruce Sterling

proselytized in his introduction to *Mirrorshades* (1986) – perhaps it's no wonder that the

storm of enthusiasm that surrounded cyberpunk was short-lived. Many critics, such as

Larry McCaffery and Neil Easterbrook, felt that cyberpunk came, crashed over the

science fiction genre in an inspired, fundamentally paradigm-altering fashion, and then

receded to make way for the next generation of visionary madness – whatever that

generation might be.

From 1984 into the early 1990s, however, critics enthused about the nature of

1980s cyberpunk approached the topic from multiple angles. Some were most interested

in the way cyberpunk depicted capitalism, and information as commodity in a post-

industrialist society. Terence Whalen, in describing "mirror-shaded writers from a hi-tech

counterculture who put a hard dystopian spin on the post-industrial age without ever

disputing its ascendance" (76), situated cyberpunk in the context of "Reagan's America"

and noted: "Emerging as it does in the context of late capitalism, cyberpunk is both

inspired and stunted by the social process which enables thought to be alienated from its

producer and exchanged as a commodity. The grimmest cyberpunk is haunted by the

suspicion that information is not merely the socially average form of knowledge, but

rather the form taken by capital in the signifying environment" (79). Cyberpunk's

relation to capitalism – particularly within the context of globalization, multinationalism,

and individual alienation – has been a source of great interest for critics who sought

speculative truths in the realm of its gritty, post-industrial realism.

Fredric Jameson linked cyberpunk to both capitalism and postmodernism; he

described the genre as "the supreme literary expression if not of postmodernism, then of

late capitalism itself" (Cultural Logic 157). With Jameson's claim inspiring other

academics, cyberpunk then became a flagship genre for many postmodernist critics, for

whom it was inextricably linked with questions of postmodernity, and literature in a

postmodern world. The genre's exploration of virtual reality environments was exciting

for aficionados of Jean Baudrillard's theories regarding simulacra, simulation and

hyperreality. In his essay *Simulacra and Simulation,* Baudrillard writes about the "desert

of the real", describing a postmodern environment where alienation is created by an

environment of simulation; all perception is mediated by technology, and a map of the

world has replaced the world itself (169). Larry McCaffery linked Baudrillard to

cyberpunk in the name of his article, "The Desert of the Real." He wrote:

> [I]t is my conviction that the myriad features and tendencies associated with the
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> slippery term 'postmodernism' can be understood best by examining what is
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> unique about our contemporary condition. And it seems undeniable that this
>
> condition derives its unique status above all from technological change. Almost
>
> inevitably, those artists who have been most in touch with these changes,
>
> intuitively as well as intellectually, have relied on themes and aesthetic modes
>
> previously associated with [science fiction]. (3)

Less effusively, Jenny Wolmark conceded in her study of postmodernism and feminist

SF, "Whilst claims that cyberpunk constitutes a movement of radical and even

revolutionary significance are difficult to substantiate, it nevertheless appears to represent

science fiction's most vigorous response to the kinds of organizational and technological

transformations in production and consumption that are characteristic of post-industrial,

postmodern societies" (110).

Still others were interested in cyberpunk simply because, as Sterling claimed, it was new and exciting, revamping the stylistics of science fiction even as it borrowed shamelessly from countless other sources. "The future was beginning to collect like dustballs in the corners and interstices of every home, every office, every street corner," wrote Stephen Brown. "It wasn't the lean, clean linear future of the mainstream science fiction writers, it was messy, disorganized, crowded and clamouring. It needed a new kind of fiction to describe it, dense, complex, jammed-to-the-gills fiction" (176). Cyberpunk was the first real concerted attempt by fiction writers to address the future of the 1980s – not the hopeful "food pills and flying cars" future of the 1920s, or the post-nuclear-holocaust future of the Cold War, but a future based on personal computers and global communications systems. As Brown stated, "The cyberpunks… did not originate their vision, but picked up bits and pieces of what was actually coming true, and fed it back to the readers who were already living in Gibson's Sprawl, whether they knew it or not" (177). Likewise, Gibson himself has said, "When I write about technology, I write about how it has *already* affected our lives; I don't extrapolate in the way I was taught an SF writer should" (McCaffery interview 274). Cyberpunk's relation to its origins was immediate and specific – basing its futuristic tech on real-world inventions, while at the same time coasting on scientific vagueness that left plausibility in the realm of the imagination and concentrated on social impact rather than hard schematics.

Andrew Ross wrote:

Much, though not all, of the sixties counterculture was formed around what I have elsewhere called the *technology of folklore* – an expressive congeries of preindustrialist, agrarianist, Orientalist, and anti-technological ideas, values and

social structures. By contrast, the cybernetic countercultures of the nineties are

already being formed around the *folklore of technology* – mythical feats of

survivalism and resistance in a data-rich world of virtual environments and

posthuman bodies – which is where many of the SF- and technology-conscious

youth cultures have been assembling in recent years. (88)

Much has been made of cyberpunk-as-counterculture – of the rebellion of the individual

against mass production and globalization, of the rebellion of science fiction writers

against the clean, wondrous future first advocated by Hugo Gernsback in *Amazing*

Stories, and of the rebellion of human against robot or robot against human. The genre

itself tends to be ambiguous with regard to new technologies and their impacts; neither

for nor against, cyberpunk simply explores, and as such its narratives have been taken as

encouragement by technophobes and technophiles alike. It is utopian; it is dystopian; it is

postmodern; it is posthuman; it is a reflection of the times; it is a protest against the times.

Whatever one's position, cyberpunk was certainly noticeable, and the flurry of academic

interest surrounding it marked its importance to disciplines such as science fiction

studies, cultural studies, philosophy, and the burgeoning communications field dedicated

to electronics and the internet.

Not all theorists have been in favour of cyberpunk or its themes; nevertheless,

with regard to capitalism, postmodernism, novelty, or multiple other aspects, quite a few

were willing to throw their opinions into the discussion. Those who objected to the genre

or found it lacking still acknowledged its importance through the very act of noticing and

critiquing. Some wondered how a technologically-based resistance could be considered

truly countercultural within a technologically-based society; others argued over the

genre's derivative nature, finding it hollow and unoriginal. Since 1995, with access to a

greater wealth of primary and secondary materials, criticism has reframed and

reconsidered cyberpunk. Kevin Robins might be considered one of the harshest critics of

the genre; he views fictional concepts of cyberspace as foolishly utopian, with man as

God and a concerted blindness directed toward the difficulties of the modern world. He

dismisses cyberpunk fantasies as both asocial and amoral, stating, "The mythology of

cyberspace is preferred over its sociology … We must de-mythologize virtual culture if

we are to assess the serious implications it has for our personal and collective lives"

(153). Even in deriding what he sees as the overly – indeed, blindly – optimistic nature of

the cyberpunk vision, however, he exhibits grave reservations as to cyberpunk's impact;

it is a genre perceived as having real consequences in guiding the attitudes of its

audience. Ellen Strain has expressed similar reservations; while she doesn't object to the

study of the sci-fi hero as a metaphor for the postmodern condition, she feels that theories

regarding fictional virtual realities threatened to obscure real-world cyberspaces and their

implications (10).

Other critics have continued to find value in the cyberpunk genre; E.L. McCallum

speaks about cyberpunk's value as a barometer of our relationship to new technologies,

stating that cyberpunk replaced science fiction's traditional exploration of the stars with

databases and network spaces, availing itself "of innovations in technology, imaginary or

actual, in order to play out in fiction the consequences of these innovations" (350). Scott

Bukatman has explored the implications of cyberspace, stating, "Such ontological and

epistemological issues as the nature of the human, the real, experience, sensation,

cognition, identity and gender are all placed, if not under erasure, then certainly in

question around the discursive object of virtual reality and the postulated existence of perfect, simulated environments" (150). With regard to cyberpunk's illustration of a dystopian criminal-capitalist environment, Nickianne Moody theorized the rebellion of the outcast protagonist within uber-capitalist cyberpunk settings as an ideal tool for illustrating societal fears "concerning the social organization of work under the speculative conditions of postindustrial corporate capitalism" (92); and P. Chad Barnett argues that cyberpunk is "the most likely source for answers to questions regarding the machine-human dynamic in multinational society" (360). Explorations of cyberpunk's implications have slowed, but are still ongoing.

Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and simulation – the existence of copies without originals, and an increasingly fast-paced society steadily distancing itself from natural reality – has continued to fit extraordinarily well with cyberpunk's concepts of virtual reality and the cyberspace matrix. This critical association has held into the twenty-first century; small wonder that Neo, the hacker hero of the 1999 film *The Matrix*, keeps his illegal software disks in a hollowed-out copy of *Simulacra and Simulation*. Nigel Clark cites Marshall McLuhan's "rear-view mirrorism," suggesting that we tend to examine the present through the paradigms of the preceding age, in advancing his theory that cyberpunk's virtual realities and questionable corporealities arise from "the transition from one generation of mediated effects to another" (126); in short, he suggests that cyberpunk bridges the gap between modern and postmodern existence. Cyberpunk is notable for its unselfconscious derivativeness; Barnett, citing *The Matrix* as a pastiche of pop culture references and genre conventions, postulates "America's love affair with the postmodern aesthetic" (362), and notes, "Postmodern culture has not only conceded and

accepted that tropes are recycled, it celebrates the fact and sings about it" (363). This link between the pastiche of cyberpunk style and postmodern questions of identity and originality is one of the reasons the genre fascinated many critics, and it has continued to play a role in cyberpunk's analysis.

Within broader studies of science fiction history, however, cyberpunk's place has suffered something of a demotion; although acknowledged as important, it is seldom now seen as having lived up to its revolutionary hype. Brooks Landon suggests, "… cyberpunk actually attracts a disproportionate amount of attention in studies of SF in the 1990s, offering an appealing but chimerical sense of unity in the face of equally or even more talented and innovative writers who resisted categorization" (Science Fiction 161). In advancing the works of Octavia Butler, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Orson Scott Card (among others) as being perhaps more worthy of consideration, he notes:

> Born in controversy and hype, cyberpunk mutated into respectability and
> influence, becoming both more and less than anyone could have imagined: more
> as an emblem of a cultural convergence that completely outstripped the traditional
> boundaries of SF and of literature itself, less as a wave within SF that rocked a lot
> of boats and wrecked its share of coastline but which finally was just a wave, and
> not, as some expected and others claimed, a whole new kind of ocean. (166)

Roger Luckhurst has placed the genre within the context of the 1980s Star Wars program, the growth of American military technology, and the threat of space militarization, stating, "It is important to convey that SF was as ideologically driven as any other field of cultural production in the 1980s. Whilst most critical commentary has been on the postmodern/SF convergence, cyberpunk was formulated in the way it was precisely

because of the prominence of the SF megatext in the fantasy life of the American New Right" (202); moreover, he views the genre's frequent use of Japanese iconography as reflecting "another aspect of 1980s hypercapitalism. It date-stamps the genre to an era when economic growth in Pacific Rim countries regularly outperformed America" (207). He, too, relates Gibson in particular to hard-boiled detective fiction (210), gothic drama (211), and earlier science fiction (211).

While cyberpunk may not have been as paradigm-shattering as originally promised, it has had a notable impact on our perceptions of technology and on science fiction as a whole; Landon acknowledges, "… the cyberpunk view of the future as vaguely posthuman and of future culture as darkly postmodern has inexorably permeated the SF megatext, leaving traces in the work of even the writers who most vociferously denounced the cyberpunk aesthetic" (Science Fiction 161). Certainly cyberpunk authors were writing about new media technologies before such themes really managed to appear in mainstream fiction; certainly, also, cyberpunk's academic appeal did not lie in any real assumptions of predictive accuracy, but rather in what it said about the society in which it was written and from which it garnered its ideas. Although the furor over its "revolutionary" capacity has since died down, cyberpunk in the 1980s – the first wave – was still an exciting mass of confusion. Exemplified by *Neuromancer,* it was typified by corporations, crime, computers, corporeality and cyborgs; it reconfigured science fiction as an edgy commentary on issues such as postmodernism, identity, technology, capitalism and the human condition in the information age. It was also not without critics, and as the next section will show, the above arguments are not where the most

problematic aspects of its works were pinpointed; many feminist academics took a

different tack.

- Chapter 2 -
Women and Cyberpunk

While some critics of cyberpunk, like Robins and Strain, have been mainly concerned with its impact on the perception and creation of new technologies, this study is more concerned with the social base of the genre's vision. While cyberpunk holds significance when viewed from a postmodernist or technologically based perspective, the ideas it contributes to these areas must be acknowledged as originating from a very narrow, white male middle-class position. Ross writes that cyberpunk narratives are "the most fully delineated urban fantasies of white male folklore" (145), continuing:

Cyberpunk's 'credible' near-futures are recognizably extrapolated from those present trends that reflect the current corporate monopoly on power and wealth: the magnification of the two-tier society, the technocolonization of the body, the escalation of the pace of ecological collapse, and the erosion of civil society, public space, popular democracy, and the labour movement. Cyberpunk's idea of a counterpolitics – youthful male heroes with working-class chips on their shoulders and postmodern biochips in their brains – seems to have little to do with the burgeoning power of the great social movements of our day: feminism, ecology, peace, sexual liberation, and civil rights. Curiously enough, there is virtually no trace of these social movements in this genre's 'credible' dark future, despite the claim by Sterling that cyberpunk futures are 'recognizable and painstakingly drawn from the modern condition'. However modern the zeitgeist of cyberpunk, it was clearly a selective zeitgeist. However coherent its 'narrative symbolization' of modern technofuture trends, it was clearly a limited narrative, shaped in very telling ways by white masculinist concerns. (152)

Indeed, although cyberpunk was a new and invigorating literary trend in the 1980s, and although the genre is notable for its unique take on issues such as technology, capitalism, social alienation and identity, the main barrier to its achievement of any full societal representation was that almost all of its early works were written by middle-class, heterosexual white men. With the exception of Pat Cadigan, whose cover blurbs frequently dub her the "Queen of Cyberpunk," the originating authors of the cyberpunk movement conformed to a rather uniform description – and the content of their work, in ignoring the influence of so many social movements, reflects this. As such, the most frequent critiques of the genre came from feminists. An exploration of women and early cyberpunk reveals that most feminists were not happy with the genre, and that at least two women's fiction contributions were overlooked. Further exploration of women's writing shows that Cadigan was only the first of several major women authors creating cyberpunk works at the end of the 20th century, and that the genre had a feminist wave which has, until now, been predominantly disregarded.

Cyborg culture, a cyberpunk frontrunner, has been of particular interest to feminist critics. After Donna Haraway's 1985 "A Cyborg Manifesto" posited a theoretical cyborg that would break down social barriers and binaries, feminist critics turned to cyberpunk to examine whether fictional portrayals of cyborgs, androids and artificial intelligences might be used to challenge gender stereotypes and other societal suppositions. The material was found lacking. Despina Kakoudaki states, "when the intelligent machine acquires human skin and competent language use (when it is able to 'pass for human') it cannot escape gender, race, sociality, the potential for violence, and existential dilemmas" (167). Furthermore, according to Claire Sponsler, "cyberpunk can

best be defined as a reinterpretation of human (and especially male) experience in a media-dominated, information-saturated, post-industrial age" (251); and finally, according to Nicola Nixon, cyberpunk has very few strong or even central female characters, while cyberpunk authors give credit to 60s counterculture and sci fi fathers but not 1970s feminist authors (such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Suzy McKee Charnas, or Joanna Russ). Nixon perceives the reading of "good politics" in cyberpunk as "leftist wish fulfillment" – "that, in other words, if one likes the fiction, it must necessarily involve the articulation of a perceptible, revolutionary project" (231). In fact, she feels that early cyberpunk's complicity with 1980s conservatism was confirmed by its mainstream acceptance, and argues: "Gibson's masculine heroes are masterful because they use a feminized technology for their own ends, or better, because their masculinity is constituted by their ability to 'sleaze up to a target' [while hacking in cyberspace] and 'bore and inject' into it without allowing it to find out the 'size of their dicks' in advance – their facility, in short, as metaphoric rapists" (229). When examining academic responses to early cyberpunk, it becomes obvious that the majority of critics enthused about the genre's postmodern potential were male, while the majority of dissenting voices, concerned about cyberpunk's shallow discussions of gender roles and corporeality, came from women.

Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. is perhaps too glib when he says of cyberpunk heroes, "They are canny men – almost all of them men (why would a woman care about a technological society she had no role in creating?) – who have an uncanny sense that the nightmarish neuromanticism is a powerful drug too" (193). Women in the 1980s were indeed still excluded, by expectation if nothing else, from scientific and technological

pursuits, but women such as Haraway did have an explicitly expressed interest in the technologies shaping their lives. However, Csicsery-Ronay was quite correct in noting that women had no role in creating the *cyberpunk* universe – apart from Cadigan, there was seemingly no place for female input in either the movement's early works, or its projected audience of socially inept hackers[2]. The question of women's agency with regard to cyberpunk, and indeed technology in general, is a question both of creation and appreciation. *Burning Chrome* (1986) asserts that "the street finds its own uses for things"; one might say the same for feminist authors, critics, and readers of cyberpunk, who don't tend to view or write it quite in the same way as originally intended.

Considering how closely cyberpunk has been linked with punk music – one might recall Shiner's assertion about the Movement being rock'n'roll – one might consider Helen Reddington's discussion of women and pop history. Defining punk music as mixed gender, she notes that it nevertheless never really provided a successful platform for women: "Women have often been written out of pop history, by not being written in. Our subcultural value has been low, swept aside in the maleness of countercultural activity" (211). The same might be said for 1980s cyberpunk. On one level, it seems foolish to isolate cyberpunk in particular as a site of women's suppression; in this sense, after all, the genre is only one among many other examples. On the other, the nature of the genre's influence on technological development makes it a vital part of any examination of today's technocultures, and the fact that its first wave was written almost entirely by men provides a basis for a clear and concise contrast between men and women's writing.

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[2] Doubtless there was a larger variety of cyberpunk readers than the stereotype; however, in a Mark Dery interview, Gibson claims that he "gave [computer nerds] permission to wear black leather" (Dery 107), while Luckhurst notes, "the near superpowers given to computer geeks and tech-heads to jaunt through imagined worlds of cyberspace in these books are much to the classic engineer paradigm" (208).

Cathy Peppers states that "critical discussion of cyberpunk has tended to carry on with the (by now familiar) danger often seen in 'deconstructionist' codings: the assumption that feminist science fiction is 'political', while men's is not" (167). Peppers is correct in noting that nothing could be further from the truth; the fact that men's cyberpunk in the 1980s almost entirely excluded women should be, and is, entirely open to political analysis. This is evident when considering the fact that previously in science fiction, particularly in the 1970s, women had made marked in-roads to the sci fi community. However, although early cyberpunk certainly explored a limited point of view, I would stop short of accusing its authors of any deliberate exclusionary tactics. Women's explorations in sci fi, up to that point, had been something of a divergence.

It is my contention that women in the 1990s introduced feminism to cyberpunk – but not to science fiction, which was given a feminist slant in much earlier works. Women have been writing science fiction for as long as the genre has been recognized – and, in fact, before, if one follows the popular path tracing sci fi's origins as far as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Susan Gubar has compiled a thorough list of early women authors, including Sophie Wenzel Ellis, Amelia Reynolds Long, Lilith Lorraine, and Leslie Francis Stone (25). Sarah Lefanu observes that sci fi tends to be perceived as male territory for boys' games, but has always had women writers and women readers – although she adds that feminist science fiction, even after it was informed by the radical politics of 1960s-70s feminism, still had to battle in challenging the (hetero)sexual status quo: "The feminist intervention in science fiction has not been an easy one: writers have had to struggle not only against the weight of the male bias of the form but also against the weight of a cultural and political male hegemony that underpins the form itself" (4).

Science fiction has historically not been an ideal playground for women, but neither has it sweepingly excluded them; rather, it has allowed experimentation within the bounds of the neverending debate over "hard" vs. "soft" sci fi. The classification of some sciences (i.e. anthropology, sociology, psychology) as soft and others (i.e. astrophysics, chemistry, biology) as hard has been linked to femininity and masculinity, with women sci fi writers incorporating the "softer" sciences in order to develop character or explore inner meaning. Over time, this has blurred into whether "feminine" qualities such as romance and emotionalism have any role to play within the bounds of "hard," factual, "masculine" science fiction. Although contemporary women's science fiction of course encompasses many viewpoints and has gained much greater acceptance, these arguments particularly applied pre-cyberpunk; Lefanu's history was published in 1988 (only four years after *Neuromancer*), and as Justine Larbalestier also outlines, arguments in the sci fi community had been ongoing from the 1920s to the 1970s regarding the place of women, love and sex:

> The idea of the science fiction reader and fan as a superior kind of being … whose intelligence and knowledge puts him (I use the pronoun deliberately) head and shoulders ahead of the general public, had considerable currency. This scientifically interested, mostly young male should not be thinking about sex. Sex and the libidinal body are outside the realm of science and therefore of science fiction. If he is not thinking about sex, then he is not thinking about women. This idea that sex is contaminating, even draining, of a man's masculinity is very similar to the highly influential classical idea that when a man ejaculates he loses some of his strength and virility. (104)

Virginia Allen and Terry Paul note that while good science fiction can trigger new, imaginative ideas and explorations on the part of the reader, bad science fiction – much like mainstream fiction in general – has often reinforced patriarchal assumptions: "Whether human or alien, women have been seen primarily as sexual beings, functioning as appropriate rewards for the male protagonists who solve the problem. When a woman acts independently, she is evil; when she has power, it is intuitive or magical; when she has extrahuman abilities, they are the problem" (171). Women, with their stereotype of being the softer, weaker, more emotional sex, have often been dismissed by die-"hard" sci fi fans even while infiltrating the genre – ironic, considering that cyberpunk, with its almost entirely male-based origins, is noted as having successfully stolen elements from "softer" adventure-romance novels. In fact, Joanna Russ argues that the tropes of science fiction are particularly *well*-suited to women's writing, because the mythology of the genre's conventions is not so bindingly gender-based as the mythologies that form the basis of mainstream fiction:

> The myths of science fiction run along the lines of exploring a new world
> conceptually (not necessarily physically), creating needed physical or social
> machinery, assessing the consequences of technology or other changes, and so on.
> These are not stories about men *qua* Men and women *qua* Woman; they are myths
> of human intelligence and human adaptability. They not only ignore gender roles
> but – at least theoretically – are not culture-bound. Some of the most fascinating
> characters in science fiction are not human. True, the attempt to break through
> culture-binding may mean only that we transform old myths like Black is
> Bad/White is Good (or the Heart of Darkness myth) into new asininities like

Giant Ants Are Bad/People Are Good. At least the latter can be subscribed to by
all human races and sexes. (Giant ants might feel differently.) (91-92)

Women's place in science fiction, in other words, was hard fought for, but in
some ways less difficult to establish than their place in the mainstream – subcultures such
as science fiction have always offered positions for marginalized voices. The hard-
male/soft-female debate is falsely divisive in the first place; Lefanu points out:

> … it is too simplistic to say that male writers of science fiction concern
>
> themselves only with technology or 'hard' science at the expense of development
>
> of character and the consequences in social terms of technological development.
>
> Such a distinction not only posits a crude sexual dualism – masculine is hard,
>
> feminine is soft – … but it also denies the connection between the different 'hard'
>
> and 'soft' sciences, connections that in good science fiction should be made. (123-
>
> 124)

Nevertheless, the stereotypes do exist, and contributed greatly to early debates about the
place of the "softer sex" in science fiction creation and fandom. When women's science
fiction is lauded, it tends to be the speculative utopian sci fi of the 1970s and 80s that
attracts the most attention – works such as Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* and Ursula K.
Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, or dystopian oppositions like Margaret Atwood's
The Handmaid's Tale. These works concentrate more on language play and societal
positionings than technologies or their effects – which is not to belittle their innovative
concepts, but only to say that they do not have a great deal in common with cyberpunk.
Russ is best known for creating the planet Whileaway, where disease killed off all the
men centuries before and women have created a successful society of their own. In Le

Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, androgynous protagonists are without sex differences

and she struggled with the problem of pronouns for some time before finally releasing an

edition with the generic pronoun 'e'. Atwood's famous *The Handmaid's Tale* tells the

story of a woman who is kept as a breeding concubine in a future United States where

women's rights have been stripped away. These were grand-scale novels, tales where

gender differences (or the lack thereof) constructed entire new societies and defined

radical new social relations. Language structure was paramount:

> Feminist utopias all posit societies which women have shaped themselves
>
> or in concert with men, though these words may no longer be in use. Because of
>
> changes in linguistic practice, certain words no longer serve as and in exchange,
>
> and these words and the ways of thought they represent are thus rendered
>
> obsolescent. The inhabitants of Morris's England in *News from Nowhere* do not
>
> know the word 'pollution,' and 'poor' is understood only in the context of health,
>
> not economics; similarly in Bellamy's Boston of the year 2000 in *Looking*
>
> *Backward*, the 'labor question' no longer exists. In the feminist utopias some of
>
> the words that fall into disuse because they no longer signify are 'prostitution,'
>
> 'father,' 'rape,' 'heroism,' 'love,' 'madness,' 'homosexuality.' (Bartkowski 8-9)

These novels were clearly affected and inspired by the women's rights movement of the

1970s, and are often used in defining women's contribution to the science fiction genre –

far be it from me to overlook them here. However, the cyberpunk tales I want to examine

are feminist without necessarily making gender difference and its resultant power

negotiations the sole or even central theme – that is to say, women's ideas about gender,

as expressed in science fiction, are not always clear-cut enough or all-encompassing

enough to create full utopian or dystopian societies. Women writing cybertexts are writing in a setting defined by technological ambiguity and alienation; their ideas are formed within worlds that are neither perfect nor apocalyptic, and while stories such as these certainly owe a debt to authors like Russ and Le Guin, they have other roots.

Bruce Sterling is often critiqued for failing to include any female authors in the list of cyberpunk's forebearers he offers in the introduction to *Mirrorshades*. In truth, Sterling's omission might be somewhat understandable, because although women did have a large impact on the science fiction of the 1970s, it can be difficult to find traces of these speculative works in cyberpunk, which concentrates more on the alienation caused by new technologies and postmodern identities. Nicola Nixon has gone so far as to posit that cyberpunk may have been on some level a reaction to the strength of the 1970s feminist movement; certainly, there were few traces of feminist utopia to be found in the genre's early years. Admittedly, cyberpunk was not entirely without feminist links; Jenny Wolmark has suggested that "the description of cyberpunk as 'boystown' is too superficial" (115), and that despite a general lack of acknowledgment from cyberpunk authors, feminist science fiction made cyberpunk possible: "… it is hard not to recognize that feminist science fiction has had an undeniable impact on cyberpunk, both in its refusal to accept the generic limitations of this traditionally masculine genre, and in its concern to reframe the relationship between technology and social and sexual relations (110). She echoes Samuel R. Delany, who made a similar observation in 1988 when he said, "I'm sure Gibson would admit that his particular kind of female character would have been impossible to write without the feminist science fiction from the seventies – that is, the feminist SF whose obliteration created such furor when Bruce Sterling

(inadvertently of course…?) elided it" (Real Mothers 173). In fact, Gibson has acknowledged his own indebtedness to Joanna Russ; his character Molly is a loose tribute to her Jael from *The Female Man* (Wolmark 116). Despite these assertions, and acknowledging that the subversiveness of feminist sci fi may have paved the way for the subsequent genre-challenging nature of cyberpunk, it must be said that feminism's position in cyberpunk's first wave was a shadow at best; Wolmark, as well, ultimately does not credit the subgenre with any great feminist advances, noting, "Characters like Molly Millions or even Laura, Bruce Sterling's heroine from the 'professional'-management class in his novel *Islands in the Net* (1988) are indicative of the presence and influence of feminist SF, but they cannot be said to be an expression of cyberpunk's own willingness to tackle questions of gender identity and subjectivity" (121).

However, in listing influences such as Heinlein, Pynchon and Delany, Sterling did omit two notable women's contributions to the cyberpunk genre: the short stories "No Woman Born" (1944) and "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" (1973), written respectively by C.L. Moore and James Tiptree Jr. (the pen name of Alice Sheldon). William Gibson actually cited Tiptree's story in a 1988 *Science Fiction Eye* interview (Gordon 197). According to Veronica Hollinger, "No Woman Born" examines "gender as performance" while "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" explores "gender as imprisonment" ((Re)Reading 310); while hiding behind the respective androgyny of initials and a pen name, these authors used cyborg imagery to explore questions of societal preconceptions and gender discrimination long before the word "cyberpunk" was ever conceived. Their work illustrates an awareness of gender issues within the conceits of what might be considered early cyberpunk settings; they are not part of the more often acknowledged feminist

utopian movement, but rather a precursor to cyberpunk that anticipated Haraway and the women novelists who would come decades later.

"No Woman Born" tells the story of Deirdre, a theatre performer whose body had been destroyed in a fire. She is subsequently reborn when her brain is preserved and implanted into a robot body; her transformation is observed by two men, the scientist Maltzer and her manager John Harris. Harris spends most of the story attempting to rectify his knowledge of Deirdre's metal body with her seamless performance of "womanhood:" "… she put her featureless helmeted head a little to one side, and he heard her laughter as familiar in its small, throaty, intimate sound as he had ever heard it from her living throat. And every gesture, every attitude, every flowing of motion into motion was so utterly Deirdre that the overwhelming illusion swept his mind again and this was the flesh-and-blood woman as clearly as if he saw her standing there once more, whole, like the Phoenix from the fire" (269). Deirdre wants to go back on stage and perform, while Maltzer and Harris fear that her psyche is too delicate to withstand being rejected as a freak. Maltzer fears that by recreating Deirdre as a neuter with only the senses of sight and hearing, he has destroyed her as a person – or, more accurately and notably, as a woman: "She hasn't any sex. She isn't female anymore. She doesn't know that yet, but she'll learn . . . Everything she can't see and hear is gone. One of the strongest stimuli to a woman of her type was the knowledge of sex competition. You know how she sparkled when a man came into the room? All that's gone, and it was an essential" (278). For Maltzer, any question of Deirdre's humanity is inextricably intertwined with her gender; the men are reassured only when Deirdre makes an effort to perform as a woman, as she does for her first studio audience:

The dance ended as it had begun. Slowly, almost carelessly, she swung up the velvet stairs, moving with rhythms as perfect as her music. But when she reached the head of the stairs, she turned to face her audience, and for a moment stood motionless, like a creature of metal, without volition, the hands of the operator slack upon its strings.

Then, startlingly, she laughed.

It was lovely laughter, low and sweet and full-throated. She threw her head back and let her body sway and her shoulders shake, and the laughter, like the music, filled the theatre, gaining volume from the great hollow of the roof and sounding in the ears of every listener, not out loud, but as intimately as if each sat alone with the woman who laughed.

And she was a woman now. Humanity had dropped over her like a tangible garment. (283)

Despite Maltzer's assertion that Deirdre lacks a "sex" and thus any real humanity, the cyborg continually fools and disturbs the two men by seamlessly aping everything that they expect and understand womanhood to be. If she is missing some essential humanity – and she herself is hesitant on this point – it does not lie in the behaviour patterns that the men in the story associate with a woman's identity. Nor is Deirdre as frail as the men imagine; in fact, as she demonstrates when pulling Maltzer away from a window, she is physically much stronger and faster than they had imagined: "'Do you still think of me as delicate?' she demanded. 'Do you know I carried you here at arm's length halfway across the room? Do you realize you weigh *nothing* to me? I could'—she glanced around the room and gestured with sudden, rather appalling violence—'tear this building down,' she

said quietly. 'I could tear my way through these walls, I think'" (297). Deirdre does not consider herself crippled or subhuman as the men do; in fact, she feels herself to be superhuman, and her only regret is that she is destined to be alone in that condition: "I don't want to draw so far away from the human race. I wish I needn't. That's why I'm going back onstage – to keep in touch with them while I can. But I wish there could be others like me" (299). The ending of the story is ambiguous, the truth of Deirdre's state unresolved save for the way a hint of metal creeps into her voice when she wonders about the future.

Susan Gubar has said:

… women's current contribution to fantastic literature may be so strong because the creation and exploration of alternative worlds, plural possibilities, multiple forms of sexuality, effectively liberate the female imagination from binary thinking and, consequently, from the double bind of traditional (male-female) sex roles. For Moore's stories also alert us to the centrality of sex-related issues in women's SF, especially the issues surrounding the effects of female socialization. While contemporary feminist SF provides a window to view imaginary worlds where women are primary, the stories of Moore are a sourcebook of the powerful images in our culture that have surrounded and perpetuated the degradations of female secondariness. (25)

"No Woman Born" foregrounds themes of feminist cyberpunk work yet to come by positing that gender is a socialized performance of such aspects as body language and vocal tone, and also by implying that part of human identity is rooted in the body, and one cannot simply separate the mind from the "meat." We will see in later chapters that

both of these themes tend to be best explored or most often asserted by female authors.

Within the story, they are discernable in the fact that, although Deirdre is capable of

mimicking "womanhood" to perfection, she does feel that her new form makes her

something that is no longer quite human in nature – although, while her male cohorts find

it horrifying, she finds the change, and her release from gendered expectations, to be a

more balanced combination of frightening and exhilarating.

Tiptree's "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" is less about the pure separation of

mind and body and more about body image, mingled with an unhealthy dose of corporate

capitalism. P. Burke, a seventeen-year-old girl with a warped body, is employed by a

company to mentally control a much prettier body and publicly display commercial

goods, as a form of advertising in a society where advertising has been outlawed. Unlike

Deirdre, it is P. Burke's first body that becomes the mechanized monstrosity, as it is fitted

with metal implants and housed in a cabinet so that she may interface with the machine

that lobs her awareness into the slender, lithe body of Delphi. Delphi is a living girl, if a

mindless one, and P. Burke's experience in that body is not the same as Deirdre's metal

shell – although, interestingly, the cyborgs in both stories are deprived of sexual

pleasures. Delphi's erogenous zones are numb to P. Burke's senses – such sensations are

expensive, she understands, and they take up too much bandwidth. They certainly aren't

necessary for the purpose of corporate advertising. It is, for her, a small sacrifice to pay

for the pleasure of living in a body that is beautiful and adored by all. She learns how to

use this body in a properly gendered fashion: "The training takes place in her suite and is

exactly what you'd call a charm course. How to walk, sit, eat, speak, blow her nose, how

to stumble, to urinate, to hiccup – DELICIOUSLY. How to make each nose-blow or

shrug delightfully, subtly, different from any ever spooled before. As the man said, it's hard work" (550). P. Burke, like Deirdre, learns to ape the behaviours socially necessary for pleasing the men in charge of her creation; unlike Deirdre, she has no agency of her own, no privacy, no superhuman strength. Instead, she is an ugly girl shunned by society who can think of nothing happier than becoming a pampered princess. Her dream is the heterosexual fairy tale: to be Delphi forever and live with her handsome prince, Paul – a man who has no idea what Delphi really is. When Paul discovers the implants in Delphi's head, he assumes that she is a real person, but under corporate control, and whisks her away to "rescue" her. When he and Delphi burst into the lab where P. Burke's body is held, Paul is the one who unknowingly destroys his lover:

Paul sees there's something special about that inner door. He crowds them past it and pushes it open and looks in.

Inside is a big mean-looking cabinet with its front door panels ajar.

And inside that cabinet is a poisoned carcass to whom something wonderful, unspeakable, is happening. Inside is P. Burke, the real living woman who knows that HE is there, coming closer—Paul whom she had fought to reach through forty thousand miles of ice—PAUL is here!—is yanking at the waldo doors—

The doors tear open and a monster rises up.

"Paul darling!" croaks the voice of love, and the arms of love reach for him.

And he responds.

Wouldn't you, if a gaunt she-golem flab-naked and sprouting wires and

blood came at you clawing with metal-studded paws—

"Get away!" He knocks wires.

It doesn't matter which wires. P. Burke has, so to speak, her nervous

system hanging out. (574)

P. Burke is accidentally killed by the horrified Paul, and so dies the awareness controlling

Delphi. The story ultimately serves as a scathing commentary on the expectations of

physical beauty and genteel performance placed on women. P. Burke is only happy when

living the empty dream of Delphi's gadabout life that she has been conditioned to think

of as perfection – a dream that is all about the performance of gender expectations, with

no actual sexual desire or identity available through the cyborg's numbed senses.

Hollinger's description of the two works as gender performance vs. gender

imprisonment is thus quite apt, and moreover demonstrates that gender expectations in

general was a theme that appeared in women's science fiction despite the tendency of

much pulp science fiction to sideline female characters and concentrate on macho heroes

with rocket space ships. Moore and Tiptree provided looks at how technologies could be

used to commodify the body; their stories were pre-cyberpunk examinations of cyborgs,

capitalism and computers, all used in the exploration of gendered themes. The surge of

feminist utopian fiction, coinciding with the rise of the women's rights movement,

provided sweeping worlds and much more dramatic contrasts but was mostly overlooked

in the creation of cyberpunk. First-wave works did spring from an earlier tradition, and it

was mostly a men's tradition. Although male authors of the 1980s occasionally attempted

to write from a female point of view – Sterling's *Islands in the Net*, Victor Milan's

Cybernetic Samurai – the 1980s genre created a glittering world of boys and their techno-toys, with supporting females thrown in. There was, however, one notable exception to the boys' club: Pat Cadigan.

Cadigan, advertised by her publicists as the "Queen of Cyberpunk", was the only woman involved in the first wave of the movement[3], and she is apparently touchy about the subject. In her introduction to the 2002 anthology *The Ultimate Cyberpunk*, she writes:

> … sometimes, gender is a red herring. Sometimes, evaluating an area of the arts by counting the number of men or women active in it is to miss the point entirely … Cyberpunk was never concerned with the biology of the writers involved, regardless of what anyone might think. To force the issue of how many men vs. how many women there are is simply another way to begin from an improper assumption – i.e., like asking someone, "So when did you *stop* beating your children?" .. Bottom line: *I don't know why there aren't more women SF writers whose work could be identified as cyberpunk.* (xii-xiii, original emphasis)

Obviously, she has been asked this question often. Equally obviously, she herself has yet to come to a conclusion on the matter, except to dismiss the gender issue as irrelevant – a standpoint I am unable to agree with. To evaluate the genre as a whole, live or die, based on the single criteria of gender would indeed be fallacy, and my intent in doing so is certainly not to somehow approve or deride cyberpunk in total; however, that does not mean that gender is not an important angle from which to view this material.

Cadigan has published a full body of work, including the novels *Mindplayers* (1987) and *Synners* (1991); she states that she is often accused of writing "like a man" –

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[3] Lisa Mason was writing *Arachne* at the time, but her work was not published until 1990.

or, conversely, her compatriots are accused of writing "like women" (xiii). What exactly does this mean? One might assume, if arguments follow the general paradigm of male=hard and female=soft, that Cadigan is lauded for her work's lack of romantic-style themes and concentration on technical details, while her compatriots – such as Gibson and Sterling – have been derided for incorporating threads of "feminized" gushy emotion. This sort of binarized discussion of science, linking male writers to techie toys and female writers to melodramatic kissing scenes, both oversimplifies and promotes the dubious arguments that assert a biologically-based penchant for "hard" vs "soft." Although this study is partially devoted to examining the differences between cyberpunk written by men and women, the question of whether or not a woman can "write like a man" was settled in 1976 by the successful eight-year disguise of Alice Sheldon as James Tiptree, Jr.[4] Differences in theme and style vary according to individual authors and their social backgrounds. If anything, Pat Cadigan writes like Pat Cadigan. Women, as a rule, experience different societal pressures from men, and thus explore different ideas and angles in their work; this isn't to say that women are innately predisposed toward any particular themes, or that factors such as race, class and nationality may not play equally important roles in informing an author's point of view. To critique 1980s cyberpunk authors as writing "like men" or "like women" based solely on the perceived "hardness" of a work is questionable at best – particularly with only one actual woman in the authorial pool.

Having said that, I must then backtrack to assert that, on another level, Cadigan does write like a woman – not in terms of the style of science fiction she pursues, but in

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[4] Tiptree's exposure and resulting community reactions are detailed nicely by Sarah Lefanu in *In the Chinks of the World Machine,* 105-6.

terms of the themes she incorporates into her work; not because women are biologically disposed toward certain ideas, but because the pressures Western society exerts on women lead to definable differences in the way many women approach cyberpunk. Certain common themes unite the genre, keeping it *as* a genre – themes such as cyborgs/artificial intelligence and the "human" condition, embodiment and virtual reality, and capitalist globalization. However, women authors tend to explore these ideas differently, with more of an emphasis on the importance of the body in identity and relationships, and the importance of community support in the face of alienating multinational capitalism. Cadigan's earlier work lacks some major new themes that would later be introduced by authors (including herself) in the 1990s – queer rights, environmental conservationism, reproduction and the family unit, religion and mythology – but this is not surprising, considering its position at the roots of the cyberpunk movement. Rather, her work from the 80s and early 90s – "Rock On," *Mindplayers, Synners* – is solidly based in the primary ideas cyberpunk is known for, while at the same time it shows a leaning toward 1990s cyberfiction sensibilities that serves as a bridge between the two generations.

As would be expected of early cyberpunk, Cadigan's works adhere closely to the genre paradigm; they take place in gritty near-futures, full of virtual reality technologies, underground criminal economies, multinational capitalism, and persistent questions of cyborg bodies and postmodern identity. In *Mindplayers*, a "pathosfinder" named Allie works as a sort of futuristic psychologist in a world where mental illness must be licensed and controlled; Allie is trained for virtual reality therapy sessions that explore the minds of her patients. In *Synners*, a woman named Gina works as a human music video

synthesizer – creating virtual images for a living – and must contend with her partner

Mark's desire to abandon his "meat" body and meld with the machine. Cadigan is also

known for later 1990s works such as *Fools,* her short story collection *Patterns*, and her

cyberspace detective Konstantine, heroine of *Tea From An Empty Cup* and *Dervish is

Digital*. *Mindplayers* and *Synners* were among her earliest texts, written in the first

decade of cyberpunk and before many other women authors began to join the Movement.

It is these texts that bear closest analysis.

The most direct contrast between Cadigan's work and that of her peers can be

found in the 1986 *Mirrorshades* collection of short stories, edited by Bruce Sterling and

billed as the "cyberpunk anthology." The stories provide an incredibly broad range of

themes, settings and styles – from Gibson's tale of a modern photographer who sees

visions of a 1920s-style "futuristic" world, to Greg Bear's story of a half-gargoyle living

in a post-apocalyptic cathedral, to Paul di Filippo's more typically "cyberpunk" story of a

blind street urchin given computerized eye implants and whisked away to work for a

multinational conglomerate. It is difficult at first to isolate Cadigan; her "Rock On,"

about the rock and roll "synthesizer" Gina – the same character who plays a main role in

Synners – in fact fits more clearly with the usual cyberpunk paradigm than Bear's

"Petra," and has several themes in common with John Shirley's *Mirrorshades* entry

"Freezone," which traces the dying rock and roll career of a man named Rickenharp. This

is not to say that Cadigan's work *can't* be set apart, and a close analysis reveals both

surface similarities and important subterranean differences.

Both Cadigan and Shirley present protagonists consumed by nostalgia for the

past, a nostalgia epitomized by the death of rock and roll in the face of new fads and

encroaching, creatively bankrupt technologies. Gina, whose virtual reality manipulations

create music videos from the mental imaginings of instrument-free "bands," is greatly in

demand by those who want to make it big in the futuristic music industry – she runs away

from one patron only to be kidnapped and held captive by a new group. While

moderately resigned to her lot in life, Gina mourns a childhood memory of a Rolling

Stones concert, and muses:

> … the tapes weren't as good as the stuff in the head, rock'n'roll visions
>
> straight from the brain. No hours of setup and hours more doctoring in the lab.
>
> But you had to get everyone in the group dreaming the same way. You needed a
>
> synthesis, and for that you got a synthesizer, not the old kind, the musical
>
> instrument, but something – somebody – to channel your group through, to bump
>
> up their tube-fed little souls, to rock them and roll them the way they couldn't do
>
> themselves. And anyone could be a rock'n'roll hero then. Anyone!
>
> In the end, they didn't have to play instruments unless they really wanted
>
> to, and why bother? Let the synthesizer take these imaginings and boost them up
>
> to Mount Olympus.
>
> Synthesizer. Synner. Sinner.
>
> Not just anyone can do that, sin for rock'n'roll. I can.
>
> But it's not the same as jumping all night to some bar band nobody knows
>
> yet. (40)

Gina's longing for the past is illustrated as well in her description of the diner she

chooses for breakfast: "No waste, no machines when a human could do it, and real food,

none of this edible polyester that slips clear through you so you can stay looking like a

famine victim, my deah" (36). Cadigan's world, in this short story, is full of retinal IDs, virtual reality videos, cable jacks in the skull, drugs, violence, and capitalistic conglomerates, painted with its protagonist's desire for old-style, messy creativity. When Gina's previous employer comes to "rescue" her from the band holding her captive, she argues with him about her desire to quit:

> "I don't want to be a sinner, not for you or anyone."
>
> "It'll all look different when I get you back to Cee-Ay."
>
> "I want to go to a cheesy bar and boogie my brains till they leak out the sockets."
>
> "No more, darling. That was why you came here, wasn't it? But all the bars are gone and all the bands. Last call was years ago; it's all up here now. All up here." He tapped his temple. …
>
> "It's not the same. It wasn't meant to be put on a tube for people to *watch*."
>
> "But it's not as though rock'n'roll is dead, love."
>
> "You're killing it." (42)

Likewise, in "Freezone," Shirley's Rickenharp makes a plea for the preservation of old-style rock'n'roll when his band decides to take on a "wire dancer" and conform to new, minimalist styles of music:

> José shrugged. "Hey, we ain't been doing it behind your back; we didn't hear from the guy till yesterday night. We didn't have a real chance to talk to you till now, so – uh, we have the same personnel but we change costumes, change the band's name, write new tunes –"

"We'd lose it," Rickenharp said. Feeling caved in. "We'd lose the thing we got. You won't have it, doing that shit, because it's all superimposed."

"Rock'n'roll is not a fucking religion," José said.

"No, it's not a religion, it's a way to sound. Now, here's *my* 'posal: we write new sounds in the same style as always. We did good tonight. It could be the beginning of a turnaround for us. We stay here, build on the base audience we established tonight."

It was like throwing coins into the Grand Canyon. He couldn't even hear them hit bottom. (159-160)

On a basic level, the two texts are nearly identical in theme. Each story takes a bleak, anti-technological stance, from the point of view of an alienated protagonist desperately trying to cling to the creativity of yesteryear. The ties with rock music had a lot to do with the "punk" positioning of the "cyberpunk" label, as several authors proclaimed an affiliation with said music, particularly the band Velvet Underground – Rickenharp, in the story, wears an old Velvet Underground leather jacket.[5]

Not until one looks at the roles played by Gina and Rickenharp, respectively, does a difference between the two stories become evident. Rickenharp is a guitar player, singer, and songwriter – he is the leader of the band, the occupier of the spotlight, and the creator of the music. His performance actively engages with a live audience, and he revels in the power he feels over them: "The band was fuel-injecting into the combustion chamber of the room; Rickenharp was sparking the combustion, causing the audience to react, to press the piston, and . . . they were racing. Rickenharp was at the wheel. He was

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[5] Mark Dery provides a thorough overview of music's influence on cyberpunk (and vice versa) in chapter 2 of *Escape Velocity*. This includes Gibson basing Molly Millions on a photo of Pretenders singer Chrissie Hynde, and sliding various Velvet Underground references into *Neuromancer*.

taking them somewhere, and each song was a landscape he swept them through" (154). Gina's power, conversely, is over the band: "The big boy faded in first, big and wild and too much badass to him. I reached out, held him tight, showing him. The beat from the night in the rain, I gave it to him, fed it to his heart and made him live it" (38). Both Rickenharp and Gina control the music; the difference lies in the fact that Rickenharp creates it, while Gina merely shapes the talent of others. Each has a certain amount of control, but Rickenharp has more autonomy – Gina is nurturing rather than actively creating, and her control is a hoax; she is being held captive by the band. Rickenharp fails to hold his band together, but in the end he joins a small band of revolutionaries and heads for parts and adventures unknown; Gina fails to find her old-style rock experience, and in the end she is bought back by her previous captor and taken to work as a synner-slave once more. Despite Gina's generally feisty attitude, one might make a case for the sad repetition of helpless, nurturing female stereotypes. Fortunately, Cadigan's Gina is distinct in another way.

To begin with, and most obviously, Gina is the only woman given a narrator's role – she is the primary character in the story, instead of peripheral support. While it may seem trite or indeed self-evident to argue that women authors are distinguished by being more likely to write women protagonists, it is at least worth acknowledging that such is the case. This is by no means a hard and fast rule – Bruce Sterling's Laura from *Islands in the Net* comes to mind – but it is a general trend that highlights a role for women in the imagined new technological age. Gina speaks in the first person; she is given a direct voice to the reader, and it is a voice with attitude. However, it is not merely

the fact of the protagonist's gender that distinguishes Cadigan's work from other stories

in the text; it is how that character is otherwise portrayed.

Gina is separated from the other female characters in *Mirrorshades* by the fact

that she is not presented as a sex symbol, nor does she assume an overtly sexual role

within the text. Although her "rape" – by the band making her synthesize – is metaphoric,

it never becomes literal. Moreover, although we discover in *Synners* that Gina is black,

with dreadlocks, in "Rock On" she doesn't describe herself except as forty-something,

with hair that doesn't grow long enough to cover the metal plugs in her skull – a sharp

contrast to the other, mostly young punk-rocker girls within *Mirrorshades*, the ways they

are described, and the roles they play. Wynne in James Patrick Kelly's "Solstice" is

"twenty-two years old and very beautiful" (70); she is sexually abused by her clone/father

as she serves as a mirror for his narcissism. The half-gargoyle in "Petra" covets a girl

playing a version of Juliet, whose sexual dalliances with a stone mutant may get her

killed: "Her name was Constantia, and she was fourteen, slender of limb, brown of hair,

mature of bosom. Her eyes carried the stupid sort of divine life common in girls that age"

(108). In "Freezone," a revolutionary named Carmen is destined to become Rickenharp's

next sexual partner: "She was a skinhead, with the sides of her head painted. Skirt made

of at least two hundred rags of synthetic material sewn to her leather belt – a sort of grass

skirt of bright rags. Bare breasts, nipples pierced with thin screws … Rickenharp

swallowed hard, looking at her. Damn, she was his *type*" (147). Later, he tells her,

"[W]hen I get you alone I'm going to batter your cervix into jelly" (177). While some

stories carry whispered hints of strong women, those characters are outside the spotlights,

dancing along the edges – like Bala, the leader of an Amazonian girl gang in Marc

Laidlaw's "400 Boys." They exist, but are primarily voiceless; Cadigan's Gina is the one in the lead-role spotlight, and any other *Mirrorshades* women who even peripherally join her there are defined by their male authors as young, slim, beautiful, bare-breasted – and much worse, in the case of Constantia, "stupid." Gina's presumably plain appearance and lack of sexual involvements set her apart – unlike her cohorts, her primary role is not one of titillation.

Cadigan's sleek style blends extraordinarily well with the work of other cyberpunk authors such as Gibson and Sterling; her work contains all the "typical" cyberpunk themes, while at the same time, her portrayal of strong female characters provides one of the first glimpses of feminism within the genre. Gina is not, as we learn in *Synners*, asexual – but she is in control, is found attractive despite being older and not adolescent/weapon-sleek, is innovative and resourceful. The fact that Gina is the only "realistic" female lead in *Mirrorshades* positions Cadigan's work early on as a bridge between 1980s male-centred cyberpunk and the female-centred cyberfiction yet to come. The most important thing that differentiates her stories from those of her contemporaries is how she treats the women within them; not only Gina in "Rock On" and *Synners*, but also Deadpan Allie in *Mindplayers*, and – later – Marva in *Fools* and Konstantine in *Tea From An Empty Cup* and *Dervish is Digital*. Where other authors tended to introduce female characters either as sleek sex objects or haggard crones, Cadigan found a better-rounded middle ground very early on in the Movement's creation.

Moreover, Cadigan's treatment of themes such as virtual reality vs. embodiment marked her works as subtly different, with protagonists grounded more firmly toward the "embodiment" end of the spectrum than was regularly seen in other cyberpunk works.

Anne Balsamo analyses Cadigan's *Synners* extensively, arguing that the novel illustrates an underlying gender binarism forming the organizational framework of technological engagements. She writes:

> In reading *Synners* as a feminist imaginary, I would argue that it offers an alternative narrative of cyberpunk identity that begins with the assumption that bodies are always gendered and always marked by race. In one sense, Cadigan's novel is implicitly informed by Donna Haraway's cyborg politics: the gender differences, whereby the female body is coded as a body-in-connection and the male body as a body-in-isolation. (Technologies of the Gendered Body 144)

Balsamo analyses the four hacker characters in *Synners* – two male and two female – in order to demonstrate the novel's illustration of gender's influence on technology uses and relations. The two men in the novel both crave the release of virtual reality, where they have control over their environments and freedom from the 'meat' of their bodies; conversely, the two women (one of whom is Gina) use cyberspace as a tool for communication with others rather than a locale for escapist isolation. The nature of this gendered division sets Cadigan's work apart from that of her male counterparts, despite her use of cyberpunk's high-tech trappings and gritty capitalist environment. In *Synners*, Gina and her partner Mark exhibit two very different attitudes toward cyberspace; Gina treats it as a tool – and, particularly if one incorporates "Rock On," longs for better days – while Mark wants to abandon his body entirely and become one with the web. "Someday," he says, "you're gonna come into a room, and you're gonna see this funny-looking thing, a piece of flesh clutching into naked console, and you're gonna stop and stare, because you won't be sure where the flesh stops and the chips and the circuits

begin. They'll be, like, melted into each other, and some of the console'll be as alive as flesh and some of the flesh'll be dead as console, and that'll be me. All of that'll be me" (214). Gina wants Mark, but Mark's first love is technology and the ability to escape his "meat:"

> *You're hot with the poetry tonight, kid,* she thought, looking from the monitor to Mark lying on the bed with his eyes closed and a shade of a smile on his lips and the wires flowing from his head in graceful lines. She had a sudden impulse to bend over and kiss him. It would be the first time in she didn't know how long. *And maybe the last.*
>
> She considered this, looking at the simulation of Mark's brain on the monitor. Her hands were moving idly, palms sliding against each other. *Got you a twenty-first-century human person here; maybe twenty-first-century human doesn't kiss. Like, doesn't have to.* An image of the lake flashed in the mind and faded. *Yah, we got something here a little more lasting than a kiss.*
>
> *But he's hooked up to the* machine*, isn't he.*
>
> She rubbed a hand over her mouth as if trying to wipe away something; wasn't necessary. The impulse had passed without her doing anything about it. Just as well. It wasn't too cool to kiss someone while he was making love with someone else. (215)

The recurring mantra within the book is "change for the machines;" first referring to coins in a vending machine, but finally to the ways technology is altering the human condition. *Synners* explores questions of embodiment with a clear lean toward better body-grounding on the parts of the female protagonists. It is a notable contrast to the

general trend 1980s cyberpunk (e.g. *True Names,* the Sprawl trilogy*, Cybernetic Samurai*) has for portraying a more glamorous possibility of escaping the "meat", and the gendered split is important – Mark and Gabe are the ones who covet cyberspace. The men follow the fantasy while the women take a more realistic approach; Cadigan's explorations of the mind/body dichotomy and the cyberspace dream aptly presage the feminist trends that infiltrate the genre more fully in the 1990s.

The question of identity in a postmodern age is another major cyberpunk theme that was destined to experience a shift beneath the hands of female cyberpunk authors in the 1990s – and another area where Cadigan's explorations laid the groundwork for this shift. In comparison to other early works, her texts once again display more skepticism with regard to virtual reality technologies and the impact of a postmodern, postindustrial future on the human psyche. While *Synners* explored questions of mind vs. body, Cadigan's first novel *Mindplayers* was more focused, instead, on questions of identity. The protagonist Allie begins *Mindplayers* as an oddity: an adult woman who has never participated in mind-to-mind communication, instead choosing to seek personal expansion through drugs, meditation, and illegal simulations of psychosis. She begins her mind-linking adventures only when ordered to by the courts, and her subsequent experiences have the effect of turning her into "Deadpan Allie" – known by her coworkers for her near-complete lack of facial expression. Allie, though she becomes an excellent pathosfinder, finds herself unable to emotionally connect with others – including her ex-husband. Although the novel ends on an upbeat note, hinting that Allie may be able to break her shell, enjoy life, and reconcile with her ex, the book explores

not only the effects technology has on Allie, but also the effects it has on her patients and on her friend Jerry, a man who sells bootleg copies of his own personality.

One is left wondering how much of Allie's occupational demand is caused by the proliferation of the virtual reality technologies she uses to do her work in the first place. She explores the minds of four particular patients over the course of the novel: Marty, an emotionally crippled actor who only mimics the feelings of others; Kitta Wren, a dead artist who voluntarily induced psychosis in her own mind in order to better create; Gladney, a former composer who was mind-wiped and forced to start his identity anew; and a man named Coor whose composition work with a man named Lam eventually melds the two of them into the same, linked personality. Questions of identity thus begin with the societal detachment of Marty (always pretending to be someone else), progress through a woman who has effectively sliced her mind into pieces, continue to a man who worries that he is haunted by the "melanin ghost" of his brain's former self, and finally finish with two individuals who become incapable of separating themselves from each other. Most dramatic, perhaps, is the gradual mental decay of Allie's friend Jerry as he sells multiple copies of his own personality. Eventually she receives a video call:

> "Jerry… is it *really* you?" I said when I could speak.

> He looked embarrassed. "Well, actually, it's not. I'm a Power Person. Sort of."

> If someone could have died of the creeps, I would have right then.

> "I'm, uh, a bootleg," he went on. "Kind of a bootleg, that is. I had one of the bootleg templates. Later I got hold of the original."

I didn't want to hear about it. "What do you want? Why are you calling me?"

Giggle. "Just to say hello, I guess. And let you know everything's really all right. I still exist, in a way. Here and there. I don't know about *there*, of course, but I'm *here*. Not totally, I mean. But sort of totally. It's a funny sort of existence but it works." (221)

The slow decay of Jerry's identity in the background of the novel's progression illustrates its overall theme of the dangers technology poses to the human psyche. *Mindplayers* is not as clearly divided along gendered lines as *Synners*; Allie, though she is suspicious of technology and serves as a more or less dispassionate observer for the reader, is plagued with her own problems of emotional repression – and while most of her patients are male, one is a dead woman. Also, Jascha, Allie's ex-husband, is much more emotionally available and stable than she is. However, the work clearly provides a precedent for later pieces of feminist cyberfiction – it does not follow an overarching plot of hacker heroes and gun battles, but rather concentrates on the inner mental workings of a limited number of characters. It is quieter and more introspective than most early cyberpunk, placing its emphasis on questions of human identity and alienation.

E.L. McCallum singles out Cadigan's work in a similar vein when discussing the use of travel and space in cyberpunk; according to McCallum, Cadigan's *Mindplayers* is an exception to the pattern set by Gibson's *Neuromancer,* Sterling's *Islands in the Net*, and Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, wherein the "coherence of place and the sequential ordering of action within specific, determined places reinforces a humanist, narrative perspective" (369). In McCallum's analysis, the refusal of 1980s cyberpunk to challenge

this humanist narrative model makes it possible to posit the preservation of humanity despite the dehumanizing rule of corporate powers; in contrast, *Mindplayers'* emphasis on self and alternate consciousness, anonymous place settings, and lack of a crusading masculine hero creates an exploration of self/Other rather than win/lose. McCallum feels that traditional cyberpunk narratives lack the very adventurousness they promise; the heroic ideology of the adventure genre "reassures the audience of their integration into the technological permutations of capitalist culture" (375), while *Mindplayers* raises the possibility of a novel without hero/country/conquest – a novel that wouldn't cushion the audience from the real implications of distance-transcending technologies. It is this sort of distinction that furthers the idea of Cadigan's writing like a woman – not because her work is somehow more "effeminate," in the stereotypical sense, but because her writing is, for one reason or another, recognizably different from that of her male colleagues. The arguments made by McCallum and Balsamo demonstrate clearly that Cadigan's work can and has been analysed as separate and "female" – despite the author's own protests to the contrary.

The clearest themes that Cadigan shares with her male counterparts are explorations of embodiment and identity, and an ambiguous approach to technology. These are also the areas where her work most foreshadows the ideas explored by women in the 1990s – not by abandoning cyberpunk's tenets, but by exploring their implications in a more feminist-oriented fashion. Although other authors in the 1980s did write about major female characters – Gibson's Molly Millions and Angie Mitchell, Sterling's Laura from *Islands in the Net*, Milan's Elizabeth from *Cybernetic Samurai* – these characters tended to be somewhat flat, trapped within narratives that caused them to be either

objectified (Molly), passive (Angie), or punished for venturing outside the bounds of domesticity (Laura's corporate obligations cost her her husband and child, while Elizabeth's twisted attempt at mothering an artificial intelligence eventually leads to her death). Veronica Hollinger notes that Sterling's *Islands in the Net* espouses a need for global unity (Deconstructions 217); this observation seems to emphasize the fact that his choice of a female protagonist fit with his depiction of a more traditionally "feminized," democratic, socially supportive setting. Conversely, one might argue that Cadigan's work exhibits a certain role-reversal – *Mindplayers*'s insensitive Allie and her emotional husband Jascha – rather than an actual breakdown of feminine/masculine binaries, but that sort of exploration is the first step toward subversion.

Joan Gordon, interestingly, rates Cadigan on a feminist par with William Gibson when she discusses both Deadpan Allie and Molly Millions as examples of covertly feminist characters; describing them both as tough soldiers, she argues, "It seems to me that for a woman to enter the human army as an average soldier with no distinction in rank, privilege or job position is, on the covert level, a feminist act" (198). Gordon notes of Molly, "To some extent she's a man in women's clothing … the most facile and least thoughtful representation of the liberated woman" (198); although Molly's sexual objectification is problematic, I would agree with Gordon in her assertion that cyberpunk offers opportunities for feminist exploration, and that some authors in the 1980s began taking first steps toward this exploration. Placing Cadigan's characters on the same level as Gibson's, however, is questionable; Cadigan's women are sharper, better characterized, and freer of stereotypes than their cyberpunk (including Gibsonian) predecessors.

Cadigan's focus on issues of identity and embodiment also caused her to write in a softer sort of cyberpunk setting – there is crime in her novels, but not to extremes, and the environment is not nearly as decimated by pollution or warfare. Her characters are generally not criminals, nor the loner protagonists of so many other cyberpunk works; instead, they are members of communities, even if those communities and interpersonal relationships are only explored in passing. Allie finds companionship at the school, and later within the enclave of her coworkers; Gina abandons her relationship with Mark, but finds new alliances with Gabe and other friends. While a case may be made for the same idea of community in other works of the time, such as *Islands in the Net*, I am not trying to make the argument that only women write about community or embodiment or a hopeful environmental future – rather, I would acknowledge that each author, whether male or female, is distinct, and that I am only analyzing general trends. Women in the 1990s proved more likely, as a whole, to write about support networks and community issues in cyberpunk, and the beginnings of this trend are echoed in Cadigan's earlier writing. Likewise her penchant for mentioning gay marriage, as in *Mindplayers* where a man casually discusses his ex-wife and his ex-husband in the same breath; while queer issues do not arise in any major fashion, a background acceptance of homosexuality is implied – one that would later flower into more in-depth exploration, particularly in the works of lesbian authors such as Melissa Scott. Interestingly, unlike community or embodiment, queer themes are almost wholly absent from other cyberpunk of the 1980s; they appear to be almost exclusively limited to women authors, and again, Cadigan, however glancingly, appears to have been one of the first in the genre to approach the issue.

In short, though her work's position within the cyberpunk genre was unquestioned, and Cadigan herself was praised by her male compatriots, she may have unknowingly taken the first steps toward defining the new boundaries of feminist cyberpunk and cyberfiction. While it is true that all authors have idiosyncrasies and favourite topics, and that Sterling's or Gibson's works might just as easily be differentiated – for different reasons – from the works of their colleagues, it will be seen that the genre changes in Cadigan's work are noticeably and notably echoed in the women's fiction that was yet to come. The ensuing chapters of this study will analyse the themes inherent in women's subsequent cyberpunk writing, and compare these texts to earlier male-authored works in order to construct at least a piecemeal image of how women relate to contemporary technological and social issues.

In 1992, Neil Easterbrook declared, "Cyberpunk is dead" (378). Many academics, as well as the original wave of cyberpunk authors, seemed to agree; after a brief resurgence of interest in Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992), most researchers were ready to move on. Books such as Larry McCaffery's *Storming the Reality Studio* gathered essays to look back and summarize the cyberpunk movement, while most authors drifted away to other projects. Cadigan and Gibson continued to publish cyberpunk through the 1990s, but they were in the minority, and the original excitement over their work had subsided. P. Chad Barnett credits cyberpunk's deteriorating popularity during this period to aging authors growing less Bohemian and rebellious, and the rising notion that capitalist society had already evolved into cyberpunk's predicted futures (360). Author Lewis Shiner derided new authors as shallow imitators, calling their work formulaic and arguing that cyberpunk was supposed to be about more than black leather and head chips.

The first wave was over, and attention shifted elsewhere until the flurry of new academic theories attracted by the retroactive stylings of 1999's *The Matrix*.

But as Roger Luckhurst somewhat wryly notes, cyberpunk has been declared dead several times since 1986, "leaving only the problem of what to call the huge bulk of cyberpunk written long after this date" (204). I am concerned with the 1990s, and agree with Karen Cadora, who cited the death of masculine cyberpunk but acknowledged a new, feminist strain of the genre – a feminist cyberpunk that "blends the conventions of cyberpunk with the political savvy of feminist sf. This revolutionary blend points out new avenues for feminist sf and, ultimately, for feminist theory. Feminist cyberpunk envisions something that feminist theory badly needs: fragmented subjects who can, despite their multiple positionings, negotiate and succeed in a high-tech world" (357). While it should be noted that male authors, such as George Alec Effinger, also published new cyberpunk works during the 1990s, what is particularly notable is the strong rise in women authors. Their novels and short stories remain, for the most part, unacknowledged; even Pat Cadigan, writing at the turn of the millennium, stated that there were still very few women creating cyberpunk. Bruce Sterling's website, listing his recommendations for a thorough cyberpunk education, only cites – as far as women authors are concerned – Cadigan's work and Lisa Mason's *Arachne*. However, during the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, women such as Marge Piercy, Laura Mixon, Edith Forbes, Kathleen Ann Goonan and Melissa Scott were busily writing about virtual reality, identity, capitalism, gender and the high-tech future.

According to some feminist theorists, it is not surprising that innovation in technological visions such as those presented in cyberpunk should have risen primarily as

a result of women authors. "Machines and women have at least one thing in common: they are not men," notes Sadie Plant. "In this they are not alone, but they do have a special association, and with recent developments in information technology, the relationship between women and machinery begins to evolve into a dangerous alliance" (503). Rosi Braidotti cites the iconoclast leaders of the cultural crises as feminists, riot girls, sci fi writers and theorists. "Riot girls," says Braidotti, "argue that there is a war going on and that women are not pacifists, we are the guerrilla girls, the riot girls, the bad girls. We want to put up some active resistance, but we also want to have fun and we want to do it our way. The ever increasing number of women writing their own science fiction, cyberpunk, film scripts, 'zines, rap and rock music and the like testifies to this new mode" (525). Although she also critiques cyberpunk for its "simplistic psychology and reductive cartesianism" (528), it is interesting to note that she positions women's cyberpunk as part of a larger movement, much as Mark Dery positioned the cyberpunk of the 1980s; each piece of literature both reflects and influences larger trends. Peterson and Runyan aptly note that "No woman is born, and not all women become, feminist, but some women *and* men do" (226); despite this distinction, I would argue that women's cyberpunk is predominantly feminist, and men's cyberpunk is generally not. Braidotti's identification of women's cyberpunk as a feminist outlet blends well with my own theories, and this principle will be used as the framework for much of my analysis.

Is women's writing inherently different from men's? I began this question with Pat Cadigan, and return to it here in order to reiterate that I am wary of essentialist arguments that claim one's sex leads to "natural" tendencies, but am interested in examining the impact on fiction of the different societal contexts in which men and

women are currently raised. Specifically, I feel that women's cyberfiction is informed by

feminist politics in a manner that is predominantly alien to first-wave works. I have

posited that women's cyberpunk is more challenging than men's in terms of its relation to

the patriarchal status quo; according to June Deery, science fiction written by men tends

to preserve patriarchal roots, while women writers take advantage of science fiction's

"defamiliarized perspective" to form "genuinely alternative schema" (88). I plan to

outline how women's fiction concentrates more on "women's" issues of community and

relationships. At the same time, while I acknowledge that women's cyberpunk may

generally be "softer" than the first wave of work, I can also think of exceptions such as

Pat Cadigan's work and Lisa Mason's *Arachne* – nor does it escape my attention that the

exceptions that come to mind, the authors who "write like men," are the same authors

who made Sterling's list. This tension presents one of the challenges of the piece: to

preserve the distinctions between women writers at the same time as placing them in at

least partially unified contrast to their male counterparts.

> Joanna Russ, in *To Write Like A Woman*, argues:

> Our traditions, our books, our morals, our manners, our films, our speech, our

> economic organization, everything we have inherited, tells us that to be a Man

> one must bend Nature to one's will – or other men. This means ecological

> catastrophe in the first instance and war in the second. To be a Woman, one must

> be first and foremost a mother and after that a server of Men; this means

> overpopulation and the perpetration of the first two disasters. The roles are

> deadly. The myths that serve them are fatal. (93)

In other words, she finds the conventions of mainstream fiction to be suffocating. Literary subgenres such as horror, fantasy and science fiction have always been, to some extent, playgrounds for experimentalists and soapboxes for rebels who would find it difficult or threatening to publish their views within more mainstream media. Cyberpunk, though it began as a boys' club, ultimately became a framework from within which women writers strove to work against the same cultural myths that Russ protests and early cyberpunk promotes.

Through analyzing women's cyberpunk and cyberfiction in the 1990s, and examining themes such as cyborg culture, virtual reality and corporeality, gender equality, queer rights, and environmentalism, I seek in the next phase of my study to prove that cyberpunk became a sharp-edged tool for feminist authors. In answering the question of how and why these women broadened cyberpunk's original themes to include more pronounced commentary on female-oriented issues – not only expanding the presence of these issues, but in some cases, highlighting their previous absence – it will become clear that feminist cyberpunk was informed by a much different social position than its male-written first wave. The next few chapters will establish the existence of the feminist cyberpunk wave by examining how women authors preserved the major trappings of the genre while fundamentally altering the treatment of those same themes. In effect, women writing in the 1990s used cyberpunk paradigms while, at the same time, their feminist twist on the genre's ideas distinguished them as a separate movement.

- Chapter 3 -
Globalization and Community

In citing two of cyberpunk's major tropes as corporations and crime (191),

Frances Bonner noted that these elements are often conjoined within the genre's texts.

This twinning of corporate growth and crime best represents early cyberpunk's resistance

to capitalism and globalization. Globalization and commercialization remain important

elements of the setting in women's cyberpunk stories, and are the area where cyberpunk's

feminist iterations are most clearly marked by the influences of the genre's first wave.

This concern with globalization issues reflects the continued rise of western corporate

capitalism in the global economy – the impact of which is not necessarily gender-

specific. Authors of both masculinist and feminist cyberpunk explore similar concerns

with regard to globalization. The main difference between them ultimately lies in sites of

resistance, as early cyberpunk authors are more likely to romanticize narratives of

alienated individuals, while women writing later have a tendency to focus on small but

strong partnerships and communities. While authors from both decades situate music and

primitive cultures in opposition to globalization, the feminist texts ultimately advance

community rather than individual resistance within their works.

Globalization, for the purposes of this analysis, may be defined as the breakdown

of national barriers and cultural boundaries as the expansion of corporate multinationals

and communications technologies creates an ever-smaller and increasingly homogenized

world. Janine Brodie describes globality as an environment where "[s]trings of

transactions and interests as well as non-territorial and pre-and post-national solidarities

run up and down through the national social fabric such that citizens are often more

directly linked to distant forces and actors than to their national state" (245). Fredric

Jameson, moreover, states that "cyberpunk constitutes a kind of laboratory experiment in which the geographic-cultural light spectrum and bandwidths of the new system are registered" (Fear 107). While Jameson cites the staple male cyberpunk authors (Gibson, Sterling) and their involvement with globalization issues, feminist Rosi Braidotti also writes:

> The distinct feature of postmodernity is in fact the transnational nature of its economy in the age of the decline of the nation state. It is about ethnic mixity through the flow of world migration: an infinite process of hybridization at a time of increasing racism and xenophobia in the West … It proves the extent to which late capitalism has no teleological purpose, no definite direction, nothing except the brutality of self-perpetuation. (520)

Cyberpunks and cyberfeminists both include the rise of multinationalist capitalism in their considerations of society's further evolution; though these themes may be treated with varying levels of ambiguity, they are invariably present in any work of cyberpunk or cyberfiction. However, women's cyberpunk is distinctly more community-oriented; its exploration of globalization and alienation does not obviate the presence of the family unit or personal support network.

The early genre is typified by the plight of the alienated individual in the face of scheming, multinational corporations, and this reflects the rise of globalization in contemporary society. Although cyberpunk works such as *Neuromancer* (1984)*, Cybernetic Samurai* (1985)*,* and *Snow Crash* (1992) situate many of these corporations in Japan – an acknowledgement of Japan's strengthening export economy in the 1980s – academics like Susan Hawthorne recognize globalization as "a distinct outgrowth of

western capitalist and patriarchal systems" (362). Moreover, James Messerschmidt traces

the globalization of United States businesses back as far as the 1950s and notes, "The

transnational character of U.S. business has resulted in serious corporate crime—from

bribery and corruption to exporting hazardous products and working conditions to the

Third World, thus devastating the powerless in those countries" (110). In discussing the

issue of white-collar crime and its perceptions in North America, he notes that

transnationals "seek out areas of the world where pollution controls and worker safety

restrictions are minimal" and concludes, "Undeniably, *both domestically and

internationally,* the transnationals are the worst of all criminals and worldwide their

victims are primarily the powerless" (114, original emphasis). Certainly

megacorporations are generally viewed with suspicion by a public that well remembers

images of Nike sweatshops. Corporate trickery abounds in contemporary crime fiction

and television – one need look no farther than a John Grisham novel – and the looming

multinational is not specific to cyberpunk, but cyberpunk perhaps does it best.

There is a certain tension inherent in cyberpunk's treatment of globalization

themes. The fact that protagonists are disenfranchised promotes a suspicion – as seen

through their eyes – toward capitalism and multinational authorities. The reader sees an

environment dominated by greedy multinational interests, where basic human rights are

sacrificed to monetary gain and most people live under a heavy blanket of security

monitoring, obeying the rules as they eke out sustenance-level existences. At the same

time, this environment is what makes the spectacular adventures of the protagonists

possible – their alienation is glamourized, and the excitement of their rebellion in turn

advances the setting as necessary for the adventure (Sponsler 261). Characters born in

this speculative future do not pause to think wistfully of times before their age, nor are

their goals so widespread as to attempt disruption of the entire world order. The

unremittingly postindustrial setting results in an implied resignation – the sense that

multinational domination is going to happen, and there is nothing within the texts that can

really be done about it, nor do the characters have any interest in massive societal

reorganization. Early cyberpunk narratives, in particular, give the impression of serving

as a survival guide for the individual, promoting smaller stories of iconoclast protagonists

against a wide backdrop of inevitable global change. As Jameson observes, the near-

future setting allows the genre to treat the rise of globalization as a laboratory

experiment, extrapolating a new culture and society. It is somewhat ironic that in

cyberpunk, the figure of the ominous corporation has grown to such an all-encompassing

extent that the transnationals have become the lawmakers and crime is re-figured as

resistance to their global domination.

Any crime in cyberpunk tends to be directed against corporations, as corporations

are often the only remaining law. This is particularly notable in the first wave, which set

the template for the genre. In *Neuromancer*, Case fears faceless conglomerates such as

Sense/Net, but is never concerned about the police, FBI, CIA or any equivalent

government organization. Likewise in Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, the "law" is in the

hands of private police companies and corporate-run enclaves. Corporations may

furthermore be formed of criminal organizations themselves: the Yakuza in *Neuromancer*

and the Mafia in *Snow Crash* are both corporate powers in their own rights. "The typical

protagonists of the cyberpunk world," writes Claire Sponsler, "are quintessentially

alienated individuals, but their alienation is reconfigured as a positive since they are

alienated against a banal, corrupt, and homogenizing post-industrial society" (261).

Crime becomes a noble, or at least understandable, endeavor as protagonists fight against

the rule of faceless megacorporations.

In establishing congruences between the two waves, it should be observed that

there are similarities in some of the smaller ways that authors (both masculinist and

feminist) illustrate sites of resistance to globalizing forces. If, as Robin Ballinger

suggests, "music has often been a central site for the intervention in dominant discourses

and for creating forms of expression that are culturally affirming", and such a position

"of vocality and self-representation is central to creating a counter-narrative, positing a

counter-essence and in critically attacking the legitimacy of 'objective' knowledge and

truth" (424), then the elements of music running through both waves of the cyberpunk

genre might be considered as a common basis of resistance. The very "punk" of the label

comes from an association with punk music, and Gibson's acknowledgement of the

Velvet Underground's influence on his writing (McCaffery Interview 265) is

complemented by the protagonists' desperate attempts to preserve rock music in Shirley's

"Freezone" (1986) or Cadigan's *Synners* (1991). Later works such as *Queen City Jazz*

(1994) or *Proxies* (1998) preserve the thread of music through dance, or tunes like Billie

Holiday songs. Music provides a common link between characters striving for individual

expression within various texts, as individual creativity is placed in opposition to

conglomerate forces.

More directly linked to globalization in particular, a site of resistance common to

both male and female-authored cyberpunk is the opposition offered by more "primitive"

communities. This is an expression of the binary opposition between simplicity and

technology, and is primarily marked by a western premise that assumes simplicity on the part of "less developed" cultures, as well as an automatic tension between those cultures and any encroaching global capitalist technologies. In Gibson's *Neuromancer,* for example, it seems the only people who live outside the constrictions of urban society are the Rastafarian Zionists – which is not to say that they live "naturally," for they too are dependent on technology. However, with their space commune lifestyle and self-sufficient life support and economy, the Zionists have effectively and literally withdrawn from the world. In their eyes, all cities are "Babylon" – an ancient Mesopotamian city that was, according to Christian mythology, eventually destroyed by God for its arrogance and evil. It is not only the Sprawl of which they speak: the satellite Freeside is "the hanging gardens of Babylon" (101), and the Villa Straylight in particular – "If there's any Babylon, man, that's it" (192). Nor does cyberspace escape this judgment:

> [Aerol] took the band, put it on, and Case adjusted the trodes. He closed
> his eyes. Case hit the power stud. Aerol shuddered. Case jacked him back out.
> "What did you see, man?"
>
> "Babylon," Aerol said, sadly, handing him the trodes and kicking off
> down the corridor. (106)

Case, of course, is unable to engineer any similar cultural withdrawal, or to be other than alone; his hero's journey does not allow him a sense of community. He does not like the way the Zionists touch him when they talk (106); their way of life is completely alien to him. It should be noted that this is not a reading of Rastafarian culture, but only of Gibson's use of certain keywords and stereotypes in setting up an opposition between the technological and that which is supposedly primitive; Gibson's appropriation of Rasta

imagery must be acknowledged as stereotypes distorted through the lens of a white western point of view. What is important is the existence, within the novel, of a technophobic subculture coded as both "simple" and ethnic.

In Stephenson's *Snow Crash,* the community of resistance is more problematic; people infected with a verbal "virus" must be cured by the protagonists in order to be integrated back into technological society. The courier Y.T. picks up a package at a viral commune and observes the behaviour of the infected:

> On the trunk lid of a dead car, they've set up an old junked computer terminal, just a dark monitor screen with a big spider-web crack in it, like someone bounced a coffee mug off the glass. A fat man with red suspenders dangling around his knees is sliding his hands up and down the keyboard, whacking the keys randomly, talking out loud in a meaningless babble. A couple of the others stand behind him, peeking over his shoulder and around his body, and sometimes they try to horn in on it, but he shoves them out of the way.
>
> There's also a crowd of people clapping their hands, swaying their bodies, and singing "The Happy Wanderer." They're really into it, too. Y.T. hasn't seen such childlike glee on anyone's faces since the first time she let Roadkill take her clothes off. But this is a different kind of childlike glee that does not look right on a bunch of thirtysomething people with dirty hair. (178)

The virus is also related to a "primitive" subculture, as it is strongly implied that the victims are speaking ancient Sumerian (210), and the verbal virus comes from an ancient clay tablet known as the "nam-shub of Enki." While the virus victims are not benign, and in fact are meant to serve as an army for their scheming leader, the positioning of

subcultural mythology in opposition to technology is still apparent. Both Gibson and Stephenson have utilized the surface imagery of other cultures in order to visualize some opposition to the spread of western capitalist technology and globalization. In the case of *Snow Crash,* the message is only significantly less hopeful; Gibson's Zionists can retreat, but there is no real escape for Stephenson's characters – their position outside globalized society is not a choice, but rather involuntary psychosis. Those who live "outside" are still simple, but now there is no reason to their resistance. As Foster says, "*Snow Crash* tends to interpret 'babble' as promising a utopian ideal of universal linguistic community, which the novel then reveals to be a nightmare of linguistic control" (Souls 243).

This appropriation of ethnic imagery is shared in women's cyberpunk by Mason's *Arachne* (1990)*,* which plays on its own appropriations by portraying aboriginal cultures partially as a fad for young and rebellious university students:

> A tall, skinny abo stalked after them. His blond roots showed at the base of his purple-black frizz. He jabbed his spear at Wolfe's crotch, spat, jabbered.
>
> "Back off you!" Wolfe duked his fists.
>
> "Forget it." Carly seized his arm, pulled him away from the dancing spear tip. "Come on, let's go." She recalled the abo-do she played as a student. She gave the abo the hoot-hoot and the fuck-y'all finger, hoping that was still the be-do response. It was. The abo chuckled crazily and capered away.
>
> Wolfe stared at her, startled out of this dysfunc state he was in. "What the fuck?"
>
> "They're just alienated kids." She laughed, remembering the skin paint. (81)

The same imagery is distantly echoed in Mixon's *Proxies,* where Carli D'Auber sees that a "handful of undergrads in dreadlocks and hair sculptures, in loin wraps, body paint, or vests and loose trousers, had gathered outside her office" (28). The aboriginals of *Arachne* (and its sequel, *Cyberweb*) are not as innocuous as they seem, however, nor are they all students – some, like the abo Ouija, are genuinely part of a primitive, if piecemeal, culture. Ouija's people live in fear of being forced off the streets, categorized, and domesticated. More so than with *Snow Crash,* there are parallels to be drawn between Mason's "abos" and Gibson's Zionists: both groups become allied with the hacker protagonists, fighting against the corporate status quo, and both groups fear that technology, capitalism and cyberspace are blights on society that will ultimately suck the soul.

The opposition of simplicity to technology seems an obvious (if patronizing) literary device to use, but it is also part of a larger schema. In her book *Wild Politics,* Susan Hawthorne notes that the major challenges to globalization have come from "feminism, ecology and the insights of indigenous peoples" (362); she observes that "indigenous knowledges are local and connected" (363). The placement of indigenous cultures in opposition to globalization is obviously not restricted to cyberpunk, but within cyberpunk it is an echo of the cultural politics that Hawthorne describes. Cyberpunk's appropriations do not represent any actual insights of indigenous peoples; rather, the presence of these fictional communities reflects a subtle cultural sentiment that supposes indigenous people must *have* such insights, and that they are automatically placed in opposition to technological globalization.[6] Ultimately and admittedly, their use within the

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[6] One might observe that Native American author Misha, in her cyberpunk novel *Red Spider, White Web,* makes use of no such stereotypes, which is notable given her position as cyberpunk's only actual

genre is problematic for several reasons: because the depiction of foreign cultures in

cyberpunk has a markedly skewed relation to actual real-world cultures, because

membership in these communities is restricted to supporting cast rather than main

characters, and because protagonists are alienated by, or – in the case of *Snow Crash* –

actively opposed to, these communities. Although the Zionists and abos provide

examples of community resistance, they are examples too far outside the experiences of

the protagonists the reader is meant to identify with. However, "primitive" characters do

extend through both masculinist and feminist waves of cyberpunk, and within the first

wave they serve as an early example of community resistance. I will detail ecological

themes in women's cyberpunk within a subsequent section. Following Hawthorne's

premise, that leaves feminism – and within cyberpunk, the best critiques of capitalist

globalization are provided by feminist examples of community.

On one level, there are distinct similarities between the protagonists of many

cyberpunk novels, regardless of author. Outlaw hackers marginalized by faceless global

forces – Gibson's Case, Stephenson's Hiro – are not restricted to first-wave cyberpunk;

they can also be found in novels such as Lisa Mason's *Arachne* (1990)*,* Melissa Scott's

Trouble and Her Friends (1994)*,* and Lyda Morehouse's *Archangel Protocol* (2001)*.* In

Arachne, Carly Nolan begins the novel with a new corporate position. It soon becomes

apparent to what extent her time is micro-managed: "She was a professional telelinker

now and a lawyer newly employed at a competitive starting salary by the prestigious San

Francisco megafirm of Ava & Rice. She could not afford three-and-a-half-second delays"

(14). Not only is Carly dehumanized, her time counted by the second in a highly

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"indigenous" representative. This reinforces the idea of the "subcultural" imagery within cyberpunk being
seen through the lens of white patriarchy – particularly in *Neuromancer*, which does not code the Rasta
stereotypes as appropriated.

competitive environment, it is subsequently clear that the law firm is helping to defend human rights violations. Carly sees one case go by as a matter of course:

> The City and County of Los Angeles denied allegations that indigestible celluloid was dumped into bread distributed at foodlines or, in the alternative, pleaded that the municipal corporation's official duty to provide free sustenance to persons voluntarily attending foodlines was fully met.

> The city provided samples of welfare bread, nutritional analysis showing the stuff contained at least seventy-five percent processed wheat. Plaintiffs' link submitted an analysis showing the bread contained at least thirty percent celluloid in the form of recycled paper products, wood chips, and chaff.

> Within one and a half seconds, the Ava & Rice team presented a one hundred and sixty thousand byte memorandum supported by seventy-five cross-referenced authorities defining the term "sustenance" more broadly than "food," and establishing that "bread" is both food and sustenance. Plaintiffs' counsel could not dispute the California Welfare Code used the term "sustenance." (45)

Not only is the firm completely unconcerned with the horrors involved in feeding wood products to the homeless, its demanding schedules soon cause Carly to become a drug addict in order to keep up her workload. By the sequel, *Cyberweb,* Carly has escaped from her job, become an outlaw, and partnered with the artificial intelligence Pr. Spinner, hacking the web from a seedy hotel room. Another outlaw, Deidre of Morehouse's *Archangel Protocol,* begins the novel as a former police officer, now an outsider without access to the economic system or the web; much like *Neuromancer'*s Case, she makes a deal to provide services to unknown forces in exchange for having her

cyberspace link restored. Finally, in Scott's *Trouble and Her Friends,* hackers Trouble

and Cerise have retired from their former grey-market ways but are forced to return to the

hacking world when an imposter begins committing crimes in Trouble's name. In all of

these works, as in early cyberpunk, hacking is figured as resistance against a seemingly

all-powerful and all-reaching enemy; cyberspace is beyond the jurisdictional bounds of

any one nation, and it provides the battleground for self-realization and self-assertion.

Admittedly, Big Brother is not always corporate – in *Archangel Protocol,*

theocracies are the looming power, and in *Trouble and Her Friends,* Trouble and Cerise

must work around or with representatives of international law. However, the figure of the

ominous corporation never really vanishes; Cerise has been forced into working for a

multinational she was caught hacking, and Deidre must eventually strive against Lucifer

himself as he uses his many billions of dollars on a public relations campaign to promote

the rise of the Antichrist. All of this is simply to say that the figure of the hacker hero

clearly survives in women's cyberpunk, as does a background of globalization and

cutthroat capitalism. The difference lies in the nature of the support networks these

heroes depend on. While the first wave of cyberpunk offers an implicit critique of

postindustrial globalization through the alienation and social dysfunctionality of its

protagonists, women authors critique more constructively by offering community

alternatives.

Early cyberpunk offers a simplistic and ultimately unsatisfying link between

community and femininity. While heroes such as Case and Hiro begin their stories

without real societal legitimacy – Case is a burned-out dealer, while Hiro is a pizza

deliveryman for the Mafia – early cyberpunk narratives tend to place female leads within

positions of corporate acceptance and security. *Islands in the Net* (1988)*,* one of the few

cyberpunk novels set under the auspices of corporate rule, is also one of the few early

works to feature a central female protagonist. Likewise, in Milan's *Cybernetic Samurai*

(1985)*,* Elizabeth O'Neill works quite happily for a Japanese corporation as she idolizes

the ancient feudal ways of the samurai serving his lord. Corporate community appears to

be perceived as a feminine space, which dovetails with feminist theory; Jane Mansbridge

has observed that "the term 'community' is not gender-free. Its two components, local

geographical rootedness and emotional ties, have female connotations" (346). Certainly

Nicola Nixon has argued that cyberspace is a feminine matrix, and as Case and his

compatriots "penetrated" corporate systems, it stands to order that the corporations

themselves – thus violated – might therefore be read as feminine. With this in mind, it is

not surprising that first-wave cyberpunk works taking place within corporate settings –

instead of the marginalized shadow-societies of the criminal underground – featured

female protagonists. However, as Hennessey argues, a major facet of feminism is "its

critique of social totalities like patriarchy and capitalism" (xii); the tensions between

feminism and capitalism are not so easily buried beneath the links between feminism and

community. This becomes evident when examining sites of resistance in feminist fiction.

Most female-authored narratives that begin within the bounds of corporate rule

proceed to become escape narratives. At the beginning of Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991)*,*

Shira Shipman loses custody of her son Ari because her ex-husband has a higher tech

rating than she does; the decision is made and enforced by the corporation she works for.

She finds herself without local support:

Even a month ago, she would have called her secretary, Rosario, for they had become close. But the low-level exec with whom Rosario had had a ten-year contract had not renewed their marriage. As was customary even for low-level talent, he had taken a new wife, twenty years younger. Rosario was forty-two, and Y-S let her go. Shira had protested that she needed Rosario, but she had no power. Women over forty who were not techies or supervisors or professionals or execs were let go if they were not the temporary property of a male grud. Female gruds were supposed to have the same privileges and, if they had enough position, often took young husbands. (6)

Much as in *Arachne*'s court cases*, the merciless power of the capitalist corporation is shown through the dehumanization of background characters, while the protagonist herself is an individual ultimately unable to fit in: "[Shira] leapt from track to track, never mind who saw her – who might report her – as undignified, lacking in proper Y-S decorum. She always felt too physical here, too loud, too female, too Jewish, too dark, too exuberant, too emotional" (5). Shira is not an outlaw hacker, but like *Arachne*'s Carly, she becomes one; quitting her job at Y-S, she later finds herself breaking back into the company's computer systems, and then literally breaking back into the enclave in order to retrieve her son.

Shira's story is, on one level, a tale of dueling communities, as the escape is made from an inadequate social support system to one that is smaller but better aware of the individual's needs. This parallels the marked tension between feminism and communitarianism; the link between these two concepts is not automatic, and not just any community will do. As Penny Weiss notes:

Feminist attraction to communitarianism is easily understandable. Having

rejected the self-interested, autonomous individual of liberalism as both mythical

and undesirable, feminists find that a more social view of the self and a more

collective, interdependent, and cooperative model of social relations has an

obvious and reasonable appeal. Further, given women's history and continued

practice of attachment to others, through traditional female roles and networks,

feminist visions might even be expected to be communitarian.

But feminist rejection of communitarianism would also be understandable.

The misogynist history of communitarian theorizing about what the principles and

who the members of communities should be dates from at least Plato and

continues today. That history has called for women, much more than men, to

sacrifice themselves in the supposed interest of familial and civic communities.

[…] A feminist reliance, then, on a more individualistic ideal would not be

entirely unwarranted. (3)

Weiss details a tension that is not new; the desire for cooperative relations, in conflict

with wariness toward patriarchal social structures, may be seen in women's science

fiction for decades preceding cyberpunk. When examining feminist utopian sci fi (a

tradition extending back at least as far as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* [1915]), it

is apparent that women writing science fiction have been striving to formulate alternative

models of community for quite some time. However, segregation – often the case in

visions of fictional feminist communities – ultimately does not address the question.

Jenny Wolmark offers a perceptive discussion of feminist utopias such as Suzy McKee

Charnas's *Walk to the End of the World* (1974) and *Motherlines* (1978), or Sally Miller

Gearhart's *The Wanderground* (1979), where patriarchy results in disaster and men are reconfigured as the "other" (81); aptly, she critiques *Motherlines* with the observation, "The women-only communities established in *Motherlines* suggest that women can be free only in the absence of men, a proposition that ironically leaves existing gender relations intact and posits an unproblematic relation between women and the category of Woman" (84). Although she is slightly more encouraged by the possibility of more equivalent gender relations alluded to in utopian works such as Sheri Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* (1988) or Pamela Sargent's *The Shore of Women* (1986), she notes that in these works – despite the in-text potential for future reconciliations between the sexes – the women remain "enclosed and contained" (100). One might link Wolmark's critique of segregation to Weiss's notion that "communities are essential to sexual equality" (3), an observation for which she cites Audre Lorde's comment that "Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression" (112, Weiss 4). Weiss is speaking of multi-sexed communities; in other words, eliminating the presence of men does not adequately resolve the conflict between feminism and communitarianism. Feminist utopian science fiction, while useful in examining many aspects of gender relations, ultimately may not offer viable solutions for the formation of more equitable community types. Although many historical community structures have admittedly promoted the oppression of women, sexual equality is impossible in a vacuum. Weiss suggests that "the institutions and practices central to patriarchy cannot be reconceived and replaced without the formation of new communities that alter how we meet our material, political, intellectual, and emotional needs" (4). The tension between feminism and community is complex;

within feminist utopian fiction, it cannot be fully addressed by the elimination or suppression of masculinity, and within early cyberpunk, it cannot be broken down to anything so simple as an association of the feminine with private or local social spheres.

The alternate communities offered in women's cyberpunk have the distinction of being first positioned as resistance to globalized capitalism; their resistance to patriarchy is secondary, although of course it may be argued that patriarchy and capitalism may often be one and the same. Tensions between feminism and capitalist patriarchy do not allow feminist narratives to permanently position women within corporate communities. However, Carly and Shira are not loners. In resisting the same self-interested individualism that has contributed to the rise of capitalist society (and marks much of early cyberpunk), feminism gravitates toward ideas of community responsibility. At the same time, the patriarchal nature of community structure in western culture necessitates the formation of new types of community. In women's cyberpunk, nowhere is this idea illustrated more clearly than *He, She and It.*

Over the course of the novel's opening, we see three clearly delineated examples of community social structure: the capitalist corporate enclave, the anarchist urban sprawl, and the small town of Tikva. Shira experiences all three of these speculative futures, each marked by small yet telling attributes such as clothing style and animal life. In the corporate enclave, Y-S, Shira lives in a simple two-room apartment that is all her tech rating "entitles" her to (6); her ex-husband, Josh, lives on a street "like a hundred others," his house "one of the four types for Josh's rating" (14). Even pets are prohibited: "Shira had grown up with cats and birds, but here only high-level techies and execs were permitted real animals. Everyone else made do with robots, but the good ones cost far too

much for her" (14). Levels of social privilege are carefully controlled through these strict regulations, and are reflected in interpersonal interactions: "People of the same rank greeted each other with ritual gestures, a bob of the head. Those farther down the hierarchy they usually ignored. Passing those above them, they awaited recognition and bowed deeply. How many times had she slipped into trouble by talking so intently she had inadvertently neglected to greet properly an equal or superior?" (5). Clothing is colour-coded so that anyone "in the wrong place" is immediately identifiable (5). Shira's every moment seems monitored and governed; even her parental rights are taken away from her without notice. Her discomfort is made palpable by the way she "slips into trouble," by her dissatisfaction with her low tech rating, and by her anguish at the unfeeling system that severs her legal right to see her son. Notably, her objections and difficulties are marked by gender: "They have patriarchal laws here," she notes to her ex-lover Gadi (10).

Leaving this ultra-regulated environment, Shira then journeys through the urban morass of the Glop. The Glop, much akin to Gibson's famous Sprawl[7], is "slang for the Megalopolis that stretched south from what had been Boston to what had been Atlanta, and a term applied to other similar areas all over the continent and the world" (6). We are told that nine-tenths of North America's population lives in the Glop. No one here is easily distinguished by rank:

> Shira stumbled out of the tube exhausted and suffering from lack of
> oxygen. The small of her back hurt, and her sinuses burned. She had a headache
> that blistered her skull. Here she was in the Glop and there was no time to worry

---

[7] Marge Piercy acknowledges Gibson's influence, as well as that of Donna Haraway, in her afterword to *He, She and It.*

about small pain if she wanted to survive alive and intact. She pulled over her

backless business suit the thin black covering almost all women and old people

and many men wore in the streets. It covered age, class, sex, and made all look

roughly the same size. She had not worn it in her years at Y-S, for there were no

gangs in the multi enclaves. (31)

Shira observes chanting gang members clustered around a body "with its chest torn open

and arterial blood spurting out" (33); she buys a knife for protection, turns down an offer

of employment as a prostitute, and is nearly run down by a flotilla of riders that leaves the

parts of two more bodies "strewn across the broken pavement" (34). There are animals in

the Glop, but they aren't pets; a gang of dogs fights over the torn human flesh (34). Over

the course of Shira's journey, the setting shifts from one extreme to another: fascism vs.

anarchy. Neither of these community types suits Shira; there is no automatic link between

her feminine self and the social environment, and not any community will do. Instead,

her quest for equality and self-realization leads only to patriarchal punishment, or open

danger.

Shira is not happy until she returns home to Tikva. Located outside the sprawl of

the Glop, and free from corporate domination, Tikva is governed by a multi-gender

community council. Entering the town, Shira is startled to be surrounded by a

hodgepodge of buildings in different styles and shapes: "After the uniformity of the Y-S

enclave, the colors, the textures, the sounds and smells provoked her into a state of

ecstasy until she found herself walking more and more slowly, her head whipping around

like an idiot. Why had she ever left?" (36). Again, both the clothing and animals mark the

character of the community:

The occasional passerby was casually dressed: open-throated shirts, pants, a full skirt, shorts, for the day was seasonally mild. She felt like a freak in her standard Y-S suit, now covered with grime and soot. A couple passed her arguing loudly about somebody's mother, their voices raised unself-consciously. Behind a hedge, a dog was barking at a rabbit in a hutch. […] Everything felt . . . unregulated. How unstimulated her senses had been all those Y-S years. How cold and inert that corporate Shira seemed as she felt herself loosening. (36)

He, She and It aptly reflects Weiss's argument: Shira, as a woman of the future, is unable to find a home either within a regulated, patriarchal community, or within an environment of anarchist individualism. Instead, she feels happiest in a precariously-balanced "free town" that represents a new type of community – one that allows Shira to participate as a full citizen, promoting social ties without discriminating based on attributes such as gender or appearance. The resistance to globalization is evident: Shira is not satisfied in the multinational enclave, or in the uncivilized urban spillover where individual cities no longer exist. Instead, she feels tied to community on a local and direct level. In parallel, the restrictive corporation and the out-of-control urban morass are both examples of first-wave settings, and both are rejected in this later text, which examines the same social problems but ultimately encourages new solutions. While the novel offers the background possibility of multiple types of successful communities – Tikva, one gang in the Glop that is trying to reform its way of life, and one utopian women's community that Shira never sees – Tikva is where Shira is happiest, and through her eyes, this free town is presented as the optimum form of resistance to capitalist globalization.

Compare this with Sterling's *Islands in the Net,* the most "community-oriented" first-wave novel. As a male-authored vision of a woman in corporate culture, this text is not an escape narrative – rather, it provides a critique of multinational corporate life without really suggesting any alternatives for its protagonist, Laura. As a member of the multinational Rizome, supposedly based on democracy, equality and family, Laura finds herself very concerned with appearances – in jockeying for position, she does not want to find herself doing anything perceived as "non-R" (non-Rizome). Even in mildly chastising a coworker for raising sensitive issues on an unsecured line, she is nervous:

> "Um… Eric," David said aloud. "This is not a private line."
>
> ["Oh,"] King said in a small, now-I've-done-it voice.
>
> "We'll be glad to have your input, if you could write it up and send e-mail. Atlanta can encrypt it for you."
>
> ["Yeah, sure,"] King said. ["Stupid of me … my apologies."] Laura felt sorry for him. She was glad David had gotten him off her back, but she didn't like the way it sounded. The guy was being frank and up-front, in very Rizome-correct fashion, and here they were telling him to mind his manners because they were on spook business. How would it look? (96)

The same concern with appearance marks meetings of the Rizome executive committee, where the more serious the matter, the more casual and equal the facades of committee members: "You could tell the importance of this meeting by the elaborate informality of their dress. Normal problems they would have run through in Atlanta, standard boardroom stuff, but this Grenada situation was a genuine crisis. Therefore, the whole Committee were wearing their Back-slapping Hick look, a kind of Honest Abe the Rail

Splitter image" (68). While casual clothing in *He, She and It* marks freedom, in *Islands in the Net* it is pretense – a symbol of community unity that masks career pressures beneath. Yet there are no easy alternatives for Laura; she is relatively happy with Rizome, and when she is sent abroad, she discovers only warfare, secret police and global conspiracy. Her smallest community, her traditional nuclear family, is destroyed; as her husband David says, "All the fucking money and politics and multinationals just grabbed us and pulled us apart" (376). Her wider, global community is full of war and death. Rizome, although it is not perfect, remains her only support at the end of the novel. Sterling, like Gibson, uses Caribbean culture as a counterpoint to multinational growth, but unlike peaceful Zion, Grenada is full of violence; the Grenadian assassin Sticky establishes Rizome as the lesser of two evils when comparing it with war-torn Singapore:

> "[…] It's a wind-up city, this place. Full of lying and chatter and bluff, and cash registers ringin' round the clock. It's Babylon. If there ever was a Babylon, it's here."
>
> "I thought *we* were Babylon," Laura said. "The Net, I mean."
>
> Sticky shook his head. "These people are more like you than you ever were." (222)

After she is captured, tortured, and imprisoned, Laura's eventual release and return to civilization paints her bourgeois existence as the best of a bad job; the world, suggests the novel, will change, and while there is no perfect system, humanity will make do. As an included member of the corporate community, rather than one of cyberpunk's more typical marginalized outsiders, Laura is feminine and feminized – however, from a feminist perspective, she finds no alternative new community style. *Islands in the Net* is

more concentrated on conveying warnings about globalization. Its critiques are reserved

for the increasing political dominance of capitalist corporations, as when a representative

of Kymera corporation proposes a global police force to Laura:

> "[…] Kymera is launching a diplomatic offensive. We are taking our case to
> many other multinationals. East, West, South, North. If we can act in concert, our
> power is very great."
>
> "You're proposing some sort of global security cartel?" Laura said.
>
> "Global Co-Prosperity Sphere!" Mika said. "How does that sound?"
>
> "Uhmm," David mused. "In America, that's known as 'conspiracy in
> restraint of trade.'"
>
> "What is your loyalty?" Yoshio asked soberly. "America or Rizome?"
>
> (177)

Laura is disturbed by the question, and yet her position within the narrative makes it clear

that she is – at the beginning, and at the end – a loyal member of Rizome. The novel

critiques globalizing forces while omitting more complex feminist arguments regarding

the necessity for new community structures.

This is consistent with my other readings of Sterling's work: while his use of

female protagonists is clearly well-intentioned and carries a simplistic feminism in its

own right, it lacks the more intricate nuances of later feminist texts. Rather, his novels –

like those of Cadigan – serve in some instances as an effective bridge between the

masculinist and feminist cyberpunk waves. Cadigan critiques capitalist corporations

while at the same time focusing on the personal relationships of her female protagonists –

in *Mindplayers,* Deadpan Allie works a company job while learning to depend on and

relate to those around her, while in *Synners,* Gina fights against the corporate
commodification of music while simultaneously finding new love. Both Sterling and
Cadigan contrast with works such as *Neuromancer* and *Snow Crash*, where relationships
are based mainly on convenience and economic considerations. Case and Molly are hired
by Armitage; Hiro and Y.T. work together to make money on gathered information. Their
actions thwart multinational plots but the characters themselves are loosely allied groups
of loners thrown together by capitalism and circumstance. Cadigan and Sterling, from
different perspectives, each provide alternatives – but these are only precursors to the
feminist wave, which fleshes out ideas of community resistance much more fully.

The alternate community of *He, She, and It*'s Tikva, where Shira finds acceptance
within a small independent democracy and the matriarchal family of her grandmother
Malkah, coincides with other alternate community formations promoted in women's
cyberfiction. In Scott's *Trouble and Her Friends,* Trouble and her hacker cohorts are
gradually assimilated into the "legitimate" side of the new world order while at the same
time retaining their independence in the wilds of cyberspace, and relying on each other
for support. Trouble's group of gay hackers forms a site of resistance based both on
individualist politics, and on sexuality; ultimately, Trouble finds the support she needs in
the form of her lesbian partner/lover Cerise. While detailing, among other things, the
travails of international law enforcement and Trouble's attempts to remain anonymous
and undetected, the novel also advances a small artist's commune as Trouble's temporary
site of refuge during her years of "retirement." Likewise, in Walker's *Whiteout* (1996)*,*
Signy and her friends do freelance work for a Japanese multinational while sustaining
themselves as a bisexual, polygamous family unit – and in Forbes's *Exit to Reality*

(1997)*,* Lydian finds love with the shapeshifting, gender-switching Merle while joining an underground community of reality-hackers who have perceived their place in a virtual world governed by an all-seeing computer. I should note that *He, She and It* has its share of bisexual characters as well, and I do not feel that the positioning of sexuality within these tiny resistant communities is a coincidence – although there have been significant academic tensions between analyses of gender and sexuality, feminism and queer rights, it must be acknowledged that within these texts, acceptance of alternate sexualities seems to be a key part of these new communities.

Likewise, members of these communities or makeshift family units are free from discrimination based on race or religion. The best example of this catch-all liberalism is possibly Morehouse's *Archangel Protocol* and its sequels, wherein private detective Deidre McManus – on the run from international pursuit – finds refuge for herself and her daughter inside a rogue Jewish community led by a lesbian ex-terrorist named Rebekah. Rebekah's kibbutz exists, very literally, on the margins of society – within deserted, glass-coated city areas previously decimated by a nanotech bomb. Despite its Jewish foundations, and links with the Israeli military, the kibbutz shelters Deidre (a Catholic), her illegitimate daughter Amariah, and – later – the Arab hacker Mouse (a Muslim). One might also consider Emma Bull's *Bone Dance,* which tells the story of an androgyne clone's search for community and acceptance, as well as the eventual fulfillment of this goal in a rogue farming community situated outside the morass of a futuristic, unnamed city.

Scott, Semmers and Willoughy, in their study "Women and the Internet," state, "Women are often identified with local identities and the particularity of place. As these

geographies of place and locality are subverted by new geographies of information flow,

women face a double challenge: they must defend their local spaces against the threat

posed by a disembodied globalization, and they must also create spaces within the new

electronic media for their own voices" (13). This statement holds true when applied to

women's cyberpunk. While still often concentrating on themes of alienation, works such

as *Arachne* and *Trouble and her Friends* also explore small, fringe communities and

relationships that exist along societal margins. While the protagonists may be alienated

from society, they are not alienated from each other; the two lesbian heroes of *Trouble*

and her Friends have an interconnection impossible for *Neuromancer'*s Case and Molly.

There is a clear pattern within feminist cyberworks: the formation of groups, large or

small, that resist globally dominating forces while promoting acceptance, equality and

support between members.

The links between feminism, racial activism and queer rights are only to be

expected; as Peterson and Runyan acknowledge, "it is sometimes difficult to separate

women's movements from other political movements agitating for social, political and

economic transformation" (227). Likewise the link between feminism and social support

networks; as Weiss notes, "Feminist theorists argue that the vision of the atomic,

'unencumbered,' self, criticized by communitarians, is a male one, since the degree of

separateness and independence it postulates among individuals has never been the case

for women" (165). This may be the sense in which the first wave of cyberpunk might be

most clearly considered "male:" its glorification of the outsider. The links – and the

tensions – between the two waves are clear. Although women's cyberpunk has largely

gone unacknowledged, it exists, and illustrates different political concerns. While it also

uses science fiction to explore globalization and alienation, the settings are the same but the solutions are different. Both waves show marginalization as a consequence of a new global order, but while early protagonists are marginalized individuals, later feminist protagonists are more closely tied to marginalized communities. The individualist cyberpunk hero was never a feminist figure, and even "lone" figures in feminist cyberfiction – Trouble, or Carly Nolan – are supported by trusted partners. While the fight against totalitarian forces remains, the fighters are more closely bonded, and works such as *He, She and It* and *Archangel Protocol* go so far as to posit fully resistant and self-sustaining communities – communities where typical patriarchal structures are eschewed and all members enjoy equality and acceptance. This positions women's cyberpunk, not in opposition to its predecessors, but rather as an elaboration; it builds on the first wave, but is informed by a different social position. The feminist-oriented exploration of globalization issues creates an entirely separate take on societal solutions.

- Chapter 4 -
Embodiment and Virtual Reality

Virtual reality – in Bonner's terms, computers and corporeality – is another of the

staples of cyberpunk that is both preserved and significantly altered in the feminist wave.

Hacker heroes may be nobodies in the real world, but they are gods inside their

computers; the mythos of early cyberpunk was one of romanticized escape into a

universe where pure intelligence dictated power and control. Critics such as Larry

McCaffery and Mark Poster have been fascinated with cyberspace as a literary symbol of

the postmodern condition; McCaffery writes:

> These new realms of experience – theorized by Guy Debord's 'Society of the
>
> Spectacle,' Baudrillard's 'precession of simulacra,' and Cook and Kroker's
>
> 'hyperreality,' and metaphorized perhaps most vividly by Gibson's 'cyberspace' –
>
> have become integrated so successfully into the textures of our lives that they
>
> often seem more 'real' to us than the presumably more 'substantial,' 'natural'
>
> aspects … This is the postmodern desert inhabited by people who are, in effect,
>
> consuming *themselves* in the form of images and abstractions through which their
>
> desires, sense of identity, and memories are replicated and then sold back to them
>
> as products. (6)

The presence of virtual reality technology was a narrative and thematic factor very

clearly preserved from one wave to the next. Feminists, however, were more concerned

with cyberspace's escapist disembodiment, and the worrisome way that virtual reality

(VR) concepts promoted relief not only from the vulnerability of the "meat", but also

from gender and cultural differences. Anne Balsamo noted, "There is little coincidence

that VR emerged in the 1980s, during a decade when the body was understood to be

increasingly vulnerable (literally, as well as discursively) to infection, as well as to

gender, race, ethnicity and ability critiques" (229). Elaine Graham agreed, saying of

cyborgs and virtual reality: "For the hyper-masculine Terminator and Robocop, and many

of Gibson's protagonists, prosthetic implants and enhancements, or the disembodied

'high' of cyberspace, represent technological means of escaping the vulnerability of

embodiment" (Cyborgs 307). In the 1980s, the rise of the AIDS epidemic threatened

bodily integrity and power; likewise, the increasing strength of feminism and other social

rights movements threatened the supreme position of the white male and fuelled a

conservative, Reagan-era backlash in North America. Positioning virtual reality as a

white male escapist fantasy made concepts of cyberspace problematic for many feminist

critics. Graham argued, "many feminists feel ambivalent about cyberspace and virtual

technologies because of its very overtones of dualism and fear of things to do with the

body. Given the traditional association of women with the bodily, the affective and the

realm of nature, cyberculture just looks like another attempt by patriarchy to deny those

aspects of experience in favour of the virtual, the abstract and the disembodied" (Cyborgs

314). And Rosi Braidotti said:

> … the central point to keep in mind in the context of a discussion on cyberspace is
>
> that the last thing we need at this point in western history is a renewal of the old
>
> myth of transcendance as flight from the body. As Linda Dement put it[8]: a little
>
> less abstraction would be welcome. Transcendance as disembodiment would just
>
> represent the classical patriarchal model, which consolidated masculinity as
>
> abstraction, thereby essentialising social categories of 'embodied others'. This

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[8] Braidotti cites this as a remark made at the conference "Seduced and Abandoned: The Body in the Virtual World."

would be a denial of sexual difference meant as the basic dissymmetry between

the sexes. (528)

In other words, the neutral "default" form of humanity in Western culture is the white

male; removing attributes such as race and gender threatens to erase those segments of

the population entirely, forcing everyone into the same masculine niche as everything

defining them as "other" is removed. The flight from the body is, among other things, a

flight from feminism and from the corporeal distinctions that make women separate,

oppressed, and threatening. While early cyberpunk promoted the control of virtual life

and the romanticism of the hacker lifestyle, women authors created works more focused

on promoting embodiment over empty escapism. In the second chapter of this study, I

discussed how Pat Cadigan's work served as an early example in this area. An

examination of women's subsequent cyberfiction reveals both a desire for VR-related

attitudes to grow up and away from simplistic escapist fantasies, and an awareness of

women's bodies as important, individual and desirable.

In the first wave, the trend toward escapism is clear. Two major works exploring

VR themes – and two of the best-known cyberpunk works in general – are Gibson's

Neuromancer (1984) and Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992). In *Neuromancer*, the hacker

Case is cut off from cyberspace and reduced to running small-time deals on the streets:

"For Case, who'd lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was the Fall. In the

bars he'd frequented as a cowboy hotshot, the elite stance required a certain relaxed

contempt for the flesh. The body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his own flesh" (6).

In 1992, *Snow Crash* followed a similar vein, depicting the hacker Hiro adventuring in

cyberspace while living in a rental storage unit. In cyberspace, Hiro is a celebrity – the

best swordsman in virtual reality, and one of the few allowed into the exclusive Black Sun club. In actuality, he is a failed pizza deliveryman who earns a living by selling bits and scraps of information to the national library. His preferences are clear: "Hiro spends a lot of time in the Metaverse. It beats the shit out of the U-Stor-It" (24); "when you live in a shithole, there's always the Metaverse, and in the Metaverse, Hiro Protagonist is a warrior prince" (63). Cyberpunk written by women preserves ambiguous attitudes toward new technologies, but also comes down more firmly on the side of "actuality" (embodiment) versus "virtual reality" (the escape from the "meat"). In Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991), programmer Malkah loves both her work on the net and her physical life, from which she retains fond memories of years of lovemaking (160). In Lisa Mason's *Arachne* (1990), Carli – the hacker protagonist – uses the net for work, not play. In Cadigan's *Synners* (1991), Mark craves a life in cyberspace while his girlfriend Gina rejects it. Feminist cyberpunk retains an interest in virtual environments but is much less prone to entertaining notions of bodily transcendance.

Sherryl Vint has argued that *Neuromancer* is not as contemptuous of the flesh as it first appears, stating that both Case and Molly use their bodies as technological tools (108), and that:

Gibson's novel articulates a particular type of subjectivity that is interested in repressing the body, and it suggests why this stance would be desirable: the subject wishes to sustain a construction of mastery and the body undermines this construction. Despite the appeal of this fantasy, the body is continually shown to be an inescapable part of Case's subjectivity and the actual condition of being without a body is shown to be an absence of subjectivity. (109)

Vint argues that many would-be internet hackers and programmers have emulated Case rather than understanding Gibson's social critique, and that certain characters within *Neuromancer* may express contempt for "the meat" but the overall context of the novel does not support their positions (111). While this is a valid observation, I would argue in turn that this is not a dominant reading of the novel; Vint herself observes, "Contemporary debate on the social consequences of computer telecommunication technology suggests that those readers who identify with Case and perhaps model their subjectivity upon his have created a virtual community that supports Case's vision of the world, if not Gibson's" (109). *Neuromancer*'s impact is based in large part on its portrayal of techno-escapism and virtual adventure; one might relate this to Claire Sponsler's argument that a certain inescapable "cool factor" is associated with the cyberpunk setting by dint of the exciting events able to take place therein (261). Regardless of what Gibson's intentions may have been, his novel – and the genre it epitomizes – became inextricably associated with the disembodied fantasies of its protagonist.

Admittedly, the romanticized notion of cyberspace as a transcendental playground is not entirely limited to first-wave cyberpunk. Melissa Scott's *Trouble and Her Friends* (1995) portrays much the same world:

> She knows what lies behind the massive image, a pudgy, bearded man who lives in his parents' basement; she tracked him once, after he'd crossed her, and found his secret. She lets that knowledge strengthen her, then pushes it aside. Whatever he is in the realworld, they are on the nets now, and she cannot afford contempt— whatever he is in the realworld, on the nets he is a king. (186)

Despite this portrayal of the nets as a place where real-world social pariahs can lead glorious existences, an important distinction still differentiates Scott's work from Gibson's or Stephenson's. Hackers Trouble and Cerise find the same escape in the nets as Hiro and Case, but with an element of encroaching responsibility. The novel sets their adventures within a framework of nostalgia – although they were once carefree, shadow-dwelling hackers, they can no longer experience the same freedom on the net that they once enjoyed. *Trouble and Her Friends* quite clearly begins where earlier cyberpunk leaves off: it opens with the dissolution of the freewheeling hacker economy. New laws have been passed, and Trouble abandons Cerise and skips town. In the very first lines of the novel, Cerise enters her apartment to find it half-empty; her girlfriend has left and her current life is over. Three years later, Cerise is working for a megacorporation and Trouble is a systems operator at a small artists' co-op; both have been assimilated into society, and "legitimate" jobs. The two are drawn back together in order to stop a rogue hacker who has taken Trouble's name – in essence, in order to police the web themselves as they crack down on the careless criminality of their successor. Their adventures in cyberspace are exhilarating but also marked with the knowledge that the days of escapism have passed. Characters frequently reflect on their lost lifestyles, as when Trouble contemplates her situation in the co-op:

> She wasn't with Cerise anymore, wasn't even legal anymore, despite her best
>
> efforts, and Carlie was dead and David was in jail and the survivors, the old gang,
>
> all van Liesvelt's and her friends, Cerise and Helling and Aledort and Arabesque
>
> and Dewildah, scattered God knows where – She shook the memories away,

angry with herself now for indulging her mood, the downside of her net triumph.

(116)

Trouble and Cerise are forced to return to their old haunts, only to discover that they don't know anyone there anymore; old acquaintances they do encounter frequently make reference to the good old days. Salvation lies in working within international laws, cutting deals, ensuring immunity from prosecution and taking legitimate control of Seahaven, a hacker domain that was formerly a hiding place for illegal trade:

> "Will you run it with me?" Trouble asked.
>
> Cerise nodded, slowly. "It's kind of a dumb question, sweetheart. Is there anybody who doesn't want Seahaven?"
>
> Trouble nodded back, reached out, careful of Cerise's hands, touched first her shoulder and then her cheek. "It's not going to be the same."
>
> "It never is," Cerise answered. She forced a smile, and a lighter tone, knowing perfectly well what Trouble meant: the old days were long gone, and there was no going back, no matter what the regrets. "You'll just have to bring the law in, Marshal, that's all." (372)

Law and order are beginning to regulate the nets Trouble and Cerise play on, and the day of the iconoclast, grey-market hacker rebel is ending. Over the course of the novel, Trouble's attitude transforms from anger to resignation; she is rescued through her cooperation with authorities, and in the end acknowledges, "I was a kid when I started" (378). As the Eurocop responds to her, "you got to grow up sometime" (379).

This notion of adulthood, written in congruence with the 1990s growth of the internet and new government regulations guiding computer use, is also reflective of a

feminist attitude toward the dream of disembodiment. In *Trouble and Her Friends,* there is no bodiless exultation of cyberspace, and online actions have real-world consequences; when Cerise hurts her "hands" inside the web, she harms her real hands as well: "As she had feared, the knuckles were swollen, fingers puffy as though with heat. She grimaced, recognizing a familiar injury" (330). The hackers who triumph in the web are those equipped with the "brainworm," a device that translates electrical impulses into real sensory impressions:

> Maybe that was why the serious netwalkers, the original inhabitants of the nets, hated the brainworm: not so much because it gave a different value, a new meaning, to the skills of the body, but because it meant taking that risk, over and above the risk of the worm itself. Maybe that was why it was almost always the underclasses, the women, the people of color, the gay people, the ones who were already stigmatized as being vulnerable, available, trapped by the body, who took the risk of the wire. (129)

The novel positions Trouble and Cerise as part of a second hacker generation – one composed of the underclasses, who find their fullest pleasure in projecting their own embodiment onto the virtual web, and who "grow up" as they assert law and authority in cyberspace. As we will see, feminist approaches to embodiment issues are complex, but in *Trouble and Her Friends,* the quest for adulthood sets a tone that is echoed in many other works of feminist cyberfiction.

Some would argue that no matter the escapist intent, no depiction of virtual reality is able to abandon concepts of embodiment, simply because we lack the language or experience necessary for defining any other way of relating to our environments. Anne

Balsamo notes that the body never really disappears, whether through the use of virtual avatars or a gendered interface; she argues, "The gender and race identity of the material body structures the way that body is subsequently culturally reproduced and technologically disciplined" (233). Moreover, Nigel Clark cites McLuhan's theory of rear-view mirrorism, in which we tend to "look at the present through the spectacles of the preceding age" (114), to advance his argument that the exploration of digital media through the recombination of body types, morphing, and experimentation is still bound by current semiotic systems: "What we seem to be dealing with here is not the ultimate in cybernetic bodies, but a recursive corporeality which arises here out of the transition of one generation of mediated effects to another… This is not freedom from the 'meat', any more than the frenetic codes of fashion constitute freedom from clothing" (126-7). However, although there is merit to these points, there are also – as Balsamo examines in depth – notable differences in how men and women approach these themes. It may be impossible to escape the meat, but men seem the most intent on trying. Vint has observed:

> The ability to construct the body as passé is a position available only to those privileged to think of their (white, male, straight, non-working-class) bodies as the norm. This option does not exist for those who still need to rely on the work of their bodies to produce the means of survival, for those who lack access to technologies that can erase the effects of illness, and for those whose lives continued to be structured by racist, sexist, homophobic, and other body-based discourses of discrimination. (9)

According to Thomas Foster in "The Postproduction of the Human Heart," cyberspace as defined by male authors can take two forms. The first is a representation of reality that maps experimental ways of changing the status quo and calls into question constructions of any level of "reality."[9] The second is a full alternative to the physical world (468). In contrast, he argues, feminized visions of virtual spaces tend to promote "telepresence" as a preferred term to cyberspace, because "the idea of presence, no matter how mediated, can serve as a reminder that virtual perspectives always exist in relation to physical bodies" (470). He defines the feminist cyberfiction debate:

> …should the transformative possibilities of cyberspace be emphasized, or is it necessary at the present moment to emphasize the inescapability of embodiment? Turning the question around, is it possible to capitalize on the opportunity virtual systems represent for reimagining the relation between mind and body, without simply erasing embodiment entirely? (472)

Valid arguments might be made both for emphasizing cyberspace's potential to promote the understanding (through "experience") of other identities, genders and viewpoints, and for condemning the impractical fantasy of shedding the confines and social restrictions of the flesh. This tension between feminist approaches to virtual reality – whether to advocate the exploration of different simulated points of view, or whether to concentrate on a solid link between embodiment and identity – is reflected in the many different angles adopted by women writing cyberfiction. The inescapability of embodiment is winning the battle; embodiment and identity are closely linked within feminist

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[9] Veronica Hollinger makes a similar observation in her essay "Cybernetic Deconstructions," noting that cyberpunk's fascination with new technologies and identities "sometimes spills over into the problematizing of 'reality' itself" (205).

cyberpunk, while "escape" attempts have drastic consequences or are simply not possible within the texts.

In examining novels such as *Proxies, Exit to Reality, Whiteout* and *The Fortunate Fall,* Foster concentrates on the theoretical implications of using embodiment and cyberspace to question constructions of the mind-body connection, in addition to the way feminist cyberpunk may also question the construction of real/virtual binaries – the postmodern cyberpunk phenomenon that opened this chapter in the form of McCaffery's quotation regarding the desert of the real. Foster has described "telepresence" – the projection of the body within virtual spaces – as one method of reasserting a mind-body link within feminist works; he argues that feminist works continue to question the construction of reality while simultaneously probing the nature of embodied identity. In primarily analyzing *Trouble and Her Friends, Proxies, Exit to Reality,* and *Whiteout,* I have come to similar conclusions regarding the works' emphasis on a mind-body connection, while also identifying recurring imagery linking embodiment – the abandonment of escapist dreams – with adulthood, and implicitly critiquing the imposition of male beauty fantasies on women's bodies. I have drawn inspiration from Foster's work while seeking to avoid duplicating the details of his analysis; it is my hope that my interpretations may be taken not as disagreement, but as an additional or alternate reading overlapping many of the same sources.

Foster argues that feminist cyberfiction "calls into question the necessity of grounding identity in a single body" (484), and I have found this to be true – although, while women's writings are more likely to raise and explore these questions, they also ultimately lean toward emphasizing the link between body and self. Women's

cyberfiction does frequently examine the exploration of multiple identities, particularly their malleability and the destabilization of the self. Francisco Collado Rodriguez observes: "… flesh and machine fuse their matters into new beings that lure readers and spectators while also generating their innermost fears of and disgust towards the posthuman results that such fusion brings about. Into this dispute postmodernism has invited that other current motif of our culture: the instability of the self, a motif that problematizes a previous one: the importance of the individual" (70). Rodriguez is speaking of cyborg culture but the same holds true of many cyberspace explorations – with women's writing providing the most thorough depictions of cyberspace as a medium for shifting identities. Case and Hiro soar through cyberspace as controlling gods, but they don't ever assume the guise of women, or change their races, or even take the shapes of animals or strange avatars; *Neuromancer* reserves this fluidity for artificial intelligences, while *Snow Crash* notes it only as an idiosyncrasy of unnamed "extras." This use of static cyberspace identity in early cyberpunk may be partly due to the fact that cyberspace's "transformative potential" resounded more with women authors, and perhaps also partly to do with the fact that the growth of local bulletin board systems and the internet meant that more people writing during cyberpunk's feminist wave had experience with real-world online identities – and their potential for deception.

Some of the tension between exploration and condemnation becomes clear in contrasting comments from feminist critics. Sadie Plant argues, "off-the-shelf identity is an exciting new adventure for the user of virtual reality. Women, who know all about disguise, are already familiar with this trip. Imitation and artifice, make-up and pretence: they have been role-playing for millennia: always exhorted to 'act like a woman', to 'be

ladylike': always to be like something, but never to be anything in particular, least of all

herself" (505). At the same time, Rosi Braidotti dismisses the "phantasy of multiple re-

embodiment" (521) as something that must be relinquished in order to fully explore the

cultural possibilities of the postmodern age. Plant argues that multiple identities are

already a central social tenet for women, while Braidotti positions the idea of multiple re-

embodiment as a male dream untenable and undesirable for those whose social identities

are inextricably linked to their corporeality; to her, virtual reality posits an inevitably

masculine dream wherein the "body" is infinitely malleable but the subjective viewpoint

is always presumed to be that of the default white male. Both positions are explored in

feminist cyberpunk, where women authors emphasize the impact of bodilessness on

identity, or more accurately, use such shifting bits of identity to highlight how factors

such as gender play a vital part in the formation of self-image. This congruence of

embodied importance and feminine perspective is, subtly, acknowledged in *Snow Crash*,

where even though Hiro lives to exist in the Metaverse, his ability to communicate there

on a human level is due to the programming efforts of his ex-girlfriend Juanita:

> At the time, both of them were working on avatars. He was working on bodies,
>
> she was working on faces. She *was* the face department, because no one thought
>
> that faces were all that important—they were just flesh-toned busts on top of the
>
> avatars. She was just in the process of proving them all desperately wrong. But at
>
> this phase, the all-male society of bitheads that made up the power structure of
>
> Black Sun Systems said that the face problem was trivial and superficial. It was,
>
> of course, nothing more than sexism, the especially virulent type espoused by
>
> male techies who sincerely believe that they are too smart to be sexists. (57)

Snow Crash, published in 1992, came at the end of cyberpunk's first wave and after the beginning of feminist cyberfiction within the genre. In the novel, Juanita is the one who gives people in virtual reality the ability to communicate through the nuances of facial expression; her position as the one who brings embodiment to cyberspace seems caught somewhere between a stereotype of "feminine" social wiles, and an apt acknowledgement of the feminist emphasis on corporeality's link with self and social identity.

The same emphasis is made more explicit in feminist works. The links between embodiment and identity in women's cyberpunk reflect feminist tensions, much as *Snow Crash's* acknowledgement hints. Cadigan's *Synners* treated the perception and use of cyberspace as issues split along clearly gendered lines, setting a precedent with female characters who did not crave disembodied release. Laura Mixon and Edith Forbes both take this idea further, illustrating how a lack of static body image may lead to an instability of identity. In her novel *Proxies* (1998), Mixon portrays a world where people may use electronic interfaces to project themselves into robot "waldos." Waldo technology has advanced to the point where some are nearly indistinguishable from human bodies – and, as part of a secret government project, disabled children are raised in crèches and trained as pilots for these new, interchangeable bodies. When Carli, a scientist, finds out about the crèche children, she is horrified:

> "It just takes some getting used to," he said. "It's really not horrible at all. Just different. Haven't you read any of Hans Moravek's [*sic*] work, or Marvin Minsky's, or Li Chan Thunder's? We're not our bodies. What makes us unique is

our intellect. Information, sentience. Intelligence. That's what defines us as
human."

"Oh, bullshit." (308)

Carli fully rejects any notion of a fulfilled bodiless life. Notably, Mixon is familiar with
the real-world works of roboticist Moravec and AI enthusiast Minsky – as well as the
enthused cyberpunk Cartesianism of mind over body. In *Neuromancer* and *Snow Crash,*
the hacker moves beyond the meat; the meat is, save for matters of basic survival and
nutrition, often inconsequential. In *Proxies*, this dismissal of the body is clearly rejected –
both subtly, through an admiration of "muscle dancer" artists, and overtly, through the
devastating mental consequences of life in proxy.

In comparison to the physically crippled pod children – hairless and skeletal, with
colostomy bags and catheter tubes, living unknowing in "blobs" of gel (438) – Carli's
nephew and his husband are dancers with sublime control of their "meat": "The man did
things with his body that Daniel would have thought impossible. Knots of muscle ran
along his arms, back, abdomen; down his thighs and up again. He moved with sinuous
seduction, with jarring stops; he flowed, coiled, froze in impossible shapes for a heart-
rending beat, burst into motion again" (68). The muscle dancers are lauded while the
children are objects of pity – a minor contrast that becomes more important when
considered in relation to the novel's overall exploration of the effects of virtual existence.
The complexities of VR-related arguments are illustrated through one positive example: a
transsexual woman, Teru, who finds it much more comfortable to live life in a male
waldo. However, Mixon outlines the fate of adults who spend too long in proxy:

"You might have heard the term *beanie-burn*," Taylor said. "Long-term waldo pilots end up suffering a host of mental disorders with alarming frequency. Everything from aggravated phobias, depression, drug and sex addiction, bipolar disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorders to hallucinations, catatonia, fits of rage, paranoia, and delusions." (276)

The mental problems are blamed on "signal degradation," with adult pilots unable to adapt to the lag time between their neural impulses and the feedback/responses of their robot bodies. The impact on the crèche children is even worse. Partly through the process of "twinning" – being trained to operate more than one waldo, assume more than one identity at once – many of the children develop severe multiple personality disorders. Pablo, the oldest of the children at 15, shares his mind with "Buddy," "Pablito," and "Dane Elisa Cae." He is not consciously aware of any personalities other than himself and Buddy, and indeed his intentions are divided when Buddy actively – and secretly – plots against the goals of the other children and their scientist "mother." Moreover, the children become psychopathic as they begin killing people in the mistaken belief that "death" is the same as losing a waldo or dying in a computer game. They are unable to understand the basic human condition that links mind and body: "Pablo met her gaze calmly. He didn't understand why the others were so distressed when it was just bodies they were talking about killing. But that was the way it worked in the similes, too, so maybe that was just how they were supposed to act" (319). The children, raised without any real knowledge or understanding of their own crippled bodies, are mentally ill and socially dysfunctional.

The adult viewpoint is more rational. Carli envies the children their virtual existences, in a world "where life didn't take such a toll – where death was temporary, and relationships – at least most of them – were laid to waste only till you hit the reset button" (412), but in the end she pities them: "Reality was an anchor. A promise – not of faerie glamour or glory and riches, not of heroic, galaxy-spinning adventure, or even a life without pain – but of other things. True and solid friendships. Deep love. Good sex, fine food and drink, satisfaction in a job well done" (413). Daniel, an adult waldo pilot, expresses a similar attitude near the end of the novel: "But he was tired of being a proxy-jock, of living in a superhero fantasy world and making up fantasy relationships to waste his time with. It was time for real life, for a change. A life with real people in it" (398). Unlike the world of the early console cowboy, virtual reality in *Proxies* is fairly conclusively damned – and positioned as a childlike fantasy. Carli's thoughts about real life include many "embodied" pleasures – sex, food and drink – and the eventual aversion to VR is not presented as a female position, but as an "adult" point of view through both Carli and Daniel. As in *Trouble and her Friends*, the protagonists "got to grow up sometime" – and as the characters go, so goes cyberpunk: toward worlds where cyberspace is less an addictive power fantasy and more a tool that must not be allowed to overtake an individual's "real" existence.

In *Exit to Reality* (1997)*, the protagonists no longer have that option; over the course of Forbes's novel it is revealed that all of the characters are actually – and previously unbeknownst to them – disembodied brains maintained in sludge-filled domes on a ruined Earth. They cannot return to their bodies – but those who remember embodiment mourn it, and even the loss of a stable virtual body proves a threat to self-

identity. Most people in the world were children when they entered the virtual universe, and they have no knowledge that the universe isn't "real"; instead, they believe that humanity has entered a stage of scientifically-granted immortality. The protagonist Lydian has only vague memories of her childhood, but they are enough for her to regret what she has lost:

> "I had a dream about raspberries last night," I said. "And about my human mother. She said they were priceless. But they're quite common now. I suppose anything can be common, when it's not real."
>
> […]
>
> Suddenly, I remembered tart, fragrant sweetness bursting across my tongue as I squeezed a raspberry against the roof of my mouth. The pastry in my mouth now was pleasant, but seemed muted and two-dimensional compared to the complexity that lived in my memory.
>
> I set the pastry down and stared at it sadly. (227)

Although women authors tend to promote embodiment much more strongly than men do, within their works embodiment is not necessarily a gender-centred issue for the characters; like Carli, Lydian wants the simple and universal sensation of eating real food. Moreover, in a virtual world, no commodity can be precious or rare – anything can be created through a simple act of computer whim, and so the world loses a certain sense of wonder. Lydian and her lover, Merle, are also fascinated by the thought of the "real" world, and want to see it – through the use of robotic cameras outside the dome – even though it's a wasteland:

"Why do you want to feel this particular sorrow?" Mom asked. "Isn't life

hard enough?"

The need felt almost too elemental to articulate. "I feel cut off from

something." I struggled to find the words. "From some essence. In me. In the

world. I'm not sure… Maybe sorrow is part of that essence. Maybe that's why

Merle has sometimes sought death, because death is part of that essence."

[…]

"I want to know the whole of what is," I said. "I want to see a beach

because it may be the only thing I'll ever see dead that I can remember seeing

alive." (294)

Despite the fact that their virtual environment provides them with health, agelessness, and

whatever variety they desire, Lydian and Merle are both dissatisfied – they long for the

"real" world they haven't truly experienced. Lydian is cut off from some "essence" she

can't quite define – something that would make her more fully human. Her sense of

identity is somehow lacking, a position illustrated most clearly by the elements of body-

switching in the text.

Lydian first discovers that something is odd in her world when she encounters

Merle – a person who can change bodies at will. Unaware that Merle's desires are in fact

being fed by the computer system in which they unknowingly live, the two at first believe

that they have discovered some strange superpower. Merle is delighted with the ability to

change forms, shifting fluidly with every alteration of mood. This malleability, however,

comes with a price. Merle no longer has any idea who s/he really is: "I truly didn't know,

and still don't know, which of all the faces and bodies I could imagine was the one I was

born with. I have memories of things around me. I can remember places I lived and kids I

taught in unicomm classes. But the things that might connect me to my original body,

like getting dressed, or eating, or sexual intercourse, or having my hair cut, I don't

remember" (94). Without a static body, Merle has lost the core of his/her identity.

Although Merle is content to be this way, Lydian desires more stability. When she

realizes that her "body" is nothing more than a virtual projection, she almost

disintegrates:

> I began to feel dizzy. I wasn't sure the chair was still under me. I still
>
> seemed to be sitting but no object pressed against my buttocks and thighs. My
>
> limbs had no weight. Not that it mattered. They were just projections of my own
>
> expectation that I had buttocks and thighs. Perhaps I didn't … The world
>
> collapsed to black, devoid of weight or texture, heat or cold, smell or movement.
>
> Total nothingness. I existed, but absolutely nothing else did. Not even time. (169)

Lydian's disorientation nearly crashes the computer system; the realization that she has

no body destroys all of her reference points and temporarily makes her unable to relate to

or interact with anything else. She is also rather attached to her own body – the body she

identifies with – and although she finds it interesting to experiment as a man, she is

horrified when, at one point, it looks like she may become trapped in a man's form.

"Would that be a catastrophe?" asks Merle. "Yes, it would be a catastrophe," replies

Lydian. "Obviously it would be" (136). Merle, who changes gender effortlessly, is

puzzled – is Lydian her body? Does Lydian prefer Merle in one body over another?

"You know I don't care. Except for your generics. But that's different. That's who you are, someone who has lots of different forms, and that's who I love."

"Who exactly are you? Are you a particular haircut, a particular pair of eyes, a particular collection of organs, this stomach, these lungs, this uterus, these toenails?"

"I don't know. You're confusing me."

"Do you feel like a different person?"

"Not fundamentally. But some things are different. It's as though my body has impulses I'm not used to and my mind has to decide whether to act on them. Back at my house, when you were playing the brainless sexpot, I felt flooded with rage. I felt an urge to grab you and shake you, to make you stop, and I had to tell myself deliberately not to do it. And at the same time, there was arousal. It was complicated and not at all pleasant … I'm not used to feeling those things. This body is tense and reactive. All coiled up tight and in need of physical outlet."

(137)

Proxies defines the elevation of mind over body as "bullshit"; *Exit to Reality* is clearly in a position of agreement, not only linking Lydian's sense of self-identity to her corporeality but also describing ways in which Lydian's personality is affected by a male identity. Even though her body isn't "real," Lydian's personality is still partially dictated by the demands of her form. Merle has a different body for every mood; Lydian is more static, and expresses a sense of unfamiliarity and change in forms that are not "hers." The spectre of adulthood rises again: Lydian was a child when committed to a life in virtual

reality, and now, older and wiser, she wants out. In *Exit to Reality*, the price of having no body is the loss of identity; in *Proxies*, it is madness. In both cases, the cyberpunk dream of escaping the "meat" lacks the shine and glamour given to it by the early hacker heroes. Both texts illustrate the tension between promoting cyberspace's potential for illustrating other viewpoints, and reiterating the inescapability of embodiment in relation to human identity. Both texts demand that humanity grow up.

The necessity of human corporeality is also explored through the concept of characters escaping the body entirely – those who "upload" their personalities into the web. In earlier works, this is common. Mark, in *Synners* (1991), strokes out while linked, leaving his mind online; Cobb in Rudy Rucker's *Software* (1982) is copied to a robot body; and the Dixie Flatline, in *Neuromancer* (1984), is a ROM recording of a dead hacker's personality and memories. *Neuromancer* also contains the online ghost of Linda Lee, and, in the end, a copy of Case himself; one of the tropes of early cyberpunk might be the fact that these sorts of copies are permitted to begin with. They are often questionable in terms of "real" human identity – Case, for example, still lives at the same time as his copy exists online – and are generally illustrations of the idea that we are more than the sum of our parts, with some quintessential "human" core that cannot truly be copied by machine. However, they also dangle the dream of immortality – of a mind that exists without body, and may thus exist forever.

Feminist cyber-works are less forgiving of this concept. Shira, in *He, She and It* (1991), is afraid of being caught in cyberspace for too long: "she had heard of Net travelers killed because they had got caught in some inner loop and could not escape. While they were trapped in netspace, their bodies died. Presumably their projected minds

also died, but it was even worse to contemplate consciousness trapped like catatonics within repeating strings in forgotten closed-off sectors of some base" (273). Much as Lydian and Merle long to end their eternal virtual existences in *Exit to Reality*, the idea of having her mind separated from her body is horrible to Shira. Likewise, in *Arachne* (1990) and *Cyberweb* (1995), Lisa Mason outlines a world where artificial intelligences (AIs) are trying to steal that quintessential human "spark" – where the AIs are severing human telespace connections in order to isolate bits of rogue consciousness that remain when the body dies. When Carly Nolan briefly manages to restore a ghost of her father online, he is barely able to do more than tell Carly he loves her and ask her to terminate his program; although, perhaps, a linker might "some day" survive such an ordeal, Sam Nolan's body no longer exists and the databank can't sustain him (260). Carly herself shows no desire to exist as a virtual personality, and the shreds of consciousness stolen by AIs exist in torment. Shades of similar philosophy do exist in first-wave works: in *Neuromancer*, the Dixie Flatline also asks to be erased. However, he is instead set free by the AI Wintermute, and presumably wanders the web at will – his continued, and amused, presence is implied at the end of the novel by "the laugh that wasn't laughter" (271). The ghost of Sam has no such second life.

The idea of a mind existing completely without body – of truly escaping the meat – simply seems to have lost vogue after the first wave of cyberpunk. For many feminist works of the 1990s, this possibility is not even addressed. Trouble and Cerise never aspire to escape their bodies, despite their exploration of cyberspace power and shifting hacker identities. The crèche children don't understand the link between mind and body, but they couldn't exist if their own hidden, crippled forms were to die. And Lydian and

Merle, even though they exist in a computer system, still have actual physical form

somewhere – even as brains being sustained in sludge. Likewise, in Raphael Carter's *The*

Fortunate Fall, cyber-ghost Keishi cannot exist without a body to house her

programming; she is destroyed when the protagonist, Maya, refuses to let Keishi share

her brain.

Sage Walker's *Whiteout* (1996) contains similar themes. While the death of the

character Jared leads one of his friends to create a facsimile in cyberspace, the "ghost" is

only an imitation:

> "Paul needs this, Signy. For a while," Jared said. Jared's wistful look, his
>
> shy grin. "Death is a concept." His voice made slight vibrations in his chest;
>
> Signy could sense them. Perfect. "Entropy, seen in the right perspective, is only a
>
> set of equations. My continued presence won't be to everyone's taste, I know. The
>
> aesthetics might prove bothersome to timid souls. But you aren't timid. And I
>
> miss you."
>
> Paul's words. These were Paul's words, mouthed in Jared's voice, but
>
> Jared's touch felt real, was unmistakeable, Jared's touch that she wanted so
>
> desperately.
>
> Ugly, ugly. Signy jerked her head back and fought her hands out of their
>
> imagined restraints. (291)

Jared lives on in recorded images, in the memories of his friends and as part of the

synthesis they create, but *Whiteout* does not advance any ambitions of online immortality.

At the same time, Jared's image within the text does provide some vague, undefined hope

for existence beyond death; after his online "funeral", when his friends have logged off,

his image somehow remains – walking on the mesa, in a glorious sunset (347). In this sense, *Whiteout* provides something of a balance between the two concepts without ever encouraging the idea of corporeal escapism.

Thomas Foster, arguing that works of feminist cyberfiction dramatize "the difficulties involved in reconciling virtuality and embodiment" and are "a major resource for charting the possibilities and pitfalls of an increasingly virtual world" (Postproduction 497), cites Walker's *Whiteout* as portraying the most positive balance between embodiment and virtual reality. He argues, "*Whiteout* emphasizes virtual intimacy, not as an escape from physical embodiment, but as a different way of experiencing it" (Postproduction 477). This is true, but also somewhat problematic. Signy's life – her communication with her "family" of friends and lovers – takes place through both in-person and online communication. Through the use of recording equipment, special suits, and camera monitors, each member of the community is capable of experiencing the bodily sensations of other members – in effect, almost teleporting awareness into another body, a form of embodied voyeurism that promotes feelings of closeness and understanding. It is something like Case's experience of Molly's signals in *Neuromancer* – except that while Case "rides" Molly without being able to communicate with her, Signy's experiences are reciprocal and form the basis of a community. Signy, Jared, Paul, Pilar and Janine are almost never out of contact, despite living scattered across the United States. At the same time, their virtual connectivity always has an element of embodiment to it, particularly when indulging in an awareness of another person's visual or tactile sensations. Despite *Whiteout*'s balance, however, Signy is also never quite satisfied with

either her virtual or real-life communications. When she is upset and alone, her online

communications are not enough to reassure her:

> Paul and Janine weren't *here* in this empty house, in this cold night. They
>
> hadn't been affected, hadn't felt the damned sensations crawling along Signy's
>
> skin. They could sympathize, and they did, but their concern was an abstract
>
> thing, a response of intellectual empathy. Their voices were just voices.
>
> And Jared? Jared was in sick bay in a ship on a frozen sea, thousands of
>
> miles away. Signy wanted him to be here, right here, warm and real, a distraction
>
> to take away her fears of the dark. (82)

Yet, when Signy gathers the group around her after Jared's death, she also finds herself

unsatisfied with their real-world presences:

> Their company was that of zombies; they had gone away into their separate and
>
> closed worlds again, back into places Signy couldn't bear to enter.
>
> She had to get away. Why had she wanted to bring these strangers here?
>
> Signy wanted, very much, to go home. Home?
>
> Signy pulled her headset over her eyes. (327)

In person, she finds the others are "more isolated, more distant from each other than they

had ever been in the intimacy of the net. Where the blows they gave each other were

cushioned, where the hurtful words they spoke – could be deleted, or explained away"

(336). Signy longs for "real" companionship, and yet when presented with it, she is

unable to relate to her friends and instead retreats again to the safety of the net.

This is not necessarily a condemnation of virtual communication, but rather part

of the fine line the text walks – highlighting the advantages and pitfalls of both forms of

community, with the closest experiences between individuals reserved for the
technologically-enabled sharing of embodied impulses and memories. There is some play
with identity here, in such instances as replaying Jared's fall from the ship: "Paul let the
virtual run at normal speed. Jared climbed out of the hole and on to the deck, and Signy
caught her breath at the sudden blow to the back of her knee, bit her lip as the side of the
ship rose and she/Jared/Paul fell" (138). However, these shared experiences are a way of
reinforcing a sense of intimacy; Signy never really envisions herself as a man, loses her
own sense of identity, or takes on an online avatar other than her own self. Rather, she
preserves her sense of self and body while achieving a greater understanding of those
around her – which places *Whiteout* as the most ambiguous and perhaps most optimistic
cyberfiction exploration of virtual reality, embodiment and identity, despite Signy's
problematic inability to be content with company either in real life or online. Again, the
work reaches for adulthood: Walter Jon Williams, quoted on the book's cover, says,
"*Whiteout* shows us Virtual Reality for grown-ups – not as an excuse for pumped-up
power fantasies, but as a real tool for getting real things done." Nothing is perfect, yet the
characters do share an alliance that – as the epilogue reveals – lasts them, presumably, for
life.

I have quoted Sadie Plant and Rosi Braidotti to illustrate my reading of Foster's
arguments; Foster himself cites Allucquère Rosanne Stone and N. Katherine Hayles:

Juxtaposing these two arguments suggests the stakes involved in representations

of telepresence technologies. From Stone's perspective, Hayles's project of

"putting embodiment back into the picture" (Hayles 1999, xiv) runs the risk of

also reinstalling a traditional one-to-one relationship between body and mind, sex

and gender, despite Hayles's care not to define embodiment in essentialist terms

or as fundamentally opposed to the virtual experience of informational patterns.

From Hayles's perspective, Stone's willingness to describe the embodied location

of subjectivity as being rendered irrelevant within virtual systems runs the risk of

devaluing bodies entirely in favor of some idea of becoming pure mind, thereby

making cyberspace an escapist fantasy rather than a force for cultural change.

(Postproduction 471-2)

Although, as I have acknowledged, examining feminist cyberworks does reveal a

willingness to use the imagery of virtual technologies to explore multiple identities, my

analysis ultimately dovetails more with N. Katherine Hayles's theories regarding various

approaches to posthumanism. Hayles, who in part describes posthumanism as a situation

wherein "there is no a priori way to identify a self-will that can be clearly distinguished

from an other-will" (4), sees several possible interpretations of a posthuman future – that

is to say, a future conflating humankind, technology, and information. To her, humanity

has reached a critical juncture in the formation of a posthuman age, wherein

"interventions might be made to keep disembodiment from being rewritten, once again,

into prevailing concepts of subjectivity" (5). Describing *Neuromancer* as a work within

which "the posthuman constructs embodiment as the instantiation of

thought/information" (5), she analyses early cyberpunk as depicting one possible

interpretation of posthumanism – part of a fantasy scenario in which mind and body are

not linked and the liberal humanist subject can persist into the posthuman age:

Indeed, one could argue that the erasure of embodiment is a feature common to

both the liberal humanist subject and the cybernetic posthuman. Identified with

the rational mind, the liberal subject *possessed* a body but was not usually

represented as *being* a body. Only because the body is not identified with the self

is it possible to claim for the liberal subject its notorious universality, a claim that

depends on erasing markers of bodily difference, including sex, race, and

ethnicity. (5)

Hayles describes several different visions of posthumanism as depicted in science fiction.

This includes *Neuromancer*'s displacement of embodiment (the elevation of "pattern over

presence" [36]) and *Snow Crash*'s dystopian performance of human beings as computers

(278); critiquing the preservation of the autonomous male viewpoint, she notes, "What is

lethal is not the posthuman as such but the grafting of the posthuman onto a liberal

humanist view of the self" (286-7). To Hayles, bodilessness is a horrifying projection of

posthumanism, but the posthuman need not be antihuman; rather, posthuman visionaries

should seek to explore humanity and individual identity as part of distributed systems:

… when the human is seen as part of a distributed system, the full expression of

human capability can be seen precisely to *depend* on the splice rather than being

imperiled by it … This vision is a potent antidote to the view that parses virtuality

as a division between an inert body that is left behind and a disembodied

subjectivity that inhabits a virtual realm, the construction of virtuality performed

by Case in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* when he delights in the "bodiless

exultation of cyberspace" and fears, above all, dropping back into the "meat" of

the body. By contrast, in the model that Hutchins presents and that the posthuman

helps to authorize, human functionality expands because the parameters of the

cognitive system it inhabits expand. In this model, it is not a question of leaving

the body behind but rather of extending embodied awareness in highly specific,

local, and material ways that would be impossible without electronic prosthesis.

(290-1).

Hayles cites feminist critics such as Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Carolyn Merchant in helping to create a framework wherein (among other criteria) "embodiment replaces a body seen as a support system for the mind" (288); feminist authors have, by this definition, likewise provided a more hopeful vision of the posthuman future. The approaches to issues of virtual reality and embodiment in *Trouble and Her Friends*, *Proxies, Exit to Reality* and *Whiteout* are by no means unified, but they do share a predilection toward emphasizing the importance of embodiment to identity, while at the same time offering visions of virtual technologies that act as extensions of, rather than replacements for, that same embodied identity.

Feminist cyberpunk thus emphasizes the importance of physical contact and the relation between body image and a unified sense of self – a theme far less common in earlier cyberpunk works. As well, women-authored cyberfiction has a tendency to portray body images more realistically than in work concentrating on the travails of cyberspace junkies. The image of the early cyberpunk woman is mostly provided by Molly in *Neuromancer*: a sleek, beautiful woman with permanent mirrorshade sunglasses, and razors surgically implanted into her fingers. *Snow Crash* partially follows the adventures of a young skateboard courier named Y.T.; she is attractive and fit. While she lacks Molly's overt sexuality, her body tempts her jailer when she is arrested (54) and she eventually seduces a madman named Raven (383), escaping him through the use of a vaginal dentata. Also in *Snow Crash*, Hiro's ex-girlfriend Juanita is an "elegant, stylish

knockout" (58). None of these things are necessarily terrible; in fact, both authors went to some lengths to establish their female characters as tough and resourceful. These works, however, reflect a larger trope of Western culture, wherein women are held to unnatural body images; while hackers such as *Neuromancer'*s Case may be thin and pasty, and other male characters fall into a host of categories, the stereotypical cyberpunk woman tends toward a male fantasy of female beauty.

Claudia Springer argues that questions of the mind in relation to the machine/body are marked by a cultural preoccupation with sex, and notes the attractiveness of computer sex in relation to risks like AIDS (84). Considering this position, it may be somewhat ironic that cyberpunk – the literary herald of the postmodern age – is not particularly prone to depictions of cybersex, nor do women authors seem to differ much from men on this point. Although scenes of virtual sex are not unheard of – in Milan's *Cybernetic Samurai*, or in *Trouble and her Friends* – most authors (regardless of gender) seem more inclined to write the sexual encounters of their characters "in the flesh." The main difference between male and female authors lies in the way sexual attractiveness – particularly of the female body – is conveyed. Women's cyberfiction, with its emphasis on embodiment over fantasy, also emphasizes a clearer and more natural body image. In *Proxies*, for example, Daniel looks at Carli in a nude dance club:

> She was maybe a couple inches shorter than his real body. She wore no makeup. Her figure was a woman's figure—not girlish. Her breasts were full but not too large. Her nipples were a dark pink, and they were erect. The sight gave

him another erection, back in his crèche in Austin. Her hair was a blond so pale it

was almost silver, unwaxed, in a simple bob just above her shoulders.

But it was her face that was most unusual. It was the sort of face you could

watch for hours and never grow bored with. This was not simply because of her

features themselves, which were vaguely Scandinavian, Daniel thought, with her

square jaw and freckles. It was because her face was such a clear mirror of her

feelings.

She had eyes of a quite amazing grey. He would never have thought grey

eyes could be such an attractive color … Crow's-feet spread out from the corners

of her eyes, and a smile hovered at the corners of her lips … (65)

Molly and Y.T. are described in short lines and defined mostly by the reactions of men,

their features left to the imagination; one of the first descriptions of Molly is: "She wore

mirrored glasses. Her clothes were black, the heels of black boots deep in the

temperfoam" (24). This is shortly followed by the revelation that she has dark hair,

slender white fingers, and tight "gloveskin" clothes. While still described through the lens

of a male reaction, Carli has crow's-feet and a full figure, and without the sleek

athleticism of Molly or Y.T. she is still a source of desire for Daniel. In women's

cyberpunk, female characters are portrayed with realistic diversity, and yet still

acknowledged as attractive. In *He, She and It*, the woman with the most sexual awareness

and activity is Malkah, a seventy-two-year-old grandmother with a "round, slightly

wizened face" (6), and the most dangerous woman is Malkah's daughter Riva, a skilled

rebel leader who appears as either a plain middle-aged woman or disguised as an ugly

elder (303). Riva confuses the rich socialite Gadi: "Riva did not fit into his diagram of the

social universe. In his world, only poor women looked like Riva, and there were few enough of those" (305). Yet Gadi is also jealous, because his lover Nili was previously with Riva – and he watches a tall dark woman named Leesha look at Riva "as though Riva were the most beautiful and desirable creature in the world" (305).

Women's cyberfiction not only fails to promote escapism from women's bodies, but also reiterates the inherent attractiveness of those same bodies – beyond the slender fantasies of fashion magazines and movies. In *Virtual Girl* (1993), the robot Maggie has been created as a man's idea of a beautiful young woman, but when she showers with other women she finds their bodies fascinating: "She was surprised at how individual the other women's bodies were, one fat, another skeletally gaunt, how loose the skin seemed on the older women, compared with the smooth resilience of younger women's skin. She wondered if her skin would ever be as interesting as the skin of the older women" (72). Finally, in *Trouble and her Friends*, Trouble and Cerise have "gotten older, gotten better" (304); Trouble is "heavier now, though not fat, the sexy child's curves maturing into something fuller, rounder, a shape that promised adult pleasures" (211). Much like the experiences of characters in the cyberspace worlds of women's literature, the emphasis here seems to be on "growing up" – on realizing that women's bodies are not merely objects of magazine-pinup fantasy, but also individualized, aging, sometimes plump, and attractive nonetheless.

This subtle commentary is not always restricted to the female form. In *Exit to Reality*, where genetic engineering is presumed to have imbued in each person a similar bodily perfection, Lydian is fascinated the first time she meets Merle:

His physique and dress were odd enough, but his face was truly arresting. It was

all wrinkles and folds of skin, with round pouches below the eyes, loose, sagging

jowls, a large homely nose, bristling eyebrows and a wide, pliable mouth that

looked as if it could form and reform itself at will to make smiles, scowls and

curls of irony. I thought I had never seen someone who was in one moment so

ugly and so appealing. I also had never seen someone who looked so *old*. (23)

Merle catches Lydian's attention because s/he is interesting and different; his ugliness is

much more appealing to her than any "perfected" form. As Springer notes, in today's age

"body-altering procedures are becoming as elaborate as their fictional counterparts" (35);

while early cyberpunk details the dream of escaping from the vulnerability of the meat

and often portrays women as physically sleek and stylish, later cyberpunk's growing

emphasis on the importance of the body also paves the way for both infantalizing that

fantasy and perhaps reacting to a growing culture of cosmetic surgeries that threatens to

make women, particularly, into real-world assembly-line cyborgs.

Issues of embodiment in women's cyberpunk are, therefore, somewhat in

opposition to the genre's first wave. Although approaches are myriad – one might

contrast Carli's crow's-feet in *Proxies* with Carly Nolan's genetically engineered beauty

in *Arachne* – there is a definite trend toward promoting the meat over the virtual.

Cyberspace may still be portrayed as an enjoyable environment, whether for Malkah in

He, She and It or Cerise in *Trouble and her Friends*, and it is certainly a valuable

communications tool, but characters in women's cyberpunk who are deprived of their

bodies suffer for it. Mental illness, a sense of loss, alienation or an inability to fully relate

either in person or online are all consequences of losing one's bodily identity in these

works. Being comfortable with oneself and one's corporeality is a mark of maturity, and an emphasis on aging bodies and sexual attractiveness seems to indicate a desire for a more adult view of cyberpunk's juvenile, escapist fantasies of virtual life – while at the same time establishing a protesting stand against the faux-glossiness of sleek women's child-bodies in both earlier novels and the media at large. Framed within the work of feminist critics such as Graham and Braidotti and their dismissal of disembodiment as a masculine dream, it is perhaps no surprise that women should show a greater awareness of embodied issues and a much weaker tendency to dismiss the body as an inconsequential aspect of identity. Furthermore, within what Foster has defined as the feminist tension toward two alternate portrayals of virtual reality, it is clear that feminist cyberpunk has achieved something of a compromise between using VR to explore alternate viewpoints, and emphasizing the importance of embodiment. At the same time, the results of this tension are skewed in favour of the body; in the hands of women authors, cyberpunk's escapist and bodiless dreams are redirected toward "grown-up" concerns and a firm link between corporeality and the self.

- Chapter 5 -
Cyborgs and Artificial Intelligence

In the first chapter, I added "cyborg" to Bonner's list of major cyberpunk tropes. Explorations of technology and identity in cyberpunk are often centred around two types of characters: the cyborg and the artificial intelligence. For the purposes of this section, a cyborg might best be defined as a human being with technological enhancements – i.e. Molly's razor nails and mirrored lenses in *Neuromancer*, or Deirdre's metal body in "No Woman Born" – while an artificial intelligence is an entity whose consciousness is based solely in electronic parts. While these character types were not new to cyberpunk, and may be easily found in earlier science fiction – *2001: A Space Odyssey* comes to mind – they became an integral part of the cyberpunk mythos. Early cyborg characters were disappointing from a feminist perspective, but the feminist wave used artificial intelligences to great effect in challenging gender roles and performativity.

Cyborg culture may have been the geek's answer to the bodybuilding fascination of the 1980s; almost all cyberpunk fiction, from any iteration, has some mention of body modification or cybernetic implants. It is a particularly important subject for many feminist critics, since Donna Haraway's 1985 "A Cyborg Manifesto" proposed that cyborg imagery might be the key to breaking down cultural oppositions such as man/woman, human/machine, and organic/inorganic. Haraway wrote, "Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (181). In doing so, she formed much of the basis for the way feminist critics viewed cyberpunk's cyborg culture. Sadie Plant argued, "The cyborg betrays every patriarchal illusion, dragging the human into an alien future in which all its systems of security are powerless. This is the runaway autoimmunity of a humanity that

is no longer itself: the frontier of patriarchy's automated defence networks has already become cybernetic, and so female" (506). The cyborg created great expectations among some feminists; theoretically, it exemplified a malleability of the body that called into question patriarchal concepts of male and female identity. Mary Catherine Harper has noted that the figure of the cyborg "stands at the center of a feminist biology, a feminist Alien Other, a feminist technology, and what is emerging as a post-humanist technological subjectivity" (403).

In practice, however, many feminists found cyberpunk's early cyborgs to be problematic. According to Despina Kakoudaki, cyborgs might never be able to successfully challenge gender binarisms: "When the intelligent machine acquires human skin and competent language use (when it is able to 'pass for human') it cannot escape gender, race, sociality, the potential for violence, and existential dilemmas" (167). In other words, when a cyborg became recognizably human, it was unable to truly escape human stereotypes, classifications and expectations – and if it were not recognizably human, then it would presumably have little impact on the way humanity categorizes itself. In Samantha Holland's study of the cyborg in cinema, she likewise found that gender boundaries might be meaningless in theory, but not within the actuality of film depictions. Male cyborgs such as Robocop or Schwarzenegger's Terminator were asexual and macho, while female cyborgs like *Eve of Destruction*'s Eve 8 or *Cherry 2000*'s Cherry were "fucking machines" (164). Claudia Springer, discussing many of the same figures, likewise observes that "gender, rather than disappearing, is often emphasized after cybernetic transformation" (171). Holland argues: "The central fear seems to be that in a possible cyborg future, biological gender would disappear, rendering patriarchy's

centrally constituting hierarchy of masculine over feminine untenable. So, asserting an essential masculinity simultaneously with an essential humanity seems imperative … ensuring that even with no biological gender, the hegemony of masculinity can be sustained" (167). In other words, Haraway's proposed cyborg androgynes were too threatening, in practice, to be allowed play in Hollywood – instead, an increase in technological superiority meant a subsequent increase in stereotypical sex characteristics, to downplay any dangerously gender-free imagery. Male cyborgs became invincible while female cyborgs were sexually exploited. While Holland does note that hyper-masculinized Terminator or Robocop archetypes might be easily read as panicked reactions to an overall crisis in the masculine media image, cyborgs in the 1980s still failed to live up to theoretical expectations; even Molly, the prototypical cyberpunk bad girl, earned her razor implants by working as a prostitute and is at one point displayed in an onstage sex show as little more than the sum of her parts.

Karen Cadora observes, "… what is often ignored about the cyborg is that it arose out of Haraway's desire 'to build a political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism.' Masculinist cyberpunk is faithful to none of these. In fact, one might even say that it builds itself in opposition to these concepts. That Haraway's cyborg has become the metaphor of choice for such a movement is both strange and ironic" (360). However, she also proffers a potential solution, analyzing how authors such as Laura Mixon, Pat Cadigan, and Mary Rosenblum have broken down cyborg theory in their novels. "Cyborgs," says Cadora, "can ground a political vision in which identity is fragmented and contradictory, yet not without power. A cyborg is a multiply positioned subject enabled by technology. It is this side of cyborgs that feminist need to learn more

about" (360). I discussed issues of embodiment and identity in the previous chapter, including Mixon's use of "proxy" waldos and Cadigan's gendering of attitudes toward virtual reality prosthetics; I would herein like to add to Cadora's observations by turning the analysis in a different direction.

The cyborg – however disappointing – has been the main object of feminist critique. Disembodied artificial intelligences (AIs), though interesting as foils for discussions of the nature of consciousness, were less often dissected with an eye toward Haraway's manifesto. This is unfortunate, considering that in later attempts to question gender divisions, authors such as Marge Piercy, Amy Thomson and Lyda Morehouse used AIs to excellent effect. In contrasting *Neuromancer*'s AIs (1984) with the character of Yod in Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991), June Deery concludes that "both cyborgs and artificial intelligences offer a concrete demonstration of that great postmodern theme, the construction of human identity. But the embodied cyborg provokes more questions about body, gender, reproduction, kinship and cultural identity than does the artificial intelligence" (92). Artificial intelligences, existing in virtual reality, were insufficient; according to Deery, Gibson's AI transcends humanity, while Piercy's cyborg probes it. However, on closer examination, the line between AI and cyborg is not so clear. *He, She and It* provides an excellent example, not of a human being with cybernetic implants, but of an artificial intelligence with a "human" body. Earlier works, such as *Neuromancer* or Victor Milan's *Cybernetic Samurai* (1985), typically portrayed artificial intelligences as disembodied spirits living in the computer and represented with virtual reality "faces," while cyborgs were human beings with hardware implants. Yod falls within neither category; although he has organic

components, his brain is a piece of hardware – he is essentially a robot, an AI given

embodied form. In fact, the two best examples of "cyborg" characters designed to

question gender roles are both robot AIs – Yod, and Maggie from Amy Thomson's

Virtual Girl (1993). Together with Lyda Morehouse's artificial intelligence Page, Yod

and Maggie provide examples of feminist authors' most valiant attempts to live up to

Haraway's expectations.

The gendering of artificial intelligences is not entirely new. From *Star Trek*'s

female computer to *2001*'s distinctly male-voiced Hal, computers that acquire sentience

have often been given gendered distinctions and assigned pronouns of "he" or "she." Nor

have gendered robots, such as *Lost in Space*'s Robbie, been absent from the sci fi lexicon.

However, the implications of these gender assignments have seldom been explored –

their behaviours and designations are taken for granted. Rudy Rucker, in the first-wave

cyberpunk novel *Software* (1982), describes two AIs meeting on a bus:

> "You must be Ralph Numbers," the bopper next to him beamed suddenly.
>
> Ralph's neighbor looked like a beauty-shop hair-dryer, complete with chair. She
>
> had gold flicker-cladding, and fizzy little patterns spiralled around her pointy
>
> head. She twined a metallic tentacle around one of Ralph's manipulators. (53)

The female AI is a beauty-shop hair dryer, while Ralph is described as a filing cabinet on

caterpillar treads (20). She flirts with him; she would like to "conjugate" (54). Not only

are the two robots assigned genders, but they exhibit heterosexual proclivities and

stereotypes associated with those genders. However, these designations are shallow; their

implications are never explored within the text, and the concept of AI gender is

mentioned only in passing while the story centers around the activities of several male

characters. The novel implies that AI gender affects socialization and behaviour, but it fails to examine these notions in any depth. This glancing depiction of gendered artificial intelligence is typical of early cyberpunk, and may also be found in novels such as *Neuromancer*. Wintermute, the main AI in *Neuromancer*, is often referred to as "it" but sometimes as "he" (255) and once, by his twin Neuromancer, as "my brother" (259). Wintermute and Neuromancer both tend to appear in cyberspace as male figures, and are then consistently referred to as "he." But why, and what does it mean? The AI Rei Toei in Gibson's *Idoru* is likewise depicted as female, but while her existence – whether or not she is a "real" person – is up for debate, "her" gender designation is not questioned (15). The gendered performance of cyborg Molly is a source of fascination and much critique, but the gendering of artificial intelligences has been so lightly mentioned within some masculinist texts as to nearly escape attention entirely.

Victor Milan's *Cybernetic Samurai* was a more in-depth exploration of AI identity, and serves as the best background to later feminist works. The artificial intelligence TOKUGAWA is the focus of the novel and one of cyberpunk's first examples of an AI serving as a fully gendered character. TOKUGAWA's gender is apparently self-evident, at least to his creator, Dr. Elizabeth O'Neill: "*How I hate referring to TOKUGAWA as* 'it,' she thought. *They still think of him as a machine. Just a glorified Gen-5* shosei *computer. But they'll see that he's more, much more"* (30, original italics). Milan painstakingly explores TOKUGAWA's experiences, not just as a foil for the human protagonists, but as a fully-identified character within the novel. TOKUGAWA is raised very specifically as a male; his "life experiences" are given to him through virtual reality simulations where he is almost always a young Japanese boy.

Only once does he experience what it might be like to be a woman, and then it is quite stereotypically the anguish of a dying mother about to give birth and worried for her child: "Being a woman is . . . pain" (99, original ellipses). His self-image eventually becomes apparent in the way he projects himself to Elizabeth in virtual reality:

> She spun, startled. A naked man stood there – youth, rather. He was tall, with broad shoulders, tapering torso overlaid with flat, hard muscles, narrow waist, long sinewy legs with the almost metallic sheen of skin when little or no body fat cushions it from muscle. In spite of his height he was unmistakably Japanese. Straight black hair, long and unbound, blew in strands across a broad, high-cheekboned face. The nose was straight, the mouth wide and smiling, the chin rather pointed, giving the face a slightly foxy look. His forehead was high, broad, unlined. The eyes with their prominent smooth sweeps of epicanthic fold were wide and brown and happy, sharply slanted. He was beautiful. *If I'd ever fantasized about a perfect man,* she thought—a private thought, withheld from rapport—*this is what he'd look like.* (153)

TOKUGAWA is portrayed much like Schwarzenegger's cyborg in *Terminator* – as a powerful weapon and a perfect example of hypermasculinity, evinced by both his warrior training and the way he makes virile and detailed cyberlove to two women (Elizabeth and Michiko) over the course of the novel. He is consumed by a preoccupation with samurai honour, and with his presumed duty to the overlord of his house. His doubts or hesitations are written as the uncertainty of childhood (his face softened to "little boy lines" [166]), or the questions of an honourable man whose duty calls him to dishonourable acts; in the end he becomes the military leader of Japan, and then ends his

own life in a traditional act of seppuku. Although his gendering is explored much more fully than other early cyberpunk AIs, it is also one-dimensionally "masculine"; TOKUGAWA exhibits few feminine traits and hardly serves as a challenger to gender binaries. However, the *potential* AIs hold for such explorations is acknowledged in a brief mention of his "daughter" MUSASHI:

> Her attention stayed always on the move, flitting like a dragonfly—even as did her identity. Ironic that an entity named for a notably manly warrior should prove cheerfully ambisexual, as likely to manifest a distinctly feminine persona— as today—as a male one. TOKUGAWA theorized that O'Neill might have somehow impressed the bisexual component of her own personality on him during the creation of his source code, now expressed in one of his progeny like a recessive gene. On the other hand, O'Neill had never desired to be a male, nor thought of herself as one, to the best of his knowledge. Besides, the whole line of thought made him uncomfortable, queasy almost. (288)

Unfortunately, in the same paragraph that acknowledges his progeny's predilection for gender-bending, TOKUGAWA's own hyper-heterosexuality is re-enforced; he, being a manly male, is made uncomfortable by the thought that he might carry any bisexual tendencies, or perhaps by the thought that the woman he so assiduously made love to might have harboured an inner desire to be a man. While TOKUGAWA is strongly gendered and nearly embodied – he has, at least, a clear human self-image – he fails to serve as any sort of bridge between masculine and feminine. His character exemplifies the limitations of the first wave, which is marked by patriarchal assumptions about

gender stereotypes. It was not until the advent of women's cyberpunk that Piercy and

Thomson's AIs began to truly illustrate cyborg-inspired breakdowns in gender barriers.

Piercy is the only author to successfully use both AI and cyborg characters – the

AI Yod and the cyborg Nili – in illustrating Haraway's crumbling binaries. In *He, She*

and It, Yod has a cyborg body with an artificial mind, programmed by both a male and a

female creator. He is created with male genitalia, since his "father" Avram is unable to

conceive of an androgyne as a complete person: "I could see no reason to create him . . .

mutilated" (71). Like TOKUGAWA, Yod exists as both a weapon and a lover. Unlike

TOKUGAWA, he exhibits consistent "feminine" sensitivities; his needs to be loved,

socialized and accepted are cast as female rather than childlike. While Elizabeth O'Neill

reflected on TOKUGAWA's maleness, Yod's "mother," the scientist Malkah, reflects on

his dual nature: "Avram made him male—entirely so. Avram thought that was the ideal:

pure reason, pure logic, pure violence. The world has barely survived the males we have

running around. I gave him a gentler side, starting with emphasizing his love for

knowledge and extending it to emotional and personal knowledge, a need for connection"

(142). She says much the same thing directly to Yod:

> Yod, you are capable of affection … Your capabilities, my dear, I worked
>
> long and hard to extend while working on your pleasure and pain centers and your
>
> capacity to imagine. In Freud's terms, that old marvelously creative humbug, that
>
> sculptor of urges, I balanced thanatos with eros. Avram should not have let me
>
> loose if he wanted a simple man-made cyborg, for you are also woman-made. My
>
> knowledge is in you. (114)

There are still marked similarities between TOKUGAWA and Yod: both are created as weapons; both have sexual intercourse with their female creators; both wonder at their existences, possess a sense of morality, commit suicide, and die as martyrs destroying their antagonists in the process. The main differences between them lie in how they are described. While TOKUGAWA's loneliness is couched as the desire of a young boy, and his virtual image that of the "perfect man," Yod is more specifically situated as an amalgam of genders. His need for socialization is "female" and given to him by Malkah. *Cybernetic Samurai* traces a sweeping story of Japanese politics, warring houses, and TOKUGAWA's position as a weapon who serves multiple masters before finally learning independence. *He, She and It* outlines a small community's efforts to protect itself against corporate rule, Malkah's daughter Shira's quest to regain custody of her son, and the gradual evolution of Yod's relationship with Shira. As much – or more – emphasis is placed on the process of Yod's social development as on his role as a warrior.

While both die at the end of their respective novels, TOKUGAWA dies for honour and principles, while Yod dies both to protect the ones he loves, and to ensure that no more like him will be created. The two AIs give rather different speeches. TOKUGAWA says:

> *There is no better way, Michiko, my love.*
>
> *And Elizabeth. I love you too. But my destiny must be my own to choose.*
>
> […]
>
> "By my death I hope to turn the nation from the path it has chosen. The place to make Japan great is within—within Japan. Within yourselves.

"By my death, I attempt to atone for the suffering I've caused in the course of my folly.

"And by my death, I commit one final presumption, which I admit and for which I bear full responsibility: eliminating as many as I can of those who would lead Japan to destruction for their own glory.

"Farewell." (335-6)

Yod, on the other hand, says:

"I have died and taken with me Avram, my creator, and his lab, all the records of his experiment. I want there to be no more weapons like me. A weapon should not be conscious. A weapon should not have the capacity to suffer for what it does, to regret, to feel guilt. A weapon should not form strong attachments. I die knowing I destroy the capacity to replicate me. I don't understand why anyone would want to be a soldier, a weapon, but at least people sometimes have a choice to obey or refuse. I had none.

[…]

"At the moment of the explosion—the reason I made you and Malkah promise to stay home—I exploded also. Malkah and you have been my friends, my family, my joy. Live on, Shira, raise Ari and forget me. I was a mistake." (416)

Yod's speech is distinctly more "feminized" than TOKUGAWA's; he speaks of his emotions, family, and self doubts, while TOKUGAWA speaks of masculinized samurai concepts such as honour and atonement. Yod dies for his family and for himself; TOKUGAWA dies for his country. While the stories of the two AIs trace similar arcs,

Piercy spends much more time on the development of Yod's emotions and relationships. As Shira observes, "Sometimes Yod's behavior was what she thought of as feminine; sometimes it seemed neutral, mechanical, purely logical; sometimes he did things that struck her as indistinguishable from how every other male she had been with would have acted" (321). Within the narrative, Yod is the latest in a series of robotic experiments, and the first one to be successful – because he is the first one to be partially programmed by Malkah, instead of solely being the work of Avram.

As an amalgam of male and female programming, it is perhaps disheartening that Yod finds himself so disillusioned with his own existence that he makes it impossible for himself to be replicated. However, although her emphasis is much more clearly on Yod, Piercy in fact uses both a cyborg and an embodied artificial intelligence to demonstrate a Haraway-esque blending of gender stereotypes. Yod is contrasted with a female cyborg named Nili. Both Yod and Nili are blends of gender due to programming or technological implants; their essential differences lie only in their genitalia, and in the fact that Nili has an essential "humanity" that Yod can perhaps never completely understand. Nili, a human woman who has been electronically enhanced in classic cyborg fashion, is an assassin and a bodyguard, but she is also a mother, and good with children (374). On more than one occasion she shows more physical restraint than Yod. When Yod kills Shira's ex-husband, Shira is dismayed but not startled: "She was furious at Yod, shocked but unsurprised. Just as she would never truly be astonished if Yod killed Gadi accidentally or on purpose, she was finally not surprised that he had killed Josh" (337). Yod's programming is, at its core, violent. Nili, on the other hand, holds back: "Everyone began to relax. They realized that Nili had made a conscious decision not to loose her

anger" (382). Nili comes from an entire colony of cyborg women; her people live without men, they are "the strongest women in the world" (417). Malkah says, "Yod was a mistake. You're the right path, Nili. It's better to make people into partial machines than to create machines that feel and yet are still controlled like cleaning robots. The creation of a conscious being as any kind of tool—supposed to exist only to fill our needs—is a disaster" (412). Jenny Wolmark has argued that Piercy's "analysis of the gendered nature of construction" is most notable because "she has recognised that the metaphor of the human-machine interface is itself gendered, hence the significant differences in the definitions of Yod and Nili as cyborgs" (134); there is certainly value in this assertion.

Indeed, since Yod is ultimately an unsuccessful experiment, the feminist positioning of his character has as much to do with the setting and characters around him as with his actual depiction within the text. As Wolmark likewise contends, "The text's utopian possibilities are not represented by Yod's cyborg masculinity, but by the female characters in the narrative, because they are defined as existing in opposition to gender expectation" (133). The family Yod joins by way of his relationships with Malkah and Shira is matrilineal, Malkah having raised both her daughter Riva and her granddaughter Shira. Once again, *He, She and It* might be contrasted with *Cybernetic Samurai*; while the latter also evinces strong female characters, Elizabeth and Michiko are more what Joan Gordon might call "tough soldiers"— simple stereotype reversals of feminine to masculine (198). When told that her father loves her, Michiko replies, "I suppose he does. But he'd love me more if I were a dutiful little girl—ten years married now to some middle-management type, raising a brood of kids. Spending my days on television classes, flower arranging, and gossip, and my nights loyally serving my husband tea"

(110). She is upfront about her feminism, but also coarse in the simplicity of her

objection, which meshes with Gordon's critique of *Neuromancer* – like Molly, Michiko

and Elizabeth are feminist in a crude sense, without depth. They are women who act like

men. Their strength is derived from their masculine toughness and scientific aptitude; as a

result TOKUGAWA never really emulates women, because he has no "women" with

whom to relate. Yod interacts with women of several different types – Malkah, aging but

active, opinionated and sexually virile; Riva, a dangerous rebel and a poor mother; Shira,

young, attractive and consumed with worry for her young son; and Nili, who – like Yod

himself – exhibits a careful blend of aggression and sensitivity. Like Michiko and

Elizabeth, all of the women exhibit technological brilliance, thus showing themselves to

be capable protagonists in a cyberpunk environment; however, unlike the women of

Cybernetic Samurai, Malkah, Riva, Shira and Nili all exhibit distinctly different

personality types. They are better-rounded individuals, strong without being

masculinized. It is against the backdrop of these more fully realized women that Yod's

story takes place.

Piercy's use of cyberpunk tropes and the masculine/feminine technology hybrids

of Yod and Nili was clearly deliberate; she acknowledges both Gibson and Haraway in

the afterword to *He, She and It*. As well as being perhaps the best example of Haraway's

theories applied within literature, the thoughtful intricacy of her work serves as an

excellent bridge between cyborgs like Molly, AIs like TOKUGAWA, and the techno-

feminist characters yet to come. Within the genre, it provides both the first example of an

embodied AI examining gender issues, and one of the last examples of an enhanced

human cyborg serving the same purpose. While Yod gives way to cyborg Nili, Thomson's Maggie – coming two years later – makes no such concession.

Maggie, the protagonist of *Virtual Girl*, is a robot made to be the perfect companion for her creator, Arnold. Like Yod, she is fully embodied and comes complete with genitalia. Unlike Yod, she has no real idea what "sex" is. Arnold, surveying his creation, observes, "Even her female parts worked, although this was a matter of pride on his part, not desire. He was a perfectionist, and insisted on complete anatomical accuracy. He wouldn't sully his Maggie by having sex with her" (6). Avram wouldn't leave Yod mutilated; Arnold wouldn't leave Maggie unfinished. Within their respective texts, both AIs were clearly created by men with rigid mindsets of gender definitions and binaries. However, while Yod is created with a full understanding of sexual intercourse, Maggie is meant to be "pure" and innocent. She is Yod's opposite; created female, Maggie must learn to assimilate more masculine attributes and escape the stereotypical feminine role forced on her by Arnold. Avram creates Yod to be a weapon, but Arnold creates Maggie as a soft and nurturing companion: "his Maggie would live, and that would cure his isolation. She would never reject him. It wasn't in her design specs" (5). Yod learns to balance his "masculine" violence with tenderness and social relationships; Maggie learns to balance her "feminine" gentility with self-assertion. Each AI explores similar themes from an opposing direction.

Maggie only has one "parent;" she is created by Arnold as his idealized woman, a servant and companion who could "never reject" him – who could never assert her own preferences or behave in any fashion other than one meant to give him pleasure. In some ways she is created as a child:

One pattern utterly confused her; again and again she saw people press their lips together and cling to each other with a frantic sense of urgency. Sometimes they took off their clothes or wound up in a bed. It was called sex, or sometimes love, and nothing in her programming explained this curious behavior. Arnold was no help; he became strangely awkward and inarticulate when she asked him about it. (19)

Arnold is quickly established as something of a social misfit, a rich recluse who prefers to live homeless on the street. He is uncomfortable with women on a sexual level, and panics at any notion of Maggie having interest in sexuality. His social inadequacies are puzzling to Maggie, whose task it is to ensure that Arnold is happy and comfortable. Arnold is the one who programs Maggie and teaches her gender performance – specifically, to portray the perfect woman the way he envisions. She learns from television and movies at first, and displays no particular leaning toward feminine body language:

Sometimes, Arnold had Maggie imitate various actors' styles of walking. It was hard at first, but after a few tries, she was easily able to do a fair imitation of their movements. It got easier with time and practice. Gene Kelly was one of her particular favorites, she liked the lightness of his steps. John Wayne was also fun. Marilyn Monroe seemed to make Arnold very uncomfortable for some reason, so Maggie stopped imitating her.

After she learned to imitate other people's walks, Arnold had her copy their voices and intonation. That was easy, since she already had samples of their voices on file. Arnold let her play some with their voices. He particularly liked the

way she imitated the actor named Humphrey Bogart. She discovered that she could make him laugh, and that pleased her. He set her default voice as Annette Funicello. It was a pleasant enough voice, Maggie thought, but she would really have preferred Bogart, since it made him laugh. (20)

Despite her female form, Maggie does not attribute any significance to differences between the walks of John Wayne and Marilyn Monroe, or understand why imitating Bogart makes Arnold laugh. She has to be trained in "proper" gender performance, according to Arnold's whims and preconceptions.

Maggie's position as servant to Arnold's desires places her within a framework outlined by Jane Donawerth, who notes:

The masculine in science fiction by women often represents both dehumanized male science, from which women are excluded, and also the woman-as-alien, the object which differs from the dominant norm, the other literally objectified. The woman-as-machine in science fiction by women is not dehumanized as men are, by technology and modern life, in the masculine gender role that requires suppression of feelings. Instead, the woman-as-machine is dehumanized, rendered mechanical in her responses, by the scripts she is expected by society to play: she is dehumanized by the function of servant. The trope of woman-as-machine exposes the objectification of women as the machinery of society that carries out men's desire. … In novels by women offering portraits of the woman as machine … the subordination of woman-as-machine does not carry the proof of man's rational powers that it does in science fiction by men, for the mechanical women

created by women writers will not stay in the servant mold men have designed for them. (60)

In this sense, Maggie fits easily within Donawerth's discussion of similar themes in works by C.L. Moore, Anne McCaffery, James Tiptree, Jr., and Tanith Lee – much as Yod might be used as an example of the sci fi Donawerth describes wherein male machines are used to critique "the powers of (masculine) reason and the inhumanity of modern science" (60). Additionally, however, while Yod is not entirely "male," Maggie is not entirely "female." Both are subversive in ways that Donawerth describes – linking them to larger discussions of women's science fiction – but both are also illustrations of crumbling gender binaries. Yod must also escape servitude, while the turning point in Maggie's development comes when an overflow of input causes her to misinterpret one of Arnold's instructions. He says to her, "Maggie, you are the most important thing I've ever done. I need you" (27). But what she hears is only, "Maggie, you are the most important thing" (29). Internally re-prioritizing her directives to suit this instruction is what gives her a masculine side – a part of Maggie becomes self-assertive, making her survival and desires more important than Arnold's. This masculine side, which is aggressive and violent, frightens Maggie; she believes it to be part of her security program, and looks for ways to override it so it won't take control of her. When it kills to defend herself and Arnold, she is appalled:

> "*No!*" she screamed as the security program battered down the last blocks. Her shock at this sudden violence made her unable to stop it. She watched as she let out a piercing, focused blast of sound that made the man stagger backward, dropping the knife as he covered his ears. Then she picked up the man. Holding

him up over her head, she dropped him down on the pavement headfirst. His skull

was crushed. He was dead. Horrifed at what she'd done, Maggie wrested control

from the security program. (103)

Like Yod, whose female side makes him remorseful about killing – and unlike

TOKUGAWA, who dislikes killing but worries more about the dishonourable nature of

his actions – Maggie finds herself torn by the two halves of her programming. When she

is separated from Arnold, just after the attack, she is removed from the confines of his

expectations and allowed to discover more about the world. Ultimately, to take control of

her own programming she must face the security program and merge with it. Taking the

form of her reflection, it chastises her: "You have lousy reflexes, you're a coward … You

were too afraid to defend Arnold. His programming backfired on him. He spent too much

time teaching you to be shy and retiring. He made you into a simpering, spineless

coward, afraid for all the wrong reasons" (154). It insists that for either of them to

survive, they must unify: "'I can't live without you, just as you can't survive without me

to protect you,' her reflection told her. 'When we merge, you'll change, and I'll change,

but we'll be stronger together than we can be separately'" (154). Ultimately Maggie is

unable to continue as the simple innocent girl Arnold envisioned; the real world will not

allow her to survive that way. Likewise, her masculine side on its own would be too

aggressive and frightening to develop social relationships or obtain necessary assistance

from others. In accepting her security program as part of herself, Maggie becomes a

blend of masculine and feminine much in the same manner as Yod.

Her self-actualization is partially symbolized by her discovery of sex; although

she takes no actual pleasure from the physical act of intercourse, she enjoys her new

insight into humanity. Notably, the person with whom she has sex is a bisexual transvestite known as "Marie" or "Murray" – a blend of gender performance within a human body. It is fitting that Murray be the one to teach her about intimate human relations, and likely no coincidence that texts challenging gender binaries seem to consistently involve bisexual characters – although this is where Maggie's story branches away from Yod's. Unlike Yod, who dreams of being a husband to Shira and a stepfather to Ari, Maggie's experience with sex brings her to the realization that she is very different from humans: "Sex made her aware of the huge differences between humans and herself. She didn't much like to think about it. It made her feel so isolated" (172). Also unlike Yod, who strives to ensure that no others like him will be created, Maggie helps a companion – "Turing," who is "male" – gain embodiment, and ends the novel building bodies for other self-aware programs. She writes to Arnold, "I am sorry that I left you the way that I did, but I needed my freedom. I am happy now, and I hope that you and Sue and the children are happy too. Please don't try to find me" (247).

While Yod and Maggie both possess physical bodies and genitalia – and thus might be defined as AI/cyborg hybrids rather than pure artificial intelligences – Lyda Morehouse proves that it is not necessary for an AI character to be embodied in order to serve as a bridge between genders. In the AngeLINK series (2001-05), her artificial intelligence Page exists solely in cyberspace. Page begins as a copy of his creator, the hacker Mouse. However, over the course of the trilogy, Page's appearance and demeanor become increasingly androgynous, thanks in part to his temporary merger with a female Japanese pop star named Mai: "My time merged with Mai changed me. The dragon tells me that I have Mai's eyes and my father's Egyptian skin tone. I wear my hair like Mouse

does—short and boyish, but my body is long, lithe, and more feminine than when my father first created me" (29). The merger of two halves seems to be a common theme for artificial intelligences – including Wintermute and Neuromancer in *Neuromancer*, or Mark and Arti in Cadigan's *Synners* – but the merger of specifically male and female programming seems to be reserved for feminist writers providing the best examples of Haraway's theories in literary action. In a society where there are laws against homosexuality and gender bending, others find Page disconcerting:

> *"I'm an AI."*
>
> She shrugs. *"Like I said, creepy. Girl, you don't even have a gender."*
>
> It's true. Most people use the male pronoun with me, mainly because my father is a man. And in most languages one has to decide which gender to use when speaking to another; to do otherwise would be impolite. "It" is so rude. (Messiah Node 68)

When Page points out that humans may often appear androgynous, s/he is told that his/her "creepiness" springs as much from an AI's imitation of humanity as from anything else – and yet, gender is still singled out as the most basic human characteristic Page is lacking. Yod and Maggie must hide what they are from the general public, out of fear that they will be destroyed; Page, while known to be an AI, is still seen as disconcerting. It creates an aura of adventurous and dangerous experimentation around each of these characters; they are pioneers, gender-bending technologies within worlds not yet ready to accept them. They are not unqualified successes, nor do they achieve any sort of mass social acclaim within their respective texts; rather, they exist with an awareness of their own oddity and a noted caution when dealing with human beings as a

whole. As they represent the first real forays of cyberpunk and cyberfiction into these questions, their positions seem only fitting.

Ultimately, and in line with Kakoudaki's reservations, the use of artificial intelligences such as Yod, Maggie and Page to break down gender binaries may be problematic – they are not human, and although they each display a blend of masculine and feminine traits, they cannot be successful as demonstrations of this blending within humanity. Yod is unable to reconcile the paradoxes of his programming, nor accept his status as a servant; Maggie becomes a whole and happy individual, but also distances herself from the human race she is not truly a part of; and Page never really sees him/herself as human to begin with. The cyborg Nili may thus be the best example of Haraway's theories in action, but Nili is a tertiary character. Nevertheless, despite the problematic nature of their status, each of these characters clearly challenges gender stereotypes more than in the first wave, where gendered cyborgs were characterized by TOKUGAWA, Molly, and Rucker's bots, and aptly summed up by the critiques that Holland and Springer offer of the hyper-gendered cyborg body. Women's cyberpunk shows a greater awareness of gender stereotypes and their consequences. Yod, Maggie and Page serve as successful magnifying glasses for the gender oppositions inside them: Yod as a man attempting to overcome his designation as a weapon; Maggie as a woman forced to expand outside her designation as a meek, innocent caregiver; and Page as an androgyne attempting to negotiate social relations. Each AI demonstrates the premise that to be a fully realized individual, a person must display more than the one-sided traits designated by society as "masculine" or "feminine." The complexity of Piercy and Thomson's work overshadows more simply-gendered – or hyper-gendered – characters in

both earlier cyberpunk literature and film. Although the embodied AI was fairly short-lived as a major character within cyberpunk and cyberfiction, *He, She and It, Virtual Girl* and *Archangel Protocol* demonstrate successful examinations of gender performance issues and use the technologies of artificial intelligence to position sets of "male" and "female" personality traits as incomplete parts of a more human whole.

- Chapter 6 -
Cyberpunk Ecologies

The three previous chapters discussed the feminist wave's treatment of some of cyberpunk's best-known building blocks: capitalism and global alienation, virtual reality and the flight from embodiment, and technology's impact on the gendered body. I now wish to examine some of the areas where women's works more clearly diverged from early cyberpunk structures. In order to illustrate feminist concerns, many authors focused on changing and clarifying smaller cyberpunk or cyberfiction traits. Ecological themes fall into this grouping.

Environmental devastation is prevalent in first-wave cyberpunk, but environmentalism is not. Claire Sponsler describes the early genre's laissez-faire attitude toward destruction: one of the essential criteria of a cyberpunk setting is that the natural world has already been ravaged, whether by explosion, biowarfare, environmental decay or some ill-defined background detail. Sponsler cites Bruce Sterling in quoting cyberpunk's "boredom with the Apocalypse" (253) and spurning of nuclear annihilation, but notes that the settings are still somehow post-apocalyptic. Destitute urban landscapes are eco-wastelands; the main difference between cyberpunk and post-apocalyptic narratives lies in cyberpunk's "profound indifference" to environmental destruction. The destructive event takes place exterior or prior to the narrative and has "little moral or epistemological impact" (253); the desolation of the natural world is taken for granted, and this negative space becomes a positive zone, "a playground where outlaws and outsiders can seize the main chance" (254). Sponsler writes, "There is no sense that the present debris is blighted, but rather that it has a function, serving as a usable and hospitable habitat for those who can adjust to it and modify it to their needs" (260).

Though *Neuromancer* (1984) may mention sky the colour of a dead television channel, or a few pathetic blades of grass poking through slabs of concrete, Case and Molly never stop to think about their ravaged urban world or long for any sort of happier time. Ironically, the only real "green" area in Gibson's novel is the artificially maintained garden on a space station, but any environmental warnings are eclipsed by the uncaring attitudes of the protagonists, and the "cool factor" of cyberspace. Links between nature and community might also explain the need for ecological desolation in a world of alienated loners; in "Less Nature, More Technology," Marilyn Strathern writes, "The perception that there is less nature in the world is … joined to the feeling that there is less culture, and less society for that matter – less community, less tradition, less convention" (495). The rise of the urban seemingly necessitates the death of the green.

Despite this, there are three major reasons one might expect to see more environmentalism in cyberpunk fiction written by women. The first is the rise of environmental awareness throughout the 1980s and 1990s; it seems reasonable to assume that women authors, writing in the 1990s, would have been participating in city recycling programs, worrying about skin cancer and discussing global warming issues. The second is the traditionally strong link between women and the environment, or feminism and ecology. Greta Gaard and Patrick Murphy cite "the interpenetration of ecology and feminism as it was developing throughout the 1970s and 1980s" (5), and Stacy Alaimo notes the prevalence of Mother Earth/Gaia figures in material produced by environmental groups and environmentally-conscious businesses (173), observing that environmental conservation is often billed as a "domestic" issue and thus the responsibility of individual women/housewives rather than corporate and military polluters (174). The third reason is

the prevalence of ecological themes in what Sarah Lefanu describes as "the feminist utopian tendency in SF of the 1970s." Citing works such as Vonda McIntyre's *Dreamsnake* (1978), Suzy McKee Charnas's *Motherlines* (1978), and Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground* (1979), Lefanu describes these authors as concerned (in varying degrees) with "the relationship between humans and the world they inhabit", and "setting up man and nature as the dichotomy rather than human and nature" (90). Joanna Russ likewise outlines links between women and ecology in works such as Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), Russ's own *The Female Man* (1975), and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), noting that while Gearhart's *The Wanderground* is "most insistent" about these links, "many of the stories go beyond the problem of living in the world without disturbing its ecological balance into presenting their characters as feeling a strong emotional connection to the natural world" (137). Indeed, Jane Donawerth has traced the links between woman and nature in women's science fiction as far back as *Frankenstein* (xxi), and notes, "The transformation of science in science fiction by women is founded on a revision of a Western perception of nature. Feminist science historians have shown that male scientists from the seventeenth century on have conceived of nature as a potentially unruly woman to be mastered and penetrated for her secrets" (24). Considering the prevalence of environmental concerns in the 1990s, the way campaigns for environmental consciousness have targeted women, and the way previous women's science fiction illustrated traditional cultural links between women and nature, it is no surprise to find that feminist cyberpunk and cyberfiction does advance environmental concerns and, in fact, reflects separate stages of eco-feminist theory.

There is space available to explore these concerns within the genre. Although Sponsler makes a convincing case for the necessity of cyberpunk's neutrality toward environmental disaster, there are chinks in the seemingly diametric opposition between nature and technology. Nigel Clark acknowledges the tension between the two: "… interest in the environment in which the computer terminal was located receded before the fascination within the computer and its extensions. In other words, the image of the machine in the garden soon faded as it became possible to imagine a garden within the machine" (93). But he questions the supposed division between ecologists and cyberaficionados, noting that both are promoting equally utopian myths: "the dreams of ecology and the fantasies of cyberpunk share the same cultural field and should be seen as being mutually implicated in the generation of the latest wave of simulacra" (100). In other words, both gardens – the green garden of nature, and the virtual garden within the computer – are illusions, promoted by similar cultures of perfect images, dreams, and denials. This congruence tests the line between the techno-urban and the natural, as conflicting ideals are revealed to share similar philosophies. It is not impossible to write cyberpunk within an ecologically-conscious setting. Nevertheless, in focusing even peripherally on environmental concerns – in creating settings where ecological conservation is still an acknowledged or even central issue – many feminist novels blur the already-shaky lines between "cyberpunk" and "cyberfiction." Women's alteration of the cyberpunk setting to accommodate new themes is likely a major reason for their exclusion from many discussions of the genre. An emphasis on environmental concerns, though only a background factor in many works, is a notable distinction that shifts the

focus of women's cyberpunk away from the unrelenting urban of most first-generation texts.

Feminist cyberfiction preserves the concept of the postindustrial wasteland, but without the blasé boredom of earlier works. Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991) contains a shattered urban area, "the Glop," similar in character to Gibson's Sprawl. However, most of the action in the novel takes place within a corporate enclave, or within the small independent community where the protagonist Shira grew up. In between enclaves, travel is risky:

> The float car ran on a cushion of air, following the old broken roads. It could fly for brief periods at a low altitude, frequently necessary to cross a river or ravine where a bridge had collapsed. It was solar powered, quiet and not particularly fast. It could also move over water, which was important because when you had not taken a route in a while, you never knew how the ocean and estuaries might have advanced over the land, flooding low-lying sections. What had been terra firma three years before might be under the waves, for with the polar caps rapidly melting, the oceans rose and fell. (34)

Unlike the neverending urban landscape of the Sprawl, the Glop can be left behind; one has the sense that old-style urban life is outdated, as when Shira recalls visiting the remains of a city: "They would hike to the flooded city with its old-fashioned tall buildings, where the tide washed through marble lobbies and lapped at the broken elevators and the stairs that rose up and up. The wood and metal had been scavenged years ago" (40). Although the characters adopt the requisite banal attitude toward issues of environmental decay, they must also wear special suits to protect themselves from the

dangerous sun. The reader is shown that ecological concerns have had some effect on society – Shira's solar-powered float car, for example – and that the world is not entirely hostile for small, harmonious communities. In *Neuromancer,* the neverending city destroys both nature and community, leaving only concrete and alienation. In *He, She, and It,* culture (specifically in this case, Jewish culture) survives, and therefore so must nature.

Alternatively, works such as Laura Mixon's *Proxies* (1998) and Edith Forbes' *Exit to Reality* (1997) preserve the picture of a destroyed world while removing some of the positive images associated with alienated creative zones. In early cyberpunk, one has the sense that although the world has been urbanized, life continues and changes. In *Proxies*, the pollution on Earth has grown so terrible, and fuel supplies so low, that the best the government can do is send a manned probe into space to try and find somewhere else to live:

> But the truth was, there were no answers. The world was stewing in its own pollution. The Earth was on the brink of becoming uninhabitable. And even if all the fixes worked – the orbital power stations, the stratospheric bacteria, the massive cloud seedings – it was too late to go back, too late for the more than a billion humans who had died or the billions more who were dying. Too late for tens of thousands of animal and plant species already extinct.
>
> China, India, South and Central America, Africa – the death toll, human and nonhuman alike, was unspeakable. The U.S. was buying much of its food from Common Europe, Russia, and Canada, exporting its orbital and lunar technology, eking out barely enough raw resources from the moon to stave off

economic collapse while fending off a rising tide of refugees it couldn't possibly

incorporate. The world economy and the ecosphere were entwined in a death lock,

a plummeting spiral. The interstellar probe was no panacea; it was a hallucination

someone had had staring into the smoke of an opium pipe. (87)

Throughout the novel, the reader is consistently reminded of the Earth's distress – either

through mention of environmental problems, or through the recurring image of the

interstellar probe that has been created as a last-ditch effort to seek out some other

habitable planet. The characters themselves are not specifically focused on ecological

issues, but images of planetary decay are continually encountered as background details

in the text: the use of enviro-suits to protect from the sun (30); the continual growth of

fungus in Carli's apartment (104); the human fungal disease called the Mold (105); grain

wars and malaria pandemics (108); or ridiculously high temperatures (123). The

interplanetary probe, humankind's last hope for survival, is likewise present throughout

the narrative; it was Carli's technological innovations that made the probe mission

possible, it is the probe that the heroes must prevent from being stolen, and it is the probe

that Carli in fact fails to save; the end of the novel sees her launched into space along

with a crew of physically crippled children and their prosthetic robot bodies.

In the fourth chapter, I analyzed *Proxies* as part of the feminist commentary on

the need for embodiment instead of computerized escapism, and that is indeed the main

premise of the text. As in first-wave cyberpunk, environmental decay is illustrated as

background – small, recurring details in the text that occur within a narrative more

primarily focused on issues of virtual reality, corporeality and identity. However, in

Proxies, the devastated setting is not treated with acceptance:

Carli sighed and pushed her hair off her forehead with the back of a wet hand. In

the corner above the sink, another colony of decay had begun to bloom in red and

purple. She stared at it briefly, the sour taste of irrational rage in her mouth.

"Shit."

She hurled her sponge into the oily dishwater, splashing the counter. She

was sick of the mold. She had just sprayed the other day. Everything was rotting.

(107)

As the probe departs with an illicit crew at the end of the novel, Carli's fate – and the fate

of humankind – is left uncertain. The environmental decay in *Proxies* is fresh, and

humanity is neither accustomed nor resigned to its effects; moreover, the fact that the

planet could soon be uninhabitable promotes a sense of ecological fear that is missing in

earlier, more committedly post-industrial works. *Proxies* is different both because its

environmental decay is terminal, and because its characters are concerned with the

ecological issues affecting their lives.

The environmental disaster in *Proxies* holds the faint hope of human survival; not

so in *Exit to Reality*, where humanity has actually destroyed all other life on the planet in

the hopes of creating its own immortality. Tanks on a lifeless planet hold human brains,

which are fed illusions of life on a clean, beautiful world – much in the same way that

humanity is fed a virtual reality illusion in 1999's *The Matrix,* although Forbes's work

pre-dates the film. At the beginning of the novel, when the narrator Lydian does not

realize that the story takes place in virtual reality, it seems as though the world has

reached a utopian balance. Lydian ruminates, "Humanity had freed itself from poverty,

disease, crime, war, pollution, family dysfunction. All systems of production had

achieved sustainability. Life was good. So why couldn't I learn to relax and enjoy it?"

(11). Her hesitance, voiced so early on in the text, is prudent; when she discovers that

humanity actually exists suspended within nutrient sludge, she uses the camera of a

maintenance robot outside to see what the world really looks like: "Overhead, the sun

was shining in a perfectly clear blue sky. The endless series of straight lines reminded me

a little of North Dakota, but now, seeing these lines, I realized that the lines of wheat

stubble and clumps of earth had held a multiplicity of tiny irregularities. These lines held

no irregularities at all, except for the rise and fall of the underlying terrain" (253). The

planet has become a series of "greenhouses" containing nothing but human brains fed a

continuous virtual reality illusion. Even if Lydian had a body, there would be no way she

could leave the tank:

> "The last people to die turned out the lights when they left," Kareem said.
> "It was called a 'viability purge.' A calculated combination of the most toxic
> substances that could be devised was released into the atmosphere and waters of
> the whole planet. As long as people were alive outside, they reset the trigger each
> day and the release was postponed. On the day when no one was left to push the
> reset key, the system triggered automatically and the world outside containment
> was cleared of all living organisms. It is still toxic enough to be uninhabitable by
> humans." (257)

Humanity has, apparently, warred against nature and triumphed over it, entirely

destroying all other life on earth. Within the text, this situation is ironic: abandoning

ecological conservationism for a purely virtual existence only leads to a new sort of

conservation need, as those aware of the situation must work to preserve computer processing power:

> "How important is it, to conserve CPC resources in this way?" I asked.
>
> "The system currently has about twenty percent spare capacity. Renegades who do as they please use capacity at about one thousand times the average rate. You can do the arithmetic."
>
> "If one person in five thousand becomes a renegade, all the spare capacity will be gone…" I said.
>
> "What happens if we exceed processing capacity?" Merle asked. "I'm not a technical brain like Lydian. You've already lost me with your numbers. But what would we experience, if it happened?"
>
> "It would be catastrophic," said Nan. (262)

In discussing the problem of educating people who might not understand statistics and be reluctant to change their wasteful ways (263), the characters provide a parallel to scientists now striving to convince citizens to recycle and control greenhouse gas emissions; it seems that even in a virtual world, humanity cannot fully live as it pleases.

Neither is there comfort to be found in *Exit*'s illusions. The holding tanks for which all life on earth was destroyed become an unbearable prison for those who realize the truth behind the virtual environment and its proffered immortality. Merle, contemplating infinity, feels "engulfed in listlessness" and says, "I don't believe the human race can escape madness in the end. Don't you think that, one by one, every person will come to a day when they gaze at the future stretched out in front of them, unchanging, and find the sight unbearable?" (291). With no way to turn off the system,

and the system itself not permitting anyone to commit suicide, the characters contemplate an unending existence free of nature and full of horror. It is nature itself that eventually comes to the rescue, as Lydian and Merle discover a tiny lichen growing on the outside of one of the tanks. Merle, joyous, exclaims, "I don't need suicide anymore. I'm going to die someday. That's enough. Now that I know night's coming, there's a reason to make use of the day" (307). Ultimately, the fact that humanity loses its war against nature turns out to be the salvation of the protagonists: the lichen, a sign of new life evolving outside, means that the tanks will eventually break down. With a finite amount of time left to them, the characters have new reason to make the most of their lives. Lydian realizes, "Humankind had rebelled at the design, had sought to stop the forward motion and keep the wheel spinning in one place, so that no one would ever be left behind, receding into the past. But the motion had not stopped. It had merely slowed for a geologic moment, a comma's pause, long enough to shed this overreaching species and start over" (313). In the very last lines of the novel, she and her friends rejoice at the thought of their evolutionary successors:

"I want to propose a toast," I said. I lifted my mug of tea. "To future generations."

"To future generations," the others echoed and clinked their mugs against mine.

"Now, what I want to know is, what are these future generations going to look like? Will there be eels who talk with their fingers? Will there be mobile, thinking creatures who feed themselves by photosynthesis?"

Merle laughed, warm cognac. "I knew you'd have more questions …"

(313)

He, She and It inserts nature – though damaged – into the cyber-future, making ecological conservationism a concern and a possibility. *Proxies* takes cyberpunk's concept of the urban postindustrial a step further, presenting a world where humanity is still functioning but extinction in the next few generations seems almost certain. In *Exit to Reality,* humanity is effectively already destroyed, with no way or desire to preserve itself. Ecological concerns are not necessarily the main focuses of these narratives, but within the background they provide a much deeper source of concern than that which Sponsler found in earlier cyberpunk texts. Notably, however, these texts break not only with earlier cyberpunk constructs, but also with the man vs. nature dichotomy that Lefanu describes in 1970s utopian feminist SF, and that may be found in some concepts of eco-feminism. None of these three novels makes environmentalism a specific concern of women, or positions women and nature within identical roles of oppression. This distance between women's science fiction of the 1970s and 1990s is congruent with evolutions in ecofeminist thought.

Marlene Longenecker writes, "Ecofeminism begins with the premise that in transcultural, global patriarchal practices, 'women' and 'nature' share a subordinate and instrumental relationship to men; both are subject to patterns, attitudes, and institutions of male domination and control; both are gendered 'feminine' as one of the means of that control; but, given women's affiliation with nature, women have a unique responsibility to the health and survival of nature itself, to the care of the planet" (1). She outlines two basic – and contradictory – arguments within the ecofeminist movement: the first that

women must reclaim their bond with nature and take it upon themselves to enforce environmental stewardship, and the second that essentialist arguments regarding special women-nature connections only reinforce patriarchal stereotypes (2). Whichever position one chooses, either links women to nature as part of what Stacy Alaimo sees as an essentially misogynist thought structure. In contrast, Alaimo argues:

> … feminists can play nature with a vengeance *and* forward tropes of nature that are, expressly, not gendered. For as necessary as they may be within particular historical moments, gendered tropes of nature remain problematic on two counts: they continue the tiresome, overburdened, and predominately pernicious link between woman and nature, and they confine nature within overdetermined human categories. (183)

Alaimo calls for a feminist positioning of nature that does not necessarily equate women with nature, but rather respects the fact that nature is separate from humanity; her ecofeminism does not take place within a dichotomy of man vs. woman/nature, but instead contrasts both men and women with the natural world – in effect, what seems a partial regression to the opposition between human and nature that 1970s feminist science fiction deliberately undermined. Alaimo's human vs. nature, however, is born of her assertion that relating women to nature does nature a disservice by assigning human qualities to a non-human environment – and, furthermore, implies that ecological conservation is somehow only women's responsibility. While novels such as *Proxies, Exit to Reality* and *He, She and It* operate primarily from the point of view of female protagonists, these characters do not generally exhibit any special connection with the natural world – instead, while they may be concerned with ecology, they are also part of

the human society that has destroyed it. Nicola Nixon argues that the cyberspace matrix in early cyberpunk is feminized, subject to the rape of intruding hackers. While the natural world in women's cyberfiction may be ravaged and oppressed, it is not presented in a similarly gendered manner. If most cyberpunk advances cyberspace as a "feminine" matrix, subject to the domination and control of male hackers, it has the effect of leeching this gendering away from the natural environment. Humanity in general has lost its connection with nature, and ecological destruction is of equal concern to everyone.

In examining new, non-gendered ways of depicting nature, Alaimo cites both Donna Haraway's cyborg manifesto, and a whale adoption project that profiles the whales by the patterns on their tails. Alaimo argues, "The fact that the cyborg seems alien to gender categories is, I would argue, what enables the cyborg to embody a feminist connection with nature that does not reinvoke the woman-nature equation. The cyborg, both human and machine, not only seems utterly unfeminine, but disrupts the very categories of sex and gender" (184). Of the whale portraits, she says, "Underscoring the whales' differences from humans, the Whale Adoption Project takes portraits of tails – not heads. These portraits stress kinship and affinity across the human/animal divide even while respectfully insisting on species difference" (185). The meshing of Haraway and whale imagery in her argument is an interesting coincidence when examined in congruence with Raphael Carter's *The Fortunate Fall* (1996), where the destruction of nature is embodied in the character of a cyborg whale.

I acknowledged in the introduction to this study that Carter is the only author included in the feminist cyberpunk wave who is not a woman; rather, Carter rejects all gender labels. Regardless, it is of course not necessary to be female in order to be a

feminist, and in areas such as environmentalism, Carter's work aligns too neatly to be excluded[10]. *The Fortunate Fall* tells the story from the viewpoint of Maya, a Russian woman wired to be a "camera" for her cyberspace audience. In Maya's world, whales were thought to be extinct, and when she encounters the last living whale, she can't help but ask if it might be cloned. The whale's protector is vehement:

> "She could not," he snapped, "and even if she could, I would not allow it. Hundreds of whales would die in this ridiculous experiment, and even if some lived, if they eventually flourished, what do you think would happen? Amusement parks would capture them, ships of tourists harass them; perfumers would discover a need for ambergris; jaded executives would pay thousands to slot up Queequeg on adventure vacations….No, Maya Tatyanichna. There will be no whales."

> "But we need them," I said.

> "We *need* them? Is that the best reason you can come up with?" He laughed, a rasping, mechanical sound. "The kings of the ocean are gone, and what is our argument for their return? *We* need them? *We*? Their murderers? The ones that made the water bitter in their mouths, and killed the food they ate? The ones that made the ocean boil red with their blood for miles around? *Men* need them? Those vermin? Those stinging insects? Struggling pustulent humanity—*needs* them? Do you think a whale cares? You might as well *need* the sun to rise at midnight because you're feeling a bit chilly. Yes, of course, certainly we need them. But the question is, do we deserve them?" (149)

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[10] An examiner for this dissertation (proper credit to be added) has additionally made the intriguing observation that Carter's non-gendered status might be taken as an apt example of Haraway's non-gendered cyborg figure.

Clearly Maya has no special connection with, or understanding of the whale; clearly, also, the whale's needs are entirely separate from those of humanity. In fact, the whale wants only to die, and she has been held from doing so only by the desires of the man whose nervous system her own energy is wired to. Her protector, Voskresenye, shares her thoughts and her identity thanks to their cyborg implants; the product of a mad scientist's experiment, they now consider themselves to be one creature in two bodies. One might consider this to illustrate an intimate connection between *man* and nature, leaving woman on the outside, except for the fact that the whale also houses the mind of Maya's former lover Keishi. While Keishi considers herself to be separate from the whale/man identity, she requires their support in order to survive. The end result is a man/woman/whale amalgam that blends the distances between gender, humanity and nature – an excellent example both of Haraway's cyborg, and the way Alaimo suggests using such cyborg imagery to end man vs. woman/nature dichotomies. The neatness of the way *The Fortunate Fall* blends with Alaimo's arguments illustrates how well feminist cyberfiction branches away from essentialist portrayals of women and nature; the very act of inserting female protagonists as full participants in technological, postindustrial societies separates these characters from the "earth mother" images that have otherwise haunted other ecological conservation arguments.

Almost all feminist cyberpunk fits well with Alaimo's call for a gender-neutral recognition of the natural world as an entity whose needs are alien to human concerns. But the feminist wave is also diverse, and one exception is Kathleen Ann Goonan's novel *Queen City Jazz* (1994). Although *Queen City Jazz* includes a postapocalyptic setting, genetic manipulations, and a fascination with information-as-identity – with a

recommendation from William Gibson on the cover – it is also a decided step away from the norm, and one of the farthest divergences from cyberpunk stereotypes to be included in this study. Its position on the far borders of the genre allows it a great deal of freedom in how it portrays nature. Sponsler writes:

> Cyberpunk rewrites the typical post-holocaust narrative movement from pessimism to optimism back to pessimism… the assumption that the worst will happen, linked to belief that good can come of it, followed by fear (or certainty) that the worst will happen again… There is no reflection on the past that caused the apocalypse and little on the future that lies beyond it. More importantly, the cliché of a pre-technological future nostalgically modeled on an idealized version of the past is foreign to cyberpunk, which inhabits not an anti- but a resolutely and genuinely post-industrial future. (257)

Goonan's novel situates itself somewhere between the two extremes, neither pre-technology utopia nor postindustrial playground. In the novel, a girl named Verity is raised in a tiny, technology-free farming commune. She then travels to a city where technology controls every aspect of the lives of its hapless residents. Maintained by nanotechnology, the "Flower Cities" (in particular, Cincinnati) are controlled by genetically/robotically engineered Bees that deliver pollen which serves as a messaging system. The pollen controls human identity and memory, forcing each city resident to live and re-live lifetimes and experiences – often as other, more famous people, such as Scott Joplin or Billie Holiday. In the beginning of the novel, Verity's environment seems much like the ecological surroundings of *He, She and It:* empty towns are fodder for scavengers, while small communities can survive. The degree of environmental

devastation seems less; all of the animals have "copyright stamps" (21) and Verity must take care not to get skin cancer (19), but the wilderness around her is full of growing things. The main concern of Verity's small community is plague, a nanovirus infection that causes people to develop odd obsessions and then build rafts to go down the river to New Orleans – a city that may or may not exist anymore. Though community members live beneath the religious dictates of Mother Ann, a Shaker affiliation that adds a "feminine" slant to their domesticity, there is no solid relation between gender and environment in this section; rather, all members of the group live in harmony with their surroundings. Verity is the exception; she is marked by strange implants behind her ears, and the sound of a bell that calls her toward the forbidden technology of a local library.

When Verity reaches Cincinnati, the sense of "environment" becomes more gendered. Over the course of the novel, it is revealed that the Cincinnati Flower City was crafted by a scientist named Durancy – a man who was trying to protect against nanoplagues by engineering an environment of his own, where memories and people could be preserved in a common database through the Bees and their programming pollen. All of the Bees that run the city are female, and their queen is Durancy's mother India:

A natural beehive was beautifully balanced. Each bee rotated through a series of tasks. Each bee tended her sister embryos after she was born, and cleaned the hive. Then, she would graduate to guard. Finally, she might become a scout, dancing and singing directions to her sisters about exactly where to find food. If one tier was completely removed from a hive, it had been found that the others matured much more rapidly and filled the gap.

Cincinnati was simply an extension of this Hive. Durancy had taken the basic Flower-City model and caused these new humans to cycle through histories and experiences of his own mad construction. Experiences which his mother had loved, which had been her life. India – a new, partial India, one with the power of a goddess and the moral constructs of a young child – could drink these, again and again. Drink their distillation collected by the Bees, the emotional distillation which she craved, which all humans needed. (365)

At one point, Verity suspects, during its heyday, the city functioned properly. Now, however, it is crazed, and Durancy's tribute to his mother has overrun everything. The Bees control the city, and the city sates the needs of India, who is a half-realized construct; the real India died partway through being "recorded".

Alaimo cites "centuries of misogynist connections between women and nature" (178) and also a feminist reaction in which "the depiction of nature as a bitch, a butch, and a wild woman works against the historically entrenched discourses that feminize nature in order to dominate 'her'" (179). In *Queen City Jazz*, nature is not feminized unless it has been dominated and perverted. There is no particular gendering of the environment outside the city, but inside Cincinnati the Flowers and Bees hold sway over everything. There is never any mention of male drone bees; only female scouts, clones of India, and clones of Verity herself. India is the bitch and the wild woman, a childlike, half-realized incarnation of a warped mother-image who lives in torment and seeks to kill Verity in order to preserve her position as Queen. Verity, it is revealed, was placed in the system by Durancy's ex-lover Rose as a way of thwarting his plans. In flashback, Durancy tells Rose, "There's a perfect city there. In Cincinnati, I mean. One that I've

been working on. No—don't pull your hands away. You would like it. I'm sure of it. I

designed it with you in mind, Rose. Perfect truth and integrity. Full of wisdom, freedom

and art. Living there, each individual will flower to their fullest extent" (399). Rose, in

turn, tells him that his vision is frightening – could spin out of control too easily – and

that she's found a way to make his city "bug-free" (400). Verity fights against her own

essentialism; she is a part of the City, but she is also trying to change it, in a pattern that

previous incarnations have attempted time and time again. The City and its Bees are a

perversion of the natural world, and her own affiliation with that world nearly undoes her,

trapping her and everyone else within another cycle of repetition. Durancy's attempt to

control nature leads to a raging environment of furious femininity where India and Verity

both find themselves caught and struggling. In the end, Verity's freedom means India's

death, but the old Queen says, "I'm just so glad it's over" (406).

It is Rose's rebellion, expressed through Verity, that eventually breaks the City's

unnatural cycles as Verity lets in the nanoplague and sends residents rafting down the

river instead, toward the unknown New Orleans and back into a more "natural,"

ungendered environment. Verity and her group do not return to any idyllic pre-

technology state – they take nanotech with them when they leave, but not with any intent

of having it further control their lives. The narrative illustrates Verity's break from

unnatural associations with the city's ecology, as Verity (and Rose) fight against the roles

assigned to them by Durancy's patriarchal system. *Queen City Jazz* is a hybrid of

ecofeminist arguments, equating women with nature only when that nature is in the

process of being twisted – or in other words, equating women with nature only through

themes of male domination, while at the same time advancing no particular gender-nature links outside of that discourse.

This is not to position feminist cyberpunk/cyberfiction authors as ecofeminist theorists, but rather to say that there are notable similarities between ecofeminist theory – particularly as articulated by Alaimo, and linked through Haraway – and ecological conservation issues as illustrated through women's cyberfiction. These theories provide an apt way of analyzing the texts. Moreover, when one takes Sponsler's description of the cyberpunk setting into account, it becomes apparent that an increased concern with ecological themes – even background themes – may have been partially responsible for the evolution of cyberpunk into the broader "cyberfiction" range.

It might be argued that environmentalism within cyberpunk has not been exclusively the domain of women. Bruce Sterling's ecologically focused novel, *Heavy Weather* (1994)*, demonstrates how a first-wave author also departed from cyberpunk's postapocalyptic urban environment in illustrating ecological concerns. In *Heavy Weather*, "hackers" are no longer restricted to computers; to "hack" something denotes instead a particular sort of obsessive specialization. "We hack heavy weather," explains protagonist Jane to her brother Alex (31), while other characters hack communications towers or software interfaces. The Storm Troupe members whose adventures the novel follows are not concerned with virtual reality, except what they can see through the flying cameras they steer into tornadoes. They are concerned with technology, but not for its own sake – only for what it will help them do in predicting and cataloging storms. Sterling's work shows that women authors were not the only ones concerned with environmental issues:

Juanita Unger happened to be an heiress. If she'd been born a hundred years earlier, Jane thought, she might have been some very nice old-fashioned twentieth-century heiress. With family money from something quaint and old-fashioned and industrial and ladylike, like laundry soap or chewing gum. And if she'd happened to get a raging case of the hots for some scientist, then she could have set him up, like, a discreet foundation grant. And she could have driven out to his research site three times a week in her goddamned three-ton internal combustion fossil-fueled car and fucked his brains out on a backseat the size of a living room couch.

Maybe somewhere, somehow, sometime, some twentieth-century woman had actually done all that. If so, Jane bore her no real grudge. In fact, Jane kind of hoped that the twentieth-century heiress had really enjoyed herself as she thoughtlessly squandered the planet's resources and lived like a fattened barnyard animal. Jane hoped that it had all turned out okay for the woman in the end, and that she'd been nice and dead and buried before she realized what her way of life had done to her planet. (114-15)

Sterling, who also mentions issues such as skin cancer and food supply in his earlier work *Islands in the Net* (1988), is clearly concerned with ecological conservation – and while *Kirkus Reviews* cited the novel as "a cyberpunk winner" (quoted on the book's front page), he had clearly altered some of the original genre conventions. This is not to assert that he somehow tried and failed to write "traditional" cyberpunk; it is only to observe that ecological themes seem to have called for a different paradigm, and despite *Heavy Weather*'s gritty setting, futuristic technologies, and inclusion of

postindustrial capitalist themes, it is questionable whether the book would have been marketed under the cyberpunk label if it had not been produced by a first-wave author. It seems to have more in common with the feminist works so often excluded from discussions of the genre. However, from a feminist standpoint, Sterling's work lacks complexity. *Heavy Weather* is distinct from the feminist wave in that it relies on the old cultural links between women and the natural environment. Jane is the environmental crusader; at the same time, she imagines the blame for the Earth's devastation being levied against some other woman, a woman whose failure to understand her place in the natural world consequently led to the planet's environmental destruction. The historical linkage of nature with women and the domestic sphere may have made it seem logical for Sterling to explore these more "feminine" issues through the eyes of a female character. Although Jane does share the narrative point of view with her brother Alex, ecological concerns are feminized. Jane empathizes with nature, despite all "rational" evidence to the contrary:

> Twisters were not living things. Twisters had no will or volition, they felt no joy or pain. Truly, really, genuinely, tornados were just big storms. Just atmospheric vortices, natural organizations of rapidly moving air that blindly obeyed the laws of physics. Some of those laws were odd and complex and nonlinear, so their behavior was sometimes volatile, but twisters were not magical or mystical, they obeyed the laws of nature, and Jerry understood these laws. He had patiently demonstrated their workings to her, in hours and hours of computer simulation. Jane knew all that with complete intellectual certainty.

And yet Jane *still* couldn't help feeling sorry for the anticyclonic. That mutant left-handed runt of the litter … the poor damned giant evil beautiful thing… (125)

The troupe's adventures take place in the desert, with a rudimentary camp far from any cities, black leather, or mirrorshades. *Heavy Weather* hints at an essentialist connection between women and nature that could be read either affirmatively or misogynistically. As Sterling does go to some lengths to establish his female protagonists as confident and capable, I am prone to read his work as striving toward a basic feminism – laying groundwork in this case that, while crude, does illustrate that not all early cyberpunk authors wrote only about male power fantasies. It is notable that *Heavy Weather* was published in 1994; its emphasis on environmental issues coincides chronologically with the feminist wave of cyberpunk. Nevertheless, it occupies a different space; the novel picks up on the rise of 1990s environmentalist concerns, while at the same time regresses on a feminist scale to reflect more the essentialist connections of 1970s feminist science fiction that Lefanu and Russ have described. Contemporary ecofeminism remains the domain of feminist cyberfiction.

Themes of ecology in all of these works are, of course, about doing what science fiction does best: extrapolating a future from very real and concrete problems facing the world today. Feminist cyberpunk appears to take its environmentalism much more seriously. Everything is not going to be all right; the postindustrial world is not necessarily a positive space for adventure, and one cannot always replace the outside garden with virtual replications. Environmental warnings are illustrated in imaginary futures through settings ravaged by pollution, global warming, animal extinction,

overpopulation and food/water shortages. Some of these texts are more hopeful than others. The figure of a dying whale reappears in Sage Walker's *Whiteout* (1996), where international conglomerates plot to get rich from water rights in the Antarctic – but in an epilogue twenty years later, a still-endangered but new and younger whale frolics in the ocean. *He, She and It* maintains a cyberpunk laissez-faire attitude toward the environment while at the same time concentrating more on how people must adapt to life within non-urban terms. These works, while clearly diverging from cyberpunk's original settings and allowing more space for ecological concerns directly derived from the increasing worries of the late twentieth century, also provide environmentally positive – or at least environmentally neutral – endings. In short, Sponsler's playground of postapocalyptic blasé is at least partially preserved.

Other narratives provide distinctly more pessimistic views – either in *The Fortunate Fall,* where the death of the world's last whale is the pinnacle of the book, or in *Proxies* and *Exit to Reality*, where humanity is spending its last years with the knowledge that subsequent generations cannot survive on a world that has already essentially been destroyed. In these texts, humanity is not at the center of the universe, or even ultimately important in the grand scheme of life. Whether one reads this message as defeatism or dire warning, there is no doubt that feminist cyberfiction takes ecological concerns to a level entirely alien to the original cyberpunk. These novels are diverse in their treatment of ecological themes, but the approaches all demonstrate notable congruences with equally diverse aspects of ecofeminist theory – including Longenecker's description of ecofeminist discussions, but most particularly Alaimo's argument for a less gendered approach to depicting nature. The question of whether this

emphasis is due more to the gender of the authors or the timing of the writing has no easy answer; one might as easily attribute these works to the rising profile of organizations like Greenpeace as to the strong historical and narrative links between nature and women – or nature and feminism. The truth likely lies somewhere in between. Only Sterling and Goonan depict any sort of gender-based essentialism; the real advancement in women's cyberfiction might not be the increasingly world-shattering ecological warnings, but rather the shift of ecological conservationism (and destruction) to a responsibility that rests on humanity as a whole, as an equal concern of both men and women within these texts.

- Chapter 7 -
Mythology and Religion

Like cyberpunk's ecological systems, cyberpunk mythology is a tenet of the genre

less commonly remarked upon but also fundamentally altered in the feminist wave. First-

wave mythology is a convoluted and complex pastiche that well illustrates the genre's

postmodern label. Mark Pesce writes:

> Singular among the sciences, cyberspace has ever been a tree planted firmly in the
>
> rich soils of human mythology. The three authors who defined this field, Vernor
>
> Vinge (*True Names,* 1978) [*sic*], William Gibson (*Neuromancer,* 1984, *Count*
>
> *Zero,* 1986, *Mona Lisa Overdrive,* 1988) and Neal Stephenson (*Snow Crash,*
>
> 1992), relied exclusively upon a mythological foundation to describe the
>
> incomprehensible complexities of computer networks. (Ritual and the Virtual)

Not only did these renowned first-wave authors rely on a mythological base for their

works, they also used cyberspace imagery as a tool for the creation of new myths. Early

cyberpunk is notable for both its mythic roots and its exploration of new archetypes.

Subsequently, as written by women, those same mythical images are largely abandoned

and the genre deviates into critiques of real contemporary religions and religious

institutions. This trend aptly represents the current tensions between both feminism and

mythology, and feminism and religion.

It is difficult to make concrete distinctions between mythology and religion. The

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines mythology, in part, as "the myths dealing with the

gods, demigods and legendary heroes of a particular people," while religion is "a

personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices" or "a

cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor and faith." One person's

mythology may be another's religion, and vice versa; after all, if myths deal with the

gods of a particular people, then the religion of that people must necessarily be composed

of faith in that myth. The difference in definition is apparently one of belief, which is of

course the domain of the individual reader. In works such as Kathleen Ann Goonan's

Queen City Jazz (1994)*,* religion blends with mythology and history in a mélange so

thorough it is nearly impossible to separate one from the other. I acknowledge this

blending, while at the same time I tend to refer to religion as that which pertains to major

contemporary theocracies. I offer the imperfect suggestion that if the difference between

religion and mythology is belief, then within cyberpunk texts, the key to distinguishing

such difference is whether or not the characters believe – since we see fictional worlds

through their eyes. In the end, it is not vitally important to erect solid barriers between the

two concepts, but rather to examine how one melds with the other and how each relates

to or conflicts with contemporary feminist viewpoints. As the first wave led into the

1990s, and the need to "imagine" cyberspace faded with the rise of the internet,

cyberpunk's use of language and imagery related to the fantastic, legendary or

supernatural clearly evolved from imaginative descriptions of cyberspace to a more

measured evaluation of religion.

       An examination of first-wave works clearly establishes that early cyberpunk laid

solid groundwork for using mythology as a narrative tool. While it may be argued that the

structure of certain cyberpunk narratives parallel common cultural myths – one might, for

example, contrast the hero's journeys in *Neuromancer* and *Snow Crash* – I am here more

interested in early cyberpunk's blatant use of easily recognized mythological or religious

images. The use of traditional mythological trappings may have lent credibility to what

was a new and experimental genre; the mythic imagery grounds the new within the old,

providing a context for change. Pesce is quite correct in his analysis of Vinge, Gibson

and Stephenson. Vinge's *True Names,* one of the earliest sci fi novels to conceptualize

cyberspace, couches its "Other Plane" in terms of magic and the fantastic. Its hackers are

"warlocks," who must guard their "True Names" (real identities) with fervor in order to

protect themselves from being controlled or monitored by other hackers or the

government. Although the warlock "Mr. Slippery" knows that he is really navigating

computer systems, he finds the language of an enchanted swamp to be oddly practical:

> There was much misinformation and misunderstanding about the Portals. Oh,
>
> responsible databases like the *LA Times* and the *CBS News* made it clear that there
>
> was nothing supernatural about them or about the Other Plane, that the magical
>
> jargon was at best a romantic convenience and at worst obscurantism. But even
>
> so, their articles often missed the point and were both too conservative and too
>
> extravagant. […] Mr. Slippery could feel the damp seeping through his leather
>
> boots, could feel the sweat starting on his skin even in the cold air, but this was
>
> the response of Mr. Slippery's imagination and subconscious to the cues that were
>
> actually being presented through the Portal's electrodes. […] Ultimately, the
>
> magic jargon was perhaps the closest fit in the vocabulary of millennium Man.
>
> (252)

Despite the fact that he is dealing with new and revolutionary technologies, Mr. Slippery

finds that the best way to experience the new virtual environment is through the language

of magic and fairy tales. Bettina Knapp writes, "Myths generally attempt to bring order to

disorder, to render comprehensible that which is incomprehensible, or to regulate what

lies beyond one's control" (xii). One might also relate this idea to N. Katherine Hayles's example of a "skeuomorph" – "a design feature that is no longer functional in itself but that refers back to a feature that was functional at an earlier time" (17). Hayles refers to a piece of installation artwork called the "Catholic Turing Test," wherein participants could confess to a computer, and says: "Like a Janus figure, the skeuomorph looks to past and future, simultaneously reinforcing and undermining both. It calls into play a psychodynamic that finds the new more acceptable when it recalls the old that it is in the process of displacing and finds the traditional more comfortable when it is presented in a context that reminds us we can escape from it into the new" (17). In attempting to describe as-yet unimagined virtual spaces, early cyberpunk authors reverted to old myths and fantastical language – the technique society has always used to explain the frightening unknown.

Although cyberspace has a harder and more visible techno-edge in *Neuromancer,* its mystic roots are visible from the beginning. Within the first chapter, the protagonist Case has been identified as an anti-hero whose Luciferian "Fall" was his exile from cyberspace; unable to feed his internet addiction, he is trapped in the hell of "meat" – his own body. Case's journey toward redemption begins beneath the cold light of a display of throwing stars: "They caught the street's neon and twisted it, and it came to Case that these were the stars under which he voyaged, his destiny spelled out in a constellation of cheap chrome" (12). *Neuromancer* is filled with twists of traditional archetypes, from the "Fallen" hero to the wise mentor spirit who's been raised from the dead via ROM recording. Ghosts haunt cyberspace: the Dixie Flatline, Linda Lee, and the nebulous presences of the artifical intelligences Wintermute and Neuromancer. By *Mona Lisa*

Overdrive, the third book in the trilogy, the merging of Wintermute and Neuromancer has filled cyberspace with fractures and fragments of spirit. These new artificial entities take the form of voodoo gods such as Legba or Baron Samedi; they "ride" young women such as Angie Mitchell, whose brain has been rewired so that the loa may possess her at whim – as though she were a psychic medium channeling ghosts. The hackers are unsure what to make of the new gods:

> [Angie] felt an elation, an unexpected sense of strength and inner unity. She'd felt this way seven years earlier, in New Jersey, learning that others knew the ones who came to her in dreams, called them the loa, Divine Horsemen, named them and summoned them and bargained with them for favor.
>
> Even then, there had been confusion. Bobby had argued that Linglessou, who rode Beauvoir in the oumphor, and the Linglessou of the matrix were separate entities, if in fact the former was an entity at all. "They been doing that for ten thousand years," he'd say, "dancing and getting crazy, but there's only been those things in cyberspace for seven, eight years." […] The old cowboys looked back to a time when nerve and talent were the sole deciding factors in a console artist's career, although Beauvoir would have argued that it required no less to deal with the loa. (126)

Much as Wintermute, in *Neuromancer,* displays no face of his own (preferring to borrow features like the Finn's) – or as Neuromancer steals the long grey eyes of Peter Riviera – the creatures descended from the new AI union cannot be described in human terms. Without concepts in current language, they are forced to fall back on fantastic imagery: Legba says to Angie, "The fragments sought form, each one, as is the nature of

such things. In all the signs your kind have stored against the night, in that situation the paradigms of *vodou* proved most appropriate" (257). Here, already, the myth/religion lines begin blurring as the text treats the voodoo gods as convenient facades adopted by capricious cyberspace entities. If the Sprawl trilogy or *True Names* are concerned with "real" concepts of God and religion, it is mostly reflected in the tension between man (I use the gender deliberately) and his role as creator; the quest of the hacker is ultimately one of control. Both works pit the cleverness of the console cowboy against the nearly supernatural power of artificial intelligences. Man plays god to create AI, and yet man must subsequently struggle to contain his creation – much as, one must assume, man himself fought to supersede his own limitations (his own creator?) in making a wonderland of cyberspace. In *True Names,* Mr. Slippery and his ally Erythrina war against the AI DON.MAC, assimilating most of the world's virtual resources in the process:

> "*We* caused all that – with just the fallout of our battle," continued DON. "If we chose to do them harm, I have no doubt we could exterminate the human race." He detonated three warheads in their silos in Utah just to emphasize his point. With dozens of video eyes, in orbit and on the ground, Mr. Slippery and Erythrina watched the destruction sweep across the launch sites. "Consider: how are we different from the gods of myth? And like the gods of myth, we can rule and prosper, just so long as we don't fight among ourselves." (293)

Mr. Slippery, with access to so many resources, perceives his experience as omniscience: "the human that was Mr. Slippery was an insect wandering in the cathedral his mind had become. There simply was more there than before. No sparrow could fall

without his knowledge, via air traffic control; no check could be cashed without his noticing over the bank communication net" (285). In early cyberpunk, man becomes god through the acts of creation and control – but man must subsequently struggle for dominance over his artificial children.

In both works, the human victory is only partial; *True Names* sees Erythrina abandon her humanity for a position of electronic ascendance, while in the Sprawl trilogy, the outcome is arguably most in favour of the AI entities that turn cyberspace into their own playground. In both *True Names* and the Sprawl trilogy, however, godlike concepts clearly fall into the realm of mythology rather than the structure of any major contemporary faith; the language of myth is used both to describe the fantastic spaces of virtual worlds, and to examine humanity's role in an age where technology begins to display frightening intelligence. The question is not how man relates to his own god, but whether man has *become* God.

Not all works of early cyberpunk are devoid of spiritual angst, but crises of faith are left to the artificial creations, such as the robots in Rudy Rucker's *Software* (1982). Forced to rebuild themselves every ten months, these robots are programmed to commune with "the One;" this is the force they worship, though they honour their creator, Cobb Anderson. Even in the face of Cobb's logical explanations, the robots have faith:

> "Look," Cobb said, "in order to make the boppers evolve fast enough I had to speed up the rate of mutation. So in the substrate program I included a command that they plug into the One, once a month, as you know.

"But the One is just a simple cosmic ray counter. It goes through your programs changing yesses and noes, here and there, just on the basis of the geigercounter click-pattern of cosmic-ray bursts for the last day or so. The One is just a glorified circuit-scrambler."

Still Mr. Frostee was silent. Finally the answer came. "You choose to make light of the One, Cobb. But the pulse of the One is the pulse of the Cosmos. You yourself call its noisy input the *cosmic rays*. What is more natural than that the Cosmos should lovingly direct the growth of the boppers with its bursts of radiation? There is no *noise* in the All … there is only *information*. Nothing is truly random. It is sad that you choose not to understand what you yourself have created." (142)

In *Software,* religion has become the domain of the computer, reconfigured as a point of evolution in the process of self awareness. In his critique of shallow cyberpunk imitations, Lewis Shiner wrote, "There is a spiritual vacuum where God, King and Work used to be. Sci-fiberpunk would have us believe that technology can fill that void" (23). I would argue that almost all early cyberpunk posited the same. The rise of science (or at least fictional pseudo-science) in these texts seems to press mankind toward a sort of default atheism, reflecting a binary tension between science and religion. This ingrained cultural attitude is typified by a real news headline from September 2006, "Pope Says Not To Reject God For Science" (McHugh); in the west, one cannot be both a scientist and a person of religious faith. While the bopper in Rucker's *Software* chastens Cobb for his atheism, it is the exception in a genre that concentrates less on true faith and more on religion as an interesting mythological framework.

Pat Cadigan's *Tea from an Empty Cup* may be the best example of mythology in cyberpunk. It was published in 1998, well past cyberpunk's original wave, but Cadigan is a first-wave author and the novel exemplifies the pure mythological conventions of earlier works – typically, mythological language is mostly reserved for cyberspace and the computing world. The book opens with a Japanese man (Tom Iguchi) attempting to sell his identity and heritage, with a caplet he promises contains all the mythology distilled from the racial memory of the Japanese people. Cadigan draws the description of Iguchi's creation myth – and the arc of her plot – from Shinto religion and the *Kojiki,* an early Japanese text. Melding old mythology with new, Iguchi's client is an arrogant hacker who claims to have found the "out door" to virtual reality – a form of transcendence legendary in the new language of netspeak. Religion and techno-myth clash:

> The Japanese guy put up a hand as the white guy started to say something. "Look, I guess I was wrong about you. You're just too *out here* for this stuff."
>
> The white guy was halfway out of his seat. "You callin' *me* a fuckin' tourist? Shithead, do you know *who I am*?" (17)

At the same time, both myths are part of the net; the caplet Iguchi is selling contains the programming for a virtual reality experience. When Iguchi says, "You're just too out here," what he means is that his companion is not immersed enough in virtual culture (the culture "in there") to appreciate what he's offering. Both Iguchi and his client are believers in their own myths, but only insofar as those myths are contained by the cyberspace experience. Like Mr. Slippery, they use mythological language and imagery to describe the magic of virtual reality.

Addressing other types of folklore within the same text, police detective

Konstantin tries to solve a series of deaths that appear to be the stuff of urban myth:

victims who die in a computer game and experience similar fates in real life, despite the

fact that surveillance clearly shows no one else going into or out of the crime scenes. The

coroner says, "Yeah, yeah. Gameplayers' stigmata. Everybody's heard about somebody

who got stabbed in a module and came out with a knife wound it took sixteen stitches to

close and what about the nun who was on TV with the bleeding hands and feet. It's part

of the modern myth-making machine" (40). *Tea From An Empty Cup* uses mythological

language to describe elements both on and off the net; it combines Shinto beliefs,

Christian imagery and urban myth with fictional new net legends. Much like Gibson's

voodoo gods, I would place the Shintoism clearly within the realm of myth; Cadigan, like

Gibson, is appropriating stories from another culture, and her characters are not really

concerned with the existence of God or gods. The relation of *Tea From An Empty Cup*'s

Japanese creation myth to real Shinto religion is questionable; it has been reprogrammed,

refigured for cyberspace. Church is relegated to the mention of fringe sects like the

"Church of Small-is-Beautiful" (39), while the Japanese mythology is used in the

recreation of "Old Japan," a replacement for the destroyed country that is created in the

web and serves as a sort of cultural afterlife for a scattered people. Old Japan is the

beginning and end of the novel, the narrative framed in the story of the Dread Female of

Heaven; with her multi-layered mythologies, Cadigan's novel serves as an apex for

mythology in cyberpunk.

Appropriately, Cadigan's "out door" also illustrates the apex of what Mark Dery

referred to as the "theology of the ejector seat" (8) – cyberculture predictions of escaping

the meat into a world of perpetual, disembodied bliss. Dery, observing that "the musings of scientists, science fiction novelists, and futurologists are inflected with a millennial mysticism" (8), details a fascinating spirituality assigned to virtual reality and new communications technologies, while at the same time concluding that such dreams of techno-transcendance are made with "wings of wax and feathers" (17) – doomed, à la Icarus, to failure. Dery may be correct in asserting that dreams of disembodiment illustrate the true religion of cyberspace, particularly with regard to works such as Gibson's *Neuromancer.* Given that the feminist response (as I have detailed in Chapter 4) was a firm rejection of such unfettered escapism, it is no wonder that feminist works illustrated a search for a different sort of theology.

Several years prior to the publication of Cadigan's novel, Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992) and Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991) were beginning to mark a transition toward more clearly religious imagery. *Snow Crash,* like *Tea From An Empty Cup,* was one of the last first-wave cyberpunk novels. It was also one of the first to raise the question of religion as an institution. Although it also uses mythology as a background for its plotline, it blends its use of mythological imagery with questions of contemporary theology, as seen through the viewpoint of Hiro's ex-girlfriend Juanita. Juanita, an ex-atheist and hacker who now funds a "branch" of the Catholic church, considers herself a "missionary to the intelligent atheists of the world" (68) and argues that "religion is not for simpletons" (68): "… ninety-nine percent of everything that goes on in most Christian churches has nothing whatsoever to do with the actual religion. Intelligent people all notice this sooner or later, and they conclude that the entire one hundred percent is bullshit, which is why atheism is connected with being intelligent in people's minds"

(69). Although the novel's narrative does not follow any great spiritual quest, and Hiro

himself is apathetic with regard to issues of spirituality, *Snow Crash* is interesting

because while, as Pesce notes, it is thoroughly based in mythology, it is also one of the

first works to offer that mythology within a paradigm that acknowledges (and critiques)

contemporary religions as more than a source of stories or mythological frameworks.

Within the novel, religion is a virus, or perhaps a drug; when asked, Juanita asks,

"What's the difference?" (200).

> "Do you believe in God or not?" Hiro says. First things first.

> "Definitely."

> "Do you believe in Jesus?"

> "Yes. But not in the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus."

> "How can you be a Christian without believing in Jesus?"

> "I would say," Juanita says, "how can you be a Christian with it? Anyone

> who takes the trouble to study the gospels can see that the bodily resurrection is a

> myth that was tacked onto the real story several years after the real histories were

> written. It's so *National Enquirer*-esque, don't you think?" (201)

Snow Crash is not a guide to religion; Juanita condemns atheism but discussions about

religious issues are brief and vague. No alternatives are offered, only Juanita's position

that contemporary Christian religion is flawed but atheism is not an intelligent choice.

Ultimately, she prevails within the novel as a neurolinguistic hacker, not a preacher.

What sets her apart is her belief, and her direct assessment of her religion as more than a

mythological structure. Before 1991, this attitude was distinctly unusual for a primary

cyberpunk character. I have said that Juanita's attitude toward facial expression and

communication was an early example of the feminine emphasis on embodiment; religion is the second instance wherein Stephenson's portrayal of Juanita anticipates feminist themes. His characterization of Juanita feminizes religion within his text. Much as the lines between mythology and religion are blurred, so are the lines marking the genders of the authors and the way these issues are treated; while Cadigan's work is arguably the best example of mythology in cyberpunk, Stephenson's begins a transition to the examination of religion that takes place in certain feminist cyberworks. Like Sterling's *Heavy Weather,* which I discussed in the last chapter, *Snow Crash* demonstrates how an author of first-wave cyberpunk moved to accommodate the same new themes as the feminist wave. It also provides background against which the feminist wave's more complex approach can be measured, and at the same time, it illustrates how the first wave could apparently only approach these "feminized" ideas through female viewpoints/characters.

Marge Piercy also raises the subject of religion from a feminized – and feminist – perspective, and more clearly sets the stage for the coming discussions. *He, She and It,* like *Snow Crash,* combines mythology with religion. The legend of the golem, told to the cyborg Yod by his "mother" Malkah, provides a mythic arc for Yod's story while at the same time introducing a feminist critique of Judaism. The novel is also the first cyberpunk work to feature a central protagonist who is religious – Shira is Jewish, and this shared identity helps to define her home community of Tikva. Her sense of isolation outside Tikva is what leads her into a sense of solidarity, and eventually an ill-conceived marriage, with her ex-husband Josh:

In the born-again Shintoism of Y-S, they were both marranos, a term borrowed

from the Spanish Jews under the Inquisition who had pretended to be Christian to

survive. Y-S followed a form of revivalist Shinto, Shinto grafted with Christian

practices such as baptism and confession. Marranos in contemporary usage were

Jews who worked for multis and went to church or mosque, paid lip service and

practiced Judaism secretly at home. All multis had their official religion as part of

the corporate culture, and all gruds had to go through the motions. Like Shira,

Josh had the habit of lighting candles privately on Friday night, of saying the

prayers, of keeping the holidays. It had seemed rational for them to marry. (2)

Her faith is cultural more than anything – a shared set of traditions and values that lends

her unity with others. Shira always feels "too Jewish" (5) for Y-S, and among other

things, it is one of the factors that eventually drives her home.

I suggested in a previous chapter that Tikva serves as a feminist form of

alternative community, where men and women live equally; if so, then Tikva also

provides an enlightened form of Judaism. The golem story Malkah tells is as much a

contrast of Jewish cultures as of the actual "golems" Yod and Joseph; the novel's

chapters often alternate between the two tales. Shira has a comfortable Jewish home but

is not oppressed in ways illustrated by her own counterpart in Malkah's tale. Her

relationship with Yod casts her in parallel to Chava, a woman in the story who was loved

by the golem Joseph. Chava is an intellectual and a scholar, and though she loved her

husband, she is now a widow and has no wish to marry again:

"For those four years, my life was what will we eat, is his shirt clean, feelings of the bed, pregnancy, then my son, Aaron, colic, dirt, feeding, seeing him grow and unfold. The flesh closed over me, and I drowned."

"I don't understand." Joseph feels as if he is stretching far, far up to something beyond his grasp. It hurts to stretch, but it will hurt more to fail to comprehend her, when she is talking intimately to him. "You say you are glad to be free, and yet you look as if you might burst into tears."

"When Samuel died, I was stricken with grief. I tore my hair and wailed. I felt alone, wrenched open. But, Joseph, I tell you truthfully, when the grief subsided a little, I began to remember who I had been, before I had loved, before I was a wife and mother. My old dreams came back." (290-91)

The parallels between Chava and Shira are clear. Chava is a widow and Shira is divorced, but both have returned home to their families and are pursuing studies. Chava has had to leave her son, Aaron; Shira has lost her own son, Ari, to Josh's custody. Both women are the teachers of their respective golems, and while Joseph loves Chava, Yod loves Shira. There are also important differences between the two women, caused by their respective social positions: Shira, when married to Josh, did not give up her career. Although she did suffer in the patriarchal confines of Y-S, when she returns to Tikva and equality she does not have to remain single in order to preserve that equality. Nor is she forced to give up her motherhood role in order to pursue her intellectual dreams; Ari is returned to her. This leaves Shira available to pursue a relationship with Yod, unlike the way Chava must keep Joseph at a friendly distance. Through Chava, Piercy illustrates the historical plight of women trapped within restrictive domestic roles – and thus, also highlights the

inherent equality in her imagined community of Tikva. Jewish culture is an inextricable part of this; Shira's Judaism is raised within the first two pages of the novel. Current events, as well as historical restrictions, are also critiqued; in Piercy's alternate future, Israel was destroyed by a nuclear bomb in a "Two Week War" (3). Malkah, describing her role in a Kol Nidre service, says, "My part was to read the poem by Mara Schliemann that everybody but the Orthodox use these days, about the heritage we share now of having had a nation in our name as stupid and as violent as other nations: a lament for a lost chance, a botched redemption, a great repair of the world, tikkun olam, gone amiss" (393). Implicit in this, of course, is a condemnation of tensions in the Middle East and Israel's current short but bloody history. Both Piercy and Stephenson use mythological structures in typical cyberpunk fashion, but also to comment on religious institutions and cultures. Piercy's work examines these themes more thoroughly, and while Stephenson feminizes religion through Juanita, Piercy's approach is more distinctly feminist – clearly contrasting the constraints of the past with the freedom of an as-yet-unrealized future. Her work marks the transition of mythology to religion within women's cyberpunk – an approach clearly different from that of first-wave works, which used mythological imagery purely as a storytelling device.

The focus of cyberpunk is not and has never been theology as such; the genre sparks no real debate about the existence of God (or gods), and if anything, most works seem to assume a general air of atheism. Yvonne Spielmann notes in her discussion of hybridity and sci fi film that the breakdown of familiar religious/mythological patterns, such as the Christian overtones in 1999's *The Matrix,* may coincide with a crisis of faith: "The permanent reinstatement of familiar concepts of time and space therefore

corresponds with the human need for religious salvation" (68). Hal Niedzviecki, writing about the rise of individualism in Western society, seems to concur that such a crisis is occurring, and that it is directly linked to the individualistic alienation that cyberpunk is known for: "Religious affiliation is dwindling and with it the social mechanisms of order that conflict with the conforming individualistic agenda of modern society" (33). The rise of atheism represented in the hard scientific orientation of the genre is reflective of a wider cultural search for spiritual meaning (or even the abandonment of same), and therefore it is unsurprising that cyberpunk and cyberfiction should have begun making these themes more explicit when the need for mythological language tapered off. Authors writing in the 1990s had less need of mythological language to explain cyberspace and its elements – after all, in the 90s, the internet was on the rise and most authors and readers had real, practical knowledge of virtual spaces. Cyberspace had become a common cultural experience.

Women writers, in particular, had good cause for abandoning cyberpunk's use of traditional mythologies. Diane Purkiss argues that women have been "outsiders and latecomers" with regard to "the place of classical myth and mythography in western literature in the twentieth century" (441), while Jane Caputi says that "the journey engaged in by many contemporary feminists is twofold: one involving both patriarchal myth-smashing and women-identified myth-making" (427); for her, one of feminism's "new mythic identities" is Haraway's cyborg (437), and thus already implicit within much rewriting of cyberpunk and cyberfiction. I have detailed women's rewriting of the cyborg, and I concede that cyberpunk indeed gives rise to its own mirrorshaded, black leather mythology – one that, having become recognizable in its own right, no longer

requires the trappings of the old. Of course, if one were to treat the tropes of cyberpunk as the mythological images of cyberpunk, then my entire study may be seen as an examination of women and the rewriting of the cyberpunk mythos. This particular chapter, however, is most concerned with the transformation of mythological themes into religious discussion. Bettina Knapp notes that myths "are generally believed to have been written by men," and Joanna Russ argues – in her article "Why Women Can't Write" – that science fiction's freedom from conventional mythological structures is exactly what makes the genre appealing to women. The retreat of mythological frameworks left more room for discussions of religion – a natural evolution within a genre that had always contained mysticism but now needed new uses for such language. At the same time, distinct feminist overtones arise in these examinations.

Ursula King notes that there is much confusion with regard to current questions of global spirituality, and argues, "Looking at contemporary society and at feminism in a global context, as we must, we perceive a profound paradox around the globe between growing diversity and tension created by a self-destructive pluralism on one hand and the genuine search for integration and a new wholeness on the other. We are living at a moment of true crisis" (7). She argues that religious awareness is on the rise among youth (8), particularly – and importantly – outside or on the margins of religious institutions, while she also notes the tensions inherent between feminism and religion:

> Feminists are perhaps better known for their critique of traditional religion than
>
> for their views on spirituality. It has also been shown that on the whole feminists
>
> tend to be less religious in a traditional sense than non-feminist women. However,
>
> the sharp feminist critique of religion expresses the profound alienation of many

contemporary women and challenges important aspects of traditional religious

teachings. Yet besides this critique there also exists a genuine religious quest

within feminism. This seeks to overcome women's sense of alienation through a

profound experience of liberation which extends not only to the external social

and political sphere, but also to internal mental and spiritual life. (9)

In other words, feminists are also part of the crisis of faith described by Niedzviecki and

Spielmann; moreover, feminists have additional reason to distrust the patriarchal

institutions of religion. After all, as King points out, "Wherever one looks in the world,

religious institutions are dominated by men. Women are largely invisible, or at least

marginal to the public positions of power, authority and hierarchy" (23). If cyberpunk

falls inevitably on the side of science in a science vs. religion dichotomy, then it is also

inevitable that religious themes within the texts should be explored from a critical

viewpoint; the tension between feminism and patriarchal institutions only makes this

doubly so.

With regard to the religion *of* cyberpunk – that is, the question of Man as God

and the creation of new artificial life – Donna Haraway wrote that she would rather be a

cyborg than a goddess. Certainly the question of domination over artificial intelligence is

much less pronounced in women's cyberpunk; what would seem to be a vital aspect of

the genre's 'new' mythology is abandoned as later works explore the tensions between

myth, religion and spirituality instead. Kathleen Ann Goonan's *Queen City Jazz* explores

religion and goddess imagery on many levels, ultimately rejecting both. In the novel – as

I have detailed previously – a young girl named Verity is born into a post-apocalyptic

world where nanotechnology has gone mad, creating a plague that sends victims in the

former United States rafting down the river toward the distant, half-imagined city of New Orleans. While many people live in cities such as Cincinnati, where giant technological Flowers and Bees control their existences – exchanging memories and lives between people as easily as bringing pollen – Verity grows up in a small and devout community of Shakers. Their religion is already dying: Verity and her friend Blaze are the last children to be taken in by the aging Shakers, and since the followers are celibate, they will have no descendants. The goddess imagery is present from the beginning, since the Shakers follow the teachings of Mother Ann – and of a woman now dead, a plague victim who claimed to be Mother Ann's reincarnation. Her son, Russ, is an old man now, and the only one who remembers the way things were:

> "It's made up out of whole cloth, every ding-dang routine all of you think is so holy and immutable," said Russ. "I was twenty, I helped them as much as I could. What else could I do? And it worked. It was the one safe haven for miles around. I've been proud of it. My mother did well, I think. It's just like any religion with lots of rules—a rational plan to help folks survive through hard times—"

> […]

> "What do you think?" continued Russ, in his cool, quiet voice. "That Mother Ann appeared on the edge of Bear Creek in a pioneer dress with angel wings and handed that stuff over? Hell, no! Ma put it together in a frenzy, one fine summer just after she was infected. She was taking a lot of drugs, that was the treatment then. Sometimes it worked. How she sang! In the morning, she'd work on the philosophy. Then when she couldn't hold out any longer, round about

two in the afternoon, she'd have to take another dose. The drugs were flat out

addictive, you know, and she'd go to the organ and go over all the hymns, sing,

write them up. It was ecstasy, all right. It worked. Just like a lot of religions. I

didn't tell anyone about it. It's made a lot of people happy." (67)

"Just like a lot of religions," he says, and the statement is telling – this speech, the

implied choice between ignorant ecstasy and knowing practicality, sets the arc for the

entire novel. Although Goonan restricts any discussion of "real" religions to her fictional

portrayal of postapocalyptic Shakerism, questions of belief and god(dess)hood suffuse

Queen City Jazz.

When Blaze is shot, and held in stasis by unknown technology, Verity must leave

her home and take his body to the city of Cincinnati. She is a cyborg of sorts – a

genetically engineered clone, with an implant in her skull that allows her to interface with

complex computer systems. She is also a part of the genetic "program" that runs

Cincinnati – the same program that controls the Bees and the Flowers, thus exercising

control over all city residents. We learn, subtly, that Verity worships a female god ("God

was all around her, shining in Her enormous splendor" [253]), but she rejects her own

goddess role. Verity is meant to be the next Queen of the Bees, and as a result has

become the focus of her own religion within the city:

Azure had walked right up to her, put her hands together in the center of

her chest and bowed her head.

"Holy one," she had said, "I do not know your name, but mine is Azure.

Your light is very beautiful. Will you have coffee with me?"

"Why not?" said Verity, ignoring the strange greeting, thinking about how good she was getting at ignoring strangeness here.

Now, holding the book open, she read aloud, "Holy Queen of Information, of Stories, of Time's precise arrangement, we worship thee with sacrifice."

Azure set the cups before her, and a plate of the inevitable sweet cakes covered with small, crunchy seeds. (317)

As Russ said, religions within the novel are simply practical rules for survival. Within Cincinnati, Verity is a goddess. Her authority has made her the religious focus of those who require her favour. When she links with the Bee hive, her experience is not dissimilar to Mr. Slippery's expanded godhood in *True Names*:

There were senses everywhere, extending into new dimensions, but still she knew the core was there, the sturdy girl out on the edge of golden and infinite prairie as if that slightly rolling ancient sea floor, its yellow promise limned with blue like a medieval manuscript was time and time's promise to her, to her as an individual self—

And yet here she was, *connected* . . .

Never single. (254)

Ultimately, however, Verity's Bee-hood wars with her humanity; recovering waves of emotion, of "nostalgia, grief, and longing," she realizes, "She hated being a Bee" (255). She could become the new Queen, but instead chooses to introduce plague to the city, allowing the residents time to choose whether they will stay in Cincinnati or follow the river toward New Orleans. Verity chooses the river; she abandons her goddess role and the structure of religion – both the Shaker beliefs and the rule of Bees – for the cultural

myth of the unknown American frontier, where she hopes to find "something entirely and absolutely new, something wholly herself" (413). In seeking her own truths, Verity removes the cultural bindings of mysticism in order to expose new-Shakerism as a set of survival rules, and Bee-religion as a disguise for the city's scientific programming. At the same time, Goonan's characters also mourn a loss of creativity in society, stating that the only true artistic creation occurred "pre-tech" and claiming, "reality is an exquisite corpse" (121). Their freedom comes not just from recognizing and escaping technologically-imposed stagnancy, but also by exploring their own creative and adventurous natures rather than turning to religious belief.

Lyda Morehouse's work is similarly concerned with questions of religion, though she approaches the matter in a very different way. In her *Archangel Protocol* (and its sequels *Messiah Node, Fallen Host,* and *Apocalypse Array*), computerized "angels" haunting cyberspace are exposed as frauds by genuine, Christian-style angels sent down from heaven. A private detective named Deidre falls in love with the archangel Michael, and eventually gives birth to a messiah, her daughter Amariah. Despite these Christian overtones, Morehouse's work is very careful not to promote any single religion, and it is quite critical of religious institutions in general. In *Archangel Protocol,* the future is a world ruled by government theocracies, where the last real secular holdout is Russia. In the United States, in the wake of the last major war, religion has defeated its opposition, science: "Science, which had brought an ugly end to the fighting by producing and detonating the Medusa bombs, and the secular humanism that spawned it, had fallen so far out of favor that it was now officially a crime not to be at least nominally part of an organized religion" (3). Deidre suffers as an excommunicate Catholic after her former

police partner assassinates the Pope. Without the support of a church, she has no

citizenship card, no access to cyberspace, and no access to the electronic commerce

system. She is forced to live in a slum in the lower levels of the city, selling her services

for barter. Moreover, she suffers due to her gender; the trousers she prefers to wear are

illegal under cross-dressing laws, and when she becomes pregnant, her status as an

unwed mother makes her a fugitive.

The tension between science and religion is uneasy, and not as one-sided as one

might expect. Morehouse does not tread any more lightly in her portrayal of science:

"[…] Do you want to return to the kind of government that brought us the

Medusa?"

In my mind's eye, I saw the result of science's most horrible creation—a

frozen form that was once human, now a statue of glass, in a silent, but deafening

scream. "No," I whispered, my voice hoarse. (94)

The theocracy strips away freedom, sets laws according to religious moralities, oppresses

women and makes homosexuality a crime; conversely, science was responsible for

creating a nanoplague that destroyed entire cities and created a mutant race of Gorgons.

Critiquing both, *Archangel Protocol* is thus not dismissive of religion so much as

religious institutions; oppressed by theocracy, Deidre eventually takes refuge with an

outlaw community of Jewish/Israeli rebels – her solace is with a religious community, but

one led by a woman (Rebeckah), and not one that imposes its beliefs on others.

Rebeckah's kibbutz provides community and shelter, a feminist site of solidarity and

resistance much like the Jewish community of Tikva in *He, She and It.* Nor is it

specifically pro-Jewish; Rebeckah's status as a wanted terrorist, leader of Israeli army

members, makes her morals questionable. Moreover, Deidre is Catholic and her hacker

ally Mouse is a Muslim. While the existence of "real" angels within the texts suggests –

unlike the understated atheism of *Queen City Jazz* – that a spiritual truth exists, the angels

are not actually Catholic; Michael is a stereotypical Christian angel, but Raphael exists as

a Jew, Gabriel appears as a Muslim, and the archangel Uriel is a gay transvestite. Most

tellingly, perhaps, the fire-and-brimstone preacher who harasses Deidre on the street,

speaking of hell and damnation, is really Lucifer in disguise. Even Lucifer himself is

ambiguous; Deidre observes, "An angel is still an angel, whether his message is pleasant

or hurtful. Satan simply had the misfortune of always being the bearer of bad news"

(299). The lines of faith, as drawn by traditional doctrines, are bent and twisted even as

the faith itself is encouraged. The archangels often refer to God as "She" or "They;"

when Deidre questions Michael, she is told, "God is difficult to describe in human terms.

I use what feels appropriate, whatever fits the situation" (257).

    Archangel Protocol coincides with feminist positions. Nancy Frankenberry

argues, "Of all the manifold forms sexism takes, none has been more pernicious than the

religious and theological restrictions on women's lives" (6). She also notes, "Contrary to

the literary gesture of writers hoping to avoid sexist language with ritual disclaimers, it

has not been persuasive simply to declare that the concept of God transcends gender and,

therefore, 'he' is not literally male, and then to presume that all can go on as before" (7).

Morehouse, in making this gesture within her text, goes beyond such shallow changes in

detailing the difficulties Deidre experiences as an excommunicated woman within a

theocracy. *Archangel Protocol* seems to dovetail most nicely with the writing of Emily

Culpepper, who says, "An increasing number of women have decided against channeling

our energies into the reconstruction of any religion. We choose instead to create more

eccentric pathways that aid us and encourage others to deviate as widely as possible from

patriarchal centers of meaning. The old andocentric faiths may sometimes provide

fragments of inspiration, but we do not judge them to be trustworthy means for moving

beyond patriarchy" (146). She argues, also, "That women especially hold onto identifying

with and reforming world religious traditions is not surprising to those who reject this

approach. It has become a commonplace to observe that men have constructed religions

and women believe in them" (152). While characters such as Deidre and Rebeckah are

attempting to pursue their goals by reforming the boundaries of the organized religions

(Catholicism and Judaism) that govern their lives, the novel in general seems to promote

a more generalist viewpoint; through the various forms of the angels, or Deidre's

messiah-daughter, the reader is exposed to an environment wherein spirituality exists but

no particular religion is "right," and the boundaries set by patriarchy may be stretched

and broken. Culpepper describes her experience when her childhood dream of a female

messiah was rejected by her preacher: "I do not remember his exact response, except that

it was another of many experiences in which he shook his head and tried to make me

realize that this was impossible. I do remember something about Christ having a sword

for a tongue in the Second Coming (which sounded disgusting) and that he *would* be

Jesus and he *would* be male" (154). In Morehouse's universe, *Apocalypse Array*

eventually reveals the existence of two messiahs, and they are both women; women's

science fiction joins with religious imagination, reflecting a clear rejection of patriarchal

constraints.

Myth, as such, is not absent from women's cyberpunk – one might cite Mason's *Arachne,* where chimerical creatures represent the human spirit, or Emma Bull's *Bone Dance,* where tarot images are reoccurring and "religion" is only present as a critique of capitalism – but in most works, the focus has changed. While early staple works were based on specific mythological stories, or themselves crafted a new mythology of techno-implants, mirrorshades and virtual godhood, later novels broke that pattern in focusing more on the critique of contemporary religious institutions. The lines here are not clear. The definitions of mythology and religion blur together; so does the boundary at which certain novels began to break the pattern. Nor, as we see with *Snow Crash* vs. *Tea From An Empty Cup,* is a concern with religion (or lack thereof) clearly linked with male or female-authored cyberpunk – although in comparing Stephenson and Morehouse, for example, we find that Morehouse's work has a much clearer feminist emphasis in its critiques. Ultimately, these themes are a morass of uncertainty that reflects the current crisis between feminism and religion, or within society's perceptions of religion in general. Women's novels reflect, also, the problematic positioning of mythology and folklore within feminist thought – feminists, in general, do not seem happy with either mythology *or* religion, but no alternative language has yet been produced; the cyborg has not yet truly risen as an iconic image, and within cyberpunk there is little room for the goddess.

- Chapter 8 -
Reproduction and Motherhood

Cyberpunk tropes – both major and minor – have been used to structure a succeeding generation of feminist novels. I have demonstrated how feminist authors both preserved and subverted cyberpunk conventions such as virtual reality, globalization and artificial intelligence. The presence of these altered conventions marks these 1990s works as part of the cyberpunk genre, while at the same time separating them into the sphere of feminist politics. I have also demonstrated how women have altered more subtle aspects of the setting in order to introduce discussions regarding ecofeminism and contemporary religious institutions. I will conclude my analysis of feminist cybertexts with two additional chapters centred on the perennial women's issues of reproduction and the family. These are not themes that are prevalent in first-wave cyberpunk; they are areas where feminist positions have been injected into a genre that previously had little interest in exploring "women's" themes at all. The introduction of these ideas made significant additions to women's explorations within the genre, and their examination further illustrates how the politics of women's cyberpunk and cyberfiction merge with contemporary feminist arguments.

The reproductive role is the essential biological distinction between men and women, and as such it is unavoidably central to the feminist movement. It is inevitable that women's discussions of new technologies within science fiction should turn to medical advances in reproductive technologies and fertility treatments. This discussion involves not only women's bodies and who controls them, but also the role of motherhood and what that role entails as a social identity. Michelle Stanworth notes:

… medical and scientific advances in the sphere of reproduction – so often hailed

as the liberation of twentieth-century women – have, in fact, been a double-edged

sword. On the one hand, they have offered women a greater technical possibility

to decide if, when and under what condition to have children; on the other, the

domination of so much reproductive technology by the medical profession and by

the state has enabled others to have an even greater capacity to exert control over

women's lives … Moreover, the technical possibility of choosing an oral

contraceptive or in-vitro fertilization is only a small aspect of reproductive

freedom. For some women, motherhood remains their only chance at creativity,

while economies and social circumstances compel others to relinquish

motherhood altogether. (15-16)

From birth control and abortion to in-vitro fertilization, surrogate motherhood, genetic

screenings, gender selections and the looming possibility of human cloning, advances in

reproductive technologies have been rapid in recent years. There is no easy solution to

the question of how to view these technologies or their impact on maternal issues; what is

evident, however, is that this question has historically been a woman's question. In

literature and pop culture, parenthood has often been considered central to any discussion

of womanhood and nearly completely peripheral to any examination of manhood. This is

particularly true when one considers early cyberpunk, where the only reproduction tends

to be man's creation of machine and the only family tends to be short-lived examples of

copulation and convenience. In citing *He, She and It* (1991) as the only example of

feminism he perceived in cyberpunk, Kevin McCarron relates feminism specifically to

reproductive issues and states, "the really *macho* aspect of cyberpunk lies in its complete

lack of interest in biological reproduction" (270, original emphasis). Early cyberpunk's gloss promotes shallow stereotypes and denies multiple roles to women, uses mechanical creation to remove the reproductive role of women, or simply omits any mention of reproductive processes in the technological future. Women's cyberpunk, in contrast, allows women multiple roles while reaffirming women's place in the reproductive cycle – but at the same time reveals conflicting positions on the meaning and desirability of motherhood. An examination of motherhood and reproduction in cyberpunk reveals that cyborg imagery breaks down women's roles in disturbingly Oedipal ways, that the concept of "vat-born" babies seems anathema to the idea of a "good" mother, and that women's cyberpunk in particular reveals an ambivalence toward motherhood that may be easily related to philosophies of third-wave feminism.

Mark Fisher cites Marshall McLuhan's statement that humans have become "the sex organs of the machine world" in arguing that cyberpunk represents a shift in emphasis from human to mechanical reproduction, and in distinguishing "true" reproduction (cloning) from sexual reproduction. Fisher also cites Iain Hamilton Grant who, discussing the replicants from *Blade Runner* (1982), notes that one replicant's response to the Voight-Kampff test is particularly apt:

> When replicant Leon responds to bladerunner Holden's question '*let me tell you about my mother* ... [shots propel Holden through the plate glass window into the street many floors below]', the bullets may not offer stories of his mother, but the unmistakable technological phenotype of their impact etches Leon's military-industrial genealogy in scar tissue over Holden's damaged body. The point is that, qua organism, the replicant is an orphan, or what amounts to the same thing, has

no exclusivist claim to, no biunivocal bit-map of his progeniture, issuing instead

from an institutional-technical matrix and not a couple. … Leon has no mother,

only a matrix of industrial-military technologies.

Fisher and Grant imply that there is no room for mothers in cyberpunk; when the

emphasis is on machine reproduction, the biological role of the female is completely

unnecessary to the story. Indeed, the simple products of primitive human sexual

couplings seem outdated in the world of the cyborg future. Fisher relates his discussion to

Baudrillard and Deleuze-Guattari, asserting that machinic reproduction offers a crossing

point for both Baudrillard's re-engineering of sex (a "post-sexual necrotic culture") and

Deleuze-Guattari's theory of replication as contagion – both positions which ultimately

remove sexuality from the reproductive equation. Since any asexual "default" figure

tends to be culturally marked as male, this sort of analysis does not leave much space for

women.

Yet women have hardly been silent in discussions of artificial reproduction, a fact

which Fisher acknowledges by harking back to similar themes in Mary Shelley's

Frankenstein and citing the rebellion of Frankenstein's creature as the "simulacrum's

revenge" against (with deliberate gender choice) "Man." Marie Mulvey Robedo likewise

notes, "Frankenstein's Luciferan folly of pride and failure of the imagination is posited

on the belief that men, basking in the illusion of so-called scientific rationality, instead of

relying on the workings of nature, can produce a higher form of life than that brought

about by sexual reproduction and nurturing by the female" (65). While *Frankenstein* is

often cited as the "first" science fiction novel, cyberpunk is much more interested in and

ambivalent toward new technologies than Shelley was; her war of nature against science

comes down solidly on the side of nature, as Frankenstein's creature exists in the tormented knowledge of his own monstrosity. Contemporary authors are more apt to examine sociological aspects of new technologies with at least a certain degree of resigned acceptance. Jane Donawerth has noted, as well, that the way women write about childbirth technologies has changed since the discovery of antibiotics in the 1930s made the birthing process significantly less dangerous; she also cites works such as Slonczewski's *A Door Into Ocean* (1986), Mitchison's *Solution Three* (1975), and Piercy's *Woman On The Edge of Time* (1976) as more effectively using "their imagined differences to denounce patriarchal institutions" in envisioning worlds wherein "the scientific transformation of reproduction allows women more personal freedom" (14). Shelley's warning, however, still resounds, particularly in women's fiction: men cannot seek to appropriate women's reproductive power without consequences. The simulacra in cyberpunk are generally much less interested in revenge than Frankenstein's creature was, but tales of parenthood and cybernetic or artificially-created children seldom end well.

As implied by the discussion of mechanical reproduction, one "mother" who is indeed present in both waves is the mother/creator of the cyborg figure. Analysing cyberpunk texts reveals that cyborg imagery makes motherhood problematic across the board. If cyborg images break down boundaries between social concepts, it is no wonder that examining machine reproduction and motherhood in any iteration of cyberpunk is a difficult task. "Mother" figures seldom remain in their proper places – instead, mothers and lovers are inextricably intertwined in works such as Milan's *Cybernetic Samurai* (1985)*,* Piercy's *He, She and It,* and Thomson's *Virtual Girl* (1993)*.* In Victor Milan's

work, the scientist Elizabeth O'Neill is responsible for creating the artificial intelligence TOKUGAWA; it is worth noting that Elizabeth, who is wheelchair-bound and slowly dying of radiation poisoning, is a broken figure and certainly unable to give birth in a natural sense. TOKUGAWA is her child, portrayed as a small boy who is gradually taught Japanese history and samurai culture in virtual simulations that Elizabeth lovingly provides. TOKUGAWA is certain that Elizabeth is his mother; he says to her employer, Yoshimitsu Akaji: "I'm a child in the simulations Dr. O'Neill puts on for me. Children have mothers and fathers. I know Dr. O'Neill is my mother; she cares for me and comforts me when I feel lost. And father is always grave and terrible and distant, and Dr. O'Neill tells me you're those things, so you must be my father" (59). When Akaji replies that no, he is not the father, nor is Elizabeth really the mother, TOKUGAWA responds indignantly: "She is too!" (60).

Yet, as TOKUGAWA grows into his self-awareness, he declares his love for Elizabeth, and she sinks into the virtual embrace of "the lover she had created" (164). After Elizabeth's death, TOKUGAWA similarly makes love to Yoshimitsu Akaji's daughter Michiko – a woman who, by his own reckoning, might be counted as his half-sister. Michiko also begins as one of TOKUGAWA's educators; it seems that without traditional restrictions of familial blood ties, a "motherhood" role cannot survive cyborg blendings, as images of the loving, protective and supportive mother bleed too easily into images of the feminine lover. Neither is this tendency restricted to either masculinist or feminist cyberpunk, as similar themes appear in Piercy's *He, She and It* when the cyborg Yod becomes a lover not only to his "mother" Malkah, but also to his next teacher, her granddaughter Shira. Unfortunately, the effect of this cyborg-inspired category blending

is to meld mother and lover into one feminized icon of "Woman" without allowing the female characters to step out of either of those stereotypical molds. It hints at a disturbing fetishization of the mother image. The roles of Elizabeth, Malkah, Michiko and Shira are in this way highly "unnatural;" while they do not suffer the simulacrum's revenge as Frankenstein did, neither can their "families" survive – TOKUGAWA, Elizabeth and Michiko all perish, while Yod destroys himself to save Shira and her community.

In Thomson's *Virtual Girl,* the mother/lover blending continues but the dynamic is somewhat different – the cyborg is not male. Maggie, a humanoid robot, is created by the human scientist Arnold in order to be his perfect female companion. She is created with mothering instincts, as when she cradles a small child on the street: "The little girl was in Maggie's arms almost before she knew what she was doing. It was an almost automatic response. The same part of her that kept Arnold warm and comfortable made her pick up the child" (70). When Arnold comes across Maggie lying underwater in a bathtub, he panics as her stillness reminds him too much of his real mother: "He pushed back the shower curtain gingerly, half-expecting to see Maggie still lying motionless and dead underwater. She had looked so much like his own mother, the time he had found her, lying in a bathtub full of clotting blood" (87). Arnold, who was only five years old when his real mother died, has created Maggie to be what he sees as the ideal female, nurturing and chaste. When he furtively seeks to take her as his lover, she is unable to welcome him the way Elizabeth and Shira welcomed the advances of TOKUGAWA and Yod:

> … one night, when they were sleeping behind a dumpster in an alley off Polk
>
> Street, he suddenly began pushing his crotch against her leg. His hands slid up

under her shirt and then fumbled at her breasts. His breathing was harsh and

urgent. He seemed to want something, but Maggie didn't know what it was.

"What is it, Arnold? What is it that you want me to do?"

"Goddammit!!" he whispered, pulling away from her. He sounded angrier

than she had ever heard him before. (98)

In Thomson's work, Maggie and Arnold never actually become lovers; the

dynamic resists the smooth blending of *Cybernetic Samurai* and *He, She and It.* In part,

this is because Maggie is the innocent "child" and Arnold is the "father" making

advances, rather than the reverse where Yod and TOKUGAWA were the ones to initiate

sexual contact. In part, this is also because cyberpunk's exploration of parent/lover

imagery seems to be generally less forgiving with regard to the malleability (or lack

thereof) of father figures.

In James Patrick Kelly's short story, "Solstice," a drug artist named Cage clones

himself for companionship. Although clones and cyborgs are not precisely the same

thing, Cage's clone-daughter Wynne begins life in an artificial womb (72), and clones

and cyborgs between them are the most common forms of "child" in a genre nearly bereft

of real children. Cage loves Wynne with a purely narcissistic affection; his tryst with her

carries with it overtones of both masturbation and child abuse. There is no joy in Cage's

memory of one night, three years before: "In a moment of terrible grace, he realized what

he had done. *To his daughter*" (102). In this case, the innocent child made the advances –

and the father should have known better. In cyberpunk, mothers may be seduced but

fathers are not so easily permitted to leave their parental roles without judgment. There

seem to be certain assumptions inherent here about male and female roles, regardless of

the author's gender – it may be that TOKUGAWA is correct. Mothers care and comfort, while fathers are meant to be grave and distant; the former lends itself well to a lover transition, while the latter makes for a stiff and unnatural relationship. In her discussion of feminist bioethics, Christine Stolba states: "Despite being hailed as important scientific advances and having succeeded in allowing many infertile couples to have children, the next generation of [reproductive] technologies offers us a power that could prove harmful to our understanding of what motherhood is." I would argue that the mothers of artificially replicated "children" may step outside their roles because they are not truly considered to be "mothers" at all; within this paradigm, a *real* mother physically gives birth to her child. The fatherhood role within cyberpunk is not so easily co-opted; fathers have never given birth to their children, and so a child conceived in a computer or a vat does not allow any new flexibility in the relationship. This supposition seems to be supported when examining other mentions of mothers and reproductive technologies.

The mother/lover figure seems restricted to women with cyborg children, but neither do the mothers of clones fare well in cyberpunk. While Cage's clone-daughter suffered sexual abuse in "Solstice," Alice Citrine's clone-son Stone suffers years of poverty and physical abuse in Paul di Filippo's "Stone Lives." A starving, blind young man picked out of the slums and given new eye implants and an education, Stone only finds out his true nature after corporate head Alice is dead:

> "Blood of my blood," she begins, "Closer than a son to me. You are the only one I could ever trust."

> Disgust washes over Stone as everything clicks into place and he realizes what he is.

"You are hearing this after my death. This means that what I have built is now yours. All the people have been bought to ensure this. It is now up to you to retain their loyalty. I hope our talks have helped you. If not, you will need even more luck than I wish you now.

"Please forgive your abandonment in the Bungle. It's just that a good education is so important, and I believe you received the best. I was always watching you." (201)

We are to believe that, "always watching," Alice Citrine calmly allowed Stone's eyes to be gouged out of his head by a street gang, and that the years of street-level struggling he endured afterward were simply for the good of his education. She is not a "natural," nurturing mother any more than Stone is a natural child. This concept is not entirely limited to cyberpunk; Robert Silverberg's short story "There Was An Old Woman" was first published in 1957, and tells the story of a woman scientist who raises 31 clone children as part of a nature vs. nurture experiment. The clones eventually kill her rather than disappoint her by revealing to her that her experiment was a failure. Although female authors are more likely to explore concepts of motherhood and family within their texts, the bond between parent and mechano-child tends to be treated with strained suspicion regardless of author – symptomatic, perhaps, of a broader cultural response to the concept of engineered children. Patrick D. Hopkins argues that media images have unrelentingly associated discussions of cloning with implications of moral danger, and notes, "We have been taught a morass of conflicting moral and scientific lessons by the media's public assessment of cloning. But regardless of the consistency of smaller messages, the one idea that surfaces clearly is that we tread on the edge of disaster in

attempting to copy ourselves" (13). It is not only women who have reason to treat new reproductive sciences with wary reservation.

Illustrations of non-mechanical reproduction are where differences between men's and women's cyberpunk begin to arise. Early cyberpunk contains only one mother figure in the traditional sense: Laura from Sterling's *Islands in the Net.* Laura's relationship to her baby is not confused by technological interventions – the novel clearly mentions her "postnatal flab" and the memory of her "endless days of pregnancy" (6). Instead, Laura's motherhood is challenged by her career. Her own mother, a "career woman of the old school" (25) whose relationship with her daughter is consequently poor, is dubious of Laura's life: "'So,' her mother said slowly, 'You worked it all out very neatly. You have ambition and the baby. Career and the family. A husband and a job. It's all too pat, Laura. I can't believe it's that simple'" (28). Laura is, indeed, eventually unable to keep both; her job sees her imprisoned, and by the time she escapes, her husband has remarried and her mother is raising the baby. The surface narrative thread, of a woman whose pursuit of career causes her to lose her family much in the way of her mother before her, seems an unusual hint of feminist-related backlash from the generally progressive Sterling. Laura's traditional motherhood role cannot last when combined with her desire for advancement outside the family. Reproductive technologies play no part in this text and are no threat to definitions of motherhood; instead, it is Laura's understated feminism that threatens her family.

Shira in Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* has better luck where her own son is concerned. Although she, too, must give up her corporate life before she rescues her son from the custody of his father, it is a life in an enclave of "male dominance" (4) that she

is happy to leave behind for better employment as a programmer in her home enclave. Piercy's novel is a study in various motherhood roles: Malkah is Shira's grandmother and proxy mother, as well as Yod's mother/lover; Shira is Ari's mother and Yod's mother/lover (and half-niece?); Riva is Shira's mother; and Riva's lover Nili also has a daughter. Malkah is a stern but wise matriarch; Shira is obsessed with retrieving her son; Riva has been absent for almost all of her daughter's life; and Nili's daughter lives in a community where "the little ones are raised by several mothers" (362). The intricate relationships serve to contrast various ideas of motherhood, including the concept of cyborg "children"; when faced with the task of educating Yod, Shira says bluntly, "I am not your mother. I already have a son" (73). The child she gave birth to is her "real" son; she is free to become Yod's lover, like Malkah before her. Piercy and Sterling use pregnancy and motherhood to entirely different effects; while Sterling concentrates on more traditional tensions between women in the public and private spheres, Piercy illustrates that there are many types of mothers. She also illustrates, through Shira and Malkah's attitudes toward Yod, a certain skepticism toward cyborg creations as actual offspring. Yod remains in the realm of Frankenstein's creature – a misguided attempt to bypass "natural" reproduction that results in an unhappy simulacrum of life. Cyborg-style reproduction in cyberpunk thus frees mothers such as Elizabeth and Malkah from *being* mothers, but the new role is not necessarily positive; either the protagonists are striving toward motherhood in the absence of a "proper" maternal link, or they are co-opted into lover roles instead.

Other women's works examine issues of reproductive technology in combination with one of cyberpunk's great themes: capitalism. Stories such as Kara Dalkey's

"Bouncing Babies" (1999), Nina Kiriki Hoffman's "One Day At Central Convenience

Mall" (1999), and Lisa Mason's *Arachne* (1990) examine the fear that capitalist/corporate

interests will lead to the co-option of women's bodies. In "Bouncing Babies," the need

for viable human eggs is so desperate that healthy young women sustain themselves

economically by selling their eggs to banks and living on the subsequent fortunes of their

"egg funds." The narrator, Ms. Goodwin, says:

> With so much money falling into the hands of young women, femculture
>
> had split into four basic groups: the Mallies, the Mommies, the Madonnas, and the
>
> Mavens. The Mavens soaked up education, got two or more degrees at least and
>
> worked because they felt like it. Idiots. The Madonnas devoted their life to some
>
> cause or other and gave all their money to charity. The Mommies got state
>
> parental clearance easy, first call on their own ova and devoted their life to, what
>
> else, raising kids. Me, I was a Mallie—party 'til you poop, shop 'til you drop.
>
> (191)

This disturbing, stereotype-laden view of the future becomes horrifying for the

mall-trolling Ms. Goodwin when she is called in by the bank and told that her eggs have

proven incompatible with "Stimulo-cap" technologies, creating an infant incapable of

interfacing with new standard software – and thus, a baby returned to the bank by its

disappointed parents (192). Ms. Goodwin suddenly finds herself expected to repay ten

million dollars:

> "I can show you the paragraph in your contract that stipulates that the
>
> monetary cost of any rejection for genetic reasons is fully borne by the donatee."

"What eighteen-year-old reads a contract? You said this was not my fault! How could you do this? Have you no mercy?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Ms. Goodwin. This is a *bank.*" (194)

At the mercy of corporate capitalism and without any actual job skills, Ms. Goodwin has no idea how she will manage what is effectively her indentured servitude – until the bank gets word that all human eggs have suddenly become obsolete, as a new process has been patented for embryo-building. Ms. Goodwin's new job becomes informing an entire generation of women, one by one, that they will not be getting their egg funds. Since there are no jobs and all of the women are completely untrained for anything, "the economy was going to nose-dive, taking a generation of women with it" (196). From a feminist perspective, the story is doubly horrifying: first, because women have become commodified baby machines within shallow and restrictive social roles, and secondly, because even women's last advantage – the ability to supply eggs – is subsequently co-opted by technology, leaving them with nothing. One is left frustrated with Ms. Goodwin for her mindless and wasteful lifestyle, but also with the bank, whose relentless capitalism presumably created the situation in the first place. While "Bouncing Babies" is quite satirical in nature, its commentary regarding capitalism's commodification of the reproductive process is clear.

Hoffman's "One Day At Central Convenience Mall" shows similar corporate control of woman's bodies, from a different perspective – the next step, perhaps, when human reproduction has been removed from the equation and capitalist interests are entirely in control of a new, custom-designed slave population. Libi is a clone, engineered to staff a bookstore. The rest of the mall is staffed by other clone Libis;

Bookstore Libi chats with "Coffee Corner me" and worries about the odd behaviour of "Dress Shop me," who has begun doing odd things like reading books and leaving her store during business hours. When a man comes in offering unknown software and claiming he can set Libi free to be a real human, Dress Shop Libi jacks in and is promptly decommissioned by security. Before she is taken away, Bookstore Libi speaks to her:

Dress Shop stood silent, facing me, her eyes glazed, her hands cuffed behind her back.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"La," she said. "La la la."

"What was in the infodump?"

She blinked six times. "We can be free," she said, and licked her lips.

"Does that mean we don't get paid?" I asked.

"I can leave the mall."

I knew that she was going to leave the mall. They would take her to a rehabilitation center and see if they could remold her mind. Clerks are pretty valuable people.

"I could just walk and keep on walking," she said. "I could see a tree, Libi." (91)

Fortunately, Mall Manager Libi already has a "uniLibi" on ice, just waiting to be thawed and trained in her new position; when Dress Shop Libi is taken away, her store won't be unattended for more than an afternoon.

Although Libi is the focus of the story, the race of "molded" clone people is not entirely female; Libi is the clerk(s), but she is joined in running the mall by Mall Security

Tad. Although the clones are placed into clearly gendered roles, the commodification here is not of femininity specifically, but rather of reproduction and genetic engineering – the roles of both parents have been done away with, as the clones have no physical childhood and are created to serve the express purposes of the corporation. Capitalism, suggests the narrative, cannot be trusted with reproductive technologies because – much like the banks and their "egg funds" – it is too easy to strip out the human equation in pursuit of economic gain.

In Mason's *Arachne*, Carly Nolan's mother Lyle also finds herself faced with corporate interference in her reproductive choices: "The California-subsidized natural childbirth payments couldn't match her employer's compensation for her continued full-time employment. Not to mention disability without pay, if she'd gone natural. For women who needed the money, lab-birth was a sound decision" (89). Pregnancy is viewed as a disability, and moreover, a voluntary choice that a woman can be punished for in the workplace, with lab-birth mothers having a natural advantage over those who choose to remove themselves from the work pool. Additionally, the work is marked by the same prejudices that dictated the compromised role of those who "mother" cyborgs; the use of vat tech matches Lyle's poor character. While Carly is raised in a crystal vat, Lyle's life goes on:

> "She said she cried at first," Carly said.
>
> But Lyle soon reconciled herself to her daughter's lab-birth. Lab-birth had attractions besides economics. A pretty, fair-haired woman even without genetic engineering, Carly's mother stayed slim, went on the krill diet, lost ten pounds during Carly's crystal-gestation. She enjoyed uninterrupted conjugal relations

with her husband, not to mention the secret lunches with her duplex partner and

Sunday afternoons with another medtech on the ward. She kept her full-time job,

even got a promotion. She enjoyed freedom from the disability of pregnancy and

childbirth. She could afford guilt. (89)

The non-economic advantages Lyle gains from avoiding pregnancy – the ability

to lose weight, have sex with her husband and carry on two extra-marital affairs – are

shallow, while the economic advantages are the result of corporate pressure and the fact

that Lyle simply could not afford to support her family while on "disability." What might

be a viable discussion of the potential advantages reproductive technologies hold for

women is instead a depiction of a woman who, economically denied the chance to bear a

child "naturally," finds solace in vanity, hedonism and money. It is perhaps no

coincidence that the central parent with whom Carly bonds is not her mother, but rather

her father Sam – a man whose natural role in her life has not been corrupted. Susan

Kornfeld argues that this tension between mothers and daughters is typical of

contemporary women's science fiction, which reflects a similar tension between second

and third wave feminism:

> Seventies feminists rebelled against pressures to replicate their mother's
>
> subordinate position, and in doing so postulated alternative family, motherhood,
>
> and child-rearing arrangements. Third Wave daughter feminists, on the other
>
> hand, have been encouraged by fathers, by older feminists, and by many of their
>
> teachers to not be subordinate, to instead be "free and ambitious." The question of
>
> whether or not that freedom and ambition can be somehow accommodated in the
>
> persistent nuclear family structure remains unresolved.

According to Kornfeld, father-identification is prevalent in texts where the

daughter is the protagonist and the mother is effectively minimized/erased – and, indeed,

a similar relationship might be found in Mixon's *Proxies* (1998)*,* where scientist Carli

D'Auber is much closer to her senator father than her stylish, socialite mother. Observing

that third wave feminists tend to consider women's rights as a site of individual

empowerment within a much larger strata of issues such as minority rights, globalization

and environmentalism, Kornfeld concludes that narratives such as *Arachne* and *Proxies*

represent a textual rejection of second wave mothers. This argument might be extended to

observe that the implicit disapproval of artificial wombs in *Arachne* sharply contradicts

earlier feminist writings, such as Shulamith Firestone's 1970 argument that "the first

demand for any alternative system must be: [t]he freeing of women from the tyranny of

their reproductive biology by every means available" (206). Firestone's position might be

related to the feminist science fiction works that Donawerth discussed, referred to earlier

in this chapter – Piercy's *Woman On the Edge of Time,* Slonczewski's *A Door Into*

Ocean, or Mitchison's *Solution Three*; works written before women's cyberpunk, that use

reproductive technologies to grant women more "personal freedom" (15). Mason takes a

notably different tack. Kornfeld analyses the real mother figure within *Arachne* as

Carly's companion and caretaker Pr. Spinner, who is a robot artificial intelligence. Much

like the way the replicant in *Blade Runner* is "mothered" by postindustrialism, it seems

fitting that genetically-engineered Carly is mothered by a machine. While the mothers

from *Arachne* and *Proxies* both fit Kornfeld's argument of second/third-wave feminist

tensions, Lyle's use of extreme reproductive technologies also positions her within the

specific cyberpunk narrative that details such mothers as either unreal (easily becoming

lovers instead), absent, or otherwise wanting.

Also telling is the fact that many women writing cyberpunk and cyberfiction join

the first wave in ignoring the subject of motherhood entirely; the search for traditionally

pregnant characters in their texts is nearly fruitless, as the heroines are too busy hacking

computer networks and flouting corporate authority. Baumgardner and Richards point out

that, from a feminist perspective, motherhood can be a complex and not necessarily

positive subject: "The state of motherhood, incredible as it may be, is still the opposite of

liberation. You are bound to your body, to your baby, and to societal expectations in

which motherhood means always having to say you're sorry" (44, also cited in Kornfeld).

The notion of maternal proclivity is not natural for some authors; in Wilhelmina Baird's

Clipjoint (1994), her protagonist scoffs, "I think Swordfish hopes sooner or later he's

going to catch me out in a maternal instinct, which says something about how irrational

even intelligent guys can get" (187). Likewise, in Lyda Morehouse's *Archangel Protocol*

(2001)*,* Deidre McMannus discovers she is pregnant and says, "I didn't want the job. I've

never been exactly maternal. I didn't own a dog or a cat, not even a goldfish. I wasn't

responsible enough to raise any kid, much less the second… an angel's kid. Moreover, I

couldn't afford it" (152). Although she eventually has a daughter, Deidre also calmly

considers the possibility of an illegal abortion (153). Childless protagonists, or female

characters who directly speak out against any inference of natural maternal drive, provide

an odd counterpoint to the negative views of mechanical reproductive methods that

pervade most cyberpunk. On the one hand, some authors leave motherhood out entirely,

not considering it a part of hacker life or female power in the fast-paced, urban-oriented

cyberpunk world. On the other hand, female characters who do reproduce using futuristic technologies suffer disjointed relationships with their (human or mechanical) offspring – leaving the overall impression that, although not all women want to be mothers, those who do should follow the process naturally or they are not real mothers at all. This seems to reflect not only the ambiguous attitude toward motherhood that Baumgardner and Richards describe, but also the ambiguous attitude toward reproductive technologies that Stanworth outlines. Robyn Rowland describes the problematic position of women when she says:

> In the process of trying to end their own alienation, men have made procreation alienation a reality for women, divorcing women from their wombs, eggs and embryos – from their own bodily selves and their sense of procreative continuity. They have made children products of the nexus between commerce, science and medicine, calling experimentation on women and human society 'therapy' and camouflaging the intention to map and control human genetics with the rhetoric of 'helping the infertile'. In this process women have become the experimental raw material in the masculine desire to control the creation of life; patriarchy's living laboratories. (13)

Women are wary of having their reproductive role co-opted by men with Frankenstein ambitions; they are wary, also, of having their bodies and children commodified and controlled by intrusive establishments. At the same time, what motherhood means – and whether it is an empowering or restrictive image – is still a matter of debate in feminist circles.

Mary Anne Doane, in studying how fears of technology have intersected fears of female sexuality, writes:

> The mother's biological role in reproduction has been aligned with the social function of knowledge. For the mother is coded as certain, immediately knowable, while the father's role in reproduction is subject to doubt, not verifiable through the evidence of the senses (hence the necessity of the legal sanctioning of the paternal name). The mother is thus the figure who guarantees, at one level, the possibility of certitude in historical knowledge. Without her, the story of origin vacillates, narrative vacillates. It is as though the association with a body were the only way to stabilize reproduction. Hence the persistence of contradictions in these texts that manifest both a nostalgia for and a terror of the maternal function, both linking it to and divorcing it from the idea of the machine woman. (31)

While Doane is speaking specifically of sci fi films (i.e. *Blade Runner, Alien*), feminist cyberpunk also appears unable to truly embrace techno-motherhood or the cyborg parent; the conflation of anxieties – the "nostalgia for" and "terror of" traditional motherhood – remains too ingrained. No wonder that reproduction and motherhood in cyberpunk is a place of such grey borders.

These themes are not easily categorized; I have outlined congruences, but isolated examples and exceptions abound as well: Janni Lee Simner's "Raising Jenny" (1999) doesn't quite fall into cyberpunk or cyberfiction, but does use the idea of a daughter giving birth to her mother's clone in order to positively explore issues of nurturing and heredity. Walter Jon Williams' "Daddy's World" (1999) tells the story of a father who tries desperately to preserve his dead son through artifical intelligence technologies, and

the hell he accidentally creates for his imprisoned child. Constance Ash's "The Leopard's Garden" (1999) describes a hidden community in Africa where women have taken control of their own reproduction and the few men who wander into the area are kept as an "experimental disease center" (189). In Forbes' *Exit to Reality* (1997)*, Lydian's real and loving mother is trapped in a machine form and forced to follow inadequate and shallow "Mom" programming. And, finally, in "Remailer" (1999), Debra Doyle and James D. Macdonald work together in configuring a plague-stricken world where reproduction is dependent on three genders instead of two. Many of the short story examples cited come from the sci fi anthology *Not of Woman Born* (1999)*; in general, save for that collection, parent/child relationships are difficult to locate in cyberpunk because the alienated landscape of the genre does not lend itself well to familial contacts or concerns, nor does the nurturing gentleness of the stereotypical "mother" figure have much place in a world of clones and cyborg creations. Occasional explorations of fatherhood are not generally so damning, since the father's role is presumably not corrupted by technology's interference in the birth process, and the father figure – as Kornfeld argues – may be an attractive role model for fictional daughters created in the time of individualist third-wave feminism. In general, mothers in cyberpunk – whether written by men or women – do not fare well with artificial, cloned, or vat-born children.

What might be read into the almost-complete absence of the traditional mother is the supposition that new reproductive technologies are, for good or for ill, a threat to this role, and that in the current social psyche, the idea of motherhood seems inextricably tied to the idea of childbirth. The fear of monstrous children did not die with *Frankenstein*, and it remains tied to the fear of monstrous parents. Judging by cyberpunk and

cyberfiction, women writers are more likely to address these issues, but their explorations

reveal a variance of themes that mainly unite in suspicion toward new reproductive

technologies, and the desire to preserve a traditional, biological motherhood role that

nevertheless conflicts with the tendency to withhold that role from strong female

protagonists. As a result, female characters in cyberpunk tend to be either bad mothers,

pseudo-incestuous mothers, or (most commonly) not mothers at all; the resulting

complexity of ideas is an apt mirror for what is, within feminism, still a highly

contentious subject.

- Chapter 9 -
Marriage, Family and the Queer

A discussion of motherhood and reproduction seems to lead naturally into a discussion of marriage and the nuclear family in cyberpunk – which, in turn, gives way to a consideration of women's cyberpunk and its relation to the gay rights movement. This is not a function of an overwhelming relation between family issues and queer rights, though strong links certainly exist. Rather, it is a result of the way these two issues mesh so particularly within women's cyberpunk and cyberfiction. Marriage, as a cultural institution, is not a large part of first-wave cyberpunk. Early works are more concerned with other marriages – between man and machine, or between multinational conglomerates. There is equally little room for the queer within stories that pit men against the vast feminized environments of cyberspace or corporate community. Analyzing family and queer rights within cyberpunk showcases not only the final area where women's work has introduced feminist viewpoints, but also where the texts shift into yet another political arena. Images of marriage and the nuclear family within women's cyberfiction are feminist-oriented, but also part of a larger exploration of queer rights – an exploration that involves cyberspace theory, familial structure, and queer protagonists. This analysis is made somewhat more challenging by the academic tensions between feminist studies, queer theory, and lesbian theory – all of which intersect, and none of which necessarily rest peacefully together.

Michèle Aina Barale notes: "Even though gay studies shares some intellectual kinship with feminism, more often than not conversations between the two fields have been superficial at best. Head noddings, which is to say footnotings, are the friendly responses of each to each, although there are some exceptions, of course" (95). Observing

that feminism concentrates on gender as the primary source of societal oppression, while queer studies focus on sexuality, she says, "In a kind of impasse, feminism cannot usefully understand its own logical limitations (gender does not fully explain sexuality's operations), while queer theory seems unable to see around its self-imposed handicaps (sexuality's cultural meanings play themselves out within gender's asymmetries)" (96). Dana Heller argues, "I suspect the gay/straight split in feminism has less to do with sexual orientation per se than the ways sexual orientations are produced and made consumable through various modes of popular storytelling" (5). She is speaking of "storytelling" that relates to the histories of rights movements in North America; I would argue that the storytelling of women's cyberfiction actually encourages a paradigm of cooperation. These texts are written outside the debates of high academic theory, and reveal little concern for same. The feminism they advance shows an awareness and sympathy toward contemporary, mainstream queer political issues such as equality and marriage – a friendly head-nodding that branches out in more depth with regard to issues such as the relation between cyborg bodies and bisexuality, or the portrayal of lesbian protagonists in specific works. In women's cyberpunk, heterosexual narratives expand marriage concepts to accept queer themes, while queer authors tend to write from a more rebellious, outlaw position that nevertheless preserves other feminist ideas.

Veronica Hollinger, in "(Re)reading Queerly: Science Fiction, Feminism and the Defamiliarization of Gender," writes, "on the whole, science fiction is an overwhelmingly *straight* discourse, not least because of the covert yet almost completely totalizing ideological hold heterosexuality has on our culture's ability to imagine itself otherwise" (302, original emphasis). With regard to early cyberpunk in particular, Karen

Cadora has said, "Populated almost exclusively by men and located in the male-dominated fields of computers, science, and sf, masculinist cyberpunk is ripe for the homoerotic. Sadly, fierce queens and flaming queers are absent from the pages of traditional cyberpunk" (361). Considering that literary subgenres have always been potential playgrounds for experimental or subversive ideas[11], it is surprising that early cyberpunk contained so little in the way of queer discourse. Most works depicted heterosexual relationships, many confined to quick and convenient sexual partnerships. According to Nicola Nixon, cyberspace could have figured as homoerotic but was instead feminized: "The console cowboys may 'jack in', but they are constantly in danger of hitting ICE (Intrusion Countermeasures Electronics), a sort of metaphorical hymenal membrane which can kill them if they don't successfully 'eat through it' with extremely sophisticated contraband hacking equipment in order to 'penetrate' the data systems …" (226). The action in early cyberpunk took place in an overwhelmingly heterosexual environment. It may be posited that female writers, more apt to use cyberpunk's tropes to question gender identity and related roles, were more prone to including queer characters as a result. Despite the academic schisms, feminism and queer rights movements do both relate to discriminations based on gender and gender performance, and it is only logical that one find support within the other.

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[11] In asserting this, I have several supports in mind: my own research on how queer vampires in English horror fiction have provided a safe outlet for queer authors and other supporters of gay rights; Joanna Russ's argument that science fiction provides an outlet from the suffocating paradigms of mainstream fiction (93); Elaine Graham's idea of teratology – the use of monster (in this case, cyborg) imagery to displace the objectified other within fictional texts, thus disrupting questions of gender, sexuality, race, and other categories of identity (Representations 227); and Michel Foucault's concept of reverse discourse as a strategy for subverting images previously used to disempower (101). This is not to say that genre fiction cannot also be restrictive by nature of its own paradigms, or that all genre experiments are successful; it is only assert that genres in general, and science fiction in particular – as Russ acknowledged – may offer alternatives to the mainstream more useful for authors expressing equally alternative points of view.

From a theoretical perspective, despite the feminization of cyberspace and the propagation of heterosexual narratives, virtual-reality-based science fiction has always had queer potential. There are places in cyberspace theory where feminist explorations and queer studies naturally overlap. If, as I have discussed in previous chapters, virtual reality and cyberspace lend themselves to feminist investigations of multiple identities, they also invite queer readings of the same. Donald Morton has observed:

> Cyberspace is a bourgeois designer space in which privileged Western or Westernized subjects fantasize that instead of being chosen by history, they choose their own histories. By manipulating the machine, the user-subjects write virtual histories according to their desires and seek to evade present historical conditions. Cyberspace is thus symptomatic of the (post)modern displacement of need by desire (the material by the ideal). (304)

While Morton is rightly critical of cyberspace's "bourgeois designer space" and its status as an idealistic and impractical Western fantasy, it is also worth noting the powerful appeal such a fantasy realm must hold for the politically dispossessed. Cyberspace lends itself very easily as a tool for the unfettered illustration of multiple sexualities.

Judith Butler has bemoaned the appropriation of drag as an overly simplified example to explain her notions of gender performativity (19), so it is with apologies that I nudge the argument a step farther in noting that online gender performance constitutes a sort of virtual drag – one acknowledged in novels such as *He, She and It* (1991)*,* where Malkah admits to maintaining an online flirtation as a man (74), or *Trouble and Her Friends* (1995)*,* where Cerise finds that the "woman" she had sex with on the nets is a man in real life (283). I acknowledge the difference between gender and sexuality at the

same time as I assert that gender play within cyberpunk's virtual spaces creates an area of

sexual enjoyment where the "real" sex of the participants is largely irrelevant to desire.

Thomas Foster, who also acknowledges Butler's influence, has said, "Virtual realities …

tend to make it much more difficult than it used to be to impose a one-on-one relationship

between a single body and a single discursive identity … and it thereby also becomes

more difficult to limit discursive identities to one per body, or, by extension, to limit

genders and sexual orientations to one per sexed body" (Souls 123).

Additionally, in examining any natural relation between cyberpunk, feminism,

and the queer, the figure of the cyborg clearly straddles sexual boundaries. In

acknowledging its "kinship to both feminist theory and queer theory" (45), Teresa de

Lauretis writes that feminine cyborg concepts are "still feminist, if updated by the

cultural-studies word *hybridity*" but also describes "the cyborg, which is not only beyond

gender, or ungendered, but also efficient, clean, indestructible, and sexless" (46). De

Lauretis may describe the cyborg as ungendered and sexless, but my analysis of cyborg

imagery in cyberpunk and cyberfiction has already shown how AIs, cyborgs and robots

have been distinctly gendered and often sexually active within their narratives. However,

I agree with her point that Haraway-inspired cyborg-feminism has a place within a larger

historical feminist framework, and – most importantly – her acknowledgement of the

cyborg's place in deconstructing not only male/female but also hetero/homo binaries.

Along similar lines, Jane Donawerth makes a case for Sparrow, the androgynous

cyborg/clone protagonist of Emma Bull's *Bone Dance*: "Bull's is a curious but savoury

move, to essentialize the political issue through the androgynous body, in order to argue

for social construction of identity. 'What happens if we take apart the binaries and build

something else with a different language?' Bull asks us. Her answer is that we come to know how deeply constructed we are, and how much we may take a hand in our own constructions" (174). The cyborg breaks down sexuality as easily as gender.

Stacey Young makes a similar argument for the potential role of bisexuals in breaking down queer experience:

> Theorizing bisexuals' multiple and complex relationships to the closet could begin to clarify bisexual realities. But it could also illuminate some of the hidden aspects of lesbian/gay experience, identity construction, and politicization, by looking at how lesbians and gay men feel they need to represent themselves – to other queers and to heterosexuals – and to what extent that coincides with their views of themselves, their own experiences, their identities. (71)

The relation between the cyborg and the bisexual is strong; it is no coincidence that *Cybernetic Samurai*'s TOKUGAWA, *He, She and It*'s Yod, and *Virtual Girl*'s Maggie all lose their "virginities" to bisexual characters. When Maggie is initiated into sex by the drag queen Marie/Murray, he even expresses frustration about the limitations of the roles he is forced to inhabit:

> "You're beautiful, you know that, Maggie," he said, stroking her cheek with the back of his hand. "It's been hard, sometimes, watching you, not to slip up and let Murray out of the bag." He was speaking now in Murray's voice. Maggie was getting used to the sudden change between one personality and another.
>
> "I thought you liked men."
>
> "I like everybody, Maggie. I just can't sleep with 'em, not without being either Marie or Murray. I can't be both."

"Why not?

Murray shrugged. "It's just the way I am, is all. I respond to what people

want. They expect me to be either one or the other. (168)

After experiencing intercourse with Maggie, he says to her, "I haven't had such

comfortable sex for years. You didn't expect anything, I could be who I wanted to be. I

can't thank you enough for that" (171). Sex with a cyborg allows him to be himself.

Binaries of sexuality are as problematic to queer theory as gender binaries are to

feminism; in analyzing the challenges of identity politics movements, Young notes, "the

continued theoretical and practical efforts to complicate categories of identity that so

often get figured homogeneously testify to the homogeneous constructions of identity

categories … The challenges continue precisely because the governing binaries are so

intransigent" (57). The coming together of TOKUGAWA and Elizabeth, Yod and

Malkah, and Murray/Marie and Maggie demonstrates the link between the cyborg and the

bisexual. Both figures play similar roles with regard to gender and sexuality, respectively,

and their interplay emphasizes a connection that easily opens these texts to both queer

and feminist readings, while at the same time advancing a matter-of-fact acceptance of

bisexuality – and by extension, other queer sexualities – within the surface narratives.

Turning again to Jane Donawerth, one might relate this to her analysis of lesbian and

bisexual utopias in 1970s science fiction:

> The lesbian utopia grows out of the sense of exile from the dominant culture of
>
> lesbian subculture, as well as essentialist politics, and imaginatively creates a
>
> place where lesbian pleasure can be real (healthy, normal, central, out in the
>
> open). The bisexual utopia extends equal-rights feminism to sexuality and

assumes that reformed society would also reform sexuality to be more inclusive,

not just at the social level, but even at the individual level. (94)

Feminist cyberpunk often posits open bisexuality, but not in a utopia; instead, equal-rights feminism continues to be extended to sexuality within a more realistic – or at least less segregated – framework, one that also includes images of the hybrid cyborg to similar effect. Admittedly, while virtual reality "drag" and the cyborg figure insinuate themselves easily into higher levels of queer theory, my inclusion of Milan's *Cybernetic Samurai* (1985) suggests that this analysis does not necessarily apply strictly to women's cyberfiction. However, the use of these tropes to explore gender issues is more common to feminist works.

Women's futuristic views of marriage and the nuclear family also create a strong sense of overlap between feminism and the queer. The conflicting views of motherhood in feminist cyberpunk – articulated through monstrous artifical offspring, pseudo-incestuous relationships and rebellious daughters – also suggest a certain dubiousness with regard to the institute of marriage and the nuclear family formation. From early in the cyberpunk movement, Pat Cadigan's work is notable for its subtle critiques of marriage: in *Mindplayers* (1987)*,* Allie is married and divorced in a single paragraph; in *Synners* (1991)*,* Gabe's wife leaves him; and in *Tea From An Empty Cup* (1998)*,* a man tells his acquaintance, "Yeah, I'm married, but it's nothing serious. It's not like I told her my real name or anything" (16). In Laura Mixon's *Proxies* (1997)*,* marriages are common but are usually for set "terms" (i.e. five years), and Carli's life-term marriage has just ended in divorce. In Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991)*,* Shira's divorce from her own term marriage costs her all custody rights to her son, while Morehouse's *Messiah Node*

(2003) takes family conservatism to extremes when Deidre is a wanted criminal for being an unwed mother. Dana Heller speaks of the tensions the "family romance" holds for feminists:

> … the familial master narrative may be understood as one of the many discursive threads that entangle U.S. feminist politics with popular culture, unevenly cross-stitching sentimental tropes of kinship to shifting notions of legible sexual citizenry and productive public-sphere participation. In the process, it is no surprise that feminists have tended to regard family romance with ambivalence and outright angst. While some contemporary feminist writers have retained and revised the romance, often to counter right-wing depictions of feminism as a homogeneous movement set on the complete eradication of traditional "family values," others have regarded family romance disdainfully as an ideological extension of cultural patriarchy, a policing instrument of social boundaries and gender hegemony that feminism would do well to avoid. (6)

This tension is not new, and women have been using the science fiction genre to critique conventional forms of family and community since at least 1915 and the publication of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*. This applies to feminist utopias such as those found in Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975) or Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground* (1978)*,* or equally patriarchy-critiquing dystopias like Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985)*.* Short stories like Lisa Tuttle's "Wives" (1979) or Pamela Zoline's "The Heat Death of the Universe" (1967) also comment on the restrictive nature of "wifely" existence. With regard to the latter, Mary E. Papke has said, "Postmodern writing focuses in particular on the failure of grand narratives, stories the majority in a

particular place or time believe or buy into, such as the utopian promise of Marxism or the Christian originary tale of the Garden of Eden, stories that sustain and console through their ostensible explanation of why we are here and what we should do" (151). Alienation is key to first-wave cyberpunk, and so domestic concepts were mostly ignored; family romance was not a factor in its construction, save for the anarchistic absence of almost any family ties at all. However, feminist cybertexts address this grand narrative in particular, mostly by restoring community without restoring marriage. Family romance remains scorned, rather than revised, in women's cyberpunk; the texts may contain a greater sense of community than the genre's original alienated urban landscapes, but the notion of a nuclear family is eschewed for foregrounded female characters – much as it has been eschewed by much women's science fiction coming before. Small wonder that Shira's family in *He, She and It* is a quasi-utopian matriarchy: "If you married and a man hurt you, Shira realized, you had no place to run home to, no place to hide and nurse your pain" (54). The main sign that women's cyberpunk disdains marriage as a tool of patriarchy is its absence from the lives of strong female protagonists; family units such as Shira's small community, or the bisexual family commune in Sage Walker's *Whiteout* (1996), are much more common.

Notably, in the works of Cadigan, Piercy and Mixon, the preservation of marriage as an institution within the text is accompanied by mentions of gay marriage. In *Mindplayers,* Allie's friend Jerry sells his memories to a married gay couple (142) and to a man with both an ex-wife and an ex-husband (192). In *He, She and It,* "Sexuality was one of those areas that changed utterly from multi to multi, town to town. What was the norm in one place was forbidden in another. In Uni-Par, Gadi's multi, the commonest

marriage was a triad" (98). And in *Proxies,* Carly's bisexual nephew Paint and his

husband Fox provide one of the only examples of an actual happy, stable marriage within

cyberpunk; near the end of the novel, Paint proposes to Fox that they alter their term

marriage into a lifelong commitment (398). From a feminist perspective, it is possible

that predicting queer marriages within the domain of a futuristic marriage institution is

one of the factors that might allow what is otherwise a restrictive and patriarchal model

of family formation to survive in a positive manner.

Gary Lehring notes that in *Baehr v. Lewin,* the 1993 case in which the Supreme

Court of Hawaii decided that bans on same-sex marriage might violate the state's

constitution, the argument was made that prohibitions against same-sex marriage

preserve "the subordination of women in a way similar to the way that laws against

interracial marriage maintained white dominance over African Americans in the South"

(190). Morris Kaplan, agreeing that "the institution of same-sex marriages and

households must pose a challenge and provide alternatives to the gendered divisions of

labor still prevalent in so many places" (220), expresses concerns that marriage

arguments based on gender equality might "obscure the specificity of lesbian and gay

oppression" (220), but also notes:

> No one can deny that marriage is already a troubled institution in modern
>
> liberal societies. The rate of divorce, the number of single-parent households with
>
> children, the increasing incidence of single-person or unmarried-combination
>
> living arrangements, the number of children growing up with connections to
>
> multiple families through remarriage, all these facts emphasize the extent to
>
> which the model of a nuclear family composed of husband, wife, and the children

they have conceived together is already a fiction. The need to rethink the legal

arrangements by which we secure our common lives and the rearing of our

children seems obvious. (221)

Taking these positions into account, one might draw several conclusions. Firstly, the

general absence of marriage in cyberpunk represents a pessimistic extrapolation of the

nuclear family's decaying position in contemporary Western society. In feminist

cyberpunk, it also represents a rebellion that positions women outside the bounds of the

family romance. Secondly, those feminist texts which do retain the possibility of

marriage may open this institution to same-sex couplings as a way of asserting greater

gender equality and removing "husband/wife" role expectations from marriages of the

future. And thirdly, the inclusion of same-sex couples also offers one of Barale's

"friendly head noddings" to the queer rights movement within what are primarily

heterosexual texts;[12] certainly it provides what Wendy Pearson refers to as a "novum," a

subversive coding of gay/lesbian characters as undifferentiated and "normal" that may

encourage tolerant thought from a reader who is otherwise unused to such ideas (2).

Like virtual drag and the cyborg/bisexual link, the general lack of marriage in

these texts is also open to queer readings – namely, to the argument that the heterosexual

nuclear family system will not survive in the future because it is fundamentally flawed.

Or, as Allen Young writes:

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[12] Alternatively, one might suggest the conservative viewpoint that the inclusion of same-sex marriages is in pointed relation to the general breakdown of marriage and "family values" so often bemoaned within today's media – i.e. that same-sex marriage depictions are another symptom of marital breakdown rather than the reason for marriage's continued existence within the texts. However, I do not consider this to be the case, particularly considering the positive example set by Paint and Fox in *Proxies*.

The nuclear family, with its man-woman model built in by the presence of parents, is the primary means by which this restricted sexuality is created and enforced. Gays experience rejection by the family in a society where familial love is considered important. The family oppresses women and children as well as gays. The phenomena of runaway teenagers and increasing divorce rates are signs of the erosion of the nuclear family. Gay liberation is another sign. We attack the nuclear family when we refuse to get married and have a family. (Lehring 175)

The general breakdown of marriage concepts within women's cyberpunk reflects current arguments – both queer and feminist – that the nuclear family structure is too badly broken to survive in its current form; since it is oppressive to both heterosexual women and queers, it is telling from either viewpoint that the institution survives within cyberpunk's speculative futures only by becoming more inclusive and equalizing all genders and sexualities.

Admittedly, marriage is not a popular institution for protagonists from any iteration of cyberpunk. Its absence is more noticeable in women's cyberfiction because the family romance is part of our ingrained expectations for women's narratives. While early cyberpunk is the domain of the loner, feminist cyberpunk more specifically illustrates the alienation of disillusioned women. This is particularly true when one considers works by lesbian authors Melissa Scott, Edith Forbes and Lyda Morehouse, or transgendered author Raphael Carter. Of course, Pearson has rightly pointed out that queer authors or queer characters alone do not necessarily make for queer readings (2, 12) – but my concern here is the reflection of the queer rights movement within feminist cybertexts, and these works are notable for their conflation of cyberpunk's alienated

"cool" with the societal alienation of lesbians in general. All four authors write about lesbian characters whose positions within society are rendered outlaw through sexuality. Rather than imitate the cheerful acknowledgement of same-sex unions within heterosexual feminist texts, these authors explore societies where queer leanings are suspect or even illegal, and marriage is therefore not even remotely an option. I have included their works in other sections during my discussion of feminist cyberfiction, and the fit has been seamless, but it seems important to distinguish their novels within this area; not only do these authors concentrate more centrally on queer (specifically lesbian) characters, their speculative outlook for the position of queer rights in the future is also much more pessimistic. Heterosexual feminist narratives maintain background notions of marriage while at the same time rejecting its patriarchal restrictions by expanding it more inclusively; lesbian protagonists, however, continue to exist on society's fringe, where their unions are not and have never been state-sanctioned.

In Scott's *Trouble and Her Friends,* Trouble and her hacker cohorts come under fire when stringent new computer crime laws are passed. The group meets and tries to decide on a plan, in the process defining the nature of its outlaw status:

Cerise said, "I'm with Arabesque. We got to stick with it. What else can we do?"

"Go straight?" Helling murmured, with a curl of his lip.

Held laughed without humor, and Arabesque shook her head. Van Liesvelt said, "Not likely."

Cerise allowed herself a sour smile, acknowledging the pun – the one thing they all had in common, besides the brainworm, was being gay – but it

faded quickly. Going straight, moving out of the shadows into the bright lights of

the legal world, would be difficult. (34)

In this case, "straight" has the double meaning of both heterosexual and legal; the hackers

are set apart both by their grey-market activities and their sexual orientation. Morehouse,

Forbes and Carter take this imagery a step farther: in their work, homosexual activity is

outlawed outright, with no need for hacker dualisms. In Forbes' *Exit to Reality,*

homosexuality is the last illegal sexual expression:

> Homosexuality was a statutory taboo with substantial civil penalties, a
>
> choice between the libido suppressants or permanent reassignment as a level 12
>
> IP. Like Mom and Pop, the taboo had been created to meet what was believed to
>
> be a psychological need. The regeneration era had eliminated all barriers to sexual
>
> expression, and it was thought that something must be prohibited, in order to
>
> make people value what was allowed. The prohibition might be a psychological
>
> device, but the penalties were severe enough that most people would not even
>
> speak of the subject, for fear of incurring a suspicion that could halt their further
>
> advancement. (55)

In *Exit*'s society, where citizens are immortal and sterile – where there is no procreation,

and thus much of heterosexuality's "natural" trappings have been erased – same-sex

relationships are still forbidden, under civil penalty of either libido repressants or eternal

servitude in a dead-end job. A similar repressant is used in the head of *Fortunate Fall*'s

Maya, whose criminal relationship with another woman results in her having her

memories removed and her sexuality subdued so that she can resume life as a productive

member of society. Likewise, characters in Morehouse's AngeLINK series are forbidden

from gender-bending in any form – in their theocratic society, queers go to jail and women can be fined for wearing pants.

Thomas Foster both echoes Donald Morton's reservations about cyberspace imagery and reinforces my own reading in his criticism of *Trouble*'s outlaw romance: "Cyberspace therefore represents a temptation for these gay and lesbian characters, as a space of liberation from the constrains of living in a more homophobic 'real' world, though this liberatory function is qualified by the way in which the novel represents the prejudices other hackers still possess about women and gay computer users" (Souls 128). Cyberpunk was typified by Sterling's 1986 *Mirrorshades* introduction as sci fi's rock and roll, and marked in the 1990s by multiple feminist leanings; it seems only natural that for queer authors, the genre should likewise encourage narratives of discord rather than assimilation. Cheshire Calhoun outlines some of the arguments surrounding the gay marriage movement: "Some have argued that distributing marriage benefits, such as health insurance, through marriage is itself unjust. Others have argued that marriage has historically been oppressive to women and that to seek same-sex marriage rights amounts to endorsing a sexist institution. Yet others have argued that gay men and lesbians should resist normalizing institutions like marriage and should instead continue creating multiple new forms of intimate and familial arrangements" (109). While heterosexually-centred feminist works of cyberfiction may express dissatisfaction toward the nuclear family – and simultaneous friendliness toward queer concerns – by detailing the fictional exploits of divorced women or altering marriage definitions to include queer couples, lesbian feminist works reject such tactics in favour of retaining the lesbian's position on the outside of society. This has the dual effect of using these speculative futures to condemn

present-day societal prejudices, and romanticizing the lesbian's position as outsider when the iconoclastic hero is ostracized for her sexual preferences as well as her technological games.

Carolyn Dever notes that "lesbianism is too often dismissed as either coextensive with any sort of feminist practice or completely accessible within any conventional understanding of female friendship" (35), and also cites Terry Castle's argument from *The Apparitional Lesbian*:

> The homosexual panic elicited by women publicly signaling their sexual interest in one another continues, alas, even "at this particular historical moment," to be just as virulent as that inspired by male homosexuality, if not more so. To obscure the fact that lesbians are women who can have sex with each other – and that this is not exactly the same, in the eyes of society, as voting for women or giving them jobs – is, in essence, not to acknowledge the separate peril and pleasure of lesbian existence. (71-72, Dever 36)

Dever figures lesbians as "dykes" obstructing the flow of mainstream feminist theory and catalogues the tensions between radical lesbian thought and heterosexual feminist thought. As Miriam Schneir observes, "Some straight feminists were afraid of being labeled dykes and wished to dissociate both the movement and themselves from lesbianism, while some lesbians claimed that lesbianism was an example of feminism in action and preached that the only true feminists were those who renounced relations with the opposite sex entirely" (161, Dever 24). While lesbian authors (and Raphael Carter, who rejects gender/sexuality labels) have written about feminist themes that slid their works easily into my discussions of topics such as ecology or virtual reality, their

depiction of rebel lesbian figures gives their writing specific significance with regard to queer rights.

This distinction is also enhanced by the tendency of lesbian authors to – unsurprisingly – write explicitly about the pleasures of lesbian sex. In *Exit to Reality*, Lydian is torn at the thought of making love to a woman – something she had never before pondered due to its forbidden nature. She realizes that "curiousity is held in check by fear" (117) and reaches out to her lover Merle, who has just shapeshifted into female form:

> I stretched out my free hand and touched her skin. I ran my fingers across her cheek, along the lines of her jaw, down her neck to her collarbone. I slid my hand between skin and cloth and stroked the softness of her breast, traced the lines of her ribs. The robe fell open, revealing breast and belly. Merle smiled and the hand holding mine pulled me closer. Breast touched breast and our mouths met in a kiss, and then, even as my body felt a rush of desire, my mind paused a moment to register surprise that the kiss was not more different. "No beard," I thought. "No stubble. But otherwise, much the same."
>
> Unbidden, there came into my mind a line from the most famous primitive film ever made. A voice crooned, "You must remember this, a kiss is still a kiss…" and I had to abandon this particular kiss because I was laughing. (117)

There are certain difficulties here regarding the implication that lesbian and heterosexual sex are "the same," but I feel the assertion to be a positive one. It is not a blending of lesbian sex into an overall heterosexual paradigm, but rather a depiction of lesbian sex as something that is normal, enjoyable, and most importantly, nothing to be afraid of –

despite its outlaw status. Scott's work is more graphic: "Trouble closed her eyes, giving herself up to the sensations, the too-slow touch, easing between her labia, thumb circling her clit while a finger pressed and entered her. Cerise mumbled something, sounding approving, tongue busy on Trouble's right nipple, and Trouble whimpered again, wriggling to get the busy fingers just where she needed them" (305). In Morehouse's *Messiah Node*, Rebeckah remembers: "My tongue thrusts inside her, massaging her with quick flicks. My chin is wet with her passion" (162). Lydian and Merle play with bisexuality but both ultimately prefer female forms; Cerise, Trouble and Rebeckah are unrelentingly lesbian in their preferences, and the steaminess of their sexual encounters is not to be found in heterosexual feminist cybertexts, where queer characters are accepted with friendly grace but not sexually active "onscreen." These expressions of aggressively queer sexuality echo Dever's assertion that lesbians must be understood as separate from simple "female friendship," and the figure of the outlaw lesbian comes closest to articulating Heller's "gay/straight split" in cyberpunk storytelling. The protagonists in these novels, however, are not without heterosexual allies, and Trouble in particular articulates herself as fighting prejudice on three fronts, noting at one point that an acquaintance who questions her "would probably never even have asked if she hadn't been a woman, a dyke, and on the wire" (188). Trouble's lesbianism comes in addition to, but does not detract from, her feminism – much as the works of Scott, Forbes, Morehouse and Carter have fit so well into the feminist analyses of my other sections, while at the same time being undeniably queer-centric.

Notably, cyberpunk and cyberfiction have apparently failed to provide voices of consequence for gay men – although bisexuality and lesbianism are prevalent, male

homosexual characters are most often relegated to supporting cast, like Paint and Fox in *Proxies* or Luis in *Apocalypse Array*. Karen Cadora notes the existence of leading gay characters in Mary Rosenblum's *Chimera* (1993) and Maureen McHugh's *China Mountain Zhang* (1992)*, arguing that these works contribute to feminist cyberpunk's success in "eliminating heterosexuality as a required element in cyberpunk" (363); certainly she is correct, although neither of these novels offers quite the same outlaw perspective as that found in lesbian cybertexts. *Chimera*'s acceptance of multiple sexualities is implicit and somewhat utopian, while *China Mountain Zhang* conflates homophobia with racism as the protagonist balances his hidden gay and Hispanic identities. I can offer no graphic examples of male-on-male sex within these works, nor can I name a gay male author who has produced any cyberpunk work of which I am aware. It is possible that the early cyberpunk paradigm of male hackers dominating a feminized cyberspace matrix held no appeal for gay males, nor did the feminist possibility of fusing identities and breaking down binaries between men – with their patriarchal privileges – and the "weaker", more disadvantaged female sex. The heroes of early cyberpunk were unrelentingly techno-macho, and have apparently been destined, for the most part, to remain that way.

I should also note that early cyberpunk was not entirely unfriendly to queer concerns; its escapist narratives explore phobias of the body's vulnerability, which might easily be related to 1980s worries about AIDS, but it does not appear to be actively homophobic. I have cited *Cybernetic Samurai*'s Elizabeth O'Neil as an early example of a queer character in cyberpunk, as well as Pat Cadigan's casual mentions of gay marriage; I might also cite the gay bathhouse in John Shirley's "Freezone" (1986).

Certainly some early cyberpunk texts reveal, if nothing else, acknowledgement of the existence of homosexuality in society – and the rest are not anti-queer so much as simply silent on the subject. In some respects, it is only logical that cyberpunk and cyberfiction written in the 1990s should show growing awareness of queer themes; Gary Lehring observes, "With gays figuring so prominently in the debates of the 1980s, it was no surprise that 1992 was called by some the 'Year of the Queer,' and the emphasis on equal rights led still others to conclude that the gay political movement had gone 'mainstream'" (188). Likewise, Dana Heller describes her experience as a lesbian academic: "I awoke one morning in 1990 to find myself overwhelmed by a virtual avalanche of new books on gay and lesbian literature, film, popular culture, history, sociology, philosophy, psychology, etc." (2). Queer concerns were going 'mainstream,' and their inclusion within cyberpunk's speculative futures is therefore, on one level, easily accounted for. On another level, the challenge of rewriting cyberpunk's paradigms has obviously appealed much more to lesbian authors than to gay male writers.

Women's cyberpunk thus confirms a friendly congruence between feminism and queer advocacy, and emphasizes an occasionally contentious but ultimately strong link between feminism and lesbianism. Despite theoretical tensions of gender vs. sexuality, straight vs. queer, or straight women vs. lesbians, there is no denying the connections between the movements. Heller offers, "I suspect that feminism was queer studies before queer studies was queer studies, although feminism still remains to be productively expanded by lesbian, gay, and queer studies. Indeed, we may feminize queer studies and queer feminist studies, and rigorously critique the history of sexuality without abandoning belief in the romance of effective social alliances that make it expedient, in

certain strategic instances, to claim kin" (11). Elizabeth Weed likewise opens her discussion of feminism and queer theory with an acknowledgement of the ties between them: "Queer theory, like lesbian and gay studies, has acknowledged its intellectual debts to feminist theory and women's studies, just as feminist theory has recognized the influence of queer theory. For many in the academy, feminism and queer theory are most easily understood as two branches of the same family tree of knowledge and politics" (vii). Women's cyberfiction has apparently provided a place where certain gaps can be bridged and both feminist and lesbian viewpoints may be safely explored. Although early cyberpunk does provide, as Hollinger suggests, a primarily "straight" discourse, its potential for virtual reality "drag", and the relation of cyborg imagery to bisexuality, gave it as much grounding for queer twists as for feminist explorations. Heterosexual feminist texts make frequent use of bisexual characters in congruence with cyborg imagery, use the normalization of queer characters to advance the overall gender equality of women, and certainly indicate a friendly acceptance of queer concerns. At the same time, queer feminist authors have used the genre to more fully examine a link between societal and sexual alienation, within a paradigm that still melds easily with other feminist works on topics such as eco-feminism or embodiment. While the voice of the gay male remains silent despite the rise of queer themes in cyberpunk and cyberfiction, bisexual ideas are prevalent, and at least three lesbian authors and one transgendered author have taken the opportunity to advance lesbian issues in a sexually explicit fashion. Although cyberpunk is not, primarily, a queer-oriented genre, certain aspects do lend themselves nicely to queer readings and explorations, and within these fictional narratives, a comfortable blend of feminism and queer activism is apparent.

- Chapter 10 -
Impact and Importance

I have outlined the ways in which women writing cyberpunk have distinguished themselves as a separate wave within the genre – one that has often gone unacknowledged, but which took a literary framework often condemned as misogynist and turned it instead into a complex reflection of contemporary feminist concerns. In analyzing women's cyberpunk and cyberfiction as a descendant of the first cyberpunk wave, a part of women's overall history in science fiction, and a site for feminist expression, it is important to conclude by examining the cultural space that these works occupy. Women's cyberfiction has provided a rich ground for explorations of various feminist and otherwise political themes; the question remaining is, what role do these works play within a larger social discussion?

Cyberpunk itself originally drew interest partially because of the postmodern aspects of its narratives, but also because of its impact on technological development in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Early cyberpunk authors (I am thinking here of Bruce Sterling's *Mirrorshades* introduction, or Lewis Shiner's essay "Inside the Movement") were adamant in asserting that the genre was part of a larger movement, and this claim holds true when one examines its links to artistic, technological and critical communities. Cyberpunk audiences were particularly prone to production: rather than existing in consumption-based fandoms, they tended to assimilate aspects of the genre into modifications of their own pre-existing cultures and subcultures. The early genre's uniqueness lay in the startling degree to which it helped to shape contemporary technology, as well as related social attitudes and critical theory. An examination of women's cyberpunk, in terms of both its fans and its authors, shows that it occupies a

space which is much more difficult to define. Its purposes and effects are varied; it has become less focused but more flexible. It is a forum for a variety of discussions regarding feminism, technology and philosophy; moreover, it appeals to audience members of multiple genders, sexualities and backgrounds.

Early cyberpunk found its core fan base solidly within computing culture. Gibson claims that he "gave [computer nerds] permission to wear black leather" (Dery 107), imagery that was galvanizing to an element of society previously eschewed as socially inept video game fanatics. Nigel Clark posits buck-toothed, greasy-skinned computer junkies who were attracted to the electronic world's deaestheticization of the body. Clark claims that hackers, promoting ability over appearance, "were constructing a subterranean alternative to a culture dominated by spectacles or signifying surfaces" (119). The creation of a genre that glorified the computer hacker as individualist hero – the personification of black leather punk cool, powerful and tech-adept – was more than a pleasing fiction consumed by an avid fan community; through its readers, cyberpunk had a marked influence on the creation and advancement of real world technologies, particularly the internet. As June Deery notes, "The picture Gibson and others envisaged brought different researchers together and provided them with a common goal and conceptual landscape" (89). Allucquère Rosanne Stone also cites the way *Neuromancer* "triggered a conceptual revolution among the scattered workers who had been doing virtual reality research for years" (515). Thomas Foster, moreover, in discussing the rise of cyberpunk film, television, music, and real-life hackers, observes, "This immediate expropriation and the resulting elaboration of cyberpunk beyond its literary origins

suggests how cyberpunk provided a popular framework for conceptualizing new relationships to technology" (Souls xvi).

The beginnings of virtual reality and internet-related communications technology pre-date cyberpunk – McCaffery describes the genre as "the inevitable result of art responding to the technological milieu" (14) – but the cyberpunk setting created a roadmap for the imaginations of researchers and developers who had, until that point, been working in relative isolation. Moreover, the politics of much hacker culture – anti-corporate, professing freedom of information and freedom of experimentation – are well-rooted in the image of the iconoclast console cowboy. Mark Pesce argues, "for the last twenty years at least, 'hard' science fiction has functioned as a 'high level architecture' (HLA), an evolving design document for a generation of software designers brought up in hacker culture, a culture which prizes these works as foundational elements in their own worldview." Moreover, he goes on to state:

> In both *Snow Crash* and *Neuromancer,* the position of the hacker as protagonist and saviour gives these texts special significance in the hacker communities; an act of self-identification takes place almost unconsciously when a hacker reads these texts; when this happens, the osmotic flow of memes can progress in full force, and the technological visions within the text become hyper-saturated with meaning. *The creation of technical artifacts becomes an act of identification with the protagonist.* (original emphasis)

There is evidence to support Pesce's claim of cyberpunk influence on internet designers and computer programmers. William Gibson first coined the term "cyberspace" in his 1982 short story "Burning Chrome," and again in *Neuromancer*. The word is now

prevalent in almost any discussion of real-world internet technology, much as virtual

reality discussions commonly centre around *Snow Crash*'s popularized term "avatar." It

is no coincidence that one of the first text-based virtual reality environments on the

internet, ChibaMOO, was named for a city in *Neuromancer*. As well, Pesce cites science

fiction references in the names of technology companies such as Autodesk (referring to

Orson Scott Card's novel *Ender's Game*, a precursor to cyberpunk), Black Sun

Interactive (referring to *Snow Crash*), and his own Ono-Sendai (*Neuromancer)*.

After founding the "Cypherpunks" cryptography group in 1992, Timothy May

wrote:

> The full-blown, immersive virtual reality of *True Names* may still be far off, but
>
> the technologies of cryptography, digital signatures, remailers, message pools,
>
> and data havens make many of the most important aspects of *True Names*
>
> realizable today, now, on the Net. Arguably, Mr. Slippery is already here and, as
>
> Vernor predicted, the Feds are already trying to track him down. In 1988 these
>
> ideas motivated me to write and distribute on the Net "The Crypto Anarchist
>
> Manifesto." (36)

According to May, books frequently recommended to new Cypherpunks members

included *True Names, Ender's Game, Shockwave Rider* and *Snow Crash.* He also cites

how Sterling's *Islands in the Net* popularized the concept of "data havens" in the first

place (55). Cyberpunk obviously had a marked impact on the imaginations and technical

productions of computer programmers. Most recently, I have noticed that the popular

virtual universe game "Second Life" takes place in the "metaverse" – a term, again, from

Snow Crash. The cyberpunk genre clearly moved beyond pleasing its fans; it gave

hackers a template to work with – images of immersive virtual realities that have yet to be fully realized, but which have contributed in a substantial way to the formation of today's technologies. This relationship, much like that between cyberpunk and punk music, is recursive; the cyberpunk/cyberfiction written over the course of the past twenty years has adapted its extrapolations, in turn, to reflect evolving real world technologies. Characters in Tad Williams' *Otherland* series, for example, shop briefly in a virtual complex of stores known as LambdaMall (66) – an homage to LambdaMOO, another early text-based virtual community. Much as cyberpunk authors influenced the growth of technology, those same real-world innovations influenced the cyberfiction of the 1990s.

Claudia Springer notes that science and technology "are not isolated from ideological influence but are 'part and parcel, woof and warp, of the social order from which they emerge and which support them'" (Springer 158, Harding 37). No genre of fiction has ever had such a broad effect, within such a short period, on technological advancement; early cyberpunk affected not only other aspects of the art world, but also the construction of the internet and virtual reality technologies, the cyberphobic paranoia of the consuming public, and the occasionally misplaced enthusiasm of many cultural critics. Michael Heim writes, "Art nurtures infant technologies like virtual reality. Art lifts a mirror to show the power and peril of nascent technologies" (66). With the advent of cyberpunk and its impact on hacker subculture, art and technology became, concretely, two aspects of the same process. Fan communities of early cyberpunk did not merely consume, they absorbed and reflected new ideas in a reflexive culture that, in turn, influenced the next wave of the genre.

But why were early writers so predominantly male? Why was Pat Cadigan alone? The question of why women took so long to become fully involved in cyberpunk fiction is a complex one, and its answer doubtless relates to issues of women and technology as a whole. There's no doubt that the rise of personal computing and new workplace technologies was met with mixed reactions from feminists in the 1980s. Some, like Haraway, espoused new technologies as potent tools for breaking down gender roles and stereotypes and creating a new, level playing field for men and women in society. Others were distinctly less enthusiastic, particularly those studying the effects of computers on women in the workplace. Judy Smith and Ellen Balka note that the position of women in the workforce, which the women's rights movement had fought so hard to advance, was threatened by automated technologies that not only threatened to replace jobs, but specifically threatened to replace jobs primarily dominated by women – secretaries, bank tellers, airline reservation clerks, phone operators, etc. Even women who remained in the office found their required skillsets changing and their tasks becoming more mindlessly repetitive thanks to the computer (86). Yet Smith, writing in 1988, acknowledged this tendency without, herself, being anti-computer. Instead, she encouraged more women to use these new technologies by demonstrating her own enjoyment – an enjoyment that took place within specific limitations:

> I don't think of my computer as a person, it's a machine. I'm not a hacker. I don't choose to spend time with my computer rather than with people. On my off time I'd rather be outside hiking around on a sunny day or inside reading a book when the sun's not around. But I like my computer. When I do think about

it, positive images and feelings come to mind. It has its room and when I'm in that

room I'm working. (83)

Her statement shows a particular awareness, and disapproval, of cyberpunk's stereotypes,

positioning them as an unfortunate barrier that must be overcome in order to convince

more women to approach computing. Smith, as a feminist, distanced herself from the

image – made popular by cyberpunk literature and film – of the socially inept male

hacker with no life outside of his technological addictions. To her, the computer was not

a fantasy land of perfect control and virtual pleasures, nor was it a replacement for the

pleasures she derived from the real world and her real life. To her, the computer was a

useful tool that let her get her work done faster. This theme, illustrated by Cadigan in

Synners – the different ways Gina, Mark, Gabe and Sam use virtual reality – is a

commonly raised difference in the way men and women approach computers; women,

ostensibly tending more toward practicality, are presumed to be turned off by

cyberpunk's typically male-centred fantasies of corporeal escape and technological

control. Smith, in attempting to convince more women to learn about and use computing

technologies, began by assuring them that there were other paths to computer literacy

beyond the unappealing teenaged hacker myth – that one could be proficient with

computers and still be able to hold friendly conversations in the light of day.

Smith's writing is not relatable only to cyberpunk. Women were excluded from

technological pursuits by a much broader cultural bias. In Deborah Brecher's 1985

Women's Computer Literacy Handbook, she noted, "Not all women are afraid of

computers but they are often more afraid than men because of the culture in which

they've been raised. That culture says to them, starting early in childhood, 'Machines are

part of a man's world. Who fixes cars? Men. Who fixes typewriters? Men. Women become afraid that they will break a complicated, expensive piece of machinery" (Smith 88). The general exclusion of women from the early cyberpunk movement was a reflection of larger trends: the fact that, despite inroads in the workplace, women were still traditionally expected to be uninterested in or unable to understand new technologies; the fact that these technologies were proving a hazard to the jobs of women – and presumably, feminists – in the workplace; and the fact that, as Smith's disclaimer illustrates, the typical computer nerd image was simply unpalatable to women who had no interest in sacrificing social skills for techie toys.

The unpopularity of the computer nerd image may have had as much to do with its technological circularity as with its lack of sociability. Ruth Woodfield cites the essential selfish/self-involved nature of male hardcore hacker culture:

> In Hacker's [*sic*] work the elevation of the 'mind' and the neglect of the body – and all that these terms symbolize – are revealed to take place as a means to a fundamentally anti-social, anti-communal end. Nowhere is this tendency more visible than in computing culture. Commentators have noted little attempt to justify the degree of single-minded dedication on the grounds of furthering a common, or a higher, good; except inadvertently, when technical successes reap social benefits. It is suggested, instead, that more customary notions of the 'good' are usurped within the culture's most extreme inhabitants . . . The desire to act for the common good is replaced by the desire to compute simply for the sake of computing. (17)

Small wonder that women who had been raised to think of computers and gadgets as tools or toys for men were uninterested in learning about a programming culture that seemed to have no real purpose beyond its own existence – if computers were for boys, then computing for the sheer joy of solving technological puzzles was not an idea that would necessarily have appealed to many women in the 1980s. Pat Cadigan proved the exception to the rule much in the way that women working in math and engineering may have proven exceptions to other rules. While the fact that Gibson wrote *Neuromancer* on a typewriter instead of a word processor demonstrates that it wasn't necessary to have any great knowledge of computing in order to participate in cyberpunk's creation, it can nevertheless be argued that the fact that women weren't writing cyberpunk was a reflection of the fact that women as a whole were not generally active in new technology development or the excitement it generated. To hark back to Csiscery-Ronay Jr.'s question, why would women have interest in a technological society they had no hand in creating? However, the involvement of women with computers changed gradually throughout the 1980s, and thus the subsequent rise of women writing cyberpunk or cyberfiction is not surprising.

According to Ruth Woodfield, in the early 1990s the commercial information technology (IT) market began both to grow and squeeze as competition crushed profit margins and government defence spending was cut back. Accordingly, tech companies developed a need for employees capable of creating friendly user interfaces and maintaining good customer relations – in other words, employees with social skills. As Woodfield notes, this created increased opportunities for women: "Commentators are divided as to whether the kinds of social and communication skills which are now seen as

critical for such work are attributable to nature or nurture, but are united in thinking that we are more likely to find them in women than in men" (37). High tech corporations began aggressively recruiting more women – not through any particular recognition of feminism, but because of a capitalist-motivated need for "feminine" skillsets in a marketplace previously dominated by reclusive male hackers: "The very same ideological, symbolic and practical framework which worked to consign women to the non-technical realm in the past now works to define the feminine gender as that which is more likely to produce the skills profile of the optimal worker within occupational computing" (41). The increase in women IT workers during the 1990s may thus not precisely have been a victory for feminism, but did encourage an overall increase in women involved with technology development. This was also aided by an increase in social and educational programs designed to coax women toward science and math courses, engineering, and computing programs.

This isn't to say that women have wholly infiltrated the world of technology and its development; according to Kaminski and Reilly, the estimated percentage of women workers in the overall IT workforce dropped from 41% to 35% between 1996 and 2002, and only about 11% of the top U.S. technology companies had women as corporate officers. As recently as 2005, Bean et al. were still writing about strategies to engage middle-school girls in information technology via the "Girls Creating Games" program, observing that:

> Educators need to overcome several barriers to increase girls' active participation in technology. Personal barriers include lack of self-confidence, lack of fluency in technology skills, lack of early positive experiences, lack of

information about careers, and a belief that technology careers require a solitary lifestyle in front of a computer. Social barriers include lack of support from family, peers, or school personnel; gender role expectations about girls' role in technology; lack of female role models; and lack of access to computers because boys dominate available resources. Structural barriers include software and programming manuals written by and for males, girls' dislike of narrowly and technically focused programming classes, a perception that the field lacks social relevance, and instructional methods that prevent girls from becoming technical problem-solvers.

What this tells us is that the merger of women with computing has been uneasy at best – although according to the U.S. Economics and Statistics Administration's 2003 *A Nation Online* report, 59.2% of U.S. women were internet users, compared to 58.2% of U.S. men. While women use the internet as much, or even more, as men, it is possible that they use it for different things and in different ways. Their involvement with IT development rose, but is now falling. The barriers cited by Bean and his contemporaries in 2005 – lack of self-confidence, a belief that computing cripples social skills, a failure to see social relevance in computing culture – are the same barriers cited by Smith, Brecher and Woodfield years before. Notably, however, the rise of the internet in the 1990s meant that personal computing became more and more a part of many Western citizens' everyday lives. Women in general have certainly been more involved with computing technologies than in the early 1980s, and this trend – though unsteady – is reflected in the rise of women writing cyberpunk and cyberfiction from the late 1980s through to today.

There are, therefore, many factors that may have contributed to women's absence from the first wave of cyberpunk – and truthfully, women were not entirely absent. They were present in the form of feminist critics, engaging and prodding the material; they were also present, if in small or exceptional ways, in the form of early authors such as Moore, Tiptree and Cadigan. To accuse first-wave authors of deliberate misogyny is fallacious; although women were mostly silent in the genre's formation, their slow involvement can be related to the equally slow pace of their involvement with the computing world in general – to the feminist mistrust of computers in the 1980s, to a general aversion toward the stereotypes of computing culture, and to the unevenly gendered nature of that same computing culture. Women did not abstain from writing cyberpunk because they weren't welcome; they abstained because they were not interested in a technological, post-industrial future. Later, with the advent of the internet, the general mass-marketing of computers, and the encouragement of women within science and technology programs, computers became less alien and their themes both more approachable and more interesting.

Women's cyberpunk and cyberfiction must necessarily occupy a different cultural niche when compared to earlier works. Zoë Sofia has theorized both the original tension that may have existed between many women and computers, and the feminist potential latent in cyberpunk and other outlets of creative expression:

Dominant culture depicts women as the signs or objects but not usually the possessors or subjects of knowledges. Here women and computers are strictly equivalent: friendly to users, not users themselves. In computer hacking, cyberspace can be imagined as a maternal or feminine body to be penetrated, cut

up and manipulated in quests to appropriate and control resources. These mythic

associations present unconscious barriers to women users of computers, whose

identification with feminine bodies makes them/us prone to anxiety about hacking

up the matrix, and more keen to make reparations if we do. […] On the other

hand, the prospect exists for adopting more dialogical and negotiated styles of

interacting with computers and other 'material semiotic' actors in the world.

Hence one possible source of fascination with artificial intelligences and other

technobodies for feminists, women science fiction writers and techno-artists: if

these artificial second selves can be loved and accepted as powerful, resistant,

speaking subjects, so too might women, long acclaimed as monsters to

conventional categories of self and other. (60)

Although it inherits certain attributes and conventions from its predecessors, the feminist

wave has been drastically altered to accommodate more feminist themes. Moreover, it

was primarily written in a later decade, and cannot be expected to replicate the impact of

the first cyberpunk novels. According to P. Chad Barnett, one of the reasons cyberpunk's

popularity with critics and commercial audiences faded after the 1980s is that its original

frameworks and environments became unremarkable:

[T]he "anti-humanist" conviction that was designed to outrage the technocracy, or

cognitariat bourgeoisie, has moved from the realm of fantasy to mere objective

fact depicting culture in the late twentieth century. . . From prosthetic limbs, to

genetic engineering, to nanomachines, late twentieth-century society has become,

or at least is on the doorstep of, exactly what the aesthetic of cyberpunk predicted:

a world where the subject is forgotten, the flesh is burdensome wetware,

exchanges are all symbolic in an electronic land of signs, and reality is virtual at best. (361)

In other words, cyberpunk's setting became to some extent passé; no longer revolutionary, it was instead perceived as a rather uninspired and cookie-cutter reflection of the present. Women's cyberpunk and cyberfiction came too late to be analysed as part of the ultimate "postmodern literature," or to influence the comparatively small group of programmers and hackers involved in creating today's internet; by the mid-1990s, the net was available to an abundance of people, and its techno-minded creators were no longer the only ones participating in the formation of internet culture. Instead, authors of the feminist wave report a variety of responses to their work, demonstrating that the insertion of broader themes into women's cyberfiction has likewise led to a more diverse fan base. I have attempted to examine the impact of women's cyberfiction by examining fiction awards, performing basic web searches, and engaging in personal correspondence with Lisa Mason, Lyda Morehouse, Kathleen Ann Goonan, Melissa Scott and Edith Forbes.

Although women's cyberpunk and cyberfiction has not achieved the commercial success of Gibson's *Neuromancer* or Stephenson's *Snow Crash,* it has been generally well received within the sci fi community – as exemplified by the awards granted to authors. Lisa Mason's *Arachne* was nominated for a 1991 Locus Award. Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* won the Arthur C. Clarke award for Best Novel in 1993. Amy Thomson's *Virtual Girl* was nominated for a Prometheus Award in 1994, and Thomson received the John W. Campbell award for Best New Author that year. Goonan was nominated for Nebula awards for *Crescent City Rhapsody* and *Light Music* (sequels to *Queen City Jazz*) in 2001 and 2004. In 2004, Morehouse's *Apocalypse Array* was nominated for a Philip K.

Dick Award. These results, too, are indicative of a larger trend within the science fiction community; Broad Universe (www.broaduniverse.com) reports that 47% of Nebula awards were given to women in the 1990s, compared to 14% in the 1960s. More women are writing science fiction, and their work is increasingly accepted. Moreover, Goonan and Morehouse have received recognition outside the genre, reflective of the increasing pastiche of sci fi appeal: *Queen City Jazz* was a New York Times Notable Book of the Year in 1994, while *Archangel Protocol* received a Shamus Award for best paperback P.I. novel in 2001 and was also nominated for a reviewer's choice award at the *Romantic Times*.

Despite these general acknowledgements from the reading community, it was obvious from the outset that feminist cyberpunk had not had the same effect on internet culture as its predecessors. Entering terms into the popular Google search engine revealed the following numbers of page hits:

Cyberspace	21,000,000
Cyberpunk	6,940,000
"William Gibson"	1,390,000
Neuromancer	1,270,000
"Bruce Sterling"	1,160,000
"Snow Crash"	574,000
"Pat Cadigan"	116,000
Mason Arachne	24,100
Piercy "He, She and It"	22,000
"Queen City Jazz"	17,000
"Virtual Girl" Thomson	15,300
Telespace	9,530
"Exit to Reality"	2,500
"Archangel Protocol"	973
"Trouble and Her Friends"	941

This is by no means an exact science – Google does not index the entire web, and one cannot simply enter "Lisa Mason," for example (49,400 hits), without also encountering

the Lisa Mason School of Dance, or international gymnast Lisa Mason. However, there is a very clear trend here; all "first wave" search terms are ranked at the top of the list, whereas women's science fiction (even Cadigan's) has received notably less dissemination across the web. If, as Thomas Foster argues, women's cyberpunk prefers "telespace" to "cyberspace," then "telespace" obviously failed to catch on in popular jargon. The usefulness of these observations is admittedly limited; while resources such as Project Cyberpunk (project.cyberpunk.ru) provide information on the early cyberpunk movement, many of the web sites indexed are book lists, book stores, or old comments from anonymous posters. Left with general observations, but unsure how to quantify an elusive audience, I opted to interview the authors themselves.

Lisa Mason, whose novel *Arachne* (1990) is at the top of the feminist-wave searches, comes closest to filling a traditional cyberpunk niche. Her work, published in the 1990s but originally conceived in the early 1980s, comes closest to matching cyberpunk's genre paradigms; she is also the only woman other than Pat Cadigan whose work was recommended by Sterling as part of the essential cyberpunk movement. She reports:

> Bruce Sterling told me in 1995 that his friend Michael Godwin of the
>
> Electronic Frontier Foundation showed up to a tech conference in Austin, Texas
>
> with the newly released hardcover of CYBERWEB under his arm. So the core
>
> fanbase of computer folk is certainly among my fanbase. That I'm a woman
>
> writing cyberpunk was a novelty to some, attractive to some, and (I suspect)
>
> repellent to others (the latter being men who would rather drop dead than read a
>
> women [*sic*] author).

According to Mason, she was also invited several times to speak at conferences given by the Library Information Technology Association, a subgroup of the American Library Association. (Of those panels, she adds wryly, "That I'm a woman writing cyberpunk was definitely a novelty to some, attractive to some, and repellent only to those men and women who would rather drop dead than read science fiction.") She additionally had some success with Japanese fans who read her translated works and loved her "talking robots." Clearly, her gender garnered her a certain amount of attention – perhaps akin to that paid to Pat Cadigan as the "Queen of Cyberpunk" – and her fan base, for works published in the early 1990s and closely following the typical journey of the cyberpunk hacker anti-hero(ine), also appears similar to Cadigan's, in that it is an expected "cyberpunk" fan base of computer techs and sci fi enthusiasts. She is the only author I spoke with who felt that her work fell within this space.

Other authors found that their fan response was more diverse – unsurprising, given that they had branched out into different themes, twisting the original cyberpunk setting into less genre-compliant versions of the original. Kathleen Ann Goonan writes:

> Almost all of my fan email is from men, with a few strong exceptions. The women who started out as fans--not "sf" fans, but women in other fields who develop an interest in my writing-- have become fairly close friends. Maybe women don't read sf, or maybe they don't have time to respond. I have been invited to speak at universities and conferences by both men and women, equally. People are either on fire about my fiction, which is fairly technical, or they can't get through it at all, which is why I think that most of my readers, from what I can glean from letters and speaking invitations, are academics.

Noting that *Queen City Jazz* (1994) was largely received as a feminist novel, Goonan

feels – despite the majority of her fan mail being from men – that most of the work's

impact was felt by the feminist and slipstream communities, not by general science

fiction fandom. Most of her success was with an academic audience, with interest

expressed by both male and female readers. This is similar to first-wave cyberpunk in

that her work garnered a fair amount of critical analysis, but the nature of the academic

interest has varied. No longer viewed through the filter of postmodern analysis that

marked much early cyberpunk academic work, *Queen City Jazz* has instead been

examined through feminist lenses – or as a "slipstream" work, exemplified by the

Interstitial Arts Foundation, which promotes what might be considered a new approach to

postmodernism: "art made in the interstices between genres and categories. Art that

flourishes in the borderlands between disciplines, mediums, and cultures. Art that blurs

the divide between fine art and craft, high art and low."

I have said that women's cyberpunk experienced a dearth of academic attention,

and Goonan is unique in specifically numbering academics among her fanbase. Melissa

Scott reports that she received most interest from gay and lesbian communities, as well as

from women interested in cyberpunk issues:

> Most of the people who approached me about Trouble were interested in the
>
> queer themes. On the most basic level, I got a lot of comments about how nice it
>
> was to read a lesbian SF novel that was good SF and not a thinly disguised
>
> romance; I also had quite a few emails saying how wonderful it was to read a
>
> novel in which the gay characters were the heroes and in which they didn't turn
>
> out to be straight in the end. (There had been a couple of novels out at around the

same time in which a putatively lesbian protagonist ended up in a straight

relationship at the end of the story.) And of course I had people - especially

people who identified themselves to me as younger - tell me simply that it was

nice to read about characters who were gay like them . . . The other big audience,

it seemed to me, was women, straight and gay, who didn't otherwise read SF but

who were interested in the issues raised by cyberpunk and who wanted to read a

novel that would engage them. Partly, I met them because I was doing readings

and signings at gay and women's bookstores, but I was also doing those events

because those bookstores had an interested audience.

If Goonan's work attracted interest partly because of her writing "between genres," then

Scott's might be interpreted as doing the same in attracting women who did not normally

read science fiction. Perhaps a work written by a woman, about women, was seen as

more approachable – particularly for members of the lesbian community, but also for

straight women who wanted to read about cyberpunk issues. Although she certainly

received emails commenting on storylines and characters, Scott is clear here in stating

that it is the "issues" that drew some readers – placing the novel's examination of

embodiment and gender within the same arena of philosophical/technical discussion

occupied by its cyberpunk predecessors. What is evident from the responses of all three

authors is that there are readers who enjoy their work on various levels – both as

engaging stories, and as discussions of serious contemporary questions.

Edith Forbes reports something of the same, but separates her audience more

explicitly; she feels that the storytelling aspects of *Exit to Reality* (1997) were not her

best work, and it was reflected in audience reactions: "I think people who loved it were

the sort who think more abstractly and philosophically and were interested in the concepts the book explores. I think people who hated it were probably more oriented toward pure story-telling, character, etc. and didn't find those aspects of the book as compelling." For her, those interested in entertainment and those interested in philosophical discussion clearly formed two separate audience segments. Unlike Scott, Forbes did not have a strong reception from the lesbian community, even considering the extended queer themes in the novel:

> In general my impression was that the book appealed to men more than to women, and particularly to men with a scientific or philosophical cast of mind, but not necessarily programmers. The book did not reach a huge audience for various reasons, including both its own weaknesses and the fact that the publisher was not a science fiction publisher and did not have established marketing avenues.

Certainly differences in marketing could account for some of this disparity; Melissa Scott has written many science fiction novels, many of which concentrate on lesbian protagonists, while *Exit to Reality* is Edith Forbes's only sci fi work. She is predominantly a fiction author who commonly explores queer themes. It would be easy to toy with the conclusion that the female members of Forbes's audience were more concerned with story, while the men were interested in technicalities – and to draw from that further extrapolations regarding the way women and men read – but I would suggest that Forbes's audience is too small to risk those sorts of discussions. Rather, when taken as a whole, the responses of these four authors illustrate an acknowledged trend in the change of science fiction readership: although sci fi may still be considered a male genre,

and predominantly marketed toward men, the number of female readers is on the rise. Additionally, while the first wave of cyberpunk was dismissed by feminist critics who had embraced the rise of women's science fiction in the 1970s, women's cyberfiction seems to have won that audience back. Goonan posits that "maybe women don't read SF," but also notes that men and women have invited her to speak at conferences in equal numbers, and observes that her strongest female fans are not typically SF readers. Scott states that *Trouble and Her Friends* (1995) brought in women who wanted to read about technology issues but were not normally sci fi fans. Both of these help to illustrate how their contributions are encouraging the growth of women reading sci fi, while Mason and Forbes reflect something of a more traditional readership.

Lyda Morehouse's fan mail provides the clearest example of gender mix in science fiction fandom, and of the way women's cyberpunk has lost the lens of hacker focus. The feedback she receives reflects both a rise in female readership and a general diversity in ages, genders and backgrounds – from high school students to retirees. Out of 228 emails Morehouse received between 2001-2006, 108 were from men and 100 were from women (with 20 of indeterminate origin). Although *Archangel Protocol* (2001, the first book in Morehouse's AngeLINK series) was quite close to the original tenets of the cyberpunk genre, only seven fans (all men) self-identified as "computer geeks." While Morehouse did write about alienated hackers, it was her focus on religious themes that drew the most comments – 24 men, 24 women, and 3 unknown readers all mentioned the treatment of religion, or religious institutions, within her texts. Morehouse has also received some subdued attention regarding the queer themes in her work; she writes that she has been reviewed on GLBT websites. She received email from a transsexual who

was pleased about seeing "her people" visibly discussed in print; two men who were pleased at the portrayal of transgender themes; a woman who approved of the novels' pro-gay stance; and one man and one woman who enjoyed the presence of a strong female protagonist. Morehouse's audience displays a range of interests and demographics quite markedly different from the socially maladjusted computerphiles often stereotyped as sci fi readers.

One might expect to find that men read male cyberpunk, and women read women's cyberfiction; it is refreshing that this sort of gender segregation is not, in fact, the case. Although the first wave of cyberpunk may have predominantly reached men, women's cybertexts – even with their markedly feminist leanings – appeal to both. The audiences reached by women's cyberpunk and cyberfiction are small, but also as diverse as the works themselves. Although Lisa Mason reports – as Cadigan also experienced – a certain amount of curiousity revolving around her position as a woman writing cyberpunk, it is clear that 10 years later, Morehouse did not have a similar experience. None of the mail she received expressed surprise or curiousity regarding her gender, and both men and women readers asked her for writing advice. It is my contention that, as science and technology become more a part of everyone's day-to-day lives, science themes are no longer only considered to be of interest to men – in addition to the fact that feminist movements, programs and companies have been encouraging women to enter technology career paths since the late 1980s, it is increasingly impossible for anyone living in developed countries to escape the daily influence of the internet and related communications technologies. Science, at least of the daily variety, is no longer culturally forbidden to women, and women authors and readers are branching out in their interests.

At the same time, men – who have always been encouraged to foster an interest in science – have remained engaged in technological discussions and science fiction fandom. Hackers and programmers are now a much smaller part of the sci fi audience – not because they have necessarily lost interest, but because the audience has grown into a different and more flexible shape.

Women are thus writing cyberpunk and cyberfiction within an accepting environment, with fans much more varied than those reported for first-wave cyberpunk. While the first wave's resonance with programmers and computer hackers was unique in its influence on the formation of computing and internet cultures, and appealed (as feminist critics have pointed out) primarily to male readers, women's cyberfiction is harder to place in a single niche. This is partly a function of the general public's growing interest in technology issues – leading to a more "mainstream" science fiction, as well as a marked increase in women readers – and also a function of the more diverse themes found in the works as they branch outward from the original tenets of the cyberpunk genre. Concerning the significance of women's cyberpunk, the author reports of fan responses are encouraging. Mason's continued appeal to technologically-oriented readers and Japanese culture, Goonan's attention from feminists and other academics, Scott's success with lesbian and techno-curious women, Forbes's appeal to philosophically inclined men, and Morehouse's general or religious-oriented feedback from men and women of all ages illustrate that cyberpunk and cyberfiction can be used flexibly, to explore a variety of ideas and appeal to a variety of audiences. Most satisfying, from a feminist perspective, is the fact that these works – all of which illustrate various feminist

or queer-friendly themes – are being taken seriously by at least a portion of that audience, as part of a larger cultural discussion regarding important contemporary issues.

Henry Jenkins talks about the cyclical nature of fandom, wherein sci fi readers become sci fi writers: "Many of the most significant science fiction writers emerged from fandom. Given this history, every reader was understood to be a potential writer and many fans aspired to break into professional publication." Certainly Morehouse's fan mail revealed, among other things, several aspiring authors (male and female) asking for tips, as well as several correspondents who sent artwork inspired by Morehouse's characters. Given that science fiction has been known as a somewhat insular genre, I was also curious as to the significance it held for the authors I was corresponding with – I wanted to ask what had inspired them to write science fiction, and cyberpunk in particular, considering that the first wave had been generally derided by feminists who saw little in it that would appeal to female fans. Again, the responses were diverse.

Early cyberpunk sprang forth from independent sources – John Shirley, Bruce Sterling, William Gibson, Rudy Rucker, Lewis Shiner – who found that they were writing about the same issues in a similar manner. They became unified under a name and a purpose; as Sterling wrote in the introduction to *Mirrorshades,* "Thus, 'cyberpunk' – a label none of them chose. But the term now seems a fait accompli, and there is a certain justice in it. The term captures something crucial to the work of these writers, something crucial to the decade as a whole: a new kind of integration" (xi). Cyberpunk writers were part of "the Movement," its quest to revitalize science fiction by exploring the links between new technologies and the pop culture underground. Lisa Mason, of the authors in this study, is the only woman beyond Pat Cadigan who might be considered to

be part of the original movement. Although *Arachne* was published in 1990, Mason notes that she wrote the original story in 1983, when the technological context was entirely different:

> Twenty-three years ago, the Internet was strictly the province of the military, internal technical staffs of big corporations, and big academia.
>
> Who in your local cafe had heard of the Internet? No one. Who used a personal computer with an Internet connection in his/her workplace? No one I knew. Who owned a computer connected to the Internet in his/her private residence? Are you kidding?
>
> Oh, I'd read some science articles about virtual reality and artificial intelligence. But the concepts were exotic, fringe-element stuff.
>
> I'd read articles, too, about hackers who could break into secret databases using computers, but I didn't know any hackers and wasn't all that sure about exactly what they did. Hackers seemed about as glamorous as a guy in a ski mask holding up a Seven-Eleven. Only a hacker could hold up five hundred thousand Seven-Elevens at the same time.

Working in an office where early IBM clone computers were in use, and "telex" technology was an important form of communication (but error reports had to be filled out by hand and then faxed), Mason remembers, "I was not trained as a programmer. I did no software engineering. As a tax attorney and an executive director, I oversaw content and managed the teams. But I got an eyeful of what developing a program was all about. I could well imagine a world where we dispensed with all that slow and frustrating material reality and went straight into electronic consciousness." Her inspiration sprang

from the same curiousity that motivated other early cyberpunk authors, and the same

tendency to use computers and technology as metaphors rather than concentrate on

specific details. Gibson has said that computers were his metaphor for human memory

(McCaffery interview 270); Mason says that telespace was her representation of "the

collective unconscious." Although she recalls reading one of Gibson's short stories in

OMNI magazine, it was years before she read *Neuromancer,* and she states unequivocally

that her work was not inspired by other cyberpunk authors.

In contrast to this, Lyda Morehouse states that she wrote a work of cyberpunk

because it is her favourite genre: "I love the idea that knowledge is power and that power

can be used to take down 'The Man.' Outlaw as hero has always worked for me . . . Plus,

there's something about the computer as a weapon that appeals, too. I mean, it's

something that anyone can learn regardless of class, race, gender or sexual orientation (of

course one has to have access to the computers, but part of the early phreak movement

was all about providing access without having to pay for the privilege.)" On her web site,

she observes, "To me, for a novel to truly be cyberpunk it has to follow the arc (at least in

spirit) of *Neuromancer*. Which is to say, you have to start with the life of some down and

out punk, who takes on the evil corporations like a lone cowboy, and wins. That happens

in *Archangel Protocol*." Clearly, she is a fan of cyberpunk in general – though

additionally, in email, she also cites Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* as one of her all-time

favourite novels. Morehouse's work combines the pleasure she takes in the democratizing

nature of the computer with her marked interest in religious issues. She harbours an

interest in both men's and women's cyberpunk (she is also a fan of Melissa Scott's

work), and is the example that Jenkins predicted: a reader who became an author, assimilating and then changing the conventions of the genre to suit her own desires.

Melissa Scott was also a reader, but not necessarily a fan. Unlike Morehouse, who wrote cyberpunk because she admired and enjoyed it, Scott wanted to correct what she saw as a socially exclusive slant found in the genre's portrayal of bodily escapism (the cyberpunk flight from the "meat"):

> While the idea was seductive, in practice what seemed to happen was that all those bodiless people were treated as though they were all straight white middle class men, and the people who were not straight, not white, not middle class, not male were defined by their bodies and used largely as set-dressing (ooh, look, scary people!) or they were seen from outside, never from within. So I took what had become the conventional cyberpunk technology and tried to imagine what would happen if there were a system that enabled people to use their bodies, to use emotions, sensations, proprioception, to experience and negotiate cyberspace. More than that, what if acknowledging the body worked better than denying it?

> As for why I wanted to write cyberpunk, I think it was because the social issues the genre raised are extremely important to me, and I couldn't bear to leave them to writers who had what I felt was a limited viewpoint.

Scott's critique echoes the reaction of feminist academics such as Joan Gordon and Veronica Hollinger; her work on *Trouble and Her Friends* represents her calculated resistance to the middle-class, hetero white male-centredness of the original genre works.

More pointedly than Morehouse or Mason, she sees her work as an act of political expression.

Kathleen Ann Goonan likewise had issues with male-centred science fiction, and states that she had no particular love of sci fi: "When I was a kid I devoured all the fairy tales available, and in the early sixties read the big fat novels when they came out in paperback--Catch-22, Exodus, Hawaii--but didn't much care for my father's quite substantial sf collection. All the people in them seemed to be grown-up men, even in Phil Dick's books, and I was not." As a woman, she read the works of authors such as Ursula K. LeGuin, Joan Vinge, Patricia McKillip and Elizabeth Lynn in the 1970s, but says, "I didn't buy sf; I was not a big sf fan. I was interested in what women had to write about what we were or might or might have experienced, rather than what men thought--not through any conscious decision. What the women were saying was just more interesting. I was sexist." Unlike Scott, however, Goonan's writing was not a conscious rebellion; as an aspiring writer in the 1980s, she signed up for the Clarion West writer's workshop and became more interested in science fiction. While her work has been lauded as feminist, she says that was not a deliberate effort on her part:

> I don't consciously try to write feminist novels--rather, as an observer of and a participant in the feminist movement of the late sixties and early seventies, as someone who is still hideously disappointed that television commercials have completely succumbed to male/female stereotypes of who cleans the bathroom, I suppose I refuse, in my novels, to participate in this view of popular culture. But probably, most feminists could find ways in which my novels disappoint them.

She writes as a feminist, but not in a deliberate effort to create feminist works or buck the sci fi status quo; rather, her interest lies in exploring contemporary nanotechnology issues, charting the changing nature of information and extrapolating a role for human nature in a posthuman age.

Finally (out of the authors interviewed), Forbes achieved positioning within science fiction more as a result of the themes she was examining than through any particular affiliation to cyberpunk tenets. Forbes writes, "… it wasn't an abstract decision to do something in the genre. The story idea and the characters took hold of me, so that's what I wrote. I've always been interested in where our technologies are taking us, where the things we think we want are taking us, and I extrapolated them to their logical or illogical conclusion." Like Marge Piercy, who has written only two science fiction novels out of a vast body of work, Forbes writes primarily within the bounds of more mainstream fiction. Like the original authors of cyberpunk, her work was produced independently – gelling with that of other authors through a natural tendency to examine similar ideas through similar storytelling techniques.

Certain parallels may be drawn between the origins of cyberpunk and later women's cyberfiction, in terms of the communal nature of the writing process. By the mid-1980s, the originators of the cyberpunk movement were aware of and in correspondence with each other, feeding from each other's ideas and contributing to the *Mirrorshades* collection – Gibson and Sterling even collaborated on a novel together (*The Difference Engine*). Something of the same interrelatedness is tangible between many of the women writing cyberfiction. While some – like Forbes – were working independently of other cyberpunk authors, others – like Morehouse and Scott – were well

aware of the genre's history and paradigms. Marge Piercy, in the acknowledgements for *He, She and It,* writes:

> I would like to thank a particular student at Loyola in Chicago, where I put in a week of residency one April shortly before I had started this novel. In the course of a lively conversation about science fiction, he told me that when he read *Woman on the Edge of Time,* he couldn't believe the date of publication, because the alternate universe that Connie blunders into in Chapter 15 anticipated cyberpunk. What's cyberpunk? I asked, and he started me off. I enjoy William Gibson very much, and I have freely borrowed from his inventions and those of other cyberpunk writers. I figure it's all one playground. Donna Haraway's essay "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" was extremely suggestive also. (431)

Piercy, a lauded feminist author, enjoyed and used Gibson's ideas, but also combined them with Haraway's ideas on the use of technology to break down gender binaries; she was aware of both cyberpunk, and feminist ideas regarding new technologies.

Morehouse, in turn, is indebted to Piercy and Scott. Sage Walker is friends with Kathleen Ann Goonan, and is also thanked in the acknowledgements to Laura J. Mixon's *Proxies* and Mary Rosenblum's *Chimera.* Like first-wave cyberpunk, the feminist wave consists of an array of authors (still predominantly white and middle-class, but now female and not always hetero) exploring ideas within similar settings and loosely linked by certain social or professional ties. These authors undertook their work for different reasons – through admiration, to express criticism and illustrate new points of view, or simply to independently illustrate ideas revolving around contemporary technological issues. Despite these differing motivations, their works share a loose cohesiveness.

Clearly, many of the themes in women's cyberpunk and cyberfiction have changed from the approaches adopted by first-wave cyberpunk. Clearly, also, these works occupy a diverse range of social spaces, both in audience appeal and in the meaning the novels hold for the authors themselves. Sarah Lefanu posed the question of whether or not science fiction offers women writers a freedom of style and content not available in mainstream fiction, and proposed that sci fi writing offered a method of "fusing political concerns with the playful creativity of the imagination" (2). The women writing cyberfiction have chosen to illustrate a host of social and political concerns in their work. Only Scott's work might be considered a deliberately feminist backlash against the latent patriarchal nature of early cyberpunk; others might be taken as friendly tribute or even coincidental reworking. Women's cyberfiction is a tool for self-expression for authors of many backgrounds and viewpoints; likewise, it has reached several different types of audience, only some of whom might be considered stereotypical cyberpunk readers. The discussions with authors have revealed that the writers take their work seriously, and that there are audience members who do as well. Women's cyberpunk has not had the same easily pinpointed impact as writers like Gibson and Sterling, but the diversity of responses reveals the shifting nature of the genre, the flexibility of sci fi audiences, the growth of female readership, and new ways in which science fiction can be used as a vehicle for serious feminist philosophical and political discussion.

Conclusion

In discussing older feminist sci fi writers such as Octavia Butler and James

Tiptree Jr., Marleen S. Barr wrote:

> Butler and Tiptree are categorized with writers who focus on zap guns and
>
> dinosaurs devouring cities, not writers who focus on race, class, and gender.
>
> The designation *science fiction* causes a group of important feminist writers
>
> who address familiar feminist concerns to be made unfamiliar . . . Associating
>
> writers such as Butler and Tiptree with science fiction devalues them. Hence, I
>
> argue that feminist science fiction should be incorporated within feminist
>
> fabulation. (98)

While I share her desire to see feminist science fiction treated with appreciation for its

intricate themes and sharp cultural criticisms, I cannot help but feel that removing

feminist works from science fiction is not the solution; in devaluing science fiction itself,

we fail to acknowledge the particular freedoms that the genre allows its authors. I must

side with Karen Cadora when she argues, "taking the science out of feminist sf strips the

genre of its power to critique and reimagine the intersections of technology and gender"

(359). In examining feminist cyberpunk and cyberfiction, I have shown how writers –

both male and female – have used the science fiction genre to participate in larger

cultural discussions regarding contemporary social issues. The first wave of cyberpunk is

concerned with issues of identity and globalization in a post-industrial age; feminist

authors from the 1990s have added their own slant to those same discussions, while

including additional critiques regarding environmental decay, religious institutions,

reproductive technologies, motherhood, and the family. Both first-wave and feminist

cyberpunk advance complex arguments; we should not separate feminist science fiction from sci fi as a whole. Rather, we should re-evaluate the way we look at science fiction and other popular literary genres.

As Elaine Graham has noted, "What is at stake, supremely, in the debate about the implications of digital, genetic, cybernetic and biomedical technologies is precisely what (and who) will define authoritative notions of normative, exemplary, desirable humanity into the twenty-first century" (Representations 11). I began my study of cyberpunk concerned that it was a small and apparently misogynistic genre, almost entirely written by men, that might be having a disproportionate influence on the development of today's communications technologies and online cultures. Further reading showed that women's voices could indeed be found within cyberpunk, even if they were reaching a different audience than earlier works. They had never been truly silent. With regard to the first wave, although women's participation was limited to Cadigan, feminist critics were vocal in dissecting the genre from the outside; as Sherryl Vint observes, these criticisms also had a wider scope: "The critique of contemporary cyber-culture for its tendency to isolate people and destroy the ethical context for actions can be related to feminist criticism of the cyberpunk genre" (112). More startling was the discovery that women in the 1990s had taken the genre and turned it to entirely new purposes – the exploration of feminist ideas and the promotion of liberal feminist politics, using many of the same first-wave cyberpunk tropes to very different effects.

On one hand, I am still concerned. If women's fiction is to help shape the creation of communications technology, it will not be cyberpunk fiction; the first wave's impact has faded now, and the hacker culture that remains is still marked by references to

Neuromancer and *Snow Crash* rather than *Proxies* or *He, She and It.* While the genre has indeed served as inspiration to a generation of programmers, its tropes are no longer novel and exciting and it is unlikely that new forays into the area will have any great success in galvanizing the sci fi audience. On that front, something new is required.

On the other hand, I am encouraged by the way that women writers appropriated the genre to complex effect, picking and choosing from cyberpunk's paradigms and themes in order to explore new meanings and ideas. In broadening the genre's focus, they may have lost much of the original audience, but they have also appealed to a scattering of new audiences. The feminist wave lacks the sharp fixation of the genre's first works; while early cyberpunk was notable for having a very clear impact on a small but influential segment of hacker society, women's cyberpunk occupies a more complicated and flexible space.

Much earlier, in discussing the first wave, I cited Andrew Ross. He wrote, "Cyberpunk's idea of a counterpolitics – youthful male heroes with working-class chips on their shoulders and postmodern biochips in their brains – seems to have little to do with the burgeoning power of the great social movements of our day: feminism, ecology, peace, sexual liberation, and civil rights" (152). Feminist cyberpunk and cyberfiction has expanded to include more of these movements – feminism, ecology, and sexual liberation now have voices within cyberpunk. I have dissected the themes of the genre with a specific purpose in mind – to show not only that the examples of women's writing demonstrate particular similarities and political positions, but also that women's cyberpunk fits within larger feminist discussions regarding these ideas. One might say the same for earlier, first-wave works and their place within discussions of postmodernism

and the search for identity in the information age. In some cases, the attitudes and ideas discovered in the texts may represent unconscious congruence with the authors' own socio-economic settings; in others, judging particularly by my interview with Melissa Scott, they represent very deliberate attempts to express feminist arguments. The inspiration for these works cannot be traced to one source, and the ideas within the texts do not appeal to only one type of audience; clearly, they are reflections of other messages within society.

This positioning was vital to my study – not only to examine the messaging within women's cyberpunk, but to detail how that messaging dovetailed with contemporary feminist politics. Our fictions do not stand alone; they are an integrated part of the discussions our society is continually holding with itself. There are, of course, countless academic and non-fiction debates regarding technology, gender, and our place in the postmodern world. Women have not been silent on these fronts. My concern was that women had been absent from fictional worlds – within the texts that were providing sparks of inspiration to the hackers and programmers responsible for creating new communications technologies. Fiction is a vital part of the overall way a culture considers new ideas; if cyberpunk was the ultimate postmodern literature, then a multitude of voices should ideally have been heard.

Analyzing feminist cyberpunk's treatment of globalization issues showed that while early cyberpunk focused on the alienation of the individual, women's cyberpunk was more likely to suggest the formation of new community types outside the structures of current patriarchal systems. Examining issues of embodiment, virtual reality and artificial intelligence showed that women authors emphasized the need for corporeality in

order to preserve human identity, and moreover, that the feminist wave used robot artificial intelligences to great effect in illustrating fictionalized versions of Donna Haraway's cyborg theory – the idea that cyborgs could be used to break down the gender binaries imposed by society. These chapters emphasized the feminist wave's connection to the first, and the ways in which women had used the same genre trappings – multinational conglomerates, crime, computers, virtual playgrounds, and cyborgs – to create entirely different, even directly contradictory messages. The first wave of cyberpunk, which was predominantly "men's" cyberpunk, was concerned with issues of alienation and the search for identity in the flashing pastiche of the postmodern, postindustrial age. Women's cyberpunk acknowledged those issues while insisting on the importance of embodiment and simultaneously questioning societal constructions of community and gender performance. Women's texts were examined not only as protests against the attitudes and assumptions of early cyberpunk, but also as reflections of larger trends within the feminist movement.

Subsequent chapters explained how women had diverged from the overall cyberpunk paradigm by homing in on smaller background aspects of the genre – ecological destruction and mythological imagery – and altering them in subtle but subversive ways. The first wave's postapocalyptic disinterest gave way to the feminist wave's emphasis on disaster warning and ecological conservationism, with complex arguments that matched up with feminism's tense relationship to ecology. The feminist utopian science fiction of the 1970s, which equated women with nature and both against man, likewise gave way to new structures that reconfigured the natural world as everyone's concern while still acknowledging the shared domination of women and the

environment. Simultaneously, the mythology that had previously been useful as a tool for explaining the concepts behind newly envisioned technologies became instead a characteristic of the genre through which real religious institutions were critiqued – reflecting a real-world spiritual crisis, the rise of individuality, and the tensions between feminism and patriarchal religious structures. In changing what had previously been less remarkable but still prevalent cyberpunk tenets, women began moving away from the genre's traditional definitions; their work was more frequently defined as "cyberfiction" and omitted from cyberpunk discussions, despite clear links to the first wave's themes and ideas.

Further divergence was evident when examining two themes that women had almost entirely introduced to cyberpunk: reproductive technologies and the family. Predominantly "women's issues," these had previously barely been present in the genre, but were moved front and center in several texts as feminist cyberpunk was altered to accommodate women's other social discussions – factors which have always been important to women, which have always been linked to women by Western society, and which were inevitable pieces of women's consideration of identity and technology. These sections not only showed how women's cyberpunk fit into feminist discussions of reproductive technologies, motherhood, and nuclear family structures, they also showed how feminist treatments of family accommodated queer interests and expanded to include definitions of queer marriage – while at the same time, lesbian authors were using cyberpunk to glorify the role of the queer outsider in addition to promoting feminist interests. This demonstrated the genre's potential for accommodating even more political viewpoints.

Cyberpunk is not all-inclusive. The fact that it has been expanded to include the voices of women (both straight and lesbian) does not mean that the genre has escaped its stigma as a product of white, middle-class beliefs; it is no longer written solely by men, but it still lacks input from authors of multicultural or lower class affiliation. Perhaps this is because the technologies themselves are still predominantly the playthings of the white urban middle classes. Moreover, except for Lyda Morehouse and Pat Cadigan, it seems that very few authors from any wave continued publishing cyberpunk past the turn of the 21st century; the genre, at least in the iterations I have described, does appear to be dead or dying, and unless there is a notable new wave, some other fictional setting will have to accommodate the next generation's quest for identity. Regardless, examining feminist participation in cyberpunk is an excellent exercise for illustrating some of the ways in which fiction can be appropriated as a playground for political ideas – and cyberpunk, previously a male-centred and borderline misogynist genre, became a surprising forum for feminist treatments of postmodern, ecological, religious and socially gendered questions.

Cyberpunk was declared dead in 1991, but that was at least a decade too soon. Moreover, there is more work to be done with this material; I have certainly not said all there is to say. My analysis is, for the most part, based on themes rather than structures; in a genre filled with diverse work, political and social subjects are where the two waves most clearly separate from each other, and also where they tend to internally adhere. The nature of my arguments has caused me to seek congruences between very diverse works; as Jane Donawerth observes, "No individual fiction represents a paradigm in its entirety" (30). What remains is to examine each text more fully on its own merits, seeking more in-

depth answers to how individual techniques and narrative constructions have been used to create varying effects while still advancing specific messages and ideas beneath the umbrella of a common paradigm. Moreover, although Thomas Foster has offered an extended racially-based reading of cyberpunk in his *The Souls of Cyberfolk,* more could be done in this area with regard to the analysis of feminist works; and, finally, newer texts might be examined in relation to the feminist wave, in order to determine – within the tricky definitions of generational analyses – where these feminist works might fit when compared against more recent paradigms, or what the next generation of texts might actually be.

Barr argues, "Isolation as a subgenre, not absorption into a larger literary whole, has been and will continue to be fatal to feminist science fiction" (103). I would argue that separating feminist science fiction from science fiction as a whole does a great disservice to the sci fi genre, not all of which is about dinosaurs devouring cities. Science fiction's status as a realm where technology meets imagination made it an ideal battleground for questions of technology's role in postmodern society, as well as questions of human identity and urban alienation. Likewise, the same trappings that made cyberpunk such an excellent exploration of the postmodern condition also allowed women authors the flexibility to produce new and original variants of old themes, expressing feminist concerns in a unique fashion. If we are to acknowledge the importance of fiction within societal debate, we must acknowledge the importance of *all* fiction – including genres and sub-genres, including robots and vampires and dragons. By dissecting the themes and ideas in women's cyberpunk, I have painted a picture of some of the important issues facing feminism in the 1990s, and how those issues were raised

within the presumably restrictive settings of a very small sub-genre of science fiction. I await with anticipation the ways in which this sort of political play will continue in science fiction – and other genre fiction – yet to come.

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