

## STRETCHING BEFORE AND AFTER

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“Narrative relations, which see the desire for narration encounter its tale, can themselves be political actions.” (Kottman, 2000, p. xxiii)

### *Preface*

I find an identity because I am a narratable. I find an identity because I recognize myself in a tale told by another. As Adriana Cavarero has suggested narration reveals my shape. It reveals a pattern traced out by my actions, a pattern I made but one I could not discover fully on my own (Cavarero, 1997). This is my life story, my narrative identity. It is continuous – in that I am held in a narrative thread – but it is also in flux; the story develops and the shape changes. This is my own story, but it is opened by narration into the horizons of a particular culture, at a particular moment in that culture’s history, and it is socially symbolic of that culture. I am at once myself and I am of my time. Today, the shape traced out through narration might reveal a self that is a cyborg. Increasingly, I contain technologies. I extend into a landscape itself as artificial as it is natural. Indeed, it is hard to say where I end and where the world beyond myself begins. Certainly the boundary is not formed only at my skin. Perhaps it is formed by my experience, by my life story, or by the narration of that life story – which might itself be a narration undertaken partly by a machine. If I remain myself, I have to ask myself what *kind* of self am I, in these conditions? And what choices, what actions are open to me, what kind of a political creature can I become?

### *Introduction*

Exploring information technology and subjectivity through narrative can help think through some issues in cyber-feminism; what it is, and what it needs

to do. Currently, cyber-feminism is often a celebratory discourse – often a discourse understood to be shared between cyborgized women and the feminised machine environments which contain these women, and from which they are indistinguishable (see Plant, 1996). Other forms of techno-feminist analysis, understanding information technology as a productive site for a feminist politics of re-signification share this general optimism, and also find within information technology the grounds for a technologically derived alteration in the conditions within which women operate (see Stone, 1995). In contrast stands an approach to the subject and/in information technology that allows for the restitution of cyber-feminism as a political critique and as a project for transformation, to be undertaken by active agents. This restitution is important because, in my view at least, *feminism* itself remains a project with work to do. Accepting that the rise of information technology has entailed a certain measure of feminisation, but has not materially changed gender inequality, it has *new* kinds of work to do. Cyber-feminism makes sense to me – as a political project – only if it is concerned centrally with transformation.

In what follows cyber-feminism is explored from three directions. First, the relationship between information society theory and dominant forms of contemporary cyber-feminist is considered. I suggest that information society theory has formed the grounds of much contemporary cyber-feminist thinking (although it does this in ways that are complex, and that relate not only to essentialist forms of cyber-feminism). I would like to disturb these grounds, partly to suggest that they may be the *wrong* grounds from which to begin to develop a political approach to cyber-feminism, partly to underscore my claim that they are not the *inevitable* grounds upon which to base cyber-feminist analysis of information – as they often appear to be today.

Through this analysis I hope to move cyber-feminism to a new space, one which allows some different approaches to the conceptualisation of the subject and/in information to be considered. Disturbing the connection between cyber-feminism and information society theory can make it evident that cyber-feminism's priorities need to be re-drawn – and re-drawn within horizons that are differently understood. The world *is* changed through the advent of information, but without the link to the information revolution thesis it is no longer necessary to assume that this change adds up to a radical break – to the ascension of information as the new prime mover. And without the incessant chorus proclaiming that information is progress (and the only progress possible) that the information society thesis produces, it is possible to strip away the comforting illusion that this change is both inevitable and necessarily for the better.

The second part of the paper does something different – and something

rather more tentative. The focus remains in part on critique, but this time not of cyber-feminism in its most essentialist moment. Rather, I look at the problems emerging when post-structural critical theory, particularly that of Butler, is deployed to consider gendered subjectivity in on-line spaces. Parallels can be drawn between the problematic of differentiation (between the subject and the discourse that writes the subject) that emerges here, and the questions I see as being raised by cyber-feminism's conscious confusion of the figure of the cyborg with the body of the informational web, or the Matrix. In both cases the question of agency becomes important.

The final part of the paper develops an alternative approach. Drawing on Adriana Cavarero and Paul Ricoeur I contrast an understanding of identity as narratable with performative accounts of subjectivity looking at attempts (including my own) to read Butler's account of subjectivity into the virtual. I conclude that a conception of cyber-subjectivity deriving from narrativity can be used to articulate and argue for a form of cyber-feminism that stresses the continued necessity for politics, rather than demanding the celebration of new forms of life. This way of thinking about identity might suggest that an urgent project for (cyber)feminism is the development of forms of *opposition* to the particular kinds of "feminisation" that are characteristic of informed capital and that are promoted by it. In particular I would like to argue for a form of cyber-feminism that operates "within and against" as much as with "the grain of" an environment feminised through the extension of information technology into all areas of life.

### *Information Revolution*

"[W]hat some refer to as the post-modern condition, others refer to as information society." (Braman, 2000, p.308)

It is articulated as the network society or the age of information. It is invoked to explain the waning of narrative, or the rise of post-Fordist working patterns, or to account for a general increase in the speed of our lives. It seems to be and do many things. At root, however, the information society/information revolution thesis is based in the single assertion. This is the assertion that information has produced what Schiller has called a "massive discontinuity." The information society, that is, is not "a projection or an extrapolation of existing trends in Western Society...[but it is] a new *principle* of social-technical organization and ways of life" (Schiller, 1997, p. 116). Information revolution theorists believe that information technology overwhelms previous forms and relations of production, re-organizes communication, and

supersedes old forms of social life and social organization. This re-organization also produces new social subjects – and they are in a very real sense the subjects of technology, not of the social totality.

The specific information technologies said to be involved in producing such a revolution and such a change in subjectivation are rather more difficult to describe, not least because the information revolution has been proclaimed many times over. Daniel Bell, who announced the information society at the end of the 1960s suggested it would emerge due to the new work-patterns ushered in by computerization (see Webster, 1995). Manuel Castells' 1970s analysis of the network society, in which the ascendancy of the morphology of the network over the social logic is asserted, shifted the focus towards information networks (Castells, 1996). Today, the focus is again moving; it is biopower that is regarded as key to the constitution of the multitude and the Empire in Hardt and Negri's recent writing, for example (Hardt and Negri, 2000). Clearly, it is the *principle* of the ascendancy of information to the role of prime mover within the social totality that links the different declarations over the years. Indeed, there are ways in which information society theory, taken as a whole, is fundamentally indifferent to the specific qualities of the information technology upon which its assertion of rupture rests. A corollary of this has been that information society theory is also largely indifferent to the ways in which such information technologies might be gendered. That is, the question is not central to the basic analysis even though it may (does) become important in contemporary elaborations of that analysis.

Hardly surprisingly, the same indifference to the gender of information technology is not found amongst feminists exploring information – arguably indeed, cyber-feminism finds its roots in Donna Haraway's 1984 *Cyborg Manifesto*, which is a techno-feminist<sup>1</sup> exploration of precisely this issue. Despite this, much cyber-feminist writing since Haraway has tended to cleave to the basic assertions of the information society/information revolution thesis, and in a more absolute way than Haraway, even while it has taken gender and technology as its project. Certainly this is true for a well-documented current within cyber-feminism based on forms of gender and technological essentialism. Sadie Plant is the obvious example here (see Plant, 1996; Squires, 1996). This is also the case when influential approaches to cyber-subjectivity based around feminist post-structural critical theory and queer theory (see Turkle, 1995, for instance) are considered. Here, however the connection is more

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<sup>1</sup> I have called Haraway techno-feminist since the Manifesto at least pre-dates both the popularisation of the internet and the emergence of cyber-feminism which essentially developed in response to the latter.

roundabout and to trace it out requires that attention is paid to the connection between theories of the information society/information revolution and theories of the post-modern. A starting point here is to note that the belief that there is a more or less direct correspondence between the advent of post-modernity and the advent of the information society/information revolution is widely held (see Braman 2000, above). Information is understood as at once a cause of, and as an instantiation of, the fragmented cultural forms of post-modern life (see Lyotard, 1984). These forms might include modes of living (spatial and temporal organization) forms of subjectivity, and cultural productions of all kinds. To point out that a version of the information society/information revolution thesis underpins much feminist writing on technology and gender, is therefore to link together not two terms (feminism with information revolution), but three (feminism with information revolution and post-modernity).

It seems increasingly necessary to question this three way connection. First because techno-feminism's old method of operating as a force distinct from, but still within the grounds of, information society frameworks is now increasingly problematic. The force of feminist writing on information technology originally derived from its ability to find a distinctive point of view from within this tripartite framework. But this is becoming harder to do. In the time since the 1980s, when Haraway wrote the *Manifesto*, there has been a process of increasingly absolute convergence between mainstream and feminist understandings of contemporary information technology; a convergence based around a shared sense of the feminization of this technology. A consequence of this is that cyber-feminism or techno-feminism no longer functions to critique the information society – even from within. Let alone from without. It is simply another articulation of the same analysis. The result, I suggest, is that the distinctiveness of the cyber-feminist position, and the kinds of critical and political distance cyber-feminist analysis can produce, is diminished. To substantiate this proposition I want now to briefly compare the contemporary landscape with that laid out in the *Manifesto*. The point here is to ask how the cyborg has lost its bite.

### *How the cyborg lost its bite*

“The hybridization of human and machine is no longer a process that takes place only at the margins of society rather it is a fundamental episode at the center of the constitution of the multitude and its power.” (Hardt and Negri, 2000)

In the fiction of William Gibson cyberspace was widely celebrated as an escape from the “meat.” It was an escape out of (feminine) nature into (masculine) culture. Gibson’s fictional viewpoint connected with real-world analyses of the impact of the diffusion of information technology. On the one hand the development of new forms of information technology promised to automate everyday life processes, on the other the development of new information spaces entirely devoid of “noise” promised to deliver the dream of perfect communication (see Moravec, 1988; Kittler, 1997). Haraway’s *Manifesto* challenged this dominant understanding of the probable impact of the widespread diffusion of information into society and culture. Avoiding the “abstract concept” (Feenberg, 1999, p.15) of information technology as pure code (“the one code that translates all meaning perfectly”), Haraway looked instead at how the forms of computer technology developing in the early 1980s might interface with humans. She concluded that the logic of information technology could be located not in transcendence but rather in connection. The allure of the virtual would not be found in disembodied code, nor in fleshless connection or subsumption (the “bodiless exaltation of cyberspace” as Gibson put it). Instead she argued – against the mainstream at the time – that information technologies would produce new forms of connection between bodies and machines.

Situated on the cusp of Marxism and post-structuralism, second wave feminism and post-structural critical theory, Haraway used this insight to develop a technophile politics that set out to explore the disruptive possibilities information technology raised for conventional assumptions about gender. She produced the cyborg as an “ironic political myth,” a technophile entity that resisted assimilation into the information machine but gloried in its connections with it.

Others also adopted the cyborg – but in less radical and less ambiguous ways. The focus on increasingly intimate and tight forms of human computer interaction found in Haraway’s writing parallels real developments in computing (for instance the rise of personal computing and of graphical interfaces). As it turned out Haraway’s *Manifesto* was better at conceptualizing the reality of information technology as it embedded itself into everyday life than accounts of information stressing escape and dis-embodiment. Haraway’s cyborg, reflecting the prioritizing of the human machine relation that occurs with the growth of user-friendly interactive systems was a figure that fitted the times. As a consequence the *Manifesto* was immensely influential. Indeed, arguably it is “foundational” (Kennedy, 2001, p. 285) not only within feminism, but within many forms of thinking about the interactions between humans and machines. This perhaps is why the ironic cyborg, raised to be an oppositional

figure, has now become the approved figure for the new work, the new consumer, the new digital citizen. The hybridization of human and machine is now accepted as a standard feature of the contemporary world, it is “no longer a process that takes place only at the margins of society ... [but] rather a fundamental episode” (Hardt and Negri, 2000). In sum, the cyborg is everywhere – but it no longer retains its political force as a figure that stands *against* orthodox readings of the information revolution. The partial evisceration of the power of the cyborg as feminist myth – as something operating as a powerful political fiction (Braidotti, 1996) – was achieved partly by virtue of its popularity.

Today the cyborg also remains a figure within cyber-feminism, but the focus has shifted away from it. In the work of Plant and others attention is given less to the cyborg individual and more to the new information networks into which cyborg individuals are subsumed. In the place of the “original” cyborg, a figure famously beyond gender, cyber-feminism places the feminized networks that contain women; this is cyber-feminism’s matrix. In focusing on feminized information networks cyber-feminism sets aside the question of agency altogether. Indeed agency is no longer required since new forms of cyber-feminist writing are not operating around a perceived *necessity* for change. For them the need is to *explore* or indeed *celebrate* this new terrain that both *contains* women and *contains* the feminine principle.

The distinctions that functioned to distinguish Haraway’s analysis from the mainstream analysis of the information society have collapsed almost entirely in this form of cyber-feminism. First, the shift from transcendence to connection – a certain kind of feminization – is now accepted. It is around interactivity between humans and machines/flesh and non-flesh/natural and artificial that information society/information revolution theorists make their claims. Second, cyber-feminism can no longer set itself up as a critical strand, operating within but also in opposition to the general understanding of the information society/information revolution thesis, or even as holding a specific position on the forms and types of connection desired. The cyborg/matrix coupling desired and developed by cyber-feminism points to why this might be so since this coupling, cyber-feminism’s ideal, is indistinguishable from the ideal form of the new social subject required by and envisaged by informational capitalism. That process whereby (mostly female) humans might be plugged into sympathetic (feminized) information networks, to produce “ideal” (ideally efficient) forms of human computer interaction in newly configured workplaces is precisely a process of cyborgisation. This is the intimacy between women and machine that is, for example, entailed in the flexible, surveillant, working life of the call centre operator, the figure paradigmatic of the developing information economy.

This connection indeed, might make it evident why the celebratory mode of cyber-feminism is problematic. The “triumph” of the cyborg project, if this is re-configured as the “achieving” of a particular form of feminization of the everyday environment, rings very hollow when material conditions of the informational capitalism are properly considered. Why should women celebrate the “feminization” of work, the move towards an undifferentiated intimacy between women and machine entailed in call centre work, for instance – or in most other information society posts? In these contexts the cyborg has become problematic as an icon for contemporary cyber-feminism. Indeed, the lingering possibility/promise of disruption it still inspires might now operate less to open up new forms of thinking, and more to obscure the disciplining effects that an intimacy with information technologies (feminized or not) all too often brings.

So setting aside the cyborg, what would it mean to reconstitute to cyber-feminism that sense of making demands that was explicit in Haraway’s *Manifesto* – that made her cyborg a *demanding* figure? What forms might cyber-feminism take if its priorities are reset from “celebration” to “change”? First, this kind of cyber-feminism could be defined as operating within and against the feminized grounds information technology produces, within and against an increasingly feminized culture. This might require the repudiation of particular modes of the feminine – something not developed further here. Second, this kind of cyber-feminism requires a conception of the subject as someone who can act within such grounds – someone indeed who can act *against* them at times. Without such subjects, I would like to suggest, we might have (we do have) cyber-feminisms (as theoretical discourses) but we can’t actually have *cyber-feminists*. In search of such a subject I consider below the possibilities that open up if the subject and/in the machine is understood as someone constituted through narrative.

### *Stretching before and after*

“The genealogy of narration, after having turned the everyday practice of storytelling into a refined art, thus leads – through a progressive slide into the autonomy of the work – to the omnipotence of the book. At the end of the succession, instead of being ‘narratable’ the existent becomes paradoxically a ‘narrated,’ which from time to time is under the illusion that it has an existence. [But] in spite of everything, the existent exists and re-exists... ‘At a certain point, surely, we must accept that material reality exists, that it continually knocks up against us, *that texts are not the only thing...*’” (Cavarero, 1997, p. 127, *my italics*)



As the stock of information rises, the stock of narrative has tended to fall. This sense of narrative collapse is widespread in writing on techno-culture (see Darley, 2000). It finds Virilio's apocalyptic reading of information as that which collapses space and duration into absolute speed, thereby stripping away the grounds within which narratives might be made, or within which stories might be "walked" (Virilio, 1995). It is also evident in cyber-feminist writings since these too often stress *affect* and *intensity*, concentrating on what is instantaneous, what is *felt* at the moment of use, or what is *produced* at the moment of use – the subject herself being included in this instantaneous and fleeting production process.

Less often considered within cyber-cultural writing and cyber-feminist writing cleaving to the information revolution approach with all that this entails, is how forms of user interaction with ICTs might be examined as they persist and as they are continuous over time, even as they cross and re-cross heterogeneous spaces. Instead of focussing on the discrete moment of interaction with technology as a moment producing (or dissolving) the subject as a technological subject, what needs to be explored here is how the subject persists over time. One way to do this is to ask how s/he might be held together in a narrative thread. Such a subject could exist and re-exist through and across information networks, and beyond them. Further, s/he would be a subject whose material configuration is not confined to the body.

In thinking about narrative and identity I have been informed by the writings of Paul Ricoeur, Hannah Arendt, and Adriana Cavarero, all of whom have considered identity in relation to narrative. All share a conviction that "life" exceeds the text, standing both before and after it and all conceive of narrative as a form that can bind this life together in meaningful ways – it is thus narrative that provides the individual existent with her identity.

Paul Ricoeur's account of narrative identity, and of the *maintenance* of identity over time is to be read as an extension of the narrative arc he has developed in his writing on fiction and history – and particularly in the first volume of *Time and Narrative* (1984). For Ricoeur narrative is produced through a series of distinct moments of emplotment (*mimesis*) and together these produce narrative as an arc. This arc spans the initial pre-configuration of an experience or event, draws up to itself the central moment of the configuration of the tale (the moment of *poesis*), and also includes as an integral moment, the re-opening of this tale into the horizon of the reader or narrator. In his later writing Ricoeur explores ways in which identity can be understood within these narrative frameworks (Ricoeur, 1991). Here identity itself is understood as another narrative arc, another narrative *practice*. Within this narrative economy the life story, a pre-configuration of the tale, stands in ad-

vance of the narration of the tale. In this sense the narration of an identity is an act that is at once faithful to a life story (reaching back towards it) but which also breaks with it since it is also a *fictional* resolution; the resolution in *poesis* of a life. For Ricoeur the existent is thus understood not as a subjectivated individual produced through an act in language, but nor indeed as an individual *destined* by an act in narrative. For Ricoeur, (as for Cavarero), the individual *is someone that already lives*.

The narrative arc conceived of here however stretches after as well as before. It is only the act of narration that produces the tale in its fullest extent since it is this that involves the lived life coming to fruition “in the living receiver of the story being told” (Ricoeur, 1991). In this way narrative identity, which is the significance of a life story or its *resolution*, is inter-subjective – and indeed interactive. It “wells up from the *intersection* of the world of the text and the world of the reader” (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 430, *my italics*).

Cavarero’s account of identity draws on Arendt’s in that it stresses connections and relations between “....[a] human being, their life story, and the narrator of this story” (Arendt, cited in Caverero, 2000, p. 40). Cavarero’s sense of the narratable self can be read across Ricoeur’s account of narrative identity – usefully opening up some questions about the narrator of the tale, and the place of its narration. The distinction Cavarero draws between the actions that make up a life and the narratability of the tale of that life is made partly through the distinction drawn between the *what* of a life and its *who*. This is a distinction that usefully raises the question of self-identity over time and through material transformations. Cavarero argues that it is precisely the knowledge that one has a continuing life story, a story which could be told back to one and which could be *recognized* as one’s own, that confirms the individual in her everyday, and in her *on-going*, sense of self. For Cavarero, identity and in particular the *maintenance* of identity over time thus *depends* not on repetition, but on the knowledge that there is something to be narrated about oneself. Bringing the desire for this narration together with our inability to narrate ourselves Cavarero produces the paradox of the narratable self. This is the self who is always seeking the unity narration might provide, but who cannot fully satisfy her own desire to be narrated – to know herself. It is because the self is involved in the continuous, open, and inter-subjective production of her-self that she is able to act.

In *Relating Narratives*, Cavarero aligns post structuralist theories of the subject with a particular mode of cultural production. She suggests that a consequence of book culture (read here as synonymous with the linguistic turn) is that individuals are increasingly thought to exist only in language. Becoming *narrated* rather than *narratable* selves (Cavarero, 1997, p. 127), their

capacity for action is closed down. This alignment might be problematic. On the other hand, it is clear that digital culture *has* tended to reinforce an understanding of the self as narrated rather than narratable – that is, as textually or cyber-technologically produced, and/or as discursively performed, rather than existing before or after the text or technology.

Certainly this is a popular theorization of the subject within cyber-theoretical writing (see Stone, 1995; Turkle, 1995; Farquhar 2000, for instance) which has often found in cyberspace and in the identity confusion it produces “living” evidence of the kinds of apparently flexible subjectivities postmodernism heralded in theory (see Hayles, 1993). The postmodern subject is easily understood to be eminently suited to a life on-line. Understood as partial, and as fragmented, and as somebody discursively produced, she is often already understood to operate in many worlds at once. It is therefore no surprise that for some cyber-theoretical writers the *virtual* subject is apparently capable of “performing as,” *as a discrete entity*, in various virtual spheres and in real life – and sometimes indeed simultaneously. If discourse writes the body it can perhaps write an identity which has *many* bodies at once. Thus, for Stone, identity on-line is a performance and/in technology, of a subject that is *fundamentally* multiple. The subject puts on cyberspace and in doing so can put on an identity more or less at will (Stone, 1995, p. 90). Sherry Turkle develops a similar argument – and in *Life on The Screen* quotes more or less approvingly an informant, who claimed that real life was “just another window,” one world amongst many in which he might choose to operate (Turkle 1995).

Turkle’s consideration of cyber-identity draws on Butler’s theorization of the performative production of the self. Turkle, along with other cyber-theoretical writers, has also suggested that cyberspace opens the way for the productive queering of gender, sexual, and other norms, and for productive identity experimentation of all kinds (Bruckman 1993; Schmeiser, 1995; We, 1994; Stone, 1995). Cyberspace might therefore be used to offer a vindication of the politics of re-signification Butler offers (Butler, 1993). My sense however, is that it reveals these politics as problematical.

For Butler, the subject is discursively produced through repeated acts in language, citations from normative discourses that produce the subject as a raced, sexed, gendered subject. Butler began with gender but extended her account to bodies, understood not as essentially produced but rather as morphologized through performative acts in language (Butler, 1993). Following Derrida, these performative acts in language are viewed as *iterative* acts, being based on repetition and alterity, rather than on simple repetition. As a consequence they can fail to repeat exactly, leaving space for forms of re-signification or *queering* – a form of citation that subverts. Cyberspace has

seemed to some to be ideal grounds for the practice of a radical politics based around such processes of re-signification. This is because setting about *exploiting* the possibility that the performative act constituting the subject might fail to repeat exactly, has seemed to be a fairly simple – even an instant – proposition in cyberspace. This proposition relies on the malleability of cyberbodies on the one hand, and the convenient way in which corporeal bodies can be regarded as literally out of the frame on the other.

A problem with these (optimistic) claims is that they have been substantially under-mined by the empirical evidence of users and of use practices which tend to suggest that cyberspaces often operate within the same normative values that operate everywhere else. (See Bassett, 1997) Remaining within the register of performative conceptions of identity, the conclusions that might be drawn from this observation are non-propitious. On the one hand the evidence suggests that the performative production of the self within a virtual world *remains* constrained by the discourses that define certain bodies as desirable or intelligible. This being the case even when this production is not constrained for the individual by an already existing body. In a sense this simply amounts to saying normative discourse will out as usual – despite a technologically achieved alteration in the (bodily) constitution of the subject. Here then, the specificity of the body in cyberspace is shown to be irrelevant to the process of subjectivation. At which point, the cyber-body's famous malleability becomes somewhat *beside* the point – and discourse is revealed as indifferent to the material specifics of what it conforms.

There is however, a yet more pessimistic way to read the situation through Butler since the logic of her argument also suggests that the possibilities for a politics of re-signification around identity are *narrower* in cyberspace than elsewhere. Butler claims that iteration means there is always a certain distance between discourse and the subject (this despite the fact the subject is discursively produced). However, in cyberspace, in a universe in which bodies are already discursive, Butler's claim that "[d]iscourse is not life, its time is not yours" (cited in Kottman, 2000, p. xi), and her conclusion that re-signification is possible within the terms of the iterating act, which can always fail to repeat as expected, and which always fails in part because of the *distance* between discourse and the subject, rings rather hollow.

Without living bodies operating in *excess* of discourse – bodies that might fail to approximate to the norm – the constraining discourses operating to conform the subject, operate in a more total way. In this way it could be claimed that discourses conforming the subject are more *absolute* in virtual conditions than in "normal" ones.

Seen in this way, virtual conditions, and virtual identities, at one point

considered to offer exciting new grounds for operating a politics of re-signification, have to be understood to do something rather different. The question of virtual life and virtual identity actually turns out to under-score the *difficulties* of thinking about a meaningful politics of re-signification, as it is attached to performative conceptions of the subject. Indeed it can be used to problematize the whole notion of agency as it pertains to performative accounts of subjectivation.

This is the same impasse as that produced by cyber-feminism's dissolution of the subject into the expansive – and feminized – body of the machine, discussed above. Here, again, but this time working through a theory of performativity, what has been produced is an absolute identification or absolute subjectivation to the machine – whether machine and/or subject are considered as discourse or as technology. In this sense feminist post-structural critical theory and cyber-feminist essentialism produce the same kind of “wallpaper” cyborg. In neither case can the gendered subject, stand out against, or move independently in relation to, or indeed be distinguished from, the networks that produce her; her background, of which she is now also a part.

A sense of narrative identity, as I have sketched it out above, might produce a different conception of the subject, since the existent here can be understood as s/he who stands before and after both language and technology, but who cannot be reduced to either. Within this framework the cyber-textual production of the self is only ever one moment in an extended narrative economy of the self; the narrative arc precedes and follows the cyber-text, or the cyberspace moment.

To develop this, it seems useful to return to Cavarero and pursue the distinction between the latter's approach and Butler's, comparing Cavarero's sense of the narratable self with Butler's account of subjectivation. Kottman, also in pursuit of this difference, distinguishes between Butler's sense of the performatively produced subject, in which the possibility for re-signification (and therefore politics) is understood to exist in the space *between* the discourse and the life (hence Butler's claim that “[d]iscourse is not life, its time is not yours”, cited above), and Cavarero's sense of an identity politics as they cohere around narrative identity, when narration is always entrusted to another. As Kottman points out, in part, this distinction turns on the question of the *nature* of this other. That is, there is difference between what Cavarero understands as the “necessary other” in narration and Butler's sense of the constitutive outside, the *exclusionary* matrix that produces the subject (Butler, 1993). Kottman understands this in terms of a contrast between Butler's abject other, who is never more than a third person *perspective*, and Cavarero's insistence on “an other who is really an other” (Kottman, 2000, pp. xii- xiv).

My own sense is that the “reality” of this other might be used here to underscore the degree to which a conception of identity as narrative can allow the subject to be composed of different materialities. Working within the narrative frameworks outlined above the “real other” is to be viewed as a component in the narrative arc that finally produces the existent, that gives them their identity. This other is thus exterior to the self – in that s/he is not an internally generated perspective. However, even as a real other, s/he is also on the inside, in that s/he is part of that narrative economy – that arc – that produces the self. Another way to put this is to say that the desire for narration by a real other extends the operations that produce identity, thereby precluding the existent from complete identification with her moment to moment iteration – her iteration within information networks for instance. The narratable self who emerges operating within technological networks or elsewhere, is thus not pinned down by her identification with her narrated self – since this self is narrated by a real other. In this way she escapes the tyranny of the performative and/or the technologically perfected performative. In summary, it is feasible to explore the role of technological mediations in the production of an identity (or a life story), beginning not with an account of social existence “predicated on interpellation” (see Kottman, 2000), but rather by presuming that identity concerns material existence as well as discourse. This opens the way to understand identity as a continuous thread maintained across both sides of the screen and maintained over time.

*Conclusion: the body of narrative*

I begin this paper by arguing that cyber-feminism, understood as a political project which can realistically think about itself as agential is at an impasse. I argued that this impasse has come about because cyber-feminist writing has accepted too uncritically as a starting point, that tangle of wires and thoughts that goes under the name “information revolution.” I have suggested that this approach tends to produce conceptions of the subject that are both absolutely fragmented and absolutely derived from information. This kind of thinking produces humans not as subjects but as objects of the network. Against this, I have used narrative to begin to develop a form of thinking about contemporary subjectivity as it is inflected by technology. This approach is focussed not on narrative geometries. Rather I have considered narrative as a mode of interpretation; as a way of making sense of lived experience in time.

As a final move, here I would like to sum up some ways in which this approach does open new doors to thinking about technologically produced

transformations in subjectivity and in particular in gendered subjectivity. Two important issues that have threaded through this article concern the uncertainties information technology produces, firstly about the boundaries of the self (an anxiety about the body) and secondly about the coherence of the self; about its persistence as a self, over time. For some forms of cyber-feminism, neither of these uncertainties are problematic. For essentialist cyber-feminism the dissolution of the subject into the matrix provides a final answer to the question of boundaries between human and machine, since these are simply removed. For other feminists adopting the Butler approach, the point is to explore the fragmentation of the self, and the possibilities this produces for re-signification. To me however, it does seem important to find a way conceive of the self (as a continuous material self), but one which doesn't oblige us to return to the sexed biological body. This body, so often understood as the essential shape of *who* I am, where I am, and how I remain who I am over time, clearly cannot be the ultimate reference point if we need to include within our sense of self activities that reach out beyond this body. I include here those activities that take place in a different mode from the one the body finds itself in (in the informational mode, for instance). Neither however can this body simply be absorbed into the new feminized body of information (a giant body) since while this does allow a technological reconstitution of the material self, it dissolves the subject as a meaningful category.

I hope I have shown that the kind of approach I develop here, one centred on narrative rather than on the body, and one that understands experience as exceeding the text rather than being constituted within discourse alone, is useful in finding a way around these issues. The conception of a material self, both continuous and continuously transforming, held together by narrative experience, narrative emplotment, and the possibility of narration, rather than by recourse to the biological body – and therefore not exploded into fragments in the non-biological spaces of information, has potential. Why? Because a narrative approach allows identity to be considered as a material process – since material objects “natural” and “artificial,” human and technological, bodily and discursive can all become elements of that narrative arc that produces the self. At the same time it provides a means by which to think about identity as continuous and to think about the subject as someone with agency. In this way a conception of identity based on narration does take us behind and beyond those existing conceptions of identity and/in machines that inform cyber-feminism. That is, it can offer a different approach both to analyses marked by re-formulated essentialism discussed above in relation to “feminization” and those marked by more discursive post structural accounts of “life on the screen” that stress the performative production of the self.

The final point I want to make concerns narrative – a category that might be understood to introduce a whole new series of problems with which to replace the old. Here I would simply insist that narrative itself, as I read it here, is formed within historical rather than universal horizons;<sup>2</sup> it is perhaps anthropological rather than ontological. Narrative is not only useful as a category through which to explore identity and technology because it can contain multitudes and materials operating at different speeds with different densities, and because it can be used to organize them into something meaningful – even into something called a life or a self. Narrative is also a useful category because it is itself continually formed and re-formed within new historical contexts. In this way it is socially symbolic. Roland Barthes once said that narrative is simply there “like life itself” (Barthes, 1997). These days, we might use this comparison to stress contingency and transformation. Like life itself narrative is something that is under-going a process of transformation.

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<sup>2</sup> Here I would break with Ricoeur’s narrative hermeneutics.



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