Networked Resistance: Gender Abolition through Collective Consciousness in Japanese Science Fiction Anime

Donna Haraway's seminal work "A Cyborg Manifesto" conceptualizes the cyborg as an entity that hybridizes traditional dualisms, such as organic/inorganic and male/female (Haraway 1991, 154; Wajcman 2013, 95). She argues that this ability to elide boundaries is inherently liberatory, positioning cyborgs as postgender beings which embrace the confusion of boundaries as part of a larger techno-solutionist project to alter material realities and social relations (Haraway 1991, 150; Wajcman 2013, 94). The cyborg thus opposes what Haraway coins the "informatics of domination," the categorization and control of the other through binary oppositions; it instead seeks to build a system constructed through affinity and coalition, rather than through exclusion and differentiation (Haraway 1991, 161–63).

Transitioning from the cyborg's individual transcendence, xenofeminism expands this disruption to a broader socio-political scale. Xenofeminism builds on Haraway's gender-conscious techno-solutionism by advocating for a strategic disassociation from nature as a means of challenging biological determinism and bioessentialism, which manifest as sex/gender slippage, norms, and binaries (Hester 2018, 6-9; Laboria Cuboniks 2018; Wajcman 2013, 94). Laboria Cuboniks' *Xenofeminist Manifesto* not only reacts to current inequalities, but also proactively recalibrates technology to reconstruct gender norms and power structures through iterations of alienation, proposing that emancipation is crafted through increasing alienation rather than adherence to any natural state (Hester 2018, 17, 144; Laboria Cuboniks 2018). Thus, xenofeminism aims to establish a universally just structure through a non-absolute, intersectional reworking of the universal that actively challenges foundations of social inequalities (Laboria Cuboniks 2018). By proposing a future where gender as a biological

determinant is obsolete, xenofeminism aligns with Haraway's postgender cyborg ideal in envisioning a society where gender equality is achieved through the erasure of gender itself within the cyborg (Hester 2018, 25, 30).

Despite the theoretical potential for cyborgs to transcend traditional gender roles, Japanese sci-fi often reinforces bioessentialist notions through the depiction of gynoids, which automate and thus entrench feminine roles. In this essay, I will critique this representation as it occurs in anime works *Ghost in the Shell* (1996) and *Serial Experiments Lain* (1999) and propose that true gender abolition might be envisioned through the portrayal of networked entities, which dissolve individualism and by extension, gender.

Gynoids—defined here as female-coded or feminine robots, androids, and cyborgs—as depicted in Japanese science fiction anime often embody traditional female roles, notably in caregiving and sexualized contexts which emphasize a compliant, servile, and manageable vision of femininity (Orbaugh 2002, 440). Representations commodify female traits, with gynoids' appearance and behaviors drawing from predetermined collections of desirable traits that can be quantified, standardized, and sold. The value of these artificial female beings lies in their ability to conform to and perform within narrowly defined parameters of desirability and utility. Gender becomes an embedded system in artificial beings programmed to perform care and sex, suggesting a perpetuation rather than a disruption of existing gender dynamics. The fetishization of gynoids as both sexual(ized) and stripped of any potential for agency or interiority, suggests that the ideal form of female autonomy is its absence. Gynoids are portrayed as objects of utility rather than having inherent qualities of self.

This representation is deconstructed by *Ghost in the Shell* (1996), which uniquely explores the commodity fetishism of gynoids from the perspective of a gynoid herself. The film

contrasts the physical prowess and high intellect of cyborg protagonist Major Motoko Kusanagi with overtly sexualized or utilitarian depictions of her body. She often completely disregards the aesthetic or physical wellbeing of her body, being constantly naked to utilize her artificial skin's invisibility technology or tearing her own limbs in a desperate attempt to extricate a heavy object (Oshii 1996, 00:02:25, 00:32:20, 01:04:50-01:05:11).

Thus, the narrative of Major Kusanagi's transcendence of *her* physical form includes transcendence of the limits of a body explicitly defined as female. The opening sequence of the film features her using her camouflage abilities to escape after a successful infiltration mission (Oshii 1996, 00:02:25-00:04:11). She falls backward off a roof, smiling confidently at the camera as her body disappears from view (Oshii 1996, 00:02:25-00:04:11). The opening credits which follow crosscut between computer text and images of the reconstruction of Major Kusanagi's body after the mission (Oshii 1996, 00:04:11:00:07:21). Her naked form is on open display, with shots lingering on her curves and skin peeling off her breasts, accentuating her nipples on an otherwise completely blank form (Oshii 1996, 00:05:44-00:05:52). Sexualization and objectification occur both at once, as she begins the film as mechanical parts assembled by a machine. As Major Kusanagi and her partner remark, these parts are inextricable from her body—Major Kusanagi, who is entirely cybernetic apart from her brain, would die without them (Oshii 1996, 00:31:33-00:31:50). However, she does not own her body, arguably the most elementary source of self and identity; it is owned by Section 9, the law enforcement department for which she works (Oshii 1996, 00:31:33-00:31:50). Her brain, the only part of her that she 'owns,' is useless without a physical body. Her body, sense of self, sex, gender, and sexuality are not her own. Major Kusanagi speaks repeatedly about finding her ghost, which is both

independent of her physical form and still capable of exercising its own agency, and may be separable from the gender she has been assigned (Oshii 1996, 00:31:54-00:32:20).

Serial Experiments Lain (1999) similarly explores themes of identity and reality within a networked age, through the eyes of its young female protagonist, Lain Iwakura. Through Lain's experiences, the anime comments on the transformative and often disorienting effects of advanced technology on individual identity, particularly highlighting the vulnerabilities and confusions faced by young women interacting with technology. Lain is established as a quiet, unassuming teenager who is emotionally distant and alienated from her family and peers at school (R. Nakamura 1999, “layer:01 WEIRD”, “layer:02 GIRLS”). As Lain thinks to herself, “I don't need parents. Every human is alone..And is connected to nobody,” she becomes increasingly interested in the Wired, an advanced form of the Internet that operates as a comprehensive virtual reality network where such connection is possible (R. Nakamura 1999, “layer:04 RELIGION”). Her father remarks positively on her obsession, saying that because of the Wired, “even someone like Lain can get friends soon” (R. Nakamura 1999, “layer:01 WEIRD”).

As she moves deeper into the Wired, Lain increasingly begins to feel alienation from physical reality, dissociating to the point that she felt “there was no necessity that I was in the real world. There was no difference between whether I was there or not. When I realized that, I had no fear to lose my flesh” (R. Nakamura 1999, “layer:03 PSYCHE”). Lain’s inaction in real life, establishing herself as a bystander to reality, neglecting to fulfill her feminine auxiliary role, meant that her existence inherently had little utility. After witnessing a medical incident at a nightclub with her peers, they remark:

“We are strange. It is certain that we saw someone dying very closely last night. But we felt as if we just saw a movie… It is certain that we were there, but I felt it was not so real…

Alice, don't take it so seriously…No. I'm saying it is strange because we can't take it seriously" (R. Nakamura 1999, "layer:03 PSYCHE).

The Wired is no longer simply a method of communication: against her father's advice, Lain has begun to mix it up with the real world, believing that soon she can enter it the same way she enters the real world when leaving her home (R. Nakamura 1999, "layer:04 RELIGION"). She is manipulated, watched, and overwhelmed by external forces within the Wired, which aligns with the experiences of women and girls navigating visibility in surveillance-capitalist technospaces (R. Nakamura 1999, "layer:13 EGO", "layer:11 INFORNOGRAPHY").

Such depictions of gynoids can be contextualized within the broader socio-economic shifts in postwar Japan, which reflect both an enchantment with technological advancement and a critique of its implications for societal roles, particularly gender roles. Japan's rapid economic recovery from WWII—fueled by technological innovation in robotics and automation—was reinforced by popular media, including anime and manga, where gynoids became symbols of futuristic aspirations and anxieties (Napier 2003; Gaunder 2011, 194, 196). These gynoids often embody an idealized femininity, reflecting traditional gender roles of domestic subservience and sexual compliance that were being simultaneously questioned and reinforced in a rapidly modernizing society (Silvio 1999; Orbaugh 2002, 443; Kotani, Nishimura, and Bergstrom 2021; Gaunder 2011, 219).

Technological advancement in postwar Japan, while propelling the country into economic prominence, paradoxically reinforced rigid gender roles established during earlier periods of modernization. As factories and offices integrated new technologies, men were typically positioned to benefit from these new opportunities, while women were often relegated to roles that supported male workers, both in the workplace and at home (Wajcman 2013, 27-29, 46-47).

This gender differentiation was not just a remnant of past practices, but rather was actively maintained through societal norms of women as caretakers and auxiliaries (M. Nakamura 2002). Indeed, despite postwar legislative efforts to secure equal employment opportunities for women, most women continued to become housewives and mothers after marriage, and the gap between male and female incomes in Japan remained the greatest within developed nations (Gaunder 2011, 132).

Within this socio-economic context, the persistent gendered division of labor ensured that women remained in subordinate, supportive roles, which is vividly illustrated in the narrative functions of gynoids in Japanese sci-fi. These characters often serve as foils to human characters, highlighting the tension between Japan's technological idealism and the reality of persistent gender inequality (Orbaugh 2002, 448). Gynoids are typically created for roles that echo traditional female occupations—such as caretakers, entertainers, or sexual partners—reinforcing the notion that even in a technologically advanced future, women's primary value lies in their ability to serve and support men (Napier 2002; Takayuki 2021). This portrayal not only reflects but also perpetuates a societal view where women's contributions outside these roles are undervalued and underutilized, highlighting the role of popular media in both reflecting and shaping socio-cultural norms (Haraway 1991; Kotani, Nishimura, and Bergstrom 2021).

Against this backdrop of entrenched gender roles reinforced by technological narratives, the concept of networked identities offers a xenofeminist alternative that harnesses technology's disruptive potential to dismantle entrenched systems of oppression, particularly those related to gender. Xenofeminism argues for the use of technology to engineer inequality out of existence, advocating for a future where the biological determinism of gender can be overcome through technological intervention (Hester 2018). In this context, networked entities—often depicted as

complex systems where individual consciousnesses merge into a singular, interconnected entity, challenging traditional notions of identity and embodiment—embody the xenofeminist vision of creating a digital or posthuman landscape where gender as we understand it becomes irrelevant, replaced by a new form of identity based on connection and collective consciousness (Haraway 1991; Braidotti 2013). This concept extends beyond simple physical or digital connectivity; it redefines existence itself, emphasizing a posthuman form where human boundaries are not just blurred but entirely dissolved (Haraway 1991; Braidotti 2013). In such narratives, the networked entity functions as a collective organism, with each part contributing to a unified whole without the biases and limitations imposed by physical form, including those of gender (Orbaugh 2002, 443, 448; Kotani, Nishimura, and Bergstrom 2021).

Anime films *The End of Evangelion* (1997) and *Akira* (1988) offer cinematic representations of networked entities which contrast with similar depictions within *Ghost in the Shell* and *Serial Experiments Lain*, as the former pair have male protagonists and depict networked entities without overt gendered considerations.

The dissolution of individual identities into a collective consciousness in *The End of Evangelion* underscores a profound thematic inquiry into the nature of self and other (Anno 1997). The Third Impact, a cataclysmic merging of all souls facilitated by the merging of man and the Biblical characters Adam and Lilith represents the physical and metaphysical elision of boundaries between separate entities (Anno 1997). The Third Impact metaphorically captures the abolition of gender by depicting an ultimate unification where individual distinctions, including those of gender, are obliterated. Its portrayal draws heavily on neo-Christian existential motifs, suggesting a rebirth or a return to an Edenic state of non-differentiation, a transcendental event that goes beyond mere physical reality (Anno 1997).

This event is the conclusion of a conspiracy known as the Human Instrumentality Project, which aims to create a world where the pain of individual existence and the fear of otherness are resolved by merging All consciousness into One (Anno 1997). In the episodes leading to this climax, characters repeatedly face their deepest fears and desires, confronting and often succumbing to the existential dread that comes with their struggles for identity and recognition (Anno 1997). This merging is thus depicted as both a terrifying loss of self and a blissful release from isolation, encapsulating both connection and alienation (Anno 1997). That is, the film's ending suggests that in the collective consciousness, the personal traumas and existential questions of individuals like Shinji and Asuka—the post-Third Impact's Adam and Eve, are resolved—or at least rendered obsolete—in the face of overwhelming collective identity (Anno 1997). However, the narrative also critically engages with the implications of such a radical form of unity. Shinji's ultimate decision to reject Instrumentality and the collective identity it offers champions the messy, painful reality of individual existence over the sanitized, unified existence the project proposes (Anno 1997). This choice emphasizes the value of individual subjectivity and the inherent messiness of human relations, including gender relations, over an imposed uniformity. Thus, while the narrative explores the potential for a post-gender world, it also reaffirms the significance of individuality and personal struggle with identity.

In *Akira* (1988), the dissolution of individual identities into a collective consciousness is depicted dramatically during the climax, the birth of a new universe (Ōtomo 1988). The film's portrayal of this final metamorphosis, where the transcendent antihero Tetsuo's body grotesquely and spectacularly loses its human form, expanding to devour other bodies, concrete, and the land itself to the point of apocalypse and rebirth, implies that form of unity that negates personal identity in favor of a shared existence is inherently cataclysmic (Ōtomo 1988). Such radical

unity, where the very essence of human identity is reconstructed and gender distinctions dissolve completely, is accompanied by loss of personal autonomy and the potential for totalitarian control over such a collective (Ōtomo 1988).

The End of Evangelion and *Akira* present cataclysmic forms of networked entities which are largely devoid of explicit gender considerations, especially in comparison to *Ghost in the Shell* and *Serial Experiments Lain*, which feature female protagonists grappling with their identities within highly gendered contexts. The lack of gendered focus imply a thematic stance concerned not with networked entities as a feminist or gender-abolitionist strategy, but as a broader and more nihilistic commentary on the human condition, which may explain the overall lack of endorsement of networked entities as a revolutionary construct (Bolton 2008; Dale 2008; Beynon 2012).

Thus, by contrast, *Ghost in the Shell* positively explores the dissolution of traditional gender identities through its depiction of the Puppet Master, a computer virus which has gained sentience, whose quest for autonomy mirrors that of Major Kusanagi herself. Halfway through the film, Section 9 obtains the remains of a cybernetic body housing the Puppet Master. Curiously, the body is androgynous: it has female breasts, but a male face and voice (Oshii 1996, 00:48:05-00:53:01). Initially introduced as a rogue AI, the Puppet Master is subjected to various forms of control and restriction by external forces, primarily governmental and corporate entities. His desire to seek asylum and express free will challenges the notion of artificial intelligence as mere tools devoid of sentience or desire; rather, he is pure ghost. After this body is stolen by Section 6, Major Kusanagi tracks down the military tank guarding it (Oshii 1996, 01:00:00-01:04:00). As she wrenches the tank's hatch open, her muscles begin to ripple uncontrollably, her mechanical frame tearing through her flesh, her body a mess of wires, oil,

blood (Oshii 1996, 01:04:50-01:05:11). This image, made gruesome not only by the gore but also by Major Kusanagi's uncharacteristic desperation to speak to the Puppet Master, symbolizes both the limitations of her physical, objectified, female form and the lengths she will go to pursue transcendence of it. Her ghost bursts through her shell, reversing the assemblage, sexualization, and symbols of subjugation with which the film opened. Thus begins her transcendence, which she completes in collaboration with the Puppet Master. She attempts to enter his consciousness, but he instead enters hers; the two begin speaking from each other's bodies, each with a voice coded the opposite gender of the body (Oshii 1996, 01:07:11-01:12:15). The Puppet Master explains his desire to merge with Major Kusanagi's body, as he is pure ghost, unable to die and doomed to a Sisphyean life of traversing the Net, while she suspects she is pure shell (Oshii 1996, 01:12:11-01:15:17). However, while this merge is articulated through the Puppet Master's desire, the product has the face and voice of Major Kusanagi, which she previously deemed markers of one's identity (Oshii 1996, 01:15:20, 00:31:30). This merge was her successful final transcendence beyond her physical form, becoming at once both pure ghost and pure shell. Notably, the merged entity does not identify as Major Kusanagi, but something more—she can harness the Net to be anywhere and everywhere all at once, so her sense of self is no longer attached to the physicality of her body (Oshii 1996, 01:17:18-01:17:27).

Similarly, Lain's interactions in the Wired also allow her to reconceptualize her existence, shifting from a purely individualistic perception to a more networked understanding of self. In Episode 5, Lain speaks to Deus, the self-proclaimed 'God' of the Wired, who tells her that while human beings have ceased to evolve, they "created the exit" from humanity to the "network" (R. Nakamura 1999, "layer:05 DISTORTION"). This exit is the Wired, and it will grant Lain the freedom from "remain[ing] a miserable human being" (R. Nakamura 1999, "layer:05

DISTORTION"). In addition to Deus, Lain encounters alternate versions of her family and even herself in the Wired. These alternate beings tell her that "the flesh in the real world is just a hologram of the information of the Wired," suggesting that these virtual selves are the true, complete versions of the self (R. Nakamura 1999, "layer:05 DISTORTION"). Later, Deus returns to tell Lain that she is just like him—a networked entity, capable of being everywhere at once. At first, Lain is confused by this revelation: as she still retains a sense of self in the real world, she is not consciously aware of all the interactions she has in the Wired (R. Nakamura 1999, "layer:08 RUMORS"). It is only with the knowledge of the Wired as a hypertext, where every textual culture will exist simultaneously and forever, that Lain begins to understand how she can retain a sense of self while becoming distributed over the Net (R. Nakamura 1999, "layer:09 PROTOCOL"). Thus, Lain finds empowerment in this connectivity, her identity becoming fluid and extendable across different platforms and states of being. By the series' end, she has achieved omnipresence within the Wired, her ability to traverse the Net granting her a feeling of utility and connectivity to others, a powerful contrast to her initial disorientation and confusion as a human girl (R. Nakamura 1999, "layer:13 EGO"). This evolution from vulnerability to empowerment reflects a broader theme within xenofeminist narratives, suggesting that technology, while potentially alienating, also holds the capacity for liberating individuals from the traditional physical and social constraints of gender.

The portrayal of networked entities as both anti-capitalist and gender-abolitionist reflects a critical response to the commodification of individual identities and the rigid structures of gender norms enforced by capitalist imperatives. Capitalism often relies on gender distinctions to target markets and maximize profit, enforcing and exploiting these distinctions through advertising and media (Haraway 1991; Wajcman 2013, 82, 94). By contrast, narratives featuring

networked entities challenge these practices by eliminating the markers upon which such economic strategies depend, presenting a society where identity is fluid and shared (Braidotti 2013; Napier 2002). This not only subverts the capitalist model that thrives on individual consumer identities but also disrupts the social structures that support gender-based discrimination and exploitation, paving the way for a more equitable social order.

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