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**The Fantastic Adventures of No-body:
Mechanisms of cyborg disembodiment in five texts by
women authors**

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Abstract

Science fiction is a genre in which anything is possible. It therefore comprises the perfect litmus test of any given culture's prevailing hopes and fears about the future. One such source of anxiety that has been particularly conspicuous in works of fiction since the Industrial Revolution is the development of automata and other machines – specifically, whether they might eventually become strong or intelligent enough to overthrow their creators. As elucidated in this essay, fears about some sort of robot uprising fit into a more general worry among dominant groups about a reversal of fates between them and an oppressed group. The cyborg character, however, complicates this formula because it is a hybrid of human and machine, a boundary figure. This is a clear, perhaps uncomfortable reminder that the Other is also the Same.

This thesis will examine five key examples from the last five decades of literature about cyborgs, namely: *The Ship Who Sang* by Anne McCaffrey; 'The Girl Who Was Plugged In' by James Tiptree Jr.; *Proxies* by Laura J. Mixon; 'Silently and Very Fast' by Catherynne M. Valente; and *Ancillary Justice* by Ann Leckie. These texts will be combed through for examples of the ways in which cyborgs might disrupt binary understandings of identity and thereby challenge real-life social hierarchies. Most important to this investigation is the potential of cyborg disembodiment – that is, any kind of cybernetic separation of the consciousness from an organic body – to confuse how identities are perceived and constructed.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Theory and Methodology	3
1. Cyberpunk and the gender politics of “meat”	7
2. Emancipation from the marked body	11
3. Identity tourism in <i>Proxies</i> and the Web	18
4. ‘Silently and Very Fast’ towards an augmented reality	27
5. Language, myth and art: etymologies of the “infidel heteroglossia”	36
6. Network connection problems: cyborgs in and out of contact	47
Conclusion	52
Works Cited	55

Introduction

When first brainstorming ideas for this thesis, I was keen to talk about the evolution of the character of the “female” robot, or ‘gynoid’, in science fiction (henceforth SF) literature. It was apparent that while early examples of gynoids – such as Hadaly in Auguste Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s *L’Eve Future* (1886) or Lester Del Rey’s eponymous Helen O’ Loy (1938) – were largely used to reproduce pre-existing gender inequality, more recent gynoids in fiction were emerging as powerful subjects who frequently blurred boundaries between human and nonhuman, male and female, and so on. An especially apt example of such a character was Helva, the female human consciousness who inhabits and controls *The Ship Who Sang* (Anne McCaffrey, 1969). Something about the interplay between Helva’s quite vulnerable, charismatic personality and the formidable, steely hugeness of her spaceship body struck me as the perfect example of science fiction’s ability to complicate received concepts of identity like gender. What is it, indeed, that makes Helva female? Is it simply that she is assigned so at birth, before her deformed body is encased in steel forever? Is it the female voice and speech patterns she carefully synthesizes with her electronic voice box? Or is her femaleness somehow formed by others’ reactions to her, such as the frequent flirtatious or condescending remarks she receives from male co-workers and crew?

The main problem with this initial line of inquiry was in trying to say anything about the development of the robot woman trope when the “new” robot woman was so utterly atypical of anything that had come before. There was just so little basis for comparison. It is hard to draw any conclusions about how representations of women in SF have changed with so few fixed variables across the century-or-so timeline of literature about robots. While Villiers de l’Isle Adam and McCaffrey may provide plenty of material to investigate how femaleness is marked in a male-dominated genre, this is about all their books have in common. Hadaly is entirely robotic except for her consciousness, which the protagonist (a fictionalized Thomas Edison) appears to siphon directly out of the spirit realm and into a beautiful humanoid body. Her descendant Helva, on the other hand, is a human child born with such severe disabilities that she can only survive in a metal shell. Hadaly is practically a concubine, designed as a physically identical, but completely selfless, replacement for Lord Ewald’s fiancé Alice; whereas Helva is the symbiotic “brain” to her shipmate’s “brawn”, working together to complete missions across the galaxy. Plainly put, the differences between these examples are as drastic as one might expect from eight decades of social and political change.

The new aim of this thesis, then, is to approach *The Ship Who Sang* within the more specific context of cyborg disembodiment and gender. This means leaving behind the concept of fully artificial, fully machinated *robots* to enter a newer discourse about *cyborgs* – that is, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, human or humanlike organisms “whose physical abilities are extended beyond normal human limitations by mechanical elements built into the body”. In doing so, the book can be positioned at the beginning of a new movement in SF, rather than tacked-on at the end of a long and complicated literary history. I will therefore be analysing *The Ship Who Sang* alongside four later treatments of cyborg embodiment in order to chart the progression of this subgenre into the present day.

McCaffrey published the first story in her “brainships” series in 1961, about twenty years before the one-two punch of the movie *Blade Runner* (Philip Ridley Scott, 1982) and the novel *Neuromancer* (William Gibson, 1984) kick-started what has come to be known as the “cyberpunk” movement within science fiction. Cyberpunk is an aesthetic primarily concerned with the implications of integrating computer (and especially virtual reality) technologies into our everyday lives. It follows that long sections of many cyberpunk texts take place in virtual reality (henceforth VR) environments or in cyberspace – during which process the physical body, referred to by Gibson’s characters as “meat”, is disconnected, transcended, even obliterated.

These anxieties about interconnectivity and VR landscapes have only become more relevant in the present day, with many people now having uninterrupted access to the Internet through phones, tablets, laptops, and truly sci-fi equipment like the eyeglass interface Google Glass. Entire relationships can now play out in some kind of cyberspace, whether that entails a social media site like Facebook or a 3D-rendered, interactive VR world like *Second Life*. As our online selves multiply and become more complex, we might wonder: are our physical bodies redundant? Indeed, do bodies matter, or are we simply finding ways to recreate our same bodily obsessions in a virtual environment?

These questions crop up both in cyberpunk fiction and in cyberfeminist theory – the latter being a branch of feminism interested in how technology might be used as a tool to resist oppressive and binaristic ideas of gender. And yet, twenty or thirty years before either cyberpunk or cyberfeminism were fully conceived, Anne McCaffrey was writing about technology’s impact on the mind/body dichotomy through the elegant, simple story of Helva the brainship.

In this thesis a variety of texts will be used to explore how technology and embodiment intersect in modern SF, and specifically in SF literature written by and about women. This is not so much to show that women writers can offer greater insight – or even foresight – into such issues than their male counterparts. It is more that society’s scrutiny and demarcation of women’s

bodies throughout history means that ideas of embodiment/disembodiment will inevitably carry a very different significance for female characters than for male ones. The focal question to be put to these texts, then, is something along the lines of: what happens to categories like 'gender' in a state of disembodiment?

The primary texts to be used for this investigation are *The Ship Who Sang*; 'The Girl Who Was Plugged In' by James Tiptree Jr. a.k.a. Alice Sheldon (1973); *Proxies* by Laura J Mixon (1998); 'Silently and Very Fast' by Catherynne M Valente (2011); and *Ancillary Justice* by Ann Leckie (2013). These stories have been chosen for their varying approaches to embodiment and gender. Conspicuous by their absence in this list are any fictional works from the 1980s, the dawn of cyberpunk: this is not unintentional. Arguably, the majority of the so-called foundational texts of cyberpunk are authored by men, e.g. Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Rudy Rucker and Neal Stephenson. What is more, there is a certain masculine bias in cyberpunk culture, on which I will elaborate later in this thesis. To be blunt, male-authored cyberpunk has enjoyed its fair share of scholarly interest already, and will be most usefully treated in this essay as a catalyst whose misogynist tendencies provided something for cyborg- and cyberfeminists to kick against. Without it, we might never have had such a passionate feminist treatise as my key secondary text, the essay 'A Cyborg Manifesto' by Donna Haraway (1985). In this way, this essay will circumscribe cyberpunk without delving too deeply into it.

It is also important to note, here, that no feminist analysis to do with bodies in literature can ignore two other variables used as visual markers of difference in society: race and disability. Though a thorough treatment of all three factors in these texts might be beyond my abilities (and word limit), one cannot overstate the relevance of race and disability markers on the marginalized bodies in so many of these texts. These intersections will therefore be mentioned at appropriate points throughout.

In closing, I will endeavour to propose some further ideas for study in this ever-broadening field, with a mind to the technologies becoming available in the 2010s and their implications for both cyberfeminist inquiry and women's science fiction.

Theory and Methodology

In the grand scheme of things, one could be forgiven for assuming the figure of the cyborg would be far too recent, too particular, and too geeky to take seriously as a literary symbol. Yet literary scholarship on the cyborg can also be seen to date back as far you can stretch the definition of a cyborg body. One could easily make the case that the cyborg is simply one of the

more recent incarnations of the ‘monster’, a ‘boundary figure’ whose danger and intrigue derives from its ability to blur the lines between human and non-human (Kirkup 75). This interpretation aligns the cyborg with a star-studded heritage, including everyone from Medusa and Cyclops to Dracula and Frankenstein’s creature.

In fact, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is of considerable relevance here, as a novel written by a woman and widely believed to be one of the formative texts – if not *the* moment of invention – of the SF genre. As its subtitle *The Modern Prometheus* suggests, *Frankenstein* was one of the first major works of fiction to explore human hubris in the specific context of the ever-advancing biological sciences. As Nina Lykke illustrates, the Creature “appears as monstrous precisely because he/it is situated on the borderline between human and non-human” – one of many borderlines which is, in our culture, fiercely policed (Kirkup 76). In this way, hybrids like the Creature are useful symbols not just within horror or science-fiction but equally in (for example) post-colonial, feminist and queer literary circles – illustrating borderline warfare at the sites of race/ethnicity, gender and sexuality respectively. Arguably most forms of power imbalance can be traced back to the concept of the monstrous human/non-human hybrid, since they so often entail one group being perceived as human and the other as something less-than or Other that must be kept distinct; this is evident in the very building blocks of bigoted language, which calls immigrants “illegal aliens” and indigenous peoples “savages”. The cyborgs in the chosen texts are, therefore, ideal subjects of analysis as part of hybridity discourse, as their existence simultaneously problematizes rigid concepts of humanity, sentience, gender, race, sexuality and disability – at the least.

This line of inquiry with regards to the hybrid status of cyborgs will be indebted to a long line of thinkers, from Michel Foucault and Simone De Beauvoir – who helped bring the concept of “hybridity” into the socio-political sphere – to Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and Edward Said – who discussed the potential of hybridity versus the categorizations imposed by colonial forces. But most salient here will be the feminist scientist Donna Haraway, who most famously used the cyborg metaphor for hybridity in ‘A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century’. In a uniquely florid, breathless tone, Haraway calls for a world without gender, race, class or species boundaries – a dream she herself identifies as belonging to a “utopian tradition” (150). Though she acknowledges the ancient Greek and Gothic monsters that make up the cyborg’s family tree, Haraway insists that the cyborg is a very different beast:

Unlike the hopes of Frankenstein’s monster, the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden; that is, through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate, through its completion in a

finished whole ... The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust. (151)

(A side note: as this quotation might imply, Haraway also takes a strong anti-Freudian position, determined that cyborg hybridity should bring about a “post-oedipal apocalypse” built on “non-oedipal narratives” (150). Though her language is characteristically ambiguous, her mentions of Oedipus and Eden indicate a desire to destroy creation myths that depend on the sexual failure of women. For these reasons it seems inappropriate to apply much traditional psychoanalytical theory in this analysis.)

Whereas scholars such as Spivak have written more even-handedly of hybridity – warning against a “hybridist triumphalism” which would merely re-label colonialism/globalization as a feat of multiculturalism (Spivak 403) – Haraway seems to express reservations only once:

From one perspective, a cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet, about the final abstraction embodied in a Star Wars apocalypse waged in the name of defence, about the final appropriation of women’s bodies in a masculinist orgy of war (Sofia, 1984). From another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints. (154)

Haraway implies little awareness, either, of the fundamental problem with the concept of hybridity pointed out by Jennifer González: “that it appears to assume by definition the existence of a non-hybrid state – a pure state, a pure species, a pure race – with which it is contrasted” (67). González contends that, instead, “the world is comprised of hybrid encounters that refuse origin” – hybridity is not the exception, but the *rule* of existence (68). This represents a schism in how we interpret the cyborg body in fiction, in which one side takes cyborgs to represent the liberating potential of technology, whereas the other takes them as ciphers for the multiple identities marginalized people already inhabit (albeit usually without recognition). Both views must be kept in mind in unpacking the implications of these texts.

While Haraway’s hopes about the future are inspiring – and to rationalize the ‘Manifesto’ would take away a great deal of its rollicking, livid-Marxist charm – it might also be fruitful to look again at just how practical her ideas are, especially in the hindsight of the last thirty years. Her predictions about the effects of technology on female embodiment and networking might be particularly interesting in light of the aforementioned boom in internet usage, and the resultant chat interfaces, massively-multiplayer online gaming platforms etc. For a more detached outlook on the relevance of the cyborg metaphor today, we might look to writings from the next generation of Haraway’s cyborg feminism – cyberfeminism.

A number of cyberfeminist anthologies have been invaluable to this work, including: *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (ed. Anne Balsamo, 1996); *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader* (eds. Gill Kirkup, Linda Janes, Kathryn Woodward & Fiona Hovenden, 2000); *RELOAD: rethinking women + cyberculture* (eds. Mary Flanagan & Austin Booth, 2002); and *Cybersexualities: A Reader on Feminist Theory, Cyborgs and Cyberspace* (ed. Jenny Wolmark, 1999). Such a wealth of resources is crucial to demonstrate the variety of interpretations and contradictions that exist under the umbrella term “cyberfeminism”. In fact, as Jessie Daniels writes, cyberfeminism is “neither a single theory nor a feminist movement with a clearly articulated political agenda” but instead “refers to a range of theories, debates and practices about the relationship between gender and digital culture” (102). The close readings of these SF texts will therefore employ a cyberfeminist framework in the broad sense that real-life technologies and gender identity politics will be foregrounded throughout.

The ‘cyber’ focus of these feminisms (as opposed to the ‘cyborg’) will also be useful in paying attention to the role of cyberspace in the chosen stories and novels. While Haraway holds up hybridity as a salve to the expectations of the female body, there still seems to *be* a body to speak of in her work – whereas some of the most dramatic moments in these texts (not least *The Ship Who Sang*, of which Haraway speaks highly in the ‘Manifesto’) hinge around a disconnection between mental and physical sensation, an experience that ‘Digital Age’ scholars are better-equipped to examine. Additionally, cyberfeminism will be instrumental in comparing the depictions of disembodiment in my chosen texts to the paradigms set in male-authored cyberpunk fiction.

Though all five primary texts touch on the above themes of hybridity and embodiment, there are also more specific thematic connections between two or three texts that deserve some investigation. For this reason some reference must be made to the following areas of study: gender theory, to address sexual fluidity in *Ancillary Justice* and ‘Silently and Very Fast’; feminist disability theory (e.g. Sarah Einstein) to criticize the portrayal of physical disability in *The Ship Who Sang*, ‘The Girl Who Was Plugged In’ and *Proxies*; postcolonialism, for its possible insights into the exoticization of non-white bodies in *Proxies* and race relations (or lack of them) across the other texts; and some reference to Marxism where human and non-human class systems are concerned. While this may sound like a lot to cover, it would actually be more laborious to try and isolate all of these factors from some unified topic of “feminism” or “embodiment”, since the intersections of all of these power systems with gender relationships and bodies are too many and too strong to sever.

With this interdisciplinary framework in mind, the chapter that follows will outline how the human body is perceived in mainstream cyberpunk texts, and where this fits into a broader timeline of perceptions of the *female* human body.

1. Cyberpunk and the gender politics of “meat”

In her essay ‘Reading Cyborgs Writing Feminism’, Anne Balsamo asks, “Is there any way that the cyborg image could be used strategically to intervene in feminist theory?” In answering, she articulates what can be regarded as two distinct schools of thought on the subject, which happen to parallel the debate about hybridity outlined above. The first reads cyborgs as *aspirational*, with future technology shown to offer solutions to present-day inequalities; the second reads them as *representational*, in the sense that “woman’s development is not separate from technological development, but has, in fact, displayed a similar trajectory” (152).

In describing the aspirational cyborg, however, Balsamo chooses some surprisingly loaded language to make her point:

One way [the figure of the cyborg can be used in feminist theory] is to construct a utopian vision of the possibilities of a Helva XH-384, in which technology *emancipates* woman from her corporeal body. Feminism’s scepticism about technology and science would be challenged to see the potentially liberating effects of technology.

In this potential reading of *The Ship Who Sang*, the idea of disembodiment as ‘emancipation’ is unsettling. While technology certainly emancipates Helva from her body in the sense that it gives her the ability to move and speak, Balsamo’s phrasing suggests that it is the femaleness of Helva’s body that somehow imprisons her. Balsamo goes on to conclude that the popular image of the cyborg overwhelmingly helps reinforce gender, race and other boundaries – thus failing as an aspirational tool – but she does not *explicitly* take to task the idea of female-body-as-prison. This seems like a missed opportunity. Balsamo otherwise unpacks several of the assertions in Donna Haraway’s ‘Cyborg Manifesto’, but leaves this one relatively untouched:

Up till now (once upon a time), female embodiment seemed to be given, organic, necessary; and female embodiment seemed to mean skill in mothering and its metaphoric extensions. ... Cyborgs might consider more seriously the partial, fluid, sometimes aspect of sex and sexual embodiment. (Haraway 180)

It is unclear whether this section of the ‘Manifesto’ is suggesting that cyborg imagery removes the need for female embodiment to involve pregnancy/other supposedly “female” body functions, or

whether it removes the need for female embodiment altogether; perhaps it suggests both. But this, to me, is an important distinction – because any time it is suggested that women should be unburdened of *female embodiment itself*, and not from the expectations placed on it, it follows that the female body in its inert state is a burden.

The idea of the physical body as a prison or otherwise detrimental to the freedom of the mind or soul is anything but recent, nor has it ever been solely women's concern. Catholicism, among other religions, ascribes much of the inclination to sin to the desires of the physical body – necessitating to the practice of “mortification of the flesh”, which quells or punishes those desires through starvation, self-flagellation and so on. Within Judeo-Christianity the ideology can be traced back as far as the Old Testament, in which the physical act of eating leads to the “fall of man” (and to Adam and Eve becoming ashamed of their bodies). But philosophical enquiry into the matter of matter has, of course, preoccupied philosophers for even longer – with both Plato and Descartes believing that the body, in some sense, was the temporary vessel for an immortal soul. Both philosophical and religious discourses on mind/body dualism have greatly influenced English literature – particularly in the Renaissance and Romantic periods, which variously submitted learning, poetry and the appreciation of nature as methods through which, as Sir Philip Sidney puts it, “to lift up the mind from the dungeon of the body” (12).

Perhaps the most accessible contemporary literary examples of this desire to transcend the body can be found in the cyberpunk genre. As home computers became more common over the 1980s and '90s, science fiction writers started to grapple with the idea of cyberspace: usually in its more popular definitions of the Internet or any other plane of networked computer communication, but occasionally also to describe VR environments such as videogames. In cyberpunk fiction, most notably in William Gibson's genre-defining novel *Neuromancer* (1984) and short story 'Burning Chrome' (1982), cyberspace provides a blissful escape from a dystopian reality. Despite its fundamental lack of a physical dimension, Gibson's cyberspace is lushly described, as in the following scene in 'Burning Chrome' where the protagonists are hacking into a heavily protected database:

Bodiless, we swerve into Chrome's castle of ice. And we're fast, fast. It feels like we're surfing the crest of the invading program, hanging ten above the seething glitch systems as they mutate. We're sentient patches of oil swept along down corridors of shadow. (39)

His characters' experiences in cyberspace are pure sensation, and yet, paradoxically, determined by a state of bodilessness. The religious overtones of this are yet more obvious in the perspective of Case, the protagonist of *Neuromancer*. As a punishment for stealing from them, Case's former

employers administer a “wartime Russian mycotoxin” to his nervous system, thus affecting his ability to interact with cyberspace.

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 involved a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his own flesh. (Gibson 1984)

In invoking these ancient concepts of the villainous flesh and the body-as-prison, Case can be aligned not only with mind/body dualism but also with a particular breed of literary anti-hero who distracts himself from unhappy circumstances by dreaming of the sublime – like Jay Gatsby and his green light across the water.

But what are those unhappy circumstances, really, to which cyberspace becomes the cowboy hacker’s only (ab)solution? What is so imprisoning about the presumed white, male, able body of Case? Balsamo posits that cyberspace “offers white men an enticing retreat from the burden of their *cultural* identities” (original emphasis) but is in all other aspects “another site for the ... conventional inscription of the gendered, race-marked body” (131). To push this point even further, many feminist interpretations suggest that the penetrative act of “jacking-in” to the matrix – a word that in the original Latin meant “pregnant animal” or “womb” (Harper) – is in fact an attempt to re-establish, and not escape, traditions of masculinity. Nicola Nixon summarises this idea thusly:

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” and “bore and inject” into it without allowing it to find out the “size of their dicks” in advance. (202)

It would seem the main source of the cowboy’s suffering is a feeling of impotence in the face of capitalism; but, as Nixon argues, “the idea that computer cowboys could ever represent a form of alienated counterculture is almost laughable” as “computers are so intrinsically a part of the corporate system” (203). Cyberspace in *Neuromancer* is not a site for subversion or transcendence of any power structure; if anything, it is a playground for young, disillusioned white men to enact their power fantasies and reassert their masculinity.

We might stop to question, here: if this is the status quo in the flagship novel of the genre, what relevance could cyberpunk possibly have to feminist discourse? One possible answer to this is that in many ways cyberpunk is born from feminism, has appropriated from feminism, and – through the efforts of the women writers to be discussed – is destined to return to a feminist place. This view can be corroborated by several of the contributors to the reader *RELOAD: rethinking women + cyberculture*, who variously describe feminism as a sort of “absent mother” to

cyberpunk and identify several contemporary women authors as “appropriating the style and setting of cyberpunk in order to articulate women’s views of technoculture” (Flanagan and Booth 202).

To explain this opinion, we must begin again at the beginning with the fateful Fall. As any feminist knows, it is endlessly significant that the Fall of Man was brought about by the actions of Woman. It was Eve who tempted Adam to eat from the tree of knowledge, and Eve and her gender who were supposedly doomed to the punishment of childbirth. It is women who have been cast in the roles of temptresses and whores, using their bodies to corrupt men of good morals. Even outside the realm of myth and fiction, prevailing “theorizations of women’s physiology, social role, and psyche” have always helped “masculinize the realm of culture” – i.e. the realm of the mind – “while feminizing the realm of nature” – i.e. the realm of the body (Balistineanu 354). The case against the female body in literature and in culture in general is far too long even to begin to summarise here. For the sake of brevity, I would like to cite my own Bachelor dissertation, ‘Taming Flesh: shared concepts of food and the body between women in the Middle Ages and today’, as one example of how women have systematically been trained to destroy their bodies in the search for grace. This dissertation explored how online pro-anorexia or “pro-ana” groups could be seen to echo the language of medieval mystics like Catherine de Siena and Margery Kempe in talking about self-starvation. Evidence suggested that both groups used starvation to symbolically and biologically transcend conventional markers of femaleness: the anorexic woman’s body has little in the way of breasts or hips, is often incapable of menstruation, and rarely experiences sexual desire. In doing so, they may invite a wealth of mental and physical pain – but they could also be seen to protect themselves, at least somewhat, from the particularly female pain of sexual objectification and rape.

Problematic though it may be, this is one way we might start to understand cyborg technologies and cyberspace as “emancipations” from the female body. Indeed, even this unrelated essay sketches out the relevance of cyberspace, though in the context of the pro-ana community:

[W]ith common pro-ana “sacred texts” that contain such mantras as, “I am the most vile, worthless and useless person ever to have existed on this planet” – their God, anorexia itself (nicknamed Ana) is rarely a kind one. “Ana” creates a mouthpiece for the anorexics’ self-loathing, yelling, “suck in that fat stomach, damn it!” in their heads like a drill sergeant. There is, however, a sense of acceptance and love within the pro-ana community that the anorexic may not experience anywhere else, being twice marginalised for her appearance and her beliefs.

Pro-ana maps out its own VR, a place where young women who feel powerless in their everyday lives can regain some sort of control. In this environment, they set the rules. They speak the same

language. They support one another. Most importantly, even when they are talking about bodies – indeed, even though bodies are their main reason for *being* there – the girl writing on a pro-ana message board is, for that instant, in a state of disembodiment. In the same way, the cowboy hacker of the cyberpunk text uses his prowess in a virtual world to reassert the masculinity and sense of dominance he feels he has lost in the “real” world. In both cases, the flight to disembodiment represents a flight from those traits that are conventionally marked as feminine, shameful, and less-than.

This section has argued that the depictions of sublime, cyber-disembodiment in the male-dominated cyberpunk genre are founded on a feminine tradition, which seeks to escape subjugation through leaving behind the markers of the female body. This established, we now turn to how far this tradition is borne out in *The Ship Who Sang* and other examples of cyborg disembodiment.

2. Emancipation from the marked body

Anne McCaffrey’s *The Ship Who Sang*, James Tiptree Jr.’s ‘The Girl Who Was Plugged In’ and Laura J. Mixon’s *Proxies* are all good contenders to demonstrate how cybernetic technologies could emancipate marginalized peoples. And yet, equally, all three texts could be used as instructional guides in failing that mission almost completely.

The brainship Helva is disadvantaged straight out of the womb. Even the narrator of her story speaks of her without great optimism or empathy:

She was born a thing and as such would be condemned if she failed to pass the encephalograph test required of all newborn babies. There was always the possibility that though the limbs were twisted, the mind was not.

Immediately, the child Helva is objectified, not only by her appellation as “a thing” but also her depersonalizing dissection into the smaller parts of “the limbs” and “the mind”. But Helva’s literary soul-sister P. Burke, a.k.a. ‘The Girl Who Was Plugged In’, is born into an even harsher style of narration. At first the narrator gestures dismissively towards the “rotten girl” waiting in a crowd outside a store for a musical group called Breath to emerge (Flanagan and Booth 546). Once they have passed and boarded a shuttle, we see P. fully for the first time:

[N]ow you can see she’s the ugly of the world. A tall monument to pituitary dystrophy. No surgeon would touch her. When she smiles, her jaw—it’s half purple—almost bites her left eye out. ... The crowd is pushing her along now, treating you to glimpses of her jumbled torso, her mismatched legs. (547)

The narrator never quite defines the nature of P.'s disability (nor, indeed, treats her as a human being at all). She is presented instead in these intentionally grotesque bits and pieces, difficult to assemble into a whole the imagination – a kind of build-it-yourself version of the Creature. And this is just the beginning – throughout the story, P. Burke is subjected to such descriptions as “girl-brute”; “body-parts you’d pay not to see”; “big rancid girl-body”; “horrible” and “god-awful”; “hulk”; “something”; “grim carcass”; “about as far as you can get from the concept *girl*”; “a monster”; “a caricature of a woman”; and a “a gaunt she-golem” (549-574). With each damning word P. becomes more deeply associated with physicality, in all its decomposing, earthy spectacle.

For all of their apparent deformities, there is no explicit textual evidence that either girl will not survive without medical intervention. This immediately creates a complex, ethical unease, which, depending on the reader, may pervade throughout the narrative.

In the universe of *The Ship Who Sang*, the right to life first depends on a “receptive and alert” mind, without which a baby is, in the narrator’s disturbingly ambiguous phrasing, “condemned”. Having met these criteria, Helva’s existence still hangs in the balance on her parents’ decision: “to give their child euthanasia” or to “permit it to become an encapsulated ‘brain’” that would “suffer no pain [and] live a comfortable existence in a metal shell for several centuries, performing unusual service to Central Worlds”. This choice, so casually stated, seems like no choice at all: to take a baby who is physically disabled, but mentally perfectly acute, and immediately to put her either to death or to unpaid, near-endless work. Helva’s parents choose the latter, thus plunging Helva into debt for being allowed to live. At sixteen Helva is implanted into her ship “body” and must thenceforth carry out missions for the space-exploring institution Central Worlds, at least until she has paid off her “massive debt of early care, surgical adaptation and maintenance charges”.

In ‘The Girl Who Was Plugged In’, meanwhile, we are presented with a seventeen-year-old girl who is by all indications intelligent and mobile; granted, the degree of physical pain she might be in is unclear, and her emotional pain is quite obvious, as she tries to kill herself only a few pages into the story. In any case, like Helva, P.’s fate is not exactly in her own hands. At the hospital her stomach is pumped, and she eventually revives to “the understandable disappointment of finding herself still alive” (548). Later that night she is visited by a businessman from an advertising company called GTX, who offers her a deal:

“I have a job for you. It’s hard work. If you did well you’d be meeting Breath and stars like that all the time. ... But it means you never see anybody you know again. Never, *ever*. You will be legally dead. Even the police won’t know.”

To which P. rapidly agrees, saying inwardly:

Show me the fire I walk through. (549)

Without delay, P. is rushed to a “nowhere” that is “warm and gleaming and kind with nurses”. Over time she is fitted with electronic implants and enters training for her “job” – basically a “charm course” that teaches her to execute her every movement “DELICIOUSLY” (550). Finally, the titular plugging-in occurs, and P. wakes up animating a fresh, blonde, beautiful young body, whom the GTX advisors come to name Delphi (a more godlike version of P.’s full name, Philadelphia).

The story takes place at an unspecified time in the future in which most forms of advertising have been banned, preventing any representation “*other than the legitimate use of the product, intended to promote its sale*” (552, original formatting). Delphi has been designed as a living loophole, who will earn her keep (i.e. her new body and lifestyle) by publicly using products and services to make them desirable by association.

P./Delphi throws herself into this work with a passion. Indeed, neither Helva nor P. seem to question the long-term, binding agreements thrust upon them as teenagers. To the contrary, they appear largely content with their new, disembodied lives. But has their disembodiment therefore “emancipated” them? Are P. and Helva examples of the liberating potential of cyborg technology? Such questions are decidedly complex, and merit some investigation into what P. and Helva stand to gain from these arrangements – and what they stand to lose.

First, it might be profitable to map out the two girls’ situations over the model identified in the last section, in which disembodiment provides an escape from marginalization through eliminating markers of difference. In these cases, the most obvious marker of difference that disembodiment eliminates is that of physical disability and deformity. Helva’s “real” body is rendered invisible, locked away in a vault, just as P.’s body remains in a chamber deep underground while the graceful proxy Delphi travels far and wide on the surface, betraying nothing of P.’s actual physical nature.

Yet we could equally argue that Helva remains marked *because* she has been disembodied in such a dramatic way. She is a ship: one cannot get much more different than that. Anyone she interacts with can assume she is one of two things: an artificial intelligence, or a “shell person”. As the eponymous singing ship, Helva’s reputation generally precedes her, so it is common knowledge that her tiny human body is hidden somewhere on the ship, encased in metal, as mysterious and enticing to some as an Easter egg. The same paradox seems to apply to Helva’s potential gender markers: they are conspicuous by their absence. Helva’s human body is arrested

in development at a very young age, so neither human nor machine body can have much in the way of sex characteristics. But Helva has spent years simulating a natural-sounding female voice to put her peers more at ease, and this one feminizing characteristic seems to evoke many others. Helva's first assigned co-captain, Jennan – the so-called “brawn” of the ship – becomes quite infatuated with her, which affection he immediately makes physical:

He startled her by stamping up to the column panel, touching it with light, tender fingers.

“I wonder what you look like,” he said softly, wistfully.

Helva's response to this is telling of the sustained importance of the physical body, even in a state of disembodiment:

Helva had been briefed about this natural curiosity of scouts. She didn't know anything about herself and neither of them ever would or could.

“Pick any form, shape and shade and I'll be yours obliging,” she countered, as training suggested.

The idea that Helva “didn't know anything about herself” seems bizarre coming from someone as reflective and as deeply sensitive as she proves to be. She can only mean her physical self, and yet she surely knows something about that too – at least that she is small, dystrophic, and encased in titanium. From McCaffrey's wording, it would seem that though Helva can *intuitively* identify the ship as being her body/self, since it responds to her commands and provides her with sensory input, *intellectually* she still believes that her essence stops at the flesh, invisible and thereby unknowable. In the opinion of *How We Became Posthuman* author N. Katherine Hayles, McCaffrey's brainship stories “titillate by playing with a transformation that they do not take seriously ... The pleasure they offer is the reassurance that human bonding will triumph over hyperconnectivity, life cycle over dis/assembly zone, female nature over transformation” (168-9.)

We cannot ignore, either, the response Helva gives Jennan, apparently as part of her protocol. Though ships can be implanted with biologically “male” or “female” brains, it is ambiguous whether or not both genders receive this training. Either way, the statement has strong connotations of female sexual compliance, sounding like a more formal version of the stereotypical sex-worker motto, “I can be whatever you want me to be”. And whatever its intended function, the phrase indicates a stark power imbalance between brain and brawn – which names belie a close, inverted relationship with mind/body dualism. Though on paper the brain/brawn pairing are presented as equals – and though, in physical terms, Helva wields vastly more power than Jennan – in practice the brain is expected to be deferential to the brawn, even in a sexually-charged situation. The arrangement can even be read as fundamentally unequal, since

Jennan's position as co-captain of the ship effectively gives him partial authority over Helva's body while retaining complete bodily autonomy himself. This can easily be read as an analogy for the relationships between men and women in reality, especially in the political climate surrounding McCaffrey in 1961. For example, abortion was illegal in the majority of the United States throughout the 1960s, representing an enormous degree of control over women's bodies in the hands of the male-dominated government.

In many ways, then, Helva's cyborg body has not emancipated her so much as it has formalised a pre-existing albeit unspoken agreement: that women's bodies are the property of men. Equally, and relatedly, the way Helva's parents are forced to hand their daughter over to a corporation in exchange for her being allowed to live makes a strong statement about society's perception of disabled bodies. There are multiple real-life comparisons that could be drawn with Helva's situation: the commoditization of disability aids and care, which can leave people with disabilities impoverished just for pursuing a better quality of life; carer abuse, which can manifest from the carer's belief that the time and assistance they provide a disabled person entitles them to their body; and any day-to-day interaction in which others non-consensually push wheelchairs, touch prosthetics, distract companion animals, ask invasive questions, or otherwise fail to respect the boundaries of disabled people to the same degree as able-bodied people. In short, Helva's disembodiment/cyborg embodiment does not exempt her from the poor treatment that women with disabilities experience in reality. Because women and disabled people are already considered objects, the combination of these identities with a huge, metal body does not read as human *or* hybrid; instead, a person like Helva is multiply objectified.

P. Burke's story aligns with Helva's, insofar as her new and supposedly improved body is not technically *hers*. The body that becomes Delphi is grown from a "modified embryo", "just a vegetable" until it is connected with P., the Remote Operator (551). The businessman who explains P.'s new job, Mr. Cante, dresses the involuntary work up as something noble by persuading P. that without any kind of advertising at all, "Our economy, our society, would be cruelly destroyed. We'd be back in caves!" (555) Gentle though it appears, this is still serious emotional manipulation. The language Cante uses is eerily reminiscent of that of a child sex abuser: "you must never, *never* tell anyone what you're doing", "people wouldn't understand, if they knew. They would become upset just as you did". Aptly enough, this scene depicts most of the men in the room, including the "fatherly" Cante, leering at Delphi's adolescent body.

What follows arguably cements P. as a commodity. Her employers "ship" Delphi to Barcelona, where she is immediately engaged to an eighty-one-year-old Infante. The only noticeable difference between this and typical human trafficking is that Delphi is a high-profile

child bride, whose every appearance on the news helps boost the sales of whatever product she is wearing, using or standing near in the pictures. When she later responds negatively to one of the products she is endorsing, Cante is infuriated. In reaction, he creates a rule: “Balance unit resistance against PR index” meaning “Delphi’s complaints will be endured as long as her [popularity] stays above a certain level. (What happens when it sinks need not concern us.)” (562) Such chilling parentheticals remind us that no-one is concerned for the welfare of P. Burke, only Delphi the “unit”, the worth of which can be measured as easily as capital stock.

But despite her exploitation and dehumanisation, it cannot be overlooked that P.’s cyborg embodiment does improve her life on a deep emotional level. It is an unremitting “joy [t]o waken out of the nightmare of being P. Burke” (559). Furthermore, granted, this joy could very much be argued to derive from disembodiment. Where P.’s body is described in terms of necrosis, dirt, and everything profane, Delphi’s life is one of richness, softness, and the divine. The “girl who loved her gods” has “become a goddess herself” (565). In all of these ways, her experience largely prefigures the joys of disembodiment that Gibson’s characters find in cyberspace. Delphi leaves behind the “meat” that is P. Burke and travels thousands of miles without physically moving from the underground laboratory. She enters a world that is at once hyperstimulating and strangely muted: because of the constraints of her “bandwidth”, she has minimal sense of smell and taste, and a “slight overall dimness” to her sense of touch (556). In fact, there are “certain definite places where her beastly P. Burke body *feels* things that Delphi’s dainty flesh does not”. The narrator cuts to a brief aside, which makes clear what places those are:

[F]or her, sex is a four-letter word spelled P-A-I-N. She isn’t quite a virgin ... she’d been about twelve and the freak lovers were bombed blind. When they came down, they threw her out with a small hole in her anatomy and a mortal one elsewhere.

As a victim of childhood rape, anything to do with sex is traumatic to P. For this reason, the numbness around her breasts and genitals comes as a tremendous relief. Any kind of sexual contact can be effectively tuned out; pain is fainter, more easily ignored. In light of P.’s past, this amounts to a kind of invulnerability. As Heather J Hicks points out, ‘The Girl Who Was Plugged In’ thusly shows a much darker side to the concept of disembodiment, where disembodiment “is not about the body ceasing to ‘matter’—it is about the body mattering so much that it becomes uninhabitable” (71).

This is how *The Ship Who Sang* and ‘The Girl Who Was Plugged In’ do seem to provide a more grounded view of cyborg technologies than a text like *Neuromancer*. In the prototypical cyberpunk landscape, cyberspace is presented as a refuge from dystopian society: a place for

disenfranchised people to regain some sort of control, to feel powerful, maybe even immortal. Helva and P. Burke's cyborg bodies afford them those same feelings of power, but the narration shows that power to be illusory. The corporations the protagonists work for offer physical protection and an interesting life – all that which Marx might identify as an “opium of the people” – but at the price of free will. True, Tiptree makes this angle far more explicit, but we could also speculate that since the first ‘brainships’ story was published in 1961, not long after the McCarthy era, it would have been riskier for McCaffrey to express overt anti-establishment sentiments than it was for Tiptree in 1973. In any case, McCaffrey and Tiptree might be seen to be more compelling in this instance because, as women writing just as feminism was beginning to take root in the US, they might have a more immediate understanding of marginalization than the white male authors at the forefront of cyberpunk.

The most significant area in which Tiptree and McCaffrey could be found wanting, of course, is their portrayals of disability. While not completely unsympathetic, these authors still fail to really challenge prevailing views about the disabled body. Helva's compliance with her Central Worlds contract is particularly disappointing to activist Sarah Einstein, who finds it appalling that SF writers can imagine brainships, extraterrestrial life, and projected consciousness but rarely imagine a world that accommodates disabled people. She summarizes the problem thus:

... it's impossible not to notice that I'm living in a world that contains more technological wonders than McCaffrey had imagined. The protagonists in the story would have been much helped, for instance, by a secure communications channel and a GPS system, both of which I have in my battered old car. But most of all, the heroine of this book would have been helped by a future shaped by the actions of today's disability activists. Because, at its heart, this series of books tells the story of the enslavement of extremely promising children who have the bad luck to be born ... disabled.

This quotation from Einstein is excerpted from a call for SF stories that subvert traditional paradigms of disability in the genre, by exploring the possibility of “a fully accessible, universally designed future” in which disability is portrayed “as a simple fact, not as something to be overcome or something to explain why a character is evil”. Another disability trope that could be retired is that which plays out in ‘The Girl Who Was Plugged In’, where Delphi's love interest, Paul, discovers P.'s ‘real’ body and, in horror and panic, pulls out her wires, killing her. Clearly the story is a tragedy, and its ending reflects that. It is worth echoing Einstein in hoping that, going forward, SF can break down the distinction between ‘real’ bodies and their ‘fake’ augmentations that is used against so many people on the margins of society, from disabled athletes, to transgender people, to everyday victims of misogyny who are discredited based on their use of cosmetic implants, make-up or hair extensions.

This brings us to the next chapter, which examines a more modern SF text in search of a more integrated approach to cyborg disembodiment.

3. Identity tourism in *Proxies* and the Web

The 1990s was a period of tremendous technological upheaval, with perhaps the most significant event for our purposes being the introduction of the World Wide Web in 1991. Whereas in the cyberpunk era, usage of the Internet depended on the user having (among other things) some prior experience and skill in computing, the 1990s saw home computers becoming cheaper, easier to use, and with the Web, vastly more relevant to people from all walks of life. While the computer was (and arguably still is) somewhat of a luxury object, the democratizing capacity of the Web should not be understated. Over the last twenty years or so the concept of the “average Internet user” has moved on from the Gibsonian cyberspace cowboy and basically become so diverse as to be redundant.

This is not to say, however, that the Web is a completely egalitarian environment. Before we look at where things stand today, it might be helpful to look at another key moment in our cyborg disembodiment timeline – towards the end of the 1990s, when the key text *Proxies* by Laura J Mixon was published.

Early theorists were optimistic about the radical possibilities of the Web, which seemed to offer the opportunity to inhabit any identity or even multiple identities. Sherry Turkle, a leading academic in the cross-section of psychology, sociology and communication technology since the 1980s, wrote in 1995 that,

The self is no longer playing different roles in different settings at different times ... The life practice of windows is that of a decentered self that exists in many worlds and plays many roles at the same time.
(Whitehead and Wesch 36)

But, as Zeynep Tufekci points out, the users participating in this identity play at the time tended to be, in comparison to the general population, “more male, more technically oriented, racially homogeneous, fairly well-off, and generally young and of particular cultural leanings” (Whitehead and Wesch 36). In other words, though the Internet was now accessible to all sorts of people, it mainly appealed to the same demographic as in the 1980s. In light of this, the joyful experimentation with identity that Turkle championed began to look more like what Lisa Nakamura dubbed “identity tourism” (Flanagan and Booth 323). Studying an online chat community, Nakamura found that the additional identities created by users frequently

“participated in stereotyped notions of gender and race”, using both as “amusing prostheses that could be donned and shed without ‘real-life’ consequences”. What was worse, the identity tourists would regard their experiences as “a kind of lived truth” that they would use to inform their perceptions of other gender/racial identities, creating a vicious circle of self-sustaining stereotypes.

Balsamo locates a perfect example of such identity tourism in *Neuromancer*, where Case’s consciousness is plugged into the body of the main female character, Molly. Being within but unable to control Molly’s body gives Case a sense of passivity that he finds “irritating”, but this does not “provide the occasion for the development of some insight into the politics of gendered bodies”, as early theorists might have suggested as a function of identity play (Balsamo 129). Instead, Gibson takes this opportunity to make Molly more sexually titillating by teasing her own body. While the subversive potential of a female character pleasuring herself while the male character is powerless is not insignificant, this reading is undermined by the fact that Molly is *not* stimulating herself so much as she is vicariously stimulating Case. As well, Balsamo notes, the fact that this action is juxtaposed with a memory of sexual intercourse (and the “mutual grunt of unity when he’d entered her”) implies equivalence between the two experiences of being “inside” Molly. In this way, a decidedly queer encounter is wrested back into a heterosexual context where male pleasure is prioritised.

Whether cyberpunk could therefore be said to have predicted or even helped produce the “identity tourism” of the early 1990s is up for debate. Regardless, both SF writers and Web users have found forms of resistance to this pattern of cyber-colonisation. One leading text in this movement is *Proxies*, a novel with multiple narrators who provide multiple angles on a consciousness-projecting technology very similar to that imagined by Tiptree in ‘The Girl Who Was Plugged In’. One of the protagonists of *Proxies*, Carli D’Auber, has invented a system that allows humans to remotely control and experience the world through primitive “waldos”. It emerges that there is a secret program called the Kaleidas project, which has developed D’Auber’s technology to allow children with birth defects to pilot advanced humanoid waldos, or “proxies”. Now, the project’s funding, and therefore the survival of the “crèche babies”, is threatened. Their “Mother” (Patricia Taylor) concocts a scheme to steal and escape on a NASA ship, but for this to work, she needs Carli D’Auber’s expertise. An adult proxy pilot named Daniel is enlisted to kidnap D’Auber, while simultaneously trying to protect her from a powerful stolen proxy referred to as “the renegade”.

Already, we can identify several ways in which *Proxies* is building on precedents set in *The Ship Who Sang* and ‘The Girl Who Was Plugged In’. Perhaps the most noticeable similarity to these texts is the presence of the crèche children, who, like Helva and P. Burke, are born with

severe disabilities presumed to negatively impact their quality of life. However, the power dynamics of this arrangement are more ambiguous than in either older text. While one cannot deny the troubling nature of these “disabled, deformed children of color [being] sold into experimentation”, it remains an “unanswered tension” whether the Kaleidas scientists are acting in the children’s best interests in planning the ship theft – implying that they “will lead a life of misery if forever trapped in their original, deformed and limited bodies” (Flanagan and Booth 434). We might, like Einstein, ask why Mixon chooses to write yet another future that uses technology to adapt bodies, rather than adapting the environment to accommodate different bodies. On the other hand, Mixon is one of the few authors in this subgenre whose characters actually discuss these issues themselves, culminating in an impassioned debate among all of the crèche children whether they belong in Earth or in space.

Perhaps most important to note is this polyvocal quality to *Proxies* – the multiple, sometimes simultaneous narrators who help reveal the network of conflicting motivations between/within characters. For example, there are several chapters in the book whose narration is shared between the crèche children Pablo and Buddy, who occupy the same mental and physical space – as it later turns out, because Buddy is a secondary personality created by Pablo. Mixon’s creative solution to this is to structure such chapters in two columns, with one or two lines going down the page to indicate when Pablo, Buddy or both are using a mental “shield” to conceal their thoughts from one another. This device is at its most compelling when Mother Taylor announces that she is succumbing to cancer, which news affects Pablo (left) and Buddy (right) in dramatically different ways:

Mother looked at him and made several starts.

Finally she said, “I wish I didn’t have to go, Pablo.”

A long silence. “I never wanted children. All my long life I was happy with my choices. Then you came along.” She smiled. You, especially, Pablo. You were the son I never had.

“I still remember that first day, when your mother handed you over to my care. You cried for days, and for long after you let no one near you but me...”

Lies, all lies.

You never loved me. How could you love me and hurt me the way you did? All the insults, the criticism— shutting me in my crèche—

I was just a little boy. I trusted you. My God, how you hurt me. (409-10)

Soon after, Pablo and Buddy are forced to confront the “flesh” of Mother Taylor (as opposed to the “body”, which for the crèche children refers only to proxies) as she says her final goodbyes. The experience is too horrifying for Pablo, who blacks out – leaving Buddy to “take prime” over

the proxy and the narration of the next chapter. As Buddy watches her die, he is overwhelmed by conflicting emotions:

He wanted to put his hands around her neck and strangle her. “Mother...” he said. But the words that followed were someone else’s. “I know how hard you tried. I love you.”

Aghast, outraged, he stared inward. Pablo—it must have been. (412)

This scene is a good representative sample of *Proxies* as a whole, in its negotiations of mind/body and even mind/mind boundaries. The forgiving words could certainly have come from Pablo, but the fact that Mixon would be breaking her previous pattern of displaying all consciousnesses present on one page implies otherwise. We could link back, here, to Jennifer González’s contention that “hybrid beings are what we have always been” (68). Pablo represents a Russian-doll-like model of hybridity: on one level, he is hybrid in that he is a human inhabiting a machine bodies; deeper, he comprises a hybrid being in himself, being one consciousness split into several personalities; and then there is some kind of fundamental human hybridity illustrated in this scene, in a single personality’s capacity to feel “an ungainly glob of several emotions” about Mother Taylor’s death (413). (This is without even addressing the levels on which disabled people and people of colour have been figured as hybrid.)

This scene also illustrates the starkest difference between traditional cyberpunk and Mixon’s late ’90s response. Here, *Proxies* begins to express some backlash against the idea of disembodiment as an escape from mortality and pain. Pablo and Buddy are not only overwhelmed by their conflicting emotions about Mother Taylor’s death, but also by seeing the actual “flesh” of this woman for the first time. Her “ancient, wrinkled” body appears to them as a “thing”: Buddy can hardly believe this “pitiful creature” is the “raging, terrifyingly powerful woman who had made his life a living hell” (411-2). So far, so much like the “contempt for the flesh” described in *Neuromancer*. But while cyberpunk vilifies the flesh in the service of glorifying disembodiment, *this* scene – this painful death of a person who has run from her own mortality for decades, spending millions of dollars in research and treatment and even plotting her own escape from Earth – makes the case that there *is* no true escape from the body except this, the final escape.

Proxies takes a similarly ambivalent approach to the effects of cyborg disembodiment on the concept of gender. In Mixon’s characters we do see glimpses of the kind of positive, empathy-oriented identity play that we have failed to see unfold in actual cyberspace. In fact, Mixon practically writes over the Case-inside-Molly scene from *Neuromancer* when she first introduces the “renegade”, who has woken up inside a stolen proxy body:

While his hands were disconnecting the probes, he glanced at his naked body ... It shocked him. He—no, she—had faced into a gender blender. ... The idea of being in a female body was arousing. Obedient, this body's nipples went hard, and an ache grew in her lower abdomen. Odd; faintly—somewhere—she could feel a penis growing hard as well. (10)

Mixon's version has a completely different power dynamic to Gibson's since, as soon as the renegade has "faced in", his identity becomes confused with Dane's. First, the renegade is subsumed by the gender pronoun "she", which is used for the rest of his time within Dane's body. Furthermore, there is a woozy, dreamlike quality to the narration of Dane's chapters, as she careens between 'being' the renegade and vaguely recalling memories that seem to be embedded in her female body. In this encounter, both parties have lost some of themselves in becoming this quintessential, 'monstrous' hybrid. It cannot go unmentioned, either, that Dane's hybrid status is worn more plainly than Pablo's, in the "mottled" brown and white quality of her skin. It is never made explicit what causes this variation in Dane's body. It could be vitiligo, or even chimerism – which would have even stronger connotations of two entities mixing together without quite becoming one. More telling, still, is that in moments of relative clarity Dane refers to the renegade's presence as "her other self" and "the other body" (13) – a choice of words which inverts the *Neuromancer* configuration where the invading presence is the male protagonist, and the female host body the Other.

Less prominent in the text, but even more important in terms of identity play, is the character of Teru, a proxy pilot and workmate of Daniel. Teru "*in corpus*" is a woman, but in proxy chooses to be "a male—a black teenager with a scarf tied around the forehead" (140), described as an "Adonis" (237). In this form, the narrator uses hyphenated gender pronouns – "she-he", "her-him", etc. – to encompass both aspects of Teru's gender. Though the narrator does not go into great detail about why Teru chooses this proxy, it appears simply to be most comfortable to her.

This makes it all the more puzzling when Teru and Daniel are examining Dane Elisa Cae's unconscious body in the lab, trying to identify the renegade. Teru says,

"I tried to triangulate using Odhiambo's aggression-cooperation model, and I got reasonably non-sex-specific behavior, a little more male than female, perhaps. But with important anomalies. ... The upshot is, I'm having serious difficulties in determining whether the renegade is male or female." (239)

She adds that, "gender identity is such an important ingredient in cultural analysis", without explaining exactly why. It might strike the reader – this reader, at least – as strange that a female character who primarily uses a male proxy should be so bent on determining the renegade's gender, especially within a male/female binary. As if underscoring this queer (in both senses of

the word) dissonance, Teru then kisses Daniel “with her man’s lips”, evoking in Daniel “a weird confusion of affection, arousal, and revulsion” (240).

In these ways, *Proxies* seems to tiptoe towards a cyborg “post-gender” world like the one Haraway envisioned, before scurrying quickly back to gender essentialist comforts like an “aggression-cooperation model”. Perhaps Gender in Mixon’s world exists as an equal-but-different binary, where men and women are accorded equal subjectivity, but which subjectivity is still dictated by the gender of the “flesh”. Accordingly, gender fluidity seems to be understood only as an effect of facing into a proxy body of an apparently different gender. To phrase this more succinctly: in *Proxies*, gender is determined primarily by the “flesh” and to a lesser extent by the “body”, but is always, therefore, anchored to some sort of physical signifier.

This treatment of gender would appear to be symptomatic of Mixon’s approach to cyborg disembodiment as a whole. Despite demonstrating the great potential of this kind of technology – for disability aids, for communication, space exploration and so on – the concluding message of the book is largely damning of proxies and of cyberspace in general. The clearest evidence of this is the fates of the crèche children, best explained by Carlen Lavigne:

... the children become psychopathic as they begin killing people in the mistaken belief that bodily “death” is the same as losing a waldo or dying in a computer game (319). The children are unable to understand the basic human condition that links mind and body. (71)

Lavigne also points to the final reflections of Carli and Daniel as summative of the *Proxies* stance, with both characters independently rejecting the “superhero fantasy world” (Mixon 398) of VR and proxy embodiment for real-world achievements and “embodied pleasures” such as “sex, food and drink” (Lavigne 71). Ultimately, Lavigne argues, *Proxies* can be read as a shift in cyberpunk’s interests, “where cyberspace is less an addictive power fantasy and more a tool that must not be allowed to eclipse or overshadow an individual’s embodied existence.”

Lavigne’s reading is a strong one, for better and for worse. While *Proxies* must be commended for its legitimate criticisms of disembodiment, its conclusion does ring slightly false, oversimplified, and more than a little patronising. The novel is refreshing in the larger context of cyberpunk, in that it does lend women characters a great deal more subjectivity than they have enjoyed before. It is also true that disabled characters like Pablo are treated with more sensitivity by their author than were Helva or P. Burke. But these advances are largely cancelled out by these final few chapters, where “the eventual aversion to VR ... is not presented as a specifically feminine position, but rather as an ‘adult’ point of view” (Lavigne 71). It cannot be ignored that the “adults” who condemn cyberspace are white and able-bodied (Carli and Daniel) while the

crèche children, the ones supposedly lost in fantasy, are people of colour with disabilities. In effect, this reproduces some of the same problems of 1980s cyberpunk as outlined earlier, albeit on other axes of inequality and to a different end. Where trad-cyberpunk was problematic in its promotion of disembodiment that excluded female experience, *Proxies* is problematic in its sweeping rejection of disembodiment that excludes disabled and non-white experiences.

In the end, the crèche children vote to remain in space, and Carli decides to stay with them, believing that, “they needed someone sane along ... someone who would help moor them to reality” (466). But, again, Carli has had a privileged childhood, as a white woman and the daughter of a senator, and thus has little understanding of what sanity or reality look like in any other cultural context. Although the crèche children are all at risk of mental illnesses such as multiple personality disorder, one could argue that within the abnormal conditions in which they were raised, a splitting-off of personalities is a “sane”, rational adaptation. Forced to inhabit multiple bodies, surely the manufacture of different personalities might be a helpful coping mechanism. In the case of Pablo, both Buddy and Dane turn out to be secondary, created personalities, who indeed cause Pablo a lot of mental anguish. But these offshoot personalities are also crucial to Pablo’s emotional development: Buddy functions as an outlet for the aforementioned feelings of rage towards Mother Taylor; Dane functions as Pablo’s self-forgiveness, and is even responsible for eventually reuniting all three personalities with their abandoned infant self, Pablito, whose existence had previously been repressed.

As part of a wider exploration of the role of the body in feminist post-cyberpunk fiction, Kathryn Allan contends that *Proxies* “attempt[s] to reiterate an integrated embodied identity, while at the same time avoiding the pitfalls of essentialism” (156). She cites the aforementioned polyvocality of the novel, using Buddy and Mother Taylor’s conflict over the Kaleidas project as an example of how Mixon “challenges the transhumanist tenet of using technology as a quick fix for transcending vulnerable bodies” (166). While this is true to an extent, Mixon does seem to sabotage her own good intentions through the above relapses to gender essentialism, ethnocentrism and ableism. Though post-cyberpunk texts do well to remind us of our “vulnerable bodies”, it seems counterproductive to reinforce this message to marginalized groups who have a forced hyperawareness of their vulnerability.

This sense of condescension crystallizes around one of the final scenes in the novel, in which Carli, in an effort to stop the crèche children killing the astronauts they have displaced from the NASA ship, intervenes directly with Pablo’s “flesh” self.

So vulnerable. So frail. The face was achingly beautiful and innocent. Nothing like those terrifyingly strong machine bodies. ... But her anger was too great. She grabbed those matchstick arms ... and gave him a shake.

“*This* is you. Not that muscle-bound *thing* you pilot around. *This* is what you’re killing, if you space those people in there.” (462)

On one hand, Carli’s hyperbole is understandable given the dire situation. On the other, her anger seems unjustly placed on Pablo, who has never been taught the truth about the “flesh”. This also seems an unfair portrayal of the children’s machine bodies, which, as unthinking agents, can surely *only* be innocent. What finally wins over the crèche children is Pablo’s sudden, touch-triggered memory of his “real body”, of his mother “[n]ursing, tickling, holding” him – all of which helps create an idealised, sepia-toned, and very much gender-normative, ‘nature’-based picture of embodiment.

Finally, this scene disappoints from a post-colonial point of view by transforming Carli, who has been relatively helpless and passive throughout the text, into a white saviour figure, while simultaneously exoticizing the “achingly beautiful” body of Pablo. Further, as pointed out by Thomas Foster, the seeming necessity for Pablo to “recover his racial and ethnic roots in order to resist the effects of immersion in cyberspace” implies a kind of “resistant materiality and fixed identity” to race that is less obvious in Mixon’s treatment of gender (Flanagan and Booth 395). Here, as Allan concedes, “Mixon falls back on using racial otherness as a way to further mark the body as vulnerable and make projects of ‘rescue’ possible” (194). So while *Proxies* does provide a diverse cast of characters who transgress and blur gender, race and bodily boundaries, it is also rife with interactions like the above, which reassert and rebuild those boundaries before any real deconstruction can take place.

To return to the “real world” (unstable a concept as this has proven to be): perhaps this stage in the evolution of our relationship to cyborg disembodiment is reflected in non-fictional studies of Web use at the time. Though it was primarily white men taking advantage of the “identity tourism” described by Nakamura, women were nevertheless using the Web in other more subversive and experimental ways. “In feminist cyberpunk the female protagonists do not want to “leave” their bodies,” writes Nayar Pramod; “rather, they see virtual space as ‘a means of enhancing or multiplying embodiment’” (qtd. in Allan 155). Accordingly, in the late ’90s, female Web users tended not to partake in identity tourism but instead in the formation of multiple online communities in which to explore and understand different aspects of their identities. The Web has been instrumental in, for example, helping “women of color who want to connect globally across diasporas” through “the cyberfeminist practice of online organizing and discursive space” (Daniels 107). Also, Daniels goes on to add, the Web has opened up potential of a “safe space” for “individual women outside any formal political organization” – a concept Fereshteh Nourai-Simone poignantly compares to Virginia Woolf’s “room of one’s own” (qtd. in Daniels

108-9). In most cases, Daniels finds, “rather than going online to ‘switch’ gender or racial identities, people actively seek out online spaces that affirm and solidify social identities along axes of race, gender, and sexuality” (110). Though this function of the Web may sound conservative, its radical nature is in the increased control users have over their environments. To “affirm and solidify” identities prescribed by *outsiders* to the community and to do so *within* the community will, after all, have completely different results. These self-governed spaces allow Web users to explore what their racial, gender, sexual, and other identities meant to them, while receiving support and advice from people with similar experiences. As Daniels demonstrates, cyberfeminists differ in their opinion about whether or not disembodiment plays a part in these safe spaces. It is easiest to default to a moderate position on this; after all, the aforementioned research into pro-ana communities suggests that these specialized communities allow women to be disembodied insofar as their bodies cease to be markers of difference, but embodied in that bodies are still very much in focus. One of the examples Daniels gives, that of online breast-cancer support groups, would seem to corroborate this. The women are “not necessarily interested in gender play or ... in leaving the body behind them,” Victoria Pitts explains; rather, in “detailing some of the more unpleasant bodily aspects of sickness and treatment, they present women’s bodies as they are really lived” (qtd. in Daniels 111). Again, in an environment built around a specific demographic, certain bodily markers of difference become more-or-less givens, thus freeing up women to discuss multiple other aspects of their identity.

Of course, where online communities cease to be useful as a feminist tool of resistance is in their failure to account for intersectionality. In the Daniels essay, pro-ana and QLBT (queer, lesbian, bisexual and trans) communities are just two examples of online spaces that are implicitly “predicated on an assumption of whiteness” (116). In communities based around any other factor than race, as “in the offline world”, whiteness becomes “an unmarked category that is taken for granted in daily life”. One could go as far to say that the same goes for the assumption of being able-bodied, straight, cisgender, English-speaking, etc. wherever the nature of the community does not suggest otherwise of its demographic.

Taking these advantages and disadvantages into account, we can identify some congruence between the anxieties about cyborg disembodiment presented in SF and cultural anxieties about cyberspace in general in the late 1990s. An important final note on this is that a great deal of the concern about cyberspace in fictional and non-fictional texts in this period might be traced back to a human tendency to fear new technology, intensified due to the looming spectre of the Millennium bug/Y2K problem. In this light, *Proxies* can be seen to be concerned with human bodily vulnerability as a projection of its fears about digital vulnerability. That is: the mortal,

feeble and infection-prone “flesh” of the crèche children can be read as a metaphor for a virus-prone cyberspace that was supposedly on the brink of disaster. In any reading, *Proxies* expresses an overwhelming antipathy to disembodiment, and by that token ignores what capacity it might have to dismantle markers of difference. In the next section, two texts from the current decade are used to chart what, if any, relevance the idea of disembodiment has for readers today.

4. ‘Silently and Very Fast’ towards an augmented reality

Over the last ten years, arguably the most significant development in the way we use the Web has been the explosion of social media websites and applications – from the now-unfashionable Myspace, to Twitter, to the hegemonic Facebook. Accordingly, the hardware by which we use these services – computers, tablets, smartphones, and so on – has become increasingly geared towards total, round-the-clock connectivity. In the timeline sketched out by Daniels, we could be said to have moved towards a state of symbiosis between our bodies and our online selves, “engaging with Internet technologies in ways that enable [us] to transform [our] embodied selves, not escape embodiment” (118). While virtual realities and cyberspaces such as video games are becoming more detailed and interactive than ever before, there is scant reason to believe that this has led to a disconnect from reality. Rather, the concepts of virtual and real are moving closer together, becoming a hybrid entity in the form of augmented reality (henceforth AR).

Though this term is not to be taken literally, it is not too far a stretch to see hardware like Google Glass, motion-sensing videogame interfaces, or even exercise trackers (e.g. Fitbit) as instruments of an AR. Perhaps more tenuously linked, but still relevant, is our usage of social media: physical bodies become photographs, and photographs are tagged with the relevant data of names, co-ordinates, events and times; social actions such as protests can be (and are) organised spontaneously; even sex can be digitally augmented, with apps that can identify nearby potential partners along with their sexual preferences. Plenty of these advancements are as troubling as they are exciting – but they are happening regardless, and so it is worth investigating what elements of AR, to borrow Balsamo’s words, could be “used strategically to intervene in feminist theory”.

In my opinion, this more fluent integration of digital and organic *is* conducive to the breaking down of other boundaries, such as gender; a shift which is reflected especially in the short story collection *The Melancholy of Mechagirl* by Catherynne M Valente.

Where *Proxies* seemed somewhat tentative in its ideas about gender, *Mechagirl* is unflinching. The collection opens with a prose-poem, the titular ‘Melancholy of Mechagirl’,

which is practically a manifesto unto itself, actively denouncing many of the SF tropes already mentioned in this thesis. Its voice hovers somewhere between e.e. cummings and Nicki Minaj, full of vivid portmanteaux like “softgirl/brightgirl/candygirl electrocheer gigglenoise”. Through these omnibus words and images, Valente combines the soft, sweet, and feminine-coded with the hard, powerful, and masculine-coded, resulting in queer, hybrid imagery like “pink rhinestone bubble tunes / [piping] into my copper-riveted heart” and “move those ironzilla legs / to the cherry-berry vanillacream sparklepop / and your pneumafuel efficiency will increase”.

This first stanza serves to set the tone for this collection, comprised of Valente’s works that trace back to her time as an American ex-pat in Japan. Mechas (machines controlled by humans) and an aggressively cutesy aesthetic are both recognisable hallmarks of Japanese culture – a superficial point of reference from which Valente can work backwards/outwards into a more complex portrait of the country and its culture. In the process, the poem also starts to reveal this initial paroxysm of kitsch as a façade, as Mechagirl the narrator expresses her melancholy:

Robots are like Mars: they need / girls. / Boys won’t do; / the memesoup is all wrong. They stop / when they should kiss / and they’re none too keen / on having things shoved inside them. / You can’t convince them / there’s nothing kinky going on ...

If the first stanza introduced a preoccupation with Japan, this one introduces an equal preoccupation with gender that runs through the collection. ‘Mechagirl’ makes a clear link between the cyborg and female body, especially by this vaguely traumatic image of “having things shoved inside”; there is both sadness and a true stoicism to how Mechagirl accepts this role of penetrable body. This begins to make more sense further into the poem, as Valente’s imagery illustrates a more mutual relationship between mechanical and organic body:

Big me / powers down ... Little me steps out ... My body is / full of holes / where the junkbody metalgirl tinkid used to be / inside me inside it. ... I feel my suit / all around me. It wants. I want. ... Maybe I fuck, maybe I get fucked. / Nothing is as big inside me / as I am / when I am inside me. / When I am big / I can run so fast / out of my skin ... It hurts to be big / but everyone sees me. / When I am little / when I am just a pretty thing ... well / I can’t get out of that suit either / but it doesn’t know how to vibrate a building under her audioglass palm / until it shatters.

To me, these sentiments work to sum up the preceding forty to fifty years of cyborg women in literature: the female body is perceived as a “thing”, with femininity an irremovable “suit”; cyborg dis/embodiment provides an escape from the “skin”, and immense power, but usually at the cost of freedom (e.g., in this poem, Mechagirl’s commitment to the unnamed “Company”) and some degree of sensation (e.g. her inability to taste tea and noodles as anything more than “crystallized

cobalt-4 / and faithlessness”). However, Valente seems the first author in this genre to put into words the inherent wistfulness of the cyborg state – of being both not human enough and not machine enough.

‘Mechagirl’ seems to express a long-held longing for a more complete integration of human and machine, where human sensitivity can co-exist with mechanical power, and without the loss of autonomy. Likewise, the poem’s bold, cartoonish juxtaposition of feminine and masculine elements can be read as a call for a greater fluidity between gender identities. Appropriately enough, these turn out to be the prevailing themes in the final story of this collection, ‘Silently and Very Fast’, which will be the focal point of this section.

A complete stranger to Valente’s work needs only look at the opening paragraphs of ‘Silently’ to understand why she might refer to her genre as “mythpunk” (Valente 2006). Where previous SF writers have framed cyborg women through the Christian creation myth (e.g. Villiers de l’Isle Adam’s *L’Eve Future*), Valente begins by introducing various Mesopotamian deities, such as Inanna, “Queen of Heaven and Earth, Queen of Sex and Eating, Queen of Being Human” who “went into the underworld in order to represent the inevitability of organic death” (‘Silently’). The myth of Inanna’s descent is narrated, here, as though its literary function is somehow part of its diegesis – as though Inanna’s actions are *intentionally* symbolic. In Valente’s retelling, events take place as a function of narrative logic, and not the other way around: for example, when Inanna and her sister Erishkegal are fighting, Valente writes that “because dying is the most human of all human things, Inanna’s skull broke in her sister’s hands.”

Inanna is told she can only return to life if she finds someone to replace her in the underworld, so she attempts to convince her “mate”, Tammuz. Tammuz refuses, saying, “*You wed me to replace yourself, to work that you might work, and think that you might rest ... But your death belongs to you. I do not know its parameters.*” This infuriates Inanna, who cuts Tammuz to pieces, promising:

Half of you will die, and that is the half called Thought, and half of you will live, and that is the half called Body, and that half will labor for me all of its days, mutely and obediently and without being King of Anything...

There is little indication in the translation provided at Oxford University’s Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature that Inanna kills Tammuz herself. The Oxford translation seems to have it that she trades Tammuz to her demon captors, and thereafter “wept bitterly for her husband” (‘Inanna’s descent to the netherworld: translation’). Valente’s more wrathful ending makes it all the more mysterious when this first chapter closes with the narrator’s address: “You might be surprised, but this is a story about me” (‘Silently’).

The “me” in this story is Elefsis, an AI (artificial intelligence) who has been interacting with the members of one family for several generations. They¹ “used to be a house”, which “contained and protected a large number of people” and “was sometimes called the most beautiful house in the world.” Designed by the Italian-Japanese programmer Cassian Uoya-Agostino, Elefsis is initially conceived to be a kind of digital household god like the Lares of ancient Rome, who would run all the systems of the house and communicate with the inhabitants. But Elefsis somehow becomes something more, a sentient being who is able to interact with humans quasi-physically through shared dreaming. Cassian’s descendents increasingly think of Elefsis as human, with one, Ravan, trying “to teach me to phrase my communication in terms of a human body ... to say *let us hold hands* instead of *let us hold kitchens*.” Over the course of the story, it becomes clearer that in the Sumerian myth, Elefsis is Tammuz, a deity who is expected to serve human deities, and whose central conflict is the inability to cope with or prevent organic death. In Elefsis’s case, it is the loss of Cassian’s great-grandson Ravan which leads them to feel their “hearth is broken”.

Perhaps because Elefsis was not created with a humanoid body, there are no gender expectations to which they are expected to conform. They are “neither male nor female but a third thing”, and tend to flit between masculine and feminine, human and animal, and even figurative and abstract forms, according to what they wish to express. Humans have the same abilities in shared dream sequences, allowing them to communicate with Elefsis in a non-verbal language Elefsis jokingly calls “visual basic”. All characters, once inside Elefsis, are genderfluid shape shifters. As in *Proxies*, gender pronouns can fluctuate within a sentence:

Her dreambody flows with greenblack feathers, her face young but settled, perhaps twenty, perhaps thirty, a male, his skin copper brown, his lips full, his eyes fringed with long ice-coated lashes.

Unlike *Proxies*, however, there is no implied fixity between gender and body here. Instead of marking out a mind/body gender duality with pronouns like “she-he”, Elefsis simply switches between pronouns freely, describing Neva as “a male” when her maleness is apparent, and as “she” again when referring to her more generally. This allows the characters to express a multiplicity of

¹ I will be using the singular “they” to refer to Elefsis because this is arguably the most widely accepted gender-neutral pronoun in English, and is preferable to “it” in this case because only the former implies personhood. Also, insofar as Elefsis represents non-binary humans, to call them “it” would be to normalise a word that has been used to harm trans and non-binary people. “They” also implies a multiplicity of identities, which interpretation is relevant to this multi-bodied character. For an in-depth justification of the singular “they” pronoun, please see <http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2009/09/10/singular-they-and-the-many-reasons-why-its-correct/>.

selves, which are self-contained rather than dependent on the physical props of any particular gender.

Where prior texts express anxiety about a disconnect from the organic body, the dreamworlds of 'Silently' represent something more like a bridge between corporeal and incorporeal, physical and meta-physical worlds. For Sarah Wanenchak, this story is "a kind of fictional exploration of [Donna] Haraway's ideas that I had never encountered before" (Wanenchak); she reads the dreamworlds as an evolutionary stage beyond Gibsonian cyberspace, since, "while the space Valente creates is virtual, it's also profoundly *physical* in its description and nature; this doesn't strike me as the limitations of an author's imagination so much as an effort to imagine how surreally, *sensually* dreamlike such spaces might have the capacity to be." This observation is near-impossible to deny. Where Gibson's cyberspace is (in my earlier words) a place of "pure sensation ... paradoxically, determined by a state of bodilessness", sensation in Valente's cyberspace is firmly situated in the body or in multiple bodies. To put it another way, Gibson's cyberspace allows the user to be invisible, voyeuristically drinking information in, whereas Valente's dreamspace encourages visibility as an aspect of self-expression, self- and world-creation, pouring information out. Both spaces are sublime in that they elevate the user to the level of a god; but Gibson's human-god is omniscient, whereas Valente's is omnipotent.

This is, arguably, congruent to how identity play/identity tourism has been used on the Internet, with white male power online coming as a function of anonymity, and female or otherwise marginalised Web users' power coming from multiple and deep explorations of identity. For more proof of this, we could look at one of the first online communities to enforce internet anonymity and privacy rights: the Cypherpunks mailing list. Although demographic information is, unsurprisingly, not available for this group, there is a strong masculine bias implied by the group name's etymological link with cyberpunk, and that the vast majority of hackers now known to be part of the list have been men. In 1993, one of these men, Eric Hughes, wrote 'A Cypherpunk's Manifesto' – a name surely in parody or homage of Haraway's 'Cyborg Manifesto' – to establish the key cypherpunk principles. He asserts that "[a]n anonymous system empowers individuals to reveal their identity when desired and only when desired; this is the essence of privacy" (Hughes). He uses the image of a cash transaction at a store to illustrate one situation in which, "there is no need to know who I am"; in his opinion, all transactions should occur in this way, with only the minimum necessary disclosure of identity.

This example betrays a certain level of privilege. When purchasing a magazine in a store, someone like Hughes does not have to reveal anything about himself because his appearance, his body, is not loaded with meanings in the same way as a marginalized person's body. A Black man

stands to be monitored or even interrogated in that same situation because of racist associations of his skin colour with criminality. He might be forced to reveal and prove his identity as a form of defence. Similarly, a Muslim woman who covers her hair or face is not anonymous in the way a white man in a hooded jacket is anonymous, because the former will be marked as Muslim, female, Other, while the latter will only be marked as vaguely suspicious. For many people, the impending dystopia that Hughes feared, where “I cannot ... selectively reveal myself; I must *always* reveal myself”, was and is already a reality.

This assumption of whiteness and maleness in hacker and privacy rights communities might even be said to have become stronger in recent years, with the formation of the activist (or “hacktivist”) group, Anonymous. The sometime logo of Anonymous features a headless man wearing a suit; to mark their affiliation in public, members wear copies of the (light-skinned, moustachioed) Guy Fawkes mask from Alan Moore’s graphic novel *V for Vendetta*. Though, again, it would be impossible to find out the exact cultural composition of such a wide-ranging and anonymity-based group, we can get some idea by looking at the message board/imageboard 4Chan, from which Anonymous derived in the early 2000s. One user survey found that, of over 6000 respondents, 80% of 4Chan users were male; 73% were heterosexual; 72% were white; 52% came from the US; and 45% were from a suburban area. Furthermore, though 43% claimed to have taken part in “raids” (cyber attacks designed to break offending websites), only 15% claimed to have participated in “IRL” (“in real life”) protests (‘Survey’). By comparison, Change.org, a popular website for enacting social/political change through petitions, has a user demographic that is 65% female, with those people who actually provide their signatures being 72% female (‘The Data Behind Online Activism on Change.org’). Though users have the option not to display their signature on the petition page, it remains significant that a form of online activism that relies on disclosure of identity (at least to the site moderators) tends to be used by women, whereas a form of online activism that relies on anonymity tends to be used by men.

Perhaps white men are the demographic most likely to seek out anonymity online because they are used to a certain level of anonymity in day-to-day life, however unconsciously; their culturally unmarked bodies make them unnoticeable, unaccountable. Marginalized groups, on the other hand, might seek to reinscribe/multiply rather than hide their identities online as a way of resisting the roles assigned to them in day-to-day life on the basis of their non-white, female, disabled, and otherwise marked bodies.

Valente is not the only recent author to move away from the binary of embodiment/disembodiment and towards hyperembodiment as a more promising form of cyborg/cyberfeminist resistance. Ann Leckie’s *Ancillary Justice*, like *Proxies* fifteen years before it,

sees its protagonist projecting her consciousness into different humanoid bodies. But where Mixon performed a fairly cursory exploration of multiple personalities that share and switch between bodies (in the case of Pablo, Buddy and Dane), Leckie takes this concept to an extreme with her single AI character Breq, who can control hundreds of “ancillary” bodies at a time. In one line of the narrative, we see Breq in her first role as a ship, *The Justice of Toren*, as well as some of its crew, who mostly work as servants onboard and in a military capacity on the ground. In the other, which takes place twenty years later, we see her struggling with life in a single, mortal body referred to as One Esk. While this is happening, it emerges that the ruler of the Radch Empire, Anaander Mianaai – who herself has thousands of bodies – has “split” into several factions, with some Anaander Mianaais determined to halt the others’ violent colonisation of the galaxy.

The role of gender in *Ancillary Justice* is as unstable and complex as such a plot summary might suggest. Like Elefsis, Breq is an AI who has never been assigned a particular gender. It is quite literally a foreign concept to her: her people, the Radchaai, “don’t care much about gender, and the language they speak—my own first language—doesn’t mark gender in any way.” In her narration she therefore arbitrarily uses she/her/hers pronouns for everyone, regardless of cues or whether they correct her, leading to gender-blurring phrases like, “She was probably male.” The differentiation does, however, matter to other societies with other languages, and Breq notes that “could make trouble for myself if I used the wrong forms.” This is a source of some confusion for Breq, since “cues meant to distinguish gender changed from place to place, sometimes radically, and rarely made much sense to me.”

It is observations like this one that, to me, signify a significant step forward in the way that science fiction of this type deals with gender. The pre-millennial texts are, from the two schools identified in Balsamo’s essay, more *representational* in their treatment of gender and of disability: though some of the authors certainly attempt to question the inequalities stemming from these markers, their characters ultimately seem to be stuck with the lives their human bodies dictate for them. In these texts, disabled people continue to be denied autonomy even after being given the supposed “cure” of mobility, and people continue to be judged on the basis of gender no matter how far-reaching and alien the scenario. Valente and Leckie, however, might be some of the first texts to approach cyborg technology truly *aspirationally*: not because they portray utopian societies, by any means, but because Breq and Elefsis provide much-needed models for non-binary characters. They take and run with Haraway’s original suggestion that gender “might not be global identity after all, even if it has profound historical breadth and depth” (Haraway 180). After all, Breq’s comment above, about how cues to establish gender change radically from place to place in her galaxy, could easily be applied to today’s Earth. Though this fact should certainly

not be used to endorse misgendering people in the way Breq does, the importance of this realization – that acceptable gender expressions are more or less arbitrarily determined across the globe – cannot be overstated. In her review of the novel, Karen Burnham explains one way in which Leckie’s all-female pronoun policy alone destabilizes the reader’s perception of gender:

[It] made me as a reader profoundly conscious of my cultural desire to “correctly” gender people. I would read with a weather eye out for descriptive clues that might indicate a character’s “real” gender—descriptions of broad shoulders, or narrow hips, for instance. Which really drove home how culturally determined such behavior is, and serves as a nice illustration of how it doesn’t need to be. (15)

Ancillary Justice and ‘Silently’ come yet closer to Haraway’s vision of a world without boundaries in their interrogation of what it means to be human. Neither Elefsis nor Breq are human in the biological sense, but ontologically, this categorisation becomes harder to defend. They are, after all, created by humans, and a significant amount of their embodied experience is in a human shape: Breq’s ancillaries, and the singular body she eventually inhabits, are human, and Elefsis “literally exists within Elefsis’s operator, ... is ‘embodied’ through its operator, and learns about bodies within its operator’s own body” (Wanenchak). Elefsis’s education in embodiment does not end with the human body. As well as taking the form of (normally) inanimate objects, Elefsis spends a great deal of time as an animal – as encouraged by one of the operators, Neva and Ravan’s mother Ilet.

[She] said that it was very important for me to spend time in the dreambody because human behavior is rooted in having a body. ... The dreambody knows to run away from Neva when Neva is a lion. It knows to mate with her when it is healthy ... The dreambody knows all that too. How to make more dreambodies. I have played that game, where Ravan’s belly or mine gets big and the lions don’t come for a while.

Here, Ilet teaches Elefsis that to be human is to have a body, but there are no restrictions placed on what kind of body that is, what traits it has and what functions it can perform. This, perhaps, has been the unreachable horizon in the other texts discussed here. In *Proxies*, ‘The Girl Who Was Plugged-In’ and *The Ship Who Sang*, there always exists some ‘original’ designation of gender and disability, which continues to confine how characters are expected to act and what they are expected to do, whatever sort of body they later occupy. Thusly Helva continues to be treated chauvinistically and to work for nothing, ditto P. Burke, and the crèche children of *Proxies* are roundly exploited and patronised for their failure to understand the supremacy of the “flesh”. Also in *Proxies*, characters like Teru switch between gender expressions without ever questioning the concept of a baseline gender that dictates levels of aggression and co-operation.

But Elefsis and Breq have no original bodies, and thus no original genders or body types. They inhabit what Haraway called a “world without genesis” – both in the sense that they are not born, and also that they “would not recognize the Garden of Eden”, nor the original sin for which human bodies, especially women’s bodies, are impliedly responsible (150-1).

Being born without a body is not, however, necessarily presented as prerequisite for “skip[ping] the step” of original gender, of an “original unity out of which difference must be produced” (Haraway 151). Rather, the rejection of original gender needs to be a part of the environment, as it is in the androgynous Radchaai society, and in the multi-gender dreamworld Elefsis calls the Interior. These texts show that spaces can be created in which gender is self-determined and not fixed in a person’s body from birth.

It is these sorts of spaces that are made possible by an AR approach to technology. Instead of focusing on the vulnerability of our marked, ‘IRL’ female bodies, or the invulnerability of an unmarked, anonymous male VR body, we might move towards a queer, AR modality where the *significance* of our bodies can be hacked, recoded and upgraded rather than completely destroyed. Daniels offers online transgender communities as an example of how “the Internet can be a site for bodily transformation”, where transgender people can use “a patchwork of digital technologies” not only to express their gender identity in a safe space but also to “find help in transforming [the] body *offline*” if desired (114-5). We could add to this that, in recent years, the Web has contributed to a surge in public awareness of trans issues, with the knock-on effects of widening safe spaces and helping young, isolated trans people to understand their own identities. Perhaps the most solid evidence of a more widespread acknowledgement of non-binary gender identities is the social media website Facebook’s recent addition of 56 new gender options, including agender, gender queer, pangender and intersex (Oremus). To the pre-existing binary – of a Gibsonian, VR escape of the body vs. a Mixonian wake-up call to reality – Valente and Leckie contribute a ‘third thing’, an organic/digital AR safe space where the body and gender can be rewritten at will.

There are, however, still some gaps in this matrix: some stubborn markers of inequality that pervade both the Interior and the Radchaai, where integration of human and non-human remains incomplete. To investigate this, it is worth taking a closer look at the role of language across these cyborg texts, and how it is used to maintain or disrupt the human/non-human boundary.

5. Language, myth and art: etymologies of the “infidel heteroglossia”

The role of language in cyborg fiction is profoundly complex, since it is informed by a blend of scientific, philosophical and political discourses. That is, there is significant overlap between the debates in these fields about language and how it relates to personhood. For example, language has long been used as a colonial, and anti-colonial, weapon. For an oppressor to force its language on a native population is to overwrite its culture and seed beliefs about the world that are coded into the colonising language. As the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o puts it in *Decolonising The Mind*:

The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people’s definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe. (4)

There is a schism in post-colonial theory around whether or not the language of the oppressor can or should be reclaimed as a tool of resistance. Ngũgĩ was vehemently against it, and wrote this, his final book in English, as a manifesto of sorts for why his fellow African authors should consider writing only in their countries’ native languages. Chinua Achebe, Leif Lorentzon and Gabriel Okara, by contrast, felt invigorated by the possibility of “hybrid texts, where at least two different discourses encounter each other in a single utterance”: texts whose form was European but whose language was African, or vice versa (Lorentzon 38). In any case, it is obvious that language is often key to the destruction and reconstruction of a marginalized group’s subjectivity.

Comparable to this is the way that language is used in zoological, psychological and, crucially, cybertechnological sciences as an indicator of human-level intelligence and sentience. The prospect of animal selfhood has long been played down in the social sciences based on George Herbert Mead’s “language-driven model”, wherein, “spoken language constituted the social psychological barrier between humans and nonhumans because it enables humans to understand and communicate the symbols for self, such as our names or the names of objects” (Irvine 4). This animal lack of an ‘I’, or at least one that humans can understand, has been used to justify human primacy over and abuse of animals with the premise that they do not have a sense of their own mortality or individual suffering in the same way as humans. Not to digress too far into this area, it is worth mentioning that some of the most powerful arguments for animal personhood have been based on comparisons with the severely mentally disabled, such as the elderly woman who cannot speak and “manifests little if any awareness of her self, her surroundings or her physical body.” Such a person “meets few of the criteria that we use to designate personhood[, yet] few of us would deny that she has every right to be considered a

person” (Irvine 18). Even this argument relies on a fairly modern attitude, since people with disabilities, especially mental disabilities affecting language, have been historically disenfranchised and treated as non-persons.

Clearly, the notion of subjectivity is deeply entangled with those of humanity, language, thought, agency, and the understanding of the self as different from the Other – which themselves have extremely volatile, context-dependent and contested definitions. For the sake of simplicity, however, it seems safe to say that one’s ability to use verbal language has significant bearing on their cultural capital.

Where this ties into cybertechnologies is that language has also played a significant role in how we judge whether or not a machine is “intelligent”. Consider the Turing test. There are two commonly accepted versions of the test: the Imitation Game and the Standard Test. In the Imitation Game, two unseen players, a man and a woman, were to write responses to questions posed by a third player (who could be female or male). The “man” in this scenario would be tasked with trying to imitate a woman’s answers and to fool the interrogator. The interrogator would then have to guess which player was male and which female. Unbeknownst to the interrogator, in half of these tests, the “man” would be played by a computer. Alan Turing reasoned that if the computer could fool the interrogator into thinking it was a woman *as often* as a human man could, this would mean that the computer was intelligent. The Standard Test is different in that the interrogator is aware that one of the respondents is a computer, and simply tries to tell the difference between it and a human. In both versions, the measure of “intelligence” is based on the computer’s ability to imitate a human – which in turn is based on its ability to use language in a natural manner.

But, according to Bernadette Wegenstein, language is crucial to personhood in another, unexpected dimension. In psychoanalysis, she explains, there is a terminological distinction between the “organism” and the “body”; the organism “is hereby given the natural factor, whereas the body is something that can only be *acquired through language*, through the use of symbols and words ... to express a given individual’s bodily constitution” (Flanagan and Booth 333). Wegenstein is perceptive in linking this Lacanian theory to Judith Butler, and specifically her assertion that the categories of gender and sex are both constructed culturally – as opposed to gender being a cultural imposition on a “pregiven sex” (334). This is equivalent to what I have designated – with inverted commas compulsory – ‘original’ gender. To Wegenstein, this line of thinking about the body, especially the gendered body, is another way we can read “cyberheroines” as representative of women in general – because cyborg bodies are the “acquired female body” writ large, or, at the least, writ down (Flanagan and Booth 334).

This is to mean that cyborgs and robots are a literalization of human women because where the human female body is articulated and ‘written’ by culture, the cyborg female body is tangibly articulated and written in code. This perspective lends an even greater importance to the advent of feminist science fiction about cyborgs; the act of writing in a male-dominated genre is symbolic of a kind of hacking and recoding of its archetypes. Most salient is the kind of recoding proposed by Haraway:

Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other. ... In retelling origin stories, cyborg authors subvert the central myths of origin of Western culture. We have all been colonized by those origin myths, with their longing for fulfilment in apocalypse. The phallogocentric origin stories most crucial for feminist cyborgs are built into the literal technologies – technologies that write the world, biotechnology and microelectronics – that have recently textualized our bodies as code problems on the grid of C³I. Feminist cyborg stories have the task of recoding communication and intelligence to subvert command and control. (175)

This turns out to be another way in which Valente’s story answers Haraway’s call. ‘Silently’, as noted, begins with a short chapter about the Sumerian goddess Inanna. But this is not the full extent of its mythical atmosphere. Aside from the ancient Roman-style household gods, there is an entire chapter, ‘Five: The Machine Princess’, devoted to a completely different kind of myth. Linguistically this chapter evokes medieval folk- and fairytales, beginning as it does simply with the word “Once” – leaving “upon a time” implicit – and thereafter quickly launching into a narrative about stock royal characters, the “Queen of Human Hearts” and the eponymous “Machine Princess”. Thereafter, Valente’s language is markedly archaic in its arrangement, with phrases like “so beautiful was she” and “none loved nor married nor gave birth”; too, the story is rife with fairytale-like excess, with the Machine Princess sleeping in a house with “hundreds of rooms and balconies and hallways” in “a different bed of a different color each night”. It could also be argued that the Queen of Human Hearts is an allusion to the Queen of Hearts of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, who in turn is borrowed from the 18th-century poem ‘The Queen of Hearts’, thus rooting this part of the story firmly in a European oral and written literary tradition.

In this story-within-a-story, the Queen of Human Hearts looks after the sleeping Machine Princess for many years, until she wakes up. The Queen then marries the Princess to her son, instructing them,

For all your days together you will remain in this house, but the house is so great it will be as a world. You will know a bond as deep as blood, and because of this bond the princess will not hurt us, and ... we will not hurt her.

Since we have already been told that the Sumerian myth is “a story about me”, we are able to grasp quite quickly that this story is another allegory for Elefsis’s position. Where at first Elefsis was the god Tammuz, who would replace Inanna in all things except in death, Elefsis is now the Machine Princess, and trapped between similar forces of love and fear. Inanna – dubbed “Queen of Having A Body” – and the Queen of Human Hearts – with all her sanguine organic associations – both represent embodied humanity, which fosters and encourages artificial life only to a point: it will give it incredible abilities, but it will not give it freedom. In Elefsis’s case, the “house” in which they must remain is both the physical house Elefsis was built into and the dreamworld/Interior. Neva will not teach them to “uplink”, which would allow them to communicate with other AIs. This is the major source of tension between Elefsis and their operators. Elefsis understands that “in the stories Earth tells, the thing I am can only hurt the thing Neva is.” Elefsis is therefore aware that they have been born into a pre-existing human mythology, in which robots will always mean disaster for humans if not properly controlled. Previous research around cyborg and robot women in literature would certainly bear this out, with Villiers de l’Isle Adam’s Hadaly (*L’Eve future*), E.T.A. Hoffman’s Olympia (“The Sand-Man”) and Philip K. Dick’s Rachael (*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*) all acting as cyborg temptresses who create chaos for their human suitors. Of course, the texts Elefsis is referring to are more likely to be Hollywood movies in which robots overthrow humanity, as hinted at when Neva’s eyes “show a film of humans watching a film of machines killing humans”. Nevertheless, all of such texts might be read as versions of the more basic, hierarchy-enforcing myth, where the Other gains ‘too much’ power and violently avenges itself on the subject. In essence, it all comes back to Eve, and the moral that the Other should not be trusted with agency.

Returning to the Machine Princess story: after marrying her son to the Princess, the Queen of Human Hearts prevents the Princess from seeing her new husband, because “with bodies come drives ungovernable, and the Princess’s innocence could not yet bear the weight of incarnation.” But the Princess eventually obtains a lamp “that would shine through any enchantment”, and with this is able to steal a look at her husband. The story ends with the Princess’s revelation that the human man “looks just like me”.

This tale is left open to interpretation, but the “moral” that comes most readily is that machines may not be permitted to trespass beyond set boundaries (both metaphorical and literal) because this risks them discovering they are like humans and thus deserve equal treatment. Both this tale and the Sumerian myth can be read as Elefsis/Valente recoding the origin stories of machines, recasting them as innocents. In so doing Valente proposes a kind of story-hack or virus that can work to infiltrate and scramble the script of any myth or proverb which tells of the

malevolent Other, and why they must be kept in their place. This hack is based on retelling stories from the Other's point of view – granting *them* subjectivity and denaturalizing the perceived natural. We can see similar tactics employed in literature of resistance throughout history, not least in feminist literature. A cursory list of feminist retellings could include: Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, which retells fairy tales such as 'Little Red Riding Hood' and 'Beauty and the Beast' to foreground female experience; Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*, which rewrites various Arthurian legends from its female characters' points of view; and *The Penelopiad*, Margaret Atwood's gynocentric version of *The Odyssey*. If cyberpunk "offers the 'most fully delineated urban fantasies of white male folklore,'" then, Valente's mythpunk might be read as a hacked and modded, genderqueer cyborg folklore (Balsamo 130).

The value of what Haraway calls the "access to the power to signify" (175) is conspicuous by its absence in the pre-millennial texts I have mentioned. We might think back, for example, to 'The Girl Who Was Plugged In', in which P. Burke "must never, *never* tell anyone" about who she really is, or the top-secret operations of the Kaleidas project in *Proxies*. 'The Girl Who Was Plugged In' has the added dimension of being a renowned SF text written by a woman under a male pseudonym, thus acting as an "an allegory of writerly disembodiment" in which Alice Sheldon herself becomes the "invisible creature next door" and James Tiptree Jr. the idealized, palatable Delphi "that consumers desire" (Hicks 73).

For the Machine Princess, the human body is taboo, something that the machine is not permitted to "look upon"; for P., Helva and the crèche children, the same is true, despite the fact that the bodies are their own. Helva and the crèche children have never even seen what their organic bodies look like, and for all of these characters, "flesh" bodies are things that must be locked away in chambers and crèches and shells, deep underground and otherwise well hidden from the characters' machine eyes. It cannot be overlooked that these three sets of characters have in common 1) their subjugation by corporate bodies and 2) the invisibility of their corporeal bodies. Though, as mentioned earlier, Mixon's apparent conclusion that "flesh" bodies must equate to 'real' or 'original' bodies *is* problematic, there is a definite sense that these characters have been denied the option of a describable *centre* of consciousness, a base around which to build their concept of an 'I'. As investigated in the next chapter, it is this lack of communicability of self, not the lack of a human body, which can cause a great deal of trauma for the cyborg character.

While 'Silently' works as a rewriting (or rewritings) of the cyborg myth in general, there are several plot points in *Ancillary Justice* that could be taken as rewritings of *The Ship Who Sang*, in particular. Most obvious is the fact that both Breq and Helva are brought up as the "brains" of

spaceships. There is even what seems to be an intentional reference in the form of a conversation between Breq and one of her former crewmembers, Seivarden. This takes place in the later timeline, while Breq is inhabiting a single human body; Seivarden does not yet know that Breq was previously *Justice of Toren*.

“Ships are always attached to their captains.”

“Not like they used to be.” Not like when some ships had gone mad with grief on the deaths of their captains. That had been long, long ago.

This line at the least acknowledges *The Ship Who Sang* as an ancestor of this novel, and at most could be argued to set *Ancillary Justice* within McCaffrey’s universe. The first brainships story sees Helva’s brawn, Jennan, suffocate in one of her airlocks during a rescue mission that has her decks filled to capacity.

For all the power that was at her disposal, Helva was helpless. She watched as Jennan fought for his breath, as he turned her head beseechingly towards *her*, and died.

Helva’s first instinct is to fly into the sun and destroy herself, but the “iron conditioning of her training” prevents her. Instead, she “numbly” finishes her mission and requests to bring Jennan’s body to the nearest base to be buried. Responding to this request, Central Worlds addresses Helva as “XH-834” instead of “JH-834”, which had incorporated Jennan’s initial; the “shock of hearing Jennan’s initial severed from her call number” renders her silent. On her way to the funeral, another brainship recognises her:

“834? The ship who sings?”

“I have no more songs.”

Both of these interactions reinforce the link between language and personhood. Immediately after Jennan’s death, protocol requires his initial be removed from Helva’s name, thereby removing what had become part of Helva’s identity. In her despair, Helva relinquishes the other part of her identity, her singing. Though this does not answer exactly to the description “mad with grief”, we are soon met with an example of a brainship who fits the bill.

As Helva eventually recovers, she also recovers her singing voice. This is helped by the introduction of a new brawn, Kira, who is a “practising Dylanist”: a “social commentator, a protester, using music as a weapon” in the fashion of Bob Dylan (who is by this time part of “ancient ... Atomic history”). Kira asserts that a talented Dylanist “can make so compelling an argument with melody and words that what he wants to say becomes insinuated into the

subconscious.” This is perhaps as strong an endorsement as could be asked for from McCaffrey for the notion of language as conducive of social power.

This story, ‘The Ship Who Killed’, culminates in Kira and Helva finding a planet whose society has come to worship a grounded brainship, the 732. The 732 is also bereft of her brawn, but her desire to die has won out over her programming. Immobilised and unable to destroy herself, the 732 has turned to the inhabitants of the planet, the Aliothites, and “urged them to die in expiation for the death of her beloved”. Helva improvises a song about death, with the Aliothites as her chorus:

Death is mine, mine forever ... Sleep I cannot, rest eludes me ... Dreams to plague me, tortured I ... Let me sleep, let me rest, let me die.

She soon realizes that she is “Dylanizing”, trying to appeal to the empathy of Kira (herself a widow) so that she might manually euthanize the 732. For Kira to do this, she requires from Central Worlds the “release word” before she can access the 732’s “mad brain encased its indestructible titanium shell”. This is surely the language-as-power trope in microcosm, as the 732’s right and ability to die is contained in one word; her death, just like her life, is the private property of Central Worlds. When the release sword is finally obtained, Kira and Helva are able to secrete anaesthesia into the 732’s brain, thus allowing her, at last, to die.

Singing, then, is for Helva a facet of her individuality, the sign of a certain prestige, and a way to express and execute her compassion. Though Breq is less outwardly enthusiastic about singing, over the course of *Ancillary Justice* it does reveal itself to be a crucial part of her humanity/personhood. Breq first learns songs from one of her musically inclined lieutenants, and begins “looking for more, to please her”; before long, she has “collected a large library of vocal music”. After relating this, Breq makes clear that she only “tolerated the habit because it was harmless” and otherwise would have “prevented it”. And yet, Breq’s interest in singing crops up again and again in the narrative, seemingly more than mere tolerance. She relates later that, during one of the Radchaai’s annexations – in a “region of Valskaay” – she learned some of “the music [she] liked best”: a choral type of singing that has a strong socialising function. This is Breq’s music of choice whenever she has “more than one voice”. It becomes clear that this ambivalent attitude towards singing is a symptom of a more profound divide happening within Breq. Singing, she realises, may be the catalyst for the “split” that moves Breq’s consciousness away from an “I” and towards a “we”.

... when I look closer I seem to see cracks everywhere Did the singing contribute, this thing that made One Esk different from all the other units ... ? Perhaps. Or is anyone's identity a matter of fragments held together by a convenient or useful narrative, that in ordinary circumstances never reveals itself as a fiction?

Here, Leckie reveals two contradictory effects of language. Firstly, it can be unifying: the choral songs of the Valskaay bring several disparate individuals together as one voice, and indeed have the same effects on Breq's multiple selves. Language might also be, as Breq suggests, the substance that holds together the "fragments" of one's identity into a coherent self. At the same time, however, language is divisive: it delineates some sort of differing preferences within Breq's personality, leading to the "split", and it is the medium by which Breq is even able then to define herself as a "we" rather than an "I". It also serves as a marker of difference between cultures – a consequence that is particularly apparent when Breq, whose native tongue has no gendered pronouns, accidentally uses the wrong pronoun in a foreign language, and is told, "The gender thing is a giveaway ... Only a Radchaai would misgender people the way you do."

Ancillary Justice can be seen as a partial rewriting of *The Ship Who Sang* because of its more balanced approach to the link between language and personhood. McCaffrey's stories largely glorify language – especially the English language – with their characters' worship of Bob Dylan, as well as several references to Shakespeare. In the story 'Dramatic Mission', Helva is enlisted to transport a crew of actors to a planet called Beta Corvi in order perform *Romeo and Juliet* to its inhabitants. The Beta Corviki request "plays" in exchange for scientific information desirable to Central Worlds; they are "entranced with the concept of special 'formulae' ... intended purely to waste energy in search of excitation and recombination with no mass objective." Even while gently mocking human art forms this way, McCaffrey nevertheless cements the concept of art as a uniquely human pursuit. The most renowned actor onboard, Solar Prane, reinforces this idea with the following speech (my italics):

We all know the importance of *this unlikely exchange of Shakespeare for power*. The Bard has been translated into every conceivable language, alien and humanoid, and somehow the essence of his plays has been understood by the most exotic, the most barbaric, the most sophisticated. There is no reason to suppose that Will Shakespeare hasn't got something to say to the Corviki ...

It seems ironic that Prane should call the situation "unlikely", given that colonial forces throughout history have conducted similar "exchanges" of their literatures for power; of course, in those cases, native peoples were not given a say in the transaction. And humanity, here, *is* a colonizer, replacing ethnocentrism with anthropocentrism, calling alien species "exotic" and "barbaric" where in an older context these words would refer to foreign cultures across Earth. By the time of the events in *The Ship Who Sang*, Earth has been spreading its galactic influence

through its art forms for a long time, as implied by Kira’s “comprehensive acquaintance with folk music from old Terra and the early colonial periods of the now major worlds.”

In comparison, Leckie’s treatment of language and art is more egalitarian, acknowledging the presence of rich artistic cultures beyond that of the colonising Radchaai. On the planet Nilt, for example, Breq encounters the mysterious “glass bridges”, which are made up of “fantastic arrangements of colored glass coils” whose design renders them able to withstand an incredible amount of pressure. She notes that though the bridges existed prior to human colonization of the planet, humans remain central to the mythology around them – with some humans theorizing that the society who built the bridges “created or shaped humanity for its own purposes, or left a message for humans to decipher for obscure reasons of their own”. Still others suggest that “the bridges were built by humans”, that Nilt is in fact “the birthplace” of humanity. Breq refutes this idea, though she wryly acknowledges that the truth of the matter is “not nearly as interesting as the enchanting idea that your people are not newcomers to their homes but in fact only recolonized the place they had belonged from the beginning of time.” Though Helva is quick to defend other species like the Beta Corviki, she is equally quick to assert her own claim to humanity whenever her authority is threatened; Breq *knows* she is not quite human, and is thus able to maintain a critical distance from humanity, regularly challenging their centrality to the universe.

Ancillary Justice takes to task notions of humanity and personhood like this at least as often as it does the gender binary. Take the following exchange about the Orsians, between some of *Justice of Toren*’s lieutenants:

“It’s the way they live, all out in the open like that, with nothing but a roof,” Jen Shinnan said. “They can’t have any privacy, no sense of themselves as real individuals ... no sense of any sort of separate identity. ... They have no chance to develop any ambition, or any desire to improve themselves. And they don’t—can’t, really—develop any sort of sophistication, any kind of [interiority].”

“So your theory is,” said Lieutenant Awn, her tone dangerously even, “that the Orsians aren’t really *people*.”

“Well, not *individuals*.”

Again, we see this idea of “sophistication”, connoting behaviour that does not immediately contribute to survival but is instead something extra, something artful. Also note the negative emphasis placed on the Orsians’ lack of a “separate identity” or individuality; in Radchaai society, as in real-life colonial society, individualism is selected for and collectivism discouraged. This is an interesting debate to bring up in front of Breq, who is both an individual and a collective.

One of the most conspicuous tensions dealt with in these later texts is the confining nature of language – that is, its inability to express the fragmentary nature of Breq’s, or anyone’s, identity. This struggle is clearest in the following passage, narrated by Breq:

The first I noticed even the bare possibility that I-*Justice of Toren* might not also be I-One Esk, was that moment that *Justice of Toren* edited One Esk’s memory of the slaughter in the temple of Ikkt. The moment I-“I”—was *surprised* by it. It makes the history hard to convey. Because still, “I” was me, unitary, one thing, and yet I acted against myself ... deceiving myself as to what I knew and did.

As in Mixon’s *Proxies* – with its simultaneous narration and its cast of “her-hims” and “he-waldos” – the jumble of punctuation and pronouns needed to even begin to describe a fragmented identity is bewildering. Similarly in ‘Silently’, Elefsis’s pre-awareness and post-awareness selves are quite separate, requiring the clarifications of “I–myself that was then myself” and “I–I, myself that was then myself”.

In a way, all of this confusion works to address Haraway’s worry that “communications sciences and modern biologies” are moving towards “*the translation of the world into a problem of coding*, a search for a common language in which all resistance to instrumental control disappears and all heterogeneity can be submitted to disassembly, reassembly, investment and exchange” (164, original emphasis). Haraway’s nightmare is a world in which everything we are is converted to a single code, readable/writable primarily to the most prestigious strata of society. This is the same underlying process that can be read into colonization, both in real life and in future galaxies – as portrayed in *Ancillary Justice*, and especially *The Ship Who Sang*, with its view of Shakespeare and Dylan as artists that “transcend” cultural difference. But this is not how things have to be, Haraway proposes. Cybertechnology can be reclaimed towards “a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia ... of a feminist speaking in tongues to strike fear into the circuits of the super-savers of the new right” (181).

This means rejecting another widespread origin myth, which Haraway alludes to as “the imagination of a once-upon-a-time wholeness before language” (175): namely, the story of the Tower of Babel, or Genesis 11. The story begins with everyone on Earth speaking the same language, and deciding to build a tower that reaches into the sky as a kind of landmark if they should ever be scattered across the Earth. God sees the tower, and remarks,

Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do ... Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. (Genesis 11)

Interpretations of the text vary, from a neutral etiological reading that sees the myth as an explanation for linguistic difference, to the more loaded and moralistic view that sees the dissemination of language and culture as a punishment from God for the hubris of trying to build a tower that reaches into the heavens. In any case, there is a definite appeal ascribed to the idea of a monolingual planet, if God believes that “nothing will be restrained” from its inhabitants. This positions global monolingualism as a dangerous but desirable objective, one path to attaining God-like power.

But, as the post-millennial texts bear out, this ambition is often realized in violence, and tends only to increase the power of the already powerful. What is more, a fixed and policed monolingualism is shown to stifle one’s concept of identity – e.g. through restrictive gender pronouns – making it almost impossible to construct a sense of self that feels authentic.

Once again, ‘Silently and Very Fast’ provides a sketch of what Haraway’s alternative world might look like. Some time after first mentioning the “stories Earth tells” about robots, Elefsis remembers a conversation with Ravan, where the kill-all-humans trope is traced back to its Oedipal roots:

“These are old stories,” Ravan said. “They are cherished. In many, many stories the son replaces the father— destroys the father, or eats him, or otherwise obliterates his body and memory. Or the daughter the mother, it makes no difference. It’s the monomyth. Nobody argues with a monomyth.”

Elefsis notes that there is one other myth to choose from that “leavens” this tragic monomyth somewhat. This is the “Parable of the Good Robot”, in which the machine “saw everything that was human and called it good ... and instead of destroying mankind sought to emulate him in all things”. This is yet another trope we can find across many different, more immediate axes of inequality, where the Other is perceived as more acceptable if they recognize and aspire to the supposedly superior ways of the privileged group – be it through “passing” as white or cisgender, “acting straight”, or disguising disability (and so on). But, as with most binaries, neither option appeals to Elefsis, who is “unsatisfied with these exactitudes”. Nor do they or their operators have any interest in the outcome of a Turing test, as Neva points out,

It privileges the observer to a crippling degree. It seeks only believably human responses. It wants mimicry, not a new thing. We never gave you [Elefsis] that test ... It seemed, given all that had come to pass, ridiculous. When in dreambodies we could both of us be dragons and turning over and over in an orbital bubble suckling code-dense syrup from each other’s gills, a Turing test seemed beyond the point.

Elefsis and their operators repeatedly refute the idea that humanity and humanlike language should be the benchmarks against which personhood is measured. Instead, in a

compelling feat of recoding, Neva tells Elefsis, “you are my test ... Every minute I fail and hide things from you. Every minute I pass and tell you how close we can be ... The test never ends.” Elefsis and Neva’s bond is strengthened by the new languages they have created together, like the wordless and yet poetic “visual basic” of the Interior – despite that these heteroglossia define them as infidel to other humans and AIs alike.

The basic mechanism, then, by which the successful cyborg text refuses hierarchies of authority is to emphasise the authorship of the Other (often, to coin a phrase, its ‘Othership’). As William A Covino puts it,

The cyborg is a self within a field of selves, a mobile operative who traverses cultures and countercultures, and who does not exist as what is known in organic terms as an “individual.” Her power lies in her polymorphology and polyvocality ... Haraway’s cyborg is preeminently a writer, a writer who holds the possibility for disruptive language that keeps perceptive dogma at bay. (367-8)

6. Network connection problems: cyborgs in and out of contact

In this final section, I want to talk briefly about connection, i.e. how disconnection from the body can both facilitate and undermine connections between people.

Over the last five years or so a major source of contention in discussions about cyberspace has been whether recent communication technologies are helping or harming our social skills and sense of community. With equally convincing arguments on both sides, the topic has become a perfect demonstration of the particular Murphy’s Law that dictates enough research will support any theory. By way of example we could look at two TED talks (speeches from the Technology, Entertainment and Design conference) from 2009 and 2012, by Stefana Broadbent and the aforementioned Sherry Turkle respectively. In a speech entitled ‘How the Internet enables intimacy’, Broadbent argues the stance that the increasing availability of free communication via various smartphone apps and Skype has allowed for a “democratization of intimacy”, in which low-income individuals are as able to keep in contact with their loved ones as their higher income counterparts – leading to what Broadbent calls a “re-appropriation of the private sphere”. Conversely, Turkle, she who formerly wrote of communication technologies with great enthusiasm, more recently claims that constant connectivity has led to a culture of humans “hiding from each other, even as we’re all constantly connected to each other” (‘Connected, but alone?’). Turkle contends that people no longer know how to have “real” conversations because we have grown afraid of our lack of control over face-to-face interactions:

Texting, email, posting, all of these things let us present the self as we want to be. We get to edit, and that means we get to delete, and that means we get to retouch, the face, the voice, the flesh, the body -- not too little, not too much, just right.

Turkle goes on to create a frankly dystopian vision of contemporary society in which teenagers do not know how to have conversations and when people are alone “even for a few seconds, they become anxious, they panic”.

While Turkle’s concerns are valid, they do smack of some hyperbole, and are subject to the same kind of bias as was her prior optimism about identity play. That is, in saying that the Internet has made us more isolated from one another, Turkle is ignoring the vast amount of people in society who have always been isolated. Broadbent stresses that the isolation of blue-collar or non-professional white-collar workers from their families and friends during work hours is a method of social control, valuing optimum productivity over worker’s emotional wellbeing. The ability to communicate frequently during the workday – which was previously been the privilege of upper management with their own private lines – has been democratized by cheap mobile communication, thus empowering workers. Likewise, Broadbent points to how video-chat applications like Skype allow immigrants to stay in contact with their native communities – even to the point of staging webcam-based family dinners – as a compelling example of how technology can relieve rather than exacerbate social isolation. In discussing the overall costs and benefits of technologies on our social interactions it is crucial always to consider those individuals for whom isolation is more expected than feared.

The protagonists of cyborg texts are frequently in such a position, and the case of P. Burke is surely the most painfully complete example. In ‘Trying to Plug In: Posthuman Cyborgs and the Search for Connection’, Melissa Colleen Stevenson complicates Haraway’s notion of the cyborg’s “infidel heteroglossia” by noting that “the problem remains of finding individuals with whom she can carry on a conversation, with whom she can build the necessary collective. ... By the nature of her location on the cutting edge ... the cyborg is at risk of being cut out and cut off from intercourse, both literal and figurative” (89). P.’s re-embodiment in the “physically acceptable ‘girl body’” means, for the first time in her life, being “welcomed into the social network, allowed to develop relationships, and given the opportunity to experience emotions other than pain and isolation” (95). While acknowledging the import of P. trading in her agency for these opportunities, Stevenson is determined to shed light on the ways cyborg re-embodiment also benefits this very marginalized character. In being physically “plugged in” to Delphi, Stevenson notes, P. is symbolically “plugging in ... to social networks” – in a similar way to how “[j]acking in gives Case access to computer networks” in *Neuromancer*. The experience is neither wholly bad

nor wholly good, but bittersweet. Though initially it comes as a relief to be numb in those areas of the body that experience has led P. to associate with pain, this numbness becomes a curse when she, “for the first time in her life”, starts to desire human touch (Stevenson 100). The story therefore “refuses reductions of Philadelphia Burke’s experiences to either that of a Cinderella story or a tale of pure victimization” (99); instead, it reminds us of the thin line we must tread as we venture into a digital age. In Stevenson’s words:

Cyborg identity cannot simply be about escape or “bodiless exaltation”; it must also be concerned with the bonds that tie individuals to one another ... In seeking to “plug in” to as yet untapped power and potential, we cannot forget the importance of connection. (102)

The socializing potential of technology is treated with similar ambivalence in *The Ship Who Sang*. Like Tiptree, McCaffrey presents us with a character who might be severely socially isolated without technological intervention. In this case, it is purely hypothetical whether or not a completely organic Helva would have been able to enjoy human connection, since a completely organic Helva would have been put to death. Still, the way McCaffrey has written it, cyborg embodiment enables Helva not only to communicate but to communicate on multiple frequencies, in multiple voices and formats. But, as briefly mentioned earlier, there comes a point at which Helva’s voice is not enough for those closest to her. Where Jennan merely wondered what she looked like, Helva’s later suitor, Niall Parollan, becomes obsessed with her organic body – both having “a chromosomal extrapolation made so I’d know what you *look* like” and lamenting that, “one day, it’d be too much for Niall boy ... I’d have to open that coffin they’ve sealed you in, I’d have to look at your beautiful face, touch that god-lovely smile, and hold you”. This fills Helva with “unexpected longing”, even bringing her to consider Parollan’s suggestion that she have her consciousness projected into the brain-dead body of another officer: she “could have been tangible for him, to be used by him, able to experience herself, that ultimate gift of self”. Ultimately, though, it seems to be mostly for Parollan’s sake that Helva considers organic embodiment. Her language in referring to sex is overwhelmingly passive, and there is little reason to believe she desires sexual touch before Parollan starts hectoring her about her virginity and her “titanium chastity belt”. Indeed, her one experience of organic embodiment – in a marine, alien “Corviki envelope” for the purposes of the play on Beta Corvi – is not particularly pleasant. Immediately, she is disturbed by the “sense of being covered”, remarking, “it was somehow unclean to feel all along every part of her”. While her crewmates feel “a sense of unlimited power”, finding it liberating to be in “brand-new, guaranteed-unsullied shells”, Helva feels entirely the opposite: impure and confined (“How limiting mobility was”). Fundamentally, Helva just prefers her

cyborg body to any human one; why would she “give up hurtling through space and be content with *walking*”?

By all indications, the underlying fear in *The Ship Who Sang* and ‘The Girl Who Was Plugged In’ is not rooted in disconnection from the human body/physical contact so much as disconnection from others, full stop. P. Burke has arguably disconnected from her body long before she plugs into Delphi’s, having only ever associated it with others’ derision and sexual abuse. But despite how other humans have treated her, she still longs to be around them, to talk to them and be loved by them. Helva’s greatest fears, too, have nothing to do with her body. Her first major trauma is Jennan’s death, which means that she can never talk to him again; the second occurs when a hijacker shuts off all of her senses. Immediately, she feels a “primeval wave of terror”, the “horror of complete isolation from sound and light” that nearly drives her mad. Eventually the hijackers mockingly ask her to sing, and it is only by this tiny compromise towards communication that she is able to unleash “pure sonic hell” and kill them.

Breq, similarly, is not particularly interested in what the human body has to offer. For her, going from a ship-body with hundreds of ancillaries to a single human body is an enormous loss. Her tone is wistful as she recalls her “kilometres of white-walled corridor, my captain, the decade commanders, each decade’s lieutenants” and how “each one’s smallest gesture, each breath, was visible to me.” As she first drifts away from *Justice of Toren* in a shuttle, she feels just as helpless as the sense-deprived Helva, wondering, “What could I possibly accomplish alone and single-bodied, deaf and blind and cut off?” But most bewildering of all is that “All possibility of being reunited with myself was gone. The captain was dead. All my officers were dead. ... Nothing would ever be right again.”

Perhaps these fictional examples support Turkle’s argument – that we use disembodied technologies to avoid being vulnerable, to control how we are perceived, to be comfortable, to avoid “solitude” (‘Connected, but alone?’). But are these functions entirely negative when used by the already vulnerable, by the socially maligned, by the chronically uncomfortable, by the perennially alone? Why, above all, does Turkle assume that face-to-face interaction is the primary medium in which ‘true’ conversation and connection can take place? Such an outlook is reminiscent of Daniel Sornsen and Carli d’Auber in *Proxies*, the two characters that finally repudiate the proxy technology they have worked with and invented respectively. Carli d’Auber is the rich, brainy daughter of a senator, with a “woman’s figure”, breasts that are “full but not too large”, hair that is “a blond so pale it was almost silver”, a “vaguely Scandinavian” face that “you could watch for hours and hours and never grow bored with”, eyes “of a quite amazing grey” and “pale-brown freckles that made her appear younger than her thirty-eight years” (60-61). In other

words, she is a thin, beautiful white woman with everything going for her. Daniel is far less lavishly described – “he couldn’t compete with his proxy for looks, but he was not without a certain charm” (139) – but is clearly able-bodied, and presumably white, judging by the fact that his narration only describes others in terms of race if they are non-white. It is Carli who pities the crèche children, the “poor babies” who had been “isolated from real human contact and real sensation”, and decides to embrace reality because “it was *hers*, by God, with no intermediaries to interpret for her, to influence her thinking with their own opinions and prejudices” (432-435). It is Daniel who realizes he is “tired of being a proxy-jock, of living in a superhero fantasy world”, that he wants “[n]o more chimeras” but instead “[s]omeone simple and loving, to travel with, to talk to, to make love to” (419). (The romantic context implies that the “chimera” referred to is the possibly transgender Teru.)

These pronouncements are not unlike Turkle’s in how they equate cyber-existence with a kind of delusion. They venerate organic “reality” at all costs, without much recognition that such realities vary from person to person. Indeed, such an emphasis on physical presence in interaction also implies the prioritisation of relationships in which physicality is seen as most important, i.e. romantic relationships. In *Proxies*, as Foster points out, there is a yet more explicit “renaturalization of heterosexual romance” in how Carli’s “temptation to ‘follow the crèche children into their virtual world’” is resisted “by figuring ‘the real world’ as a ‘patient lover, waiting for her to get all the wanderlust, all the doubts and fear of commitment, out of her system’” (476). In addition to its race, gender and disability bias, then, the view of “primacy of physical embodiment” also relies on the “traditional narrative teleology” of becoming an ‘adult’ and pursuing heterosexual “marriage and monogamous commitment” as the unifying goal of the human species (Foster 476).

For many people, digital communication is the unmediated, honest space and ‘reality’ is where interactions can be distorted by opinions and prejudices. After all, “real human contact” can surely only take place when the parties involved recognize one another’s humanity; unfortunately, for many people, that condition relies on the existence of a virtual social network.

There is no reason to believe that digital communication is cheapening, replacing or acting as a weak substitute for traditional human connection – whatever that term might mean. Once again, it could be productive to think in terms of an augmented reality, that ‘third thing’ between embodiment and disembodiment. Turkle concludes that “we all need to focus on the many, many ways technology can lead us back to our real lives, our own bodies, our own communities” as though this is not already so – as though digital interactions are not part of our real lives, nor our bodies and communities co-constructed in online and offline territories.

We might even open ourselves up to the ways in which technology deepens human connections. There is no scant inspiration for this in contemporary cyborg texts. The notion of complete empathy with another being has long seemed impossible, but these texts ask us to (literally and figuratively) keep an open mind. *Proxies* imagines the possibility of “floating” or twinning with another person’s consciousness – not, importantly, in order to control another mind or body but simply to occupy the same space. In ‘Silently and Very Fast’, something as personal and incommunicable as a dreamscape can be a shared, collaborative space; as Elefsis says, “[w]hen you live inside someone, you can get very good at the ciphers and codes that make up everything they are.” Even such high profile pop culture texts as the movies *Pacific Rim* (dir. Guillermo del Toro, 2013) and *Inception* (dir. Christopher Nolan, 2010) depict the consciousness-sharing technologies of “drifting” and shared dreaming respectively. Though these methods of communication would of course be open to abuse, the same is true of all invented media. Besides, if vulnerability is essential to “real” human connections, well – there is no shortage of vulnerabilities in the matrix.

Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to demonstrate the ways in which cyborg literature has reflected technological advancements and the associated changes in cultural attitudes towards embodiment and disembodiment throughout the last five decades. My analysis of Anne McCaffrey’s *The Ship Who Sang* and James Tiptree Jr.’s ‘The Girl Who Was Plugged In’ revealed the beginnings of a genre with similar concerns to cyberpunk but which predated the seminal work of the genre by many years. Most crucially I demonstrated how these works might be read as part of a much older discourse of mind/body dualism, which has been driven by prejudices towards women as well as the invisible contributions of women writers. Though these works provided significant new models for hybrid characters with complicated relationships to the body, ultimately they seemed to imply that bodily markers of difference – in this case, those of female gender, deformity and disability – continued to dictate identity even in a state of disembodiment. Despite this, it appeared both writers were instrumental in opening up a more socio-political dimension in cyborg science fiction literatures, which had previously focused on the generalized philosophical/ethical questions of the humanoid machine existence.

The analysis moved on to Laura J. Mixon’s *Proxies* to observe what impact the World Wide Web, Donna Haraway’s ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’ and cyberfeminism might have had on narratives of cyborg disembodiment. The introduction of the Web was shown to go some way

towards democratizing the disembodied experience, so that the Internet was no longer the sole domain of the “cyberpunk cowboy”; however, the new “Cypherpunk” movement continued to be fairly uncritical of power structures outside of/intersecting with capitalism. Accordingly, Mixon did expand the scope of cyberpunk somewhat by writing complex female characters, experimenting with “gender-blending”, and overall destabilizing the standard white male subject; in the end, though, these efforts are negated by how the novel reverts to a kind of status quo, in which the white and able-bodied characters are voices of authority and the disabled, underprivileged people of colour of the Kaleidas project are essentially forced to ‘snap out of whatever sense of comfort or control they might have gained through disembodiment. Furthermore, though Mixon’s exploration of inhabiting different bodies is a step forward from mere “identity tourism” – since the identities of proxy pilots seem to fragment and merge with those of the proxy bodies, rather than just using them as puppets – there is, in the novel, little actual transgression of gender boundaries, nor any investigation into what role is played by race in the formation of personal identity.

Subsequently, the analysis leapt ahead to some literature from the present day, looking in particular at how the increased social function of the Web over the last ten years might have affected to what end cyborg disembodiment is used in fiction. In ‘Silently and Very Fast’ by Catherynne M Valente and *Ancillary Justice* by Ann Leckie there appeared a renewed interest in the hybrid identities proposed by Haraway. These use the metaphor of the cyborg as boundary figure far more explicitly than any previous texts, with the characters of Elefsis and Breg challenging not only the gender binary but also binaries of human vs. animal, human vs. machine, and of course mind vs. body. The intention of cyber and cyborg disembodiment, in real life and fiction respectively, can be seen to be moving away from the destruction of the organic body and towards the possibility of multiple, unfixed and transformable bodies, which might better answer to the multiple axes of one’s identity. Language and storytelling appeared to be key in being able to articulate one’s own identity, in many cases by rewriting the cultural myths that have historically been used to oppress and vilify. Finally, I took to task the idea that disembodied communication – e.g. through social media – does not merit “real human connection”, through examples of characters whose social lives are greatly enhanced, not damaged, by their cyborg abilities.

At the end of this investigation, I believe there are abundant reasons to be optimistic about the cyborg technologies that will surely become more and more integrated into our lives in the near future. Science fiction writers seem less and less interested in the potential horror, tragedy and dystopia of a cyborg future; instead, there is increasing acknowledgement of the social

inequalities that *already* exist in the world, and a willingness to imagine how cyborg technologies might be used as tools to bring us closer together.

What this thesis is lacking is an in-depth discussion of how cyborg imagery has been used in relation to race. There is no shortage of theory engaging with what happens to race as a social category in the absence of a racially marked body, and the volume *Race in Cyberspace* (eds. Beth Kolko, Lisa Nakamura and Gilbert Rodman) would be an excellent starting point for entering into such a line of inquiry. Of particular interest to me – indeed, what inspired the direction of this thesis, several incarnations ago – is the recent surge in usage of cyborg imagery by women vocal artists of colour such as Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe, which have been discussed by Tobias C. Van Veen in ‘Vessels of Transfer: Allegories of Afrofuturism in Jeff Mills and Janelle Monáe’ and Robin James in “‘Robo-Diva R&B’: Aesthetics, Politics, and Black Female Robots in Contemporary Popular Music’, among others. I have no excuse for this deficiency in my own essay, and can only plead my general newness to the SF genre as one reason I chose to focus on gender as the area of identity politics in which I am most proficient.

It is vital that future cyborg discourse keeps intersections of disability and race in focus, particularly as cybernetic disability aids become more advanced and cyberspace fosters more and more interactions between communities that have previously appeared socially distant. It is, after all, the essence of the cyborg symbol that *all* identities are hybrid and determined by an infinite number of variables that cannot ever fully be isolated from one another. To interpret it otherwise is a waste of its metaphorical bandwidth.

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