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Queer Cyborgs and New Mutants: Race, Sexuality, and Prosthetic Sociality in Digital Space

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Long ago I learned my lessons from the comic books. I learned that mutant bodies were powerful but vulnerable bodies; vulnerable because such powers made one a target for social control, prejudice, enmity, and evildoers seeking recruits, vulnerable because these energies threaten to overcome and eclipse the fragile vessel of the body. In 1980 the Marvel universe introduced the superhero team called the New Mutants, a multicultural crew of misfit teens led by an ascetically thin Vietnamese refugee Xi'an Coy Manh, the daughter of a South Vietnamese colonel with an evil twin (and also mutant) brother and a criminal ganglord uncle. Recruited by Professor Xavier for his New England School for Gifted Youngsters and called Karma in her X incarnation, she was a grim and conscientious figure, able to seize control of other people's minds and bodies—a fortuitous alteration of her genetic code in the aftermath of her mother's exposure to mutagenic chemical defoliants used during the war. The luckless subjects of her power would become extensions of her will and her senses—prosthetic mannequins speaking in her voice, attacking their fellows with their physical strength or armor where she had little of both. Though she could possess several subjects simultaneously, her control would be fragmented and sometimes awkward, distributed among the hosts. In many ways, it was a curious power that left her vulnerable to physical threat and harm. Her own flesh was not protected by any aspect of her power, and she was forced to find some discrete corner or shield herself with the bodies of her more physically powerful team members. And the experience drained her; often she would eventually collapse from the exhaustion of controlling another's mind and body. If she remained in possession of her subject for too long, she would begin to leak into the subject, or the subject into her—and her distinct personality and memories would be melded with those of the host. Nine issues into the series Karma had been captured by an enemy called the Shadow King and disappeared, only to reappear herself possessed by his disembodied spirit and of monstrously large proportions, having lost both her psychic strength and bodily control.

When I was young I sought to develop my own psionic strengths, hoping perhaps my mother, too, had been exposed to the same chemical substances. This did not seem wholly unreasonable; after all, like Coy Manh I had relatives in the former South Vietnamese army, a brother with definite potential for evildoing, and an enduring sense of being a categorical mistake. Like the mutant teenagers that populated the Marvel universe, I felt my birthright was to exist “outside” the normative social body of central Minnesota. I reasoned that this awkward, preadolescent exterior—garbed in mismatched, secondhand clothes and thick eyeglasses—would serve me well as a secret identity for the while; but my real self (which would arrive with puberty, as it did in the comic books) would be eruptive, powerful, and wield a mastery of my body and my surroundings that I didn’t yet possess. No revelations were forthcoming, however, and after a while I consoled myself with the assurance that there were dangers I would never be then forced to face, so frighteningly realized by Karma’s own possession and loss of self.

For years the appeal of comic-books faded away, and punk rock had come and gone as my chosen venue for social mutancy. But in a Boston comic-book shop, between sessions at an MIT conference on race and digital space, I discovered an old back issue of the *New Mutants* series, with a cover featuring a possessed Karma as an enormous puppetmaster, dangling and jerking her chosen avatars (her former *New Mutants* team members) at the ends of their strings. Because story arcs in comic books are ruled by fateful coincidence and constant resurrection, I recognized this encounter for what it was—a fortuitous link between the mutant in my imaginary and the cyborg in my work. It made sense: both Karma and the cyberspatial body represent popular cultural visions of the intersection between organic bodies and technologies, and the powers and dangers involved in the transgression. The mutant body and the cyborg body act as metaphors, representations of social structures and cultural systems in a seemingly new, complex, and contradictory configuration. She is an image of our notions about body and bodies in a moment of transformation, creating the imaginary spaces that the mutant/cyborg inhabits and posing new human possibilities and problematics.

In this essay I examine representations and images of the mutant/cyborg subject in feminist and queer science fictions; even progressive cyborgs need to be resituated within the material and ideological conditions of their origins to make sense of their political motives and possibilities. With comic book in hand, the following group of commentaries traces this intersection and transgression in science fiction and cyberspatial culture through two very queer concerns: our prostheses and our mobility. From the Greek, *prostithensis* means “to add”—*pros*, “in proximity,” and *tithensis*, “to place”—a word, a part to something else. The prosthesis—a human-machine encounter enhancing movement, function, or activity—is often conceptualized as the interface allowing increasing freedom,

mobility, and speed. As such, a prosthesis connotes several meanings: an artificial part replacing what has been irrevocably lost; an addition to the principal body enhancing movement, function, or activity; the intimate interpenetration of the biological with the mechanical. But the prosthetic subject describes both the incorporation of these meanings and a particular kind of doubling—the worker whose mechanized labor is assisted by robotic arms or machinery; the abstract citizen who, desiring the protection of the state, gives up the particularity of her body; the comic book avatar, a mutant who temporarily possesses the bodies and minds of others; the lesbian or transgendered subject, equipped with a harness and a dildo, resignifying the phallus and sexual meanings and practices; and the virtuality of a material body in digital space, interpenetrated by informational patterns and protruding machinery (keyboard, mouse, monitor). As technologies of the self, prostheses are both literal and discursive in the digital imaginary. They are a means of habitation and transformation, a human-machine mixture engaged as a site of contest over meanings—of the self and the nonself, of the strange and the familiar, of the parameters of mobility and its limits. At this interface the body is at stake—where it begins or ends, what it means, what is replaceable (and what is not), what its limits might be, what dangers may lurk in the encounter.

Locating my inquiry at the intersection of the imagination and material reality, I begin with the *New Mutant* Karma to interrogate the premises of what I call the “recombinant liberal subject” of cyberspatial fantasy—an abstract, sovereign subject released from social location. It is this capacity for inclusivity, attributed to the imagined neutrality of the cyborg in cyberspaces, that allows feminist and queer theorists to reimagine a radical subjectivity that celebrates fluidity and mobility. I then focus on feminist and queer interventions in science fictions and queer practices that seek to disrupt the “straight” taxonomy of sex/gender/desire, with profound consequences for representations of race and the cyborg subject. At this juncture I ask, What effects do our prostheses—whether figured as abstract personae in a global public or fantastical bodies of mixture and masquerade, as projective fantasies of control or sliding, shifting walls of invisibility—have upon subjectivity and social relations? What are the implications of feminist and queer conceptualizations of digital space and prosthetic sociality for the examination of race, not in isolation, but in critical, complex, and contradictory articulation with gender and sexuality? Is there a vanishing point at which, as Karma so powerfully worries with her fiction, the body ever really disappears?

“Your Mind—Your Body—Belong to Karma!”

While a minor character in the Marvel pantheon, Karma is massively traumatized: she grew up during the war in Vietnam as bombers and bullets flew overhead; her parents were imprisoned in a reeducation camp until she freed

them with her powers; their escape on an overcrowded fishing boat was violently marked by the attack of Thai pirates; too weak from hunger to use her powers, she was forced to watch while the pirates murdered her father and raped the women, including her mother; her mother then died the day the survivors were rescued by the U.S. Navy; responsible for herself and her young siblings Leong and Nga, she moved to New York City where her ex-general, secret crimelord uncle kidnapped Leong and Nga in an effort to force her cooperation in his schemes. Originally gathered to fight “evil mutants” who (of course) sought to subjugate humanity, these teenage New Mutants are nonetheless viewed with fear and suspicion by the nonmutant population. Flanked by her teammates, Karma is an admittedly odd figure; often she holds her head in her hands, the only outward indication of the use of her powers. (The others erupt into black masses of solar energy, transform into animals, project spirit forms, or burst out at breakneck speed.) In the comics her powers are visually rendered as a kind of boundary-breaking psychic ray—it extends multihued (but usually in shades of fuchsia) from her furrowed brow to envelop her usually unwilling but violent opponents, traversing panels to intervene in other spaces. In the fashion of all comic-book characters, who are given both to lengthy exposition and statements of the obvious, she might declare, “Your day is done, villain! Your mind—your body—belong to *Karma!*”

Taken as a kind of evidence—and because comic books often wage battles across titles and temporalities—Karma can be read as a warning about the dangers of prostheses and possession, self-transformation and the boundaries of limitless mobility. For decades, both cyberpunk and corporate science fictions (and the intersection of both) predicted anarchic affairs between automaton and autonomy, negotiating the possible achievement of total liberty from the body (or derisively, the meat) or regulation. These fictions produced a cybernetic fantasy of the recombinant liberal subject—an abstract, sovereign subject reconstituted by the interpenetration of the virtual-systems interface with liberal humanist discourse, the transcendent figure of the technological sublime. That is, because both textual and graphical virtual interfaces make possible the decoupling of public persona from the materiality of the body, digital space can be made to sanction a body politic in which subject formation is understood as divorced from assigned or ascribed characteristics or social location. The appearance of the skin, the distribution and texture of hair, the bone structure of features, the contours of the body, the quality of grooming, the coterminous interplay of surfaces—the visual apprehension of race, gender, class, sexuality, and the like falls apart. To the extent that liberalism deems these to be constraints undermining autonomy and utopian subjectivity, digital space promises their removal through the absence or mitigation of presence.

But the figure of Karma substantiates the dangers of abstraction. Her powers might be said to mirror the powers of the recombinant liberal subject in digital space, enabling an escape from the flesh and the possession of other bodies, but

the hope that this genetic cyborg can be read as an autonomous social agent is circumscribed.¹ The history of this cyborg is continuously apprehended in the present: the source of her powers, her ability to possess other bodies and minds, can be traced to a series of technological interventions in the war and to her DNA.² The history of Karma, but also of Xi’an Coy Manh (her “secret identity”), is thus embedded in the historical reality of the biochemical weaponry of the U.S. military-industrial complex, and necessarily references a disturbing past of neocolonialism and medical experimentation. She is a cyborg whose creation could have easily resulted in physical deformity or damage—as it did for others whose exposure to the chemical defoliants did not end so fortuitously—and yet she is nonetheless a freak. She is a cyborg *because* she is Vietnamese. Her adventures are constant reminders of this past—she joins the New Mutants and acts as Professor Xavier’s secretary so that she might continue to provide for her siblings, who somehow contrive to be kidnapped again and again by various villains, including their uncle. As a “new mutant,” she displays the arrogance of the war’s engineers not on the surfaces of her body but from *within*, projecting these properties of possession and control onto others. As a New Mutant, her powers mirror the conditions of her creation. Against the utopian technological discourse in which the body is rendered inconsequential and immaterial, her *particular* body in all its permutations is the instrument of (and not the impediment to) her powers.

And far from being an abstract subjection position ensuring autonomy and mobility, the “new mutant” reinscribes the difference and the social powers that the recombinant liberal subject disavows. Her genetic mutation does not allow Karma unusual access to freedoms. On the contrary, because of the dangers and risks that accompany her powers, she must demand discipline from her prosthesis. As a cyborg, Karma must pass for human or risk being the object of fear and hostility, but to do so she must deny the history of her genetic mutation in an attempt to approximate the ideal (nonmutant) or be marked (by the X) as an “illegitimate” human being. The trauma of passing is realized in the “secret identity,” which is *not* the mutant superhero but *the persona of normalcy*. This secret identity—and its recombinant liberal counterpart in digital space—implicates the social powers that produce, situate, and constrain legitimate/illegitimate subjects. This subject who suppresses is provided a kind of prophylaxis, to borrow from Lauren Berlant—a prosthetic status as abstract “person” that disguises her particularity.³ But the impossibility of this disembodiment erupts repeatedly. While Karma may pass for human, she cannot otherwise pass as other than Asian; the consequences of the first kind of passing may bear upon the second, in which her body is already marked as “foreign” in the West, and vice versa. The objectification of the Vietnamese by the U.S. military as “mere gooks” during the intervention—and thus justifying the usage of napalm and biochemical defoliants—suggests that the hope to pass for human is precarious and a historical contingency. For the body that is understood as

too much body—too much sex, too much skin, too much history—the ideal of the unmarked liberal subject is violence.

But the mobility attributed to the recombinant liberal subject is not limited to abstraction; in the release of the body from social powers, the ability to wear a body that does not reflect or refer to the physical appearance of the user/performer is perhaps the most popular aspect of science fictions. And when superpowers fail to manifest, digital space provides. The emergence of the cybernetic interface has posed an incipient and significant challenge to some essentialisms as cyborg subjects generate new bodies and design new selves in the choosing and fusing of new parts in a potentially endless process of consumption and self-invention; the prosthesis of digital space enables a mobility that promises both autonomy and inclusivity. But however transgressive (and some avatars might be within certain parameters), these are choices that may simultaneously participate in the reconstruction of a recombinant liberal subject—continuously accumulating surplus (material and cultural) capital in late modernity. Such modes of cross-identification and cybernetic drag are coded as safe or entertaining, divorced from social consequence or political conditions. Even as “warranting” (the process of making the physical body legible) becomes problematic in digital space, the corporeal codes or tokens of “identity tourism” or cross-identification can still be fetishized, and the relations of power that produce and circulate such narratives about specific bodies are concealed, made invisible in electronic environments. These codes do not require the physical body that authorizes them into digital space to match, to be *warranted*, but they invoke bodies nonetheless, and in very specific ways.

This may easily become the occasion for (a desire for) escape, a wish for a post-body future in which one might enjoy the exoticism of otherness or dodge complicity by inhabiting that space of difference. Indeed, the fantasy of becoming “other” (or some approximation of her) is a feature of modern commodity culture and contributes to the apprehension of mobility for the liberal subject. The contemporary spectacle of multiculturalism appropriates racial and national otherness for use in a range of fantasies of identification. Lisa Nakamura describes this as “identity tourism”; writing of the Lambda MOO environment, she observes that “Asian-ness is co-opted as a ‘passing’ fancy, an identity-prosthesis that signifies sex, the exotic, passivity when female, and anachronistic dreams of combat in its male manifestation.”⁴ In these user-built environments, Nakamura suggests that the transgender and transracial “identity tourist” who occupies the space of the “other” is engaged in a fantasy of social control. The popular avatars that Nakamura discusses—the samurai, ninja, or mail-order bride—are deeply implicated as codes in contemporary anxieties about gendered labor and transnational capital. That many of the persons who adopt the identity of an “Asian Doll” in electronic environments are, as Nakamura surmises, white men, would then suggest that the performance

of transracial and transgender performance does not necessarily disrupt social (or geopolitical) relations *between* specific bodies; digital space allows for the nonmimetic act to be ideologically contained by the abstraction of virtual reality. Released from an empirical referent, the digitized token is circulated as “play” and severed from the sociopolitical and ideological processes that produce it. Nonetheless, these codes reference a body politic and frameworks of cultural intelligibility that, in this case, spectacularize already hypervisible bodies.

To what degree, then, does the autonomy of the recombinant liberal subject depend upon the suppression of other subjects, throwaway cyborgs used as servants, laborers, or toys? Maintaining multiple subjectivities drains Karma, and she is always in fear of losing control of her prosthesis, or worse, abusing its capacity. Her twin brother Tran developed similar abilities, and enjoyed the power over others. Having both saved and spared his life on numerous occasions she was forced to absorb the essence of her evil twin (effectively killing him) when he threatened innocents (having possessed Spiderman) under the guiding criminal thumb of their ex-general uncle. And when possessed by a mind more powerful than her own after a raging battle of wills, Karma grows enormous, gorging to satisfy the appetites of the Shadow King, the disembodied mind of an Egyptian crimelord once trapped in the astral plane who inhabits her body for his own vicarious purposes, fulfilling fantasies of consumption, disguise, and desire. In the throes of this possession, she traps her former team members—who had thought her dead—and pits them against one another in a gladiator-style battle for an audience of the international elite. Always a risk when using other bodies as a personality, she is submerged in the appropriation of *her* physical form; the Shadow King even dresses her physical body like a geisha in an enormous kimono and top-knot. Possessed, she becomes her own enemy; could the dangers of inhabiting other bodies be more obvious?

The Queer Appeal of Cyborgs

Because of this fluidity, this mobility, feminist and queer appropriations of science fictions are rewriting gender and sexuality in cyberspaces, fashioning pervert avatars in drag and powerful cyborg selves in a space perceived as boundaryless. If digital space makes possible a Cartesian abstraction or the commoditization of the flesh, it also suggests that there is no necessary mimetic or expressive relation of psychical identifications to physical bodies. Digital space represents a situation in which the interiority of subjectivity is no longer easily located on the subject’s flesh, potentially disrupting the (presumption of an) expressive relationship between embodiment and social identity. The image in digital space does not necessarily refer to an actually existing object/subject or body; the virtual medium is a medium for discontinuity. The detachment of public personae from the physical location/material of the body can have the effect often attributed to drag or transgender identifications, denaturalizing

gender norms and making possible the articulation of a plurality of sexual subjectivities.

It is at this juncture of theory and technology that many feminist and queer scholars have engaged cybernetic politics as a space of identity play and gender reconstruction.⁵ A *Wired* editorial extols the virtues of cyberfeminism “based on the idea that, in conjunction with technology, it’s possible to construct your identity, your sexuality, even your gender, just as you please.”⁶ Others argue that “[a]ll the things that separate people, all the supposedly immutable facts of gender and geography, don’t matter quite so much when we’re all in the machine together.”⁷ Thus, digital space is hailed as a liberatory space, disrupting the social determinism of the body from the identifications of the self, allowing for sex play/gender fuck transcending the unidirectional implication of “sexual orientation” and gender norms. This radical potential is often identified with the gender trouble instigated by Judith Butler—that is, that gender does not constitute a metaphysics of presence, that a particular gender is not inherent to a particular sexed body, and that sex and gender do not thus exist in a one-to-one expressive relation to each other, that sex itself is a gendered construct.⁸ The appeal of drag as a metaphor for subversion in digital space is located in the act of cross-identification and *self-conscious* performance. Utilizing various modes of performance, drag is theorized as the revelation of the prosthetic nature of gender. Rather than a “bad copy,” drag is the disclosure of *no* original, of the fabrication of gender as essence through the repetition of its expectations and signifying systems by the “wrong” sex.⁹ Both drag and digital space make possible the nonmimetic mapping of bodies, dislocating embodiment from social identity or self. Both imagine new ways of making subjects—including cyborgs as drag queens or genderqueer rebels—seemingly free of social imperatives. Drawing upon Butler’s arguments, feminist and queer scholars like Thomas Foster, Allucquere Roseanne (Sandy) Stone, Cynthia Fuchs and many others have argued that the cyborg offers an imaginative site for radical potential because “nothing in a cyborg body is essential.”¹⁰ This crucial recognition—that nothing in a body, cyborg or not, is essential—does not, however, null the body.

As such, feminist and queer science fictions do negotiate the body in digital space in complex ways. In Melissa Scott’s novel *Trouble and Her Friends*, a group of gay and lesbian computer hackers have been implanted with “brainworms,” neural-electrical connections that allow them to directly interface their nervous systems with cybernetic networks—the now-familiar prosthetic capacity for “jacking in” in cyberpunk science fiction.¹¹ Of them the main protagonist India Carless, a white lesbian hacker (with a suggestively “colorful” name), abandons the shadow world of brainworms, dollie slots, and hacking ICE (Intrusive Countermeasures Electronic) when an electronic surveillance act is passed by the U.S. Congress (notably, against an international treaty). She is compelled to return to the networks when someone adopts her former code name—Trouble—to wreak havoc. The specter of government regulation inspires a crisis of identity

for her circle of friends, who are also faced with the choice to “go straight, moving out of the shadows into the bright lights of the legal world, the legal nets.”¹² The dangers of “going straight” are clear—whether assimilation into the mainstream of computer technicians and system operators, legally bound to follow a set of rules and conventions, or assimilation into the mainstream of heteronormativity and “wholesome” values. In contrast, digital space represents for the characters a space of liberation as queer individuals whose mobility is constrained and regulated in “real life”—it is a place where “a woman could easily be as hard and tough as any man,”¹³ where their skills are the measure of their worth, not their sexualities. Nevertheless there is prejudice in the world of hackers too, including a kind of corporeal disgust for those hackers who’ve had the “brainworm” implanted. At one point Trouble speculates that “may be that was why the serious netwalkers, the original inhabitants of the nets, hated the brainworm: not so much because it gave a different value, a new meaning, to the skills of the body, but because it meant taking that risk, over and above the risk of the worm itself. Maybe that was why it was almost always the underclasses, the women, the people of color, the gay people, the ones who were already stigmatized as being vulnerable, available, trapped by the body, who took the risk of the wire.”¹⁴ The novel groups women, queers, and people of color as a category of individuals willing to take more risks with the body because this “stigmatized” body has not been historically available as a vehicle for liberal subjectivity. The hope of “escaping” these social constraints (and acts of violence) is articulated in this novel as a possibility located in the antiessentialist ether of digital space; but this imagined capacity for radical inclusion, attributed to the prosthetic sociality afforded by cyberspace, treads dangerous ground. This is a queer cyborg subjectivity enabled by a purported universality in which digital space facilitates not only an escape from social location but also the reappropriation of the queer cyborg as a recombinant liberal subject. Whether in the replication of a universal antagonism (binary gender), in statements of solidarity or in the hope for gender and/or sexual insurrection, these accounts are often characterized by a critical lack of attention to examining the boundaries drawn around gender and/or sexuality as a social category to the exclusion of other vectors of analysis.

Nor is the transgender subject necessarily any more suited to resolving this dilemma. Sandy Stone suggests that in cyberspace, “the transgendered body is the natural body. The nets are spaces of transformation, identity factories in which bodies are meaning machines, and transgender—identity as performance, as play, as wrench in the smooth gears of the social apparatus of vision—is the ground state.”¹⁵ While aptly articulating the challenge to gender expressivity that digital space and virtuality may pose, the seeming elevation of a singular or “natural” subject/body should give us pause, as should the seeming reduction of identity to performance and play. Having dismantled the mythology of a natural woman located in biological or psychic substance in both patriarchal and feminist discourse, or the universality of “queer” as a signifier for fluid and

mobile sexual or intellectual practices, can the substitution of another body—however self-consciously constructed—as a universal subject provide a new paradigm for future identification? Where is the agency of this body located? Is it in the act of passing among other nonmimetic bodies? Is the transracial body *also* a natural body? And in considering this last question, to what extent can digital drag acts and the queer challenges these pose to traditional relations between sex and gender ideologically and politically occlude—if not contain—an emergent discourse (and conflict) with transracial performance?

In these science fictions mutant bodies and cyborg bodies are analogized as minoritarian bodies, subjected and subjugated, but the limits of this analogy are striking. Moreover, these “stigmatized” bodies are differently disciplined through sometimes conflicting and sometimes collaborating operations and structures; the work of intervening in these operations and structures must account for these different modalities of social subjection. In one problematic instance, the blurred boundaries of human-machine have inspired allusions to Gloria Anzaldúa’s work to describe deracinated cyborg subjects with a gendered and racialized geopolitical vocabulary; for instance, the iconography of the borderland and *mestiza* in Sandy Stone’s theoretical project is used to describe *all* agents participating in electronic virtual communities.¹⁶ The representation of the *mestiza* as a privileged figure transcending racial and ethnic boundaries—or those boundaries between physical and virtual space—is also the problematic relocation of a specific configuration of history, gender, race, sexuality, and nation. What are the consequences of theorizing the cyborg as *mestiza* for the actually existing (racial) *mestiza*? For the *mestiza* who works in the *maquiladoras* (factories) of multinational electronics industries, the *mestiza* who is “in the machine,” but in a radically different relation? What are the consequences of equalizing the imaginative gap between physical and virtual space with the juridical sociopolitical division of the U.S.-Mexican border? To what extent does the particularity of race (or racialized gender) as a social or subjective force disappear in order to extend the metaphor of hybridity? Far from allowing a neutral or transgressive subject position of liberty or autonomy, this powerful fantasy of the hybrid cyborg subject can function as a technology for seeming to become “other” while allowing for the reassertion of the agency and fluidity of the liberal self. The argument that “bodies don’t matter here” might be another kind of prosthesis in and of itself—the deliberate disdain of a tangled materiality for a uniformly prophylactic body, encased in hard plastic and disguised as a safe sociality because in digital space, *everybody has one*. It is a queer erasure indeed.

Overkill

Just where does the science fiction end and the cyborg possibilities begin? Feminist and queer fictions of digital space and technological transformations of the body blur the boundaries in the search for a utopian space, simultaneously producing and contesting the political terms of liberalism. In particular, the

novel *Nearly Roadkill: An Infobahn Erotic Adventure* uses practices of gender play to conceptualize virtual reality and digital space in a curious blend of liberal humanism and postmodern queer theory.¹⁷ Transgender theorist Kate Bornstein and Caitlin Sullivan’s collaborative work explicitly probes the possibilities for transgendered performances in contemporary cybernetic technologies (which are also suggested by Bornstein in her nonfiction “guide” to sexual subversion, *The Gender Workbook*),¹⁸ while demonstrating the limits of the drag/transgender metaphor for digital embodiment. Set in the near future, the central characters, Winc and Scratch, are ordinary users (i.e., not hackers) who enjoy the performance of a host of differently sexed and gendered identities in chat rooms, message boards, and instantaneous private exchanges. In the course of their online flirtations and flings in various textually rendered bodies, they examine the nonmimesis of gender, sex, and desire and fall in love. They do not reveal their physical bodies to either the readers or each other until halfway through the novel, at which point we learn that Winc is a male-to-female transsexual whose gender identity remains fluid and unfounded and Scratch is a butch lesbian. Notably their whiteness, unlike their complicated negotiations with gender and sexuality, is invisible and implied in the absence of explicit racial markers. During the course of the novel Winc and Scratch inadvertently become rebel icons for a larger community of users, having refused both to mimetically reproduce themselves in their online gender and sexual performances and to register their “real” identities with the U.S. government. Corporations have pressured the government to pursue this program of registration as a mutual venture of the public and private sectors, making it possible to gather demographic data and to tailor advertisements and strategies of surveillance for individual users based on the given information. Against the enthusiastic endorsement of actual cyberlibertarians like R. U. Sirius—for whom “commerce is the ocean that information swims in”¹⁹—these fictional queer agents are seeking an escape from the commoditization of being and compulsory consumption. Against the “natural” order of the corporation (made “natural” through sheer ubiquity) in digital spaces, Winc and Scratch seek to resist the field of invisibility cloaking the corporate logo and capital through which the contemporary social body travels.²⁰

Winc and Scratch are postmodern queer hero(in)es, and their virtual and actual acts of performance and “becoming” are clearly meant to be read as modes of transgressive mobility and fluidity, colored with the liberation of desire. While the state and transnational capital are located as nodes of power creating and regulating gendered citizen consumers, digital space is envisioned as an untamed and radically decentered expanse in danger from commercial colonization. They are the ultimate, technologically enhanced drag performers, imaginatively speeding through digital guises and urban spaces eluding captures of all kinds. And while themes of anticorporate resistance are not new to science fiction, it is rare that such resistance is spearheaded by a queer couple who simply

want to fuck however they chose. The valence of choice becomes the pivotal antagonism of the novel: between government/corporation and the individual, assigned gender and gender fluidity, regulation, and liberty.

Perhaps nowhere is the extent of virtual systems' premise of unfettered mobility more evident than in an appeal for democratic liberal pluralism, made later in the novel as the characters discuss the implications of their rebellion. Weighing their options, Winc and Scratch argue that digital space is where "anyone who can't speak up because they were always afraid of being put in their place" is granted the freedom to do so—to speak out, to act up.²¹ But while Winc and Scratch imagine that anybody—female, black, Latino, "Asians getting off the boat in California," gay, lesbian—can live more freely in digital space, "there is almost no consideration of how this technology might be used by blacks, Latinos, or Asians, despite their inclusion in the list of social subjects who might share [their] attitude toward the Internet."²² The implications of this conversation are otherwise ignored. How might these other subjects—who are hardly a homogeneous bunch—access, use, and interpret the mobility offered by digital space? And would this necessarily entail a *desire to escape location or engage in identity play*, and if so, could we be assured that the meanings attached to these acts would be the same, or familiar to Winc and Scratch?

What is also not acknowledged is that at least some of these "others" are subjects of an abject modernity, encompassing vulnerable (biological) bodies, militarized borders, and microchip assembly lines.²³ As such, the recombinant liberal subject can be read as an autonomous social agent *on the condition* of the making of other kinds of cyborgs, highly gendered and racialized workers mechanized and merged as interchangeable parts, widgets in a different order of machinic-organic assemblage. So while the question of race and transracial performance is always already implicated in the electronic environment—whether figured as invisible labor or identity play—it is overwhelmed by the spectacular and celebratory narrative of gender and sexual cross-identifications in the novel. When race is invoked it is always problematically aligned as a category either parallel to gender or altogether alien.

In the midst of an online dialogue about gender uncertainty and the context of ambiguity while occupying one of her online personae, Leila, Scratch muses, "There's this civil rights march in my neighborhood once a year. All of us, black and white, march in it. Suddenly people smile at me who wouldn't give me the time of day otherwise. The colors of our skin don't matter then, because it's *that* day, that march." Assuming "Leila" is black, and unaware that she is a persona animated by Scratch, Winc replies, "I hadn't even considered your race. Ouch." "Exactly. You probably assumed I was white, right?" Scratch then "wearily" replies, "It's OK, it happens all the time. One of the cool things for black folks online is they are assumed to be white, too. Not that they want to be white, but they're assumed to be 'in the club,' without having to prove credentials at the door."²⁴

This brief passage juxtaposes a field of racial discourses in complicated and sometimes contradictory ways. In the first instance the force of racism is located in the alleged fixity of visual knowledge. Its apparent counterstrategy is situated in the technologically enhanced ability to pass, extended by digital space to all persons of color. Passing here is construed as transgressive because it traverses boundaries of social identity, and because it exposes the categories as arbitrary. Yet passing is not a secured set of political effects or meanings, but instead encompasses a range of exercises and radically different implications for different subjects seeking to pass through different and uneven relations of power. The ability to pass is interpreted here as a deliberate strategy to reap certain benefits and avoid harassment, though the privileged body (white, male, heterosexual) retains its social power as the neutral body. In appropriating the rhetoric of disembodied abstraction, the asymmetry of corporeality ascribing universalism to some bodies and particularism to others is problematically reproduced in digital space. As a counterstrategy, passing in this instance depends upon the silence and invisibility of the minoritarian subject even as "the humiliating positivity of the particular" is attached to her body. Because this prosthetic of abstraction—facilitating the claim to legitimacy and mobility—is a relative privilege, the reproduction of the "bodiless citizen" of liberal humanism as a transcendent cyborg position in virtual systems is a clear danger, permitting the black body only an incorporeal participation in the dominant cultural body. Even as liberty is imagined as effortless mobility, it sets the terms of prosthetic sociality and places limits upon marked subjects who have no previous claim to abstraction. The presence of race is a disruption in a space that claims an asymmetrical neutrality. Oddly enough, Scratch, whose transgendered performances deliberately inspire anxiety, does not ask the obvious question, Why not be disruptive?

The answer—or *her* answer—is contained within the same conversation. Raised in this passage is the assurance that racial difference is easily surmounted—that in the visual absence of epidermis or because of an assumed political solidarity, race as an organizing principle and/or disruption disappears and "the colors of our skin don't matter." Scratch, feigning fatigue and passing as black, reiterates the sovereignty of the recombinant liberal subject—the "cool thing" about online sociality is that it allows "black folks" to adopt the prosthetic of whiteness. Here again race is imagined as *only* a superficial visual regime, and racism is abstracted from its historicity in ideological apparatus and social relations. However, even as Scratch asserts that cyberspace allows black people to pass as white, she herself passes as black by signifying race at all. The social transgression of her genderfuck is aligned with her passing, functioning to position transgender drag on an expressive level approximating that of racial otherness. The theoretical celebration of blurred boundaries and pluralism masks the act of appropriation here, disguised as empathy or the denaturalization of racial categories. The passage thus performs the elision of whiteness as transparency—and

not necessarily as an effect or privilege of power—even while positing gender as functionally and politically “the same” as race, *even while* reductively assigning race a merely visual affect/effect and the positivity of particularity. These moves position the two kinds of racial drag in lopsided and slippery opposition; for while the prosthesis of neutral whiteness allows black people to passively participate as abstract individuals, Scratch’s own transracial performance functions, like her drag, as self-conscious transgression. Thus, the structural and discursive distinction between the black subject who passes as white and the white subject who passes as black is not disavowed but *reconstituted* in an unfolding power play, displaced by the drag metaphor, in which the white subject reasserts her agency (and appropriation) as privilege and her “special” knowledge (about civil rights, the suffering of African Americans, etc.) as authority.

When Winc and Scratch do finally interact face to face, Scratch admits to a seemingly endless desire to occupy multiple personae, a desire that she is uniquely able to fulfill online, in which she juxtaposes racial identity with animal: “I wish I were black because I hate my skin and probably next week being a wolf would be even better.”²⁵ For her, both blackness and animalness signify escape from the felt abjection of inhabiting her particular body—and their juxtaposition has an imperial archive that is obscured in the “play” of the virtual interface. Such fantasies of identifying with and knowing “others” through a proximity, or, in the case of digital space, *approximation* of the “other,” reify a racial being while simultaneously establishing a normative (e.g., white) self against which racial otherness is performed as radical difference. For Scratch, that radical distance from her sense of self can best be articulated as blackness or animalness in a romantic appeal to a state of being prefigured as more real, more authentic, more primal, perhaps—an appeal that has a lengthy history in colonial and imperial relations. As a queer subject whose mobility is deemed her weapon, her willingness to occupy blackness is represented as an empathic, rather than preemptive, identification. This fantasy of redemptive identification appropriates/approximates the (imagined) experiences of racial or national otherness while depoliticizing the social powers that produce them. This racial difference is fixed in order for Scratch to imagine herself as a transgressive subject, redefined by her consumption of this otherness in which blackness becomes a fetish-object *through which she comes to know her self*.²⁶ The list of “Latinos, Asians, et cetera” cited elsewhere in the novel as a multicultural vision of digital potential is nominally fulfilled by Scratch’s appropriation of *all* difference as her drag and/or her desire.

In a novel that otherwise celebrates digital space as the denaturalization of gendered and sexual norms and the proliferation of multiplicity, race is both mythologized as radical difference (“I want to be black because I don’t want to be me”) and radical similarity (“I can pass for black because color doesn’t matter here”). Winc and Scratch are queer agents whose universality (as rebels, as countercultural heroes) reanimates the production of an abstract, sovereign

subject that is instrumentalized in a liberal humanist discourse of digital space.²⁷ Their protests and play are limited to the language of individual rights and the promise of mobility, and freedom is defined as individual license and couched in the rhetoric of “choice.” It is an emancipatory project that reproduces the liberal cyborg subject as the ideal condition of personhood, with a twist. If the transgender body is the *natural* body in the cybernetic interface because its nonmimetic logic is universalized, then transgender *in this instance* becomes the neutral subject position that secures liberty and autonomy, and digital space is the field of fantasy in which particularities are rendered equivalent, even while racial positivity (especially when articulated as nonwhiteness) continues to figure (if sometimes inadvertently) as surplus, difference, or disruption. Resting on the liberal premise of equality, the antiessentialism of cross- or transgender identification in digital space can thus subsume and mask the differential reception and meanings of racial or transracial identification. That race, gender, and sexuality are simultaneous modalities of social subjection does not mean that they operate analogously, or that the technologies of their regulation or the strategies for their transgression and destabilization will be commensurate. This queer practice cannot destabilize racial categories as a scientific concept, biological or metaphysical essence, or even as a system of classification simply by refusing to acknowledge its borders; and this queer cyborg subject may designate a flexible space that accommodates various and fluctuating positions, but its ambiguity also creates a space of ahistoricity, of social forces and cultural asymmetries once again rendered invisible.

Can this queer cyborg subject conceptualize an avatar that isn’t an escape? After all, as a young girl I was inclined toward revenge—feelings of betrayal aside, this was not an identification with abstract bodilessness. There was no small part of me that sought to recuperate my body, this ill-fit, awkward thing, through the exercise of my hoped-for mutant powers. As such, Karma might provide an alternate route of the politicization of the queer cyborg subject. It is significant that as a New Mutant she wears a uniform, but not a mask; in refusing to do so, she deliberately forsakes her “secret identity,” the abstract prosthesis of normalcy, passing, or identity play. So rather than imagine escape, we might imagine disruption, like Karma reading the histories of our mutant/cyborg/queer bodies into the matrix to indict the social powers and material conditions that produced the regulatory apparatus of deviance and normalcy.

Re-Membering Our Cyborg Bodies

“I sold my first harness yesterday!” Karyn tells me, quite excitedly, in a downtown Oakland restaurant where, I am almost sure, such words have never before been uttered. An attractive, heterosexual Chinese American woman with a penchant for black metal (black-colored pieces of metal) and longhaired Nordic types, Karyn stirs her soup as she’s relating her “firsts”—first vibrator, first dildo, first harness sold. I think to myself that I’ve never seen anybody get so excited about

their retail job, and wonder if the glow of selling sex toys—even for a women-owned collective business—will fade in time. Jokingly, I ask her to differentiate one harness from another, and she launches into a lecture—still fresh in her mind—given to her just the day before. I get dizzy with the wide array of choices available on the market and my mind starts wandering into theory, as it often does when not corralled, and I begin to speculate about the reach of consumer capitalism and the liberation offered by the commodity, and, Oh dear, should I be thinking these things while Karyn explains the difference between silicone and rubber?

I remind her to let me know where and how the products she sells are manufactured, again.

I tell this story because before I rediscovered the comics, I began thinking through digital space by way of the dildo (so often accompanied by the harness), which I had been thinking about in terms of historicity, multiple modes of production, and material relations. Sexuality is implicated in the spatial dynamics and the economies of late capitalism, producing and organizing desire; and the merger of the multibillion-dollar sex industry with plastics technologies inspired bold entrepreneurship in the realm of prosthetic parts, the imaginative stuff that stocks the shelves of the above-mentioned, internationally renowned feminist sex shop. In this context, the figure of the dildo in lesbian theorizing occupies a prominent location in sexual subversion, skewering notions of an authentic lesbian sexuality and “[turning] techno-culture’s semiotic regime of simulation and the political economy of consumer culture back against the naturalization of masculinist hegemony.”²⁸ As poststructuralist feminist and queer scholars have argued, conflating a representation (a dildo) with reality (a penis) is problematic; the dildo is not a penis, nor does it necessarily refer to a “real” penis. The mass-produced dildo does however expose the penis as itself only a representation or a failed imitation of the phantasmatic phallus, a copy of a copy of that infamous seat (or staff) of patriarchal power.²⁹ The site of the dildo, then, is open to multiple modes of inquiry—its mass production as a commodity in transnational capital, its meaning production as an erotic object of queer sexuality and (to invoke the cyborg in the dildo) the resulting interface of automaton and autonomy. As a technology/toy, the dildo (with or without the stabilizing harness) enables a fluidity and mobility of sexual practices and meanings. Still, as Heather Findlay observes, “lesbians with uncooperative sexual tastes still market and purchase politically incorrect dildos that are shaped like penises and named after mythological patriarchs, as in the ‘Adam I’ or the ‘Jupiter II.’”³⁰ Clearly there is more to be disentangled than cords, buckles, or loose limbs—if the representation is not equivalent to the reality, then what does it mean, and why?

In the electronic environment, the disavowal of the material flesh on a visual register is partnered by a simultaneous preoccupation with the digital reconfiguration of bodily pleasures, the virtual striptease of concealment and exposure in

parts. Something about sex lends itself to prostheses, the body capable of incorporating a wide range of attachments, physical *or* psychic, and as such something about cyberspace lends itself to sex, an appended metaphor for artificial bodies, the technological imaginary and mediated sociality, or what Howard Rheingold calls “teledildonics.”³¹ Imagining a technology that will allow users to map their physical bodies onto virtual images and translate movements in digital space into sensual stimuli, the possibilities—wiring virtual hand to physical crotch—again suggest the breakdown of the mimetic relationship between material flesh and electronic prosthesis. But as I have argued, all bodies in electronic space are prosthetic—involving technological extensions or reinventions of the body and its senses. Thus, digital space is often theorized as the penultimate *play* space, where “asymmetrical power relationships [become] part of a much larger and more diverse erotic and experimental toolkit,”³² and an eroticized technology will offer “pleasures of corporeality that render meaningless the arbitrary divisions of animal, spirit, and machine.”³³ An entire economy of longing and desire is organized around this impasse of presence and absence, embodiment and abstraction; clearly, erotic electronic technologies *depend* upon the signs of difference to establish the parameters of interfacial fantasy and subsequent transgression. But such that digital space and all its prostheses are sites of contest (like the dildo), we cannot assume that the fact that digital space makes possible this more diverse “erotic toolkit” that the form that follows is necessarily subversive. The relevant inquiry would thus be, If *prostheses* does not reference a “real,” organic body, what does it *mean* in digital space? Do our prostheses emerge fully formed and innocent into circuits of desire, without memory? Do they necessarily circumvent the referentiality of bodies or produce new tangles?

Several years ago, browsing Good Vibrations in San Francisco, I stumbled over a African-American History Month display. On a low-standing table covered in kente cloth sat propped-up porn videos featuring black performers, “black erotica” novels and how-to guides, and a veined black rubber dildo, complete with testicles, modeled on black porn star Sean Williams’s penis. Though on some level this collection was “merely” an exhibition of the goods and commodities available for purchase in this worker-run collective—an organization that is explicit in its sex-radical feminist politics—its display was provocative.³⁴ Michel Foucault warns that sexuality is not simply a stubborn drive or animal instinct adverse to control; sexuality is endowed with “the greatest instrumentality” in relations of power, the affective quality of historical circumstances and haunting absences.³⁵ Again, the notion of “instrumentality” is double-edged; Karyn tells me that the “realistic” black dildo is immensely popular, as Alycee J. Lane also attests—“What does it mean when white hegemony extends to the production of dildos?”—during her own foray into sex-shop bins.³⁶ When approached simply, prosthetic bodies (and parts) are assumed to be autonomous objects/subjects possessing meanings independent of the particular circumstances of their production or reception. The black dildo is simply molded, tinted rubber on the

shelf on the sex shop, and in digital space all bodies are *just* bodies because they are deliberate fictions in the absence of physical verification—we lack evidence, or the evidence of bodies (or body parts) is disassembled. And though the virtual avatar or the rubber dildo does not necessarily refer to an original or factual reality, the significance of the prosthesis still is produced through a contest of meaning that refers to a body politic. There is a politics embedded in the production, circulation, and consumption of sex toys beyond the dominant and often reductive discourses of deviancy or liberation.

I bring up the dildo in the midst of comic-book characters and science fictions in order to make two points about the material production of these (fantasies of) prostheses and the constructedness of all our images and realities. I began this inquiry with a question: What are the implications for mutant cyborg futures for Karma, whose powers to possess are the “reap what you sow” result of the systematic destruction of the war in Southeast Asia, and whose body inspires suspicions (traitor, gook, foreigner, freak) of all kinds? And from Karma’s body to others like hers, not so “lucky,” who stayed or immigrated, too: What are the implications for transgression when the bodies of Asian and Asian immigrant women workers (in sweatshops and factories of varying working conditions) provide the labor for the production of dildos and circuit boards, those instruments of identity play, mobility, and freedom? How do we account for the “other” social forces in the exploration of sexual and gender plurality—like the gendered economies of service labor, and other kinds of desire (for money, for food, for power)? We have the “new mutant” produced from the conjuncture of U.S. militarisms and economic imperatives and the “new cyborg” produced from the same. Their prosthetic existence, technologically enhanced by the technologies of war and mass production, implicates the racial geographies of transnational capital, globalization, and postcolonialism. Clearly, the hope that we might elude the naturalized order of the corporation (and the state) in digital space or queer sex play—as Winc and Scratch seek to do—is itself implicated in the technology.

Importantly, these realities of free trade zones and biochemical defoliants, sexual deviance and racial pathology, dildos and motherboards, are apprehended as meaningful through images and representations. We cannot retreat to “essence” or “experience” as an antidote to the fictions of hypersexual black men or limitless cyborg desire. While there is a physical world external to language, no order of meaning exists in itself in a thing called “reality.” Without assigning meaning to the black dildo in the feminist sex shop, I would argue that it is impossible to transcend the politics of the prosthesis/signifier; to invoke Jacques Derrida, we are forced to take a detour through signs. What does it mean that an eight-inch “monster” dildo, complete with veins and testicles, is named “The Beast” and only comes in black?³⁷ Is it possible to consider the reference to animalistic fervor, paired with an exclusive hue, without recognizing and grappling

with the troubling historical allusion to a vilified black male sexuality?³⁸ Having invested bodies with the power and knowledge relations of discipline, management and constraint, these various representations do not reveal or conceal their empirical referents; they *constitute* them. The prosthetic, without referencing a real (flesh) body, can still approximate a (symbolic) body politic and sometimes a troubled or troubling one, and in addition to the obvious body politic of its material production. That is, the absence of a material referent—never mind Sean Williams, or the fact that Karma is a fictional character, or the commodity fetish that “disappears” laboring bodies—does not occlude the prosthesis as a site of meaning or historical citation. The hope that a return to the “real”—of bodies, of experiences, of social relations—will act as an antidote to these representations and fictions ignores the fact that the image, the prosthetic, *is* a social relation. While there is no *particular* black person who is necessarily immobilized in this particular citation by a feminist collective for the purposes of a “celebratory” display, *blackness* is domesticated as an image and a subject position. So too are the bodies of labor and war, whose gendered Asianness is defined by “nimble fingers” or the “mere gook rule.” As such, avatars and dildos are meaningful codes formed in relation to an “outside,” with social forces implicated in their exchange. To insist on the historical and relational grounds of meaning is to resist divorcing the fetish object from its productive conditions—in this circumstance, the total abstraction of the prosthetic from social relations (the black dildo means nothing, and is produced invisibly) or in the uncritical reiteration of stereotype (the Black Buck, for instance).

While the resignification of bodies, of names, of parts, is politically compelling, we cannot sever this project from its structuring conditions—those that gave rise to the need to imagine resistance, or from the site of contest, in which it must produce its meaning. To make sense of our prostheses, analytically and politically, or to imagine how we might assign new meanings, we are forced to resituate them within the conditions of their construction or manufacture, and in the context and circumstances of their usage. We must therefore attend critically to what kinds of subjects digital space produces at this interface of the automaton and autonomy, the machinic and the human. What seemingly new articulations are given form and what might these occlude, or displace? What are the possibilities and what are the limitations of resignifying—a body, a practice, a name, a prosthesis? Consider the dildo in the harness as a metaphor, imbued with layers of meaning and performance. A prosthesis molded and painted by an assembly line of orderly machines and ordered immigrant women workers, a copy of a copy of the imaginary phallus, a sly subversion of masculinist prerogative, and a web of straps connoting the constraining, the taming of the nonhuman, animal or abject. Silicone, rubber, plastic or leather, vinyl, D-rings or clasps, the contradictory connotation of this amalgam of technologies/toys is a desire realized through both control and abandon, confinement and

release, possessor and possessed. As such, is it any surprise that the prosthesis (the image or representation) may easily become the location of both sexual and racial “terror and desire,”³⁹ of control and the promise of freedom?

These comments return us to the hopes of progressive discourses of digital space, and the transracial identifications of queer agents like Scratch, who seek to bridge the imaginative gap between self and other by adopting a prosthesis that may harness an image in the attempt to “free” it by claiming a loving identification with radical difference while eliding the circuits of power. Her approach to blackness—as radical similarity and radical difference—indicates her knowledge of a difference that is subsequently disavowed: it is there but it is not. Her fetish produces the desire to encompass and consume difference while renouncing it, or more problematically, seeking to resolve that difference in its consumption. Reading the classic Freudian account in which the (heterosexual) fetishist’s object allays the absence of a relation between the sexes, Findlay similarly suggests that “the black dildo fetish can ‘make acceptable’ a specifically racial lack—the lack, that is, under white hegemony of a relation between the races. . . . [T]he big black dildo allows whites to carry on a relation with blacks that is, in reality, no relation at all.”⁴⁰

All these fears and fantasies of floating, unattached prostheses are deeply implicated in each other, and what is often unremarked is the *political power* of their fictions, their thick historicity haunting the “positive” space of our prosthetic sociality. If we are not after all separate from our machines, it seems that our machines now embody our most radically symbolic activity—representing ourselves to ourselves, or in the often violent, always vexed interface of social relations.

The Future of Cyborgs and Mutants

What digital space could then mean for our politics is both problematic and profound. What had previously been established as separate domains (the virtual and the real) are mutually informed processes of signification; and our prostheses are not just symbolic but instead symptomatic of our contemporary contradictions. The fetish of digital space, of the body released from history or mimesis or materiality, manifests for progressive discourses both the hope for liberation from prior meaning and the desire to become the instrument of resolution. Digital space, as a redemptive technology of new life forms, may reproduce a modernizing or progressive idealism that reiterates the limits of transgression in the *political* coding of race (as difference) as disruptive. The cyborg may designate an elastic and progressive space that accommodates multiple and fluctuating positions, including social misfits, drag queens and kings, and transgendered rebels, but its ambiguity must not resubordinate the subjects (recalling Winc and Scratch’s list of Latinos, Asians, etc.) for whom such claims are made by erasing the historicity of those social forces and relations of power that generated the desire to be “free” in the first place.

The progressive, feminist, and queer discourses of digital space examined here are limited in scope—in defining freedom as license, liberation as choice, and identity as self-fashioned. They adhere to liberal democratic models of subjectivity and publicity premised on the imagined absence of social forces and the micro- and macropolitics of power. The fact of incoherence—of signs and signifiers mismatched, of bodies disappeared or made anew (or seemingly so), of social identity detached from material flesh—does not necessarily signal the disruption of a more hegemonic reality, and such incoherence can be easily accommodated by equally fluid rearticulations of power.⁴¹ A more useful approach to digital space would necessarily find ways to discuss the production of signs and circuit boards simultaneously, study the material and ideological labor of the technological imaginary, and examine the differential ways in which the blurring of flesh machine manifests across free trade zones and troublesome histories of colonial fantasy.⁴² To otherwise affirm an antiessentialist subject while asserting a unified subjectivity through the valence of the transcendent cyborg, endlessly shifting and ambiguous but somehow outside of social forces or relations of power and capital, is a posture of erasure and danger.

And because her name, after all, invokes return and reprisal, I want to look to Karma one last time for a guiding lesson about agency, control, and the ambivalent instrumentality of our prostheses. As a “new mutant” she is a marginal being whose existence poses a question and a threat to the normative social body and to the status quo of human relations, but not simply because of her powers—these cannot be isolated from the historical conditions of her creation as a Vietnamese mutant subject. While her psychic powers disallow a reductive conflation of body with subjectivity, or a necessary expressive relation between interiority and exteriority, she grounds the play of self and nonself in a nuanced contest of social forces and circuits of power. No matter how powerful her prosthesis, her marginalized body is vulnerable; rather than allow for total mobility, her mutant superpowers—literally and figuratively marked with an X for excess, for exclusion, for ex-human—illustrate the dangers of reproducing an abstract subject through the discourses of antiessentialism or liberal humanism. So while the celebration of porosity between mind and body in discourses of technological mobility would pose a subject who is able to transcend the flesh, Karma’s creation as a mutant subject and its constitutive conditions must be *looked at* rather than *looked through*. Last spotted as a pinkhaired lesbian film student, she defected from superhero-dom because she could no longer abide by the comic book universe of binarisms, which allowed little room for contradiction or complexity. Mobility and fluidity are not the apex of freedoms, as Karma learns the hard way (the only way in the comic books), and there are consequences and dangers involved in the prosthesis. After all, the possibilities and limitations of her prosthetic abilities make Karma a more critical queer cyborg subject *in her Vietnamese-ness*, distinct not because of an essence but because of the epistemic and corporeal violence involved in the production of her existence, because of

the contours of her historically specific biotechnological transformation from human girl to *something more*.

But even if no cyborg is ever born innocent—like Karma, born of a neocolonial encounter and possessed of a comparable power to occupy other bodies—this does not mean we may not simultaneously take *some* pleasure in our cyborgs and yet interrogate the conditions of their existence, as science or fiction. Against a nostalgic discourse of authentic selves or organic interaction, of natural bodies and traditional communities, what might instead be revealed in digital space is the constructedness of all selves, interaction, bodies, and communities; what must be attended to are the structures and relations that produce different kinds of subjects in position with different kinds of technologies.⁴³ While the cyborg bodies we create to navigate these new spaces will not resolve the material realities or social contradictions of their manufacture, they provide a rich assemblage of myths, legends, fears, fantasies, codes, and tools with which to interrogate which bodies matter and why. In doing so we might be better equipped to imagine or even achieve alliances among mutants and cyborgs alike.

Notes

1. The term *genetic cyborg* is also used by Mark Oehlert in his essay, "From Captain America to Wolverine: Cyborgs in Comic Books, Alternative Images of Cybernetic Heroes and Villains," in *The Cyborg Handbook*, ed. Chris Hables Gray (New York: Routledge, 1995), 219–32.
2. Among the original New Mutants, Xi'an Coy Manh is the only member who might be read as a symptom of modernity's violence. The others—a wary Cherokee woman able to manifest images from others' mind as spirit forms; a naive Appalachian boy who becomes a flying, invulnerable human cannonball; an insecure Scottish human-wolf shapeshifter; and a black Brazilian boy who inexplicably draws upon the sun to become a roiling energy mass—are simply mutants with no particular explanation for their abilities.
3. Lauren Berlant, "National Brands, National Body: Imitation of Life" in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 176.
4. Lisa Nakamura, "Race in/for Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet," in *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (New York: Routledge, 2000), 718. Lauren Berlant identifies this code crossing as "borrowing the corporeal logic of an other, or a fantasy of that logic, and adopting it like a prosthesis"; see Berlant, "National Brands," 200.
5. Alternately, cyberfeminist theorist Sadie Plant has argued that the electronic environment provides a pre-oedipal space that reflects a "feminine subjectivity" of weaving and webs, destroying patriarchal control: "[A]t the peak of his triumph, the culmination of his machinic erections, man confronts the system he built for his own protection and finds it is female and dangerous"; see Plant, "On the Matrix: Cyberfeminist Simulations," in Bell and Kennedy, eds., *The Cybercultures Reader*, 335.
6. Hari Kunzru, quoted in Jeff O'Connell, "The Revenge of the Yellowfaced Cyborg: The Rape of Digital Geishas and the Colonization of Cyber-Coolies in 3D Realms' *Shadow Warrior*," in *Race and Cyberspace*, ed. Beth E. Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert B. Rodman (New York: Routledge, 2000), 52.
7. Shannon McRae, "Coming Apart at the Seams: Sex, Text, and the Virtual Body," in *Wired Women: Gender and New Realities in Cyberspace*, ed. Lynn Cherny and Elizabeth Reba Weise (Seattle: Seal Press, 1996), 262.
8. See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
9. The fact that such gestures may be performed by the "wrong" sex suggests that there is no "right" or "wrong" body for any given gender identity; moreover, that the argument for "nature" is actually a political one, the normalization of social control and its violence. Against what Butler calls a "metaphysics of substance," or the articulation of gender as a coherent essence located within the sexed body, gender is instead revealed as a historical affect of a regulatory heterosexual matrix—or in effect, a technology of the self revealed as prosthetic. It would be a mistake to conflate performativity (as a modality of power as discourse or expressivity) with performance (as a deliberate display) in characterizing acts of cross-identification.
10. Cynthia Fuchs, "'Death is Irrelevant': Cyborgs, Reproduction, and the Future of Male Hysteria," in Gray, ed., *The Cyborg Handbook*, 283.
11. Melissa Scott, *Trouble and Her Friends* (New York: Tor Books, 1994). Thomas Foster makes a similar argument in his essay "'Trapped by the Body?': Telepresence Technologies and Transgendered Performance in Feminist and Lesbian Rewritings of Cyberpunk Fiction," in Bell and Kennedy, eds., *The Cybercultures Reader*, 439–59.
12. Scott, *Trouble*, 33–34.
13. *Ibid.*, 210.
14. *Ibid.*, 128–29.
15. Sandy Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 180.
16. Sandy Stone, "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up? Boundary Stories about Virtual Cultures," in Bell and Kennedy, eds., *The Cybercultures Reader*, 524.
17. Kate Bornstein and Caitlin Sullivan, *Nearly Roadkill: An Infobahn Erotic Adventure* (New York: High Risk Books, 1996).
18. Kate Bornstein, *My Gender Workbook* (New York: Routledge, 1998).
19. R. U. Sirius, quoted in Vivian Sobchack, "New Age Mutant Ninja Hackers: Reading Mondo 2000" in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 27.
20. Their cyberspatial maneuverings and their constant travel in the "real world" to escape detection and capture echo the blurred impermanence—and its anarchic, nomadic possibilities—suggested by Sandy Stone: "[S]ome people are getting harder to track. Not by getting physically shifty, but by dissolving, by fragmenting—by being many persons in many places simultaneously, . . . by refusing to be one thing, by *choosing* to be many things"; see Stone, "Split Subjects, Not Atoms, or, How I Fell In Love With My Prosthesis," in Bell and Kennedy, eds., *The Cybercultures Reader*, 400.
21. Bornstein and Sullivan, *Nearly Roadkill*, 135.
22. Foster, "Trapped?" 452.
23. As Coco Fusco notes, the so-called digital revolution has "reorganized what used to be known as the Third World, making those territories into low-end markets and low-wage labor pools for multinational corporations" (Coco Fusco, "At Your Service: Latinas in the Global Information Network" (1998) online at <<http://www.hkw.de/forum/forum1/doc/text/fusco-isea98.html>>).
24. Bornstein and Sullivan, *Nearly Roadkill*, 74.
25. *Ibid.*, 195.
26. In an incisive interrogation of cross-racial empathy, Sara Ahmed notes that "[blackness] become[s] a means through which [a woman] can know herself (as black), by providing what is lacking in her self. Passing for black is a technique of knowledge insofar as it

- remains tied to the narrativization of the white female subject's knowledge of herself through her sympathetic incorporation of others (by assuming an image of blackness, it becomes known as that which is lacking in the white self); see Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 133.
27. In describing digital space as nomadic and themselves as guerillas, their "adherence to modernist myths of extreme dislocation and refusal of 'home' ground" can replicate the "appropriation of the margins by the center in the name of a supposedly radical theoretical practice." Caren Kaplan, "The Politics of Location as Transnational Feminist Practice," in *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, ed. Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 146.
 28. Cathy Griggers, "Lesbian Bodies in the Age of (Post)Mechanical Reproduction," in *The Lesbian Postmodern*, ed. Laura Doan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 121.
 29. *Ibid.*, 118–34; and Heather Findlay, "Freud's 'Fetishism' and the Lesbian Dildo Debates," in *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, ed. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 328–42.
 30. Findlay, "Freud's 'Fetishism,'" 332.
 31. Howard Rheingold, *Virtual Reality* (New York: Summit, 1991), 350.
 32. Stone, "Split Subjects," 397.
 33. McRae, "Coming Apart," 262.
 34. In a series of coincidences, I'd been reading *A Red Record* by Ida B. Wells in a graduate seminar and following the trial that eventually convicted the first of the white supremacist men who had brutally murdered black Texan James Byrd Jr. I remember listening to the reports from the courthouse that February; a Pacifica Public Radio journalist had described the damage done to Byrd's body, seen in autopsy photographs, noting the mutilation of his genitals. And in a contemporaneous letter to a sex-advice columnist that I had read, a white woman narrated her arousal watching *Amistad*, visions of buff, black men in chains triggering an erotic fantasy of bondage and domination. She did not understand why her black boyfriend would not reenact those scenes and wanted to know how she might convince him.
 35. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 103.
 36. Alyce J. Lane, quoted in Findlay, "Freud's 'Fetishism,'" 335.
 37. The blurb in the Toys in Babeland catalog reads, "If your favorite refrain is 'More, please,' you're sure to keep this hefty, realistic rubber model at the top of your toy pile. Tipping the scales at an impressive 8" long and 2 1/4" in diameter, you can even use this monster in a harness... that accommodates a dildo with balls, and use extra-tight ring... Available in black only"; online at <<http://www.babeland.com>>. Thanks to Madeline Neighly for alerting me to this product.
 38. In a related prosthetic phenomenon we might consider the older cousin of digital space, the telephone, as an extension of the body barreling through fiberoptic cable, and never more obviously than when sex is exchanged. Highly efficient coders and skilled programmers of desire, phone sex workers by necessity must draw upon a widely recognizable range of social codes in order to invoke erotic modalities of desire: taste, touch, smell, and so on. These social codes and verbal cues mobilize certain expectations about the bodies being exchanged in the token; and desire requires no physically present body to draw upon the ensemble of social forces that sustain dense meaning from code.
 39. Findlay, "Freud's 'Fetishism,'" 334.
 40. *Ibid.*, 335.
 41. In an earlier essay, I noted that "virtual harassers" to my Asian American feminist resources website made a point not only of willing my prosthetic body into view, but also of identifying themselves as white straight men. Accordingly, I noted that privilege is not necessarily disrupted by attention drawn to its particularity. I further noted, "The violence of normalization depends upon making natural uneven relations of power and the bodies to which authority accrues; but because fluidity is also a crucial component of gendered and racial hegemony, denaturalizing the social character or the morphological particularity of masculinist hegemony and its attendant racial order by no means guarantees collapse." See Mimi Nguyen, "From Paper to Pixels: Tales of An Asiatic Geek Girl," in *Technicolor: Race and Technology in Everyday Life*, ed. Thuy Linh-Tu and Alondra Nelson with Alicia Headlam Hines (New York: New York University Press, 2001).
 42. To quote Kaplan in "The Politics of Location," "In a transnational world where cultural asymmetries and linkages continue to be mystified by economic and political interests at multiple levels, feminists need detailed, historicized maps of the circuits of power" (148).
 43. On a broader scale, what has been located as the source of identity—whether the imagined rational self or some substance of gender, sexuality, or race—can be shown to be (also) effects of institutions, practices, and discourses.