



Xenofeminism

Helen Hester

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Introduction

Xenofeminism, or XF, can to some extent be viewed as a labour of bricolage, synthesizing cyberfeminism, posthumanism, accelerationism, neorationalism, materialist feminism, and so on, in an attempt to forge a project suited to contemporary political conditions. From this litany of influences xenofeminism assembles, not a hybrid politics – which would suggest the prior existence of some impossible, un-hybridized state – but a politics without ‘the infection of purity’.¹ In collecting, discarding, and revising existing perspectives – in stripping its myriad influences for parts – xenofeminism positions itself as a project for which the future remains open as a site of radical recomposition. This book is a first

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attempt at teasing out the underpinnings, arguments, and implications of 2015's xenofeminist manifesto in an extended form. However, it is important to note that this is just one interpretation of a polysemic project – a project riven with the unresolved tensions that come from collaboration across difference.

Each of the six members of Laboria Cuboniks – the xenofeminist working group of which I am a part – would likely emphasize different aspects of the manifesto, foregrounding some tendencies over others on account of our varied backgrounds, interests, and politics. The process of negotiating between our various feminist commitments has been one of the most satisfying and illuminating elements of our collective labour over the past three years. The manifesto remains a document that we are all happy to stand behind, and which we continue to incorporate into our individual practice – be that as musicians, artists, archaeologists, theorists, activists, coders, or poets. I would like to use this book to advance my own variation of XF, whilst continuing to acknowledge the divergent strands shaping the project as a whole. This is not *the* book on xenofeminism, then, but rather *a* book on xenofeminism.

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I would like to start by briefly acknowledging some of the limits of this text, along with what I hope to achieve over the coming pages. *Xenofeminism* is not a thoroughgoing review of existing academic literature, and nor is it a lengthy monograph on feminist theories of science and technology. Rather, it is a polemic or a provocation – one grounded in a self-consciously idiosyncratic selection of critical material.² The references underpinning this text have been chosen not for their comprehensive articulation of the simultaneity of gender, technology, race, and sexualities, but for their suggestiveness and utility in terms of developing one particular strand of the XF project. The red thread uniting the chapters that follow represents what I consider to be one of the most compelling territories for any emerging xenofeminist position: reproduction, both biological and social. It is around this theme that the arguments of *Xenofeminism* converge.

Chapter 1 offers a partial definition of XF, sketching out some of the broad concepts that will ground subsequent chapters. In particular, the manifesto's treatment of three key ideas – technomaterialism, anti-naturalism, and gender abolitionism – will be explored, in order

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to indicate where they might contribute to a xenofeminist politics of reproduction. In Chapter 2, I turn to XF futurities – and, more precisely, to the need to develop visions of the future that are based upon neither the prescription nor the proscription of human biological reproduction. Using contemporary environmental activism as a springboard, I point both to the mobilization of the Child as the privileged icon of a world to come, and to the anti-natalist tendencies implicit within recent accounts of a more sustainable future. Ultimately, I argue, we should look to foster a form of mutational politics – one that can be oriented towards practices of xeno-hospitality.

Chapter 3 addresses the topic of XF technologies via an engagement with the feminist health movement of the 1970s. This section – the longest of the book – looks to the sometimes problematic activism of the second wave, not to hold it up as an aspirational model, but in order to identify some of the possibilities contained within its partially pursued trajectories. What, I ask, might the DIY technologies of seventies self-help have to teach us about bodily autonomy and reproductive sovereignty from an XF perspective? The conclusion extends this analysis to encompass

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contemporary practices of biohacking. In deliberately eschewing the politically tone-deaf imaginaries of some forms of transhumanism, and by bringing biohacking into conversation with both trans* health activism and discourses of reproductive justice, I hope to emphasize some of the more materialist dimensions of twenty-first-century approaches to emancipatory, self-directed bodily transformation.

Whilst reproduction, in an expanded sense, remains at the forefront of my articulation of xenofeminism, other related themes will inevitably arise over the course of the book – themes such as scalability, labour, intersectionality, nature, and repurposing. Let us begin, however, by asking a seemingly simple question: what *is* xenofeminism?

I

What is Xenofeminism?

XF is a *technomaterialist, anti-naturalist, and gender abolitionist form of feminism*. In this chapter, I will offer a brief outline of each of these three terms, using Shulamith Firestone's contentious manifesto *The Dialectic of Sex* as a recurring reference point. First published in 1970, Firestone's text claims that humanity's 'accumulation of skills for controlling the environment'¹ – extending, crucially, to gendered embodiment and biological reproduction – is a means of realizing 'the conceivable in the actual'.² It therefore looks to technology (including, most famously, assistive reproductive technologies, but also forms of domestic automation and industrial cybernation) as a point of leverage in efforts to

transform oppressive socio-biological conditions. Her work adopts an ambitious, constructive, and wide-ranging approach to conceiving of a more emancipatory future. In this, it has profoundly shaped the xenofeminist imaginary.

Technomaterialism

Xenofeminism is an attempt to articulate a radical gender politics fit for an era of globality, complexity, and technology – one which thinks about technology as an activist tool, whilst attempting to confront a contemporary 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’.³ It seeks to foreground the more obviously material elements of (inter)action in contemporary mediated cultures, and draws upon recent engagements with the digital that foreground its brute physicality over its supposedly more ethereal qualities – that is, over ‘the cultural perception that information and materiality are conceptually distinct and that information is in some sense more essential, more

important, and more fundamental than materiality'.⁴ In other words, XF seeks to anchor that which has been frequently mischaracterized as free-floating and disembodied within its infrastructural requirements and within the obstinate physicality of its users and producers (including those workers engaged in repetitive and poorly paid labour on electronics assembly lines around the world).

The project does not reject technology (or science, or rationalism – ideas often understood as patriarchal constructs), but positions it both as part of the warp and weft of our everyday lives and as one potential sphere of activist intervention. Laboria Cuboniks takes a critical interest in technologies that might seem mundane, such as domestic labour-saving devices, as well as higher-profile innovations capable of acting as vectors for new utopias – things like pharmaceuticals, additivist manufacturing, open source software, systems of cybersecurity, and post-industrial automation. Just as these phenomena may be turned towards furthering the control and domination of labouring bodies, so too might they represent sites of fertile possibility for the feminist left. Xenofeminism is interested in exploring

and leveraging these affordances – it ‘seeks to strategically deploy existing technologies to re-engineer the world’.⁵ At the same time, however, it recognizes that technologies are not inherently beneficial – indeed, they are not even inherently neutral – but are in fact constrained and constituted by social relations. This includes specific design histories, the existing (technical, political, cultural) infrastructures into which they emerge, and imbalances in terms of who can access them – a factor largely dependent upon the character of the specific technologies in question.

Qualifications of this kind are common to many technofeminist theories and approaches. Even the enthusiastic vision of cybernetic communism laid out in *The Dialectic of Sex* displays some awareness of the limits that social context might place upon a technology’s transformational implications. For example, Firestone appears cognizant of the fact that not only is her utopian project attendant upon the development of suitably sophisticated technoscientific capacities, but that ‘in the hands of our current society and under the direction of current scientists [. . .], any attempted use of technology to “free” anybody is suspect’.⁶ Even her preferred tools for feminist interventions in

embodiment are carefully problematized: reproductive technology, including birth control, is described as ‘a double-edged sword [. . .] to envision it in the hands of the present powers is to envision a nightmare’.⁷ Although hardly famous for the moderation of her arguments, it is clear that Firestone is attuned to the fact that the uses of both computational and biological technologies will be dependent upon the wider structures in which they are embedded.

In her response to *The Dialectic of Sex*, Sarah Franklin remarks that Firestone ‘envisaged technology both as an agent of, and a means of salvation from, social and environmental degradation, whilst constantly reminding her readers that science and technology could not achieve these ends in the absence of radical social change, including a wholesale regendering of scientific knowledge’.⁸ In Firestone’s analysis, technology is presented as both a ‘driver and a symptom, imbricated in a wider process of historical unfolding’;⁹ technoscientific developments must therefore be seen as a significant influence upon socio-political change. However, this influence is by no means unidirectional. The relationship between technology and social relations is complex, mutually shaping,

dynamic, and dependent upon continuous conversation. Shifts in one area will influence the evolution of the other, which in turn feeds back into further developments, in an ongoing process of co-constitution. Technology is as social as society is technical.

Technologies, then, need to be conceptualized as social phenomena, and therefore as available for transformation through collective struggle (a fact of which Firestone herself is well aware, even as she uses technologies to imagine a radically alien future). Technological change is a 'process subject to struggles for control by different groups', the outcomes of which are profoundly shaped by 'the distribution of power and resources within society'.¹⁰ As such, any emancipatory technofeminism must take the form of a concerted political intervention, sensitive to the fused character of the structures of oppression that make up our material worlds. It is in this spirit that xenofeminism seeks to balance an attentiveness to the differential impact technologies can have upon women, queers, and the gender non-conforming, with a critical openness to the (constrained but genuine) transformative potential of technologies. This extends to an interest in how we might