Alien Aesthetics: Xenofeminism and Nonhuman Animals

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Abstract

The recently published Xenofeminist Manifesto re-fashions accelerationist politics into radical feminism. Arguing for a universalist *xeno*-politics borne out of alienation, xenofeminists see in nature an arch-enemy, aligning with the algorithmical intelligence of technology instead, celebrating artifice and strangeness as the foundation of revolutionary politics to come. In this paper, I argue that nature is but a phantom limb tied to the decaying body of post-Enlightenment modernity. Following the ontological turn in anthropology, I argue that by legitimizing constructed dualisms of nature and technology, xenofeminism fuels the very logic that it seeks to overrun. Enlisting only with nonhumans that it perceives as technological, xenofeminism excludes a number of allies, such as nonhuman animals. Passing beyond the limits of this nature/culture dualism could open xenofeminism up to a full spectrum of nonhuman confederates and lay foundation for speculative aesthetics for all alien subjects.

Introduction

A recent entanglement of feminism and accerelationism, xenofeminism marks the most visible cyber- and techno-oriented insurgence in contemporary feminist theory since Donna Haraway's influential *A Cyborg Manifesto* [1] and Sadie Plant's work with the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit in the 1990s. [2]

Along with the publication of *dea ex machina* (2015) [3], which traces the lineage of feminism(s) that take the machinic state of contemporary existence as their testing ground, xenofeminism aims to reclaim the liberating potential of technology and alienation – a freedom *to* seize technology rather than a freedom *from* it. [4]

On the surface, by aligning their revolution exclusively with the technological dominium, xenofeminism departs from ecofeminism, perhaps feminism's most visible discourse from the 1980s until now, which seeks revolution through reclaiming the connection between women, nonhuman animals, and the environment.

In this paper, I argue that xenofeminism thwarts its own emancipatory potential by relying on the same dualism that informed ecofeminism: that of nature and technology as disperse entities. Grounding the movement into this unchallenged, universalized ontological separation, xenofeminism narrows down the scope of its metamorphic openness and excludes a number of revolutionary allies, such as nonhuman animals. Furthermore, it is only by re-evaluating this unacknowledged ontological predicament that xenofeminism could produce a *xeno*-aesthetics as well as new forms of subversive subjectivity. Thus, I suggest that an overturning of this ontological axiom creates a foundation for a futurist speculation borne out of alienation, an aesthetic estrangement that cuts across the category of species.

Accelerate! Alienate!

Xenofeminism's prosthetic limbs extend in various directions – its genealogy can be traced back to cyberfeminist collectives such as VNS Matrix - yet rest most firmly in the fertile grounds of accelerationism. Accelerationism is a political movement focused on re-cutting the Left with blades of rationality and technology.

Although radical techno-determinist Nick Land, one of the key members of the Cybernetic Cultures Research Unit at the University of Warwick, was accerelationism's most visible spokesman in the 1990s, xenofeminism rather affiliates itself with "left-accelerationism," best encapsulated by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams in "#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics" (2014). [5]

While global crises are accelerating, they argue, our theoretical capacity has to accelerate along them in order to shake off the post-structuralist "paralysis of political imaginary." [6]

Heavily critical of by-gone nostalgias such as localism and direct action, they propose to seize the neoliberal powers of capital and re-direct them in the interest of social change. To simplify – push capitalism to its limits and it will eventually collapse.

For the xenofeminists – *xeno* denoting "stranger" or alien - alienation inscribed into technological state is the condition of this revolutionary possibility. It was Marx who made alienation a concept central to politics – along with the automatization of production, he argued, the working class had nothing to sell but their labor.[7] Splitting up work into meaningless, minute tasks, the mass production assembly lines generated alienation, estranging the workers from their labor with the aid of technology. For Marx, alienation is the inherent vice of capitalism, preventing men (sic!) from reaching fruition and happiness through work.

Yet, as the accelerationists argue in a neo- or post-Marxist gesture, even Marx had already noticed that the means to capitalism's dissemination were in its own workings. [8]

Xenofeminism also succumbs to this idea, arguing that alienation is the "impetus to generate new worlds" and "the labour of freedom's construction." [9]

Proceedings of the 22nd International Symposium on Electronic Art ISEA2016 Hong Kong.

Unlike in Marx, however, where alienation is the worker's forced loneliness, in xenofeminism alienation is the perpetual state of estrangement that ensures the fluidity of potentially liberating interactions between technology and society. In xenofeminism, alienation is the relation between humans and the inhuman technology at the expense of "nature," which the Xenofeminist Manifesto proclaims the cause of all injustice: where essentionalized identities – such as 'female' or 'normal' – are produced.

Alienation here has little do to with loneliness or individualism – in fact, xenofeminism celebrates the technologically-enabled communities and platforms of "connection, organization, and skill-sharing" such as the Internet. [10]

The point is not to be isolated – the point is to be *alien*.

Xeno-subjects

A discussion of xenofeminist aesthetics must begin with the very core of the movement – with the alien. *Xeno*-aesthetics should serve the revolutionary plans proclaimed in the manifesto, and if they do, one must ask: who speaks and who is listened to? What kind of subjects are expressing and expressed in xeno-aesthetics? How could we define this xeno-subject that is non-essentialized yet able to form groups and alliances?

Dissatisfied with contemporary feminism's focus on identity and micro-communities, xenofeminists affirmatively insists "on the possibility of large-scale social change for all of our alien kin," [11] a task that they recognize demands large-scale, collective labour that cuts across narrow confines of "natural" identities. [12]

At this point, it is vital to ask who are these *xeno* alienated subjects that enter the space of open-source feminism in the technological age, and whether there should be a place for nonhuman subjects – such as animals - amongst them.

In his review of the recently published accelerationist reader, [13] Simon O'Sullivan identifies the missing component, pointing out that the movement fails to theorize its subjects or methods for the production of new subjectivities. [14]

"Technology isn't inherently progressive," the Xenofeminist Manifesto asserts, and thus must be linked to collective politics necessary to fashion it for the benefit of social emancipation. [15]

Yet can there be a new politics without a subject to carry out the turmoil? While xenofeminism advocates for clever subordination rather than idealistic insubordination, the deposition of capitalism and its exploitative practices still remain the desired outcome.

To complete such a task, O'Sullivan argues, "it will not be enough to take on… a new set of ideas, or put faith solely in technological process – subjectivity has to be *produced* differently." [16]

While Land's accelerationism indeed *is* a politics without a subject – save for the carnivorous, inhuman, algorithmic intelligence – xenofeminism seeks, through its alliance with feminism, an articulation of subjectivity.

In the opening paragraph of the manifesto, xenofeminism presents itself as the continuation of politics of *affinity* instead of *identity* – a response "through coalition" as Haraway calls it. [17]

Yet, unlike Haraway, whose further work extended the cyborg subjectivity to nonhumans such as companion animals, [18] xenofeminism, while portraying itself as a universalist politics that is not of benefit to women exclusively, scales down the mechanisms of affinity to human beings exclusively.

While the manifesto insist on the necessity of claiming technology for the subjects that it perceives as traditionally excluded – "women, queers, and the gender non-conforming" as well as differently abled - in its plea to "cut across race, ability, economic standing, and geopolitical position" it overlooks the category of species. [19]

While xenofeminism makes for a renewed engagement with insurgences of the past (and present), its disregard for nonhuman subjects prevents it from becoming a futuristic gesture that could indeed construct an "emancipatory tactics … scaled up for universal implementation." [20]

Speaking as no-one? Xeno-animals

Following Donna Haraway, Emma Wilson states that scientific knowledge has not as much as collapsed the categories of "human" and "animal" into one but rather rendered both categories meaningless – neither can be placed exclusively in the category of "nature" or "culture." [21]

While the collapse of the human/animal boundary poses challenges to previous constructions of human identity, there has been very little discussion on *how* could technology aid in liberating this polluted, non-essentialized animal subject. Can xenofeminism deliver on its promise of universal liberation for all gendered subjects without attempting to re-structure the predatory relation between technology and nonhuman animals?

There exist multiple reasons why female – and male – nonhuman animals should be woven into the formation of subversive subjectivities as well as the aesthetics bound to it. Given the length of paper, I will focus on farm animals as an example.

First of all, technology created new forms of oppression with regards to farm animals. This short paper cannot afford the space to list all of the procedures performed on female farm animals in industrial farming, yet it must point out that more often than not, these practices are highly sexualized. In the dairy industry, for example, human employees place the cows on what is commonly referred to as "the rape rack" [22] in order to artificially inseminate them by pushing pipettes into their vaginas to deposit the previously collected sperm. [23] Most often, the calf is quickly taken away from its mother and slaughtered. Thus, the patterns of abuse in factory farming are linked not only to specific technological inventions but also to an individual's gendered condition – females, as potential mothers,

would be submitted to different modes of abuse than males.

Secondly, nonhuman animals are the alienated subjects *par excellence* – it is their invisible labor that generates benefits for other groups. In "Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times," Nicole Shukin describes, from a Marxist perspective, how sourcing labor from the technologically confined bodies of nonhuman animals ties in with the circulation of animals-as-capital. [24] Without theorizing this alienation, as well as the methods for re-appropriating the currently exploitative technology, xenofeminism is not paying attention to all *xeno*-subjects.

Finally, without addressing *all* of alienated, gendered subjects, xenofeminism will be ill-equipped to provide a solution to the crises of capitalism of which Williams and Srnicek list "the breakdown of the planetary climatic system" and "terminal resource depletion" as the most substantial. [25] Xenofeminism shares Williams's and Srnicek's anti- or post-capitalist concerns. "Capital," it claims, "by design only benefits the few" and its technological circumstance currently targets "the world's poor [who are] laboring under abominable conditions." [26]

A great wealth of research has been already amassed on the relation between factory farming, industrial fishing, climate change, and poverty. [27] Thus, reflecting on the relation between technology and nonhuman animals is instrumental in addressing global issues that involve everyone.

To sum up, because xenofeminism obeys the strict division between technology and nature, it automatically relocates "natural" subjects, such as nonhuman animals, to the side of enemy at best and resource at worst. The first step to be taken in the inclusion of nonhuman animals is the demolition of dualisms that separate nature from technology and thus create oppressive hierarchies that mimic patriarchal, Eurocentric, and colonial structures that gave birth to them. Placing itself at this modern partition, xenofeminism cannot speak from a metamorphic, non-essentialized point-of-view of no one in particular that it aims for. [28]

Instead, it speaks from a consolidated and exclusive position of power.

Natural technologies

"Accelerationism is a political heresy," write Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian. [29] What is heresy if not the very denial of naturalized ontologies, unchallenged norms and axioms?

Donna Haraway captures this rebellious impulse in other words: "Blasphemy protects one from the moral majority within, while still insisting on the need for community." [30]

Xenofeminism also needs long-term collective labor that cuts across identities in order to ripen. To envision a xenofeminist aesthetics is to address the entanglement that forms the movement's political kernel – *xeno*-subjectivity built on the separation of nature and culture. Thus, producing an inclusive, xenofeminist aesthetics

that would be open to all of alien subjects is a two-step process: first, acknowledge the ontology that fuels the production of xenofeminist subjectivity in order to create space for nonhumans. Secondly, fill that space with aesthetic speculation in order to produce new alien subjectivities.

To rise above the partition of nature and technology, we must retort to ontological investigations, which are currently nowhere as thorough as in contemporary anthropology. The essentialist separation of nature and technology is a twin of another, more fundamental divorce – that between nature and culture.

Emerging in the 1980s as a critique of ethnographic politics of representation, the ontological turn contests the once dominant view of different cultures as simply divergent representations of one, objectively existing Nature. [31] It insists that we should rather recognize the existence of *multiple* worlds (ontologies) rather than position the one we were born into as the objective onto which other worlds map.

In Phillipe Descola's categorization, based on years of ethnographic research, there exist four ontologies that delineate the relations between humans and nonhumans: naturalism, animism, totemism, and analogism. [32] Upheld through practice rather than belief, these relations "exist under the form of mental structures, partly innate, partly stemming from the properties of social life." [33]

In naturalism, the ontology that Descola allocates to post-Enlightenment modernity, there exists a strict divide between natural laws and symbolic, cultural, or technological structures. Humans are presumed to be exceptional in that they are the sole possessors of an interiority, their bodies tying them to the nonhuman world only by the virtue of shared physicality.

The engagement with nature as a discursive and geo-located concept is missing from the Xenofeminist Manifesto. "We find," it states "that our normative anti-naturalism has pushed us towards an unflinching ontological naturalism. There is nothing…that cannot be studied scientifically." [34] While this statement reveals an entanglement of two different naturalisms – the first is the colloquial "natural order of things" that punishes all that is perceives an "unnatural," and the second a rationalist philosophy à la John Dewey, it does not localize, explain or engage with the separation of technology and nature through which xenofeminism amasses its accusatory and revolutionary capital alike.

In this way, it departs from its roots in the writing of cyborg feminists such as Haraway, for whom "the historically specific human relations with 'nature' must… be imagined as genuinely social." [35]

In other words, the giveness of nature as the realm beyond technology is the unexamined condition of xenofeminism, one that prevents it from offering a truly inclusive politics for all alienated subjects.

Producing subjectivities: alien aesthetics

How to remedy this ontological partition that leaves nonhuman animals behind as the revolution marches on?

Xenofeminism, hinging on the imagery of cyberpunk, hacktivism, and techno-futurism is a fabulatory exercise of world-building in practice. Defining itself as an "open source software… available for perpetual modification and enhancement" [36] that "seeks to strategically deploy existing technologies to re-engineer the world," [37] xenofeminism ties in with Williams's and Srnicek's proposal that "acceleration [is] navigational… experimental…within a universal space of possibility." [38] Thus, xenofeminist aesthetics should be nothing short of speculative.

So far, there have been only a few explicit engagements with the notion of accelerationist aesthetics. While I argued above that the unaddressed ontological premise interferes with producing a full spectrum of xenofeminist subjects, Steven Shaviro extends the problematic of ontology in accelerationism even further. For Shaviro, aesthetics *is* ontology.

Accelerationist aesthetics, he argues, are spectral, insubstantial, determined in the last instance. "Accelerationism in philosophy," he writes, "offers us, at best, an exacerbated awareness of how we are trapped." [39] When everything is subsumed under capitalism, accelerationist aesthetics operate from the inside, with no hopes for overturning the system. Instead, they produce safe distance, cruel truth: we have already lost. Accelerationist aesthetics should then allow us the possibility of smiling at other prisoners as we are suspended in an ever-expanding, excessive prison of inhuman forces. Thus, the goal of art nowadays is not to soothe us but rather to confirm that we are not insane: the unease we feel is well-justified.

In his article on geo-political accelerationist aesthetics, Benjamin Bratton notes that "it is not possible to distinguish between what is existential risk and what is an absolute invention, and what is both at once, and mobilize 'positions' accordingly." [40]

In other words, we are now living under conditions that demand a continuous mobilization of speculative resources *as if* our lives depended on it – because they *might*. Although Bratton proposes a planetary, cosmic aesthetics, his arguments could also apply to aesthetics inclusive of nonhuman animals:

> The post-Anthropocene indicates that the organizing work of a "xenogeopolitical aesthetics" (or whatever) can be done only in relation to a mature *alienation* from human history and anthropocentric time and scale. As it foreshadows and foregrounds the eclipse and extinction of Anthropocenic anthropology and corresponding models of governance, it establishes not only that humanism disappears with humans, and vice versa, but that the more elemental genetic machines with which we now co-embody flesh can and will, in time, re-appear and express themselves as unthinkable new animal machines, and with them, New Earths. [41]

In a similar manner, Patricia MacCormack argues that "the *political* role of aesthetics could [be] to catalyze inhuman affective relations that are still to come."[42] What then of xenofeminist aesthetics?

Following Shaviro, I would argue that a shift in ontology would initiate an aesthetic change of gears. Descola's ontologies are not fixed, they escape the boundaries of time, space or identity formations – they are simply descriptions of how humans and nonhumans connect and disconnect on the axes of social practice. Once naturalism is recognized for what is it – one ontology among many – we may begin experimenting with the other three, or maybe even draft a new one.

Descola acknowledges the potential of aesthetics to speculate and travel within ontologies: " art, or certain kinds of reflexive thought, or philosophy, enjoy a certain degree of freedom, which affords the possibility of stepping into different ontologies, divorced from the once in which you were born." [43]

There have already been attempts at entering – through aesthetic practice and philosophical or artistic speculation – to experiment within ontologies in order to re-construct social practice. For example, for Felix Guattari animism, the ontology that Descola defines as the opposite of naturalism, is characteristic of anyone who enters the modality of passion, artistic creation or madness. [44] In Guattari's work, animism is achieved through neurotic phenomena, religious rituals or aesthetic phenomen; a state of estrangement within the self and a sense of community outside of the self. This could be only the beginning of an inclusive xeno-politics to come.

In xenofeminism, nothing is original. There is no original human hiding beneath the layers of avatars and code. To extend xenofeminism to its logical consequences, we perhaps need to start acknowledging that there might be no original animal under the layers of disinfectants, hormones and vaccines, fences and creeps, artificial light cycles, selective breeding and confinement cells. Drawing a politics for the future can only begin when the disappearance of nature is recognized with regards to the nonhuman animal. To mobilize the aesthetics and speculative powers of technology – whether through research, art, design or environmental architecture – in the service of cross-species xeno-subjects would lay groundwork for a truly futurist politics, where the currently unmapped regions of thought and practice could house revolutionary impulses.

Xenofeminism demands: "If nature is unjust, change nature." [45] Perhaps this is not enough – perhaps if nature is unjust, we need to erase it.

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