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*an anthology
of cybertexts
for the modern
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There Is No Such Thing As Neutral Graphic Design

Story — Ellen Lupton & Leslie Xia

Each year, we harvest a fresh crop of sans serif typefaces claiming to deliver content in anonymous, trouble-free text blocks. It's Helvetica's world. We just live in it.

What does it mean to design “normal” things for “normal” people? Western society defines certain individuals and communities as average and ordinary, while everyone else is something other. People living inside the norm bubble often don't recognize their own special status, because norms aren't supposed to be special. Synonyms for the word normal include standard, average, typical, and ordinary. Norms are invisible, becoming present only when they rub up against difference.

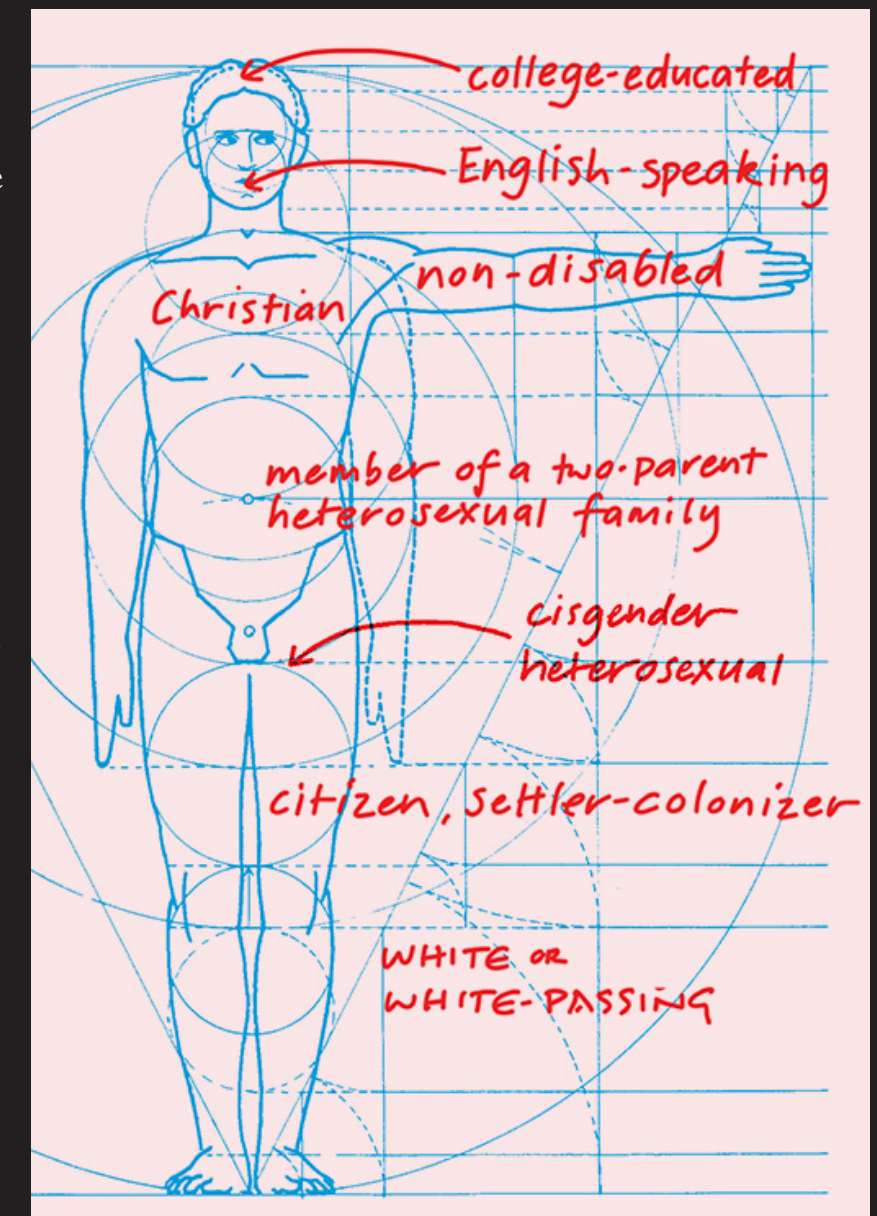
Graphic designers are in the norm business. We employ legible fonts and familiar interface conventions in order to churn out seemingly neutral, user-friendly messages. We use grids, hierarchies, and tasteful type pairings to unify publications and websites. We produce brand standards and corporate identity manuals to regulate the public image of companies and institutions. Each year, we harvest a fresh crop of sans serif typefaces claiming to deliver content in anonymous, trouble-free text blocks. It's Helvetica's world. We just live in it.

Norms appear throughout design culture. Uniforms and road signs are norms. Icons and emoji are norms. Style sheets, templates, and

content management systems are norms. Social media interfaces are norms. At its core, typography is a norm, invented to reproduce text in a consistent, error-free manner. The rules of writing and typography encompass

grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and the correct use of spaces and dashes.

People use graphic design to study and transform social relationships as well as visual ones. The words and concepts we use to talk about design—in both normative and disruptive terms—also ripple through the critical writing about race and feminism. Design is a tool for

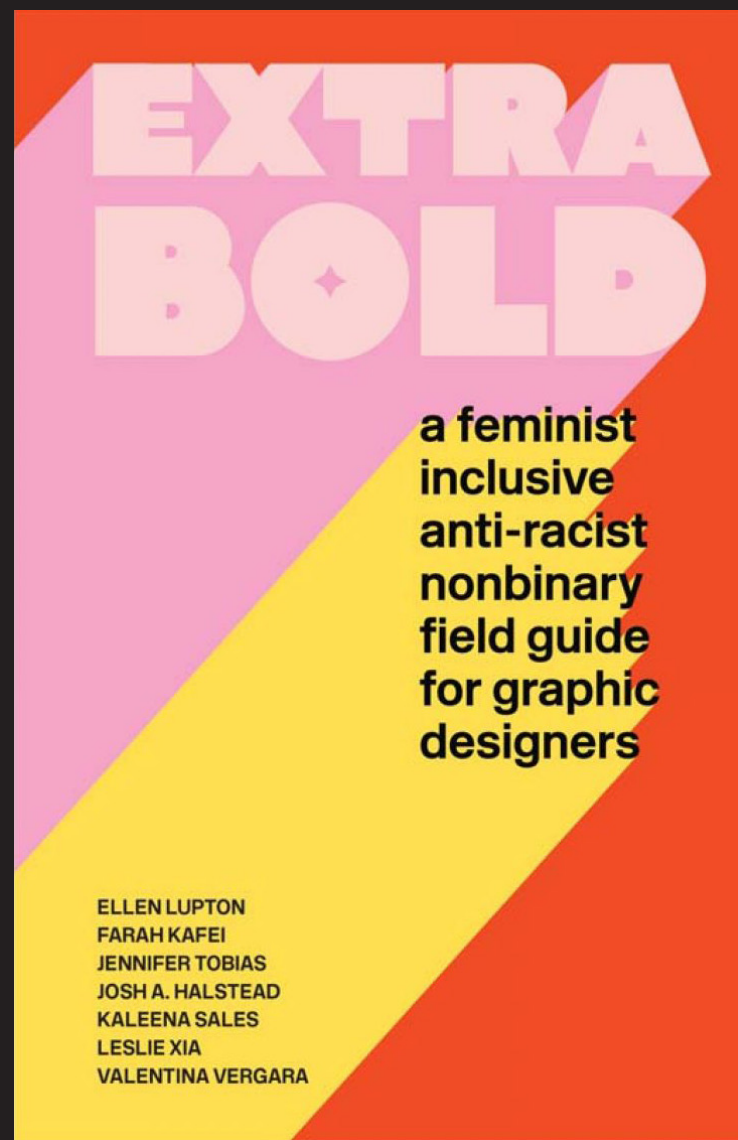


diagramming and exposing structures of power.

In the 1920s, designers in Europe argued that cubic buildings, sans serif typefaces, photographic images, and functional products could be useful and relevant to people across nationalities and income groups. Such seemingly neutral forms resisted the nationalist and fascist ideologies that pitted groups against each other. Despite modernism's egalitarian ideals, however, the concept of universal or transnational design solutions presumed a male, Western European subject.

According to poet and activist Audre Lorde, the “mythical norm” is what a given society understands to be generically human. Writing from the perspective of a Black queer woman, Lorde noted that the norm in the US is typically “white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure.” The mythical norm is an artifact of White supremacy, upheld by racism and oppression. Lorde writes, “As white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define woman in terms of their own experience alone, then women of color become ‘other,’ the outsider whose experience and tradition is too ‘alien’ to comprehend.” White women are complicit in preserving the normative system, which inflicts ongoing violence—physical, psychological, and economic—on Black people and people of color.

Exclusion from the protective bubble of normativity leads to varying degrees of oppression or inequality. People who embody some or all aspects of the norm tend to treat their ostensibly typical attributes as neutral, invisible, or non-existent. Being normal seems natural—not a special privilege. It's easy to say “I don't see race” when you live inside the bubble of Whiteness.



Indeed, any norm tends to disguise itself and disappear. Thus, a White, heterosexual, cisgender man may ignore the superpowers bestowed on him by the mythical norm—believing instead that his achievements are wholly earned through hard work, talent, and merit. A White woman may feel the forces of sexism while denying her race-based privilege. Although the norms of Whiteness or maleness may appear invisible to people who are White and/or male, they are oppressively visible to those excluded by their bubbles.

Although norms are deeply embedded in design's professional ethos and official history, protest and resistance are crucial parts of this history, too. Dada and Constructivist artists used diagonal lines, mismatched fonts, and montaged photos to challenge thousands of years of static symmetry. In the mid-twenti-

eth century, industrial designers rejected the Renaissance ideal of the perfect young man and began creating “ergonomic” products, designed to fit more bodies. Disability historian Aimi Hamraie calls this area of inquiry “epistemic activism.” New guidelines for human measurements encompassed a wider range of people.

Not all products are ergonomic. The COVID-19 crisis revealed that the gowns and masks used in hospitals and care facilities are designed to fit a so-called average male body, making them dangerous for caregivers of smaller stature, including many women. Writers and thinkers can use the tools of graphic design to study and change social relationships. The words and concepts we use to talk about design ripple through the critical writing about race and feminism. Terms like axis, intersection, and orientation are familiar to graphic designers. Writers and philoso-

Writers and thinkers can use the tools of graphic design to study and change social relationships.

phers use these terms too, creating spatial metaphors for concepts like racism, sexuality, and gender. Spatial ideas such as “margin/center” help people create vivid mental pictures of dominance. These concepts prompt readers and listeners to construct diagrams in the gray matter of the mind. White savior narratives are told from the perspective of White people who become enlightened and help improve the lives of people in marginal groups. Such narratives are said to “center Whiteness,” a process of erasing the margins and focusing on the emotional needs and seemingly heroic actions of the dominant group.

Sara Ahmed's book *Queer Phenomenology* unpacks the spatial language of queerness. The phrase “sexual orientation,” commonly used to label a person's

attraction to people based on their gender identity, suggests how bodies gravitate toward other bodies, as if drawn by a magnetic force. Ahmed wants to rethink how a body's turn “toward” objects shapes the surfaces of bodily and social space.” She states that queer comes from the Indo-European word meaning “twist.” Historically, to be queer meant to deviate from the straight line of social norms. Today, people use the word queer to express pride and solidarity.

Design is normative, but it can also be transformative. Binary oppositions lure the mind with their shiny, neatly defined polarities. Just one of many alternative models is the spectrum, which contains endless shades of difference between opposing endpoints. Intersections, twisting paths, and mixed ecologies push beyond the either/or structure of binary categories.

A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism

Story – Donna Haraway

An ironic dream of
a common language
for women in the
integrated circuit

This chapter is an effort to build an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism. Perhaps more faithful as blasphemy is faithful, than as reverent worship and identification. Blasphemy has always seemed to require taking things very seriously. I know no better stance to adopt from within the secular-religious, evangelical traditions of United States politics, including the politics of socialist feminism. Blasphemy protects one from the moral majority within, while still insisting on the need for community. Blasphemy is not apostasy. Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humour and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method, one I would like to see more honoured within socialist-feminism. At the centre of my ironic faith, my blasphemy, is the image of the cyborg. A cyborg

fact of the most crucial, political kind. Liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility. The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.

Contemporary science fiction is full of cyborgs – creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted. Modern medicine is also full of cyborgs, of couplings between organism and machine, each conceived as coded devices, in an intimacy and with a power that was not generated in the history of sexuality. Cyborg 'sex' restores some of the lovely replicative baroque of ferns and invertebrates (such nice organic prophylactics against heterosexism). Cyborg replication is uncoupled from organic reproduction. Modern production seems like a dream of cyborg colonization work, a dream that makes the nightmare of Taylorism seem idyllic. And modern war is a cyborg orgy, coded by C3I, command-control-communication-intelligence, an \$84

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is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction. The international women's movements have constructed 'women's experience', as well as uncovered or discovered this crucial collective object. This experience is a fiction and

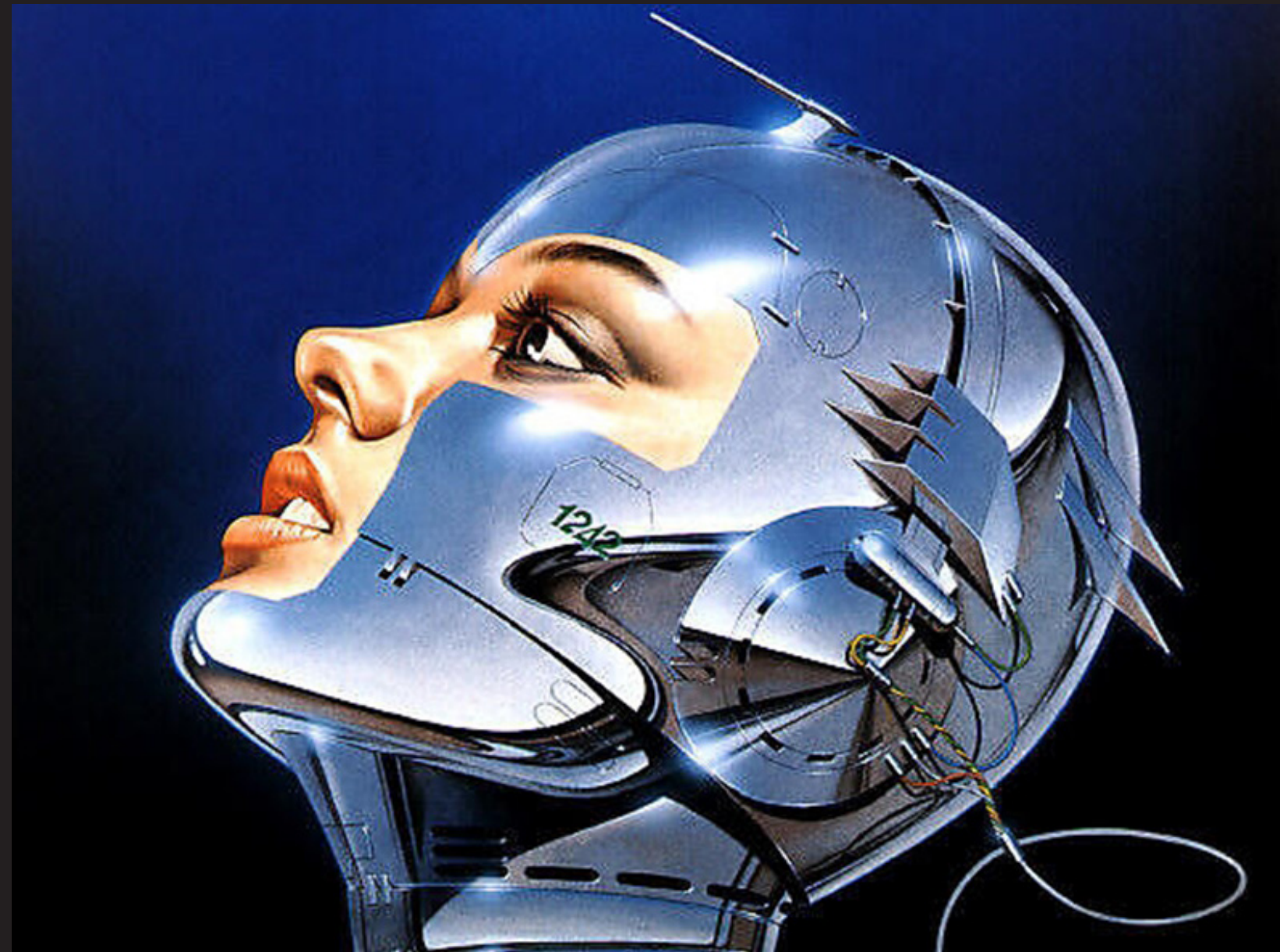
billion item in 1984's US defence budget. I am making an argument for the cyborg as a fiction mapping our social and bodily reality and as an imaginative resource suggesting some very fruitful couplings. Michael Foucault's biopolitics is a flaccid premonition of cyborg politics, a very open field.

By the late twentieth century, our time,

It is also an effort to contribute to socialist-feminist culture and theory in a postmodernist, non-naturalist mode and in the utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender, which is perhaps a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end.

a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation. In the traditions of 'Western' science and politics – the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other – the relation between organism and machine has been a border war. The stakes in the border war have been the territories of production, reproduction, and imagination. This chapter is an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction.

It is also an effort to contribute to socialist-feminist culture and theory in a postmodernist, non-naturalist mode and in the utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender, which is perhaps a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end. The cyborg incarnation is outside salvation history. Nor does it mark time on an oedipal calendar, attempting to heal the terrible cleavages of gender in an oral symbiotic utopia or post-oedipal apocalypse. As Zoe Sofoulis argues in her unpublished manuscript on Jacques Lacan, Melanie Klein, and nuclear culture, Lacklein, the most terrible and perhaps the most promising monsters in cyborg worlds are embodied in non-oedipal narratives with a different logic of



repression, which we need to understand for our survival.

In a sense, the cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense – a 'final' irony since the cyborg is also the awful apocalyptic telos of the 'West's' escalating dominations of abstract individuation, an ultimate self untied at last from all

dependency, a man in space. An origin story in the 'Western', humanist sense depends on the myth of original unity, fullness, bliss and terror, represented by the phallic mother from whom all humans must separate, the task of individual development and of history, the twin potent myths inscribed most powerfully for us in psychoanalysis and Marxism. Hilary Klein has argued that both Marx-

ism and psychoanalysis, in their concepts of labour and of individuation and gender formation, depend on the plot of original unity out of which difference must be produced and enlisted in a drama of escalating domination of woman/nature. The cyborg skips the step of original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense. This is its illegitimate promise that might lead to subversion of its teleology as star wars.

The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence. No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polls based partly on a revolution of social relations in the oikos, the household. Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other. The relationships for forming wholes from parts, including those of polarity and hierarchical domination, are at issue in the cyborg world. 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, a city and cosmos. The cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family, this time without the oedipal project. The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust. Perhaps that is why I want to see if cyborgs can subvert the apocalypse of returning to nuclear dust in the manic compulsion to name the Enemy. Cyborgs are not reverent; they do not re-member

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

I will return to the science fiction of cyborgs at the end of this chapter, but now I want to signal three crucial boundary breakdowns that make the following political-fictional (political-scientific) analy-

last two centuries have simultaneously produced modern organisms as objects of knowledge and reduced the line between humans and animals to a faint trace re-etched in ideological struggle or professional disputes between life and social science. Within this framework, teaching modern Christian creationism should be fought as a form of child abuse.

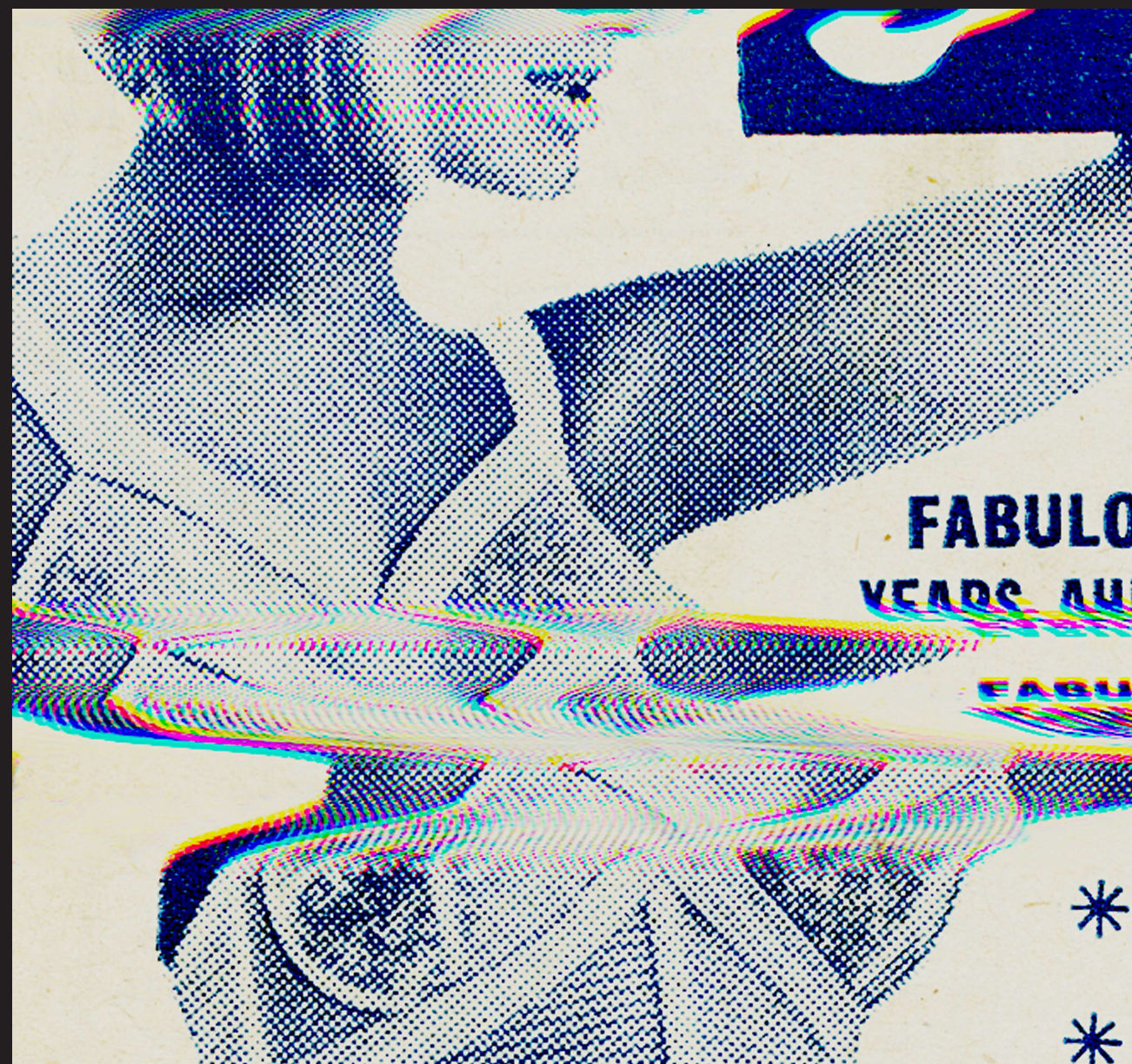
Biological-determinist ideology is only one position opened up in scientific culture for arguing the meanings of human animality. There is much room for radical political people to contest the meanings of the breached boundary. The cyborg appears in myth precisely where

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sis possible. By the late twentieth century in United States scientific culture, the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached. The last beachheads of uniqueness have been polluted if not turned into amusement parks--language tool use, social behaviour, mental events, nothing really convincingly settles the separation of human and animal. And many people no longer feel the need for such a separation; indeed, many branches of feminist culture affirm the pleasure of connection of human and other living creatures. Movements for animal rights are not irrational denials of human uniqueness; they are a clear-sighted recognition of connection across the discredited breach of nature and culture. Biology and evolutionary theory over the

the boundary between human and animal is transgressed. Far from signalling a walling off of people from other living beings, cyborgs signal disturbingly and pleasurably tight coupling. Bestiality has a new status in this cycle of marriage exchange.

The second leaky distinction is between animal-human (organism) and machine. Pre-cybernetic machines could be haunted; there was always the spectre of the ghost in the machine. This dualism structured the dialogue between materialism and idealism that was settled by a dialectical progeny, called spirit or history, according to taste. But basically machines were not self-moving, self-designing, autonomous. They could not achieve



man's dream, only mock it. They were not man, an author to himself, but only a caricature of that masculinist reproductive dream. To think they were otherwise was paranoid. Now we are not so sure. Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.

Technological determination is only one ideological space opened up by the reconceptions of machine and organism as coded texts through which we engage in the play of writing and reading the world. 'Textualization' of everything in

poststructuralist, postmodernist theory has been damned by Marxists and socialist feminists for its utopian disregard for the lived relations of domination that ground the 'play' of arbitrary reading.⁴ It is certainly true that postmodernist strategies, like my cyborg myth, subvert myriad organic wholes (for example, the poem, the primitive culture, the biological organism). In short, the certainty of what counts as nature — a source of insight and promise of innocence — is undermined, probably fatally. The transcendent authorization of interpretation is lost, and with it the ontology grounding 'Western' epistemology. But the alternative is not cynicism or faithlessness, that is, some version of abstract existence, like the accounts of technological determinism destroying 'man' by the 'machine' or 'meaningful political action' by the 'text'.

Who cyborgs will be is a radical question; the answers are a matter of survival. Both chimpanzees and artefacts have politics, so why shouldn't we?

The third distinction is a subset of the second: the boundary between physical and non-physical is very imprecise for us. Pop physics books on the consequences of quantum theory and the indeterminacy principle are a kind of popular scientific equivalent to Harlequin romances* as a marker of radical change in American white heterosexuality: they get it wrong, but they are on the right subject. Modern machines are quintessentially microelectronic devices: they are everywhere and they are invisible. Modern machinery is an irreverent upstart god, mocking the Father's ubiquity and spirituality. The silicon chip is a surface for writing; it is etched in molecular scales disturbed only by atomic noise, the ultimate interference for nuclear scores. Writing, power, and technology are old partners in Western stories of the origin of civilization, but miniaturization has changed our experience of mechanism. Miniaturization has turned out to be about power; small is not so much beautiful as pre-eminently dangerous, as in cruise missiles. Contrast the TV sets

of the 1950s or the news cameras of the 1970s with the TV wrist bands or hand-sized video cameras now advertised. Our best machines are made of sunshine; they are all light and clean because they are nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves, a section of a spectrum, and these machines are eminently portable, mobile – a matter of immense human pain in Detroit and Singapore. People are nowhere near so fluid, being both material and opaque. Cyborgs are ether, quintessence.

The ubiquity and invisibility of cyborgs is precisely why these sunshine-belt machines are so deadly. They are as hard to see politically as materially. They are about consciousness – or its simulation.⁵ They are floating signifiers moving in pickup trucks across Europe, blocked more effectively by the witch-weavings of the displaced and so unnatural Greenham women, who read the cyborg webs of power so very well, than by the militant labour of older masculinist politics, whose natural constituency needs defence jobs. Ultimately the 'hardest' science is about the realm of greatest boundary confusion, the realm of pure number, pure spirit, C3I, cryptography, and the preservation of potent secrets. The new

machines are so clean and light. Their engineers are sun-worshippers mediating a new scientific revolution associated with the night dream of post-industrial society. The diseases evoked by these clean machines are 'no more' than the minuscule coding changes of an antigen in the immune system, 'no more' than the experience of stress. The nimble fingers of 'Oriental' women, the old fascination of little Anglo-Saxon Victorian girls with doll's houses, women's enforced attention to the small take on quite new dimensions in this world. There might be a cyborg Alice taking account of these new dimensions. Ironically, it might be the unnatural cyborg women making chips in Asia and spiral dancing in Santa Rita jail whose constructed unities will guide effective oppositional strategies.

So my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work. One of my premises is

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that most American socialists and feminists see deepened dualisms of mind and body, animal and machine, idealism and materialism in the social practices, symbolic formula-tions, and physical artefacts associated with 'high technology' and scientific culture. From One-DimensionalMan (Marcuse, 1964) to The Death of Nature (Merchant, 1980), the analytic resources developed by progressives have insisted on the necessary domination of technics and recalled us to an imagined organic body to integrate our resistance. Another of my premises is that the need for unity of people trying to resist world-wide intensification of domination has never been more acute. But a slightly

perverse shift of perspective might better enable us to contest for meanings, as well as for other forms of power and pleasure in technologically mediated societies.

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. The political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point. Single vision produces worse illusions than double vision or many-headed monsters. Cyborg unities are monstrous and illegitimate; in

our present political circumstances, we could hardly hope for more potent myths for resistance and recoupling. I like to imagine LAG, the Livermore Action Group, as a kind of cyborg society, dedi-

cated to realistically converting the laboratories that most fiercely embody and spew out the tools

Of technological apocalypse, and committed to building a political form that acutally manages to hold together witches, engineers, elders, perverts, Christians, mothers, and Leninists long enough to disarm the state. Fission Impossible is the name of the affinity group in my town.(Affinity: related not by blood but by choice, the appeal of one chemical nuclear group for another, avidiy.



Glitching The Master's House: Legacy Russell and Momtaza Mehri in Conversation

Story — Momtaza Mehri

Creatively generating value for digital platforms that we don't own is a predicament felt most acutely by the socially disempowered.

Feminism charts ways of resisting the intense embodiment and corporeality demanded of us by what Russell terms the 'violent socio-cultural machine'. Described as 'a strategy of non-performance', a glitch is something to aspire to. It is what many of us already are. Interweaving memoir, poetry and critical theory, Russell analyses the productively disruptive works of artists including Emanuel Arturo Abreu, Kia LaBeija and Tabita Rezaire.

For those of us who came of age contending with the idea of the digital realm as a heady space for fluidity and emancipatory collectivity, Glitch Feminism uncompromisingly lays out the stakes.

I spoke to Russell with Bob Marley's 'Babylon System' (1979) ringing in my head. ('We refuse to be / what you wanted us to be.')

MM There is a deeply personal and moving aspect to your framing of glitch feminism. The idea of coming of age online, with all the trials and tribulations of that particular experience, felt familiar to those of us considered digital natives. Of course, some of us have had an antagonistic relationship with the internet as a space where we have encountered so much of what disturbs and haunts us.

LR For me, the creative practices that are included in the book and the discussions about what the internet can do have to do with finding sustainable modes of collectivizing. Of course, 100 per cent, there are things that exist on the internet that are toxic and unhealthy. But I recognize, too, that those things are just reflections of the world at large.

MM I appreciate how you pointedly resist the on/offline binary – between AFK [away from keyboard] and URL. That increasingly seems like a very dated way of looking at things.

LR Nathan Jurgenson was the theorist who first wrote about AFK in relation to what he calls 'digital dualism'. He was the first person to publish 'Glitch Feminism Manifesto' [in the online journal The Society Pages, in 2012] and it's his work around the problems of the term IRL and the false notion of 'digital dualism' that I was expanding upon in my thinking of glitch feminism. The primary thing is to not allow the internet to be relegated as a fantasy space. Nor to cynically dismiss it as a place where violence is happening and ignore the broader problems of the world. I

New York-born writer, artist and curator Legacy Russell interrogates how digital natives grapple with, maneuver around and unsettle this existential contradiction. Glitch Feminism, published by Verso Books in September, is Russell's manifesto, expanding on a term she first coined in 2012. From early forays into teenage chat rooms to the ingenuity of digital communities sustained by the Black, queer, gender non-conforming and othered, Glitch

wanted to look at practices that are rooted in, inspired by and speaking through digital culture, but driven specifically by queer people and people of colour as this is an underrecognized part of these histories as they're told within and outside of institutional spaces. The artists celebrated in the book are important and inspiring and it feels urgent to draw attention to them. Very often, Black, queer or femme-identified artists are not recognized for their work when they're young. Across a trans politic, the discourse is about making sure that trans folx get their roses while they're still alive. This book is about making space for those who have been historically excluded from an art canon. It's about course correcting. The broader goal of glitch feminism is to recognize that bodies not intended to survive and exist across these current systems are the ones that will push this world to its breaking point. And that's a good thing.



MM How does this tie into your ideas around opacity as something helpful or productive?

LR The idea of the glitch pushes back against the speed at which images of Black bodies and queer bodies are consumed online. This question of opacity is urgent because it is a strategic tool, a form of encryption: a way of mediating how we are seen and asking questions about for whom those images are shown and circulated. Oftentimes, cisgendered white-identified and white-presenting people are recognized as the forward thinkers in discourse

about cyberculture. That's very problematic, because there have been many, many people of colour and queer-identified people who have done and are doing this work actively, including artists such as the late Mark Aguhar, manuel arturo abreu, E. Jane and SHAWNÉ MICHAELAIN HOLLOWAY. Yet, the romanticized discourse around the 1990s and, in particular, the birth of cyberfeminism as it continues to dictate a contemporary narrative, often prioritizes white women as the core contributors.



MM I'm struck by your writing on the paradox of using platforms that grossly sensationalize and capitalize on POC, female-identifying and queer bodies and our pain as a means of advancing urgent political-cultural dialogue about our struggle. It made me remember a Jacques Derrida quote [from *Of Grammatology*, 1967]: 'One always inhabits [the structures one wants to destroy], and all the more when one does not suspect it.' You describe this as one of the greatest shared existential crises of our time. I would definitely agree with that.

LR To be honest, I feel like those contradictions didn't start with the internet. Oftentimes, it's convenient to pin that narrative on social media. In the questions you sent me ahead of our conversation, you mentioned blackfishing – white people confusingly putting on blackness online – but there is a long and complicated history of borrowing from, thieving from, Black culture in a very particular and very violent way. As a tool, the internet has given us a place to congregate, which is important in a different way than it is for a white, cisgendered, straight person. It's important to recognize that. It has allowed us survival and coping mechanisms: being able to dialogue, collectivize and congregate without the same type of harm that has presented out in the world when we're walking down the street. Of course, it's important to think

about how these spaces operate at the level of the algorithm and who is designing them. I've been really encouraged over these last five to ten years to see a great rise in conversations about the architects of online spaces: who are they? How is that power distributed? How can it be distributed differently? Safiya Umoja Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression* [2018] and André Brock Jr.'s *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* [2020] do important work in connecting some of these dots.



MM During these ongoing Black Lives Matter uprisings, the social-media landscape has been flaring up with activists sharing resources. Seeing threads disseminating information on encryption and how to identify the kind of riot-control techniques refined by the police, it's never lost on me that this is also another space of surveillance. It's part of the simultaneous empowerment and disempowerment that Black people face in cyberspace, which of course mimics what is experienced offline; it's never divorced from what happens when we walk out on the streets. [In her article 'Lynching, Visuality and the Un/Making of Blackness', 2006] the academic Leigh Raiford reads against the history of how activists used lynching photography as both testimony and rallying call; an intentionally destabilizing transformation of meaning. Raiford likens possessing the archive of that material to the old saying about holding a tiger by the tail: you can't hold onto it, but you can't let it go either. That's the bind.

LR It's this whole idea, as Audre Lorde proposed, that the master's tools cannot dismantle the master's house, right? I think that's something to pay attention to, but I also think, within that, as we have seen, there are different interventions. What does it mean to produce one's own images and to flood these platforms with different types of representation than they were built for? TikTok, for example, has become a really important site for critical discourse that pushes back at certain ideas about race and gender. Younger people are having these discussions that are happening in very short form, but are widely circulated, which allows us to have a different type of presence across these conversations about blackness and queerness. There are complicated components of

this that glitch feminism is not looking to resolve. The idea of the glitch is a vehicle to think through what it means to operate, exist and be empowered as an active intervention in the world. Thinking across history, that which does not fit or has not had space made for it is often marked as a threat.

MM We come up against the violence of legibility, its restrictive logics.

LR Legibility comes up a lot in this discussion. Oftentimes, in lectures that I've given and classes that I've taught, there is a white man in the room, who gets very angry about not understanding. To some degree, Glitch Feminism as a text and tool is encrypted in its own right, it is meant to be used and seen by those who need it as an agent towards change and survival. [Laughs] I find that very interesting when that happens because it's no fault of that individual: it's built into certain systems. If you're raised in a world where you are told all the time that you can have everything, when you come up against something that refuses you access, I'm sure it's very upsetting. As a Black queer woman, that is the lived experience we've grown up with – moments where our access is denied, where we are gate-kept out of certain systems. I'm also thinking of trans identity and the violence that trans people, trans Black women in particular, experience – even in these past weeks. That's something which needs to remain at the forefront of all of our discourse and dialogue: ways that we can actively, collectively, refuse to be read. MM: The demand for legibility leans towards a colonial impulse of taxonomy and categorization. That's something that, in itself, has to be resisted, if only for the disastrous effects of what it's done to bodies. What it's done to nations. What it's done to peoples. LR: The concept of assimilation is about finding ways to render oneself readable to a place, a society, a particular culture. With questions of nationhood, as people come into different spaces, they're being asked to assimilate as an act of allegiance, which means letting go of things that might not be readable to those who are local or native to that space. That is such a deep violence.

MM Would I be correct in thinking that refusal is a core tenet in the world of glitch feminism: as an ideal, an aspiration, a strategy of non-performance?

LR Absolutely. In E. Jane's *NOPE* (a manifesto) [2015], they say: 'We need Utopian demands, we need culture that loves us.' How can we refuse or actively take a stand against a space that doesn't love us, a world that has not been built for us to survive within?

MM I was also thinking of refusal in my own digital life and how, sometimes, it can feel like we unnecessarily feed the grinding discourse machine. Failure to react might be a success of its own kind. There's also a lot to be said for how digital echo chambers operate for people who are already marginalized or maligned in public discourse. The echo chamber can be a space for a different kind of collective knowledge, a space where you can ask questions without your right to exist being questioned. People are challenged every day when they walk out of the house; they're challenged on every other level.

- LR Part of being online is also thinking about how to exist within the world. That is something really important to keep as a primary mantra, especially through a moment like right now.
- MM I want to ask you about your video essay Black Meme [2020]. It's a roll-call of imagery, from police-brutality victim Rodney King, drag queen Pepper LaBeija, the teenager Trayvon Martin, killed by Florida police in 2012, and fictional attorney Annalise Keating [from the television series How to Get Away with Murder, 2014–20].
- LR Black Meme is the subject of my second book, which I'm currently writing. As I research, I create these video essays. I have been thinking about how 'mimetic blackness' shows us that, although the construct of the meme is considered something contemporary, in actuality, it has very deep roots. The goal of Black Meme is to allow for a better understanding of how viral content and mimetic content is based on, and driven by, blackness across visual culture. The video of King being beaten by the Los Angeles police in 1991 is known as the first viral video. When we talk about viral videos of kittens, it's all well and good, but virality often travels along the line of Black trauma. You mentioned lynching photographs: it could be argued that, in the early 1900s, these were a material form of meme. It set the stage for the GIFs we are sending around now.
- MM I'm thinking of how the image of [the rapper] Lil Mama crying on The Breakfast Club radio show [2010–ongoing] was displaced into a funny viral meme. It's that vertigo-inducing seesaw between the tragic and the comical, vulnerability and bravado. You incorporate readings of artists such as Juliana Huxtable and critics like The White Pube, who tow that very fine line.
- LR I think it goes without saying that many of the artists in the book have built their careers in and on digital space. They found community in those spaces and built out creative practices. I was speaking recently to abreu and S*an D. Henry-Smith, two phenomenal poets, writers and thinkers. All of us were reflecting on the idea that, in this moment of pandemic lockdown and social distancing, so many of our deep friendships have existed on the internet. The idea of playing and experimenting is a part of that, too. That is something that resonates deeply with me, in terms of my own growth as a queer Black woman. Being a person of colour and existing out in the world, often we do not have the privilege of experimenting and figuring out how complex our range might be. We are encouraged to shrink ourselves, to flatten ourselves and assimilate or code-switch. Digital space is a place where, perhaps, some of that can be more fluid and gentler.
- MM Part of what personally drew me into cultivating these spaces was the possibility of intramural debates. You could see these intellectual tussles happening between various strands of Black political thought, which the media, generally, doesn't reflect.

- LR Absolutely. That is something, obviously, which we lack in our media landscape, for a variety of reasons. The other thing that kept cropping up as I was writing Glitch Feminism was the idea of poetry: thinking about ways in which text can be made uniquely Black and queer, and what the languages of that are. Lucille Clifton, for example, has been such an inspiration. Her poetry is very rarely situated alongside discussions of cyberculture, yet the questions that she asked through her work – about ways to collectivize and to find your voice – echo a lot of the concerns that we are talking about here. The book includes many poets who have done a lot of that work, thinking about what a glitch is: glitching their own bodies; glitching language.
- MM I've always been obsessed with the idea of the poet and activist Essex Hemphill as an especially perceptive cyber-theorist.
- LR Incredible. Literally. But that link is so thinly theorized out in the world. Part of the work Glitch Feminism aims to do is to centralize some of that thinking, to create a throughline, to recognize that these different folks have been in dialogue with each other all along. That's the goal of thinking about what art history is: it's an active gatekeeping – and the idea is to hold the doors open. Because it feels as urgent as ever to do that work now.

THESE ARE THE AXES:

**1
BODIES ARE INHERENTLY VALID**

**2
REMEMBER DEATH**

**3
BE UGLY**

**4
KNOW BEAUTY**

**5
IT IS COMPLICATED**

**6
EMPATHY**

**7
CHOICE**

**8
RECONSTRUCT, REIFY**

**9
RESPECT, NEGOTIATE**

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