Radical Transformation through Technology: Xenofeminism as an updated version of Haraway's cyborg? Claudia Wiehler

Xenofeminists are inspired by an idea that Donna Haraway brought up decades ago: to use technology to radically transform gender relations. Yet, a closer look reveals important differences that put the Xenofeminists in question.

I am tired of being a woman sometimes. Once a month, menstruation knocks at my door like an unwelcome guest, staying with me for a week. I have been taught since school that I cannot defend myself should a man assault me. I would be the weaker sex after all. Now, imagine a world were such differences would not exist; a world, in which biotechnology and gender-hacking led to the emergence of a hundred sexes that every person can freely choose from; a world, in which no power disparities are associated with gender categories.



Abbildung 1: Paperback-Edition of The Xenofeminist Manifesto, Verso Books.

TWO MANIFESTOS, ONE SOLUTION: TECHNOLOGY AS THE WAY OUT

Such a world is sketched in the *Xenofeminist Manifesto* (XFM) by the Laboria Cuboniks collective, launched in Berlin in 2015.[1] Since then, the manifesto has spurred a lively debate in academia, art, and new media, turning it into "one of the most exciting intellectual trends in contemporary feminism".[2] In its, not least visually, powerful manifesto, the collective demands the appropriation of technology for feminist ends to reach full emancipation from natural and societal constraints. The proclaimed ideas add to the cyberfeminist discourse which has been strongly inspired by the US-American philosopher Donna Haraway and her essay *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985).[3] At the center of Haraway's essay is the cyborg – a mythical creature that is part human, part machine.[4] Its echoes seem ubiquitous in the XFM, though it is never mentioned explicitly.

The parallels between the two texts have been neglected in the reception of the XFM.[5] In the few contributions on this aspect, scholars argue that Haraway's cyborg has been decontextualized and misread as an actual demand.[6] The feminist scholar Sophie Lewis calls the Xenofeminists "Haraway's disobedient daughters".[7] But how different – or similar – are these two manifestos actually?

"A NEW WORLD FROM THE SCRAPS"

Although more than thirty years have passed since the publication of the *Cyborg Manifesto*, the (bio-)technological transformation of society is equally ongoing and, if anything, increasing in speed. Confronted with this fundamental transformation, the two manifestos present daring visions. "If nature is unjust, change nature!" is the furious conclusion at the end of the Xenofeminist manifesto. Indeed, the authors want to "build a new world from the scraps".[8] Equally powerfully, Haraway concludes: "It [the cyborg imagery] means both

building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, space stories".[9] For her, this is possible in the face of a transformation as fundamental as the industrial revolution.[10]

Both manifestos reject any form of naturalism. This position is also visible in their critiques of the feminist and left-wing movements of their times. Haraway emphasizes that "women" is not a natural but a social category that is created through oppression of people with certain characteristics.[11] According to the Xenofeminists, recent ideas of sex and gender would be unduly naturalists and any idea of a specific form of female rationality needs to be rejected. Both are critical of ecofeminism – an intellectual current that emphasizes the close link between women and nature – as well as postmodern identity politics.[12]

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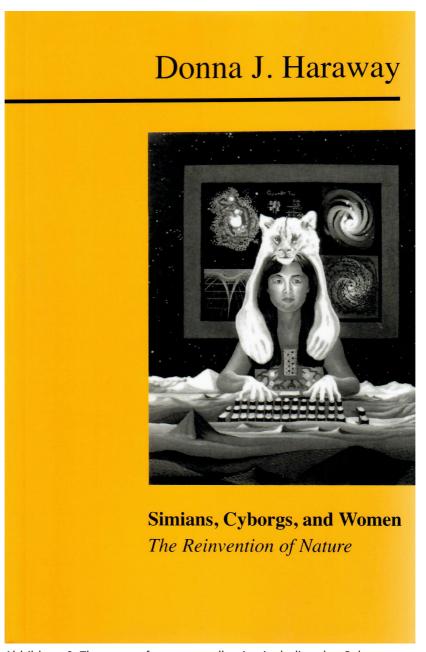


Abbildung 2: The cover of an essay collection including the *Cyborg Manifesto*.

Yet, a closer look at their understanding of feminist movements and the category of women reveals an important difference. *A Cyborg Manifesto* was written during the fragmentation of the second wave feminists based on race, sexual, and ethnic identities.[13] The metaphor of the cyborg can be seen as an attempt to overcome this fragmentation. The cyborg, as a creature built from partial identities, integrates a variety of partial perspectives. It becomes an imagery how a new unity among feminists could be created and lived.[14] At a time when ecofeminism and critique of biotechnology were popular, the cyborg was a radical image. [15]

In contrast, the Xenofeminists take the unity of women and queers as granted. Early on, they state: "We are all alienated".[16] They take shared experiences as starting point for their demand for emancipation and a universalism that would "intersect all particulars".[17] This difference to Haraway is critical because the Xenofeminists' colour blindness leads to a lack of sensitivity towards the experiences of people of colour. It is notable that both – Haraway as well as members of Laboria Cuboniks collective – are scientist-turned-feminist intellectuals and comparatively privileged, white authors from the global North.[18] Yet, Haraway considers the perspectives of black women in depth when developing her argument and critically reflects on the role that white women, including herself, play in the domination of black women.[19]

Laboria Cuboniks in turn does not acknowledge these experiences nor their dominating role explicitly. The authors emphasize that they would aim for a politics "cutting across race, ability, economic standing, and geographical position",[20] but this aspect does not receive further attention. It appears more like an obligatory lip service than a serious intellectual engagement.[21] This is not surprising as cyberfeminism more generally has been criticized for being silent on questions of race and class.[22] The silence is even more daunting, however, when considering the collective's roots in accelerationism.

FLIRTING WITH THE ALT-RIGHT

Accelerationism is a left-wing theory that envisions an intensified capitalism to overthrow the status-quo for the sake of emancipation.[23] It emerged in the context of the 2008 financial crisis and gained visibility through the eponymous manifesto by Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek.[24] The XFM can be considered the feminist response.[25] Problematically, accelerationism openly builds on techno-philosopher Nick Land who became infamous as an alt-right intellectual promoting an "eugenic philosophy of 'hyper-racism'".[26] At best inadvertently, at worst deliberately, Laboria Cuboniks even borrowed some phrasing from Land.[27] Against this background, it is telling that Laboria Cuboniks would not have considered the obvious association between Xenofeminism and xenophobia as problematic. [28]

Despite this stark difference, the perception of technology is relatively similar in the two manifestos. While being techno-enthusiasts, both acknowledge the ambivalent potential for domination and emancipation – technology is not good per se.[29] Laboria Cuboniks asserts that technology would be currently characterized by (gender) inequality but has the potential to suspend it permanently.[30] This ambivalence is also essential part of Haraway's cyborg: While it appears as the final "appropriation of the women's body in a masculinist orgy of war", it could equally be a tool of resistance.[31] Both assume that technology is shaped by the society and the underlying power structures. Haraway emphasizes that there is no technological determinism but that it would be a "historical system depending upon

structured relations among people".[32] Similarly, the Xenofeminists come to the conclusion that "material realities" underlie any technology.[33] Strikingly, however, Haraway offers a much more elaborate diagnosis of the situation at her time. She calls this "the informatics of domination".[34] To be fair, the two texts are very different in their character. While the XFM is short, concise, and full of direct appeals, Haraway's text is an academic essay of more than forty pages.

Precisely due to these two aspects – the ambivalence of technology and its enmeshment with the social balance of power – both authors arrive at the conclusion that feminists need to take on responsibility and proactively appropriate technology for their purposes.[35] Ultimately, this would allow for the abolishment of gender as a category of power disparity. [36] In Haraway's words: "the possibilities [...] include the utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without gender".[37]

THE CYBORG AS VISION

The appropriation of technology is thus very different in the manifestos. Haraway refers to the cyborg throughout her entire manifesto. While she does not go into detail how a cyborg would actually look like, she describes it as "a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction". Indeed, she remains remarkably vague on the question what a cyborg actually is and whether it is – or should be – a tangible reality. She praises the cyborg as a form of resistance that allows to integrate several identities and perspectives. In an ironic twist, she calls it the "the illegitimate offspring militarism and patriarchal capitalism".[38] The cyborg first appeared in the field of cybernetics in the 1960s.[39] Yet, it never received a lot of attention in cybernetics; it is rather a phenomenon of popular culture and academia.[40] In this vein, Haraway builds on counter-culture intellectuals and in particular feminist sci-fi authors in developing the concept.[41] She does not explicitly demand that humans should turn in cyborgs and merge with machines.

In line with their accelerationist roots, the Xenofeminists take the appropriation of technology literally. They dream of "open source medicine" that provides access to "pharmaceutical 3D printing ('Reactionware'), grassroots telemedical abortion clinics, gender hacktivist and DIY-HRT [Hormone Replacement Therapy] forums".[42] Their vision entails a trans-feminist perspective – one of the biggest strength of the manifesto.[43] Haraway, on the other hand, has been criticized for not paying enough attention to this aspect.

THE XFM AS A LITERAL BUT SHALLOW ADAPTION OF THE CYBORG

Laboria Cuboniks has not misread the cyborg. Both manifestos are ambitious in scope and have a similar perspective on anti-naturalism and the ambivalent potential of technology. Both aim for a fundamental change in gender relations through the feminist appropriation of technology. Yes, Haraway did not mean the cyborg as a literal demandYet, we do not know whether Haraway would have disapproved such an understanding. The difference lies rather in the quality and richness of the texts as the Xenofeminists fail to offer an updated and equally insightful assessment of the structures of domination. Also, a reflection of their roles as white women is largely absent. Even more critically, a decisive differentiation from the fascist tendency in accelerationism is painfully missing.

Would I change anything if the Xenofeminist vision became true? I honestly do not know. But I agree that there is an urgent need to leverage the feminist, emancipatory potential of technology – just as Haraway has envisioned already more than 35 years ago. That said, this is not only a technical question. Appropriation of technology needs to be accompanied by a socio-cultural change in order to overcome the deeply entrenched assumption that women are a deficient version of the male.[44] Technology should not aim to make women more similar to men. On the contrary, using the words of the Xenofeminists, the aim should be diversity: "Let a hundred sexes bloom!"[45]

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Seminar

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