

## DISABILITY

# The Dawn of the ‘Tryborg’

By Jillian Weise

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The existence of “the tryborg,” as a category of person, is so obvious that once I point it out, you will immediately recognize a dozen tryborgs you know or whose work you have read. It is possible you are a tryborg.

The company that makes my leg calls it a C-Leg, a cruel name, since it is vulnerable to salt water and cannot go anywhere near the sea. I’ve been wearing prosthetic legs for over 30 years. In the last decade, I’ve been wearing a leg with a computerized knee. The knee weighs 2.8 pounds and lasts 40 to 45 hours on a charge. I vacuum seal into my leg, so the boundary where I end and computer begins is imperceptible to me.

Our best-known cyborgs have long been fictional (think Lee Majors as “The Six Million Dollar Man”), but today we are real. Most cyborgs are disabled people who interface with technology. We depend on a computer for some major bodily function. The tryborg — a word I invented — is a nondisabled person who has no fundamental interface. The tryborg is a counterfeit cyborg. The tryborg tries to integrate with technology through the latest product or innovation. Tryborgs were the first to wear Google Glass. Today they wait in line for Snapchat Spectacles. The tryborg adopts the pose of a cyborg. But no matter how hard they try, the tryborg remains a pretender.

The tryborg may be an early adopter, a pro gamer, a TED Talker, a content creator or a follower. The tryborg may be an expert who writes about cyborgs for screenplays, lab reports or academic journals. The tryborg may just be a guy named Bob who works in I.T. and collects Real Dolls. Whatever the case: Tryborgs can only imagine what life is like for us.

The tryborg is always distanced by metaphor, guesswork and desire. When my leg suddenly beeps and buzzes and goes into “dead mode” — the knee stiffens; I walk like a penguin — the tryborg is alive without batteries. When I sound like a bomb in a liquor store, the tryborg hurries on, nonelectronic.

Tryborgs want to be cyborgs. This is why they go to bed with Fitbit, brag about gigabit and buy kit with Bitcoin. They have an affinity for the it or the Id. But even when they find a mate by swiping right, and then tell that mate how many steps they walked since Sunday, still they are not cyborgs. To mistake them for cyborgs is to confuse the figurative with the literal.

If you are thinking, No, no, no, cyborgs do not exist, they are theoretical creatures, then you are likely a tryborg.

Tryborgs rely on the nonexistence of actual cyborgs for their bread and butter. If cyborgs exist, how will the tryborg remain relevant? Wouldn’t we just ask the cyborg for her opinion? The opinions of cyborgs are conspicuously absent from the expert panels, the tech leadership conferences and the advisory boards. The erasure is not news to us. We have been deleted for centuries, and in the movies, you will often see us go on a long, fruitful journey, only to delete ourselves in the end.

But anyone with a hard drive can tell you: Even when you delete something, it is not really gone. So it is with us cyborgs. We remain in the periphery, un-scrubbed and un-snuffed out.

Maybe tryborgs imagine that the theorist Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” is right. The manifesto reads: “In short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics.” But Haraway is a tryborg: she’s not disabled; she has no interface; she uses the term as a metaphor. The strategic move where one group says, “I shall speak for them because they do not exist / do not live here / do not have thoughts” is common of the tryborg. When they are not speaking for us, they may take a detour into animal studies, a field where they can rest assured that their subjects remain silent.

Other tryborgs of note include Jaron Lanier (“You Are Not a Gadget” — well, what if I am?), Michio Kaku (“Physics of the

Future”) and Ray Kurzweil (“The Age of Intelligent Machines”). Tryborgs need not be famous, though they often try to sell us things: vodka, car accidents or exoskeletons. Tryborgs are often company men, selling us the future, which they imagine will be populated first by male cyborgs. This is why so many cyborg headlines concern men and their inventions: the Lovetron 9000, a vibrating penis; “Captain Cyborg,” who wears an ultrasonic baseball cap so he can be just like the blind.

I know it will take time, but things will change. For a while, all the experts on African-Americans were white. All the experts on lesbians were Richard von Krafft-Ebing. All the experts on cyborgs were noninterfaced humans.

Please do not be sad. It should bring us great relief to know who we are. The Delphic oracle declares it: Know thyself. It is not my fault if we have been taking liberties with metaphor, clicking along, declaring ourselves this, when really we are that. As the Stanford professor Franco Moretti once said, “Somehow digital humanities has managed to secure for itself this endless infancy, in which it is always a future promise.” Cyborgs are tired of being your babies.

“You just have a chip on your shoulder,” says the tryborg, smiling down from Google headquarters (the futurist factory) in Mountain View, Calif.

No, I have a chip in my knee. But I accept your invitation. I am in talks with your futurists, although in poetry, the code I prefer.

I will be your cyborg laureate.

For our first order of business: Will you please, kind sirs, create computerized parts for women? If you can give a man goat legs and a second stomach to chew cud, then surely you can give a woman woman legs. All the computerized parts are made in the image of men. You object: “What about Heather Mills and Aimee Mullins?” Yes, they can afford designer legs. Aimee Mullins owns 12 pairs of legs. The plebeian cyborg owns one.

Take my C-Leg. It gives me the muscular calf of a man-cyclist. I have a ruler, and the company name, on my shin. I can choose between the colors Volcano Shadow or Desert Pearl, which is to say, gray or brownish-gray. I cannot choose a female option because there are none. I have no complaint about androgyny. But I’m just a regular femme who likes to show her legs. Yes, I have come this far, to beg that you make a leg look like a woman’s leg.

Second, why place the outlet on my calf? How many women do you know who want their outlets exposed? To plug myself in, I must decide between uncomfortable positions. Either I remove my leg and kneel beside it as if in prayer to the tryborg creation. Or I leave my leg on and plug in by making a certain kind of pose absent from all the yoga charts. Is it tree? Is it boat?

Finally, I do not like the way I must maintain a specific weight, not to exceed 110 pounds, if I want to walk on two legs. I would like to get fatter like the rest of you. This computerized leg corsets me.

My own expert, the salesman from the leg company, asked me to name my leg for the app. The app is called “Cockpit” because of course it is. I can calibrate for skiing, golfing or cycling. Those are, apparently, the only sports I wish to pursue. The salesman had a buzz cut, shiny shoes and efficiency. He could’ve been a cyborg, if someone had been there to accidentally jitter his heart or remove his arm.

“Call me Foxy,” I said.