Conference Proceedings – Thinking Gender – the NEXT Generation

UK Postgraduate Conference in Gender Studies
21-22 June 2006, University of Leeds, UK
e-paper no.19

A Cyberian in the Multiverse: Towards A Feminist Subject Position for Cyberspace

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Abstract:
Theory generally regards cyberspace from the embodied position, looking from the outside into an imaginary universe. 'Cyberia' is a term that may be employed to describe a state of the imaginary in which this gaze is reversed to theorise cyberspace from within its architectural and communal spaces to assess its potential to change the embodied world. This paper argues that the multiversal figurations inherent in 'Cyberian' subjectivity can help formulate a different understanding of oppression by rooting its metaphors within the context of technologies of the World Wide Web. It also considers weblogging technologies as an aid to bringing a more diversified offline subjectivity into the online public sphere.

Keywords: Subjectivity, Cyberspace, Weblogging, LiveJournal, Feminism, Cyborgs

CENTRE FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY GENDER STUDIES

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Theory generally regards cyberspace from the embodied position, looking from the outside into an imaginary universe. 'Cyberia'[1] is a term that may be employed to describe a state of the imaginary in which this gaze is reversed to theorise cyberspace from within its architectural and communal spaces to assess its impact on the embodied world. The cyberian eye, looking outward from its embedded position within the infinite and ever-evolving Web, seeks to understand the 'real' in terms of the 'virtual,' rather than trapping the virtual in the discourse of the real, or perpetuating the imperial pretenses embedded in discourse of an 'electronic frontier'.[2]

Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the World Wide Web, has written that humans seemed to have an innate ability to be part of a 'fractal society' and that happy people seemed to have a 'balance of connections at different levels' (Berners-Lee 1999, p.224). He argues that a societal structure whose methodologies for growth are based on co-operation between people of diverse background and talent, rather than market conflict, might be the basis of a new, more egalitarian form of global democracy. Berners-Lee's vision for the Web is no less than to change the way we think, to produce 'a structure in hyperspace that allows us to work together harmoniously' (p.224), so we may literally 'reorganize the links in [our] own brain[s]' (p.225). In other words, like many a visionary, Berners-Lee believes that if we can change the way we think about it, we may, almost by accident, change the world.

To live in Cyberia is to view the Internet as more than an extremely useful tool. It is one's 'distanceless home' (Gibson 1984, p.52[3]), an integral and natural part of one's daily life, entered and exited as easily as leaving a room. This paper attempts to see whether 'Cyberian' thinking can help formulate a different kind of human relations by rooting its metaphors within the context of technologies of the World Wide Web. It considers Donna Haraway's cyborg (1991) and Chela Sandoval's 'methodology of the oppressed' (2000) in their historical context and attempts to imagine how a subject position embedded in this 'ungraspable middle space' (Haraway 1991, p.111 quoted in Sandoval 2000, p.383) might aid in theorising about life

[1] The term 'cyberia' was popularised by Douglas Rushkoff (1994), as a space for an electronic counterculture.
[2] John Perry Barlow incorporated the Electronic Frontier Foundation in 1990, cementing this as the dominant figuration for the Internet. <http://homes.eff.org/~barlow/>
[3] While Barlow claims credit for applying the term to the actual Internet (see earlier footnote), the concept of 'cyberspace' comes from William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer*.

offline. It also looks briefly at the use of web journaling technologies as an aid to bridge the gap between identity performance on- and offline.

RESISTANCE IS NOT FUTILE

The late 1970s saw a growing number of feminists who felt themselves marginalized by what they saw as domination of the Women's Liberation Movement by women of the white, educated middle class. Angela Davis (2000) traced this back to the movement's beginnings as a response to the way women had been treated in groups dedicated to other social struggles, which had caused radical feminists to theorise patriarchy as the root of all other oppression. This hierarchical position, according to Davis, 'exacerbated a theoretical inability to discover the threads connecting female oppression to the other visible social antagonisms' (p.147). But even a feminism theorised, as bell hooks did, 'from margin to center', where the margin was a 'necessary, vital part of that whole' (1984, preface) was not without its own problematics, its own exclusionary battles, and its own growing tendency to draw lines down the world and proclaim one side *us* and the other side *them*. This was especially painful for those such as lesbians and Jewish women, who kept finding themselves outside the lines, however they were drawn.

This, then, was the origin of Haraway's 'promising monster' (Haraway 1991, p.150), who first appeared in the *Socialist Review* in 1985[4]. With a natural allegiance to no one, Haraway's cyborg was a hybrid identity offered to a desperately fractured feminist consciousness as a figure of hope, as (with apologies to Tolkien[5]) 'one metaphor to unite them all'. The cyborg was not black or white. It was part of neither side of the Cartesian split, neither wholly mind nor body, human nor machine, neither margin nor center but both; something fused and inseparable, with no state of nostalgic 'innocent wholeness' (Haraway 1991, p.178) to which it could return. For Haraway, the cyborg was a figuration for collective resistance in a fragmented postmodern world.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about 'A Cyborg Manifesto' is that even in this time of fingersnap change, it does not appear to be twenty years old. For Sandoval, whose

[4] Quotes here are from the version in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women.*
[5] The original is from J.R.R. Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy: 'one ring to unite them all'.

methodology Haraway (1991, p.155) had called a 'hopeful model of political identity', the cyborg was less a figure of empowerment through open rebellion, and more a signifier for an 'oppositional consciousness' (Sandoval n.d., quoted in Haraway 1991, p.155), a politics of survival that had already been in use under colonialism, especially of the Americas, for several hundred years. Sandoval's way of thinking about hybrid, colonized identities returned the cyborg to its roots in what she historicized as US Third World Feminism, in particular that of theorists of *mestiza* identities such as Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua[6]. The cyborg figure embodied this *mestiza* consciousness by exhibiting a particular kind of love and affinity across lines of difference that was partially comprised of the difference itself (Sandoval 2000). According to Sandoval, US Third World feminism was not a demographic category, it was a theory and a methodology whose 'differential oppositional consciousness [could be] understood as its own kind of cyberspace' (2000, p.384), and whose tools of negotiating shifting meanings were available to anyone willing to renegotiate the dominating systems of power.

In formulating the five technologies that constitute her 'methodology of the oppressed', Sandoval characterized cyberspace as a 'zone for consciousness and behaviour that is being proposed from many locations and from across disciplines as that praxis most able to both confront and homeopathically resist postmodern cultural conditions' (2000, p.377). These five technologies, developed as oppositional strategies for survival and resistance under First World domination, are similar to strategies employed in many online communities, particularly those which understand themselves to be in opposition to a faceless monolith with power over what they are allowed to say and do. This is true of activist communities, of course, but also, for example, of communities based around health issues, who are actively engaged in trading advice and information, especially about conditions doctors cannot cure or adequately treat, or technological fora engaged in developing open-source (e.g. free, non-copyrighted) software to replace commercially-owned products. Media fans, to take a more familiar example, tend to see themselves as at the mercy of producers who not only control the primary text, but may also try to control ownership and distribution of (re)creative fan artefacts through threats of lawsuits and site shutdowns. 'Sign-reading', 'de-construction', and the appropriation and transformation of

[6] See particularly: Moraga & Anzaldua (1983) *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*; New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press; and Anzaldua (1987) *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*; San Francisco: Aunt Lute.

'dominant ideological forms', which are the first three parts of Sandoval's methodology (p.376) are, for example, also the behaviours which distinguish 'fans' from mere 'audience' (see Bacon-Smith 1992, ch.1 and Jenkins 1992, introduction). This is not to suggest that fans as a group are oppressed, only that meaning-creation systems similar to Sandoval's five technologies may also be learned as part of enacting citizenship in Cyberian communities-of-interest, and may similarly influence the formation of conflict management skills in offline life.

Sandoval's fourth technology, 'democratics', is described as a 'gathering-in' with the intent of bringing about 'not simply survival or justice' but egalitarian social relations, or 'the aim of producing "love" in a decolonising, postmodern, post-empire world' (2000, p.376). Dictionary.com has, as one of its definitions of love, 'a sense of underlying oneness', which was oddly not found in the Oxford English Dictionary. This is a better definition than Rheingold's more nebulous requirement of 'sufficient human feeling' (2000, introduction) as the most necessary component of virtual community. Indeed, as the one largely responsible for promoting the term 'electronic frontier', Rheingold has also been accused of promoting something far more akin to the American suburban 'fortress community' (Bell 2001, p.105) than the heterogenous community-across-the-divides envisioned by Sandoval and Haraway. Sandoval's formulation of cyberspace is one which refuses to characterize itself through masculine, imperialist metaphors. Viewed with the Cyberian eye, discourse of the Internet as the Wild West and an electronic frontier full of 'homesteaders' (Rheingold 2000), 'console cowboys' (Gibson 1984), and entrepreneurs prospecting for dotcom gold, is not actually as benign and clever as it might initially appear. 'The frontier' carries with it not just the connotation of freedom, opportunity and adventure, but also of an original population decimated, then forcefully displaced, a population whose descendent-survivors are still engaged in a life and death struggle to retain control over their lives, their nations and their lands. Such discourses not only wipe out those struggles and that survival, they code every expansion of the Web into a perpetual act of conquest over a terrain which simply does not exist, either as an imaginary universe or as a material network, until it is created.

The Web, in fact, may be best described by the fifth of Sandoval's technologies, that of 'differential movement', which she characterizes as 'a polyform upon which the previous technologies depend…to be transferred towards their destinations' (2000, p.376). This polyform technology does not desires domination, but is about 'anything being potentially connected to

anything' (Berners-Lee 1999, p.1). The Uniform Resource Locator, or URL, redefines the concept of universalism away from singularity, a black hole which swallows difference and dissent, and re-encodes it as an undiscriminating method of location, a system to render any piece of information equally accessible to anyone anywhere on the Net, regardless of language, code, or content.

Likewise, it may be said that Cyberia is a resource beyond location, a 'consensual hallucination' (Gibson 1984), constituted solely through agency, in the act of being a *being* online. Cyberian subjectivity is not, as Sherry Turkle would have it, '*life on the screen'* (Turkle 1995), it is situated *beyond* the screen, where it is wholly aware that behind the pseudonyms and nicks and avatars, there are real, fleshy, hurtable people. Its non-Cartesian multiplicity does not allow it to look back at its creator, it exists to be looked *through*, as what Sandoval calls a 'transcoding device' (2000, p.377), allowing the online and offline to fuse.

CYBERSPATIAL BEING(S)

Like the cyborg, the cyberian body begins unencoded: it is simultaneously anyone, everyone and no one. It is an ever-evolving figure which the user self-encodes over time, which may have multiple encodings, and which may or may not correspond to the body offline. While the cyberian subject represented by the pseudonym (or 'nick') may contain only a fraction of the physical and psychological totality of the offline person, its partiality does not render it defacto inauthentic for not being complete. The real world also encompasses fractured performances of identity -- a teacher, for example, is not the same person in the classroom as in the pub after work -- yet, as Lori Kendall points out, people still 'perceive their identities and selves as integral and continuous' (1998, p.61), a perception which is not necessarily ruptured by moving the performance space for one's identity online. While online interaction may have clarified the postmodernist contention that we are multiply-selved, we do not, as Turkle suggests, 'spin off in all directions' (1995, p.258) without a coherent center when we go online.

Work on discursive communities in cyberspace actually shows much less identity play than theorists like Turkle envisioned back in 1995, when the Web was new. Even within virtual worlds and game environments which actively encourage role play, a stable identity must be performed in order not to begin every interaction from zero. 'Newbie' is not a comfortable state

to inhabit. Ethnographic studies of a wide variety of online communities such as those devoted to music (Williams 2006), social support (Nettleton, Pleace et al. 2002), medicine (Fox and Roberts 1999), and participatory fan culture (Gatson and Zweerink 2004), show a great deal of voluntary personal revelation, and many incorporate an ethos of offline meeting. This, of course, requires that safe space can be found in which participants feel empowered to incorporate the offline body into their online persona, particularly in terms of sexual and racial/ethnic identity.

Gayatri Spivak (1994) has argued that the subaltern can never speak because acquisition of the analytic tools to describe her condition renders her no longer subaltern. But can this still be deemed true of women posting weblogs on Livejournal (LJ), a free technology no more complicated than email, which allows anyone to speak, untranslated and unmediated, in any language, to the world at large? As of May 2006, women accounted for approximately 67% of the ten million account holders (Livejournal.com 2006[7]), whose software is presently available in 31 languages including Malay, Hindi and Finnish. LJ technology removes the need to understand the coding for web pages in order to make a personal contribution to the Web. It allows women to tell stories that otherwise would never be heard, to link their stories together via 'friends lists', and even, as an open-source code, to adapt both the interface and the underlying architecture to the usage requirements of a different community, should they so desire.

While it is true that access to Internet technologies are, in 2006, still classed-based and geographically imbalanced in a variety of ways, the dream of true universal access becomes less remote with each technological advance. For example, the Navajo Nation has now implemented free universal access for its 110 communities using wireless technology, satellite systems, and solar energy for unpowered portions of the reservation (Helms 2005). As previously disenfranchised people increasingly put up their own boards, pages and blogs, thus defining their heterogeneous subjectivity to the world, can it be argued that the technologies of the Web do indeed allow the subaltern to speak? In terms of creating the large-scale social change envisioned by Berners-Lee, the fuller performance of identity encouraged by online journaling technologies -- which create personalised safe spaces which can be connected across

[7]LiveJournal (LJ) recodes its statistics to reflect percentage of those who chose a gender. The raw numbers show approximately 29 million female, 14 million male and 17 million unspecified <http://www.livejournal.com/stats/stats.txt>. Since profile information is voluntary and unverifiable these statistics should be considered an approximation, not an absolute measure.

geopolitical borders based on (but not limited to) shared interest -- may begin to alleviate some of the fear of difference which makes it easier for exclusionary behaviours to maintain their hold in the offline world.

ONE BECOMES MANY, MANY BECOMES ONE

One of the most noticeable recent changes in online communities has been the fragmentation of media fandom as its members increasingly adopt weblogging technologies as their primary space for discourse. Once a largely 'closed door' (and largely American) pursuit, the ability to download television shows as soon as they air has widely diversified who may participate in fan culture, just as weblogging has moved the public sphere of discourse from central boards and mailing lists to individual blogs and LJs where fannish speech is now interspersed with speech about other concerns, and with personal life-stories. While talking about a television show may seem a trivial pursuit in the middle of a 'world on fire' (Moraga and Anzaldua 1983, foreword), this breaking down of community walls has allowed women (and men) from an infinite variety of social positionings to interact in an analytic and (re)creative manner, based on an underlying sense of oneness with an interpretive praxis, rather than a singular narrative text.

Fan discussion can also take the form of multi-journal debate on social issues: for example, homophobia brought to light by the deliberately ambiguous relationship between Xena and Gabrielle on *Xena: Warrior Princess*; or the underlying racism in *Firefly*'s postulation of a universe in which the Chinese have become the dominant power, yet no Asian actors are ever seen. While fan praxis is not without its own divisions and longstanding battles, this is still a culture whose imperative discursive strategy is that there is no such thing as a singular truth. In fannish terms, where each show is conceptualized as a 'universe', this translates into a general acceptance of the intrinsic 'multiversality'[8] of the characters, a negotiated set of fluid, indescribable borders that the writers must stay within in order to allow the characters to act in ways that may vary quite widely, yet still feel 'true'.

To look outward from this position is to see the multiversality inherent in offline life, the

[8] Although I first heard the term 'multiverse' in the works of Terry Pratchett, I credit its usage here to the 'Eternal Champion' in the works of Michael Moorcock, a character who can embody a number of possible identities in multiple dimensions, all of which exist at the same time.

simultaneous existence of an infinite number of overlapping and often contradictory universes. Multiversality does not seek a singular truth, rather it seeks to negotiate the boundaries of mutual acceptance of difference, to define a discursive space within which a partial, actionable form of consensus may be achieved. This is a useful tool whether the multiversality is fictional, ideological, or rooted in the vastly different experiences and methodologies of people who must find a way to live and work in coalition. It is a particularly useful strategy in negotiating clashes of belief systems, and for developing a theoretical analysis of multiple points of oppression. This same multiversal, Cyberian thinking may be the key to developing that multi-dimension 'differential form of consciousness' (Sandoval 2000) which can analyze oppression as a web of intersections, without insisting on the hierarchical dominance of any one form of oppression over the other. Just as there are many pathways a packet of information may take from point A to point B, and many nodes where these pathways may cross and change direction, so too a social theory for a globalized world cannot continue to be based in a metaphor of segmented strata, when conditions vary so widely based on one's literal positioning upon the surface of the earth. In addition to race, class and gender, the nodal points of sexuality, age, ability and nationality will all affect the route an individual must take through life, and indeed whether she is likely to reach her desired destination.

'OUR BEST MACHINES ARE MADE OF SUNSHINE'[9]

In a 1991 interview Donna Haraway noted that if she were to rewrite the Manifesto now, she would be 'much more careful about describing who counts as a 'we,' in the statement, 'We are all cyborgs'' (Penley and Ross 1991, p.12). Indeed, one need only look to Afghanistan to feel one's understanding of that statement violently stretched. This is as subaltern as it is possible to be: locked in the house, able to leave only in silence, covered from head to foot. How can the burka possibly exist within the same theoretical framework as the cyborg?

But co-exist they must. The bright blue of the burka is both a symbol of how far feminism as a global project has yet to go, and of the enormous differences in meaning one item has, even within a single culture. For some women, the burka must be torn off at any cost, but

[9] Haraway 1991, p.153

for others it symbolises safety, a protection from the male gaze they could not comfortably live without. These are the kinds of unresolvable contradictions where Chela Sandoval's formulation of the cyborg as a 'non-essentialising identity' may be crossbred with Haraway's 'ungraspable middle space' to enable an analysis of oppression which can be inclusive without disintegrating into relativistic incoherence, or demanding complete ideological assent. This hybridized feminist-cyberian subjectivity, looking outward from its position embedded within the Web, working from its familiarity with asynchronous communication, partial identity, and multiversal realities, may provide the necessary distance from our embodied selves to, as Sandoval says, 'unify oppositional agents across ideological, racial, gender, sex or class differences' (2000, p.381).

In 1985 Donna Haraway wrote, 'We lack sufficiently subtle connections of collectively building effective theories of experience' (see version in 1991, p.173) Twenty years later, it is time to de-frontier cyberspace; to reconceptualize 'Cyberia' as a place where, having first learned to know each other as 'ether, quintessence' (Haraway 1991, p.153), we may now begin to recode the multiple strata of social division into multiple nodes of connection which do not require total conformance for a sense of underlying oneness to make itself known.

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