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Melissa Colleen Stevenson

Trying to Plug In: Posthuman Cyborgs and the Search for Connection

My vices are the children of a forced solitude that I abhor; and my virtues will necessarily arise when I live in communion with an equal. I shall feel the affections of a sensitive being, and become linked to the chain of existence and events, from which I am now excluded.—Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* 143

Life on the Splice. Cybernetic transcendence of the human is often represented as an escape from the shackles of the flesh and the bonds of mortality. In our new bodies or, indeed, in our new bodilessness, we can experience limitless access to information and explore new and previously unimagined vistas of physical and mental possibility. As well as celebrating fresh opportunities, however, tales of posthuman existence also offer poignant depictions of loneliness. Access to a greater variety of personal possibilities is often represented as coexistent with the increasing absence of interpersonal interaction and a gnawing desire for emotional connection with others. I will consider here two classic stories of cybernetic re-embodiment, C.L. Moore's "No Woman Born" (1944) and James Tiptree Jr.'s "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" (1973). Both stories concern human female characters who are technologically re-embodied as cyborgs. Readings of the two stories have tended toward either a technophilic celebration of the power and potential of the cyborg body, in the case of Moore's Deirdre, or a condemnation of appropriated female bodies and agency, in the case of Tiptree's P. Burke/Delphi. For the most part, the loneliness that drives these characters in their new incarnations has been overlooked.

In her "Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway employs the figure of the gendered cyborg, "a hybrid of machine and organism," as a liberatory metaphor for connections between and among individuals, particularly women, across the lines of traditionally opposed dichotomies—for instance, human/machine, human/animal, male/female—or hypothetically mutually exclusive locations of race, class, and sexuality (149). Haraway's cyborg, by refuting essentialist connections as well as barriers between individuals, allows for the fruitful political alignment of diverse interest groups without insisting upon a monolithic understanding of "Women" or, indeed, the reification of any such identity categories. Her theoretical construction offers the potential for powerful personal and political alliances cemented through "affinity, not identity" (155). For Haraway, the cyborg's technologically penetrated body allows the cyborg to reject Edenic notions of being and femininity, and to turn away from the history of repression that such an origin myth countenances. Rather than being bound in traditionally defined bodies, Haraway's cyborgs are compared to "sunshine" and technology that is "nothing but signals"; they "are ether, quintessence" (153).

In contrast to Haraway's celebration of "ethereal" cyborgs, N. Katherine Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman* emerged as a response to roboticist Hans Moravec's *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (1988). Hayles responds with horror to Moravec's fantasy of "downloading human consciousness into a computer" (1) without discernible changes to subjectivity, and to his and Marvin Minsky's view that the "most important thing about each person is the data, and the programs in the data that are in the brain" (Minsky, qtd Hayles 244). Hayles refuses this technophilic dream with its "fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality" (6) as, in many ways, a nightmare that "privileges informational pattern over material instantiation" (2) and severs the self from both embodiment and experience. In contrast, Hayles insists that "[h]uman mind without human body is not human mind" (244). She calls instead for a concept of identity embedded in both flesh and environment wherein

emergence replaces teleology; reflexive epistemology replaces objectivism; distributed cognition replaces autonomous will; embodiment replaces a body seen as a support system for the mind; and a dynamic partnership between humans and intelligent machines replaces the liberal humanist subject's manifest destiny to dominate and control nature. (288)

In this way, Hayles assails theories of identity that seek to privilege a theoretically autonomous individual whose identity remains untouched in any way by either his embodied experience or his interaction with his environment (the masculine pronoun is intentional, as this kind of individuality tends to be gendered male). Hayles seeks to redefine "human capability" as "*depend[ing]* on the splice" between individual embodied human beings and their environment, including the potential environments posited by high technology, "rather than being imperiled by it" (290; emphasis in original). Hayles's fully realized (post)human beings depend upon their embodied experiences and upon their interaction with their complex and shifting environments to define a subjectivity that extends through their bodies and out into the larger world within which they create a kind of "distributed cognition environment" (290). They are thus not independent of their worlds of flesh and of experience, but inextricably bound to them and defined by them.

On the surface, Haraway's model of the cyborg body as an escape from the repressive essentialism of physically raced and gendered bodies would seem to function at cross-purposes to Hayles's insistence on broadly embodied experience.¹ Haraway's cyborgs embrace the technological in a far less circumspect manner than do Hayles's environmentally-centered "cognitive system[s]" (*How We Became Posthuman* 291). The two theories, however, share a common goal: each focuses on what Hayles calls here "the splice" and what Haraway refers to as "weaving," the fruitful connections made between bodies and identities across categorizations previously thought to be mutually exclusive (170). Both refute the concept of the classic liberal-humanist subject; in Haraway's words, "To be One is to be autonomous, to be powerful, to be God; but to be One is an illusion" (177). In place of this illusion, her cyborgs attempt

to develop new theories of identity that allow for the construction of interpersonal connections and alliances between individuals and groups traditionally separated by essentialist constructions of identity or liberal-humanist subjectivity. Haraway imagines a “postmodern collective and personal self” (163) made possible through the categorical fluidity and mobility that offers the cyborg a powerful role in the formation of “new couplings, [and] new coalitions” (170). Far from being a solitary technological superhero, Haraway’s cyborg is “needy for connection” (151) and in search of “joint kinship” with a wide variety of others (154). In common with Hayles’s posthuman subjects, Haraway’s cyborgs seek a fuller connection with the world in which they are embodied, not an escape from it.

Just as the body of the gendered cyborg in sf is by no means as uniformly liberatory as Haraway suggests in her discussion of the genre’s “theorists for cyborgs”—among whom she includes Tiptree (173)—the experience of fictional characters living on and in the splice also reveals a great deal of complexity. The cyborg, sf’s most liminal creature, offers the promise of being able to speak in multiple tongues, Haraway’s “powerful infidel heteroglossia” (181), but the problem remains of finding individuals with whom she can carry on a conversation, with whom she can build the necessary collective. Her weaving together of categories and collectives is always in danger of failure; the suture may not be made or, if made, it may not hold. By the very nature of her location on the cutting edge, betwixt and between traditional boundaries determining concepts of self and identity, the cyborg is at risk of being cut out and cut off from intercourse, both literal and figurative, with the other selves in her environment. In the stories I will be considering here, Moore’s “No Woman Born” and Tiptree’s “The Girl Who Was Plugged In,” the title characters are biologically female human beings who have been technologically re-embodied and thus placed, literally as well as figuratively, on the splice.² Both characters struggle to construct identities from complex positions that both adhere to and challenge stereotypical gender ideals, and both women express a great deal of concern about the difficulty of developing a personal identity while, in many ways, being excluded from the defining mesh of interpersonal interaction. Each story has been extensively considered in sf criticism, but readings have tended to laud the potential of the cyborg body as represented by Moore’s Deirdre or to condemn the way in which Tiptree’s P. Burke/Delphi is stripped of both her physical form and her political agency; they have tended to neglect the complex social situations determining the two characters and their newly embodied experiences.

Can You Hear Me Now? Moore’s well-known cyborg story “No Woman Born,” published in *Astounding* in 1944, tells the tale of a world-famous entertainer named Deirdre whose mind is incorporated into a machine-body after her physical body is destroyed in a theater fire. A year after the fire, Deirdre is presented to the world in her new form: “a smooth, delicately modeled ovoid for her head,” “[with] arms ... pale shining gold, tapering smoothly ... diminishing

metal bracelets fitting one inside the other" (142, 144). Unlike the machine-women in films such as *Metropolis* (1927) and *The Stepford Wives* (1975), Deirdre is not merely a machine made in the image of the female form; she is a biologically human woman whose mind inhabits a technologically-devised metal body. Much of the drama in the story comes from the contrast between what the male characters expect and demand from her and Deirdre's own personal drives and desires.

Other than Deirdre herself, the only characters in Moore's story are John Harris, Deirdre's former manager, and Maltzer, the male designer of Deirdre's new body. Deirdre's location as a gendered subject is determined through their masculine gaze. The story is told in the third person, but primarily from Harris's point of view. His previous relationship with Deirdre, his memories of her, and his response to her in this new form color the reader's perspective from the very beginning. In fact, Deirdre is constructed for the reader through Harris's thoughts for several pages before she appears in the story.³ In the opening sentence, Deirdre is introduced through Harris's point of view as a dead woman. The reader is told that she "*had* been the loveliest creature whose image ever moved along the airways" and that "the whole world *had* mourned her when she *died* in the theatre fire" (134, 135; emphases mine). Moreover, Harris's invocation of James Stephens's poem about another lost Deirdre, the "Deirdre of the Sorrows" from Irish mythology, locates this story's Deirdre in relationship to unrealizable masculine desire: "*Let all men go apart and mourn together — / No man can ever love her. Not a man / Can dream to be her lover*" (136; emphasis in original). In the poem, the death of a woman is linked inextricably not only to the end of her sexual availability ("*No man can ever love her*"), but also of her potential as an object of masculine fantasy ("*Not a man / Can dream to be her lover*"). Like Stephens, Harris links Deirdre's loss as an object of attainable sexual desire to her death as a subject.⁴ In a similar way, in relating his concerns about Deirdre, Maltzer states that "She isn't female anymore" (160). The sentence itself is curious. How can "she" be designated as "she" if "she" is no longer female? Does her physical divorce from her female body change her into a more extreme form of other, an "it" instead of a "she" or a "he?" Is womanhood dependent upon the existence of sexed flesh? On the desirability or accessibility of this flesh? In considering the success or failure of Deirdre in her new form, Maltzer imagines her as competing against other women for the attention and approval of the world, and in particular for the approval of men (159). He considers her inability to physically contest with other women for masculine attention as equal to her loss of physical sensation: "One of the strongest stimuli to a woman of her type was the knowledge of sex competition. You know how she sparkled when a man came into the room? All that's gone, and it was an essential" (160). Both Harris and Maltzer, as Raffaella Baccolini points out, see Deirdre's "identity [as] associated with [her] beautiful and fragile" and vanished body (141). For Harris, and even for Maltzer, who had not known Deirdre in the flesh, as it were, Deirdre is defined,

in large part, in relation to her potential consumption, visual or otherwise, by men.

Even before her reincarnation in the body of a dancing cyborg, however, Deirdre is clearly already a product of perception and visual consumption. She is constituted in many ways by her celebrity and by the public's knowledge and expectation of her. The world knows Deirdre, both her physical form and her publicly consumable performance of identity: "The whole world knew every smooth motion of her body and every cadence of her voice" (135). Her position as a performer, however, also makes Deirdre uniquely conscious of her identity as a manufactured product. Harris is unaware of the irony in his observation that "they had made no incongruous attempt to give her back the clothing that had once made her famous" (143). While he is referring here to the actual clothing that once draped Deirdre's flesh-and-blood form, later references to humanity as a "garment" suggest that this "clothing" could just as easily be Deirdre's human flesh and form itself (168). As someone who has always been constituted through performance, both formal and informal, Deirdre, in her new manifestation, returns to performance to reconstitute herself after her re-embodiment.⁵

At the close of her return performance before a worldwide television audience, Deirdre laughs, a seemingly natural act that her unnatural form and her careful control over her voice reveal to be a performance in itself. Several times in the story it is pointed out that Deirdre has to pay close attention to herself in order to make her voice sound natural and to prevent the "taint of metal" from entering into it (140, 193). When Harris first hears her speak, her voice is "metallic, without inflection," but once she "trie[s] again" she is able to produce the "old, familiar, sweet huskiness" of her "natural" voice (140). Deirdre's laughter, then, is a conscious action masquerading as an unconscious one. Affected by her laughter, Harris remarks "she was a woman now. Humanity had dropped over her like a tangible garment" (168). While the designers of her new form have not attempted to give her back her distinctive "clothing," she dresses herself in humanity through her own conscious performance of it, through her control of her voice, her laughter, and her physical movement. Similarly, she is able to convince Maltzer and Harris of the perfection of her performance of humanity when she draws attention to the fact of their unquestioning acceptance of her "smoking," in spite of the fact that she has neither mouth nor lungs (184). Deirdre is so certain of her performance of both humanity and femininity that she asserts, "I could play Juliet just as I am now, with a cast of ordinary people, and make the world accept it" (184). Given that most of the female-machines that populate sf literature and film are the actualizations of male conceptions of femininity, Deirdre's performance of both femininity and humanity is especially revelatory. Her success at being a "woman" reveals again the truth of Gloria Steinem's clever one-liner: "I don't mind drag—women have been female impersonators for some time" (qtd Garber 65).⁶ While the male characters in the story have defined Deirdre by her relationship to them and their desire for her, she outdoes them by acting the

expected part flawlessly, despite her new form, forcing them to question the level of their knowledge of her and, by extension, of all women.⁷

Maltzer, the engineer who designs Deirdre's new physical form, approaches her as though she belongs to him. While every member of her audience has consciously or unconsciously constructed Deirdre, and she is eventually revealed to be very conscious of her own self-construction through performance, Maltzer, as the architect of her machine body, appears to believe that his physical construction of her new form amounts to the more holistic construction of Deirdre herself. He self-consciously situates himself as her creator, even, to a degree, as her master. He tells her "I created you, my dear" and assumes that he has both the right and the authority to make decisions for her (177). This is as much a faulty assumption for him as it is for Deirdre's audience. Through much of the story, Maltzer suffers from an exaggerated Frankenstein complex, convinced that he has destroyed Deirdre by saving her life and that he must be punished for his overweening hubris: "I know now that there's only one legitimate way a human being can create life" (179).⁸ Deirdre has to insist repeatedly to both Harris and Maltzer that she is neither their creature nor their possession:

That's another idea you and Maltzer will have to get out of your minds. I don't belong to him.... I suppose he'd be entitled to quite a lot of money for the work he's done on my new body—for the body itself, really, since it's his own machine, in one sense. But he doesn't own it or me. (158)

Maltzer believes that through her loss of sensation Deirdre has been rendered "less than human" (181). He wants to prevent her from performing on stage because he is afraid that such performances will eventually expose her (and, by extension, him as her "creator") to ridicule and opprobrium. Maltzer feels that he has, or rather *should* have, control over Deirdre's actions both because he has physically constituted her body and because he feels he knows better than she does what challenges await her in the world. Maltzer attempts to place himself as both Deirdre's father and lover, inscribing her again within a sphere of masculine control. He believes, falsely, that his act of "creation" in regard to her form entitles him to power over her person. For her part, Deirdre insists that she is "not a Frankenstein monster made out of dead flesh," that Maltzer "didn't create [her] life, ... only preserved it," and that she remains "free-willed and independent" (183). She refuses and refutes Maltzer's claim on her subjectivity by making her own decisions, such as returning to the stage, not only in contradiction of his desires, but also without consulting him.

In considering Moore's cyborg, many critics have emphasized the aspects of the re-embodied Deirdre that make her stronger than either Maltzer or Harris and more than human rather than less. Moore's cyborg has tended to attract hopeful readings of her strength and transcendence, readings that make of "No Woman Born" what Sarah Gamble calls "a rather satisfying female power fantasy" (47). Both Debra Benita Shaw and Brian Attbery, for example, recognize Deirdre as the prescient realization of Donna Haraway's model of cyborg subjectivity. Shaw sees in Deirdre a "new feminist identity" (77) and

Attebery expresses surprise that the "Cyborg Manifesto" does not cite the story as an influence because "Haraway's cyborg is so close to C.L. Moore's vision" (96). Susan Gubar reads Deirdre as a refutation of the categorical underestimation of women's potential; according to Gubar, "Deirdre proves her point that she is not inferior and in the process demonstrates Moore's suspicion that the woman who has been placed below man as sub-human might very well turn out to be above him, superhuman" (21). In contrast to Maltzer's view of Deirdre as "pitifully handicapped" (162), these critics draw attention to the great possibilities afforded Deirdre by her new form. Her dance surpasses the merely human and, after witnessing it, Harris reflects that "it was humanity that seemed, by contrast, jointed and mechanical now" (166). Moreover, Deirdre is able to prevent Maltzer's melodramatic attempted suicide through her more than human capabilities, her new-found talent for motion that "negated time and destroyed space" (186), and she herself declares that "I have found no limit yet to the strength I can put forward if I try" (189). While Maltzer wonders if Deirdre has been resurrected as something less than human, she announces that she is very likely "superhuman" (192). Raffaella Baccolini argues that her actions reveal Deirdre to be "smarter and stronger than Maltzer himself" (150). While these readings celebrate Deirdre's power and ascendance, however, it is at the cost of undervaluing the character's own uncertainty and professed loneliness. She *is* indeed superhuman when the story closes, but she finds her position isolating. Power without community is not satisfying for her. She has the form of Haraway's cyborg, but not the same ability to forge alliances. Defined by her embodiment, she is cut off from realizing her full potential.

In contextualizing her new embodiment, Deirdre relates her metallic form to other machines and vessels—such as ships, planes, and even guns—that "men depend on for their lives": "what a tremendous force the human ego really is.... It does instill its own force into inanimate objects and they take on a personality of their own" (149). Of course, Deirdre is not hoping for her new body to take on a personality of its own, but for it to become imbued with her own personality. As Katherine Hayles suggests, however, Deirdre is subject to being shaped and changed by her form as well. The narrator pauses the story in a parenthetical moment that is attributable to neither Deirdre nor Harris:

(And providing, of course, that the mind inside the metal did not veer from its inherited humanity as the years went by. A dweller in a house may impress his personality upon its walls, but subtly the walls, too, may impress their own shape upon the ego of the man. Neither of them [Harris nor Deirdre] thought of that at the time.) (151-52)

These lines, intimating that this notion is not entertained "at the time," imply that one, if not both, of these characters will later have a reason to consider such a possibility. This foreboding grammatical construction recurs later when the narrator says of Harris: "He did not wonder, *now*, if it [Deirdre's personality] were real. Later he would think again that it might be only a disguise, something like a garment she had put off with her lost humanity, to wear again only when she chose" (184; emphasis mine). In both narrative asides, the reader is given

a glimpse of a future shift in Deirdre's story, a look into a time in which not only her humanity and femininity will appear to be performances to those around her, but her very personality will come into question. The reader is forced to consider the ways in which Deirdre's embodied experiences in this unfamiliar form will shape and transform her.

It is significant that the reader gets only the barest glimpse into the experience Deirdre has of her own reincarnation. A consumable product of packaging and performance, both before and after her rebirth, Deirdre is always at a remove from the reader; we construct her to conform to our desires in the same way that both Harris and Maltzer do.⁹ At a few points in the story, however, Deirdre expresses her own anxiety about her new position as a cyborg. This anxiety is clearly articulated about the physical—"I wonder, I wonder if in time I'll forget what flesh felt like—my own flesh, when I touched it like this—and the metal against the metal will be so much the same I'll never even notice" (150). Yet it achieves its most poignant expression in regard to emotional connection and personal intercourse. As one of a kind, Deirdre fears that she will be unable to enter into discourse with an equal and that this will create a barrier between her and the rest of humanity that can only be partially ameliorated through performance: "I'm afraid. It isn't unhappiness, Maltzer—it's fear. I don't want to draw so far away from the human race. I wish I needn't. That's why I'm going back on the stage—to keep in touch with them while I can. But I wish there could be others like me. I'm ... I'm lonely" (192).

Deirdre's loneliness is a bitter companion to her new capabilities. While she recognizes the superhuman potential of her new incarnation, Deirdre also mourns that as a singular being she is self-constituted and alone. She returns to the stage in order to be made human through her vicarious contact with the audience and her performance of both gender and humanity, but she is unable to connect personally with other individuals like herself, as none currently exist.¹⁰ Further, in both Deirdre's and Maltzer's estimation, the success of her re-embodiment is "an accident" and there are unlikely ever to be any others like her (191). She has been placed outside of the defining and sustaining social mesh and she can no longer participate in a communal creation of identity. In her new form, Deirdre is able to resist external imposition of identity by masculine desire, but finds she is isolated by her very autonomy. Like Frankenstein's creature, she needs a companion to help reaffirm her humanity. She wants to be part of a dialogue that constructs and reconstructs identity constantly through interpersonal interaction, but is denied this interaction because of her singularity. She recognizes the great potential of her cyborg form, but likens herself to the mythical phoenix who "always came out of the fire perfect" but which had to reproduce that way "because there was only one" (192). Somewhere in the liminal space between human and machine, Deirdre has become, against her will, One.¹¹

A Real Fake Life. Nearly three decades after C.L. Moore's story first appeared, James Tiptree, Jr.'s 1973 Hugo Award-winning novella, "The Girl Who was Plugged In," featured another female character, Philadelphia Burke, who is reincarnated through technological means. While Deirdre's new form allows her to elude death, P. Burke's new "Delphi body," with its stereotyped feminine perfection, allows her to escape from her old form and its largely negative experiences in the world. She is allowed to become someone else, someone more acceptable, desirable, and attractive in the eyes of the world. In an interesting parallel, through the pseudonym of James Tiptree, Jr., Alice Sheldon created "the attractive figure" of a male author through whom she interacted with the "predominantly male world of science fiction" for about a decade until being unmasked against her will (Sheldon 52). Just as P. Burke is the animating spirit of Delphi, so "an old lady in Virginia" breathed life into Tiptree (Sheldon 52). "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" is a tale of transformation and masks, the story of a girl who is not who she seems to be, written by an author who was not exactly who "he" seemed to be.

Philadelphia Burke's experience of cyborg embodiment is almost precisely the reverse of Deirdre's. Deirdre finds that as a cyborg she has unlimited power and potential, but that she has also been cut off from the rest of humanity. Conversely, when P. Burke is cybernetically re-embodied in the perfect-girl form of Delphi, she cedes her power and agency to others but, for the first time in her life, is able to connect and interact with the human beings around her. Much of this difference is attributable to the extreme disparity in the lives lived by the characters prior to their re-embodiments. Before her reincarnation, P. Burke was terribly deformed and barred from the social networks that help constitute identity, while Deirdre had always been a master of those networks. P. Burke is excluded from the human and the female, not biologically, but through the intercession of her grotesquely "inhuman" form. She is shunned and maltreated by other human beings. As someone who has been conceptually located outside the category of the human, she is free to be abused, injured, and ignored. She is a perfect subject for corporate control because she is not tied to her world through bonds of love or friendship. Only when embodied as Delphi is P. Burke finally recognized and accepted as human by others. Only in her physically acceptable "girl body" is she welcomed into the social network, allowed to develop relationships, and given the opportunity to experience emotions other than pain and isolation. While critics such as Scott Bukatman and Veronica Hollinger have focused extensively on the degree to which P. Burke cedes her agency and is used by the corporation that provides her with her Delphi-body, not a great deal has been written exploring how the life she is able to live while embodied in this way is, in many ways, more "human" than the life she has lived in her own body. For P. Burke the only real life is her fake one.

As in "No Woman Born," the reader is separated from the story's primary character through the male gaze of the narrator. An unnamed tertiary player in the story, the "sharp faced lad," narrates the tale of a massively disfigured woman, P. Burke, who is remotely re-embodied as Delphi, a stereotypically

idealized form of the female body, in return for serving as a commercial spokeswoman for a corporation in the ad-free near future. Further, the story is told by the “sharp faced lad” (an unwilling time traveler) to an unidentified but presumably male “you” living in the early 1970s, the “zombie” and “doubleknit dummy” of the tale’s opening paragraph (Tiptree 397).¹² This male listener steps in between the story and its reader, a reader who is, like the listener, more than likely also a young male (considering the general, or at least assumed, makeup of sf fandom when the story was published in 1973). Of course, the “sharp faced lad” places the reader at yet another stage of remove from P. Burke’s experiences. P. Burke’s tale is always refracted through the male gaze. Her story is told by a man to a man, and the text itself is read by a third actor who is also, as above, most probably male.¹³ This layered form of address allows Tiptree to draw attention to her readers’ expectations and desires in consuming both the story and P. Burke’s nature as a woman and an avatar of femininity.

The narrator often chastises the listener, in lieu of the reader, for his narrative desires and his expectations of a particular kind of story with a particular kind of resolution. This is especially evident in an early scene in which P. Burke attempts suicide. After her elaborate and graphic introduction as “the ugly of the world ... [a] tall monument to pituitary dystrophy,”¹⁴ P. Burke takes a seat on a park bench, and “after that nothing at all happens except a few furtive hand-mouth gestures which don’t even interest her benchmates. But you’re curious about the city? So ordinary after all, in the FUTURE?” (398). What has happened here in these “few furtive hand-mouth gestures” is that P. Burke has taken pills in an attempt to end her life. This attempted suicide is what does not interest those around her, *including* the listener, and, by implication, the reader as well, who would much prefer to hear about the city of the future than about this deformed woman. Much as in the final scenes of *Madame Bovary*, the reader’s attention is drawn away from the main character’s crucial attempt to kill herself. It is more than a page after P. Burke has swallowed the pills that the narrative returns to her. The listener and, through him, the reader are implicated in this lack of focus. Three times in the space of this intervening page, the narrator points out that we are supposed to be “watching that girl” and yet each time the attention is shifted to a description of the world of the future as if in response to the listener’s/reader’s desires (309). We as the readers of the story are accused of not wanting to watch P. Burke, of not being interested in her story. P. Burke is positioned as being beneath the level of the reader’s interest, just as her physical deformities place her outside of the social sphere within her own world. We too are guilty of ignoring and excluding her.

Once the reader does become involved in P. Burke’s story, he or she is accused, once again through the use of the listener, of attempting to force the narrative into the shape of familiar myths and fairytales. Just as Delphi’s lover Paul later mythologizes her as a living, breathing embodiment of the bird-girl Rima in W.H. Hudson’s Amazonian romance *Green Mansions* (1904), the listener is accused of initially expecting the story to be a retelling of Pygmalion,

Cinderella, or “The Ugly Duckling,” and finally expecting it to be a tale of love conquering all. After her appropriation by GTX and following upon her legal and metaphorical “death,” P. Burke is carefully tended and restored to full health. At this point, Tiptree lampoons the reader’s expectations, which have been formed by years of exposure to rags-to-riches and paupers-to-princesses stories: “And here is our girl, looking—If possible, worse than before. (You thought this was Cinderella transistorized?)” (401). Despite the narrator’s ridicule, however, the story *is* in many ways “Cinderella transistorized.” P. Burke does go through the traditional “charm course” of this kind of story, learning “How to walk, sit, eat, speak, blow her nose, how to stumble, to urinate, to hiccup—DELICIOUSLY,” but the “whole new you” that emerges is more than merely metaphorical, her own body retrained; instead it is physical, in the form of the laboratory-grown “perfect girl-body” that comes to be known as Delphi (402-404).

Delphi, like the robotic Stepford wives, is a walking advertisement for stereotyped notions of femininity. The narrator’s attention to the Delphi body, and hence the reader’s attention to it, is intensive and detailed in contrast to the repeated diversion of attention that occurs in the introduction of P. Burke’s own grotesque form. In the space of a page, Delphi is presented to the reader as “a small mound of silk,” “the darlingest girl child you’ve ever seen,” “porno for angels,” “kitten,” “elf,” and “honey pot” (403-404). Nothing that she does in this “sweet little body” is too insignificant for mention (404). While P. Burke’s deformity places her outside of human notice because it locates her outside femininity, Delphi’s physical adherence to cultural standards of female beauty guarantees that her body will be one that is noticed. If, as Veronica Hollinger has argued, P. Burke’s body is “precisely the body that does *not* matter,” then Delphi’s body is one defined, almost exclusively, by the degree to which it *does* matter and by its ability to command attention (206; emphasis in original).¹⁵ Indeed, GTX has grown the Delphi body in order to use it as a spokeswoman for the products of its clients. Since direct advertising is illegal in this future world, GTX has resorted to subverting anti-marketing laws through the use of advertising by example. Delphi is not only the ideal form of femininity, but she also participates in the production of cultural norms and ideals by demonstrating the “best” clothing to wear, activities to pursue, and products to use. Through its consumption of Delphi as an idealized feminine figure, the public learns how and what to consume, who and what to desire.

In *Terminal Identity*, Scott Bukatman draws attention to the “careful ambiguity” in the title of Tiptree’s story “as to whether ‘the girl’ has plugged *herself* in or whether she has been plugged in by others” (319; emphasis in original). He reads this as a demonstration of P. Burke’s “limited agency” in contrast to Case, the male protagonist of William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984), who appears able to choose his own level of cyborg connectivity (319).¹⁶ The ambiguity of Tiptree’s title, however, goes even further than Bukatman’s reading suggests. Not only is it unclear who has plugged this girl in, it is also unclear *who* this girl is. Although P. Burke is consistently referred to in the

story as “our girl,” it is also pointed out that she is “about as far as you can get from the concept *girl*” (410; emphasis in original). As described above, however, Delphi is the concept girl made flesh. Prior to her animation and individualization through her connection with P. Burke, Delphi is a platonic ideal; she is beauty and form lacking identity. The “girl” of Tiptree’s title could just as easily be Delphi as P. Burke. The narrator tells us that Delphi is “a girl, a real live girl with her brain in an unusual place” and she is clearly plugged into P. Burke quite as much as P. Burke is plugged into her (408). Being integrated into the system matrix allows P. Burke to become Delphi and finally participate in the category of “girlhood,” whether she plugs herself in or is plugged in by others. Being plugged in to each other gives Delphi life and P. Burke a social life.

Critical analysis of Tiptree’s story has often resorted to reading P. Burke as victim. It is tempting to suggest, as Hollinger does, that “the tragedy at the heart of ‘The Girl Who Was Plugged In’ [is] P. Burke’s confusion of herself as actor with Delphi as role” (207). To choose this reading, however, is to radically misrepresent both the nature of the relationship between P. Burke and Delphi and between P. Burke and her world. P. Burke is in many ways constituted by her existence in the Delphi body, as her re-embodiment reshapes her identity. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler refers to gendered identity as “a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (26). P. Burke’s performance of Delphi constitutes her as a gendered human subject. In many ways, she does not exist apart from her performance of this role. In *Terminal Identity*, Bukatman goes so far as to deem P. Burke a “pathetic and even stupid character” (319). He contrasts the “bodiless exultation” experienced by Case in *Neuromancer* with P. Burke’s experience, noting that “the reader is always aware of Burke’s deformed flesh hovering just out of view” (319). What is crucial, however, is that when embodied as Delphi, P. Burke is not aware of her own malformed and abused flesh and neither are the individuals with whom she comes into contact. Jacking in gives Case access to computer networks; plugging in gives P. Burke access to social networks. The exultation she experiences as Delphi is most definitely embodied rather than bodiless, but it is no less real on this account.

The integration of P. Burke with the Delphi body speaks to both Haraway’s cyborg and Hayles’s concept of embedded embodiment. P. Burke’s connection into the system matrix that allows her to operate the cyborg body, to become Delphi, from afar, is precisely the kind of “disturbingly and pleasurably tight coupling” between flesh and technology that Haraway describes in her manifesto (152). When P. Burke connects to the system that allows her to inhabit and become Delphi, the story’s language is explicitly and bluntly sexual: “Our girl shucks her shift and walks into it bare, totally unembarrassed. *Eager*. She settles in face-forward, butting jacks into sockets” (402; emphasis in original). The language here is neither romantic nor sensual. P. Burke’s union with Delphi is one of physical need and primal urgency. In Hayles’s terms, the connection between P. Burke and the Delphi body is the necessary splice; it is the

interaction between flesh and technology that renders each more than they were before.¹⁷ This splice, however, is not clean. It is polluted by GTX's ownership of the Delphi body and control over P. Burke's agency. Their control functions as a limitation on the "realness" of her experience as Delphi. The Delphi body has very little sense of touch and "almost no sense of taste or smell. They explained about that: only so much bandwidth. You don't have to taste a suncar, do you?" (411). Thus, although her experiences as Delphi allow her to enter into human intercourse, the body is not a sensual one. As a corporate advertising tool, her sensation is not a priority. As Delphi, P. Burke is prevented from feeling physically what she is finally given the opportunity to feel emotionally. In the end, both bodies represent a lack to her, and the splice between the two is not quite wholeness.

"The Girl Who Was Plugged In" refuses reductions of Philadelphia Burke's experiences to either that of a Cinderella story or a tale of pure victimization. P. Burke is not simply the heart of gold beneath a false exterior or the innocent wronged. While her Delphi body puts her in the compromised position of selling femininity and its accoutrements as a particular kind of lifestyle, it also allows her the opportunity to experience the full range of human emotion and to engage in the kind of real human interactions that allow a person to grow into her own identity. In her mangled body that is "about as far as you can get from the concept *girl*," P. Burke is denied the kind of interactions through which agents are able to make themselves into individual human beings (410; emphasis in original). She is "othered" in an extreme sense. If human identity is conferred through inclusion, through empathetic recognition by others of one's sameness, P. Burke in these early scenes is not truly human. Her cyborg identity as Delphi is for her both freedom and cage. It allows her to be human for the first time in her life, but it simultaneously blocks her away from the consummation of her now fledging human desire. She finally has access to the possibilities of being human, but she has bartered away her agency for that access. What Bukatman misses in ridiculing P. Burke as a stupid character is that she is little more than a child. P. Burke's existence as Delphi sets off a long delayed process of human emotional growth. As Delphi, she finally participates in the social mesh that is so determining to the nature of the human: "with no more to do than adorn herself and play with toys and attend revels and greet her friends—her, P. Burke, having friends!" (414). If she is intoxicated by her experiences, it is only because they are so unfamiliar. Her involvement and interactions with Paul make a woman out of her in that they humanize her. It is not the romantic relationship that is necessary to this act of creation, but the fact of interaction, of interpersonal contact. Even once she has found love with Paul, P. Burke's goal is not to be loved without the intermediary of her Delphi flesh, but "*to become Delphi*" (421; emphasis in original). P. Burke longs to become human, and to experience those things that human beings experience. That she has always been biologically human demonstrates the insufficiency of that qualification.

The conclusion of "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" holds steadfastly to the realistic cynicism that has colored the story throughout. Tiptree continues to subvert the reader's desires in such a way as to force a confrontation with the very nature of those desires. Various conventional happy endings are offered by the narrator and then swiftly retracted: perhaps Paul will love P. Burke despite her form or perhaps P. Burke will succeed in merging with Delphi through the sheer force of her will and the power of her love. After all, if Pinocchio can become a real boy, why shouldn't P. Burke combine with Delphi to become a single whole and real girl? This last is held out as tantalizingly possible, as Delphi murmurs in her sleep while "unplugged" and weeps impossible tears. P. Burke pursues this option relentlessly, refusing to eat and transforming her belief in the potential for a technological fusion of herself and Delphi into a mad sort of religion: "P. Burke is seeing Heaven on the far side of death, too. Heaven is spelled P-a-u-l, but the idea's the same *I will die and be born again in Delphi*" (427; emphasis in original). P. Burke becomes determined to actualize her metaphorical rebirth in Delphi. The story even allows a moment for this "happy" ending to come to near fruition. After Paul reacts in horror at the sight of the "gaunt she-golem flab-naked" who is P. Burke—who he believes, ironically, to have some sort of monstrous control over the woman he loves and whom he accidentally kills—the story reaches a false conclusion with the line "Now of course Delphi is dead too" (431-32). But she is not. For nearly two pages it seems that P. Burke has been successful in her attempt to merge spiritually with the remotely-controlled Delphi body. Delphi walks and speaks for a few precious reader-taunting minutes, before expiring as well. P. Burke's story ends with the words "The end, really," but the narrative itself continues for another page while the narrator continues to mock the expectations of both his listener and the implied reader, promising, finally and ironically, "a great future there" (433, 434).

Defining the human on the basis of the body excludes as often as it includes. The grotesque or extraordinary body is placed out of reach, or, in the case of P. Burke, out of touch, outside the social mesh and alone. P. Burke is starved for human touch, human contact, in her grotesquely misshapen body. Ironically, this remains the case in large part when she animates the physically numb Delphi body. As Delphi, P. Burke is finally allowed to interact with other human beings as a human being, but her body remains insensible to human touch. When her interactions with Paul teach her, for the first time in her life, to crave this contact, she is still denied it. Even when sexual interaction is no longer synonymous with pain, pleasure is still out of her reach as the Delphi body is as unfeeling as that of a Stepford wife's. The one person who truly "loves" P. Burke is not, sadly, Paul, but the lab technician who loves her not as a human being, but as "the greatest cybersystem" that he has ever had the privilege of working with (433). This kind of "love," however, does not open any doors to human development or interaction. P. Burke is both liberated and trapped by her Delphi body. Delphi's perfect form allows her to experience humanity and all the faults that mortals are heir to for the first time, but in its mediated and

controlled nature prevents her from achieving true freedom, a freedom not defined by autonomous subjectivity, but by the dearer bonds of love and companionship.

Humanity as the Necessary Social Performance. As a cyborg, Moore's Deirdre is distanced from the human because of her singularity; without an equal companion she is forced into a kind of autonomous subjecthood that she does not desire. For P. Burke, however, cyborg re-embodiment serves to partially mend the breach between humanity and her previously "monstrous" inhuman self. These cyborg identities, however, are always marked by their singularity and that singularity has as its by-product a deep-seated loneliness that these characters cannot dispel, despite their newfound power and potential. As P. Burke is told, "Nobody's like you, buttons" (413). Haraway argues that this outsider quality, is, in part, what cyborg identities are designed to contend with; they offer not only new forms of personal identity but new structures for community.¹⁸ Successfully building these communities, however, is not an uncomplicated undertaking.

Humanity is always already a construction, "disassembled and reassembled," like Haraway's cyborg, from the parts at hand—most crucially, from the other beings in our worlds with their own partial and fractured identities (Haraway 163). This concept of the human takes account of its embedded nature, not only in the body, but also in the social sphere, and is sensitive to the reality that "technology cannot replace the personal bonds that tie humans to humans, humans to animals, and humans to their own senses" (Hayles 278). In such a crucible of intermeshed social performances, identities are formed and reformed and we never simply *are*, but are always in the process of becoming human.

Let me repeat here the epigraph to this essay, the exhortation to Victor Frankenstein by his creature:

My vices are the children of a forced solitude that I abhor; and my virtues will necessarily arise when I live in communion with an equal. I shall feel the affections of a sensitive being, and become linked to the chain of existence and events, from which I am now excluded. (Shelley 143)

Haraway reads this request as a call for "a restoration of the garden; that is, through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate," but this is not the only possible reading (151).¹⁹ Alone, isolated, monstrous, the creature looks to find a companion, an "equal" with whom to share the burden of self-constitution. Humanity, much like gender, is a doing, not a being. It is a performance that must be repeatedly enacted and received. Haraway refers to writers of science fiction as "theorists for cyborgs" (173). As theorists for cyborg identity, both C.L. Moore and James Tiptree, Jr. show that it is not enough simply to escape our old bodies nor to cast off our prescribed gender identities. Cyborg identity cannot simply be about escape or "bodiless exaltation"; it must also be concerned with the bonds that tie individuals to one another and the necessary connections that define aligned networks and communities. Autonomy for the cyborg is both impossible and insufficient. In our flight from the constrictions

of autonomous liberal subjectivity, it is very important, even crucial, that we do not go alone. In seeking to “plug in” to as yet untapped power and potential, we cannot forget the importance of connection.

NOTES

1. Although Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman* includes several references to Haraway's cyborg, these references are surprisingly brief and the relationship between the two theories is never fully fleshed out.

2. I do not consider it extensively here, but it seems significant that while Moore's and Tiptree's careers were separated by decades, both were women writing in what remains, for the most part, a predominantly male genre. Further, each wrote under a name that invited an interpretation of the author as male. Their representations of life on the splice in the form of their cyborg women also seem to speak to their own location as female authors writing under the popular presumption of masculinity. Indeed, the “outing” of Alice B. Sheldon as the female body behind the “ineluctably masculine” (Silverberg xii) writing of James Tiptree, Jr. remains one of sf's minor scandals.

3. In *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction*, Brian Attbery develops the role played by Harris in the constitution of Deirdre's identity in more detail than I do here. He points out how the reader's initial encounter with Deirdre is repeatedly delayed, so that by the time she actually appears in the story, “we have already met her several times in Harris's imagination: as nostalgic memory, as ambulatory answering machine, as seductive whisperer, as dancer transcending her own imperfections, as ‘lurching robot’” (Attbery 93). Our understanding of Deirdre is always colored by the identities that Harris prescribes for her even in her absence.

4. The lines that open Stephens's poem, which Moore does not include, situate Deirdre as a fantasy for men only: “Do not let any woman read this verse; / It is for men; and after them their sons / And their sons' sons” (430).

5. In *Frankenstein's Daughters*, Jane Donawerth further develops the concept of “woman-as-machine-as-entertainer” in the story, suggesting that it imperils heteronormativity and masculine control over the female body. She points out how Deirdre's “convincing performance of the motions of desire and her laughter at the men's acceptance of the illusion force the men to the brink of questioning whether all women are merely enacting desire, whether the heterosexuality they depend on as natural is really performance” (63).

6. Veronica Hollinger considers both “No Woman Born” and “The Girl Who Was Plugged in” as stories about “femininity as a masquerade” (203). She points out how Harris's and Maltzer's anxieties about Deirdre's nature are precipitated not by the failure of her performance of femininity, but by its success and the consequent denaturalization of gender roles (204).

7. Despina Kakoudaki explores how Deirdre's command of the “prearranged motions, set intimacies, and sexy ambiance” of desire reveals a “performative representation of women [that] depends not on the body but upon enforced performances of femininity” (178).

8. Susan Gubar, Raffaella Baccolini, Sarah Gamble, and Jane Donawerth all explore the Frankenstein theme in “No Woman Born” more fully in their work.

9. Perhaps this is why critics are so eager to elide this element of the story in favor of the more transcendent reading.

10. One reading I want to resist is the imposition of a heteronormative understanding of Deirdre's loneliness as a character. Nothing in Deirdre's comments suggest that she

is mourning her inability to connect with a male lover. Such a reading would serve to validate not only Maltzer's comments about sexual competition but also Harris's citation of Stephens's poem "Deirdre," which emphasizes the inaccessibility of the dead woman to male desire. I read Deirdre's loneliness as far more general and personal. She is not expressing desire for a man to be her mate, but longing for a companion with whom she can communicate as an equal.

11. Sarah Gamble reads this ending as an evasion on Moore's part of her own powerful themes (46). Jane Donawerth believes that it reflects the sexual politics of Deirdre's world. Since Deirdre, like all women, is "not accepted by the men as human," much like all women she remains "alienated from those with whom she would like a partnership" (Donawerth 63).

12. In *Terminal Identity*, Scott Bukatman offers a reading of how Tiptree uses the "you" of the story's address to position her "ideal reader" in close proximity with her presumed actual readers (317).

13. On a personal note, I assigned this story to a class of students who did not know that James Tiptree, Jr. was a pseudonym for a female author. A discussion of the author's attitude toward women was initiated by the students and resulted in charges of misogyny. When I "revealed" the author's "true" identity, the discussion turned to the ways in which feminism was implicit in the story's apparent misogyny. This anecdote points out the degree to which the reader's conceptions about an author's gendered identity contribute to the reading and understanding of that author's texts. A male James Tiptree, Jr. was understood by my students to be a misogynist who believed the things his characters expressed about the nature of femininity; a female Tiptree was understood to be questioning those beliefs. The assumption of the author's gender can greatly affect the reader of a story, a factor that Tiptree considered when she withdrew her short story "The Women Men Don't See" from consideration for a Hugo: "I thought too many women were rewarding a man for being so insightful" (Sheldon 53).

For fuller details about Tiptree's life and career, see Julie Phillips's new biography, *James Tiptree, Jr.: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon* (reviewed in this issue).

14. See Heather Hicks's "Whatever It Is That She's Since Become" for a more detailed consideration of P. Burke's body in the context of the female grotesque.

15. Hollinger reads Tiptree's story in the context of Judith Butler's queer-theoretical *Bodies That Matter*. While we each draw attention to how "gender definitions exclude as often as they include," Hollinger's work suggests it is "the cultural ideal of perfect femininity that [P. Burke] has been taught to worship" and that she covets in desiring union with the Delphi-body (206). I argue here that it is the *access* offered by this body that P. Burke desires as she herself seems somewhat indifferent to the actual physical form. She fails to notice that the Delphi body is insensate in general and even has "dead" spots in certain places where she feels nothing at all (not noticing a hand on her breast, etc.). Rather than basking in any kind of sensuality through this new form, P. Burke exalts in finally plugging in to a social network.

16. In fact, Case's own degree of agency is questionable. Gibson uses the language of addiction to describe Case's almost-physical need to "jack in" to the "bodilessness" of cyberspace. The "high" he gets from this connectivity seems akin to his other more conventional addictions.

17. In her article "Escape and Constraint," Hayles writes of Tiptree's story: "Indeed, in some respects Delphi lives a more 'real' life than P. Burke in her secret niche within the research complex, for Delphi moves in a socially constructed space" (251).

18. Moore's Deirdre and Tiptree's P. Burke might be considered the matrilineal antecedents of the technologically-mediated bodies of the better known female cyborgs

in William Gibson's cyberpunk fiction. Lise in "The Winter Market" is the character perhaps most clearly related to her forebears. Like Delphi, she is an artist, and as with P. Burke, her physical deformity (a disease has robbed her of the ability to move or feel sensation) separates her from the rest of human society. She hungers for physical connection but can only "watch" even those encounters that include her own body. Lise, "dead" as the story begins, has had her mind scanned into the ether. The story's main character is anticipating a call from this Lise, unsure whether she is human or in her new form. The question of Lise's humanity is never answered and the tension never dispelled, because the call never comes. Lise remains at a remove from both characters and the reader. Gibson's best-known female character, *Neuromancer's* Molly, however, uses her cybernetic alterations to *repel* connection with others. Her nails are intended as weapons and the mirrored lenses over her eyes prevent others from making personal contact with her. Her body is represented as a tool which either she or others can use (she rents it out sexually, minus her consciousness, in order to pay for her cybernetic alterations, and allows other characters to "jack into" her body and "ride" it in the course of their jobs). Unlike either Deirdre or P. Burke, Molly seems to relish her singularity and, to a degree, the chance to opt out of the human and to escape often painful interpersonal connections.

19. Indeed, the creature's appeal to Frankenstein comes after all other attempts at finding non-sexual companionship among human beings have failed.

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ABSTRACT

C.L. Moore's "No Woman Born" and James Tiptree Jr.'s "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" both present images of women who are technologically reincarnated, but the transcendence of the limitations of gendered human existence that is associated with the figure of the cyborg in Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" is flawed in these stories by the abiding loneliness of their cyborg protagonists and the inability of these characters to achieve interpersonal connection. Previous readings of the stories have focused on the degrees of agency assigned to the figure of the female cyborg. In contrast, this essay examines the figure of the cyborg in terms of her ability or inability to form alliances and relationships with others.