Neither Cyborg Nor Goddess
The (Im)Possibilities of Cyberfeminism

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The generational model of feminism requires that each new feminism is understood as better or more engaged with real, lived experiences than the previous versions. One of the differences between the second and third waves of feminism has been the need to negotiate and engage with the new technologies that have emerged since the personal computing revolution of the early 1980s. Cyberfeminism emerged in the 1990s, positioned as an example of what feminism could be and could do in the supposedly disembodied spaces of the Internet. New communication technologies and cyberspace have been widely regarded as providing the opportunities needed to bring about the global feminist movements of the new millennium – this third wave of feminism – and the Internet has been vaunted as the global consciousness-raising tool which the first and second waves lacked: ‘[cyberfeminism is a] woman-centred perspective that advocates women’s use of new information and communication technologies for empowerment’ (Miller 200). Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein claim that cyberfeminism is ‘a philosophy which acknowledges, first, that there is a difference in power between men and women specifically in the digital discourse’ and, crucially, that ‘CyberFeminists want to change that situation’ (2). While it is undeniable that the changes in the material conditions of technology have wrought new kinds of relationships and new ways of theorising bodies and identities, my question here is whether or not cyberfeminism is an adequate term to describe these changes. It is arguable that the myth of cyberfeminism – that women are using cyberspace in powerful and transgressive ways and that cyberspace is providing women with a disembodied space in which to move beyond gender – is far removed from online experiences. This chapter identifies how cyberfeminism’s transgressive potential
is limited by the specificities of embodied online experiences. While feminist theory should not be uniform, and this chapter takes its inspiration from Rosi Braidotti’s argument that ‘it would be more beneficial to all concerned if the tensions that are built into the end-of-century crisis of values were allowed to explode inside feminism, bringing its paradoxes to a fore’ (2002, 210), I am here concerned with the ways in which, like third wave feminism and (post)feminism, ways of defining and managing cyberfeminism are difficult and contentious.

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For a movement which celebrates the potential for moving beyond the confines of the (gendered) body, cyberfeminism remains remarkably concerned with the corporeal. This is, in part, the result of many of the tenets of cyberfeminism emerging from the work of Donna Haraway and Sadie Plant. Haraway posits a cyborg feminism, arguing that the metaphor of the cyborg breaks down the binary oppositions of meat/metal and offers the possibility of a post-gender identity: the cyborg is a ‘myth about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities’ (154). Haraway has provided what is acknowledged to be a key text in the widespread work on body theory which occurred in the aftermath of second wave feminism. Her metaphor of the cyborg has been widely discussed and referenced, largely because of its promise of resistance which is disruptive of patriarchal models of gender, the body and identity: ‘rendering ambiguous the distinction between machines and organisms, the cyborg demonstrates that technology does not exist “outside” ourselves and that we are not mere users of it’ (Castricano par. 15). For Haraway, the cyborg disrupts because it ‘lapses into boundless difference’ (161) and can thereby resist hegemonic readings: ‘cyborg politics insist on noise and advocate pollution, rejoicing in the illegitimate effusions of animal and machine’ (176) and resisting ‘models of unity’ (181). The cyborg’s apparent potential for transgression – with its visual evidence of the hybridisation of meat and metal, body and technology – has meant that it has become one of the most pervasive and persuasive symbols of postmodernity. Haraway’s post-gender cyborg has become representative of the embodied artifice of the gendered body as Jenny Sundén argues: ‘[t]he politics of cyborgs are not to be found in collective, social movements, but are inextricably linked to their constantly moving borderland bodies’ (219). Cyborg feminism has fed into cyberfeminism, with its promise of agency through monstrosity and transgression.