

Internet Constructs of Identity and Ignorance: 'Third-world' Contexts and Cyberfeminism¹

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*"we have telephones, and computers and people carry cellphones and get into fancy cars . . . we have santa barbara on tv and kitkats in our fridges . . . we even drink pepsi and coke and speak and write english . . .
but . . .
do you know what saying to-mah-to juice instead of to-meh-do juice in an american airlines can do to your self esteem . . . if the person on the other side doesn't figure out you're speaking english?
ask anyone who is standing in the 3 tier compartment of an indian train for the first time and trying to get onto an upper berth . . .
but on the internet . . . we constantly seem to think that we are communicating when there is a real danger that we don't even know we are not . . .
i sometimes wonder how we take on discussions on issues of humankind when the level of communication is so suspect . . ."*

—from an e-mail message from the 'third-world' to someone in the 'first world'

"The risk of mistaking the `culture of silence' for ignorance or indifference is one to which the powerful are inherently prone."

—Deborah Eade, 1998

*>If silence isn't ignorance or indifference, then what does it
>signify, please?*

Internet constructs of identity and ignorance occur within a discursive framing of the Internet and digital technologies that allows the " 'unconnected' in the present" to be negatively equated with the " 'illiterate' of the past" (Warnick 5). Furthermore, 'silence' online as well as the inability to coherently articulate self-identity

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within discursively and socially available categories and subject positions, while adhering to the prevailing dictates of 'netiquette' within online contexts could construct even the 'connected' as 'ignorant' or marginally connected. Thus within the constructs of identity and ignorance online, we have the information rich and the information poor, the digital and the analogue.

The Internet is situated within an Anglo-American hegemony which emphasizes the importance of modern science and technology for individual empowerment. Mainstream discourses (see Benedikt) that surround the use of technology are immersed in Utopian narratives, which in turn are rooted in enlightenment narratives of progress. These narratives are also implicit in notions of 'development' and 'underdevelopment' that divide the world into spatial hierarchies of the 'developed North' as opposed to the 'underdeveloped South.' These mainstream celebratory discourses regarding technology are immersed in a technological imaginary (Robbins 135) which is an 'intoxication' with the notion that technology will deliver us from the imperfections of our present world. Kevin Robbins points out that:

The propagandists of the virtual technological revolution tend to speak as if there were a new and alternative reality; they would have us believe that we could actually leave behind our present world and migrate to this better domain. It is as if we could simply transcend the frustrating and disappointing imperfection of the here and now. (136)

For these enthusiasts, virtual community is a place of escape from the 'real world.' Proponents of this extreme viewpoint assume that "the social and political turbulence of our time—ethnic conflict, resurgent nationalism, urban fragmentation—ha[ve] nothing at all to do with virtual space. As if they were happening in a different world." (Robbins, 137).

Visions of globalization, thus, implicitly revolve around a hierarchy that privileges an upcoming transnational corporate and intellectual 'digirati' class. People who belong to this digirati class, according to Kenneth Keniston, are all computer literate, have an Internet address and/or Web site, possess a cellular telephone, and are fluent speakers and writers of English as their first, second, or third language:

This new ruling class . . . will be concentrated in the nations of the so-called north, but its members will also

be found in Mumbai, Bangalore, Delhi, Nairobi, Buenos Aires, Singapore, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, and Johannesburg . . . they make financial transactions in Hong Kong, Sydney, London, Lima, Singapore, and Calcutta; they exchange scientific information, weather reports, business news, and personal gossip at the click of the mouse. (105)

Utopian scenarios that privilege the viewpoints of the rising digital continue to “promise sustainable development once digital highways have been constructed,” and the claim is made that the “deployment of new information communication technologies (ICTs) [will] usher in a ‘new civilization,’ an ‘information revolution,’ or a ‘knowledge society’” (Hamelink 68).

Cyberspace comes into being at the intersection of the digital and analogue. Web sites as well as various synchronous and asynchronous interaction sites like e-mail discussion lists, Usenet Bulletin Boards, MOOs and MUDs² are some currently visible manifestations of cyberspace. Cyberspace is continually being composed within the Utopic discourse described above, despite the fact that there are various inhabitants of cyberspace and users of the digital technologies who hold views that are critical of the aforementioned utopian scenarios (see Schiller; Spender). Furthermore, cyberspace is increasingly marketed as a wonderland where gender, race, and all such markers of otherness will be erased and melted down as we transform ourselves into texts and images online. This view, like the melting pot ideology, fails to point out that it is the ‘Others’ who will be the ones who will need to transform themselves into an Anglo-American dominated information structure which is dictated by programming languages and netiquettes laid out from a Eurocentric social, cultural, and political perspective.

In the present essay I will first lay out a critique of currently identifiable cyberfeminisms. I will then proceed to examine some cyborg-writing on the third-world-women and sa-cyborgs e-mail lists both of which were founded by me in the years 1995 and 1996 respectively. The third-world-women list focuses on issues related to third-world-women and their representations and the sa-cyborgs list currently “focuses on interactive, experimental creative writing with an implicit focus on gender, race, class, caste, sexuality, age, geographical location . . . identity issues pertaining to voice and voicelessness, silence and resistance, Self and Other narratives.”³ Both lists are run via the Spoon Collective server⁴.

My intention is to raise critical questions while pointing to the significance of some issues raised within postcolonial theory and subaltern studies that concern the designing and maintaining of cyberfeminist e-spaces. Allowing for the possibility that the Internet could be used for the self-empowerment of men and women all over the world, I observe, however, that current material and cultural access to cyberspace does not provide empowering options for men and women living in contexts that are at the periphery of westernized logics of consumerism and modernity.

I.

'Cyberfeminists' attempt to work towards the empowerment of women through technology while resisting various male-dominated discourses that surround the use of technology. Cyberfeminists attempt to design Web sites and other electronic synchronous and asynchronous spaces online that will resist dominant constructions of gender while empowering women all over the world. According to Kira Hall, cyberfeminism occurs at the "intersection of computer technology with subversive feminist counterculture" (148). Cyberfeminists generally believe that the Internet is a feminist issue. Among other things, they are interested in possibilities for activism and research on and via the Internet. What most cyberfeminists share is the belief that women should take control of and appropriate the use of cyber-technologies in an attempt to empower themselves.

Hall traces the history of cyberfeminism to Donna Haraway's "Manifesto for Cyborgs" and claims that Haraway's work informs much cyberfeminist discourse. Hall coins the term⁵ in relation to women and cyberspace and identifies two opposing camps of cyberfeminists—'liberal cyberfeminism' and 'radical cyberfeminism.' Liberal cyberfeminism, according to Hall, is "influenced by postmodern discussions on gender fluidity . . . [and] imagines the computer as a liberating utopia that does not recognize the social dichotomies of male/female and heterosexual/homosexual" (148). Radical cyberfeminism is "grounded in a reality of male-initiated harassment on the Internet," which has led to the formation of many women-only lists (148).

Manifestations of cyberfeminisms and cyborg-narratives are visible in digital, computer-mediated environments such as the Internet ('cyberspace'). Cyberfeminists from the Western power field⁶ have suggested that Internet technologies can serve as 'great equalizers' and can be used for the empowerment of marginalized

groups all around the world. For example, in discussions of gender perspectives at an online conference on “The Right to Communicate and the Communication of Rights” held in 1998, some participants wrote about the potential of the Internet

to be the great equalizer in today’s world The power that it offers for a relatively low cost can level the differences imposed on people due to their gender or economic status, *if* women and low-income individuals worldwide are able to obtain access to equipment and training on how to use it⁷.

Such arguments reduce the problem of inequality in relation to Internet technologies and cyberspace to just a problem of material access to equipment, wiring, and technical training. However, the issue of inequality in relation to cyberspacial environments does not stop with questions of material access and technical training, but extends into the realm of global and local cultural contexts in relation to the metanarrative of linear progress implicit in approaches to the building of cyberspacial environments.

My critique is based on what I see as cyberfeminism’s unwitting complicity with utopian narratives about cyberspace. Internet constructs of ‘third-world’ ignorance and identity occur within a framing of ‘civility’ and netiquette that are defined in very Westernized and urban bourgeois terms. At the same time, the speaking and silencing of women from various races, classes, castes, and geographical locations continues to be governed by a ‘benevolence’ that is nonetheless hierarchical in that it ‘allows’ or disallows Others’ speech.

Thus, even existing cyberfeminist electronic spaces often extend colonial discourses and progress narratives which construct ‘third-world’ Others as mere consumers of ‘first world’ productivity (be it in the form of theory or technology). Cyberfeminisms, in spite of owing their origins to cyborg theories and narratives proposed by critical scholars like Donna Haraway and Katherine Hayles, occur within westernized feminist discourses that generally assume a privileged and unified subject. This privileges a subject who is able to either transcend or leave material, community power structures and act independently of community hierarchies and practices. Implicit within such a construction of agency is a notion of Self that is totally independent of community practices and ideologies while it implicitly excludes ‘the subaltern’⁸ “from organized resistance” (Spivak, *Critique* xi). The problem is, as Spivak writes of western-

ized feminisms, that in general “[t]he [cyber]feminism we inhabit has something like a relationship with the tradition of the cultural dominant, even when adversarial” (xi).

This culturally dominant relationship is embedded in several cyberfeminist discourses. For example, Sadie Plant defines her use of cyberfeminism as follows:

To start with I simply used the word cyberfeminism to indicate an alliance. A connection. Then I started research on the history of feminism and the history of technology. It occurred to me that a long-standing relationship was evident between information technology and women’s liberation. You can almost map them on to each other in the whole history of modernity. Just as machines get more intelligent, women get more liberated. (Cross 4)

Within such a description of cyberfeminism is implicit the notion that technology will liberate humanity from its ‘primitive’ condition just as the ‘progressive’ post-Enlightenment modes of production that were transferred to previously colonized locations of the world (the ‘third-world’) by the colonizers and first world nations were supposed to have liberated the third-world from its ‘pre-developed’ misery. Thus, Plant’s claims regarding cyberfeminism appear to suggest that there is a direct correlation between the liberation from misery and the ability to use westernized technologies. This claim is similar to that suggested by developmentalists who claim that Western forms of industrialization, technological ‘progress’ and modes of production/consumption will lead inevitably to the democratization of the so-called underdeveloped areas of the world.

The idea that human beings will be liberated from their animal nature through the adoption of modern science and technologies has its origins in a development discourse (situated within enlightenment narratives) that produced a teleology of progress which privileges western knowledges and power structures. This development discourse, according to Arturo Escobar, is governed by the same principles implicit in colonial discourses and was deployed in the production of a geopolitical space, the ‘Third World,’ as a space for ‘subject peoples’ in order to ensure the continuing subordination of postcolonial regions of the world. Escobar writes that:

The development discourse inevitably contained a geopolitical imagination that has shaped the meaning of development for more than four decades The social production of space implicit in these terms is bound with the production of difference, subjectivities, and social orders. (9)

It is thus extremely problematic to assume that technology will 'liberate' human beings from whatever suffering they may be enduring. Therefore, it is my opinion that the root of the problem that women from third-world contexts face in relation to cyber-feminisms as they are currently articulated, lies in the implicit, almost causal, linear connection that a majority of cyberfeminists draw between modernity, machines, and the liberation of women. This problem is inherent in the very roots of western feminism. While feminism as a movement in the West and in the present moderni(ized) world owes its origins (and I say this in a positive way) to individualism and modernity. However, individualism and modernity are not unproblematic *causes* for the so-called liberation of women. A configuration of historical events and discourses led to what has come to be known as 'women's liberation.'

Furthermore, these modernist discourses produce dichotomies that place 'tradition' in opposition to 'modernity' and place the individual's interests and rights as being in opposition to community goals, rules, and practices. These dichotomies themselves are constructions that, even as they elevate the status of notions of modernity and progress to God terms, may freeze tradition within 'ancient' time frames while at the same time constructing it as both sacred and immutable as well as opposed to modern notions of democracy. The idea that the machine and modernity will 'liberate' us from the oppressions of stereotyped 'traditional' structures is rooted in narratives that glorify modern scientific processes that laid the ground for notions of modern economic growth. These scientific processes based within a 'rational' economic modernization have in the past displaced so-called traditional modes of local, community-based production and placed them within the realm of 'Culture.' Thus "historical dis-continuity [is emphasized] as a major consequence of technological developments" (Hamelink 68).

Modern technology and science are thus equated with the transformation of the world into a 'better place.' Practices fostered by discourses surrounding modernity are rooted in an epistemology that generally does not allow for the adequate examination of

issues related to various diverse 'old' ways of being and doing. For example, it is this world view that does not allow the old and new to co-exist in cooperation and dialogue. The existence of 'old' technology side-by-side with the 'new' is viewed as an undesirable contradiction by many who cannot see beyond the technological imaginary. A binary opposition between so-called 'old' (traditional) and 'new' (modern) is set up in which the dialectic tension and contradiction can only be resolved by the annihilation (disappearing) of one or the other. One must consume the Other. In most cases the dialectic tension is discursively resolved by privileging the new and exoticizing the old. Yet, new systems of production continue to engage in an exploitation of practitioners and experts within these old modes of production. The new consumes and appropriates the old. The practitioners of old modes of production are often assigned the status of 'unskilled labor' and paid a lower wage for their skills. Yet modern systems continue to appropriate labor, knowledge, and skills while paying them less than so-called 'experts' and at the same time constructing them as ignorant (Gajjala and Mamidipudi 12). Therefore, while it is true that the adoption of new technologies does indeed change social/cultural/economic and even political structures, the change is not necessarily liberatory for all groups of people in the world.

But this transformation of 'old' to new can never be complete. The old is labeled as 'cultural practice' so that what might be considered economically produced contradictions appear as "contradictions that emerge between capitalist economic formations and the social and cultural practices they presume but cannot dictate" (Lowe and Lloyd 25). It is through the increasing awareness of such contradictions that a re-politicization of economic and cultural practices—practices displaced into categories of exoticised and mummified tradition—that a reframing of the exploitative and consuming tension between old modes of production and new modes will occur. As Lowe and Lloyd further point out

These contradictions give rise to cross-race and cross-national projects, feminist movements, anticolonial struggles, and politicized cultural practices. (25)

Thus, cyber-feminisms in relation to 'third-world'⁹ contexts of 'development' have been greatly influenced and continue to be influenced by modern capitalist relations of production, histories of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and free-market policies. Therefore, the question needs to be raised—what does it mean to say that the

Internet and technology are feminist issues when technology-as-equalizer narratives bring with them further colonizing baggage? Dominant notions of cyberfeminism are inadequate within 'third-world' lived contexts of labor and production, considering that the technological imaginary forms a part of a United Statesian notion of 'democracy' which is "not so coincidentally . . . nearly always equated with the global economic order of market capitalism" (Trend 7). In order to examine if women from 'third-world' contexts are indeed going to be empowered by the use of technology, we need to engage in an analysis that takes into consideration all the intersections and complexities involved in "conceptualizations of identity, opposition, consciousness and voice" (Dhaliwal 43).

II.

In the remainder of this essay, I examine examples of cyborg-writing that show glimpses of the contradictory postcolonial cyborgian subjects that negotiate various subject positions as (im)possible subject positions and as 'native informants,' 'representative Others' and 'postcolonial intellectuals' from within the historical dis/continuities encountered by the postcolonial/transnational/diasporic subject. When the latter are positioned implicitly or explicitly as native informants and representative Others, their articulations (and the reading of their articulations) get entrapped within a victim/victor binary. I would argue that, rather than examining the postcolonial/transnational/diasporic subject within binary framings of 'victim/victor,' it might be better to examine the subject that emerges along the axes of complicity/ resistance, metonymy/metaphor (Jarratt 59) and to examine the (im)possibilities for examining emerging subjects and their identities as 'mestiza ecriture' (Lunsford). Therefore I discuss some cyborg-writing and suggest a few possible strategies and tactics for the production of 'interrogative cyborg-writing' (based on Catherine Belsey's definition of an interrogative text) that might displace a 'classic realist' or Anglo-American logic of reading texts produced by Others. These instances of interrogative cyborg-writing¹⁰ would work towards metonymic processes of digital subject construction rather than rely on classical realist metaphoric subject constructions that encourage readers to view the postcolonial/transnational/diasporic subjects as 'representative Others' and as 'native informants' and as reliable narrators of histories and experiences of postcolonial Others, thus veiling the subaltern. Performing cyborg-writing within such multiply mediated contexts in digital diaspora would help

foreground the few speaking 'Others' as 'unreliable narrators' online, while problematizing their role as representative Others. Belsey's description of an interrogative text, Jarratt's notion of speaking beside one's self, and what I refer to as 'dis/continuity' zones that occur through critical disidentifications are all useful in this venture. In the present discussion, I draw on prior empirical and theoretical work as well as on practical experience building Web sites and facilitating discussion lists.

An interrogative text "discourages identification of the reader with a unified subject of enunciation," while the narrator's authority "rests not on positing facts; rather I risks forfeiture by posing more and more questions," thus activating her role as an unreliable narrator (Viswesaran 62). Such a text "employs devices to undermine the illusion, to draw attention to its own textuality," and invites answers to the questions it implicitly and explicitly poses, and the "reader is distanced from time to time, rather than wholly interpolated" (Belsey 92). In the context of fiction-writing, Belsey suggests that an interrogative text

challenges the realist concept of art, and invites the spectators to reflect on fiction as a discursive practice and the ways in which discourse allows them to grasp their relation to the real relations in which they live.
(102)

In the context of interrogative cyborg-writing, I suggest that it is further possible to work against a metaphoric mode re-presentation, thus disrupting notions of the unity of the 'native informants' narratives, thus discouraging the reader of 'Other' cyborg-writing from assuming the narratives to contain essential truths without contradictions.

In order to make conscious efforts at producing interrogative cyborg-writing, it is essential that, in addition to exploring our own complicity in the production of metaphoric and reliable narratives as representative Others, we attempt to engage in the production of metonymic exchange. Metonymy, as Jarratt writes, "creates a chain of associations . . . [and] configures a relationship based on contiguity and context" (59). Therefore:

Applying metonymy to identity politics suggests that differences can be spoken of not in terms of exclusive categories but rather as places, descriptions, or narratives of relation. (Jarratt 59-60)

Even though it is unavoidable for producers of online ‘Other’ narratives to engage in a metaphoric representation, interrogative cyborg-writing at least enacts a tension between the metonymic and metaphoric modes, allowing for “rhetorics of linkage and spatial allocation” (Jarratt 60).

The enactment of this tension between metonymic and metaphoric modes of representation in the context of cyborg-writing leads to what can be termed as ‘dis-continuity zones’ formed out of statements of difference—of dis-identification—which allow for the possibility of linkage and dialogue. Thus, when women from real life contexts that are peripheral to the mainstream heterosexual, westernized and bourgeois nationalist inhabitants of cyberspace come online, they ‘speak’ in seeming anger and/or incoherence. They appear to be “beside themselves” (Jarratt 57) in indignation and/or frustration, and in such situations they produce unreliable ‘Other’ cyborg narratives.

For example, the following clusters of exchanges move to the point of dis-identification, contributing to an overall effect of unreliable cyborg-narrative, even though the exchanges do not actually and visibly (on-list at least) result in an actual dialogue or collaboration between the participants.

The first set of exchanges occurred on the third-world-women list and focuses on the contradictions of geographical location and mixed ancestry in relation to what it means to be oppressed. In the examples of cyborg-writing throughout this section, we see the emergence of contradictory, dis/continuous postcolonial cyborg writing that emerges at the intersection of silences and outrages. The examples have been arranged and narrated to give a ‘stage’ effect, so that the reader might get a glimpse of the postcolonial cyborgian disjointedness and contradictions.

[Location: <third-world-women@lists.village.virginia.edu>¹¹.

Time: Present.

M, M2, and R materialize out of thin air. Several other members of the third-world-women list materialize while some others continue to lurk. You may recognize some of these, you may not recognize some of these. They are of all skin colors. M and M2 are engaged in discussion—parts of which we, the audience, hear]

I thought I should draw some attention to the fact that THIS medium in THIS time, favors engagement and dis-

course BEYOND the lines drawn in the sand, by colonial men. What does “west” mean anymore? I am of African, Native American, and Italian ancestry. Does this make me “western” or THE MAN; or am I as oppressed as I believe I am, despite the plush insinuations of my geography? Am I included in the designation of being “western,” because powerful whitemales have dicked this joint around like no one else? Because that feels too much like laying claim to the decimation of my own ancestors. Just because the sloganeers haven’t got a title for global engagement of conscious people, is a good enough reason alone to chuck the east/west designation, if only because it means nothing now . . .

[R interrupts with a comment. M turns to R and talks.]

The question M2 put to me is “what is western anymore” and pointed to her own mixed ancestry . . . she has a philosophical point, to be sure . . . however, the “west” I reference is the one where the lines are NOT “drawn in the sand,” but where the lines are that of actual, sovereign, “nation” states drawn painstakingly by colonial oppressors, and these lines exist for a reason that is upheld even today by corporate economic expansion...from the western hemisphere . . . er, there *is* a “western” hemisphere . . . yes? or is the earth really flat?
- -M.

[R wrote:]

Are you not essentializing “the west”. As a part of the diaspora I am opposed to the “West” also, yet I am considered “Western” by my relatives back home and here in the mainstream immigrant community. interestingly, when I protested against Vietnam in College I was the “left anti-American”. Now I protested against nuclear, and I am pro-America!

The second set of exchanges is from a discussion of 'silence' that occurred on the sa-cyborgs list.

>If silence isn't ignorance or indifference, then what does it
>signify please?

to give that question another twist—
perhaps the quest to “uncover” and interpret silence is ignorance?

>cyberdiva wrote:
>“The risk of mistaking the
>`culture of silence' for
>ignorance or
>indifference is one to which
>the powerful are inherently
>prone.” (Deborah Eade, 1998)

i would say that it (meaning “silence”) could mean a refusal of the current paradigm - which is clearly one of the modes of resistance adopted by the Zapatist rebels in Mexico, when the situation turned decidedly violent through methods of low-intensity warfare employed by the government.
—Schizoid

“We only become what we are by the radical and deep-seated refusal of that which others have made of us”
(Franz Fanon)

>I'm still interested in this question if anyone here has any
>thoughts on the matter.

Of course I'm interested.

I think, for example “uncovering” silence and “discovering”—is an act that is implicitly located in some structure of hegemony. So when we come to the “exposing” of silence from within certain structures, its not always beneficial to those whose silences we have exposed and laid bare.

>was i supposed to understand
 >or respond

>cyborgwati says "i don't understand that"
 >cyborgwati says "come again?"
 >
 >cyborgwati sips virtua coffee and sits back on virtual
 furniture ignoring
 >the rest of the world
 >
 >@more
 >
 >cyborgwati says "there is no more"
 >
 >cyborgwati says "can you repeat that please?"
 >
 >POOF cyborgwati blows a virtual fuse.
 >
 >reality is insane.

*From: "Annapurna M" <mannapurna@hotmail.com>
 To: sa-cyborgs@lists.village.virginia.edu
 Date: Thu, 04 Feb 1999 09:10:59 PST*

*who gives me the right to question . . .
 if you don't have the right to remain silent . . .*

*do i explain why i ask a question . . .
 that you should explain your silence . . .*

*is it enough for me to say 'i want to know'
 should i not say 'do you want to tell me'*

*and if you stay silent . . .
 does that make you ignorant
 or me deaf . . .*

*-----
 If silence isn't ignorance or indifference, then what does
 it
 signify please?
 -----*

*hurt?
 helplessness?*

being mute?
 lack of comprehension?
 fear?
 anger?
 discretion?
 restraint?
 Despair . . . ?
 . . . the list can go on . . .

 this is rather like the 'have you stopped beating your
 wife' question . . .
 the answer can only be 'yes i'm ignorant' or 'no you're
 deaf.'
 maybe you could rephrase the question?
 -A.

From: owner-sa-cyborgs@lists.village.virginia.edu Thu
 Feb 4 10:42:33 1999
 Date: Thu, 04 Feb 1999 15:41:51 -0000
 From: "padma nori" <padmanori@mailcity.com>
 Subject: Re: cyborgwati

how about, if . . . there is no reality?
 only a created interpretation,
 by a lot of people, in a lot of angles, from a lot of point
 of views,

>cyborgwati says "what do you mean a lot of angles?"
 >
 >cyborgwati says "this is not in the manual"
 >
 >cyborgwati's reality is defined by the people who pro-
 grammed her.
 >
 >cyborgwati lives in a world of software and hardware
 design.

this is hindu mythology . . . from the western perspec-
 tive . . .
 haha
 no no . . .
 cyborgwati is god . . .

*From: "Annapurna M" <mannapurna@hotmail.com>
To: sa-cyborgs@lists.village.virginia.edu
Date: Thu, 11 Feb 1999 10:17:00 PST*

*my silence is response
to your speech*

*a weapon
against your ignorance*

*a taunt
to your insensitivity*

*a plea
for understanding*

*restraint
against your arrogance*

*discretion
in the face of your strength*

*i find i like my silence
more than your speech . . .*

*From: cyberdiva <radhik@bgnet.bgsu.edu>
To: sa-cyborgs@lists.village.virginia.edu
Date: Thu, 11 Feb 1999 15:42:58 -0500 (EST)*

*Then this is the
silence
that speaks . . .*

*but how many
choose*

to hear it?

*in
our speech*

*in
our ignorance*

in
my insensitivity

in my lack of
understanding

almost a refusal
to understand
in
my arrogance

imagining i am strong
in the face
of your

silence . . .

how many dare to listen to this silence?

*From: "Annapurna M" <mannapurna@hotmail.com>
To: sa-cyborgs@lists.village.virginia.edu
Date: Thu, 11 Feb 1999 20:20:19 PST*

*my silence and your speech go
hand
in hand*

*put together
they are clear as a bell
as tangible as reality*

*maybe i don't understand your speech
like you don't seem to understand my silence . . .
i need to read your speech
as you need to read my silence . . .*

From owner-sa-cyborgs@lists.virginia.edu Fri Feb 12
00:58:44 1999
From: Sager10451@aol.com
Date: Fri, 12 Feb 1999 00:57:30 EST
Subject: silences . . .

I came to college
to suddenly have an identity
thrust upon me

I became an Indian
the "official indian"
usually the only third world voice in the class

I came here and lost my voice
my earlier voice
cause it didn't belong
just didn't sound so right

i had to adjust to a new identity
and to a person i had to learn and read to become.
a voice for the 3rd world women, children and men

most of whom i never knew
or whose lives i could never lead

my silence became my solitude
my private space
that no questions could probe, dissect or analyze

it became a weapon
that they could not penetrate and hurt
with their racism and ignorance

my silence is my power

amba

According to Katherine Hayles, cyborg stories are "imbricated within cultural narratives while still wrenching them in a new direction" (322). In the writing of interrogative cyborg narratives, what cultural narratives might postcolonial cyborgs be imbricated in and what 'new' directions, if any, might sa-cyborgs narratives and third-world-women exchanges be pointing to? What, for example, can we read into the silences and the occasional indignant outbursts on these lists? These are questions for further investigation.

Notes

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² Synchronous or real time interaction that takes place on multi-user domains—MUD is an acronym for Multi-User Dungeon or Domain and MOO is an acronym for MUD Object-Oriented.

³ See the sa-cyborgs information sheet at <http://lists.village.virginia.edu>

⁴ The Spoon Collective is operated through the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities at the University of Virginia. The Spoon Collective, started in 1994, is “dedicated to promoting discussion of philosophical and political issues” (<http://lists.village.virginia.edu/~spoons>). The collective was started in early 1994, and I entered it in the summer of 1995 when I volunteered to co-moderate two discussion lists. I set up three other discussion lists after that, the third-world-women list, sa-cyborgs, and the women-writing-culture list.

⁵ However, as she herself points out in a footnote, Hall is not the only writer to have worked to coin the term ‘cyberfeminism.’ She writes that participants in a 1994 London conference used ‘cyberfeminism’ as a derivative of Haraway’s ‘cyborg feminism,’ and that Virginia Barrett and Sadie Plant had also been using the term to refer to feminist activism online.

⁶ Because of the nature of the work I engage in as well as my current professional and geographical location, I include myself as being situated within this ‘Western power field’ that is shaped by knowledges produced, appropriated by, and circulated from within what is known as the ‘Western’ hemisphere.

⁷ See <http://commposite.uqam.ca/vidaz/wg/genderen.html>

⁸ ‘Subaltern’ is defined “as a name for the general attribute of subordination in . . . society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way” (Guha 35).

⁹ Whether these ‘third-worlds’ are located geographically within or outside of ‘first world’ boundaries.

¹⁰ Perhaps some kind of digital mestiza ecriture.

¹¹ This exchange can be found in its entirety (published in the publicly placed third-world-women archives) at a link from <http://lists.village.virginia.edu/~spoons>. Click on the link to the third-world-women archives and look at the archives from October and November, 1998. I thank the members who participated in this discussion for giving me permission to use their exchanges.

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II

Mosaics of Narrative Optometry

Digital Narratives/Visual Literacy