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GOVT 1101: FWS: Gender Politics and Science Fiction

Instructor: Judith Piotrkowski

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Discuss Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto in the context of C.L Moore's No Woman Born and Le

Guin's Left Hand of Darkness. What does Haraway's articulation of the cyborg contribute to the fictional readings? Think in terms of technology, identity, and Haraway's suggestions for political identification and resistance.

Haraway, in *A Cyborg Manifesto* asserts that cyborgs exist in abundance today. Cyborg's are "cybernetic organisms" (Haraway 150), both of "fiction" and "lived social reality" (Haraway 150). They are on the boundary between several dualisms, that are apparently independent in the world, including machine and organism, animal and human and physical and virtual. As metaphors they teach one to go beyond the perceived dualisms in the world, and see systems, even opposites as part of "integrated circuits". In practice they show feminists the futility of identity politics. "This identity marks out a self-consciously constructed space that cannot affirm the capacity to act on the basis of natural identification, but only on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship" (Haraway 154). Thus Haraway advocates trading identity politics, divisive in its nature for "affinity" politics; that any feminist can identify as a "woman of color" (Haraway 154). The politics of returning to a "natural" origin on the basis of identity and finding political support from others with such an identity divides and weakens the feminist movement, since not all prospective members of a movement have such an essential identity. This is the lesson of the cyborg, Haraway tells us, that natural origin is not needed, since cyborg's are not natural, rather created from dualities in the world.

These lessons of the cyborg can be seen in Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Moore's *No Woman Born*. In chapter 18 of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Genly Ai talks about the

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companionship developed between him and Estraven. He says, it “might as well be called...

love” (Le Guin 267). “But it was from the differences between us.... That the love came”. (Le Guin 267). This is powerful manifestation of the cyborg lesson to go beyond the dualisms in the world. Genly and Estraven are different in species, sex, allegiances and countless other spheres, yet what they share fosters a companionship, a symbiosis between them, that cannot be obtained from the sum of their individual contributions to each other’s survival. Had they stuck to their own “identities”, and allow for a “natural” cooperation to ensue between them on their journey, they would not have been able to survive. Their survival lay in compromising their duality. The heat at night was turned up not too hot for Estraven, yet not too cold for Genly; so that one boiled and the other froze, yet both survived. When Estraven entered kemmer, it was the understanding that Genly had of Estraven’s kemmer that allowed for them to move on with their journey, still as companions, as one. Together Genly and Estraven embodied the lesson of the cyborg, and used it to make their near impossible journey, possible.

Moore’s *No Woman Born* is a story of a beautiful dancer and singer, Deirdre, who appears to have died in the body in a fire a year prior to the story, but whose brain was preserved; the story centers on the experience of Deirdre, as she is “re-born”, with the same brain, into a body made of metal. Such a summary of the story is already enough to show that Deirdre conforms to Haraway’s physical definition of a cyborg. She is a hybrid between organism (her brain) and machine (her metallic body); she breaches the boundary between physical and virtual, in that the physical control of her new body comes from virtual impulses her brain gives out, as if to the human body it used to conduct. Yet Deirdre is more than that; she

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embodies the lack of duality with which the world should be reckoned, one of the lessons of the cyborg.

When discussing her return to the stage, John Harris expresses concern that the “walls [Deirdre’s clearly inhuman body] too may impress their shape on [Deirdre]” (Moore 11); and Maltzer makes all too clear how fearful he is that the inevitable realization on Deirdre’s part that she is not human will destroy her beyond repair. Indeed Maltzer is torn apart by the perceived paradox in Deirdre’s creation: he created her to go back to the stage, yet this will be her very downfall. To Maltzer, the situation is very polarized; only humans can impress a human audience, and Deirdre being inhuman cannot and this will destroy her.

Yet both in practice and in conviction, Deirdre proves Maltzer wrong. “Beauty and talent need not be sacrificed by the destruction of all parts of the body” (Moore 13) she tells Harris. To her, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. She subscribes to the cyborg philosophy that humanity and alienness need not be discrete, but they can be integrated, like the cyborg itself is. Later when she does perform, it is revealed that critics received her with immense praise. She concedes to Harris and Matzer in the climactic scene, that though there is none other like her in the world, she is still human. The power and charm she yields over Maltzer, to keep him mesmerized until she physically stops his suicide, is symbolic of this too. She has human power and human emotion, yet she also has inhuman power. It is a similar appeal she holds over audiences, and as she confidently declares “already I’ve set a fashion in women’s clothing. By next week you won’t see a woman on the street without a mask like mine” (Moore 32). It is clear that human women will emulate Deirdre’s metallic form... almost to have a greater human

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appeal. Thus Deirdre embodies the complete move beyond dualism that the cyborg inculcates in the world.