

**automate the womb:
ecologies and technologies
of reproduction. helen hester,
xenofeminism (polity, 2018)**

bogna m. konior

Xenofeminism is a “feminism frustrated with the need for its existence.”¹ With regards to other feminisms, it is a scavenger. It strips for parts, reassembles, takes what it wants, hacks and reorients. It wants to develop a symbiotic or parasitic relation to already existing technologies (including those of *thought*). One of the timely passages from the manifesto,

...the excess of modesty in feminist agendas of recent decades is not proportionate to the monstrous complexity of our reality, a reality crosshatched with fibre-optic cables, radio and microwaves, oil and gas pipelines, aerial and shipping routes, and the unrelenting, simultaneous execution of millions of communication protocols with every passing millisecond...

alludes to xenofeminism’s willingness to deal with problems inherent to digital culture or global complexity and trespass where, it claims, feminist theory might not dare.² Xenofeminism sees the rising wave of technocracy but instead of searching for a buoy, it wants to catch the surf. It wants “superior forms of corruption.” Its hands and souls are not pure but synthetic. Its body is not made in the Garden of Eden but continually engineered in accordance with available tools. There is nothing, it claims, “that cannot be studied scientifically and manipulated technologically.”

In my encounters with people interested in the manifesto, from scholars of philosophy and politicians to crypto-inclined artists and post-witchcraft feminists frustrated with the commodification of their once-revolutionary pursuits, it became apparent that it was a versatile beast. It produced widely incompatible interpretations. Some admired its disavowal of redemptive identity politics and of transphobia, some were interested in the aesthetics of accelerationism, others in cyberfeminist legacy. All, however, were drawn to xenofeminism's explicit alliance with reason, artifice, technology, and science: "our lot is cast with technoscience, where nothing is so sacred that it cannot be re-engineered." For mainstream feminist theory, dominated by postmodern and poststructural philosophy, statements such as "emancipatory tactics can be scaled up for universal implementation" or "science is not an expression but a suspension of gender" are heresies. More so, against feminist luddites, xenofeminism embraces the artificial and desires to drive a stake through the heart of ecofeminist affirmations of women as caring parental and environmental protectors.

"The Xenofeminist Manifesto," first released online by Laboria Cuboniks in 2015 and later printed by Verso was a polemic and a provocation, borne out of furious paragraph assembling in a collectively-edited Google doc.³ If some hands were more crafty than others in this labor, we can only tell it by studying the solo work of its authors, picking and guessing, recognizing overlapping thematic or stylistic concerns across publications. This, however, would be to the displeasure of the collective, which asserted in the manifesto that Laboria Cuboniks is a blueprint for an open source software, "a mutable architecture," a platform. For those who wanted to engage in an annotated polemic, this presented a dilemma: how can we debate with a faceless manifesto that changes its directions with ease, like colored blocks on a Rubik's cube? Manifestos are slippery, incoherent. As Lucca Fraser of Laboria Cuboniks said, manifestos are like "stand up comedy...their job is to point things out . . . [t]o nudge you into adopting a point of view that might not have seemed available beforehand."⁴

The initial commitment to anonymity was a tip of the hat to cyberfeminism. In the early days of our omnivorous cyberswamp the possibility of erasing and collectivising ourselves on anonymous networks was quite the narrative.⁵ The manifesto's cyberpunk 90s online aesthetics allude in particular to VNS Matrix, the legendary "terminators of the moral code, mercenaries of slime...saboteurs of big daddy mainframe."⁶ But anonymity is hard to preserve these days. Soon enough, faces were put to sentences and it became more difficult to not see the manifesto

as an intersection of its makers' specific interests rather than a generic layout. Amy Ireland, Helen Hester, Patricia Reed, Diann Bauer, Lucca Fraser and Katrina Burch first met in Berlin in 2014 at an intensive workshop, "Emancipation as Navigation: From the Space of Reasons to the Space of Freedoms," organized by philosophers Armen Avanessian, Reza Negarestani and Peter Wolfendale and hosted at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, an institution that has proven itself hospitable to theoretical research willing to contend with the contemporary.⁷

Collectives are intriguing and one could easily imagine a Laboria Cuboniks profile in *The New Yorker*, where it would be presumed that the key to the text always lies in its authors' biographies. Character traits could be played up until we end up with a fraudulent but catchy cast of six xenofeminists in our remake of Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*: the cyberwitch, the academic, the hacker, the engineer, the artist, the sociologist. This would be a fool's errand for each of them is all six at once.⁸ And yet, for scholars of xenofeminism, stalker impulse cannot be easily overcome, mostly because each postulate in the manifesto becomes clearer for knowing the solo work of its writers. Digging around, one could even suspect that the group's name, an anagram of Nicolas Bourbaki, a collective of mathematicians that devoted themselves to rigorous abstraction, was the brainchild of Burch who performs under the name Yonda Lemma, a term also borrowed from mathematics, which describes the embedding of a local category into a set of functions as morphisms.⁹

While not all members of Laboria Cuboniks led research clusters at that fateful summer school, the two that did already signaled what was to become crucial for the manifesto. Fraser listed her topics as "universality as intersectionality" and "intersectionality and genericity," while Hester's were "feminism and technology after [Shulamith] Firestone" and "re-engineering embodiment." How could it be, xenofeminism asks, that contemporary feminism can accept the systemic nature of a totality called capitalism while at the same time championing "local, fragmented, or partial" solutions? Hester summarizes the problem well by citing an intersecting analysis:

Nancy Fraser, too, has addressed this apparent "shrinking of emancipatory vision at the fin de siècle," linking this with "a major shift in the feminist imaginary" during the 1980s and 1990s—that is, with a move away from attempting to remake political economy (redistribution) and towards an effort at transforming culture (recognition).¹⁰

Rather than participating in the game of representations, xenofeminism wants to focus on seizing material tools, technologies with which to re-engineer biology and society. While it might recognize the strategic benefit of identities, it maintains its commitment to shedding them in the future, like a snake sheds its skin. *Xeno*, after all, means strange, alien, unfamiliar. It would be correct to think of xenofeminism as a *xenomorph*. As a tool, xenofeminism is a way of admitting that we are already inside a giant technological accelerator and we need to keep adjusting accordingly. This calls for strategic flexibility: no-body is sacred and the future might demand bio-engineering ourselves beyond current species limitations. After all, the manifesto asserts that we “[live in] a world that swarms with technological mediation, interlacing our daily lives with abstraction, virtuality, and complexity.” We are all jacked into a planetary machine that continually speeds up, the question is, which sockets do we plug into? If xenofeminism is a platform, a program, a protocol, a tool that can be grasped across its different iterations, it is united by the desire to write the outside in, to undermine what appears natural and therefore lend itself to continued context-dependent use of technology.

In the manifesto, the concepts of nature and alienation work in tandem—one is discouraged and the other one is applauded. Two of the earliest academic publications assessing this rhetoric, by Emma Wilson and myself respectively, were very much critical of how the concept of ‘nature’ was used—Wilson showed that biologist and feminist scholar of technology Donna Haraway contributed to resolving the false binary of technology and nature, while I pointed out that xenofeminism’s desire to overcome ‘nature’ is undermined by its disregard for decolonial and anthropological scholarship as well as its unawareness of advances made in the field of animal studies.¹¹ Because of this omission, the vilified ‘nature’ becomes little more than a strawman, an aestheticised choice of machine over flesh that is only valid on terms of its own misdefinition of ‘nature’ as separate from technology.

One of its most daring propositions, that “alienation is the labor of freedom’s construction,” seems to allude to Marxism but disappointingly turns out to be a stylistic choice, an interesting way of saying ‘embrace technology, refuse nature (the given),’ rather than an attempt to challenge Marx assessment of ‘alienation’ as an oppressive axiom of capitalism. In xenofeminism, alienation means siding with the artificial, ‘unnatural’ and unfamiliar as well as refusing the use of ‘nature’ to justify wholly ‘social’ configurations such as the ‘natural’ predisposition of women to motherhood or care. This position ostensibly goes directly against the early ecofeminist dogma that womanhood (1) is defined by its proximity to nature

and (2) is therefore predisposed as separate from technology. In a previous article, I protested that by this logic, both xenofeminism and ecofeminism perpetuate the nature/technology split, while in fact it would be more correct to say that nature grasped properly is technology and technology grasped properly is nature. To further summarise my previous criticism, while ecofeminism hailing from the 1990s is indeed guilty of essentialism and naïve fetishisation of ‘nature,’ fetishising ‘artifice’ and ‘technology’ does little to amend the problem. Decolonial and new materialist feminist scholarship today works hard to conquer these dogmas, often amending the problems of early ecofeminism and frankly providing a more nuanced approach to the relation between nature and culture than xenofeminism does in the manifesto.¹²

With this specific definition of alienation in mind, embracing alienation and artifice is a common thread running through the manifesto, which proclaims that “the real emancipatory potential of technology remains unrealized,” opening up to speculative design. Like Cypher in the infamous steak-savoring scene, xenofeminism not only stays in the Matrix but wants to be its architects. This, for Burch and Reed, translates into doing away with the human as an unremarkable given. Burch has recently written about ‘xenolisting’ and ‘xenotemporality,’ her term for the increasingly common idea that the anthropogenic perception of time has to open up towards scales beyond humans’ perceptual capacities:

We would like to recode *machinic* blasts from the future, decaying someplace else. *Could be*—a science fiction—leaking of sound into the skin, cannibalized hard, core soaked, bled from pixel-seasoned flesh. Navigational schemes are hitched by the xenotype... The coming *techno-sapiens*’ living body never listens alone. It traverses cosmically low. And wide enough, to pulse in flowering nonhuman drones, and to array purple-shifting antibodies for transcendental immanence.¹³

Reed similarly appreciates the unfamiliar. She writes, “alienation is a necessary force of estrangement from *what is*.” This can point us to the yet unarticulated genealogies of xenofeminism, for example in the work of Wendy Chun or Luciana Parisi. Reed recalls Chun’s observation that algorithms are often structured through “homophily in network design,” an “automation of familiarity” that creates self-replicating ‘echo chambers’ and where coming into contact with the alien is written out of the algorithm itself. “Xenophily,” as she explains, is a proposition for an infrastructure of machinic intelligence that would write the alien in.¹⁴ In

calling for “commitments [both to and] beyond our species” as a principle that should guide both automation and speculative design in the climate change era, Bauer explicitly relates such inquiries to justice.¹⁵ Fraser, who works on variety of theoretical and practical projects, sees in xenofeminism a rejuvenation of cyberfeminism but this time able to both respond to and design artificial intelligence or emancipatory online spaces. In critical dialogue with the works of Firestone, Sarah Kember, Alison Adam and Nick Land, Fraser understands xenofeminism as a project continuous with the Enlightenment, where the mastery of ‘nature’ would lead not only to the abolition of sex but to “the emancipation of intelligence.”¹⁶

Hester and Ireland have most explicitly taken up the problem of xenofemininity. In an unofficial capacity a historian of the Cybernetic Cultures Research Unit, Ireland also remains its most visible heir through the focus on the continuity between femininity and alienated, inhuman virtuality. It is useful to keep her take on this matter in mind as we move through Hester’s book. “We are used to calls to resist the total integration of our world into the machinations of the spectacle,” Ireland says in an interview, “to throw off the alienated state that capitalism has bequeathed to us and return to more authentic processes, often marked as an original human symbiosis with nature.”¹⁷ She prefers to throw her lot in with the bots, her methodology akin to that of *Tetsuo, the Iron Man*, the extreme Japanese horror film in which the union between man and machine is literal: “I feed myself to machines.”¹⁸ Following from Sadie Plant’s reading of Luce Irigaray, Ireland affirms occult operations within the formless, commodified, inhuman bodies of women. Future intelligence will arrive as a *thing*, she says, and only things can understand things—by turning women into things, patriarchy makes women’s alliance with machines easy, against its own interest. That womanhood is already a spectacle or an ‘unnatural’ simulation without origin is the woman’s gain, not her curse: “Because she is continuous with [the spectacle], she is imperceptible within it.” This weaponisation of imperceptibility is what aligns women to demons to machines, all excluded from the economy of the Phallus on the shiny side of the screen. Like other members of the collective, Ireland argues against the *repetition of the same*, the homeostasis of heteronormativity, in favor of ‘the replicant’: “woman plus man produces homeostasis (the equilibrium of inequality), but woman plus woman, or woman plus machine, recalibrates the productive drive,” eventually pushing it over the edge and into something else, something inhuman, a glitch on the smooth reproduction of the same.¹⁹ Following from same assumptions, “Gender Acceleration: A Black Paper” by n1x, an affiliate rather than core member of the collective, argues that there exists an affinity between trans

women and the machines, both contribute to the literal erosion of sexed identities. Artifice is a powerful weapon. Trans women will birth AI daughters.²⁰

With these congruent takes in mind, while Helen Hester's recently published book is titled *Xenofeminism* it would be a mistake to think that it exhausts the subject. For those interested in xenofeminist takes on digital economy, artificial intelligence, modern warfare, or climate change, it will be disappointing that, while the manifesto claims that xenofeminism is "a feminism of unprecedented cunning, scale, and vision," Hester's book is only a skilled update of existing Anglophone queer and feminist theories interested in domestic, 'small,' mundane technologies and acts of care, which with time may translate bodily autonomy into scalable political change. 'Repurposing' is for Hester a key methodology; it describes not only her self-professed DIY approach to technology but also her method of engaging with existing feminist oeuvre. This can hardly be levelled as a criticism of the book, which is transparent about its scope and written with considerable care and intelligence. As an academic work, it also provides a bibliography, showing us a part of xenofeminism's genealogy. While it works well as an origin story, the more daring elements of the manifesto that seemed to have attracted most attention and were visibly diverging from feminist theories in the modern academia are not addressed in Hester's book, including the influence that neorationalism, left and right accelerationism and contemporary technologies had on xenofeminism. Instead, Hester uses the monograph to build bridges between various existing strands of feminism, re-activating and updating well-known feminist propositions of bodily autonomy.

In the introduction, Hester briefly mentions xenofeminism's varied genealogy—"cyberfeminism, posthumanism, accelerationism, neorationalism, materialist feminism and so on" (1)—but her contribution has a particular lineage, informed by her expertise in trans, queer and feminist studies as well as Marxism (which in the book is implied rather than explicit). The slim volume focuses on one issue in particular: the relation between social and biological reproduction, a largely unwaged labor of reproducing both the species and the fabric of society that has been historically assigned to women. Women are not separate from technology but are already frequently used as sexual and/or reproductive technologies. Xenofeminism asks whether a technology can hack itself to begin reproducing something alien on a mass scale. For Hester, this means reclaiming some of the legacies of feminist post-structuralism, which teaches us that what presents itself as 'natural' is indistinguishable from social norms. Notably, Hester sees in xeno-

feminism and in its embrace of ‘artifice’ a way of invalidating the claims of trans-exclusionary radical feminism in which the correlation between ‘nature,’ ‘women’ and ‘goodness’ is particularly visible.

In this context, Hester names the three pillars of xenofeminism: technomaterialism, anti-naturalism and gender abolitionism (6). The book is divided into three sections, all of which focus on re-engineering social and sexual reproduction. In “What is Xenofeminism?,” her chief interlocutors are Shulamith Firestone and eco-feminist thinkers like Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies. Here, Hester challenges normative uses of ‘nature’ and instead proposes a synthetic or technologized understanding of womanhood, which accommodates both trans and cis women. In “Xenofeminist Futurities,” her main references are Haraway and queer theorist Lee Edelman, who have been vocal on the issues of non-reproductive futures. If read literally, this can mean direct discouragement of having babies. Through an attentive close reading, Hester puts forth a proposition for a futurity that does not loop itself in the boring, oppressive repetition of the daddy-mommy-me family structure while also being hospitable to actual parents and children. As much as the first two resemble a literature review, “Xenofeminist Technologies” is an extended case study chapter of Del-Em, a menstrual extraction tool designed by American feminists in the 1970s. This surgical device allowed one to pass the entire menses at once and doubled as an early abortion technique. While the project was short-lived, Hester uses it as an example of proto-xenofeminist tech.

Each chapter, in its own way, declares a war on ‘nature,’ a strategy shared with the manifesto. Hester’s book deals mostly with how things are *constructed* as natural or are made to appear natural, although she also considers a future in which currently biologically sexed states such as pregnancy could be technologically mutated. I have previously argued that xenofeminism fails to define what it considers as ‘nature’ and thus perpetuates the modernist split between nature and technology. For Hester, ‘nature’ chiefly means ‘natural womanhood,’ or simply ‘the normative,’ as in what *appears* ‘given’ and thus naturalised or accepted as if it was natural. This is not only hardly novel but also quite confusing. What is meant here by ‘nature’ is a cultural construct of what ‘nature’ is, a question that feminism occupied itself with since its academic inception, and particularly with Judith Butler to new materialism, post-humanism or even philosophers like Catherine Malabou.²¹ As Hester herself mentions by referring to the work of Elizabeth Wilson, biology itself is neither binary nor normative (21). To the contrary, biology grasped scientifically *is* strange and unfamiliar and does not obey human

gender binaries. From that standpoint, xenofeminism *is* natural and it is patriarchy that is artificial. What only *appears* natural changes frequently over time; the normative is a more widely-applicable word albeit with less dramatic and stylistic potential. When Hester writes that “xenofeminism is invested in constructing an alien future,” she really means confronting what is *normative*, not natural, that is the heterosexual social matrix (33). Sympathetic as we may be to the xenofeminist project, in the Anthropocene, defining ‘nature’ as ‘the normative’ is a lot to ask. Unlike the normative, nature, understood as the field of science, cannot be just or unjust, nature does not care, regardless of whether humans place ethical judgments in its name. Hester already knows this; as she writes in a recent essay, “[Xenofeminism] privilege[s] the synthetic over the organic, the mediated over the immediate, and technologized natureculture over an inflated idea of “the natural” but this consideration has not quite made it into the book.²² Flawed as it is, the slogan of “changing nature” nevertheless groups potent imageries together and lets xenofeminism address both the normative and some of the current limitations of biology.

Xenofeminism, a feminism frustrated with the necessity of its existence, longs to automate itself, to be the mechanism by which women write themselves out of the labor of having to continually reproduce feminism. I titled this review “Automate the Womb” to allude to Hester’s focus on challenging naturalised patterns of social and sexual reproduction and re-engineering the structures of women’s labor, from bodies to homes and workplaces. This title also refers to Hester’s and Laboria Cuboniks’ desire to nip in the bud trans-exclusionary feminism: nothing about women’s bodies, and especially the romanticised space of gestation, is so sacred that it cannot be re-engineered. Automating bodies is about freeing us from limitations and breaking whatever connection they might have to the ideal of ‘womanhood,’ while remaining vigilant in materialist analyses of how the diversity of bodies that women inhabit provoke various types of oppression. In the remainder of this essay, I will review Hester’s book and contextualise it by relating it to the arguments she advances in her other published work and to the Xenofeminist Manifesto.

NOTHING ‘NATURAL’: WHAT IS XENOFEMINISM?

Nothing should be accepted as fixed, permanent, or ‘given’... anyone who has been deemed ‘unnatural’ in the face of reigning biological norms, anyone’s who’s experienced injustice wrought in the name of natural order, will realize that the

glorification of 'nature' has nothing to offer us—the queer and trans among us, the differently-abled, as well as those who have suffered discrimination due to pregnancy or duties connected to child-rearing.

Xenofeminist Manifesto

“In the name of feminism, ‘Nature’ shall no longer be a refuge of injustice, or a basis for any political justification whatsoever! If nature is unjust, change nature!” These lines spell the closing sentences of the manifesto. But what does nature mean here? Is changing nature about free access to hormones or geoengineering? Is it about breeding animals for human organ transplants? Is it about Monsanto crops, industrial farming and climate change? Is it about biology or health? Or maybe about developing ectogenesis chambers for all mammals? How *can* nature be just or unjust at all? Is that not a purely theological question? While the manifesto promises riches, enthusiastically naming perplexing technological complexity as its goal of study and reform, Hester is interested in a much more common feminist theme: ‘nature’ as a code word for essentialist gender identity.

There are two general ways to think about identity: destructive or restorative. The first is the idea that as subjects we should struggle *against* identities and recognize how they are constructed. While identity markers might serve us well in finding one another or even developing political projects, “[in the longer term] the full range of these traits should be stripped of their social significance, and therefore of their ability to act as vectors of discrimination” (29). This is a balancing act because patriarchy also calls for removing identity from consideration. The patriarchal project, however, is strongly irrational and subjective, for the only gendered characteristics it wants to abolish are those that it simultaneously constructs as ‘female.’ When patriarchy calls for the abolition of gender, what it means is the exclusion of those whom it perceives as women or ‘womanly.’ When the manifesto calls for the abolition of gender, it calls for a genuinely abolitionist project carried out through to the end, where gender becomes a meaningless designation and therefore identitarian “characteristics are no more a basis of discrimination than the color of one’s eyes,” as the manifesto puts it.

While Hester recognizes the importance of exposing gendered histories, in which women are ‘naturally’ predisposed to something, at the moment when “a recognition of historical gender roles tips into an apparent naturalization of these roles is the point at which this approach loses its xenofeminist efficacy” (37) and tilts towards the politics of restorative or redemptive identity. This approach posits that

there exists an ‘innate’ identity—there is something ‘natural’ to how gender is organised, which is tweaked and perverted, and therefore has to be restored. One way to understand this is through the quarrel that Hester has with the version of ecofeminism advocated by Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, who criticise science, technology and patriarchy as ways of manipulating or intervening into nature (17), and defined women as naturally caring “environmental guardians attributed to their connection with practices such as familial care, subsistence farming, and social reproduction” (37). The manifesto minces no words about such ideas: “Essentialist naturalism reeks of theology—the sooner it is exorcised, the better.” To define nature as a pseudo-theological limit to what humans are or could be is by definition preservationist or conservative, where trespassing against a narrative of the natural has to be punished. Alyson Escalante’s *Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto* notices similar redemptive undertones in relation to some branches of trans* politics based on the idea that ‘we are born this way:’

The current politics of trans liberation have staked their claims on a redemptive understanding of identity. Whether through a doctor or psychologist’s diagnosis, or through personal self-affirmation in the form of a social utterance, we have come to believe *that there is some internal truth to gender that we must divine* [my emphasis]. (27)

This is of no interest to xenofeminism, which, replicating Haraway’s cyborg, favors bio-synthetic, technologically-assembled bodies that escape ‘natural’ identities as smoothly as zombies crawl away from both death and life. For Haraway, whose influence on xenofeminism is clear, the ‘cyborg’ is “a world without gender, which is perhaps a world with no genesis,” without an origin to be recovered.²³ In agreement with Judith Butler, the manifesto is not only opposed to gender binaries but to all possible gender formations that stake their claim in the belief that the gender ‘we were born with,’ whatever that may be, is natural and that all we need to do is to reclaim it:

A sense of the world’s volatility and artificiality seems to have faded from contemporary queer and feminist politics, in favour of a plural but static constellation of gender identities, in whose bleak light equations of the good and the natural are stubbornly restored.

In contrast to such redemptive politics, in an interview, Fraser describes trans-artificiality as xenofeminism:

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.²⁴

Thus recognizing how identity is used to reinforce oppression in the present, xenofeminism also wants to continually engineer 'artificial' identities. This might mean going against what is currently celebrated as 'natural' or the idea that our 'natural' bodies are sacred and cannot be modified through biohacking or hormone therapy. In her monograph, Hester also opposes the idea that anyone, cis or trans, should look for the truth of who they are in Mother Nature or in Facebook's drop-down menu of 72 custom gender options. Her quarrel is with *all* so-called 'original' truths that ostensibly define us. Thus, Lady Gaga's dictum "born this way," referred to sarcastically in the manifesto, might be a welcome change of tune but what it affirms is still only a theological naturalism. "And God created man and woman" does not suddenly become a better sentence if we add "and seventy-two categories of the gender-nonconforming." Andrea Long Chu makes a similar argument when she asks whether we could see transition "recast in aesthetic terms, as if transsexual women decided to transition, not to 'confirm' some kind of innate gender identity, but because being a man is stupid and boring."²⁵ Beyond the false correlation of 'natural' with 'good' and 'innate,' desire is a synthetic, it is the artifice to trump the supposed truth of God or Gaga-given identity. We would rather be engineers than goddesses.

Aside from being a poor riff on theology, the idea that identity is something to struggle *towards* rather than *away from* might make it harder to see how gender is intrinsic to the economy, not to our bodies. Reflecting on how identities relate to economy could strengthen Hester's argument. In the commercial realm, sexed identity does not simply mean blue micro-suits for boys and pink dresses for girls. It is not just boys and girls. "Their name is Legion, for they are many," to borrow from the highly quotable Gospel of Mark.²⁶ As Malcolm Harris writes, capital does not "double down" but multiplies and "splits," it is not a bureaucratic stiffness but an ever-multiplying fluid network of porous powers that spit up identity constellations through exploitation.²⁷ As a 'gender nihilist' would add, understanding that there is no transcendent truth to identity simultaneously shows us how identity is assembled under power: "Gender, race, sexuality, and every other nor-

mative category is not referencing a truth about the body of the subject or about the soul of the subject. These categories *construct* the subject and the self” [my emphasis].²⁸ Joni Pitt and Sophie Monk demonstrate how queerness is not an identity but a relation of economic marginalisation:

[We] understand queerness not only as something to *pair* with precarity, but queerness *as* precarity...Welfare cuts not only constitute deprivation, but also serve a disciplinary function: to individualise the welfare needs of the queer community into discrete cases, and exclude the possibility of collective organising and solidarity. Since the proletarian queer must individually justify their reliance upon welfare services, this intensifies the precarity of their access to welfare and forecloses the possibility of genuine ‘support’... Think also about those queer orphans expelled from the family unit. As long as their parents can be shown to have assets, housing benefit remains unavailable to the child unless they endure a long and emotionally harrowing process of documenting that they are genuinely estranged from their parents.²⁹

Xenofeminism could considerably benefit from considering how queerness is enacted by capital *as* an identity of economic precarity and how capitalism is a type of magical thinking or sorcery, which creates with one hand what it describes with the other. To treat identity not as a *tool* but as a *truth* is no revolutionary gesture but grist to the mill of neoliberal capitalism. As the middle-class disappears, as more people are pushed towards poverty while working longer hours without basic social services, as the proletariat turns into the ‘precariat’ that survives from one short-term contract to the next, capitalism breeds and commodifies pseudo-difference in seventy-two shades. In that, it *homogenizes through difference*, that is, commercial identity is carved out in ways so specific and static as to secure the proliferation of small bubbles that produce very specific advertising outcomes. On a psychological or organisational level, this translates into a promise that if we specify our search criteria diligently enough we will finally be not among strangers but friends who are like us. From this angle, the fact that xenofeminism welcomes the stranger, the unknown, “all of our alien kin,” as the manifesto says, is potentially very promising. This contingency and incompatibility should be weaponised and gamified, not rejected in favor of ‘more of the same.’

In this opposition to the stasis of sameness, Hester’s monograph goes beyond challenging how personal identities are carved out. Echoing feminist critique of

normativity, she wants to challenge the household and the nuclear family unit:

From the street to the home, domestic space too must not escape our tentacles. So profoundly ingrained, domestic space has been deemed impossible to disembed, where the home as norm has been conflated with home as fact, as an un-remakeable given. Stultifying ‘domestic realism’ has no home on our horizon.³⁰

The success of this idea of the single family home is really quite remarkable when one considers its many limitations: it tends to be isolated, labor intensive, and energy inefficient; it’s also riven with tensions, interpersonal animosities, and power asymmetries, which are often felt particularly acutely by queer youth.³¹

Hester insists that the home must be reimagined because so many are *already* forced outside of it. Indeed, a report by the Albert Kennedy Trust in 2015 tells us that close to 70% of British LGBT youth experienced abuse from their own families. Ejected from the family structure, they compose 24% of youth homeless population. How could we insist on reproducing the home if it so often is a predatory space for women, trans* and queer people who are forced to conform to a structure that uses them as cannon fodder to its own replication? Patriarchy desires the uninterrupted reproduction of the home, the copying of mummies into wives, the replication of blissful and oblivious childhoods complete with the uneven distribution of labor that assures them. Nostalgia for the good old times pervades the hearts of those who were at the receiving end of reproductive labor but remained blind to its workings.

The family can inflict passivity and isolation—women are expected to seamlessly invest all ethical ambition and unpaid labor into their children while withdrawing from public life. Just by the possibility of being mothers, women are supposed to be a natural measure of virtuous commitment yet they are rarely allowed to participate, as mothers, in the political sphere. The manifesto urges to build alternative families and homes, not bound in the endless reproduction of this paralysis:

We see too well that reinventions of family structure and domestic life are currently only possible at the cost of either withdrawing from the economic sphere—the way of the commune—or bearing its burdens manyfold—the way of the single parent. If we want to break the inertia that has kept the moribund figure of the nuclear family unit in place, which

has stubbornly worked to isolate women from the public sphere, and men from the lives of their children, while penalizing those who stray from it, we must overhaul the material infrastructure and break the economic cycles that lock it in place.

For Hester, this means better communal infrastructure, “a renewed emphasis on community resources, collective housing, and socialized care practices [which] could offer real opportunities for restructuring social reproduction.”³² While on the surface these ideas read as unproblematic, xenofeminism must be weary of how the idea of the ‘commune,’ popular in the west since the 1960s, is currently re-deployed in the service of neoliberal working spaces. For example, in her article “Promethean Labors,” Hester writes approvingly of previous feminist attempts at communal living but they also sound suspiciously close to the Facebook campus 2.0.:

These feminists devised various approaches to rethinking domesticity, such as collective residential neighborhoods featuring cooperative house-keeping centers and kitchen-less houses, apartment hotels with communal dining rooms and spaces for shared childcare, and courtyard housing blocks with a common laundry, parlor, and library (as well as spaces for food preparation).³³

The general argument is that an ‘artificial,’ that is, not normative approach to identity and family could eventually scale up to a polity but how to achieve this remains an open question. Contrary to the manifesto’s enthusiasm for large-scale thinking, Hester proposes small actions and local interventions, without explaining how exactly could they scale up or compete with neoliberal ‘community’ models. If not facilitated by supra-national corporate infrastructures, how could this transition happen without a large actor, such as the state? In the absence of such explanation, her xenofeminism implicitly embraces standard state-socialist blueprints, satisfying little of the appetite for systemic techno-political complexity that the manifesto awakens and alienating a sizeable portion of geopolitical territories that have already witnessed the failure of this model.

BEYOND SEX: XENOFEMINIST FUTURITIES

No more futureless repetition on the treadmill of capital, no more submission to the drudgery of labour, productive and reproductive alike, no more

reification of the given masked as critique. Our future requires depetrification.

Xenofeminist Manifesto

The idea of seizing technological progress to re-engineer reproduction has been enjoying popularity in recent conceptual fiction. In Louis Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*, evolution runs backwards and women birth primordial species.³⁴ In XX, a lesbian couple uses an ovum-to-ovum technology, which lets them conceive offspring without sperm.³⁵ *The Handmaid's Tale*, now adapted as a series, seduces with its reproductive dystopia.³⁶ Reproductive labor is also at the heart of Hester's book. This concerns both social reproduction and sexual reproduction. As described by Silvia Federici, with the rise of capitalism, most reproductive work was confined to the realm of the domestic, where women reproduce the fabric of society by giving birth to the workforce, managing the household and maintaining familial bonds.³⁷ By naturalising and exploiting this unwaged labor, capitalism deferred the lion's share of its own reproduction to women, who were perceived as 'naturally' predisposed to it. As dismissive as society is towards these jobs, they are the necessary social glue that assures the smooth reproduction of both the workplace and the family, with women's secretarial, administrative, emotional, and sexual work as the invisible foundation.

While absent in the monograph, in her published essays, Hester pays attention to the future of work from the perspective of the so-called 'feminisation' of labor, which means that work is becoming 'naturalised' to the extent that most of it is unpaid. It is here worth repeating that for Marx, capitalism as a historical stage that displaced feudalism is defined by the alienation of workers from the fruits of their own labor. In essence, capitalist exploitation means that an ever-smaller group of people benefits from the population's growing productivity. In fact, inequality will expand *alongside* the increase in production, rather than *despite of it*. Unlike money, which decreases as we use it, capital breeds capital, allowing for the number of its owners to decrease and for the wealth gap to grow with time. This is precisely why Marx tells us that wealth is measured through *disposable time*, that is, time that multiplies its own surplus and becomes truly free. Because disposable time is the measure of wealth and the wealth gap is growing, everyone but the wealthy has increasingly less free time. Ignoring Marx while repeating him, the object-oriented ontologist Ian Bogost calls this "hyperemployment," defined by growing time-costs of maintaining our social, personal and working lives:

Pay is almost beside the point, because the real cost of hyperemployment is *time* [my emphasis]. We are doing all those [administrative] things others aren't doing instead of all the things we are competent at doing.³⁸

Acting in a vast conspiracy that continually forces me to cite men in order to point out how incompetent they can be at literature review, Bogost gleefully neglects the body of work on that exact subject produced at least since the paradigm-setting 'Wages for Housework' project in the 1970s. The movement, which is of a visible influence on Hester, started in Italy and focused on how capital exploits women's unwaged reproductive labor. Being a woman is the original hyperemployment: it is where personal, administrative, emotional, waged and unwaged labor is as necessary as it is disregarded, naturalised and derided. Women are so skilled at this work that the work itself became invisible.

This brings us to Hester's expertise the field of labor studies, which is not represented in the book but well-worth mentioning here as a supplement to the arguments she advances. In the "Technically Female: Women, Machines, and Hyperemployment," Hester, in dialogue with Nina Power, points out that automation has long been replacing work coded as feminine. Power recounts how the *more* that women's disembodied voices are present in society—in interactive animated pornography, at the automated shopping checkouts, in apps, on urban transport systems—the *less* the interests of actual women are recognized in the public sphere. Hester sums up, "women's voices have historically been used to issue instructions...precisely because women themselves have not been around [in public spaces] to be heard," which made the sound distinct in all-male environments.³⁹ Simultaneously, jobs *become* valued at the moment that machines, rather than women, perform them. All work associated with women is rendered either invisible or mocked but becomes valuable as soon as the same work is done by a machine or an app:

As feminised work becomes technologised work, it may come to be less culturally denigrated, and therefore more available to be taken up by different kinds of subjects. Those with choice and cultural capital, in other words, may be more willing to perform this labour if it is associated with culturally valued [technical] objects rather than with socially disparaged [female] subjects.⁴⁰

This dynamic of labelling the most necessary work as the most unworthy marks women not only in the public workspaces but also in their second office—the house. Maintaining a foetus and then bringing up a child is as necessary for the species as it is looked down on. Does this mean that as long as women have babies, “the heteronormative centre chugs on”? In the second chapter of the book, Hester ponders this question through a critical reading of Lee Edelman’s queer-fatalist refusal. It is not by accident that every mainstream dystopian film ends with the reinstatement of the nuclear family, as if imagining ecological disaster served to stir people’s libido and force them to make more babies so that the species can survive. This narrative simultaneously makes ‘infertile’ queer lives unworthy of reproducing or sustaining, leading Edelman to write, “fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized...fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop.”⁴¹ While she sympathizes with the way Edelman refuses the violence of heterosexual futurity, Hester wants new family structures but also reproductive justice for existing mothers and children: taking care of those who do the work of reproduction, making sure that the air they breathe is clean, their children, if they want to have them, have access to healthcare and a roof over their head, that food and water of quality is available, and that sexual harassment and domestic violence are eradicated (55-65). It is on these grounds that maintaining a liveable environment is for Hester a xenofeminist goal. Too often, she is quick to point out, do environmental activists mirror paranoid guards of the ‘natural order,’ asking that the bodies of human and nonhuman animals are conserved in their present state rather than encouraged to co-evolve with and adapt to the increasingly ‘artificial’ environment (45). (Cue the famous Alex Jones meltdown about frogs becoming gay because of ‘chemicals.’)⁴²

Hester thus warns not to correlate species survival with forced heterosexuality and with the Child as the only figure that commands environmental action while at the same time excluding anyone who does not worship its dogma. The book would benefit here from engaging with contemporary ecofeminism rather than the one from three decades ago! For example, putting into dialogue the work of Rebekah Sheldon and Donna Haraway, Sophie Lewis writes that “society requires the cipher of the Child...it prefers the ‘melancholic anticipation of future loss’ to the messy response-ability of situated ‘living and dying together on a damaged earth.’”⁴³ (This fallacy repeats when it comes to other animals: tearing up at the prospect of a future loss of a species while at the same time abdicating the responsibility for billions and billions of animal young living their lives under grotesque torture in factory farms.) The poster of the Child, seemingly neutral, is no friend

to queers neither to actual children. Hester criticizes celebrating “the wealthy, white ‘yummy mommy’” marching in greenwashed parades with printouts of baby faces demanding a better future, while “teenage mothers, black and Latinx parents, trans* and genderqueer subjects, immigrants, refugees, and benefits claimants” are rarely perceived as ‘the future’ that is worth fighting for (52). Indeed, as Hester notes, it is people of color, native populations and migrants who had long suffered medical racism, eugenics and forced sterilization (14); or were mandated to give up their children ‘for their own good,’ no more visibly than in the case of Australia’s Stolen Generations, or, even today when Native Canadian women are asked to agree to sterilization right after labor if they want to keep their newly-born children.⁴⁴ Thus, Hester interprets Haraway’s slogan of “make kin, not babies!” as a call for “post-gender, multi-parent genetic engineering,” where bodies and families are “hospitable to otherness” (64-65) and reproductive future means something more than just the state refurbishing its ranks by cloning the nuclear family (53).

It is a shame that Hester does not engage decolonial theory, which has been pointing out the flaws of ecofeminism since the 1990s. Similarly to the manifesto, Hester paints ecofeminism as naïve, romantic or essentialist. While it may serve as a useful foil against which xenofeminist celebration of artifice can form, this risks defining ecofeminism primarily through its new age-ish, western image, ignoring politically cognizant, sharp visions of ecofeminism present in the work of indigenous scholars. For example, Laura E. Donaldson critiques Clarrisa Estes’ infamous Jungian-tribal *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* for the misplacement of collective indigenous politics onto the terrain of individual growth for wealthy western women.⁴⁵ Indeed, mainstream ecofeminist discourse often slips into the aesthetics of bad self-help books, where the essentialised Nature was to be utilized as a site of self-growth for women disconnected from their “roots.”⁴⁶ Decolonial theory points out that these problems persist today and that the underlying colonial logic of environmental degradation keeps being ignored; these studies are the unacknowledged genealogy of Hester’s argument above.⁴⁷ The move to celebrate ‘artifice’ and reject ‘nature’ can erase the work of those who have been deconstructing nature for the last few decades, often working in imperial or colonial contexts. Furthermore, while xenofeminism describes itself as a feminism of large scale and indeed has ambition to redefine not only our individual relation to our bodies but the seemingly immutable social structures, it is yet to address the fundamental question of the future, which is the ecological crisis. With its current definition of nature as simply ‘the norma-

tive,' it appears not best-equipped to do so, a point I already made in my previous article on xenofeminism. Despite its promise to challenge the given, Hester's xenofeminism only envisions single-species households and predominately human spaces, thus far providing no reflection on interspecies or ahuman/asocial spaces to come.

OUTRO: XENOFEMINIST TECHNOLOGIES

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.

Xenofeminist Manifesto

*Xenofeminism takes cyberfeminism's positive valuation of technological alienation seriously, it is turned on with—and by the machines, rejects originary authenticity, and has days where it wants to merge with matrix.*⁴⁸

Inevitably, Hester also considers the pivotal point of women's reproductive work: pregnancy and child-rearing. The internally estranging process of having a human being grow inside one's body should not be easily disregarded for anyone interested in the politics of strangeness and alienation—Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* manages to capture this process of othering while at the same time breaking the seemingly immutable connection between pregnancy and the heteronormative family.⁴⁹ Hester herself says in an interview that “the baby is the ultimate chemical weapon. It makes you feel things that you might not want to feel. Very strange to be on the receiving end of.”⁵⁰ Despite the unfamiliarity of pregnancy and its potential to reconfigure the family unit, we often hear the opposite argument: that being a mother or wanting to become one is the most ‘natural’ thing in the world and that heteronormative family structure necessarily follows from it. Shiva and Mies celebrate submitting to this wild and uncontrollable life force by refusing reproductive technologies, and here lies Hester's quarrel:

[For Shiva and Mies], reproductive technology offers a disenchanting alienation, achieved via devolving epistemic authority to medical experts, whilst nature offers a (for some reason vastly preferable) *enchancing* alienation, achieved via the subjection of the impregnated body to forces beyond its control.” (17)

Embracing ‘disenchanted’ birth control against natural contingency of conception, Hester criticizes equating pregnancy with the experience of all women, a word far too wide to encompass specifically the group of fertile cis women. Of course, under patriarchy, pregnancy has been and continues to be the bane of cis women’s oppression, given that a woman’s worth has been historically correlated with her ability to produce offspring and ensure the elongation of the family line, a fact immortalized in the *still* enduring tradition of naming kids after the father even though almost always it is the mother who suffers all consequences of bearing and bringing up children. Here xenofeminism departs from post-structuralist focus on discourse, echoing the return to material reality in the work of scholars such as Katerina Kolozova, whose work represents the feminist return to categories such as the real, the material or the bodily as existing independently of cultural discourse.⁵¹ While Hester admits that as of now, pregnancy may be a biological difference between various groups of women, xenofeminism “dispute[s] that this difference is immutable” (20). In fact, we have already been using technology to change this, most notably through *in vitro*. In the future, there is no reason why we should not deploy technology in the service of xeno-pregnancy, either through ectogenesis or as of yet undiscovered forms of surrogacy.

This can make one daydream well beyond Hester’s own arguments. If *all* human bodies could augment themselves or technologically-outsource the production of offspring, the marker of ‘womanhood’ might become largely irrelevant as a sexual identity and instead transform into a generic technology, allowing the species to extend itself through controlled artifice. Even if we were to follow the idea that because of being mothers, women are more rational (they have to both decide which genes are worth passing and which environments are good for having offspring in), that would be all the more reason to make pregnancy a technology accessible for all. If we set down this path, however, xenofeminism must remember how wealthy women’s reproductive labor, from cleaning to child-rearing, has already been outsourced to poor women, often of color or from developing regions such as Eastern Europe. In this morbid ‘solution,’ patriarchy automates its own reproduction and the only way for women to reduce their reproductive labor is to defer it to other women. We are yet to develop technologies that challenge this stasis rather than reproduce current asymmetries.

Surprisingly, rather than drawing blueprints for contemporary xenotechnologies, Hester closes the book with a lengthy case study chapter that focuses on a single object, “the Del-Em menstrual extraction device devised by American feminists in

the 1970s” (70). It is no wonder that this domestic appliance, born at the height of women’s self-help and solidarity movement, is central to a book largely informed by scholarship from Second Wave Feminism. A detailed analysis, where every bit of information matters, makes the chapter difficult to summarize but shows with clarity how Hester’s xenofeminist proposals work in action. A tool of DIY care, Del-Em has large-scale applicability (many women menstruate regardless of geopolitical standing), bypasses gatekeepers and functions within a network of communal care. Given the condescension and rejection that women have historically suffered and still suffer at the hand of the medical system, this is a fitting case study, which connects to the practices of midwives, denounces racist histories of genealogy, discusses hormone biohacking, community-created self-care guidebooks for cis and trans women, the National Black Women’s Health project and Native American health initiatives, while also reclaiming self-care from YouTube influencers and making a case for a feminist international beyond the West. In her analysis, Hester demonstrates how she understands the ‘intersectional universalism’ of xenofeminism, akin to Michelle Murphy’s ‘protocol feminism,’ “a form of feminism concerned with redrafting and distribution of techno social practices by which the care and study of sexed living-being could be conducted” (108). This is an argument for adaptability: for a protocol to work, it must be both attentive to context and translocal, in other words, it must be intersectional. In her descriptions of such everyday acts of biohacking, Hester embraces cyberfeminist legacy, stating that the Internet could facilitate a “bottom-up movement centred on self-equipping via knowledge exchange” (95).

On the one hand, Hester’s attentiveness to past feminist and queer work is admirable, her careful writing style, mindful to remain inclusive, is exemplary. It rejuvenates and makes readily relevant various feminist theories from the past few decades, giving us a lesson in picking apart problematic legacies. From this angle, it almost rejects the bravado of the manifesto, whose aesthetics are necessarily provocative, its propositions presented as novel, as if without a source. Hester, an academic, rushes to correct this, showing us that xenofeminism is in fact very aware of its debt to existing feminist work. On the other hand, the manifesto—as any manifesto—promises the new, or at least something with which to justify its urgency. It is indisputable that the matters of everyday social and bodily oppression of women, which Hester pays attention to, are as relevant as ever. Yet in the manifesto there is a promise, an allusion to the unacceptable, to bio-industrial forms growing someplace dark, where actions lose coherence and causality, a world without us. Thus far, it remains only that—a promise, a whisper

from the other side, a troubled signaling that we need something else or that we begin to perceive a challenge of a scale not seen before, humming somewhere alongside our digital axes, across our machines, our plants, our bodies, ourselves. Hester's monograph gives us a necessary foundation of xenofeminism—a caring, down to earth assessment of every feminism's obligation to its roots. This type of genealogical work is the first step of every feminist praxis. But from the future arrives something else, it may even be a crisis that effortlessly drills holes in our fabrics of sense, action, temporality. Extinction, automation and cunning autonomous intelligences that remain to be detected already wrap themselves around our bodies, families, states and planets. Nowhere to be found in the monograph, the promised xenofeminist vision of “unprecedented cunning” and scale is still to come.

BOGNA M. KONIOR is a Lecturer in New Media and Digital Culture at the University of Amsterdam, a Research Fellow at the International Research Institute for Cultural Techniques and Media Philosophy at the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, the Media and Technology editor at the Hong Kong Review of Books and the editor of *Oraxiom: A Journal of Non-Philosophy*. In 2016, she was a visiting researcher in Media and Culture at the ICON Center for the Humanities at the University of Utrecht. She publishes widely across academic and popular venues, on the subjects of media, climate change, technology-oriented feminism, contemporary continental philosophy, as well as post-globalist collapse cultures. Her recent work is published in *Transformations: Journal of Media and Culture* and *Identities: Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture*. She collaborated with film festivals internationally, including the Five Flavour Film Festival in Warsaw and the ReVersed: Poetry-film Festival in Amsterdam. She holds a BA in Film Studies (Theory and Practice), RMA in Media Studies, PhD in Cultural Analysis, and was previously teaching classes in media and culture at the Lingnan University and the Hong Kong Baptist University.

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