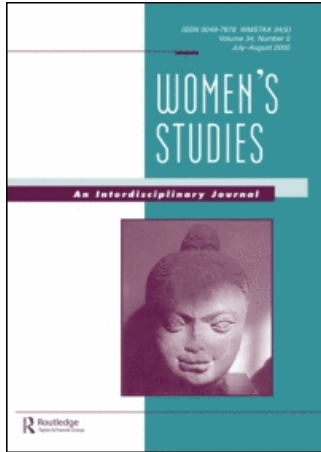


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FEMINISM, TECHNOLOGY AND BODY PROJECTS

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One of the ways that feminists have taken up the problem of women's body practices is to debate over their meanings for gender and sexuality and to consider the subject's intentions, radical or otherwise, in transforming her body. I want to shift that emphasis in this article (which began as a keynote address to the Changing Bodies, Changing Selves Conference in Sydney) to suggest that we see body projects technologically, and attend to the technological issues of visibility, access, and speed that body projects raise. In doing this, I want to link technology to political economy. My aim is to think through not only how contemporary body practices are situated in an increasingly technologized culture, but also to think through a feminist response to the technological. In other words, I want to think through technological bodies in a way that addresses the politics of technology. In particular, I mean how technology links bodies in a global and transnational world of information, representation and production that is fluid and ever-changing, but also saturated with inequality and power relations.

Thinking technologically might once have been, but is no longer a disembodied concept. Rather, bodies are now, it seems, irreversibly linked to technology and technology's acceleration. The technologized human or the cyborg is increasingly visible in postmodernity with the development of high-tech body practices. Developments in conventional medicine, gene therapy, transsexual surgery, and the widespread use of IVF, the threat of human cloning, the vast increase in the kinds of cosmetic surgery available, and the increased use of digital imaging technologies are among those shifts that have expanded our abilities to explore, scrutinize, and expose the body. In addition, the explosion of

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information technology, linked to what Mike Featherstone calls “global compression,” has accelerated the possibilities of international and interregional contact and increasing “mobility, movement, and border-crossing” of bodies and identities across the globe (128). In terms of the body, this mobility is linked to cultural relativism. The neoliberal understanding of globalization, applied here, would suggest that when the classical ideal of the body more regularly encounters other cultural norms of the body, it loses its status as the only aesthetic option for embodiment (for Westerners). This means, then, that the body appears more plastic, more available for cultural expression and transformation. Along with the material acceleration of technological practices of the body in medicine and elsewhere, these cultural developments contribute to a widespread acknowledgement of the “denatured” character of our bodies.¹

At this cultural moment, the body is often seen as lifted from rooted identities and human ontologies. Technology is often represented as a resource to free us from what are seen as the natural constraints of the body, transforming the body into what Anne Balsamo terms a “purely discursive entity” (223) puts it. The limits of the body—its physical connection to space and place, its birth-given organs and parts, its ordinary signs of aging—appear less fixed in high-tech culture. Technology not only promises to free us from biological and physical inevitabilities, but it has also been imagined as freeing us of *cultural* constraints, so that the postmodern, high-tech body appears as *socially* plastic, a space for identity exploration. Theoretically, the body-self would be freed then from its miredness in social relations. This idea has generated a lot of excitement about self-construction, the notion being that if the body itself is not fixed, then neither are embodied categories of identity. What seems promising about this is that embodied categories of power like gender, race, and sexuality seem less rigid. Possibly, one’s sense of self can be freer, more available for conscious self-management. At its most extreme, as Balsamo describes, this view sees a body reduced to its surface, and ultimately, the disappearance of the body altogether, such

¹As Donna Haraway ([2000] 1991) has argued, our bodies and selves have always been technologized, since there have always been various means by which we have materially, as well as representationally, constructed and shaped them.

that we are left with self-created identities that are “floating sign-systems” with no fixed meanings (223).²

But as Balsamo and others have pointed out, lived politics get in the way of overly idealistic celebrations of disembodied subjectivities. A political reading problematizes a view of identity as purely self-created as much as it problematizes one of the body as purely “natural” or material. Feminism has identified how subjectivities—in particular, gendered subjectivities—are linked to the rootedness of bodies in the material, lived realities of gender, race, and other power relations. Unless race, class, and gender stratifications actually disappear, individuals can be limited in the ways in which they can imagine themselves and shape their bodies and identities—even within a culture that celebrates such choice and freedom. This is why radical feminists worked for so long on consciousness raising, and also why poststructuralist are suspicious of claims of agency. From a variety of feminist perspectives, what might appear to be emerging freedoms offered up by new technological practices might be seen as forged *within* power relations, rather than outside them. Feminist readings would insist that technologized bodies are not outside of culture and power, nor are they uniformly meaningful. Rather, bodies are conceived, technologized, and debated within politically and socially meaningful contexts by people who face different and multiple situations of power.

Certainly, I don't want to suggest that feminists have achieved consensus about the meanings of body practices. Quite the opposite. There are a variety of perspectives within feminism that want to account for the interplay between bodies, power, and individual agency. Here I want to compare “intentional” views of the body-subject, which emphasize the subject's willful agency, with those that emphasize the external and unconscious forces of power that are seen to shape body practices. After navigating through these debates, I argue for shifting the focus from the subject's intentions in body projects to what constitute the technologies used in them, and *how* and in what contexts these are deployed. I am suggesting that we see body projects technologically, and attend to the technological issues of visibility, access, and speed that body projects raise.

²Here Balsamo is citing from Kroker and Kroker (1987).

As a way of describing the debates among feminists, I could point to the radical feminist, postmodern feminist, and poststructuralist feminist positions. (The latter two terms are sometimes used interchangeably, but poststructuralism articulates a particular account of power relations that is not necessarily implied by postmodern theory. Below I assume a distinction between what might be called “liberal” postmodernism, which retains the possibility of a rational subject, and poststructuralism, which does not.) Radical feminism has vigorously argued that body projects can represent patriarchy’s literal oppression of the female body. In Catherine MacKinnon’s terms (1997), the sexualization of the female body is actually the foundation of patriarchy. Many body projects have been described by radical feminists as self-mutilative, representing women’s “[self-] hatred of the flesh” (MacKendrick 1998: 6). Corsetry, Chinese footbinding, cosmetic surgery, dieting, and other practices have been highlighted by radical feminists as expressions of patriarchal culture. While radical feminists want to preserve the so-called “natural” female body, which in their view should be spared interference, alteration, and most certainly, pain, postmodern feminists, on the other hand, have often celebrated women’s body projects. While they agree that some body practices are deeply problematic, they have argued that others can reject normative beauty ideals and thus be seen as ironic practices of rebellion and resistance.

The debate between these positions, which solidified in the “sex wars” of the 1980s and was further complicated in the 1990s, centers on the question of intent. Radical feminists argued that women who modified their bodies had false consciousness; the problem was that women could not control their intentionality—or create their own meaning—because of their own internalized oppression. Postmodern feminists, having rejected the idea of a “natural,” pristine body to be defended, celebrated the *ironic* intent of deviant body modifiers. Following the publication of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1991), some poststructuralist feminists celebrated body projects as “performances” aimed at subversion. This reading of *Gender Trouble* inspired many feminist and queer scholars to explore the politics of deviant or nonmainstream body practices and discourses, including those undertaken in SM, sex radicalism, women’s body building, tattooing and body piercing, women’s self-defense, and “fat is beautiful”

movements, among others. In these accounts, the deviant body project is read hermeneutically as an oppositional speech act in which gender norms are challenged (Wilton 55).

But even in a Butlerian formula we still have a problem with intentionality. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler warns against a “presentist” view that emphasizes the intentionality of the self as authoring the meaning of the body’s performance. Here, Butler emphasizes how habit, routine, and unconscious behaviors are part of performativity. And she stresses that no bodily performance, even an overtly rebellious one, operates outside of the “accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force” over which individuals have little control (Butler 1993: 226). Interpretations of performativity “as willful and arbitrary choice,” she writes, miss “the point that the historicity of discourse and, in particular, the historicity of norms . . . constitute the power of discourse to enact what it names” (Butler 1993: 187). Instead of willful choice, performativity is shaped by powerfully gendered discourses of the self that unconsciously inform body practices. Body projects can be subversive in their effects, Butler acknowledges, but this is in no way guaranteed by subjects’ intentions.

Taking the problematics of intentionality as a point of departure, I want to argue for a feminist perspective that shifts the focus from intentionality to technology. I don’t believe intentionality is irrelevant. It’s rather that intentionality doesn’t determine meaning or effects. What Butler gets from poststructuralism is the point that intentionality is a *product of* rather than the origin for meaning. In other words, the meanings already written by culture are what shape our ideas about what we want and can do with our bodies. I want to think *beyond* intended meaning—beyond the question of “what is this body-subject saying?”—to thinking about *means*, or “what and how does this body *do*?” I want to think about body projects as the *making of bodies-technologies* that are positioned within history and political economy. In suggesting that we see body projects technologically, I argue that we need to think about what are the *means* of practices as much as what practices mean or are intended to mean.

When we think in these terms we have to pay attention to the ways in which deployments of technologies might be different or similar from each other. As Anne Balsamo points out, body technologies are differentiated because of the various ways in which,

to begin with, the bodies that use them are differentiated, such as through their gendering. She describes masculine and feminine uses of technology, where women are using technology as “bodies seeking connection,” while men seek to be “bodies-in-solation.” Bodies seeking connection, for example, might “actively manipulate the dimensions of cybernetic space in order to communicate with other people” (223). She describes how science fiction writers have created fictional female cyborgs that use technology in ways that seek connection and link themselves to others, while the male characters “are addicted to cyberspace for the release it offers from the perceived limitations of their material bodies” (223). Balsamo’s point is that these differences show how broader social relations like those of gender become part of how we imagine technologized bodies and body projects. We might think about how technologies are employed differently along such lines in real, rather than fictional, body projects; how they are gendered in terms of their framing and production in connection with—or in isolation from—others.

But we have to think not just about the differences between the categories of users of technologies, but also about how technologies themselves are also differentiated and stratified. There are, for example, the stratifying effects of access, speed, and visibility. As critical scholars of technology have argued, the use of technologies by individuals, groups, and nations both reflects and creates privileges and constraints, and so *access* to and control of technologies are highly political matters. Technologies are high- or low-tech, are outmoded or updated, are widely accessible or controlled by experts. They are characterized by *speed* and acceleration, such that some technological practices are inserted more quickly into the ever-changing matrix of culture, politics, and economy. In the age of information overload, they are engaged in contests over the extent of *visibility* and exposure, in how they are sorted, and whether they surface on the radar screens of culture. In the media-saturated environment of postmodern culture, technological practices are linked to struggles over framing and defining social problems and group identities. They are appropriated—as, for example, performance artists like the French artist Orlan have appropriated cosmetic surgery—and they are reappropriated, as, for example, how the fashion and culture industries have marketed street style. Bodies have become territories

for technological innovation, for politics and for trafficking goods, and are fought over by subcultures and social movements as well as medical, cosmetic, fashion, and culture industries.

These aspects of technological society affect the abilities of individuals and groups to define themselves and their bodies. The ability to self-define, as Patricia Clough describes, "it is about negotiating with the speed of movement as a way of knowing and not knowing, as a way of being and not being exposed, over- and under-exposed" (1998: xxii). Self-definition is a matter of having some ability to control or influence the speed and exposure of one's identity. So body projects must be conceived not only as intentional or unintentional acts of the subject who negotiates among an increasing number of technological and cultural options for body styles, self-definition, and group identity. Nor can they only be measured by how radical the meanings are of their body and identity projects. Rather, they must also be seen as practices that are stratified with the cybernetic flow of images and information (Price and Shildrick 10). They are differently paced in this flow, such that some projects are created or get recognized faster than others.

Moreover, we don't all get to author the meanings of bodies that circulate in the information world. In high-tech information society, empowerment can sometimes be measured in terms of the ability to shape or control knowledge, and disempowerment is often lack of control over the creation of meaning, or dependence on the flow of information, as Alberto Melucci suggests (1996). These stratifications not only *reflect* our subject positions within relations of power but also participate in *creating* them. As Clough describes, categories like race and gender are not givens, "not simply matters of identity and surely not of authentic subject identity" (2000: 135). Instead, we need to think about how they are continually constructed through body practices and the inscriptions of culture, which in post-modern societies are linked to the media and culture industries, to information technology, and to economic and political relations. Some bodies, such as those of women and racial and ethnic minorities, are more vulnerable to territorialization than others, to underexposure (in terms of their own definitions of self) or overexposure (in terms of their usefulness as spectacles and commodities).

For example, Black male bodies have been continually represented in the U.S. mass media as violent and dangerous. "Black" then becomes a code for dangerous or criminal. We can remember, for example, during the infamous O.J. Simpson trial, that the defendant's face was darkened by a major news magazine in an attempt to make him look more onerous. This kind of cultural marking of Black bodies is not merely offensive, but has real effects in that it reinforces patterns of societal and institutional discrimination (Giroux, 1994). This means that political struggles now involve "the when, where or how of acknowledging, elaborating, resisting or refusing," as Clough puts it, the ways in which bodies and identities are coded within mass-mediated culture (2000: 135). The "when, where, and how" of participating in how one's identity is marked and produced is what is at stake for all of us as we participate regularly in body projects, radical or socially acceptable. The problem is not just what we each mean with our own bodies, but how bodies and identities can be constructed and reconstructed—made to mean something—within information society.

Contemporary social movements know well the following lesson. Melucci describes how collective action in the information age involves a whole host of acts of challenging "codes," by which he means the agreed-upon meanings of bodies, identities, and cultural and social issues. Challenging codes can involve pushing the limits and boundaries set by established norms and social interests through aesthetic and symbolic means. Sandra Bartky, for example, describes how the Black Liberation Movement attempted to address "not only economic and political issues but the low self-esteem that was tied to the inferiorization of African American bodies" (255).

Bartky harkens back to the body projects associated with black liberation, such as the growing of Afros, dreadlocks, and corn rows, as examples of body radicalism because they violated Eurocentric body ideals, coded African styles as appealing and beautiful, and also worked to ensure in some way that new revolutionary cultural aims could "take hold" by becoming embodied and personal.

The body art movement is another realm in which a whole range of codes surrounding the body and identity is challenged. The movement's display of the spectacular body is created through the manipulation of primary categories of identity—ethnicity, gender, and sexuality among them. For instance,

neo-tribal body art not only appears to represent political affinity with indigenous cultures, but also poses ethnicity as an elective identity for largely white, urban body subjects. The use of deviant body practices by women appears to subvert gendered norms of female docility and beauty. Body modification can also be perverse in its exploration of sexuality. The affective pleasures of body modification breach the ways sexuality is ordered in heteronormative culture. Such infractions are “inventions,” in Foucault’s sense of the word, because they break the orderedness/ordinariness of bodies and pleasures (see Foucault 1982). Thus they can be seen as having critically queer meanings.

These body practices can be considered not only in terms of what they “mean” or are intended to mean, but also in terms of the political economy of the technologies they employ. In new forms of body art, technologies include the scalpel, the pharmaceutical anesthetics, the sutures, the hypodermic needle, and the laser that materially transform the body, as well as those technologies that create the *visibility* of such bodies and their “media-event-ness,” as Clough puts it. This means the technologies of representation, including all forms of media and information.

Interestingly, some of the body modifiers at the Changing Bodies Conference where I gave this address were being filmed for a television special on body modification. The otherness of their bodies would be presented as an interesting spectacle for audience viewers across America and Europe, and many of us debated whether or not the filming and the visibility it would bring would be empowering or disempowering for body modifiers. The processes of visibility, of mediation and mediatization, determine how, when, where, and what bodies are *seen*. And how individuals see their *own* body transformations (such as defining their projects as practices of self-invention, as do cyberpunks, or self-improvement, as do many people who use Botox) is also mediated within technologies of representation and visibility.

Self-narration is linked to techno-representational *access*. Body art practices link the denatured body to the subject who can choose her identity. The practices are informed by a sense of freedom or liberation that is accomplished by the breakdown of both the material and the symbolic limits of the body. As it breaks down borders and speeds up the traffic of information, representation,

and bodies, however, the political economy of technology not only increases possibilities of claiming and naming identity for those who find themselves so positioned, but also decreases the chances of self-definition for others. Virtual technologies, medical technologies, and technologies of representation are now among the methods of trafficking and producing identities and bodies across cultural boundaries. Cosmetic surgeries, Botox, and collagen injections, endlessly paraded in the media as part of the high-tech beauty ideal, are among the “medical” technologies on offer by high-tech consumer culture. The Internet offers space—through chat rooms, personal web pages, and digital photographs—to imagine and play out cyberidentities, as well as to surf the world’s fashions, cultures, and styles for an astonishing range of information about bodies, from medical to cultural to spiritual. “Multicultural” fashion spreads, *National Geographic*, and the Travel Channel bring us exotic images of indigenous Africans, Asians, and others, while news programs, talk shows, MTV and “reality” cop shows present people of color at home in variously sensationalized and damaging ways. What a political economy perspective reminds us is that while these representations and technologies can all be used as resources for identification, the ability to participate in creating the meanings of these is a function of power. Thus we can be moved to ask: in what contexts do which people find technological representations empowering, and in what contexts disempowering?

The cultural capital of technology is also related to *speed*. I would argue that speed implies hierarchy—as in faster or slower, updated or outdated, first-to-arrive or left-behind, and so on. Hierarchies of speed affect the trafficking of images of various bodies. For example, we can speak of the rate at which global body practices are surveilled, represented, and appropriated, such as when Westerners represent the bodies of indigenous people in fashion and anti-fashion. This point might be made by the following example, articulated by a Maori speaker at the *Changing Bodies, Changing Selves Conference*. The professor, on a trip to England, happened to meet a well-known Western queer activist/body modifier who was wearing a traditional Maori facial tattoo. She was intrigued with his use of the traditional tattoo, and when she introduced herself as a Maori, he was even more intrigued. He exclaimed, “But I thought you were all dead!”

As in this example, speed is at issue when Western consumers assume they are “time traveling” by consuming and representing the symbols of native cultures. Speed is at issue in contests over who owns “new” technologies, as when cosmetic surgery is used in ways that would shock most surgeons, and when various other medical technologies are learned, appropriated or “stolen” by outlaws pioneering their own practices. It is certainly implied in all of the narratives of exploration and invention chronicled in cyberspace, cyberpunk, and science fiction. And it is woven into visibility. For example, we can ask, at what speeds are bodies inserted, or made visible, in the flow of codes or information that inform the lives and mark the bodies of individuals and groups? When are these technologies of making and circulating meaning themselves interrupted?

Thus, in critically thinking through how body projects and techno-bodies are differentiated, we can focus on a number of lines of stratification, including how they reflect or achieve: access to the flow of information, or the ability to navigate cultural systems to borrow images from multiple cultural options; visibility, or to what extent they command the social gaze in one’s direction; and speed, or the rate at which they can accomplish all this. Where the issues of political consciousness and intentionality might be important is in how technologies and their users recognize access, visibility, and speed along the lines of connection and isolation. I’m suggesting that radical politics has to involve the power relations implied in technological practices.

Let me try to briefly apply this to various aspects of the body art movement, which I have been researching for about 7 years. There are a whole range of groups that constitute the body art movement, but let me speak of three groups prominent in U.S. body art culture: radical women, who include girl punks, leatherdykes, and other women who define their practices as a matter of female rebellion and resistance; modern primitives, who align themselves with tribal groups and use tribal-style practices; and cyberpunks, a fairly male-dominated assemblage that defines their practices largely in terms of technological invention, individualized evolution, and post-humanism.³

³For a much more elaborate discussion of these groups, see Pitts (2003) *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification*.

I see women's radical body projects as interrogations of the individual body's ownership and governance, but they are also often ritualized in group practices that both literally gather women together and mark women's collective position in gendered relations of dominance and violation. Thus, these are body projects that put women in connection with each other, that make social what might have otherwise been solely private and silent sufferings, and that insist upon a political, and to some extent, visible reading of bodily and sexual victimization. In reclaiming projects, agency is conceptualized as surmounting internalized oppression, perceiving that oppression as political rather than personal, and healing with the help of others.

I would also describe agency here in terms of speed and visibility. The practice of commanding the social gaze means that the insertion of women's own meanings of the body usurps, at least temporarily, the experts' role in naming women's bodies. The task of "put[ting] symbols on our bodies to show that in fact we have been actively involved in taking our power back," to quote the tattoo artist Lamar Van Dyke, involves *interrupting* the circuits of meaning in what Melucci would call "symbolically wasteful" ways (Gladsjo, 1991). "Symbolic wastefulness" is the ability to *slow down* the circuits of information flow, to interrupt the meanings being generated, to force a gaze upon oneself in ways that breach the system's symbolic limits. As he describes it, "[symbolic wastefulness] serves . . . as the expression of an irreducible difference, of what is "valueless" because it is too minute or partial to enter the standardized circuits of the mass cultural market." He suggests that acts of challenging codes with which he identifies the women's movement introduce into the cultural system "the inalienable right of the particular to exist" (142). When women engage in anomalous body projects, the circulation of norms can be, at least temporarily, interrupted, so that the ordinary relations of power over women's bodies, including those governing beauty, consumption, health, and mental health, are challenged. The minute, partial, marginal histories of women's bodies can be made visible and inserted into the flow of information, such that the dominant ideologies are forced to confront women's subjugated knowledges.

Modern primitivism sometimes overlap with women's body art projects but are also deployed by straight, white men. We see

it in the adoption of “tribal” tattoos and body rituals among largely white, urban, and suburban Westerners. These practices also create symbolic wastefulness, but I find them more masculinist, to use Balsamo’s understanding, in terms of their *non*-recognition of connectedness. Modern primitivism emphasizes the global connection of bodies, the meeting of cultures, and the historical roots of all humans in tribal societies. As I have argued at length elsewhere, to the extent that this represents connection, though, it is an *ideal* of connection that is not reflected in existing global cultural politics.⁴ And modern primitivism depends upon a sense of elective identity unfettered by one’s personal or collective social history. This unfetteredness is what facilitates the leap of the white urbanite to position of the Masaai or the Maori. But of course, modern primitives participate in the historical, global economies of representation, which are highly stratified between producers and consumers, such that white Westerners have more technological access in terms of generating cultural meanings and defining selves and groups than those whom they seek to emulate. Melucci writes of such groups,

The true exploitation is not the deprivation of information; even in the shantytowns of the cities of the Third World people today are exposed to the media, only they do not have any power to organize this information according to their own needs. Thus, the real domination is today the exclusion from the power of naming (182).

The production of modern primitivism depends upon the cultural hierarchies within the “power of naming.” In its attempt to leap over the relational politics of identity and meaning production, modern primitivism embraces a “body-in-isolation.” It can do this without public outcry, I believe, because of the relative technological powerlessness of the groups it tries to emulate and represent. While this unfortunate irony is starting to be addressed within the subculture itself, the expansion of the modern primitive style into popular culture seems to render such a self-critique largely irrelevant.

Cyberpunk is a complex assemblage of science fiction, cyber-subcultures, hackers, artists, and others. I have written at greater

⁴See Chapter 4 of Pitts (2003).

length about cyberpunk and its different manifestations elsewhere,⁵ but let me speak here of the liberal or libertarian postmodernism that circulates within some cyberpunk cultures. That is, that we can be who we want to be through technological innovation, personal, biological, and social history notwithstanding. The cyberpunk model rejects the Enlightenment understanding of the body as biologically fixed, presenting the body rather as always already shaped by human technologies. It also eschews bodily conventions and norms, pursuing instead technological inventions and interventions to expand or transform the body's performance, appearance, longevity, and purpose. Its futurism envisions high-tech hardware and software as tools for change and customization, and it assumes and sometimes champions the breakdown of traditional categories of subjectivity that are seen to be located in the body, such as sex and race. This is similar to the early celebrations of the internet as a race or sex or class-free zone.

Beginning with this celebration of technology's denaturing of the body, cyberpunk *for some* approaches a highly individualist, post-ideological fantasy of limitless (virtual) space and technological transformation. In place of the natural body or the socially constructed body over which the individual has no control, the cyberpunk aesthetic often hails the modified body as a harbinger of, and vehicle for, individual freedoms: the ultimate body-in-isolation. The Extropians, for instance, a cybersubculture, argue in their manifestos that those who seek to become post-human are already *trans*-human, to the extent that they envision human life beyond the biologically given. Post-humanism would embrace science and technology to "seek the continuation and acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond its currently human form" (*Extropian FAQ*, cited in Terranova: 273). Extropians suggest that evolution, through science and technology, will be a matter of individual choice and individual planning. Evolution, in other words, will be personally customized. They describe themselves in another text as experimentalists who actively follow the research and development of new body-transforming technologies and who are willing to explore untried forms of self-transformation.

⁵See Chapter 5 of Pitts (2003).

In a sense, cyberpunk most explicitly acknowledges the political economy of technology. It is easy to see that within this vision, access to hardware, software, knowledge, and information are understood as vital for survival. Speed, too, is a widely recognized form of cultural capital within cyberpunk. In cyberpunk imaginaries that rely on a rationalist notion of subjectivity, though, visibility is undertheorized. An analysis of visibility would challenge a rationalist conception of the subject, because it means that our very understandings of ourselves are mediated through representations that circulate throughout the flows of knowledge and information. Our own consciousness is a technologized product (something the science fiction writers seem to have long understood) and thus unproblematized notions of “choice” and “self-customization” must be met with skepticism.

Of course, intentionality and consciousness do matter, even though there are no fixed effects that come out of them. As a feminist I want to privilege notions of the body that offer possibilities of recognizing others and their relatedness to ourselves rather than those that do not recognize them, but there are no guaranteed political meanings generated out of either conception. These notions of the body, as connected and isolated, located and dislocated, traffic across cultural sites in multiply significant ways, and I would argue that myths are operating on both ends. I hope that bodies-in-connection have the potential to produce a politics of recognition, such that technologies of representation are linked to their larger historical, social, and/or political contexts. Such recognition is generated, for instance, in the anti-globalization movement when consumer bodies (those that wear Nike shoes and the Gap clothing of urban and suburban America) are linked to the laboring bodies of exploited women, men, and children. The recognition of our linked histories and futures may be required for any democratic attempt at sharing cultural, technological, and social resources, and for creating the conditions that might allow us to use body technologies in ways that multiply our existential possibilities rather than further stratify us culturally, economically, and socially. Having said that, the danger of connectedness, of course, is that such a vision can easily contain essentialist myths, such as that women are really “one body,” a distinct class with a defined set of bodily and social values and needs, as radical feminists have asserted (or that we are all really

“primitives” underneath).⁶ In working out the unification of women (or other groups) based on such unitary notions of the body and subject, we can problematically naturalize our bodies and ontologies, infusing them with dominant values to the detriment and marginalization of others.

“Isolated” bodies, as Balsamo describes them, celebrate individualism, disconnection, distinction, and difference. Sometimes Romantic, other times meritocratic or even social Darwinian, bodies-in-isolation are underwritten with a myth of nonlocatedness, the dream of freedom from the tethers of body, culture, group identity, and history. The body-in-isolation is, of course, a privileged body. Such a refusal to recognize the social, economic, and political links that tie us together, and that inform our body technologies, encourages the myths of individualism that make consumer capitalism so appealing to so many. The right to individuality, to standing alone negotiating to get one’s own, self-defined needs met through technological access, is a powerful force operating in the world of body technologies. It is the source of a great deal of the ethical crises in biotechnology, in cloning and so-called “designer genes,” in increasingly popular cosmetic surgeries, in increasingly high-tech, expensive, and economically stratified health care.

The postmodern bodily style of flexibility and choice is part of a larger capitalist-driven ideology of consumption, and this is partly what gives the global stratifications of economies and technologies their means and justification. What I am trying to argue, though, is that the Western flexible body, or the body-seen-as-project, is a technological production within a political economy of technology. In this economy, the flexible, quickly ever-changing body of the cutting-edge consumer is the body of privilege. At the same time, under consumer capitalism, it is also a body under contract, so to speak, to produce its own identity through consumption practices. The slow body, the fixed body, under- or over-exposed body (such as the sick body left to die, or the laboring body stuck in the sweatshop) is the underside of that privilege.

⁶Or, that we all transnationally share the same vision of democracy, citizenship, and individual rights, as liberal global feminists have been accused of assuming. See, for instance, Clough (2000); Mohanty (1984), and Yuval-Davis (1997).

What we have to acknowledge is that technologies of body and self-modification and representation have a political economy. Given this, an individualist vision, such as that implied in notions of self-invention, has to be seen as problematic no matter what one intends to mean with one's body. What is ultimately at stake in the political economy of body technologies are not only appearance, style, and identity, but also material and cultural survival, human equality, and dignity. For instance, the increasingly high-tech quest for beauty in the United States, and even our hailing of expensive, high-tech medical breakthroughs that will prolong life for the few who will have access, are part of a global stratification of economies, technologies, and health resources that also include health crises of astonishing proportions. Many of these crises are being managed through global health management techniques of producing "deserving" and "undeserving" categories of citizens, such as are involved in the attempt to redraw rights of ownership to life-prolonging AIDS drugs for poor nations.⁷ In the broader world of global capital, the framing of technologies as individualized problem-solvers and as tools for individualized bodies and identities comes, I think, at great social and ethical expense in the context of a world that contains both impressive bodily luxury and great bodily suffering.

I want to finish my thoughts by posing some questions that feminist and body theory might pursue in relation to body practices that go beyond "what does this say?" and "what does this mean?" When we can think of body projects as stratified and stratifying technologies, we can ask different questions about them. These include, but are not limited to: How do they insert counter narratives into the flows of information about women? How much do they foster women's critical and collective consciousness in relation to body, or how do they encourage other counter narratives, interruptions, and gaps in the flows of meaning? What images and discourses do they make use of *and* how are they received? How do they make

⁷Even though we often use ideas of individual rights and meritocracy to defend the economic system that contributes to these problems, I believe that we in the West allow ourselves some comfort in the status quo partly based on deeply held ideas/biases about cultural others and what they need and deserve. If I am right, then this is another reason to be worried about notions of the "primitive" that are operating throughout popular culture.

themselves visible and at what “speed,” in the flow of “codes” or information that informs the lives of women themselves? How are these technologies of meaning themselves interrupted by processes of reterritorialization?

As technoscience feminists have already begun to ask us to do, I would like to see theory move toward these kinds of questions as we try to make sense of the complex relationship between power, bodies, and agency. Taken together, what feminist theories of the body teach us is that understanding and transforming the body and the self toward feminist aims calls for a questioning of the ways we see both the body and the self. This includes rejecting any foregone notion of proper embodiment, but also eschewing a liberal certainty that we can wholly self-narrate our bodily identities in the face of the many forces within technology and political economy that territorialize and reterritorialize them. In my view, a useful feminist understanding of bodies must be rooted in an ontological humility that acknowledges the significance of the technological, and all of its attendant political dimensions, in us and our body projects.

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