Feminisms of the Future, Now: Rethinking Technofeminism and the Manifesto Form

Olivia Lucca Fraser interviewed by Esme Hogeveen

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Abstract

Esme Hogeveen interviewed me for Issue 132 of C magazine, back in 2016, on the Xenofeminist Manifesto and related topics.

Introduction

"Ours is a world in vertigo. It is a world that swarms with technological mediation, interlacing our daily lives with abstraction, virtuality, and complexity." So begins the Xenofeminist Manifesto, formally Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation (hereafter XFM), compiled by the collective Laboria Cuboniks in 2015. "XFM constructs a feminism adapted to these realities: a feminism of unprecedented cunning, scale, and vision; a future in which the realization of gender justice and feminist emancipation contribute to a universalist politics assembled from the needs of every human, cutting across race, ability, economic standing, and geographical position."

The considerations, in short, of Laboria Cuboniks, or LC, are extensive, taking into account not only the ways in which technology can facilitate pluralistic feminisms, but also the extent to which technology may constitute an interdisciplinary means for revising, and ideally revitalizing, discourse about gendered identity, labour and bodily experience.

This summer, I corresponded with Olivia Lucca Fraser, Halifax-based theorist, scholar and programmer, and one of the members of Laboria Cuboniks, about her vision for XFM and some of the implications of technofeminist critique considered more broadly – including its relation to aesthetics, online discourse, activism and the stakes of universalist politics. Fraser beat me to the punch with many of her responses, anticipating questions, for example, about the perceived inaccessibility of technology. "Free time," she observes, "[may be] the single biggest obstacle between the current situation and the utopias dreamt up by '90s cyberfeminism." Nevertheless, Fraser's optimism about technology's potential

and her analyses of the manifesto form itself – a kind of experiment, she wagers, that works best when "you can't predict with any probability who your audience will be" – provide an optimistic counterpoint to doom-and-gloom accounts of contemporary surveillance and techno-policing.

As Laboria Cuboniks extol in the final line of XFM: "If nature is unjust, change nature!" The following conversation considers related efforts to inspire, enact, critique and renegotiate the pursuit of such changes… - Note: Inspired by the aphoristic structure of XFM, the interview is divided into five question clusters: DEFINE, ATTEND, UPEND, EXTEND and MANIFEST. Readers should feel free to read sequentially or non-sequentially as desired. The full text of XFM is available online: http://www.laboriacuboniks.net/

Interview

Who exactly is Laboria Cuboniks, and is the group still active?

She's no one in particular. But she's still very active.

Those of us who were most immediately behind the manifesto have already been de-anonymized, so I suppose there's no need to be elusive. Except for one point: Laboria Cuboniks isn't something we want to be identified with in any rigid way. We just wanted to get [Laboria] started, and to give people a sense of what it could mean to speak through, or with, her.

There were six of us at the beginning: Diann Bauer, Katrina Burch, Helen Hester, Amy Ireland, Patricia Reed and myself. Since then, and even indirectly during the writing of the manifesto, others became involved . . . Laboria Cuboniks is meant to be an abstract platform, for which we don't feel we ought to be the gatekeepers. It's a pseudonym for anyone who's interested in using it. Of course, it's a bit of a gamble that the results will be consistent or useful, but it seems like an interesting gamble.

DEFINE

1.1 Reading XFM, and subsequently hearing you speak at NSCAD and following you on social media, I've been struck by the way in which interdisciplinary connections between a lived feminism and a lived critique of feminism effortlessly coalesce in your analyses of virtual and so-called "real" life. Here, I'm thinking in part of your references to motherhood, to gendered labour and to technology's potential to augment understandings of gender, race, sexuality, identity, power, politics and social responsibility (among other things!).

> To what degree do you think the interdisciplinarity of your thinking reflects a dissolution of traditional oppositions between material versus immaterial (i.e. inclusive of virtual) experience?

There is no real opposition any more, I don't think. It already feels a bit quaint or ironic to contrast your "online" with your "real" life. With the rise of social media, on the one hand, and the decline of the academic humanities, on the other, the Internet – especially extremely public and accessible zones, such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Tumblr, the blogosphere, etc. – has become the place where relevant political discourse and theory happens. On the Internet, discourse [interweaves] with everyday life. Threads routinely bob back and forth from back-of-the-envelope economic analyses to shitposting, confessionals and chitchat. It's a whole different ecosystem for ideas and memes . . . In this new system, ideas need to spread as quickly as the flu to stay viable; they can't afford to take the time they'd take to spread in an academic ecology (academic ideas are more like STDs – long-lasting, but requiring far more than casual contact to spread).

Another twist that the ubiquity of the Internet and social media brought about, I think, is the way it turns domestic space inside out. It goes a long, long way to abolishing the separation of public and domestic spheres. Lack of free time is still a huge obstacle here, but there's something very important about the way the Internet lets agents who have been traditionally excluded from the public sphere enter into conversations that can, at least potentially, become global in scale. The very topology of the public sphere has changed in a way that makes gatekeeping increasingly unfeasible.

To get back to your question: it's not the dissolution between material and immaterial that interests me; it's the complexification of public space. I mean this in a basic topological sense: the world no longer has – or is at least rapidly shedding – the structure that once made it susceptible to traditional forms of control: isolation, gatekeeping, censorship, containment, etc. . . The separation of intellectual and manual labour, of domestic and public spaces, and so on, presuppose a world with a very different shape than the one we have now. We've smashed the crystal spheres. New forms of control are arising rapidly, driven by forms of observation and intelligence that have no historical precedent, but there's no getting the horse back in the barn, or the stars back in the firmament.

There's a lot of talk of the modern panopticon and the surveillance state these days, but in some ways it tends to be too pessimistic: technologies and governmental practices of surveillance and control might be accelerating, but they're still losing the race. Thanks to modern encryption and anonymization technologies, the world is becoming unsurveillable and uncontrollable at an entirely different, and greater, order of magnitude. Just to give one simple example: virtually every modern smartphone is equipped with encryption technology, e.g. Signal, that is strong enough to escape the most powerful surveillance agencies on the planet. The current pushback that we're seeing in various governments' attempts to limit or weaken encryption is as inevitable and as clownish as it

looks, but this is a fight that I think they have already lost.

> 1.11 Laboria Cuboniks professes skepticism toward performative – and potentially insincere or undeveloped – intersectional discourse. Do you think a significant connection can be drawn between XF's apprehension toward labelling and cyberfeminists' refusal to self-define (i.e. as manifest in the creation of the "100 Anti-Theses" at the first Cyberfeminist International meeting in 1997)?

Yes. "Intersectionality" is a tremendously important notion – it's the insight that every demographic abstraction is leaky as hell, and that no identity category captures us without remainder, and that power never operates uniformly, but adapts itself to every facet of our complexly textured lives. This means that any grounds we put forth for solidarity are going to risk hardening into something deceitful and procrustean, or even outright oppressive, if they don't remain open to a sort of universalism. But [a universalism] that proceeds from the concrete particularities of the situation. This is a tricky point, because we also see universalist gestures being used as an excuse to ignore the situations we're dealing with – "All Lives Matter" being an easily recognizable example of sham universalism. This isn't an intersectional and genuinely universalist gesture; it's a retreat, a way of emptying a real struggle of its content, so as to make it more palatable to those who don't want to be disturbed.

ATTEND

> 11.1 Though commercial and surveillance projects seem insidiously parasitic to digital culture, do you think online memetics may still offer inroads to psychical and bodily forms of self-(re)generation, maybe even freedom(s)?

Yes, absolutely.

> 11.11 What role do you think aesthetics play in shaping visions of such freedoms?

"Shaping visions of freedom" is an interesting way to think about aesthetics, especially those of human self-artificialization, which, admittedly, seems like an enormously broad category. I don't know if I want to say this as an extremely general rule, but it seems that most engrossing art gives us a new, sometimes slightly more nuanced or skewed, sensibility of our freedoms and constraints.

> 11.111 What do you make of the borderline fetishization of 1990s subcultural aesthetics (here, I'm thinking of Riot Grrrl, Cyberfeminism, and other forms of predominantly white "alt" culture) and attendant critiques of third-wave nostalgia in contemporary culture?

Do you mean [Laboria Cuboniks'] fetishization of these aesthetics? I hope we're not fetishizing them. I think these [subcultures] influenced us at an early age, so I wouldn't be surprised if you found some echoes there. And Cyberfeminism

is basically our monstrous, ectogenic mom, with whom we're still very close and call every weekend. Most of us were teenagers in the '90s, and for some of us that meant hanging out on BBSes,1 listening to punk rock and making drug-addled, underground zines with ink, glue and Xerox machines.

The question of nostalgia has been raised before, though, regarding XF and accelerationism, our monstrous sibling… There's definitely a fondness for those moments in history when the present seemed to bristle with futures. It's not a nostalgia for what was, but for what seemed possible. We can't let it dominate our work – you don't want to fixate on these things . . . But there's a genuine affection for those moments that continues to give us energy and hope.

I guess you can see something that's been called nostalgia in quite a few of the online aesthetic movements that have formed recently – vaporwave, seapunk, cybertwee, etc. But I don't think that their enjoyment and estrangements of older cultural forms is really a problem. It would be more of a problem, I think, if we let the wreckage of the '90s go to waste without trying to explore it. . . Part of what it means to be contemporary, to live in 2016, is to look back on the ruins of the '90s - and now, I suppose, the early 2000s – as history, as something retro. That's something we couldn't do at the time. And we missed a lot of things, a lot of strangeness and a lot of stupidity on the first pass. This is a political exercise, too. Look at how every character in Friends squirms and panics every time anything even slightly suggestive of homosexuality comes up. It's bizarre as hell. And it was perfectly normal at the time. Even straight kids living today can see how bizarre it was. At the time, you had to have a seat on the margins to see why this was screwy.

The romanticism of '90s cyberculture, for example, can also be tremendously invigorating. It reminds us of how absolutely fucking remarkable our current era is. Just look at the excitement you find in authors like Sadie plant, VNS Matrix and Sandy Stone when they talk about the instant availability of knowledge, the ubiquity of artificial intelligence and the near total interconnectivity of the planet. It's too easy to see the present as something banal or unremarkable. As my friend William Gillis – who was responsible for printing [XFM] as a zine, which, I'm not going to lie, was so nostalgically satisfying - pointed out, prior to the last couple of decades, humanity was completely fragmented. People, for the most part, could only communicate with their neighbours, aside from a few very tenuous connections by phone or mail, usually with people with whom they already had some local or familial connection. Look forward a few hundred years, maybe, to the age of interplanetary travel and colonization, and you're going to see a similar situation on a greater scale: people, for the most part, will only be communicating with others on the same planet and its satellites. The 21st century is perhaps the one unique century in human history where everyone is at least potentially in communication with everyone else, by the fewest degrees of separation we've ever seen, or will ever see. This is a remarkable era, and the decade that seemed to have the clearest view of why it would be remarkable was the '90s. It's not a "let's go back to how things were" sensibility that makes

'90s cyberculture so interesting to us. Rather, it's a detour for getting to what's so bloody remarkableand new in the present.

There were limitations, too, in what we were exposed to during [the '90s]. Racial and subcultural clustering was an aspect of that. A lot of Black thinkers and artists were influential for me: Octavia Butler, Samuel Delaney, Jean- Michel Basquiat and DJ Spooky were all big influences on my weird, late-'90s self and the sort of art I was interested in making, but the subcultural milieu I was steeping in probably did skew a bit white. I'm sure there's a lot that I missed as a result. I'd like to miss less.

UPEND

> 111.1 For many, the intersections of technology and feminism inevitably recall Donna Haraway and 1990s art activism, or "hacktivism," groups like VNS Matrix. What individuals, groups, or projects currently inspire you?

VNS Matrix is one of our biggest influences, which I think is pretty obvious. One of the really cool things that happened while we were working on the manifesto was that we became – slightly star-struck at first – friends with Virginia Barratt (thanks, Internet!), and she was one of the readers who we bombarded with drafts while the whole thing was still in alpha. Sandy Stone, Sadie Plant and Nick Land also rank pretty high in terms of influence.

My aesthetic sensibilities – such as they are; I've never been part of the art world, in the sense of "high" art – were probably shaped in the late '90s and early 2000s in the underground comics and art scenes in Halifax. I used to paint a bit and make zines. I was never much good, but it was exciting, and got me exploring the far aesthetic reaches of strangeness and disorientation. Getting a taste for the xeno and all that. I learned a lot from Dan Gallant, in visual art, and Jen Devlin, as a writer. Both of them went on to do far more than I ever could with painting and poetry.

Currently, [LC's] theoretical influences are mostly friends of ours. Less the people we study, than the people with whom we communicate on a regular basis, if we haven't frittered away, then read the writings of, if we haven't frittered away all our time on the Internet: the "left accelerationists" and "neorationalists" Pete Wolfendale, Reza Negarestani, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams; Benedict Singleton, with whom we've gotten into long conversations about traps, cunning, and interplanetary colonization; William Gillis, who we met more recently, and who represents the anarcho-transhumanist camp; Alain Badiou, [who] influenced our thinking about categories like universalism; and Dominic Fox. Susan Blackmore and Scott Alexander have shed a tremendous light on the topic of memetics, which has been something I've been spending a lot of time with lately. The artist Alina Popa has been a huge influence on the question of thinking about estrangement aesthetically. And, of course, all of those in Laboria Cuboniks have been a constant source of insight and provocation.

111.11 Do you think that the interdisciplinarity of network systems and the shift toward viewing the Internet itself as a medium are encouraging a collapse of distinctions between activism, theory, art and technology?

It's definitely making it easier for anyone – as far as time and energy allow, which is never far enough – to participate in multiple spheres at once. It's easier for a software developer to find an audience for their poetry, for philosophers to learn to code, for scientists to engage in political activism, etc. The old information silos are crumbling. Time is the biggest obstacle now. Most of us aren't pampered renaissance men, and so even though we can easily pick up a free online course to learn X, and can write a blog that will likely have a wider readership than most prestigious academic journals, most of us are also pretty damn frazzled and tired most of the time, especially if we're raising kids or living in poverty or both. Free time is really the single biggest obstacle between the current situation and the utopias dreamt up by '90s cyberfeminism.

111.111 Section 0x19 of XFM reads:

> Is xenofeminism a programme? Not if this means anything so crude as a recipe, or a single-purpose tool by which a determinate problem is solved. We prefer to think like the schemer or lisper, who seeks to construct a new language in which the problem at hand is immersed, so that solutions for it . . . might unfurl with ease. Xenofeminism is a platform, an incipient ambition to construct a new language for sexual politics – a language that seizes its own methods as materials to be reworked, and incrementally bootstraps itself into existence.

I love the use of "bootstraps" here and the way it calls to mind gestures associated both with preparing oneself for the physical world and loading software onto a computer. Do you think that your familiarity with technological language encourages you to read the material world with metaphors germane to technological systems and apparatuses?

Absolutely. I transitioned from academia (philosophy, specifically) to tech (computer science, information security, and AI in particular) around the same time [LC] began working on the manifesto, so I was definitely in the process of discovering an incredibly rich conceptual vocabulary and an entirely new expanse of potential metaphors. I work in [information security] full-time now and tinker with machine learning on the side, and I'm still finding this to be the case. It's a beautiful and fascinating world: the world of the electron and the switch, the beauty of the baud and so on… I think you can certainly engage with self-representation and gender without also being a computer hacker. Different people learn different things at different speeds, so it's unfair to say that anyone can dive in and feel at home in the bowels of the technosphere. But it's also

never been easier to learn – the only real obstacle seems to be time – and those who are curious enough about it will feel themselves drawn into it. Just as those who are curious enough about refashioning their subjectivity, or their sex, will find ways and means of doing so. And there's a certain sense of "radicalism" that just is this curiosity, this restlessness, this desire to get to the root of everything and figure out how it works and how it can be changed. It's not really surprising, for example, that there's a disproportionately large overlap between computer hackers and trans people. You're unlikely to try to hack your own endocrine system and radically rebuild yourself as a social and embodied subject if you don't have a bit of restless radicalism in you. It's not surprising if the same sensibility eventually has you reverse engineering software and searching for exploits. This is just one example, of course. Art and science are others.

EXTEND

> iv.1 How is digital feminist allyship enactable? In your mind, are the politics of this form of feminism significantly different than the politics of activism in "real life"?

If someone wants to be an "ally," that's cool, and it usually means they mean well. But it's an inherently weak position to occupy, and I think that sometimes it risks coming off as a bit patronizing – as if what feminists need are a bunch of dutiful yes-men. I think it's better just to focus on respect, friendliness and egalitarianism. What's necessary, and sometimes lacking, in online communications is patience and respect, not deference and kowtowing.

One major difference between IRL (AFK?) [2] activism – or forming activist communities – and its online counterpart comes down to bandwidth. When you're interacting with someone face-to-face, you've typically got much more information to process. This can make it much more strenuous for some, but it also makes certain complexities and nuances clearer, even if they can't be unambiguously parsed. Interaction online is optimized for speed, and, at its worse, for achieving the most dramatic, noisiest reaction in the shortest time, on a strictly economized band of information (maybe just 140 characters or less). Two dominant kinds of behaviour evolve as a result: one which learns to dispatch discipline and shame with utmost efficiency while avoiding excommunication, and one which learns to completely desensitize themselves from all that, and which spreads by triggering and exploiting the other side's disciplinary reflexes instead. It's an unstable set-up. #gamergate was probably the high-water-mark for both tendencies, and, from a certain, systemic perspective, it's very interesting to look at. It's hard to imagine these particular forms of behaviour evolving, or at least becoming dominant memetic species, offline. I'm not trying to valorize offline communities or denigrate online communication. We've just got different traps and attractors to avoid in each case.

Given that these are probably the two least productive and empowering forms of communication online – trolling and uncharitable callouts – I suppose that

"digital allyship" would mean trying to communicate in a way that isn't overly prone to either. I know that "be nice, treat people as equals, and show respect and humility" is pretty boring, liberal-sounding advice, but it's what I've got.

> iv.1i Another passage of XFM reads: "Why is there so little explicit, organized effort to repurpose technologies for progressive gender political ends? XF seeks to strategically deploy existing technologies to re-engineer the world."

What kinds of projects have arisen so far in response or relation to XF? XF is still very young, and I think it's still pretty obscure, so I don't want to overstate its influence on the ground. But one project that definitely deserves mention is Open Source Gendercodes [3], a project founded by Ryan Hammond, which aims to develop genetically modified tobacco plants that produce significant quantities of human-compatible sex hormones. The technology, once developed, would be made completely open source, with the aim of ensuring a means of directly accessing cross-sex (or same sex) hormones. We were pretty ecstatic when we stumbled across Hammond's project, online – and even more so when one of us caught a glimpse of the XF manifesto pinned to his studio wall in his crowdfunding video!

We've also been happy to see artists and writers pick up XF and run with it. There's a group in the UK, for example, that put together a xenofeminist exhibition. [4] "3rdspace is a response to XF and an exploration into the powers of technology to escape modern structures of control," their statement reads. "As artists we are trying to reprogram the world's code and reengineer new ones."

MANIFEST

> v.1 XFM doesn't list demands so much as indict the conditions of technological knowledge and infrastructure limiting mental and physical autonomy. This stands in contrast to manifestos that reflect a formal indebtedness to patriarchal gestures of naming and stabilizing identity categories. I'm curious about the potential you see in the requisite declarative, and also imperative, aspects of a technofeminist manifesto… Do you think these features render the manifesto a valuable framework for collective disputation?

I think that most of the manifestos [LC are] interested in contain an element of identity destabilization. The Cyberfeminist and Bitch Mutant Manifestos of VNS Matrix were less about celebrating feminine identity than about laughing at an obsolete patriarchy's increasingly incompetent efforts to restrain anything in a stable identity marked "woman." At first, the Hacker and Cyberpunk manifestos appear like identitarian litanies – the first with its chorus "we're all alike" and the second with its opening declaration "We are…" In both cases, though, the evoked identity slips between the cracks as something misjudged and unrecognized.

It seems like even the most identity-focused manifestos involve some gesture of disidentification. From start to finish, "A Cyborg Manifesto" [5] is a celebration of everything that slips through the gridwork of recognizable identities. I suppose that most manifestos contain something like this double-movement: destabilizing identities on the one hand so as to restabilize a different configuration of identities on the other. The really intriguing [manifestos] make the most of the gap between these two moments.

> v.1i On a formal level, do you think manifestos have a unique capacity to operate as sites of self-evidence? Is there a radicality to such a mode of citation that is perhaps essential to the work of 21st century feminism?

I don't think a manifesto can claim self-evidence. Generally speaking, if you feel like you've been convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt by a manifesto, you've probably been played like a rhetorical fiddle. [Manifestos] are not meticulously developed argumentative pieces. They're more like stand-up comedy [in that] their job is to point things out . . . [t]o nudge you into adopting a point of view that might not have seemed available beforehand, but which pulls things into focus in a way that makes you want to run with [an idea] and see where it goes.

> v.ii1 Do you consider the manifesto a prefigurative form?

Manifestos are only really prefigurative if you can't predict who your audience will be. The opposite of a manifesto is a conference paper. The most difficult part of writing these things is keeping questions open, not falling too deeply into old habits (e.g. academic or art world habits). The whole point of writing something like [a manifesto] is to try to reshape the discursive chessboard, at least in some small but structural way, and not just to move the existing pieces around.