

Wired Women

Lost (Or Found?) In Cyberspace

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Abstract

The Web has been pitched to us as the ultimate egalitarian utopia. At the same time, newspapers talk about "road kill" on the information highway. Women especially have been counted among those lost in cyberspace. But even if the vision of the Internet as genderless utopia were true, it has troubling implications. Nevertheless, theoretical critiques of Web culture take us only so far. Ad campaigns aside, there *are* genders on the Internet. What do women on the Web - "wired women" - themselves say about their experiences of gender and embodiment? And what might we imagine to be the theological significance of these gendered bodies in cyberspace?

Introduction

[1] In the midst of writing this paper, I was tempted to change its title according to the text of an email I received in response to an earlier message gone awry - one I had inadvertently flung out into the dim reaches of cyberspace. The person intercepting it sent it back with the following reply: "Oh no! Girls on the Web!" How things have changed - from a few years ago when you could say, whether lamenting the fact or simply making an observation, "Oh, there are no girls on the Web" - to today when we are relatively commonplace and apparently fearsome, or at least becoming a significant annoyance. So in a way, the question I posed at the outset of my work on this topic has already been answered. Are women lost in cyberspace? No. Are there women to be found on the Web? Yes, in droves.

[2] But there is of course more to my original title, something that compels us to further inquiry. The words resonate with religious meaning: "I once was lost / But now am found." They have to do with not simply the *fact* of presence or absence, but the quality and import of that fact, of the experience it invokes. Now, that is a much more difficult - and interesting - question to answer.

[3] Let me begin by situating this paper in the context of a larger ongoing project: to investigate what I have come to call the "religious meaning of the gendered body in cyberspace." I embarked on this investigation a couple years ago when I saw a TV commercial pitching MCI Internet Services. It featured a slick, fast-paced montage of faces, information and technology, accompanied by the following narration: "People here communicate mind to mind. Not black to white. Not man to woman. Not young to old. Not short to tall. Or handsome to homely. Just thought to thought. Idea to Idea. What is this place? Utopia? No. The Internet." I should note in passing that advertising strategies have changed significantly in the meantime, this approach being abandoned in favor of ads not just acknowledging difference, but positively reveling in it. The new information and communication technologies, they would have us believe, are now designed with the particular needs of each individual user in mind. Nevertheless, the Internet as disembodied utopia, free from markers of gender, race, age and physical infirmity, along with the social stratifications they produce, remains a powerful image, one that still functions in both popular culture and theoretical discourse.

[4] So, in an earlier paper, I set out to examine this image, not so much concerned with establishing whether reality lived up to it, but more with critiquing the image itself, so as to expose its potential problems for women. Linking the idea of gender invisibility to the Enlightenment ideal of a universal human subject who nonetheless was conceived of and coded as masculine, I raised the specter of an Internet culture supposedly open to all, but in which only the white heterosexual male truly belonged since only he could pass as a neutral subject unmarked by difference, as a mind unencumbered by the body.

[5] But in the course of that examination, I came upon a few surprises. For one, the ad campaign itself - and thus the utopia it invoked - was rife with internal contradictions. Part of an overall push to expand and diversify the market for Internet services, the appeal to women - traditionally considered "under-users" of this new technology - was a central strategy. The age-old question, "What do women really want?" quickly became, "What do women want online?" (Hodges). Another dimension of this ad campaign was its heavy emphasis on domestic space, pitching the Web as technology that could help women bridge the gap between the so-called "private" sphere of home and family and the "public" sphere of work. Thus MCI's second commercial, entitled *Confessions of a Telecommuter*, featured a young woman comfortably ensconced at home - in fact, wearing a flannel robe and bunny slippers - making an online business presentation to a roomful of corporate executives who never know the difference. You can have it both ways, this ad seemed to say. You can be a successful career person without ever leaving the confines of domestic space. But as usual the message was mixed: by entering the genderless world of the Internet you can better fulfill your traditional gender roles.

[6] Of course, the contradictions evident in these campaigns reflect contradictions within the social formation itself. And we're left with the nagging question: Is it a good thing or a bad thing for women, this ability to conduct business in your robe and slippers? Such questions are nothing new for women, who daily must negotiate what Anne Snitow calls the "common divide" between maximizing and minimizing gender difference: "Even when a woman chooses which shoes she'll wear today - is it to be the running shoes, the flats, the spikes? - she's deciding where to place herself for the moment on the current possible spectrum of images of 'woman.' Whatever our habitual position on the divide, in daily life we travel back and forth, or, to change metaphors, we scramble for whatever toehold we can" (34). In many ways, then, Internet culture is a replication of the cultures we inhabit everyday, and women learn to navigate cyberspace much the same way they learn to negotiate non-virtual space.

[7] So, what *do* women want online? The answers have been as varied as they typically are in "real life." Women's websites run the gamut from beauty, fashion and child-raising forums, to professional networks, home shopping pages, online support groups, and radical feminist organizations. And whichever sites we have bookmarked in our web browsers - whichever positions on the divide we choose to take up in cyberspace - the question still remains: Is it liberating or oppressive? Does the Internet allow women to transcend the bonds of gender stereotyping or once again render them invisible, no body at all? This is where I ended my earlier investigation and where I take up the present one, convinced that such questions can be answered not in theory but only in practice - that is, in the context of women's ongoing actualization and use of this new technology.

[8] I have now logged many, many hours online. I have been for the past several months quite the participant-observer (recognizing all the issues attending that role). I have surfed and surfed to the point I now have a file jammed with women's websites of nearly every sort, and I'm sure

[12] Clearly, however, cyberbodies are not flesh and blood; they do not literally touch, skin to skin. Embodiment was not the most controversial subject I discussed with women online, but it was by far the most difficult to articulate. Generally, they talked of minds and souls reaching out to each other and connecting on the Web. But further conversation nuanced this account, suggesting an intense and tangible relationship between the bodies of computer/users, mediated by the technology and occurring somewhere in the interstices of cyberspace. For instance, in my chat with a group of women who write interactive fiction online, they began by describing their bodies in passive terms: "my fingers are just a conduit for the action and dialogue that's coming from my brain." But when asked whether what happens on screen affects their bodies, the answer was overwhelmingly positive. "I really *do* laugh out loud," one woman said, referring to the commonly used acronym, LOL. "And sometimes," she continued, "I'll cry or gasp or . . . feel like I had the wind knocked out of me." This is not disembodiment, though it may constitute a new and different form of embodiment. It also suggests that more work needs to be done exploring the connection between bodies, imagination, technology and text. But this is far from uncharted territory in feminist thought, which for some time has posited a notion of the "discursive feminine body," arguing that we must, as Dawn Dietrich says, "ascribe gender, discourse, and meaning to the *physical body itself*, as an embedded cultural phenomenon" (179). Surely this too works both ways, such that gendered embodiment must be ascribed to, and understood as wholly interactive with, "discourse" - whether oral, textual or digital in form.

[13] If the cultural myth of disembodiment in cyberspace is thus called into question, the myth of gender-neutrality is as easily dispatched. In this historical moment at least, we know of no form of embodiment - real, imaginary, or virtual - that escapes our, sometimes desperate, attempts to locate it within a dominant system of binary heterosexism. So we come to the second half of our online hug: ". . . and the ladies twice ;-)." To conclude, as does my source, that it illustrates a lack of "true" human presence strikes me as a rather large interpretive leap, while the reference to gender seems the one thing immediately apparent from the text itself. But gender runs as a subtext throughout cultural discourse on cyberspace, so much so that I call it "subtext" only because so many people remain oblivious to it. Jaron Lanier, the man who coined the term "virtual reality," talks about "the *erotic* quality of the Web." According to him, what makes it so is "that whatever you're looking at right now might not be that interesting, but there's always this draw that if you remove the next veil, there might be something that you need to see" (quoted in Zaleski: 136). Not only does this suggest gendered embodiment; it also depends on certain assumptions related to gender: that desire, for instance, is constituted by the (male?) gaze continually (un)covering what is laid out in front of it, then moving on to find something new, more exciting. But, as we shall see, the "gender" of cyberspace is presently up for grabs, one of the things that makes our experience of it so disconcerting and cultural discourse around it so laden with contradictions. Even in feminist circles, the debate continues: one writer describing the act of logging on as "penetrating the screen" whereby "the heterosexual male user . . . empowers himself by incorporating the surfaces of cyberspace *into* himself" (Dietrich: 170, citing Stone), while another claims, "Entering the matrix is no assertion of masculinity, but a loss of humanity; to jack into cyberspace is not to penetrate, but to be invaded" (Plant 1995: 60). Suffice it to say for now that cyberspace is hardly a disembodied, genderless realm.

[14] Studies of online communication bear this out, as does my own time spent on the Web. Supposedly, you cannot tell a person's gender in cyberspace because people communicate primarily through written text. But, as Anne Balsamo points out, this "rests on the assumption that 'text-based channels' represent a gender-neutral medium of exchange, and that language

itself is free from any form of gender, race or ethnic determinations" (1995: 229). Research belies this claim. Dietrich, for instance, reports on a mixed-gender electronic bulletin board with 40% female membership. Once online, however, these women seldom participated, engaging instead in what netiquette manuals call "lurking" - that is, "listening in" on conversations but not "speaking." They "were *projecting embodied identities into cyberspace*," Dietrich concludes. "In other words, as the female users wrote themselves into this virtual community, they did so in an imagined social space very much defined by their experiences in a patriarchal culture. As a result their discourse patterns were 'gendered,' meaning, in this case, that the female users were less participatory than their male counterparts, and often silent" (181).

[15] Other studies show that women participate more readily in all-women networks, and my generally positive experience on the Web no doubt reflects my decision to focus on women's websites during this phase of my research. Even so, gender remained an issue, and gender dynamics still played out. One particular site I frequented was a fan forum, dedicated to a popular male actor (no, not Leonardo DiCaprio). Nearly all the forum members were women, but some would occasionally take on the role of fictional characters played by this actor in his various movies. I encountered such role-playing in my very first visit to the chatroom. We girls were chatting away enthusiastically, when all of a sudden "George" (this actor's latest film incarnation) showed up. Conversation ground to a halt. All "eyes" were on him. "Oh, George," "George this," "George that," "whatever you say, George" - on and on it went for what seemed like forever. Not at all pleased with this trend in the conversation, I resisted, goading "George" and calling the others on their obsequious behavior. To no avail. Internet discipline is a wonderful thing. Unless you are a complete clod, you know right away when you've violated the accepted norms of behavior. Given that I was a newbie, my sins were eventually forgiven. "George" and I have since reached an understanding; he even rather admires my "spunk." And the end of the story is that now when "George" enters the chatroom I fawn all over him as well. Of course it did not hurt that I came to realize "George" was "actually" a "Georgette."

[16] Participant-observation meant, as it should, that I was often more conscious of my own "gendered-ness" in cyberspace than that of others around me. The little gender performance related above was accompanied on my part not only by a complex mixture of resistance and concession to stereotypes, but also by my keen awareness that I was dying to know who "George" "really" was, and especially what "gender" "he" "really" was. Gender provided greater psychological and behavioral mooring than I ever imagined, and without it or with it in question, I felt very much adrift.

[17] Sherry Turkle, whose research gives probably the best account of "virtual gender-swapping," especially in the game environments known as MUDs (Multi-User Domains), echoes this sentiment (212). Describing her first online encounter with a male-presenting character who asked if she was really an "it" (she had neglected to assign her character a gender), she writes, "I experienced an unpleasurable sense of disorientation which immediately gave way to an unfamiliar sense of freedom" (210). This sense of freedom was later confirmed when she herself presented as a male character, and found she had an entirely "different attitude about sexual advances" (they were less threatening) and an easier time asserting her own agenda (it seemed "natural" rather than "dismissive or rude") (211). But apparently the need for gender moorings never goes away. Turkle likewise reports that "guessing the true gender of players behind MUD characters has become something of an art form" (211). Gender difference, including the taking

on of different genders, matters very much in cyberspace. And this, in case you're wondering, *was* the most controversial topic in my discussions with women on the Web.

[18] Of course, what else should we expect? Gender is not only a ubiquitous feature of embodied identity. It is also, and always has been, intimately tied to technology and vice versa. Sadie Plant, for one, has found a usable past in the figure of Ada Lovelace, with whom, she says, "the histories of computing and women's liberation are first directly woven together" (1995: 45). Daughter of poet Lord Byron, Lovelace may rightly be considered the co-inventor and programmer of Charles Babbage's Analytical Engine, precursor to the modern-day computing machine. She, more than any of her contemporaries, recognized its potential, modeled as it was on the automated loom, allowing it to perform not just synthetic operations but also the logic on which these operations are based. The Analytical Engine, she wrote, "*weaves Algebraical patterns*, just as the Jacquard loom weaves flowers and leaves" (quoted in Plant 1995: 50). "In recognition of her work," Plant tells us, "the United States Defense Department named its primary programming language ADA, and today her name shouts from the spines of a thousand manuals" (64). For Plant, this ongoing, intimate relationship between gender and technology, while historically repressed (or perhaps because of its very repression), has liberating potential for women. The ghost in the machine, in other words, is female.

[19] The weaving of women into this new technology can happen in ways that are relatively straightforward. For instance, I was impressed by how often women mentored other women onto the Web, how they supported and encouraged each other and shared their expertise. When a woman posted her first message in a forum or spoke up for the first time in a chat, she was welcomed and congratulated. Women who knew HTML and other techniques of web publishing trained other women; those who were able to scan graphics and record .wav files shared them *and* credited each other for their origin and circulation. The result was often enhanced self-confidence and the willingness to try new things. Hope Morritt observed in her research as well that the motivation and means for women's use of computers often differed from men's, but found no reason to conclude that women were intimidated by the technology or adverse to it. She therefore challenges the underlying assumption, present even in scientific studies, of a pervasive "gender gap in computing" (23). Dietrich likewise urges us to appropriate this new cultural space for ourselves and our concerns. Through the Internet, she argues, "women can gather together in ways that challenge the constraints of time and space, allowing them to explore the potent relations among agency, authority, and discursive community" (179).

Religion and the Gendered (Cyber)body

[20] As Dietrich suggests, the creation of communities of women in cyberspace is a liberating prospect, which in itself has deeply religious implications worthy of further study and elaboration. However, for my purposes, I want to turn elsewhere, to the work of women like Donna Haraway, Sadie Plant and others, whom I take to be articulating an alternative discourse to the myth of genderless disembodiment in cyberspace and advocating an oppositional politics in the practice of cyberfeminism. Its inaugurating manifesto was a 1985 essay by Haraway in which she elaborated a "cyborg myth" redolent with "transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities" (196). The cyborg is a "hybrid of machine and organism" (191). As such, it challenges the neatly defined and separated categories on which our conceptualization of human embodiment depends. "Why should our bodies end at the skin," Haraway asks, "or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?" (220). In this cyborg myth, then, the human

body is reconceptualized "as a boundary figure belonging simultaneously to . . . previously incompatible systems of meaning" (Balsamo 1995: 215). And the boundaries this cyborg myth invokes, then proceeds to violate, are the very dualisms fundamental to Western consciousness: not only the dichotomy between organism and machine, but also that of animal and human, nature/culture, mind/body, public/private - all now ideologically in question. When important boundaries are threatened, we tend to shore up the others as if to defend the whole structure from collapse. "Indeed," as Balsamo notes, "the gendered boundary between male and female is one border that remains heavily guarded despite new technologized ways to rewrite the physical body in the flesh" (1995: 217). Here we see a case of what Doris Kadish calls "politicizing gender," in which anxiety over the confusion or dissolution of cultural categories is displaced from arena onto another. Gender, like race or sexual orientation, often does this work because it is, as she says, "familiar and omnipresent," seemingly natural (3).

[21] At least it used to be. Now the stakes have been raised, since gender itself is increasingly being exposed as a constructed and hence uncertain category. Gender as performance is no longer obscure academic theory, but an everyday occurrence on the Web. Not only are there women playing men and vice versa, but multiple permutations, such as the character in Turkle's research who "turns out to be a man playing a woman who is pretending to be a man," and says of the experience, "This is more real than my real life" (10). Such troubling of gender becomes even more acute when we consider the crucial role body imagery plays in organizing and managing the categories by which we live. Anthropologist Mary Douglas has shown us how bodies have special status in demarcating and protecting boundaries, precisely because they are so vulnerable to penetration and subject to profusion (cf. 115-129). With bodies, it is difficult to keep inside and outside neatly separated. We should note, however, that male and female bodies are not parallel in this regard. Anxieties over maintenance of bodily integrity and thus the integrity of categories which it maps, are gendered, Lupton says, for "the boundaries of the feminine body are viewed as being far more permeable, fluid and subject to 'leakage' than are those of the masculine body" (101). Likewise, the female body threatens (in the male imaginary anyway) to engulf the other in its (supposedly) dark and mysterious recesses.

[22] Thus, I would argue that the politicizing - as well as the policing - of gender on the Web has far less to do with protecting women than with protecting men. It is about maintaining the integrity of the male body from the threatened confusion or dissolution of boundaries that the cyborg represents. This is why, as Haraway's critics are quick to point out, cyborgs can "go either way." They "can equally be represented by the technofascist bodies of a Terminator or a Robocop," says Cathy Peppers, "as by the 'women of color' affinity identities Haraway describes" (165). But, to my mind, this only testifies to the power of the cyborg myth and its uncanny ability to trouble gender. Whether in cyberpunk fiction written by male authors or the Hollywood fantasies noted above, what we are seeing here is a mad scramble to claim the cyborg body for men, to fortify it against its own potential for what Haraway calls "disturbingly and pleurably tight coupling" (193).

[23] I believe this also helps explain the language of moral panic we increasingly find in much popular discourse about the Web. Metaphors of addiction have now become part of our Internet common sense, but explicitly sexual metaphors run a close second, among them my personal favorite - the "seduction of power and pleasure in cyberspace" (Brooke). These are all metaphors of indulgence and excess, which barely disguise their overriding concern with containment and control of the body. But, again, there are contradictions. At the same time we

see a fixation on the threat of bodily profusion, we also hear that cyberspace offers the promise of safe sex, sex without penetration or the dangerous exchange of fluids, sex without consequences.

[24] I would argue, however, that this too is a containment strategy. Like the myth of disembodiment in cyberspace, of which it is a piece, it marks off that realm as separate from "real life" in order to keep "real life" safe from its disturbing effects. After all, this is only "virtual reality." In fact, so the argument goes, the very reason people are motivated (seduced?) to experiment with such permutations of gender is because there are no "real" consequences. But Turkle found, as did I, that the consequences are many and often quite powerful. Virtual gender-swapping, she says, "may involve you in ongoing relationships. In this process, you may discover things about yourself that you never knew before" (213). Several of the women I met online are even now dealing with life changes brought about by such relationships, which have opened up new possibilities of gendered behavior for them, including new forms of sexual desire and response. Yes, people try things in cyberspace they might never try otherwise, but not because it is a space without 'real' consequences, rather because it is, at this moment in history, still transgressive space.

[25] Two questions remain. First, what about this scenario might we call religious? Most basically, one of the functions of religion has always been to establish and maintain the fundamental categories through which we organize, give meaning to, and thereby seek to control an untidy world of experience. Moreover, transgressed boundaries in the form of contradictions and anomalies - whether internal to the system or between the system and external reality - are nearly always overlaid with myth, ritual and symbol. Finally, religion has always pressed body and gender - the gendered body - into service in accomplishing this task. More specifically, we might consult Sarah Coakley's list of several themes recurring in contemporary theological discussions about the body, among them: "the intense ambiguity of the individual body as locus both of potential sanctification and of defilement, and the careful regulation of points of entry and exit; the transformative and fluid capacities of human bodies to pass into the divine . . . , and of divine bodies to appear in the flesh; . . . the stories of divine actors as *foci* for the playing out of the ambiguities of the body; the denial and chastening of naive bodily satisfactions for the sake of a transformed and transindividual state; and the correlation of bodily meditations with societal and cosmic effects" (9). These are strikingly similar to many of the themes we have noted in contemporary debates over the nature and status of embodiment in cyberspace, such as: the mingling of organic and technological forms of embodiment previously conceived of as radically disparate; concern for the integrity of the body over against its invasion by or dissipation in cyberspace; conversely, the desire to merge with the cyberspatial matrix by leaving the body (what cyberpunks call "the meat") behind; a growing mythology of cyborgs as figures through which to work out these concerns and possibilities; and the correlation of larger social and cultural contradictions with the cyborg bodies onto which they are mapped. And while most elaborations of the cyborg myth appear in secularized form, thus avoiding explicit reference to the "divine," we might easily imagine how cyborgs trouble the boundary between human and divine as well, inextricably linked as it is to the other dichotomies of Western consciousness. Clearly, the utopian promise of cyberspace emerges from its potential to extend human consciousness and embodiment beyond their present limits to levels and dimensions traditionally considered supramundane. Along these lines, Brenda Brasher argues that the cyborg provides a "key interpretive symbol" for the religious anthropology being worked out in contemporary popular culture. Cyborg narratives, she says, "raise essential religious questions" because they

address "the range of humanness possible in our era" (809, 815). My work here suggests that the issue is not simply the range of humanness *possible* in our era, but also and even more so the range of humanness *proper* to it, with gender serving as one of the strategic fronts on which this territory is being challenged and defended. Thus, in relation to my original project, we may do better to think in terms of the religious *function* of the gendered body in cyberspace than of its *meaning* - which we have found to be multiple, contested, and therefore precisely what is at stake.

[26] The second question returns us to the place we began: is this scenario, if indeed I have described it accurately, liberating for women? Finally, that decision must be made on a case by case basis. Not only can you not make judgments in theory, you cannot make sweeping generalizations about even the *practices* of Internet culture as a whole. Some are more liberating than others, some are downright oppressive, and most vary depending on the circumstances and people involved. But short of drawing no conclusions whatsoever, which I think not only unfair but disingenuous, I will say that, at this point, I find no reason to pronounce "virtual reality" any *more* oppressive than "real life" and find good reason to believe it does offer much in the way of liberative potential. We do well to remember that women are not merely Internet consumers; they are also the producers and shapers of this cultural landscape and the technologies that support it. Technology never plops down in our midst from on high, always already fully formed. Rather, as Hugh Mackay says, it must be "domesticated," winning a place in both our households and our work environments (278). Women's power in this regard may still be limited, but it is hardly negligible, as shown by the readiness with which Internet Service Providers and other related businesses have courted women's patronage and the eagerness with which women have found - or should I say, made - themselves a home on the Web. Furthermore, the Internet cultures currently developing do seem to permit, perhaps even encourage, the troubling and transgressing of categories that in the past have served to reify gendered embodiment and thus to constrain women. Here I must agree with Donna Haraway when she says, "It is the simultaneity of breakdowns that cracks the matrices of domination and opens geometric possibilities" (216).

[27] But I am also willing to venture more than this. Whether "really" the case - and, of course, the line between reality and virtuality is likewise now at risk - I like to think Sadie Plant is on to something when she suggests that Ada's programming is indeed "secreted in the software of the military machine" (64). Perhaps here I am carried away by the romance of this image, but the seduction may be worth pursuing. "Like woman," she writes, "software systems are used as man's tools, his media and his weapons; all are developed in the interests of man, but all are poised to betray him. The spectacles are stirring, there is something happening behind the mirrors, the commodities are learning how to speak and think. Women's liberation is sustained and vitalized by the proliferation and globalization of software technologies, all of which feed into self-organizing, self-arousing systems and enter the scene on her side" (1995: 58). Or I might simply end with another of Plant's suggestive metaphors. In an online interview at the Geekgirls website, she was asked: "Do you think technology is sexy?" She answered (one likes to think without pausing a beat): "Yeah, really sexy."

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