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Gender, the Internet and New Configurations for Embodiment

Kylan Rice

Internet dating websites like OKCupid, eHarmony, and Match.com, among many others, offer users relative control over the infinite (and sometimes cosmic) variables involved with initiating a significant and intimate relationship. Location and proximity are no longer issues, and often the body itself is a minor factor in determining the parameters of the romantic encounter. Indeed, internet dating (which has, ideally, a face-to-face, embodied meeting as its endpoint) exemplifies how corporeality functions differently online—and how paradigms associated with corporeality and embodiment have fundamentally changed in its wake. In “Life beyond the screen: embodiment and identity through the internet,” Michael Hardey suggests that online social interactions upset “the interaction order” which tends to dominate “face-to-face” relations of copresence (571). Hardey offers, for instance, the story of an internet dater named John, confined to a wheelchair, as an example of this phenomenon. John writes: “in my experience women find it difficult to get beyond the chair if they don’t know you and you just meet casually . . . Now I hold off a little before I explain about the accident . . . [the system] allows me to decide when to reveal this aspect of my life which I don’t want potential girlfriends to see as the thing that defines me” (577). Here, the internet dating profile has allowed John to regulate his *image* by “removing the immediacy of bodily disability” (577). For John, virtual interaction will eventually transition

into a physical copresence, but, leading up to this encounter, the internet dating website has facilitated here a kind of identity curation. John has redesigned the previously physicalized “interaction order” and exercised a degree of augmented control over the formulation of his own identity as it manifests itself in body and in text. Hardey concludes that “the domain of internet dating is a space in which individuals seek to close the gap between embodied and disembodied self, the public and the private individual, and anonymity and intimacy” (579). In other words, in this instance, the written, textual, virtual body becomes a lived extension of physical corporeality; it could be said to create *more body* or broader bodies. The internet refreshes the individual and reconfigures how the body represents, manifests, or signifies itself.

Clearly this bears significant ramifications for feminist and postfeminist thinkers who seek to challenge traditional formulations of identity and representation in terms of gender and embodiment. The posthuman statuses made possible by digital technology and the internet/Web 2.0 (as exemplified, in part, by the internet dating website) appear to open up new spaces for genderless, even self-describing subjects to exist and to flourish. However, at this crossroads of posthumanism, cyberfeminism, and digital discourse, embodiment is often overlooked, reduced, or abstracted—a phenomenon which ignores the new methods by which digital and virtual contexts can facilitate fresh evaluations of the body in reality as a potentially liberated surface. Indeed, discussions surrounding the internet and virtual lifestyles trend toward and even celebrate erasures of corporeality, using the same kind of mind-body caesura employed by de la Barre nearly 400 years ago. However, new thought in the fields of posthuman studies, social media theory, and glitch theory help to resituate and vindicate investigations of gendered identity initiated by Monique Wittig and Judith Butler, who critique dualistic prescriptions of gendered identities and explore what the body looks like as well as how the embodied subject may represent itself beyond categories of gender. Likewise, rather than disembodiment, digital spaces allow cyberfeminists to access transgressive, transformative, and augmented corporealities, which in turn allow scholars to explore how subjectivity might transcend socially preformatted sexual and biological identities.

In the late seventeenth century, Poulain de la Barre made the Cartesian assertion that “the mind has no sex”—a statement that helped to disembody the gendered subject for hundreds of years, if the subject is conceived of as an *esprit du corps*, instead of an ontological yoking of mind and body. Indeed,

since writers like de la Barre and Descartes, the Western world has sought to perpetuate the caesura between mind and corporeality, occasionally in defense of feminist agendas. Take, for instance, sentiments expressed by Sadie Plant, who “envisions the internet as a feminist and impartial setting in which ‘access to resources’ that ‘were once restricted to those with the right face, accent, race, sex are now accessible to everyone” (White 605). Indeed, in carefully self-curated online environments, user photos, avatars, edit options, and other “unbiased, empowering technological tools” (White 606) have allowed for a disembodied, posthuman identity politics to develop. However, this approach fails to entirely account for AFK (away from keyboard) / IRL (in real life) states, the body itself, or how this genderless, raceless, virtual space can be transposed meaningfully onto corporeality. Cartesian ruptures celebrated by some digital thinkers ultimately continue to entrap the subject and fail to address the productive and “fluid materialities” or forms of embodiment offered by new media.

Indeed, dualistic impulses and agendas continue to spring from Cartesian headwaters and ripple through all levels of society, conserved specifically in languages, both daily and digital. Even where computer code and computer culture are concerned, Anna Munster notes that “familiarity with the legacy of Cartesian ontology and post-Cartesian rationalism within the knowledge systems that have informed the rise of computation reveals that there is little place for the body within computational spaces” (3). Munster questions this “Cartesian schema” as a compromised paradigm which has led to the birth of a digital culture largely “shaped via binary logic” (3). Reductionism aside, this kind of binary logic or digital dualism, instead of freeing the subject, serves actually to subjugate and to contain, to reify and to perpetuate harmful offline social configurations. In “Digital Dualism and the Fallacy of Web Objectivity,” Nathan Jurgenson asserts that the digital dualist “assumption that the on and offline are separate,” that online ontology is a kind of Janus-faced state, is a fallacy that ultimately springs from “a bunch of (mostly) white males claiming to create a digital space somehow separate from their own socialization.” Indeed, for Jurgenson as well as Legacy Russell, the “mind-body” caesura (or rather, the IRL / real life divide encouraged by visions of a virtual utopia) ultimately fails to render a flat or objective subjectivity—or rather, a state in which “the internet has the power to transcend and remove social locatedness” (“Fallacy”). In other words, as long as a digital dualism reflective of de la Barre or Descartes’s model exists, there cannot be a “possible deconstruction of dominant and oppressive social categorizations such as gender, race, age, and even species (“Fallacy”).

Russell joins in the offensive by acknowledging “that the rigidity of digital dualism needs to be retired, as it plays into binaries of real/virtual that parallel the rampantly socialized figuration of male/female” (“Glitch Feminim”). Exploring the syntactical stakes even further, Jurgenson notes that “Lawrence Lessig, Saskia Sassen, and many other have demonstrated that computer code itself, that ultimate symbol of inhuman, logical neutrality, is embodied, social, historical, and reflects specific value judgments” (“Fallacy”). Reminiscent of Cixous, Irigaray, Gilbert, and Gubar, who each critiqued the phallogocentricity of language, computer dialects also remain imperfect, non-neutral modes of expression, compromised by oppressive paradigms. Rather than offering a way out of the oppressed subject, when digital culture is informed by the same kind of Cartesian logic put forward by de la Barre, it may actually entrap and condemn the subject to old forms of social figurations.

Throughout her career, and especially in her essay, “One is Not Born a Woman,” Monique Wittig rejects this kind of dualism, too, and envisions new forms of embodiment, which are facilitated today by new media. Wittig, of course, seeks in her writing to “lesbianize” society, though, for her, the lesbian operates less as a sexual standard and more as a *bricoleur*. As a marginal subject, the lesbian exists outside normal and normative systems of representation and subjection. The lesbian “refuses dualism and gains an ‘axis of categorization from which to universalize’” (Farwell 115). Marilyn Farwell notes that by focusing on the displaced subject and by methodizing this displacement, Wittig “puts the subject ‘outside of the presence/absence and center/margin dichotomies’” (115), allowing, ultimately, no specific identity, nor recognizable point of view within the system of heteronormativity. In other words, the lesbian revises subjectivity. By “universalizing,” the new “imagination posited by this eroticism leads the [subject] to burst the bonds of recognizable sexual imagery and forge a textuality/sexuality of her own, with its own reality and language” (Farwell 116). Farwell goes on to state that “to be outside the dichotomies, undomesticated and uncategorized [is] to create new images, new languages, and a new axis of categorization” (116). This impulse becomes valuable in an effort to redefine what the body means outside of sexual or gendered standards. Today, Wittig’s project is carried out online and by digital technologies, which fulfill the function of the lesbian by expanding or universalizing the subject.

First, however, to emphasize: neither can the subject be liberated via so-called digital escapism or digital dualism, nor can the subject be liberated solely through disembodied online interactions or states of being. Jurgenson

suggests that digital ontology “done right” augments rather than replaces. In other words, recalling posthumanist cyborg discourse, internet spaces may function as add-ons or “plug-ins” to corporeality, offering “corporeal transgression . . . through a set of tangible, albeit fluid materialities” (White 605). Is it possible that digital and internet technology might serve to re-embody or re-flesh? How can the internet perpetuate Wittig’s project for re-acquiring the subject? How does a “universalized” subject facilitate fluid or diffuse states of embodiment? To be sure, discussing the body in terms of “fluidity” seems to preference perceived identity over embodiment, though a cyberfeminist model of bodily diffusion is not the same as disembodiment *per se*. Rather, posthumanist theorists argue that consciousness can be technologically moved or relocated, an arrangement where “the body is a prosthesis for consciousness, characterized as more of a tool that can be improved, reconfigured, and quite possibly shed for a better one” (Miccoli 2). While the term “prosthesis” plays into the trap of digital dualism by subordinating the body, the sentiment behind the idea that body and consciousness operate fluidly is key in order to reconceptualize embodied subjectivity in the digital age. Indeed, it is important to redefine embodiment proper as either a “process rather than a stable state” or “lived, fluid,” and contingent or situational (Miccoli 3). It is more helpful to talk about digital spaces in terms of temporality rather than spatiality—in terms of events, encounter, and interface, which is precisely the moment that objects interact with each other, causing either new sensitivities to embodiment or at least new configurations of embodiment.

When digital dualism is overcome, these kinds of technological and interfactable events and encounters actually function to minimize reductive definitions of the body, diffusing it and multiplying it in both on and offline spaces. Here, Joan Key adopts theoretical frameworks offered by Gilles Deleuze, arguing that the linked, interconnected, and networked nature of digital stasis is congenial to Deleuze’s conception of the *fold* or of *folding*. Key writes that “folding breaks down categorizations and the subject positions that rely on such oppositions as the ‘included and the excluded, the abject and the desirable, the obscene and the seen” (White 610). If on- and offline life are not separate, if they are somehow interwoven, overlapping, or nested within each other, then the physics of the fold makes some visual sense, offering a conception of digital embodiment which is “shifting” and “fragmented” and “resists distinctions between subjects and objects and cohesive positions” (White 611). Further cementing the concept that on- and offline interplay can

best be addressed in terms of event or contingency, Bruno Latour's model for object-oriented ontology states that "nothing is by itself ordered or disordered, unique or multiple, homogeneous or heterogeneous, fluid or inert, human or inhuman, useful or useless. Never by itself, but always by others" (Miller 56). Latour's model (for ontology and even—by extension—for corporeality) resists reduction and instead argues that being is based on "local constructions," where objects engage in folding or in "concatenating, relating, networking, negotiating, compromising, and composing" (Miller 20). By transposing Latour and Deleuze into digital and posthuman contexts, the embodied, corporeal subject *becomes* through interface—that is, by folding and networking. Moreover, through digital augmentation as outlined by Jurgenson, the body is also opened to new ontological possibilities, new subjectivities.

This phenomenon of (technological) extension is conceptualized at length by Judith Butler in an essay in direct conversation with Monique Wittig. Butler throws her shoulder behind Wittig in a discussion on "the existential doctrine of choice" (505), suggesting that Wittig's theory of gender functions as a site where "gender becomes the corporeal locus of cultural meanings both received and innovated . . . and 'choice' in this context comes to signify a corporeal process of interpretation within a network of deeply entrenched culture norms" (506). Butler uses Sartre to supplement her reading of Wittig. Butler elaborates on the "cultural process of interpretation within a network," writing that "the body is coextensive with personal identity, . . . [suggesting] that consciousness is in some sense beyond the body" (508). While this, at first glance, seems to reify mind/body dualism, Butler writes that "we need to understand this self-transcendence as itself a corporeal movement, and thus rethink both our usual ideas of 'transcendence' and of mind/body dualism itself" (508). Most importantly, however, Butler elaborates that "one may surpass the body, but this does not mean that one definitely gets beyond the body," and "the body is not a static or self-identical phenomenon, but a mode of intentionality, a directional force and mode of desire . . . a mode of becoming" (509). While Butler and Wittig may not have been writing with digital or technological ends in mind, their perspectives nevertheless presage posthuman claims that technology may serve not only to extend corporeality but also to verify embodiment as a process of becoming—a concept made manifest specifically during moments of folding or interface, when the body concatenates with objects of technology.

And this moment of interface is the moment of expanded or extended corporeality. Anthony Miccoli writes that "datafying the self" does not eliminate

problems associated with embodiment nor does it eliminate the “Cartesian fear of annihilation” (6). In other words, and as expressed by Butler in terms of Wittig in 1986, extended corporeality is “not a question of leaving the body behind, but rather of extending embodied awareness in highly specific, local, and material ways that would be impossible without electronic prosthesis” (Miccoli 6). However, by understanding the embodied possibilities opened up by digital ontology, critics like N. Kathleen Hayles believes that posthumanists, digital humanists, and cyberfeminists can start addressing how incorporation, or, perhaps more precisely for the purposes of this argument, how *re-incorporation* takes place (Miccoli 7). Extended corporeality is less a push-button effect that the digital has on the real and instead more of a paradigm that can liberate attitudes held toward IRL subjectivity. Before discussing how this paradigm can be used or has been used to liberate the subject or to expand the potentiality of the subject, or how past feminists have operated in this way, it is important to understand how interface is conceived in a posthuman setting. Anthony Miccoli argues that “what posthumanism avoids addressing is the very need for connection, as well as the site of interface where connection takes place” (8). Of course, under consideration the moment of interface becomes the moment of embodiment, relationality, and digital diffusion.

Using arguments put forward by Elaine Scarry, Miccoli articulates how this moment of connection or interface is productive in re-embodiment the subject or expanding the parameters and definitions of the embodied subject. Miccoli and Scarry argue that “technology is not a means to achieve some kind of improved embodiedness, instead, it is a means by which ‘a bodily attribute is projected into an artifact which essentially takes on the work of the body, thereby freeing the embodied person of discomfort and thus enabling him to enter a larger realm of self- extension’ (10). Miccoli suggests that at the moment of interface (“a palpable surface across which ‘the interior act and exterior object becomes continuous’”) “technology allows the internal to be expressed in the outside world” (10). It is useful here to graft in claims set forward by glitch theorists like Rosa Menkman, who explore the concept of interface and moments when users become *aware* of interface (and thus aware of relationality and bodily diffusion) through glitch or bugginess. In *The Glitch Moment(um)*, Menkman asserts that in digital media “innovation is . . . still assumed to lie in finding an interface that is as non-interfering as possible, enabling the audience to forget about the presence of the medium and believe in the presence and directness of immediate transmission” (14). However, when a glitch appears in a computer

or technological system it “fosters a critical potential . . . and captures the machine revealing itself” (Menkman 30). She writes that “when a supposedly transparent interface is damaged [by a glitch], the viewer is momentarily relocated to a void of meaning” (30), and the computer itself “suddenly appears unconventionally deep, in contrast to the more banal, predictable surface-level behaviors of normal machines and systems” (31). If the moment of interface is a moment of awareness, then the glitch aids in catalyzing this self-consciousness. A glitch becomes a way of embodying by rupturing an otherwise transparent, thoughtless, and disembodied connection between the individual and the technological artifact.

This idea remains relatively abstract until it is imported as a model into digital discourse and gender, interrogating how a *glitch* might manifest itself in social, gendered systems, or situations. In “One is Not Born a Woman,” Monique Wittig outlines a useful way of thinking about certain identities as explosive to normal perceptions of gender or the heterosexual matrix. In effect, Wittig offers the lesbian as a kind of glitch to this matrix, “a not-woman, a not-man,” who, by refusing the role of the woman, allows for a “new personal and subjective definition for all humankind . . . beyond the categories of sex (man and woman)” (362). If the lesbian interrupts woman’s “specific social relation to man” within a heterosexual matrix, living beyond the categories of sex, then the lesbian effectively meets Wittig’s call for “the advent of individual subjects which first demands destroying the categories of sex, ending the use of them, and rejecting all sciences which still use these categories as their fundamentals” (365). In other words, the lesbian, like a glitch, reveals the inner workings of the system or matrix and the moment of interface with this system. By doing so, the lesbian diffuses categories of embodiment and allows for subjective “self-extension.” In digital contexts, this can also occur when the subject logs in online and adopts “modes of virtual embodiment that fundamentally subvert [traditional] identities by more fully utilizing the potential of virtual technologies to disrupt the expressive or one-to-one-mapping of social identities and meanings onto bodies” (Vint “Funk Not Punk”). Interface with a computer, functional or malfunctioning, facilitates new ways of perceiving the body in offline states by re-envisioning how the subject represents itself.

Restated differently, augmented reality, as facilitated by URL ontology, expands and extends corporeality when it allows the subject to take on new signifiers or represent itself and the body in new ways. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler writes at length on the nature of subjectivity and representation,

arguing that, as representation occurs within a system and secondary to that system, representation for (female) subjects is necessarily problematized if “the feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation” (4). If embodiment is context based upon representation, this kind of systemic corruption reveals the problems associated with “liberating” the so-called subject, even online. Nevertheless, Butler acknowledges the diffuse nature of modern identity and modern “womanhood,” writing that, “because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities . . . it becomes impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (6). Butler goes on to problematize universal feminism and universal patriarchy, maintaining instead a principle of irreduction, showing the *subject* must remain a diffuse and diffused entity. In online contexts, representation is not infinitely liberated but is rather expanded or extended. Indeed, according to Jurgenson and Butler, the ways in which people express themselves online remain, in some ways, entrapped by offline, IRL social structures, or even by digital systems themselves. However, “radical rethinking of the ontological constructions of identity” (Butler 8) based in mobilizing identity remains the primary goal of a posthuman, cyberfeminist ontology. The mobile identity is an exercise in self-identification and self-representation—modes of self-expression that are facilitated by online posturing, profiles, accounts, platforms, and blogs.

In *The Mirror and the Veil*, Viviane Serfaty discusses the old digital dream of reframing (or dismantling) the body into an “immaterial signifier,” a site at which “corporeity seemingly dissolves and boils down into a set of linguistic signs” (101), into a body-as-text. However, if we recall writers like H  l  ne Cixous, the body-as-text (which can be edited and reframed and utterly controlled by the user or the subject) is not necessarily *disembodied*. For Cixous, the act of writing not only closely parallels embodiment, it also facilitates new bodies. Cixous argues that a woman must “write her self,” in order to catalyze “indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history,” articulating her own femininity, and, as a result, “return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display” (323). Cixous equates a censoring of the body with the censoring of speech. In other words, the very act of articulating is an act of setting up new, self-defined parameters of engenderment. If we consider contemporary discourse surrounding the narcissism of a plugged-in Generation X, Cixous

argues, tellingly, that as men have censored women, “they have made for women an *antinarcissism*” (322). Likewise, the online text (in the form of a blog or microblog post) is fundamentally narcissistic in that it *preens*—since the online text can be edited continuously, the subject/user has, at all levels, the power to design, shape, and encode itself in text; therefore, the online text shifts in the mirror. Cixous argues that a new feminine discourse functions not only to “break up, to destroy” but also to “foresee” and “project” (319). A new feminine discourse not only embodies but also specifically embodies new, speculative bodies—or, rather, bodies that exist in process and are able to be edited, expanded, copied, and pasted. Online corporeality, facilitated by the body-as-text model, allows the user and the user’s body a speculative diffuseness, extension, and recombinatory nature.

Current trends and innovations in social media technology facilitate similar paradigms that encourage diffuse, recombinatory, and extended identity. Social media theorists like Jurgenson critique current configurations of the online identity profile, offering a “liquid” or “fluid” self in place of the rigidly defined and outlined identity made possible by self-curated photos, quotes, posts, and likes or dislikes. While Jurgenson principally believes that the internet (including a variety of social media platforms) constructs an expanded identity, he also suggests in an article entitled “The Liquid Self,” that the ideal social media profile should not “ask us to work ourselves into as many identity-containers, given the fact that humans and identity itself are fundamentally fluid and ever changing.” Indeed, Jurgenson calls to mind the critical work of Walter Pater, who described human identity as a “hard gem-like flame,” both fluctuating and indelible simultaneously. Jurgenson offers an updated vision of the social media profile, writing that “dominant social media has thus far taken a stand . . . for a version of identity that is highly categorized and omnipresent, one that forces an ideal of a singular stable identity that we will continuously have to confront” (“The Liquid Self”). He argues that a “temporary social media will provide new ways of understanding the social media profile, one that isn’t comprised of life hacked into frozen, quantifiable pieces by instead something more fluid, changing, and alive” (“The Liquid Self”). Of course, Jurgenson’s claims need not stand in conflict with those previously outlined in this essay—digital platforms and profiles still offer individuals profound control over self-expression—but they nevertheless provide progressive insight into how social media and “authentic” identity can be reconciled. Again, this evidence is meant to show that the internet can offer new ways of representing the subject, à la

Butler and Wittig, and that these new ways can be ported into offline bodies and ontologies.

Perhaps one way of conceptualizing this porting or the relationship between internet augmented reality and real issues of embodiment is to examine ways in which expanded consciousness has helped the individual to rethink or re-flesh the body—both in the past and in a non-digital context. Gloria Anzaldúa outlines a cosmopolitan paradigm for self-identification, raising questions on how intersectional identities can contribute to a “*mestiza* consciousness,” or, rather, a consciousness “of the Borderlands,” which reflects a “hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool” (386). For Anzaldúa, a *mestiza* consciousness is rooted in multiculturalism, even multiracialism, but has a direct impact on the *psyche* and the paradigms of the *mind*. In other words, mind and body interface or interfere with one another, bound up in a relationship where one informs the other. She writes that “*mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity . . . and breaks down the subject-object duality that keeps [woman] a prisoner” (388). This paradigm correlates with “a massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness—the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could . . . bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war” (389). In other words, Anzaldúa believes that by destroying dualities of being, by opening the subject to fluidity, contingency, and ambiguity, the subject and the body can be freed from real violence. A *mestiza* consciousness not only defies duality, but it also is an example of the ways in which paradigms and embodiment (or here, genealogy) intersect. From Anzaldúa, it is possible to extrapolate how expanded forms of identity, self-identification, reality, and corporeality can have real effects on real embodiment.

Rethinking the internet, digital technology, and digital culture in terms laid out initially by Wittig and Butler, and later expanded upon by thinkers like Miccoli and Jurgenson, shows that because online life overlaps with the IRL, new configurations of “personality” online can inform how identity can be manifested or expressed by the body. New paradigms regarding being and personality facilitated by the internet harmonize with a sentiment expressed by Jean- Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*: that is, we “do not exist all at once” (352). Returning to the anecdote offered earlier in this essay, Sartre, in discussing his own corporeality and real disabilities, writes that “even this disability from which I suffer I have assumed by the very fact that I live; I surpass it toward my own projects, I make of it the necessary obstacle for my being, and I cannot

be crippled without choosing myself as crippled” (352). Sartre’s vision of the “body-surpassed”—using models of surpassing (augmented) embodiment—align with similar conceptions of extended corporeality offered in internet borderlands. As a result, Sartre’s vision readjusts how the body—including the crippled bodies of Sartre or the internet dating services user—can be revised or readjusted after the internet rehaults how people conceive of embodiment on a day-to-day basis. From glitch to blog writing, the internet helps to interrogate what embodiment means in a posthuman state and how individuals or *users* can expand on Monique Wittig’s project to offer new personal and subjective definitions of mankind—definitions that exist beyond gender but not necessarily beyond the body. The internet establishes a new *mestiza* consciousness, or the so-called Borderlands consciousness, where *border* is here synonymous with *interface*, a surface that folds and erupts, allowing the embodied individuals to transgress or transform traditional versions of corporeality.

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