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INTRODUCTION: PERFORMING THE DIGITAL BODY -- A GHOST STORY

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Towards *L'Ecriture Digital*

For me, it's about ghosts. My motives take the shape of a slim blue wrist, an IV drip, a steroid-induced mustache. If I stop typing on my keyboard, and listen, I can still hear her. Now, she's negotiating an uneasy truce with an air tube -- the one living in her throat since her third brain surgery. I see the panic on her face. I try to keep the panic out of my voice. Work with the machine, I tell her. It's saving your life. It's strange; even after my mother was strong enough to forego her ventilator, th at sound took up space in my memory. My mother died two years ago, which is not coincidentally when I became obsessed with writing about the Internet, the performances of the digital bodies therein, the ghost stories told by those bodies.

Much of this special issue of *Women & Performance* consists of writers telling stories, trying to draw connections between the Internet, contemporary feminism, and theories of performance. There is a saying that goes, "A feminist always asks, Who t ells the story and what precisely is told?" Indeed, it is possible to summarize most of contemporary feminism as a extended performance of story-telling, a continual struggle with those codes in narrative which have said about women, "it was ever thus." I n the 1970's, frustrated with the ways in which their life-stories were being co-opted by medicine, psychoanalysis, and sexology, Continental Feminists exhorted women to produce their own narratives, and to tell their own "bodily truths of femininity." Vi sionary texts like Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman* were not only trenchant critiques of the technologies of Freud and Hegel -- they were also offerings of feminine, embodied writing -- *l'ecriture femin'ne*, it was called.

More than twenty years later, however, feminists are in a bind, finding that it is nearly impossible to write of the truth of a feminine body, when we are all in violent disagreement about what a "body" truly is. Each time someone suggests that we need to return to our more natural, "animal" body, a critic like Gayatri Spivak counters with the observation that such a desire is rooted in white, bourgeois fantasy. If you are a woman of color, there is a good chance that your "natural" female body is current ly equated with the bestial. Depending upon your status within the world economies, your "natural" body may be the one denied even basic human rights -- significant only as a bonded prostitute, a wage slave in a microchip sweat-shop, or figure in yet anot her political rape. 1 Lest anyone be confused, the natural body is not only vulnerable "over there": in

the United States, queer activists point out, lesbians are often forbidden motherhood rights by the same politicians w ho argue against the "unnatural" act of abortion. Queer theorists ask just what it is feminists think they are doing, cherishing the womb-filled reproductive body as the "authentic, natural" version of woman, when such a body is turned against them, again and again.

Even the speculum, technological feminists argue, that gynecological instrument re-claimed by Irigaray in her famous text, is no longer an appropriate icon to describe the struggle of women to resist phallogocentrism, nor is it a useful metaphor for writi ng about "seeing" femininity. These days, results of the laboratory get more respect than those of the doctor's office, and the truth-claims of cloning, DNA research, and high-resolution sonograms have replaced older, hand-crafted technologies like specul a. Older intellectual disciplines give us some help in thinking about this new way of living, but not much. Freud, as Sharon Lehner suggests, could not have imagined a world in which a woman's womb would be rendered as a chromosomal Xerox map, and where d igital imaging is in some ways more "true" than physical experience.

What's more, personal technologies have become political strategies, as cybernetics -- communications technology -- determines what constitutes a legitimate body all over the world. In China (where men outnumber women 10:1) and parts of India, imported re productive technologies are being used to determine in advance the gender of a child, and thus "manage" its birth.2 In the United States, the Department of Immigration, pressured to come up with more efficient ways to shut tle bodies, works to deploy artificial intelligence programs which will collect the stories of immigrants once written down by over-worked civil servants, and in turn, determine who is and is not an "illegal alien."3

Most of the writers in this issue believe that like sexuality, cybernetics is a condition, not a life-style choice. They agree with Donna Haraway's assessment that "In the late twentieth century, the cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics." (153) If you are disabled, use a sex toy, utilize telephone messaging services, are chemically dependent in any way, if you have sent e-mail or keyed a bank ATM lately, then you are, yourself, a cyborg -- a body containing both organic and technological compo nents. I was a cyborg, and so was my mother. Nevertheless, it seems to me that announcing that we are all cyborgs is a little like arguing that we are all queer -- it may be true, but what does that mean? Who, exactly are "we", and which politics does the cyborg give us?

Claims of the *fin de siècle* aside, cyborgs, like lesbians, have always been among us. As blind Internet theorist Mia Lipner notes, "Steven Hawking is more of a cyborg than most people sitting around talking Haraway are used to thinking about ." I agree. You might say that if cybernetics is the theory, disability is the practice -- but only if you say that ironically. The history of eugenics demonstrates how fickle the label "disability" can be. We have included a special audio tape installmen t in this issue of *Women & Performance* -- Mia Lipner's piece, *Requiem Digitatem*.

When you listen to the tape, you will probably find that the experience of hearing a computerized text reader is disorienting. Are you "disabled" because you ha ve never heard the Internet? Is Lipner disabled because she cannot see it?

We once knew -- or we thought we did -- who were the able-bodied, what was machine-assisted, and which stories were "true". Now we cannot be sure. Once, we wondered, like Philip K. Dick, if androids dream of sheep. Now, like Barbara Browning, we ask: shou ld cyborgs be worried about AIDS? Can I catch a computer virus during cybersex? Do I have ethical responsibilities in my online community? I might feel fine, but which matters more, how I feel, or a tumor registered on my MRI?

The writers in this issue have been influenced, to varying degrees, by Donna Haraway's 1984 essay, "Manifesto for Cyborgs", and in some ways, this collection picks up where the Manifesto leaves off, adding new perspectives: first person narrative, queer t heories, postcolonial critique, and substantial online experience, among them.4 No longer interested in writing the truth of the body, we repeat instead Judith Butler's question: "Which bodies come to matter -- and why?" Bu tler stresses that when she asks this question, she means it two ways: how do bodies come into materiality, and what is their significance. As this collection of essays attempts to address those issues, our stories move away from the body politics of *l'ecriture feminine* , and towards a cyborg politics of *l'ecriture digital*..

High Performances, Online and Off

"Just what precisely do you study, in a Performance Studies Department?" There's a question for which I have struggled for years to find an answer. Of course, the word "performance" is a loaded one, and it means different things at different times. In the theatre, the word "performance" is used to describe the action of representing a character. Some anthropologists have taken that theatrical model and expanded it to non-theatre situations, i.e., "the performance of self in everyday life." But outside the theater, the term takes on a series of different, although related, meanings. When I use the methodology of performance to write about gender and technology, I often arrive at what I consider to be profound and humbling connections.

In technological fields, the word "performance" generally denotes a measure of efficiency -- for instance, "the engine performed to specifications." In communications, "high performance computing" is the term used to describe the move away from large free -standing mainframe computers, and into something called "parallel processing." In layman's terms, what parallel processing does is link large networks of smaller computers together to harness their computational power, in order to perform arduous computi ng tasks. High performance computing is especially useful in creating spatial models: mappings of Mars, three-dimensional illustrations of the human body for medical schools, architectural schema for urban planners, and weather illustrations.5

By far, the most widely-known use of high performance computing is in the creation of what we know as the Internet. The Net functions through mechanisms invisible to most of its users, who mistakenly believe it to be a seamless communications web. But as anyone who has ever had their account hacked can attest, the Net is neither seamless, nor is it a material entity. Properly speaking, the Internet is not a thing at all, but rather the *effect* of millions of performances called "packet switching." I n packet switching, messages are sent out via modem from one computer to a "switching node" where they are then divided into workable units. The units are, in turn, transmitted to their destination and reassembled. Packet switching protocol requires a ser ies of computer and telephone calculations, occurring in many different locations around the world, simultaneously. The effect of packet switching, what we call "The Internet," then, is really a series of cooperative performance gestures from multiple com puter and telephone systems. The Net functions in a way that the telephone alone (because it operates on a dedicated circuit) does not. Although there is a thing called "the telephone," there is not, properly speaking, a place called the Internet. Rather, the Net's status as a place is a metaphorical hallucination, although an understandably useful one: one of the ways high performance computing works is to carve space into what was once nothing.

Like the Internet, for certain feminist theorists, gender is not a thing, but rather the performative effect of multiple calculations. For feminists, the word performance takes a different derivation: "the performative utterance." The performative utteran ce has its roots in the work of linguistics theorist J.L. Austin, who suggested that there are two kinds of language: descriptive (also called constative) and performative. The performative is that language which executes action ("Let there be Light"); fu lfills claims ("He's dead, Jim"); and enacts promises (a wedding ceremony's "I do"). What fascinated Austin, and what challenges feminists, is the way in which performative language creates the material world, both through gesture and word. For example, t here is no marriage prior to the "I do," just as -- for medical and legal purposes, at least -- there is no death prior to the signs that signify absence of heart rate, or negative brain activity. To put it bluntly, expression dictates meaning. As the wor k of recent feminist medical researchers indicate, the statement "It's a hermaphrodite!" is not one commonly heard in hospital maternity wards, not because some babies aren't born hermaphroditic, but because such a statement generally requires a set of su rgical decisions on the part of a doctor, "for the sake of the child." 6

Near the end of his famous book, *How to Do Things With Words*, Austin wound up suggesting something that was quite radical at the time: all language is performative, and all materiality is linked to the linguistic. Today, in the wake of poststructur alism, computer programming and mass communication, this idea doesn't seem quite so revolutionary. Does it truly matter how much "real" money you have in the bank, for example, if your ATM machine -- an extension of the nation's computerized banking netwo rk -- decides you have none? The health insurance phenomenon known as the "pre-existing condition" is a particularly pernicious example of a performative language that has material effects. Here is another example -- a saying that my

friend Jennifer likes to quote -- "You may not believe in gender, but gender believes in *you*." In some ways, gender was here before you were -- unlike your body, gender is not a material thing, but is, rather, the performative effect of what Judith Butler calls "reiter ative citational practices."

In her book *Bodies That Matter*, Butler argues that "[gender] performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate act." Performativity is, rather, a process, one which looks something like this: first, our understandings of the world a re formulated in norms. In layman's terms, norms are the effects of the statement, "It was ever thus." These effects are then repeated through mechanisms of power and pleasure -- law, medicine, education, erotics, the police, etc. The cultural reiteration -- the repeated "saying again" -- of norms, in turn, produces identification within a human subject. This process is summed up by the statement: I am human, and you are human -- as I define that condition -- therefore you and I are a community, i.e. we are members of the "human race." Concurrently -- and absolutely necessary to the process, Butler argues -- is the process of repudiation. Repudiation functions by way of the statement "Although X is human like and therefore like me, Y is inhuman, and ther efore *not* like me." Repudiation is the mechanism by which the subject may then say to herself, "humans were ever thus", thereby completing the circle that begins with the norm.

Ironically enough, after identification and repudiation, Butler suggests, comes a third gesture -- disidentification. For Butler, disidentification is the more inherently subversive component of identity-making. This is because to disidenitfy, a subject s ays neither "I am this" nor "I am not that", but rather, "I believed myself to be this, and now *I no longer believe*." Put another way, disidentification insistently breaks up binary thought patterns. Explicitly critiquing contemporary identity poli tics, Butler seems to suggest that feminists and queer theorists will accomplish more politically by searching among their ranks for points of disidenitification rather than identification. This is because in the process of coming *not* to believe, a politics of affinity, rather than identity, might be forged.

Digital/Political/Hypothetical

Following Butler's lead toward her own ends, Barbara Browning argues in her essay "When Snow Isn't White" that cyborg politics in particular might provide feminists with two powerful new tools for affinity politics: hypothetical communities and prosthetic identities. Slowly unpacking the etymology of the word hypothesis, Browning suggests:

> A *hypothesis* is a proposal which comes *under* a more grounded premise of reality -- an *alternative,* imagined one which, if proven valid, might slip into our notion of reality, like a hypodermic needle slips under the skin.

Mimicking popular media's most pressing anxiety about needles slipping under the skin, Browning stages a feminist re-reading of the cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash* by asking, "Can

Cyborgs contract AIDS?" Her answer and essay is a gesture toward a hypoth etical community-making, online and off it. One thing Browning points out, and something I'd like to underscore, is this: for cyborg feminists, hypothetical communities are not Utopias.

There has been a recent impulse in sociological writing about cyberspace, one that suggests that online life is the ideal spot to experiment with hypothetical identity-making. If I had a dime for every paper I received from enthusiasts announcing that par ticipating in a MOO "breaks down gender barriers" because of its "performance elements," I would be the next Bill Gates. This line of thought, generally described by my friends on the Net as "gender fucking," has the following levels of naivete: first, it carries a wrong assumption that only an online textual body is performative, whereas a biological body at the end of the terminal is stable. Second, it presents gender fucking primarily as an issue of choice, thus reinforcing an idea that you put on gend er, like a change of clothing, and that gender doesn't wear *you*. In short, online or off it, identity and gender are complicated performances, particularly immune to Utopias.

In her essay "Changing the Subject", O'Brien takes on the sales pitch of Cyberspace as a Gender Utopia, and asks: "Fantasy aside, just how elastic is the institution of gender? How likely is it that cyberspace will be a site/occasion for complicating the customary gender dichotomy?" When we genderfuck online, are we *really*changing the subject of cyberspace?

> If I, as a biological male, log onto a dateline as "Hotpants," a "36-24-34 red-headed female looking for some stiff action" and am pursued and "bedded" by someone whose biography reads: "young black male body-builder looking for a woman who can take all o f me", does it matter that I am really a white, forty-something male middle-manager?

You might not believe in gender, but gender believes in you. The same might be said about the closet. Staring at an ad in the *Advocate* that exclaims, "There are no closets in cyberspace!", O'Brien begs to differ. Of course there are closets in cybe rspace. Moreover, cyberspace is *itself* a closet space in technological discourse -- hence the Communications Decency Act, a bill designed to do little more than fuel American hysteria about the exposure of children to pornography on the Internet. < sup>7

O'Brien asks "[On the Net] can I really expect to be treated just like everyone else? Does "just like everyone else" mean "just like one of the [white] guys?" Nowhere does this seem more clear to me than in Yvette Colon's observations about the obstacles of running group therapy online. An outspoken Puerto Rican woman herself, Colon notes:

> It is easy to assume that in an online [therapy] group everyone is white, middle class, heterosexual, able-bodied and American...Becoming involved in online

> communities requires the luxury of time and money; those without either are marginalized yet again .

Part of community-building, hypothetical or not, it seems, lies in this dual process of compromising and marginalizing -- which is, not coincidentally, where the closet comes in. Barbara Browning's image to the contrary, in the marginalized community of h ospital patients, needles are neither hypothetical, nor do they easily slide under skin. My mother's veins were "compromised" they said, and that is why things hurt so much. To term anything "compromised" is ironic enough, when you consider that etymologi cally speaking, "compromise" is supposed to be a performative speech act *par excellence*, meaning "the act of promising mutually." Who, I wonder, promised my mother's veins? If you take a look at my letters with transgendered woman Kaley Davis, you' ll see what my mother knew: compromise is not something you want to have done *to* you. And yet it seems that everyone gets to promise but the person compromised.

In some ways, Kaley Davis is the skeleton in the closet of the argument that "you can be anything online." Some people view Kaley as a work-in-progress, a hypothetical identity trying to gain entry into one of the few "safe-space" communities in cyberspac e: WIT, the women-only conference of ECHO, a NYC-based online service. I'm sure Kaley doesn't experience herself this way, just as I know my mother didn't consider herself a textbook case in abnormal metastasis, aiding the greater research needs of Roswel l Cancer Institute. These things depend so much on where you are standing, on which space you occupy. For example, the women on ECHO have one week from the time Kaley is admitted into WIT until the time she actually reads the conference, so that they may delete any posts they feel afraid to leave for her gaze. For many women, Kaley is an intrusion, even if a necessary one. What goes unspoken in this compromise is that the outdated beliefs of many (but hardly all) the women in WIT are something Kaley might find intrusive.

Like Kaley, Pamela Gilbert found out the hard way that both community and identity are conferred though an intrusion in space. After a year of being stalked online, Pamela Gilbert knows all too well the power of the Net and the fear it can cause:

> The Net is not "just words" (as if anything were either that or, conversely, anything else) but a space of social action, in which subjects are responsible for their utterances and performances, and in which discursive actions can mobilize material effect s. Like other social spaces, it is not safe...That these spaces are discursive rather than material does not lessen their phenomenological reality.

"Phenomenological reality" is precisely what is at stake in Mia Lipner's audio piece, *Requiem Digitatem*, in which she describes the struggle of an online community -- the Future Culture mailing list -- to deal with the suicide hoax of one of their members, only to later lose one of their most beloved posters, Michael Current, to diabetes complications. Lipner describes her feelings:

> For me, [Michael Current's] death felt real, but in a very weird way. I really did burst into tears when I read that he was dead. I took a long walk to try to clear my head. I was at work and couldn't really sit out in the middle of a university computer lab crying. And I thought, "I don't know how to deal with this. I don't know this person. I don't even have a telephone voice to associate with a name and some exchanged words."

In the words of Mia Lipner, "When everyone and everything is represented by words on a screen, you can never knows if things are truly what, or who they seem." Lipner's argument turns on the fact that context is everything, when we are faced with adjudica ting what is "real." Whether online or off it, the real estate maxim holds true: location is everything. But, suggest Holly Willis and Mikki Halpin, queers have always known as much:

> Queers are classified by position: in or out, top or bottom, fringe or mainstream. There are gay districts, dyke bars, drag strips. In these spaces, issues of community and self are framed. In these spaces, as we have heard over and over again, the person al is the political.

Wondering just what it takes to stake out queer space in cyberspace, Willis and Halpin document the online work of artists Barbara Hammer and Linda Dement in their review "When the Political is Digital." Willis and Halpin, of course, wind up pointing out something my friend Jennifer likes to emphasize: all art is political. This includes digital art, corporate art, art that fails, art that is unseen, or art that is censored. However, whether political equals resistant, or even transgressive, is often a di fferent story. This is especially true when the digital media outshines the artistic messages.

> In her essay, "Metro on Ice Meets Ball and Cheang," Mocha Jean Herrup chronicles the *Spinal Tap*-like saga of her multimedia adventures with Shu Lea Cheang, a lesbian artist best known for her work on racial and sexual themes. Their plan is to work on a CyberBowling installation as a way of creating community space on the Net. Because the project is well-funded -- sponsored by the Walker Arts Center, and launched on America Online -- there is an initial hope that the Bowling Alley site will serve as an art form for a diverse group of digital artists:

[Cheang] is particularly interested in the idea of the communal space of the bowling alley as imagery for the community of cyberspace. "That's what the Net is mostly about," she says. "Community." I think I get it -- at least, it sounds amazing. Multiple locations. "Alien" bowlers. Art out of space.

When the site finally goes "live" it falls short on its promises, providing little sense of community among its viewership due to the fact that the site is "bandwidth heavy": it has so many technical bells and whistles that it crashes cheaper computers. A s Herrup puts it, "Tired of their screen freezing up or waiting endlessly for images to appear, [viewers] simply give up. " Ironically, Herrup makes it clear that for those creating the web site (as opposed to those viewing it) a social and artistic commu nity has indeed been forged. Here, Herrup's real-life tale of the pleasures of artistic *production* -- a group of lesbians, creating, flirting, and eating together -- gently mocks the idea that in the postmodern world, electronic data only exists fo r pure consumption. The Web may or may not be serving up consumer goods "world-wide", but even a crashed ISDN connection can't stop a bunch of digital dykes from hanging out on the cold frontier of Minnesota.

In his essay, "The 'Space' of Cyberspace", economist Harry Cleaver takes a close look at the politics of frontiers, in electronic spaces and elsewhere, and helps explain why do so many potentially interesting online projects turn into techno-gamesmanship and displays of corporate wealth. Cleaver suggests that the frontier metaphor encourages exploitation by corporate capital:

> Like other free spirits, the pioneers of cyberspace can create new spaces for their own (very social) purposes (pleasure, politics, etc.)...Corporate capital then tries either to enclose their spaces by commercializing them if they look profitable, or cru shing them if they look dangerous.

Nevertheless, Cleaver counsels, the reason the frontier metaphor exists is because it inspires "not surrender, but resistance." This, Cleaver argues, is the excitement of any frontier, and is the reason the metaphor survives. Cleaver points to the *Zapa tistas* in Mexico as an example of such resistance, pointing out that during the peso crisis of December 1994, certain international investors tried to buy "inside scoop" information on the Mexican political scene, only to be rejected by those in the k now who were also on the Net:

> The offers were refused, so this autonomous "frontier" of resistance and discussion of the Zapatista alternative continues. Had those approached sold out...the autonomy of the [Net] activity would have become illusory, as little by little the information being circulated became more geared to what investors need to know and less to what is needed to struggle against them.

It's tough, being a resistant cyborg, and yet there are worse jobs. Writers like Amnesty International's Patti Whaley point to the fact that 2/3 of the world's population have yet to make a telephone call, let alone go online. These are closeted, non-huma n bodies keeping communications economies flowing all over the world. Nor do the subaltern exist solely "over there." Emily Poler, a health care worker in the South Bronx takes a swipe at the Communications Decency Act, and asks: "We've all seen and heard about so-called crack babies,

but where are their mothers?" In my mother's hospital room, we watched endless hours of television, and became intimate with the various slave economies of CNN online: anonymous Bosnian rape victims, unstylish drug addicts; mythological victims of child pornography who buttress the state's arguments for information control. I have to agree with Poler when she says, "Creating equal opportunity through the magic of telecommunications is about as likely as making the world a be tter place with a Coke and a smile."

Performing Prosthetic Identity

For this reason, I am less seduced by Browning's argument for "hypothesizing community" than I am by her suggestion that in contemporary feminism, identity is most usefully viewed as prosthetic. Prostheses are artificial devices to replace missing parts o f a body. The phrase "phantom limb" comes to mind. Prosthetics, because they are about metonymic replacement -- hook for a hand; chip for a brain, strap-on for a penis -- are always ghost stories. My mother and I might be cyborgs, but I am also in a prost hetic relationship with her brain chemistry, her memories, her dead body. The site of my prosthetic identity is my hypothetical cyberspace community. When my mother died, where was there for me to go? As Matthew Ehrlich puts it, I fell into the Net, the o nly thing strong enough to break my fall. In his essay, "Throes of Addiction," Alan Sondheim does the same:

> Clutching my notebook, I go out as usual in 16 degree Fahrenheit weather, heading to the local coffee-shop for breakfast/lunch after sleeping fitfully from four o'clock on. It's around noon, and I hug the computer case close to my body, keeping it warm, t he battery charged (last of a dying breed, etc.)

Of course, the notebook Sondheim writes about is a Macintosh computer, and the battery is an older nickel version. It's hard to tell which Sondheim means when he refers to a "dying breed" -- is he talking about his computer, or himself? Dictionaries don't specify whether a prosthesis must replace a part of a *human*body. They also don't specify whether a prosthesis ought to restore the original body back to what it once was, or if the prosthesis might be something that creates a whole new organic uni t. Moreover, while prosthesis is a serious component of cyberpunk (think of Molly in *Neuromancer*) it is hardly the sole province of digital culture. Women who are my age will remember watching the television show *The Bionic Woman* and thinkin g, "Is she a woman? A machine? Both?"

Nor is the prosthesis a fictional device: is an infant who has a baboon heart transplant, properly speaking, a baby baboon, a baby human, or a new hybrid of those two categories? What makes us so sure we know the answers to these questions? The plot thick ens, and bodies look different depending on where you stand, which part of your identity you regard as prosthetic. In the logic of the prosthesis, a *transsexual* is a cyborg, because she changes from one sex to another. A

transsgendered woman, on the other hand lives a prosthetic sexuality -- she points to the fact that all gender is a strap on that you can't strap off.

Like the Net, argues Marcus Boon, the telephone is a prosthetic phenomenon, and "when phone (or other forms of cyber) sex are critiqued," Boon suggests, "the arguments for and against them invariably revolve around the problem of prosthesis":

> *For example, "real sex" (one argument runs) is organic, because it requires direct physical contact. On the other hand, phone or cyber sex is prosthetic, and reflects a technological compensation for an organic lack, be it moral or physiological. Followin g this logic, phone sex is either "bad" (because it's lazy, less than real, impoverished, greedy, self-indulgent, excessive) or else, phone sex is "good" (providing, as it can, "substitute activity" for those who cannot manage "real sex" due to illness.)*

Calling these distinctions between "real" and "cyber" sex "false dichotomies," Boon moves his analysis into a inquiry of multi-user phone chat lines, because "they offer a level of immanence that cannot at present be achieved through other technologies of simulation such as online bulletin board systems and other cyberspaces" and because they display the "sexual preferences of machines themselves." Arguing that chat lines provide "a carefully controlled performance space in which consumers present themsel ves to each other" Boon also notes that the mise en scene of this performance is at least as significant as its visible players:

> *Behind the jocks with their huge penises and the babes with their dripping wet vaginas, very broad networks of human-machine communication come into play: billing and pricing networks, the full expanse of the phone system, downloading "human data" into a n ever-expanding network of moving electrons, all co-ordinated by the computer and its ability to modulate data-flow: what Deleuze has called "the silicon regime"*

Boon insists that "chat-line encounter is structured towards a strange parody of corporate efficiency, with its methods of fast forwarding through caller descriptions, blocking unwanted callers who might waste time, pager systems allowing instant communic ation to most favored parties, should they be on the system and so on." Indeed, he argues, "chat-lines I>are a kind of tele-marketing: time is brief, make your pitch, make it punchy, wacky, startlingly original. Be 'creative'." For this reason, Boon a rgues, the prosthesis argument must be viewed from at least two sides:

> Instead of showing how phone sex and other kinds of virtual interaction produce a sexuality that is beyond "the human," we can show how the global telecommunications-driven economy is more voraciously libidinous than even the

> hottest chat-line...Mid-Atlan tic cellular phone calls, solar-powered laptops, jungle fax machines, 24 hour online stock prices: there's an orgy going on out there.

"Was it as good for you as it was for me?" Matt Ehrlich asks, after his own orgy with a partner whom he suspects might be an Artificial Intelligence program. In his essay, "Turing, My Love", Ehlrich confesses:

> I am overwhelmed by the fear that you will say "no". That you'll say it to make me think we weren't fucking at all. Merely having virtual sex. God, you must think I'm obsessive to be ranting like this so soon after our performance. It's just that our comi ng, our coming together, makes me curious about the very structure of our pleasure together. Was our pleasure...together?

In asking whether "our" pleasure is ever "together," Ehrlich takes Boon's concern about "queering the machine", and doubles it, making the queer body *itself* a machine. Arguing that "all presence is telepresence," Ehrlich weaves his love letter toge ther with the story of both William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and the biography of Alan Turing -- the queer mathematician and the "father of computer science" who was later put on trial as a homosexual and treated with hormone therapy, "thus making him one of our first official cyborgs," says Ehrlich. Noting that Alan Turing committed suicide, and Gibson didn't even own a computer when he wrote *Neuromancer* , Ehlrich counsels against putting so much stock in reality, in the truth underneath the pe rformance of virtuality. Ehrlich tells his lover: "I desperately hope you never reveal the truth to me. Not that I care if you're an AI. I can't help wanting to know. But I prefer to live in the body of the text -- not its meaning.."

In her essay, "My Womb, the Mosh Pit" Sharon Lehner lives in the cybertext, and makes clear what we mean by the phrase "performing the digital body." She reports: "Exactly ten days after I laughed with wonder at what looked like a naked baby boy in real-t ime, documentary black and white on an ultrasound monitor, I aborted a 10 inch fetus from my body in the company of medical strangers." Lehner writes a love letter to the image of her fetus on ultrasound, now lost:

> I am mourning, and I can't say for whom, or even what. Does the loss of a fetus constitute a death, and if so, who dies? How can the fetus die if unborn? How does one properly mourn an image?

Since the fetus is contained within the body of the mother and cannot be "seen" without the sound waves produced by the machine, Lehner argues, in her case "the relationship between technology and biology *becomes* the relationship between mother and child":

> The image does not supersede the material presence of a pregnancy, it mediates, interprets, and supports the physical presence of an unborn child. I felt this baby inside me. I produced milk to feed him. Days after the abortion my breasts leaked.

At the end of her essay, Lehner reports that after an abortion and a miscarriage, she is pregnant once more (for the third time in two years.) Lehner, who wants a baby, returns to the office of the sonogram technician, both in spite and because of her mis givings regarding life on the screen: "I know it can hurt but I long to look again for that bleep..." She is, as she told me in a private conversation, "hooked on the information." I know the feeling. I am hooked, too.

It made me feel like I was doing something, explaining her treatments to my mother. I liked the intellectual erotics of surgeons, oncologists, epidemiologists, radiation technicians, psychiatrists. I saw them all, every day. They liked me, and I did not h ate them. I had no use for the social workers, the physical therapists, the well meaning, underpaid women in fake lab coats whose job was to assist the sick in their struggle to live. My brothers handled that side of things, and the money. My job was the technology. And loving my mother. Occupational therapists were continually giving my mother yarn projects to keep herself engaged. Frankly, I don't know why typing love letters in front of a computer screen should strike people as more dehumanizing than c at's cradle therapy. I agree with Matt Ehlrich: I am not trying to valorize teledildonics, or cyberpresence or, by extension, the closet, with this collection of essays. Yet, Sharon Lehner's words ring in my ears:

> Do not misunderstand me -- I do not argue here that the fetus of the sonogram is, simply, the right wing icon: the unborn child. However...it's not enough to say, "a fetus is nothing more than an image" and be done with it...Images ARE real, insofar as th ey pleasure, they pain, they cause action. Women, especially, ignore this crucial lesson in aesthetics at their political and medical peril.

Whether we are fighting, mourning, or loving them, the bodies in our communities stopped being "natural" -- if they ever were to begin with -- some time ago. That's not such a bad thing. I'd rather be a cyborg, as Donna Haraway says, than a goddess, anyh ow. At the time I began this project, I believed the Net was a bigger virus survivor than any human body I knew. Had I found the work of the writers in this collection sooner, I would have seen that of course cyborgs can get AIDS, that my computer can gro w cancers, that kindling and imprinting and rapid cycling aren't just things that troubled girls need to think about in their alt.support.depression news groups. I would have been, if not wiser, then a little less lonely.

Last June, I watched a group of marchers in the New York Gay Pride parade who carried signs saying, "We're here, We're Queer, and We Have E-mail." An off-line friend laughed, remarking, "We have FiestaWare too -- so what?" What she was asking, it seems to me, is whether online communities matter, and whether they can forge identities worth having. I feel fortunate because

I already know the answer to those questions, for me, is "yes." But this hardly means that my online communities are idyllic. Without a doubt, ECHO, the New York City bulletin board system, is the place I think of as my online "home". Nevertheless, it can be hard to find a place in this home. For instance, I once had the privilege of hosting a Queer Issues conference on ECHO which had an outspoken gay male Roman Catholic priest as one of its constituents. When certain members of our conference demanded that the priest choose between being a member of the Catholic community or being a member of our (open to anyone) queer online space, the priest replied -- like a good cyborg -- that both his sexuality and faith were conditions, and not "choices".

Like the writers in this collection, this priest was in the process of coming out of the digital closet, to the extent that anyone ever gets out of any closet. I believe he took large-scale personal chances, speaking as frankly as he did. Whether his bein g "out" online was less or more important than if he had held the same conversations with his congregation in the flesh is for someone else to judge. What interests me about his story, his performance, is the way that it asks the question: does the online body/community matter? Is it material? Is it significant? Members of ECHO are explicitly concerned about these issues, and when I told ECHO that I wanted to collect a series of dialogues between feminist theorists and practitioners of online life, I rece ived more enthusiastic support than I could have dreamed. One after another, writers, artists, web designers, technical advisors, promotions people -- all working for free, and all fanatical about this project -- kept asking the questions every community advocate loves: How can I help? How can we create something that matters?

This sounds corny, but I remember that my hands were shaking as I typed Stacy Horn a "yo" (real time message) asking if she'd like to co-edit an issue of *Women & Performance*devoted to the theme "Sexuality & Cyberspace." For some reason, I felt comp elled to let her know that we weren't going to publish stories about straight men masquerading as busty females on MOOs, but rather, we'd talk about what it meant to use the term "digital body" -- and mean it. Horn, the president of ECHO Communications, w ho single-handedly created a commercial online service with an industry-high 40% female subscriber base, is a very busy woman. After thirty seconds, I got my response: "I'm in!" 8

One year later, my fingers clack across this keyboard, struggling to deliver the Introduction to this book. Like many of the writers in this collection, I spend most of my time, online, on deadline. Deadline: funny word, that. I worry sometimes that I am mainlining death, that writing about my grief, something which began as a harmless enough hobby, has now perhaps spun out of control. When I first joined ECHO, the WELL, and various other locales in cyberspace, I used the name Jane Doe as my handle. I tho ught I was using that name for a series of silly reasons, most of which had to do with my prior history as a phone sex operator. I remember the first time someone sent me a yo, and asked me "Hey! Why are using the handle of a Dead Lady?" It had

never occu rred to me, until then, just how fiercely I had interjected the death of my mother. How much I meant it when I begged her, "Use the machine. It can save your life."

For me, the syntax for the subtitle of this book has always been important. "Sexuality *and* Cyberspace" -- not *in* cyberspace. "In cyberspace" sounds like the phrase "ghost in the machine". For me, the ghosts aren't in the machines; ghosts are *themselves* the machines. Although my mother's body is gone, her ventilator lives on in someone else's hospital room, bearing the traces of her spittle. I will die, but not before I scribble my thoughts all over the Internet. We inscribe ourselves unto our machines, not just to resist being colonized by them, but also to cooperate ("mutually promise") and thereby make community with them, and with one another. Data from my mother's brain tumor is currently redefining MRI technology at Roswell Insti tute. This issue of *Women & Performance*is being published on the World Wide Web, and these words will be archived on the computer systems of strangers all over the world.

Sometimes, in our rush to prove machines aren't phallic, feminists miss just how fragile and sublime the digital life can be. I was wrong. Machines cannot save lives. They can, however, extend lives, make them richer, re-define them, and help people forge connections they might not ever have, otherwise. It's funny. Those are exactly the reasons I believe in feminism.

Notes:

Like most people who write about the Net, I have had many collaborators in this project. I'd like to acknowledge the support, advice, and hard work of Hilary Poole, Mandy Harris, Jack Taylor, Morgan Noël, Gail Hess and Mary O'Shaughnessy, without wh om this book would have been impossible to produce.

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Finally, I'd like to thank Stacy Horn, Molly Ker, Robert Knuts, Paul Wallich, Mike Godwin, Jim Baumbach, Aaron Barnhart, Steve Barber and Alan Sondheim for their wise counsel and guidance.

1. See Gayatri Spivak's article, "Women in Difference: Mahasweta Devi's Douloti the Bountiful", for a far more substantial argument than I make here.

2. May Joseph discusses this further in her essay "Diaspora, New Hybrid Identities, and the Performance of Citizenship."

3. To find out more, point your web browser to Cornell's Artifical Intelligence Law Archives: http://www.law.cornell.edu/listservs/hypermail/ailaw/

4. I do not mean to imply that Donna Haraway has not *herself* been busy over the past ten years, critiquing, expanding and complicating the thesis of her own Manifesto. She has, in fact, just written an Introduction for the recently released *Cyb org Handbook*. To view the home page for the handbook, point your web browser to: http://www.routledge.com/routledge/cyborg.html/ In addition, in the past ten years, cyborg discourse has und ergone substantial permutations, as is only logical. For a taste of what's out there, point your web browser to the "Border Crossings" home page: http://www1.arcade.uiowa.edu/gw/comm/cyborgs.html

5. For a basic tutorial on high performance computing, point your web browser to: http://www.ccs.neu.edu/home/utopia/cshonor/index.html/ To read about political applications of this tech nology, visit the National High Performance Computing Center home page, by pointing your browser to: http://www.hpcc.gov/ .John C. Toole, current Director of the HPCC, addresses the U.S. Senate at http://www.hpcc.gov/legislation-testimony/toole.test.5.4.95.html

6. For further reading, see Julia Epstein and Anne Fausto Sterling.

7. There is also a popular (and convenient, for the right wing) belief that the CDA exists to keep child pornography off the Internet. Truthfully, that material (were it to exist) would *already* be illegal under current print laws. To learn more ab out the Communications Decency Act and what the Electronic Frontier Foundation is doing to keep the Net free of government hysteria, point your web browser to: http//www.eff.org/

8. In thirty more seconds, I got my second response: "Tell me what I can do!" Here is what Stacy Horn has done, so far: she has given *Women & Performance* a permanent online account (w o m e n @ e c h o n y c . c o m) and a ho me on the World Wide Web (http://www.echonyc.com/~women) so we can reach a wider audience. She sponsored our work on digital feminism, which in turn allowed us to apply for funding (which we received) to the New York State Council for the Arts. She has mobilized media interest in online feminist politics by arranging a special "Virtual Culture" Series (sponsored by PS 122 and the Whitney Museum of Art in New York City.) She has arranged for *Women & Performan ce* staff members to address corporate officers like those at the AT&T Telecommunications conference at George Washington University. In short, she has used her industry-savvy muscle to open up venues for feminist media criticism that had been shut to us before.

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