Razor Girls

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At the wane of the twentieth century, the Western world has begun to seriously consider feminist, post-colonialist, and post-structuralist modes of thought in order to revise and rethink its traditional ideologies. Among the most basic of these ideologies is the artificial division of concepts into dichotomies. These include : reason/emotion, strength/weakness, hero/victim, objectivity/subjectivity, public/private, active/passive, and, fundamentally structuring the split, male/female. This dichotomous view of gender is the lens through which we view the world; it shapes all our perceptions of human action. In all such dichotomies, one aspect is invariably valued more highly than the other (Derrida, 1979). Thus, the gender dichotomy constructs and perpetuates social inequalities. As it is the system of gender dichotomies which underlies gender domination, deconstructing gender (in anticipation of disposing of it altogether) leads to the dissolution of that power structure.

Such dismantling calls for a paradigm shift in social organization, leading to a radical re-thinking of gender. One way in which this paradigm shift can occur is through the use of technology. How this can be accomplished, and to what end, must be imagined before being implemented. In this paper, I examine such instances of imagined gender transgression through the depiction of the half-human, half-machine cyborg characters of cyberpunk fiction. In order to tease out the subversive intent of these narratives of gender, I begin by defining cyberpunk as a distinct subgenre of science fiction. I then employ this generic definition of cyberpunk fiction in order to examine the construction of gender within the genre, especially with respect to female cyborg characters, the "razor girls" of my title. Focusing on three works of cyberpunk fiction, William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, Pat Cadigan's *Mindplayers*, and Laura J. Mixon's *Glass Houses*, I analyze the demise of traditional paradigms governing gender and the rise of new paradigms of embodiment and subjectivity which center on technology.

Cyberpunk Genre and Gender

Much of the allure of science fiction is that it provides us with "the fantasy of knowing the unknowable through objectification" (Cawelti, 1978, p. 49). Science fiction writers produce models of worlds which, in some cases, differ only slightly from ours; the magic of science fiction is that it speculates on the results of such changes with little risk to us. In his review of definitions of science fiction, John Walchak (1993) concludes that "science fiction is the literary [or textual] investigation of the relationship between humanity and technology, and (thus) of the myriad kinds of change produced by science and technology". If the investigation of our relationship to science and technology is the definitive feature of science fiction, then the exploration of human couplings with a particular type of technology constitutes a broad categorization of cyberpunk fiction. Cyberpunk, a subgenre of science fiction which emerged in the 1980s, is particularly concerned with exploring the effects of "cyborg technologies" on late twentieth-century culture. Cyberpunk is differentiated from the more mainstream science fiction literature by three central themes which illuminate the role of technology in society : futurology, techno-paradigms, and the cyborg presence.

The first prominent theme of cyberpunk fiction is its pseudo-scientific and -sociological extrapolation. In

contrast to the apocalyptic and American-centered themes of early science fiction, cyberpunk presents a non apocalyptic view of the future, a globalist perspective, and the futuristic extrapolation of current social and economic trends. Prior to cyberpunk, Cold-War-era science fiction described the future in terms of pre- or post-apocalyptic nuclear imagery. The worlds represented in cyberpunk fictions, on the other hand, rather resemble our own present state magnified to a more extreme condition. Bruce Sterling notes of William Gibson's stories that in them we see a future that is recognizably and painstakingly drawn from the modem condition. It is multifaceted, sophisticated, global in its view. It derives from a new set of starting points : not from the shopworn formula of robots, spaceships, and the modem miracle of atomic energy, but from cybernetics, biotech, and the communications web -- to name a few (1986, pp. x-xi).

Reflecting the Population Crisis Committee's prediction that by the year 2010, half the world's population will live in urban areas (Hift, 1990), cyberpunk authors create settings, such as Gibson's New York-to-Atlanta "Sprawl" city, which depict a colossal mutation of today's increasingly rapid urbanization. The late twentieth-century expansion of Japanese corporations as a dominant presence in the global market and the importation of Japanese pop-culture items such as Hello Kitty, manga and anime are magnified into idioms of both dominant and popular culture in such cyberpunk films as Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). In Mixon's Glass Houses, today's environmental degradation has progressed to the point where the rich wear air-conditioned clothing while the poor rely upon sunscreen and gauze wraps. Indeed, some aspects of Gibson's early work, such as the global computer network of cyberspace, have even been realized, in this case, as the World Wide Web. Thus, the significance of cyberpunk is that, as a genre, it is not only about the near future -- it is about our own time.

The second central theme of cyberpunk is its conflation of categories; as a genre, it melds disparate elements of cultural dichotomies. The very term "cyberpunk" fuses disparate concepts of cybernetics -- advanced communications technology -- with the defiantly low-tech do-it-yourself aesthetics of punk. In cyberpunk fiction, computers are also artists, people are also machines, and nature is also technology; Gibson opens *Neuromancer* with the sentence : "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel" (1984, p. 1). This jarring, yet familiar, image shows how cyberpunk fiction redefines natural attributes by using imagery drawn from technology. In the "technoculture" predicted by the advent of cyborgs, waldoes, communications nets and global politics, the dichotomies of nature/science, body/mind and female/male become obsolete. Cyberpunk uses technology as a totalizing idiom to create new space, and to destabilize these existing constructs of power.

Nowhere is this more clearly articulated than in the third prevailing theme of cyberpunk, the ubiquity of corporeally invasive technology. Computers, cyberspace, and cybernetic organisms which meld flesh and machine are omnipresent in these fictions. The products of our technology have already become progressively invasive, with prostheses available not only for our limbs, but now for our internal organs as well. Cyberpunk's focus on corporeally- and mentally-invasive technology, in the form of prosthetic enhancements and direct brain-computer interfaces, is but an extension of an existing theme in our current experiences with the products of our technological innovation. This human-machine hybrid -- the cyborg -- becomes a central figure in cyberpunk fiction. The cyborg is not only a physical amalgam of human and machine, but represents a radical shift in subjectivity; the cyborg combines a humanly incorporated "personal consciousness" with a technologically incorporated "machine consciousness" (Csicsery-Ronay, 1991, p. 191).

It is this breakdown of categories through the use of technology which is at the root of cyberpunk authors' rethinking of gender. In these fictions, gender dichotomies are overcome through the prevalence and use of technology; as "post-human" subjects, cyborgs create new social and cultural contexts, redefining gender along with the most basic of human attributes. The fictional cyborg, however, does not necessarily escape gender categories. Fictional cyborgs are often depicted as behaving in gendered ways; in cyberpunk film, coercive sexuality is a ubiquitous characteristic of male cyborgs (Pilaro, 1994). Unlike film, however, literary cyberpunk fictions are dominated by female cyborg characters. In the remainder of this paper, I explore the two ways in

which cyberpunk writers create cyborg characters which transform gender. Writers such as Gibson and Cadigan present female-gendered cyborgs undertaking a role-reversal into masculinity; in many senses, these are transgendered representations, rather than radical revisions of gender. Mixon's work, however, presents us with a cyborg character which employs technological interface to offer a radical change of subjectivity, of embodiment, and of gender.

Original Steppin' Razor : Molly

William Gibson's *Neuromancer* is the original and still definitive text of cyberpunk fiction. No character is more beloved by cyberpunk fans than Molly, the original "razor girl". Among Molly's cybernetic augmentations are surgically inset mirrorshades which seal her eye sockets, "ten double-edged, four-centimeter scalpel blades [in] housings beneath [her] burgundy nails" (Gibson, 1984, p. 25), and a jacked-up nervous system for "the reflexes to go with the gear" (1984, p. 147). She also carries "a fair amount of silicon in her head" (1984, p. 34) -- not exactly the most feminine place in which to accommodate one's silicone augmentations. These enhancements serve to make Molly somewhat more than human and certainly less than feminine; she is faster, tougher, and stronger than any of the male characters of the novel, none of whom sport cyborg augmentations to the same degree as hers.

Molly's tough posturing and martial abilities make her the clearest candidate for female-to-male role-reversal in cyberpunk fiction. Her positioning within the economy of femininity is not at all ambiguous : she is deliberately unfeminine, lacking the traditional womanly attributes of both the "Madonna" and the "whore". Molly is not a nurturing figure, indeed, she is cold to the point of callousness : "What I always think about first, Case, is my own sweet ass" (1984, p. 30). Her cybernetic augmentations merely enhance her inherent toughness. When asked : "How do you cry, Molly ? I see your eyes are walled away. I'm curious", she replies, "I don't cry, much". When her interrogator persists, "But how would you cry, if someone made you cry ?" he receives the reply, "I spit... The ducts are routed back into my mouth" (1984, p. 183). Gibson's revision of the whore image, however, even more deliberately violates gender stereotypes. In Gibson's first novel, Molly narrates a past in which she did indeed prostitute herself, doing "puppet time" in a high-tech whorehouse in order to earn the money required for her various augmentations. However, Gibson radically reinscribes the whore image into one of traditionally masculine ferocity and violence. After slaughtering her last "trick", Molly begins to hire herself out as a mercenary and bodyguard, inhabiting traditionally masculine roles :

> "You're street samurai", he said. "How long you work for him ?"
> "Couple of months."
> "What about before that ?"
> "For somebody else. Working girl, you know ?"
> (1984, p. 30)

As a street samurai, Molly no longer participates in the economy of sexuality; she has reinterpreted what it is to be a woman on the streets, to be a working girl.

This female-to-male reversal is again underscored at the climax of the novel. As Molly commences an assault on a space station, she is joined by her male partner, Case, through an audio-visual linkup. Case's presence masculinizes Molly and feminizes Case, highlighting that it is she, the woman, taking on the active role while Case, the man, remains safely at a distance, contributing his support. Gibson cannot draw on any female imagery to describe this new female-to-male role reversal. When Molly transcends her gender role, Gibson's

descriptions turn to male models, heroes of contemporary action films :

> It was a performance. It was like the culmination of a lifetime's observation of martial arts tapes, cheap ones, the kind Case had grown up on. For a few seconds, he knew, she was every bad-ass hero, Sony Mao in the old Shaw videos, Mickey Chiba, the whole lineage back to [Bruce] Lee and [Clint] Eastwood. She was walking it the way she talked it. (1984, p. 213)

Joan Gordon describes Molly as "simply a human being in women's clothing, one of the two standard issue uniforms for the species" (1991, p. 198). However, Molly's character can best be described as a reversal of traditional gender roles; rather than being a human being in women's clothing, she is a cyborg woman in a masculine role -- this is underscored by Gibson's use of male action-hero metaphors. No longer human through technological augmentation, she is in no sense a "woman", in that she participates in none of the traditional female-gendered roles or presents any feminine characteristics. In this sense, Gibson has presented us with a nominally female character, but one who uses her cyborg identity not to rethink what it is to be a woman, but rather one who does little but take on a masculine role.

Accessing Virtual Minds : Deadpan Allie

In contrast to the visceral cyborg type Molly represents, Deadpan Allie, the protagonist of Pat Cadigan's novel *Mindplayers*, offers a more subtle, cerebral form of female-to-male role reversal. Allie is a "pathosfinder", a therapist who engages in computer-interfaced mind-to-mind linkups with artists in order to aid in the resolution of creative difficulty. Within the universe of the "mindplayer", mind-to-mind linkup is performed by computer, bringing the individual's consciousness out of the body and into virtual contact with other (sometimes artificial) minds. Extended mindplay requires the creation of cyborgs through the use of rather unique machine implants. Cadigan gently spoofs the cyberpunk penchant for direct mind-machine interface through brain implants; one of her characters states : "Sockets in the head ! Goddammit, why do people think they have to break into the skull like burglars when they've got two perfectly good entrances right there ?" (1987, p. 105). Instead, Cadigan's cyborgs sport artificial eyes, which permit brain access through machine removal of these eyes.

Like Gibson, Cadigan presents a cyborg which undertakes a female-to-male role reversal. Although Allie occupies the traditionally nurturing, maternal role of the therapist, as a pathosfinder she must de-emphasize any traditionally feminine emotive capacities in favor of a more masculine objectivity. Where most of her mindplay cases are male, it is Allie who retains an objective stance in the face of overwhelming emotional demands :

> The figure in the comer slumped and became a marionette. I was suddenly awash in waves of reassure me, reassure me. Not my job, I told him as neutrally as possible. Let's do some work. (1987, p. 130, emphases in original)

Appropriately-named "Deadpan", Allie's deadening of affect extends beyond her professional requirements; her debilitating lack of expressive, emotive ability becomes the central facet of her character. In this respect, she is firmly positioned on the masculine side of the male-objective/female-emotive split of gender categories. The net result of Deadpan Allie's lack of affect is a partial subjectivity, an integral flaw in her persona. This is resolved in what Cadigan calls "the eye trick", a symbolic exchange of cyborg eyes, where Allie incorporates the psyche of another deceased mindplayer :

> McFloy was standing there. Still here, Allie. Still with you. Which one of us, McFloy ? Which one of us is which ? He smiled. Yes. I wasn't sure who actually said it, but it didn't matter... It's a strange existence, but it works... (1987, p. 272, emphases in original)

It is the fusion of Deadpan Allie, the female, and McFloy, the male, which creates "a whole self" rather than "just an accumulation of elements". The incorporation of this male subjectivity, paradoxically, permits Deadpan Allie to overcome her crippling lack of affect. Thus, Cadigan not only presents a female cyborg character without traditionally feminine attributes, but purposely conflates traditional gender attributes in the creation of this cyborg. Yet, although she moves beyond Gibson's simple female-to-male role reversal, her reliance upon the "complementarity" of male and female characteristics places her work within traditional gender ideologies. Although both Gibson and Cadigan present non-traditional female characters in their cyborgs, their reliance upon human relationships -- where even cyborgs are still gendered -- in their creation of role reversals prevents them from exploring the limits and possibilities of "machine consciousness".

A Split Subjectivity : Ruby Kubick

Molly and Deadpan Allie represent cyborg characters who transcend femininity simply by adopting masculine roles. It is Ruby Kubick, heroine of Laura J. Mixon's *Glass Houses*, who best presents a rethinking of cyborg gender as she negotiates not between male and female, but between human and machine. Corporeally, Ruby is equipped with a "beanjack" brain implant, a by-then obsolete "brain web" created of "monofilaments" implanted in the course of her tenure with the fictional Toshiba-Merrill company. This allows her to interface with "waldoes" -- unlike robots, which are programmed, waldoes are operated through virtual reality links with humans. Like Gibson and Cadigan, Mixon reverses the polarity of gender roles usually ascribed to the active/passive and hero/victim dichotomies. In this narrative, it is the woman who rescues the prince from his high tower. Throughout the novel, Ruby, who suffers from agoraphobia -- a typically feminine illness -- progressively moves away from the safe, interior, feminine, domestic sphere of her apartment to the dangerous, masculine, public world of the city. This movement reinscribes her outside of the economy of passive femininity, into the active realm of masculinity, which culminates in her rescue of the male prince, Sidra.

Throughout *Glass Houses*, Mixon ascribes gender anthropomorphically to machines; Ruby's largest and smallest waldoes, robot-like Golem and tank-like Tiger, are male and her most intricate one, spider-like Rachne, female. However, the beanlink allows Ruby to occupy the bodies of all her waldoes; she "downloads" her awareness into the machines, adopting their point-of-view. This results in a shared perception, which Mixon indicates in the text by combining pronouns with names; when interfacing with her machines, Ruby refers to herself variously as I-Golem, I-Rachne, and I-Tiger : "I'd hoped to reach the building before Howler Felix hit the coast, but I-Golem wasn't halfway up the scaffolding when hot rain exploded from the low cloud ceiling, pounding Golem's metal shell and blurring my-his vision" (Mixon, 1992, p. 1). Conversely, when Ruby is physically present with and occupies the vantage point of the waldo, she refers to herself as object :

> Then the linkware pulled me into Golem, and somewhere far away I felt my hand fall as if I'd dozed off. I-Golem looked down at the woman in my arms. It was Ruby-me, of course, and her-my eyes were closed, fluttering a little. She-I curled with her-my cheek against Golem's chassis. (1992, pp. 60-61)

Mixon's use of possessives and pronouns gives a sense of the simultaneity of objectivity and subjectivity. Ruby's incorporation of her awareness within Golem's subject position does more than present her with a different perspective on herself; as her awareness is encapsulated within the half-ton robot, she perceives her humanity as vulnerability. Mixon continues :

> She-I looked so young and vulnerable from the outside, not ugly and scrawny like me. I was terrified that I wouldn't be able to keep her from harm; I wished she were back home, safe, right this very minute. (1992, p. 61)

In viewing herself objectively, Ruby adopts the perspective of the large robot; eight feet tall, with multiple arms and an indestructible body, Ruby-Golem views the world much differently than does Ruby alone.

Mixon's use of this doubled subjectivity frees her characters from the boundaries of single perspectives and simple embodiment. In another incident in which she downloads her awareness, this time into her waldo Rachne while holding it in her arms, Ruby again experiences a dizzying doubling of selves :

> I was looking at myself looking at myself holding me being held. With a shudder, I-Rachne looked away from Ruby-my eyes. Ruby-I backed away as I-Rachne struggled up onto my-her ten legs. The office door flew open, and both of me looked up at Vetch, who charged out onto the mezzanine and grabbed the railing.
>
> "Who's out there -- ?" Then his eyes focused.
> You.
> "Yeah. Me."
> It came out in stereo. When we-I started to move, Vetch ran down the stairs to block our-my path. I-Rachne and Ruby-I spread out, moved toward him on either side. (1992, p. 89)

In this instance, Mixon uses the plurals "we" and "our" to indicate that not only is Ruby now doubled in her awareness, but in her physical presence as well. Ruby has become not only "I-Rachne", as she refers to herself from the vantage point of the waldo, but "Ruby-I" as well, where the subject "I" is the awareness in the machine; the primacy of the subject position shifts from human to machine, and back again. Thus, Ruby-Rachne's assertion of presence, "Yeah. Me". comically emerges in stereo, from "both of me", her human and machine bodies.

This split subjectivity is the result of Ruby's technological interface with machines, moving her firmly out of the realm of unadulterated human subjectivity and fully into "machine consciousness". Unlike the cyborgs of Gibson's and Cadigan's imaginings, Mixon's Ruby emerges from her gendered human state into a cyborg state not through role-reversal, but rather through her use of technology. In conjunction with her beloved waldoes, Ruby Kubick creates multiple consciousness as Ruby-Golem, Ruby-Tiger, and Ruby-Rachne; Mixon can only articulate these newer subjectivities by graphically splitting the subject. Thus, the hyphenated subject of Mixon's novel becomes a trope for the expression of cyborg subjectivity. When Ruby's awareness can occupy any number of machine bodies, gender becomes meaningless to her subjectivity. This multiplied state of being challenges even the conventions of language, requiring Mixon to bend the very structure of communication. This genuinely new cyborg subjectivity breaks out of the traditional ideologies of gender and language, requiring new forms of subjectivity and expression.

Imag(in)ing the Post-Gender World

Imagining women as literary cyborgs in cyberpunk fiction presents a radical shift in conceptualizations of gender. Technology has always had profound effects on culture, on language and on ideology; technological innovation not only introduces new words, concepts and patterns into our culture, but radically alters old terminologies and undermines traditional ideologies. In creating these female cyborg subjects, Gibson, Cadigan, and Mixon have begun to imagine the impact of technology upon human consciousness. In creating female-gendered cyborgs with male-gendered attributes, Gibson and Cadigan begin to depict "post-gender" beings. However, in their creation of such beings, they are still dependent upon the recognition of traditionally male and female gender characteristics. It is only in Mixon's depiction of the cyborg character as both human and machine that we find a cyborg which begins to transcend gender by creating multiple split subjects.

The new cyborg subjectivities imagined in Mixon's text are especially significant not only in their articulation of new forms of embodiment, but in that they are the products of what is in reality a male-dominated industry. Men have emerged as the primary producers and consumers of the new high technologies of the computer age; it may be third world women who labor in sweatshops to assemble the components, but it is overwhelmingly men who own the factories and boys who play the videogames. Mixon's use of technology as a tool to rethink subjectivity, embodiment, and ultimately, gender, cautions women that we ought not leave such technologies in the hands of males, but rather appropriate them in the struggle for liberation. Already, categories of gender become fluid through internet communication; in the absence of face-to-face interaction, gender identities become questionable, and even meaningless. Likewise, the new reproductive technologies of in vitro fertilization and surrogate motherhood complicate attributions of maternity. As well, advances in trans-sexual surgery blur the increasingly arbitrary distinctions we make between men and women. Rather than viewing these as the downfall of womanhood, cyberpunk writers invite us to imagine these as opportunities to question the primacy of gender categories, and to rethink what these may mean to us in an age of technology. Through new technologies, we need not remain bound to human bodies which are marked by gender. Instead, we may create multiple identities, some gendered and others not, drawing on both our human subjectivities and whatever machine consciousnesses we may devise.

The definition of the cyberpunk genre is that it centers upon the relationship of humanity to technology; its significance is that cyberpunk writers create anticipatory fictions which are based upon existing and upcoming technologies. Cyberpunk fictions' female cyborgs present radically transgressive gender arrangements, and a shift to altered subjectivities and consciousnesses. Within the context of cyberpunk's predictions, such images are highly potent symbols of a change in our conceptualization of gender arrangements. Because cyberpunk fiction is both culturally reflective and predictive, the possibilities it envisions are phenomenal. In her "Cyborg Manifesto", Donna Haraway states that "by the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs" (1991, p. 150). If this is so, then we are all, especially cyborg women, on the verge of attaining the promise of cyberpunk and cyborg writing, which is "the power to survive not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked [us] as other" (Haraway, 175). Such cyborg fictions begin to present us with not only new models of gender, but with models of ways in which women can use man-made technology to overcome male domination. Although such a possibility, predicted by the cyberpunk subversion of gender, has yet to be imagined fully, it does provide us with intimations of how we may go about re-thinking gender into the twenty-first century. Cyberpunk's intimations of a post-gender world may be both intriguing and frightening, but they are also, in the many senses of the word, anticipated.

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