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## RETHINKING CYBERFEMINISM(S): RACE, GENDER, AND EMBODIMENT

JESSIE DANIELS

“If you can’t slap him, snap him,” is the tag line for the website HollaBackNYC (<http://www.hollabacknyc.com>). The site’s creators, fed up with everyday harassment by men exposing themselves on New York’s streets and subways, encourage women to use their Internet-enabled cell phones to snap photos of harassers and upload them to the site. This ingenious use of technology is emblematic of an array of new expression of feminist practices called “cyberfeminism.” Among cyberfeminists (Orgad 2005; Plant 1997; Podlas 2000), some have suggested that Internet technologies can be an effective medium for resisting repressive gender regimes and enacting equality, while others have called into question such claims (Gajjala 2003). Central to such claims and counterclaims about the subversive potential of Internet technologies is theorizing that constructs women of color as quintessential cyborgs (Fernandez 2002, 32), as when Haraway writes about the “cyborg women making chips in Asia and spiral dancing in Santa Rita” (1985, 7). In this essay, I offer an overview of cyberfeminist theories and practices. Drawing on a wide array of theoretical literature and empirical research, I review cyberfeminist claims about the subversive potential of human/machine cyborgs, identity tourism, and disembodiment within a global networked economy alongside analyses that highlight the lived experience and actual Internet practices of girls and self-identified women.<sup>1</sup> While some cyberfeminists contend that the Internet shifts gender and racial regimes of power through the human/machine hybridity of cyborgs (Haraway 1985), identity tourism (Nakamura 2002; Turkle 1997), and the escape from embodiment (Hansen 2006; Nouraié-Simone 2005b), I argue that the lived experience and actual Internet practices of girls and self-identified women reveals ways that they use the Internet to transform their material, corporeal lives in a number of complex ways that both resist and reinforce hierarchies of gender and race.

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While drawing on academic disciplines, I also focus rather deliberately on the theoretically informed empirical investigations by sociologists into Internet practices. Saskia Sassen's work addresses the embeddedness of the digital in the physical, material world, and she catalogs the ways that digital technologies "enable women to engage in new forms of contestation and in proactive endeavors in multiple different realms, from political to economic" (2002, 368). In contrast, Lori Kendall (1996, 1998, 2000, 2002), in her richly nuanced ethnography of the gendered dynamics in the multiuser domain (MUD) BlueSky, argues that digital technologies reproduce rather than subvert white, heterosexual, masculine cultures and hierarchies of power. In a 1997 article "Changing the Subject," Jodi O'Brien writes eloquently about the strict policing of gender identity online and the limitations of identity tourism. And Victoria Pitts's (2004) research about women's use of the Internet on breast cancer forums offers an important corrective to the discourse about disembodiment popular in cyberfeminist writing. My focus is based at least partly on familiarity; I am a sociologist by background and training, so it is the field in which I am most conversant. Focusing on empirical sociological research about Internet practices is also an effective strategy for informing theoretical claims about the subversive potential of digital technologies. Finally, my focus on sociological research is meant to serve as a challenge to those who claim to want to transform as well as inform society yet have little engagement in the cyberfield.

### BEYOND "ZEROES AND ONES": GENDER, RACE, AND CYBERFEMINISM(S)

Cyberfeminism is neither a single theory nor a feminist movement with a clearly articulated political agenda. Rather, "cyberfeminism" refers to a range of theories, debates, and practices about the relationship between gender and digital culture (Flanagan and Booth 2002, 12), so it is perhaps more accurate to refer to the plural, "cyberfeminism(s)." Within and among cyberfeminism(s) there are a number of distinct theoretical and political stances in relation to Internet technology and gender as well as a noticeable ambivalence about a unified feminist political project (Chatterjee 2002, 199). Further, some distinguish between the "old" cyberfeminism, characterized by a utopian vision of a postcorporeal woman corrupting patriarchy, and a "new" cyberfeminism, which is more about "confronting the top-down from the bottom-up" (Fernandez, Wilding, and Wright 2003, 22–23). Thus, any attempt to write about cyberfeminism as if it were a monolith inevitably results in a narrative that is inaccurately totalizing. However, what provides common ground among these variants of cyberfeminism(s) is the

sustained focus on gender and digital technologies and on cyberfeminist practices (Flanagan and Booth 2002, 12; Chatterjee 2002, 199; Fernandez, Wilding, and Wright 2003, 9–13).

Cyberfeminist practices involve experimentation and engagement with various Internet technologies by self-identified women across several domains, including work (Scott-Dixon 2004; Shih 2006), education (Clegg 2001), domestic life (Na 2001; Ribak 2001; Singh 2003), civic engagement (Harcourt 2000), feminist political organizing (Everett 2007; Sutton and Pollock 2000), art (Fernandez, Wilding, and Wright 2003), and play (Bury 2005; Cassell and Jenkins 2000; Flanagan 2002; Kendall 1996). While there is no consistent feminist political project associated with cyberfeminist practices, within a culture in which Internet technology is so pervasively coded as “masculine” (Adam 2004; Kendall 2000), there is something at least potentially transgressive in such practices (Fernandez, Wilding, and Wright 2003).

Rosalind Gill takes exception to the notion that there is anything subversive in these practices when she describes “women’s depressingly familiar . . . use of the Internet in affluent northern countries . . . primarily for e-mail, home shopping and the acquisition of health information” (2005, 99; see also Herring 2004). Indeed, the commercialization of the Internet at sites such as iVillage.com (“the Internet for women”) co-opts the rhetoric of feminism for profit (Royal 2005), as does much of the health information online (Pitts 2004). While it is true that many affluent women in the global North have “depressingly familiar” practices when it comes to the Internet, this sort of sweeping generalization suggests a lack of awareness about the innovative ways women are using digital technologies to re-engineer their lives.<sup>2</sup>

Sue Rosser, in her expansive review of information technology through different feminist lenses, concludes that although cyberfeminism uses “aspects of different feminist theories,” it lacks a sufficiently coherent framework to be characterized as anything but a “developing feminist theory” (Rosser 2005, 19).<sup>3</sup> Other scholars writing about cyberfeminism(s) are less concerned with the lack of a coherent framework and, indeed, revel in the “sporadic, tactical, contradictory set of theories, debates and practices” (Booth and Flanagan 2002, 12) that constitute cyberfeminism(s). Yet it is exceedingly rare within both cyberfeminist practices and critiques of them to see any reference to the intersection of gender and race (Fernandez, Wilding, and Wright 2003, 21); instead both the practices and the critiques suggest that “gender” is a unified category and, by implication, that digital technologies mean the same thing to all women across differences of race, class, sexuality.

In her book *Zeroes and Ones*, Sadie Plant is exuberant about the potential of Internet technologies to transform the lives of women. Plant conceptualizes cyberspace as a liberating place for women because, as she sees it, the inherently textual nature of the Internet lends itself to “the female” (1997, 23). Her title refers to the binary code of zeroes and ones that constitutes the basic programming language that computers use. Plant symbolically renders zeroes as “female” and ones as phallic and “male,” predicting that the digital future is feminine, distributed, nonlinear, a world in which “zeroes” are displacing the phallic order of the “ones” (Gill 2005, 99). Plant is perhaps the leading figure in popularizing the ideas of cyberfeminism beyond the academy. While Plant has been justifiably criticized for reinscribing essentialist notions of gender (Wilding 1998), Wajcman (2004) writes that Plant’s optimism about the potential of gender equality in cyberspace must be understood as a reaction against previous conceptualizations of technology as inherently masculine. In addition to essentializing gender, Plant’s binary of “zeroes” and “ones” leaves no conceptual room for understanding how gender intersects with “race.” In this way, Plant’s writing is characteristic of the field, as there is relatively little discussion of the intersections of gender with “race,” except in cases where “race” is included in a long list of additional variables to be added on to “gender.” Thus, when cyberfeminists explicitly engage both gender and race it is both conspicuous and instructive.

In their edited volume, *Domain Errors! Cyberfeminist Practices*, Fernandez, Wilding, and Wright highlight cyberfeminist practices that eschew the exclusionary aspects of earlier forms of feminism, and they remind us “the lives of white women and women of color are mutually reliant” (2003, 25). Yet, as Fernandez and Wilding point out, cyberfeminist writing often assumes an “educated, white, upper-middle-class, English-speaking, culturally sophisticated readership,” which ironically ends up replicating the “damaging universalism of ‘old-style feminism’” (Fernandez and Wilding 2003, 21). Given the “damaging universalism” of some forms of cyberfeminism, what, then, do we make of claims for the subversive potential of the Internet?

In the following two sections, I explore the evidence for the view that the Internet is a technology that facilitates gender and racial equality. First, I focus on questions related to political economy and internetworked global feminism. Then, I turn to debates about “identity tourism” and the allure of disembodiment by contrasting examples of the way girls and women are using the Internet to transform their bodies.

## "A LIBERATING TERRITORY OF ONE'S OWN": POLITICAL ECONOMY AND INTERNETWORKED GLOBAL FEMINISM

A central debate within cyberfeminism has to do with the tension between the political economy required to mass produce the infrastructure of the Internet and its reliance on the exploited labor, on the one hand, and, on the other, claims for the subversive potential of those same technologies.

Easily the most influential figure in cyberfeminism is Donna Haraway. Her conceptualization of the *cyborg*, part human and part machine (1985), and the subversive potential of a cyborg future, are of particular interest to a number of scholars who come to gender and technology through poststructuralism and cyberpunk fiction (Balsamo 1996; Flanagan and Booth 2002; DeVoss 2000; Flanagan 2002; Sunden 2001; Wolmark 1999). In contrast to this promised future, critics have pointed to the problematic construction of women of color working in technology manufacturing as quintessential cyborgs (Flanagan and Booth 2002; 12). The low-skilled work in microchip production and global call centers has not eased "the oppression of Third World women, . . . [it] has merely perpetuated their oppression in a new workplace" (Flanagan and Booth 2002, 13; see also Eisenstein 1998). Radhika Gajjala raises the central question about the possibility of "subaltern cyberfeminism from below," given this economic context: "If cyberspace is produced at the expense of millions of men and women all over the world who are not even able to enjoy its conveniences, how can we make claims that [these technologies] are changing the world for the better?" (2003, 49). This juxtaposition of subversive Internet technologies, on the one hand, and global economic inequality, on the other, is one that few scholars writing about cyberculture acknowledge. Yet, in rethinking cyberfeminism, it is crucial to examine both. In the following section, I take up the empirical evidence about political economy, gender, and race.

### POLITICAL ECONOMY

To take a global perspective, it is clear that those in industrialized nations are more likely to own computers and have Internet access than are those in developing societies (Norris 2001). The material reality of the global political economy is that women remain the poorest global citizens; the digital era has not shifted this in significant ways (Eisenstein 1998). However, aggregate-level country-specific data show that women have increasing rates of participation online, often at faster rates than men (Sassen 2002, 376). It is not surprising that women lag behind men globally in computer use and

Internet access, given that these are so clearly linked to economic resources (Bimber 2000; Leggon 2006; Norris 2001). What is intriguing is that despite women's place at the bottom of the global economic hierarchy, their Internet participation is rapidly increasing.

In the United States, the empirical research indicates that most of the apparent "digital divide" in computer ownership and Internet access, has been the effect of class (or socioeconomic status) more than of gender and race (Norris 2001). In the United States, the rate of Internet access has converged for men and women who are white (Leggon 2006, 100). There remain some small differences in access and kinds of usage between Hispanic women and men and between African American women and men; these differences, however, are negligible (Leggon 2006, 100). Yet despite the convergence and negligible differences across gender and race, public intellectuals such as Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Anthony Walton do not hesitate to assert that Black culture is "the problem" when it comes to the digital divide (Wright 2002, 2005). Discourse of "the digital divide" that configures "women" or "Blacks and Hispanics" or "the poor" living in the global South as information "have-nots" is a disabling rhetoric (Everett 2004, 1280) that fails to recognize the agency and technological contributions of African Americans, Asians, Chicanos, Latinos, and working-class whites (Wright 2002, 57). What we need is a more multidimensional view of inequality of access that allows for individual agency.

Conceptualizing digital technologies exclusively in terms of either economic oppression or lack of access is overdetermined and does not allow for women's agency with regard to the Internet. Gajjala recognizes this agency by pointing out that the very people who are excluded from mainstream society want to include themselves in these new technologies on their own terms so that "they can see themselves as protagonists of the revolution" (2003, 49). For many women, including themselves in these new technologies means including themselves in internetworked global feminism.

#### INTERNETWORKED GLOBAL FEMINISM

Within the context of a global political economy, internetworked global feminism can and does bypass national states, local opposition, mass media indifference, and major national economic actors, thus opening a whole new terrain for activism that addresses gender and racial inequality (Sassen 2002; Earl and Schussman 2003; Everett 2004; Kahn and Kellner 2004; Langman 2005; Sutton and Pollock 2000).

For women of color who want to connect globally across diasporas—what Chela Sandoval refers to as “U.S. third world feminism” (2000)—the cyberfeminist practice of online organizing and discursive space takes on added significance. Gajjala’s (2003, 2004) writing about South Asian diasporas online is a case in point. Her work combines critical, theoretical analysis with years of hands-on practice building e-spaces, such as SAWnet, the women-only South Asian Listserv. Gajjala points out that if cyberfeminist agendas are to “produce subversive countercultures or to succeed in changing existing technological environments so that they are empowering to women and men of lesser material and socio-cultural privilege the world over, it is important to examine how individuals and communities are situated” within the global political economy (2003, 54). For women of color who have been systematically excluded from mainstream civic engagement on the basis of race and gender, the political online organizing of African American women both in the United States and globally around the Million Woman March provides another example of cyberfeminism. As Anna Everett writes: “The sistahs of the march recognized the value of new technologies to further their own agendas and to promote their brand of activism, which did not require choosing which liberation struggle to fight first, gender or race oppression” (2004, 1283).

In a similar vein, Michelle Wright notes the cyberfeminist practice of online communities designed specifically by and for Black women, such as SistahSpace (<http://www.Sistahspace.com>). Wright exhorts other women of color to engage with the “Internet beyond Web surfing and checking e-mail” (2005, 57). The kinds of cyberfeminist practices suggested by Gajjala, Everett, and Wright are more overtly political than other cyberfeminist practices and are part of what Sandoval (2000) refers to as an oppositional technology of power.

Many women in and out of global feminist political organizations view Internet technology as a crucial medium for movement toward gender equality (Cherny and Weise 1996; Harcourt 1999, 2000, 2004; Purweal 2004; Merithew 2004; Jacobs 2004). Wendy Harcourt, an Australian feminist researcher with the Society for International Development, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) based in Rome and the author of *Women@Internet: Creating New Cultures in Cyberspace*, is a leading proponent of this view. She summarizes this stance when she writes that there is “convincing evidence that the Internet is a tool for creating a communicative space that when embedded in a political reality can be an empowering mechanism for



women” (1999, 219). The notion that the Internet is a “tool” to be picked up and “used” by women for “empowerment” is a metaphor that is employed repeatedly in the literature about global feminist organizations and the Internet. The evidence to which Harcourt refers is written primarily by women working in NGOs that focus on gender equality in their local regions and globally, a focus some have referred to as “glocality” (1999). The mobilization of global awareness and opposition to the repressive Taliban regime by the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (<http://www.rawa.org>) is just one example of the effective use of the Internet by a global feminist organization (Kensinger 2003). Another example comes from Mexico, where a number of feminist NGOs have used the Internet in their efforts to cross national frontiers to establish a system of global support and exchange in pursuit of a more gender-equitable society (Merithew 2004). And global feminist networks begun in South Asia have fostered a challenge to gender-specific abortion, or “son selection,” as some refer to the practice of terminating pregnancies in which the fetus is female (Purweal 2004). Lauren Langman (2005) refers to these kinds of global social movements organized online as internetworked social movements, or ISMs. These organizations, and the women writing from within them, make a strong case that information technology facilitates transnational feminist networks and indicate a measure of success for global feminism (Jacobs 2004). Sassen enumerates dozens of women’s organizations online and argues that women’s presence in and use of the Internet has the potential to transform a whole range of local conditions and institutional domains where women are key actors (2002, 379).

Many individual women outside any formal political organization experience the Internet as a “safe space” for resisting the gender oppression that they encounter in their day-to-day lives offline. In her edited volume *On Shifting Ground: Muslim Women in the Global Era*, Fereshteh Nourai-Simone (2005a) includes essays about the importance of global information technology for women living in and resisting repressive gender regimes. Nourai-Simone’s description of the importance of the Internet is noteworthy: “For educated young Iranian women, cyberspace is a liberating territory of one’s own—a place to resist a traditionally imposed subordinate identity while providing a break from pervasive Islamic restrictions in public physical space. The virtual nature of the Internet—the structure of interconnection in cyberspace that draws participants into ongoing discourses on issues of feminism, patriarchy, and gender politics, and the textual process of self-

expression without the prohibition or limitation of physical space—offers new possibilities for women’s agency and empowerment” (2005b, 61–62).

Here, Nouraié-Simone evokes Virginia Woolf’s call for a “room of one’s own” as a prerequisite for feminist consciousness when she describes her experience online as a “liberating territory of one’s own.” Rather than the “tool” imagery invoked by so many of the global feminist organizations when describing information technology, Nouraié-Simone chooses the term “cyberspace” to suggest that she goes to a “place to resist,” where she participates in discussions of “feminism, patriarchy, and gender politics.” For her, cyberspace makes global feminism possible in her life offline on an intimate, immediate, and personal level.

While the evidence presented here about the political economy and global feminist organizations and individuals using Internet technologies in ways that resist oppressive regimes of gender and sexuality is admittedly anecdotal, it does offer some insight into the questions, Is the Internet subversive? If so, for whom? Sassen’s concept of embeddedness, that is the Internet as embedded in materiality, is useful here. As Sassen notes, there is no “purely digital” or exclusively “virtual” electronic space; rather, the digital is always “embedded” in the material (2002, 367–68). Melanie Millar (1998) calls attention to the uneven effects of digital technologies on diverse groups of women. For the women working in a microchip factory in China or a call center in India, the Internet is not a subversive potential future but a workplace rooted in economic necessity. For women in global feminist organizations outside the affluent global North, the Internet is a “tool” to be used for addressing gender inequality in local regions and leveraging connections to feminists in other regions. For Nouraié-Simone, the Internet is a “safe space” to occupy away from a repressive gender regime in the offline world. Each has different relations to digital technologies, and these are embedded in present-tense, material, embodied lives rather than imagined cyborg futures.

### THE ALLURE OF IDENTITY TOURISM AND DISEMBODIMENT

After the cyborg, the two ideas that hold the most allure for cyberfeminists interested in the subversive potential of the Internet are identity tourism and disembodiment. Lisa Nakamura in her book *Cybertypes* coins the term “identity tourism” to describe “the process by which members of one group try on for size the descriptors generally applied to persons of another race or gender” (2002, 8). The allure of changing identities online has been part

of the sociological writing about the Internet since Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen*. Turkle contends that assuming alternate identities online can have positive psychological and social effects by loosening repressive boundaries (1997, 12; see also Westfall 2000; Whitley 1997). The idea that racial oppression is linked to embodied visibility is one about which African American sociologists and other scholars have written eloquently, going back to W. E. B. Du Bois (Du Bois 1903/1995; Tal 2001). This idea appears frequently in mainstream press accounts as well as the scholarly literature on "race" and the Internet, as in this passage from Mark Hansen: "The suspension of the social category of visibility in online environments transforms the experience of race in what is, potentially a fundamental way: by suspending the automatic ascription of racial signifiers according to visible traits, online environments can, in a certain sense, be said to subject everyone to what I shall call a 'zero degree' of racial difference" (2006, 141).

However, changing identities online may not be as subversive an experience as Turkle and others suggest. Jodi O'Brien notes that gender-switching online is only acceptable within very narrow boundaries and that there is an "earnestness with which gender-policing is conducted" when gender-switching occurs (1999, 82).<sup>4</sup> O'Brien interprets the earnest "gender-policing" to mean that when it is intended as play or performance, switching identities is tolerated as long as there is agreement that a "natural" (read physical/biological) referent remains "intact, embodied and immutable" (O'Brien 1999, 82). Switching identities online seems much less prevalent than the kinds of online experiences that Pitts describes in her research on women with breast cancer who seek and find real community and create new forms of knowledge via sites such as Women.com's BreastFest (Pitts 2004, 55).

Additional research into actual online practices suggests that rather than going online to "switch" gender or racial identities, people actively seek out online spaces that affirm and solidify social identities along axes of race, gender, and sexuality. For example, young girls and teens who have access to the Internet increasingly form their identities, at least in part, through their online interactions (Mazzarella 2005), often via social networking sites such as MySpace or Facebook (boyd 2004); people of color affirm racial identities online through BlackPlanet.com, MiGente, and AsianAvenue.com (Byrne 2007; Lee and Wong 2003); and self-identified QLBT (queer, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender) women go online to "learn to be queer" (Bryson 2004, 251) by using sites such as QueerSisters (Nip 2004; see also Alexander

2002). In large measure, the notion of “identity tourism,” in which people switch gender and racial identities, functions as a heuristic device for thinking about gender and race rather than this activity being a commonplace online practice. What then of the cyberfeminist claim of dispensing with embodiment as a path to gender (and racial) equality?

Nourai-Simone writes that part of *why* she finds the Internet so subversive while living under a repressive sex/gender regime in Iran is the chance to escape embodiment: “The *absence of the physical body* in electronic space and the anonymity this offers have a liberating effect on repressed social identity, as ‘electronic technology’ becomes ‘a tool for the design of freely ‘chosen identities’” (2005b, 61–62; emphasis added). In this passage, she connects liberation from gender oppression to the absence of the body as well as to the ability to adopt “freely chosen identities.” While it is not clear from Nourai-Simone’s writing if her practice includes “switching” gender or ethnic identities, it seems unlikely, given that in this same passage she writes that she goes online to seek out “discourse” on “issues of feminism, patriarchy, and gender politics,” as part of her “self-expression” (2005b, 61–62). The impact of digital technologies on self-identified women’s lives is grounded in materiality and embodiment. Pitts is instructive on this point: “Online women with breast cancer are not necessarily interested in gender-play or too interested in leaving the body behind them. Their public narratives do not ‘hide’ the body, and they generally do not abandon gender, beauty and conventional femininity. . . . In detailing some of the more unpleasant bodily aspects of sickness and treatment, they present women’s bodies as they are really lived” (2004, 55).

Instead of going online to escape embodiment, the women in Pitts’s study seek out Internet spaces where they can explore and reaffirm the bodily selves in the presence of illness, surgery, recovery, and loss. Pitts’s research is useful for considering the impact of the Internet on self-identified women’s lives and illustrates the ways women engage with Internet technologies in order to create meaning for themselves to improve, or at least change, the material conditions of their lives and their bodies.

The putative invisibility online and the “decoupling identity from any analogical relation to the visible body” (Hansen 2006, 145) to escape race and gender visibility rests on an assumption of an exclusively text-based online world that belies the reality of digital video and photographic technologies, such as webcams (and image-sharing sites, among them Flickr and YouTube), which make images of bodies a quotidian part of the gendered,

and racialized, online world (White 2003). Rather than a libertarian utopia of disembodiment, cyberspace must be considered an environment in which “definitions of situation, body, and identity are both contested and are influenced by power relations” (Pitts 2004, 53–54). The allure of disembodiment for many cyberfeminists alongside the valorization of self-identified women and girls’ engagement with Internet technologies suggests an inherent contradiction within cyberfeminism. The use of Internet technologies to (re)shape bodies by the seemingly disparate communities of “pro-ana” girls discussed below and transgendered women illustrates this contradiction.

### THE CONTINUING SIGNIFICANCE OF EMBODIMENT: “PRO-ANA” WEBSITES AND “TRANNNY” HORMONE LISTSERVS

Cyberfeminists have heralded the allure of disembodiment as a way to subvert gender and gender oppression. Some cyberfeminists, such as Braidotti (2002), Plant (1997), and Wilding and CA Ensemble (1998), recognize and celebrate the potential of a new wave of feminist practices that engage with Internet technologies in ways that chart new ground for women. However, foregrounding women and girls’ engagement with Internet technologies suggests that there is something innately feminist in such practices. Wilding and other cyberfeminists (Everett 2004) have warned that the valorization of women’s cyberpractices without an accompanying feminist critique is problematic. In the following section, I offer two examples that illustrate both the continuing significance of embodiment online and the problematic of uniformly regarding all women’s engagement with cyberspace as feminist.

#### PRO-ANA WEBSITES

The emergence of pro-ana, a shortened term for “pro-anorexia,” sites suggests that some (mostly young, predominantly white) women form online communities in order to offer each other nonjudgmental support in finding strategies and tactics for disordered eating behaviors, most often diagnosed as anorexia nervosa or bulimia. These young women both resist and embrace such diagnoses for their behavior (Dias 2003; Fox, Ward, and O’Rourke 2005; Mulveen and Hepworth, 2006). As a young woman quoted in research by Fox, Ward, and O’Rourke put it, “Personally, I feel that if a person is starving themselves or throwing up \*solely\* because of the desire to look like kate moss, devon aoki (hehe . . . my favorite model), gisele, etc . . . they don’t have all the criteria to be considered anorexic. Anorexia is defined as

a mental disease . . . the ability to play mind-games with yourself relating to anything food or exercise” (2005, 955).

This redefinition of anorexia as “the ability to play mind-games” around food or exercise refigures the usually disabling rhetoric of eating disorders into one of strength and “ability” that does not include everyone who is “starving themselves.” The mention of this young woman’s “favorite model” is revealing here because famous models and celebrities are part of the cultural products that young women engaged in pro-ana seek out for “thinspiration” (954). The young girls of the pro-ana communities turn to the Internet to support their bodily rituals of diet, exercise, and purging in the relative “safety” of being with their pro-ana peers and away from the judgments of others (mostly parents) (Dias 2003; Fox, Ward, and O’Rourke 2005; Walstrom 2001). Young women who identify as pro-ana report that the bodily rituals associated with this community provide participants with a sense of “control over” their bodies (Dias 2003; Fox, Ward, and O’Rourke 2005; Walstrom 2001). And increasingly, these images of “thinspiration” appear on YouTube, the video-sharing site, as well as on personal websites (Daniels and Meleo-Erwin 2008). Whatever one thinks of these practices, the young girls involved with pro-ana sites are engaging with Internet technologies in ways that are both motivated by and confirm (extremely thin) embodiment. While those participating in pro-ana sites may appear to be ambivalent about their own embodiment, the fact is that they are not going online to avoid corporeality but rather to engage with others *about* their bodies via text and image in ways that make them feel in control of those bodies.

#### “TRANNY” HORMONE LISTSERVS

A second illustration of the way the Internet can be a site for bodily transformation is that of community-based transgendered websites, such as GenderSanity (<http://www.gendersanity.com>), and personal webpages, such as Christine Beatty’s WebHome (<http://www.glamazon.net>). These sites, along with Listservs and websites established by trans or trans-friendly physicians, such as TransGender Care (<http://www.transgendercare.com>), provide information about how to transform the body in specifically gendered ways. The experience of transgendered women, such as Anita, whose pastiche of Internet technologies enables her gender transition (Bryson 2004, 246), is noteworthy in this context. Many nonheteronormative or queer women, whether they identify as lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, also regard global information technology as an important medium for resisting repressive

regimes of gender and sexuality (Alexander 2002; Bryson 2004; Chatterjee 2002; Heinz, Gu, and Zender 2002). Combining the metaphors of “tool” and “place,” Mary Bryson, in her study of Australian QLBT women’s experiences of the Internet, writes: “Internet tools and communities serve a variety of functions that are relevant to, and scaffold, the lives of QLBT women, including . . . interaction with other queer women in a space that is relatively safe” (2004, 249). Like Nouraié-Simone, the women in Bryson’s study experience life online as a safe space, an observation that serves to set up an oppositional relationship to life offline (“real” life) as space that is not safe. The Internet provides QLBT women with opportunities to experiment with gender identity and practices, as well as a cultural context within which to learn how to be queer through participation in a subculture (Bryson 2004, 249). Indeed, the experience of Anita, included in Bryson’s research, illustrates this point:

**Anita:** I’ve gotten a lot of information from the tranny hormone list. It was mainly an information sharing thing, and a few other lists along those lines. With the web, I’ve used transgendered sites for looking up reports of surgeons, photos of surgery, information from the surgeons where they’d posted that stuff up on the Net. Gaining information about hormones is important. I have a fair bit of experience in biochemistry and can read the scientific literature.

**Mary:** How do you access that information?

**Anita:** I can get into the MedLine database and that kind of thing. If I want information about any of that stuff, the Net is the first place I go. It’s not always easy to find good information though, especially if you are looking for knowledge that is community-based. And if you are going to read the medical articles, you really need to know the jargon and be able to read between the lines. (2004, 246)

Here, Anita describes her use of the Internet to navigate the biomedical sex/gender establishment (Butler 2004; Epstein 2003). She reports getting information from an e-mail Listserv, pursuing further information on particular surgeons, looking for digital photographic evidence of their work, and reading the peer-reviewed medical literature culled from the database MedLine. Both her technique for finding information and her assessment

of what she finds demonstrate an example of sophisticated digital fluency (Green 2005, 2006). Anita's bricolage strategy combines a number of Internet technologies, including search engines; web-based databases; websites dealing with transgender issues; community-based Listservs; and digital photography of surgical outcomes. Anita's goal in using a patchwork of digital technologies is not to pretend to be another gender online; instead, her aim is to find help in transforming her body *offline* in ways that align with her own sense of gender identity. Anita's piecing together of diverse Internet sources to navigate gender transition suggests that we need a much more nuanced and complex understanding of digital technologies, gender, and feminist politics.

Anita's experience indicates that rather than using the technology to escape embodiment or temporarily "switch" identities online, she and other self-identified women (and men) are actively engaging with digital technologies to more permanently transform their bodies offline. Anita goes online not to experience "the absence of the body" (as Nouraié-Simone does) but to access the information, resources, and technologies that allow her to transform her body into a (differently) gendered body that aligns with her identity. And in ways that are analogous to the pro-ana girls' use of the technology, transgendered women, and men, use digital images as a crucial part of the strategy in gathering reliable information about gender transition.

#### RACIALIZED EMBODIMENT ONLINE/OFFLINE

The allure of disembodiment pointed to by cyberfeminists is understandable, given the significance of racialized embodiment (Du Bois 1903/1995; Fernandez 2003; Tal 2001) for understanding the lived experience of racism. Yet racialized embodiment and the ways this offline reality is embedded in online worlds is not often remarked upon in the literature about gender online.

In the study of pro-ana online communities by Fox, Ward, and O'Rourke (2005), the authors curiously do not take up racial identity as a point of analysis even when one of the participants explicitly references it: "It started in 8th grade. I had never been really overweight, but I was average—about 115 at 5'3. [T]here was just too much going on in my life . . . mostly, I didn't know who I was maybe I was having a really early mid-life crisis. I'm adopted, and my whole family is white, while I'm Asian. I had/have a lot of issues circling around feelings of abandonment which I partially translated into 'no one loves me . . . not even my real parents' type stuff" (957).



The young girl quoted here indicates that her racial identity, and the discordant racial identity of her (adopted) family, is a contributing factor in her desire to be involved with pro-ana practices. Yet the authors do not address the issue of racial identity. This is a lost opportunity for an analysis that would further illuminate the connection between gender, race, and online identity by speaking to the compelling research that exists involving gender, “race,” and disordered eating (Lovejoy 2001; Thompson 1992).

In contrast, Bryson acknowledges the racial dynamics at work even though in her research her sample of QLBT women includes only one woman of color. The white participants in her study rarely identified racism as a problem of online communities, whereas “the discursive construction of racial identity online was a persistent problem for the Aboriginal participant whose Net experiences were frequently characterized by marginalization, silencing and enforced segregation” (2004, 246). The marginalization, silencing, and enforced segregation that the Aboriginal woman in Bryson’s study faces in online spaces is characteristic of what many experience in online communities across lines of difference. Kendall’s ethnography on the online community BlueSky is informative on this point. While BlueSky is relatively inclusive, and certainly not “racist” (or “sexist”) in any overt way, the inclusiveness is predicated on social structure in which “white middle-class men continue to have the power to include or not to include people whose gender, sexuality or race marks them as other” (Kendall 2000, 272). BlueSky’s text-only nature facilitates greater inclusiveness across differences of gender, sexual orientation, and race, yet the predominance of white men simultaneously “limits the inclusiveness to ‘others’ who can fit themselves into a culture by and for those white men” (272). BlueSky, like the queer online spaces that the QLBT women in Bryson’s study seek out and the pro-ana spaces that many young girls find empowering, are predicated on an assumption of whiteness. Unlike either the cyberracism of white supremacists online (Daniels 2009) or the white, masculine desire for community expressed by neoconfederates on Dixie-Net (McPherson 2000), the whiteness that Kendall describes in BlueSky is very much like whiteness in the offline world: an unmarked category that is taken for granted in daily life. Race matters in cyberspace precisely because “computer networks are social networks” (Wellman 2001) and those who spend time online bring their own knowledge, experiences, and values with them when they log on (Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman 2000, 5). The fact that race matters online, as it does offline, counters the oft-repeated assertion that cyberspace is a disembodied realm where gendered and racialized bodies can be left behind.

These two examples, the pro-ana and transgendered online communities, shed light on gender, race, and the subversive potential of the Internet. In both instances, self-identified girls and women engage in practices with Internet technologies to manage, transform, and control their physical bodies in ways that both resist and reinforce hierarchies of gender and race. Instead of seeing cyberspace as a place in which to experience the absence of the body, or even a text-only place with no visible representation of the body, these girls and self-identified women use digital technologies in ways that simultaneously bring the body “online” (through digital photos uploaded to the web) and take the digital “offline” (through information gleaned online to transform their embodied selves). Here, digital technologies embedded in everyday life allow for the transformation of corporeal and material lives in ways that both resist and reinforce structures of gender and race.

## CONCLUSION

This review of different forms of cyberfeminism(s) suggests a reality in which the Internet is embedded in material, corporeal lives in complex ways. To return to the illustrative example that opened the essay, the cyberfeminists who created HollaBackNYC are engaged with technologies in ways that highlight race, gender, and embodiment in the digital era. Mobile phone technologies, even in the current political economy, are widely affordable and extremely popular globally (Rheingold 2006). The tag line “If you can’t slap him, snap him,” suggests both the resistance of internetworked global feminism and a strategy of resistance that is simultaneously embedded in daily life, digital technologies, and embodiment. In this instance, to “holla-back” means to oppose an embodied notion of harassment (men exposing their genitals) with an embodied, and embedded, form of resistance (taking digital photos of those exposed bodies). However, given that the resisters pictured on the site are exclusively white and predominantly female, we must ask whether HollaBackNYC and its many imitators are disrupting or reinforcing the culture of surveillance focused on minority men in urban areas. Internet technologies offer women who are harassed on city streets and subways a mechanism for resisting such a gendered and racialized practices, at the same time that they reinforce established hierarchies of gender and race.

While some cyberfeminists are wildly enthusiastic about the subversive potential of a cyborg future, identity tourism, and disembodiment that is offered by digital technologies, evidence from cyberfeminist practices and empirical research on what people are actually doing online points to a

more complicated reality. For some, the Internet economy reproduces oppressive workplace hierarchies that are rooted in a global political economy. For others, the Internet represents a “tool” for global feminist organizing and an opportunity to be protagonists in their own revolution. For still others, the Internet offers a “safe space” and a way to not just survive, but also resist, repressive sex/gender regimes. Girls and self-identified women are engaging with Internet technologies in ways that enable them to transform their embodied selves, not escape embodiment. Girls involved in pro-ana communities deploy Internet technologies that include text and images in order to control their bodies in ways that are both disturbing for others and deeply meaningful for them. Self-identified queer and transgendered women engage with digital technologies in order to transform their bodies, not to play at switching gender identities online.

Scholar-activists who wish to challenge the status quo of racial and gender domination have also been slow to seize the opportunity of engaged public discourse offered by the Internet. Risman (2004) urges feminist sociologists to find means to transform as well as inform society, and the Internet offers such an opportunity. Yet, curiously, most academic sociologists do not have an Internet presence beyond their college or university-sponsored faculty webpage, they do not create content for the Internet, and they do not participate in online communities or social networks. I echo Michelle Wright’s call for scholar-activists to engage with the Internet “beyond email” (Wright 2005, 57). It is critically important for those of us who hope that our work can and should speak to audiences beyond the academy to follow the lead of critical cyberfeminists and “hollaback” by engaging the Internet as a discursive space and a site of political struggle.

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## NOTES

1. Throughout this essay I use the term “self-identified woman” and its plural to both recognize the problematic universalizing of difference in the terms “woman” and “women” and to signal the inclusion of queer and transgendered women who may or may not have biologically female anatomy.

2. For example, U.S.-based GenX blogger Kristie Helms writes: “I’ve been posting journal-type entries online in some form or another since 1996 when I was. Oh. 25. Various places. . . . Through all of that, I’ve gotten divorced, gotten annulled, changed/ discovered sexual orientation, . . . moved from Manhattan to Brooklyn to Boston, met three life-long best friends over the Internet, . . . bought a house and had . . . um . . . six jobs, . . . gotten a book published, one essay published, one piece of erotica published (twice), bought three cars, sold two of them, stopped talking to my mother, started talking to my mother, had my father tell me I’m going to hell and just generally keep finding myself periodically” (personal communication, June 2007). While Gill may regard these elements as “depressingly familiar,” I think that such an assessment, like history that is only concerned with the events of powerful political leaders, invalidates the substance of what constitutes women’s lives.

3. Rosser reviews women’s participation in the information technology workforce along with “design” and “use” of technology through the lenses of liberal feminism, radical feminism, “African American and Racial/Ethnic” feminism, and postcolonial feminism. Offering a review that speaks to all the nuances in this literature is well beyond the scope of my project here.

4. O’Brien does not explicitly address switching of racial identities, but in Kali Tal’s (2001) review of Nakamura, Tal likens this phenomenon to “racial passing,” about which African American scholars have written extensively.

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