TECHNOLOGY AND THE VULNERABLE BODY IN FEMINIST POST-CYBERPUNK SF
BLEEDING CHROME:
TECHNOLOGY AND THE VULNERABLE BODY IN
FEMINIST POST-CYBERPUNK SCIENCE FICTION

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A Thesis
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

McMaster University
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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (2010) McMaster University
(English) Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: Bleeding Chrome: Technology and the Vulnerable Body in Feminist Post-Cyberpunk Science Fiction

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NUMBER OF PAGES: v, 225
ABSTRACT

Emerging out of feminist and cyberpunk science fiction of the 1980s, feminist post-cyberpunk SF is a subgenre that is rife with anxieties over novel technologies (such as cloning, genetically modified foods, nanotechnology, virtual reality, telepresence, and artificial intelligence), as they infiltrate daily life and threaten to transform the definition of human being. In this project, Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*, Nalo Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber*, Tricia Sullivan’s *Maul*, and Laura Mixon’s *Proxies* are read as indicative examples of feminist post-cyberpunk, as they all give voice to the increasing shared cultural preoccupation with technology and the body. The thesis is particularly interested in the way these texts expose – and insist upon – the vulnerability of the fleshy body, rather than perpetuate notions of technophilia and technological transcendence. Drawing on the (corporeal) feminist theory of Elizabeth Grosz and Margrit Shildrick (in particular her theorization of the vulnerable body), and on the feminist posthumanist work of N. Katherine Hayles and Elaine Graham, this thesis focuses attention on issues of technological embodiment and the changing definition of what constitutes human corporeal experience and embodiment. Ultimately, the thesis proposes that feminist post-cyberpunk condemns the exploitation and control of, what Shildrick terms, the “visibly vulnerable” body and insists on recognizing the vulnerability of the flesh as a defining trait of what constitutes human being.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I want to thank my three amazing committee members: Dr. Catherine Grisé, Dr. Sarah Brophy, and Dr. Janice Hladki.

Cathy, I appreciate all of your support, both professional and personal, over the past several years and offering me the chance to get to know both you and your family. You made academia feel a lot less lonely!

Sarah, thanks for being a constant and faithful mentor to me (for 7 years!). Your keen eye for editing and generous, insightful feedback helped shape this project to something worth sharing.

Janice, we have worked together for my entire Ph.D. and the lessons I have learned from you go far beyond the professional. I deeply appreciate your commitment to equality and compassion (both in and out of academia) and your unrelenting belief and support in me.

Lastly, I owe great thanks and love to my partner, Andrew J. Holden. You are my greatest source of strength and courage. Without your love and dogged encouragement, I simply would not have made it through these past 5 years so well. We are both a little worse for the wear after all of our trials, but I take such comfort in knowing that wherever we end up in life, we will be there together.
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CHAPTER ONE

Bleeding Chrome: Reading the Body in Feminist Post-Cyberpunk

The matrix folds itself around me like an origami trick. And the loft smells of sweat and burning circuitry. I thought I heard Chrome scream, a raw metal sound, but I couldn’t have. (Gibson, “Burning Chrome” 200)

Not only is my own unity of being uncertain, but what has seemed intolerable, even unthinkable, is precisely constitutive of my self. The notion of an irreducible vulnerability as the necessary condition of a fully corporeal becoming – of my self and always with others – shatters the ideal of the self’s clean and proper body; and it calls finally for the willingness to engage in an ethics of risk. (Shildrick, Embodying the Monster 86)

Admission one: I am a newcomer to the world of science fiction. It was just over three years ago when I read my first science fiction novel, Neuromancer by William Gibson. Up until that time, my exposure to science fiction was primarily through blockbuster movies and a handful of television series. Then, while watching an old episode of Star Trek: The Next Generation, I suddenly decided to turn my academic attention to the vast body of science fiction literature. In episode “11001001,” the Enterprise crew encounters an alien species, the Binars, who exclusively use binary code to communicate between themselves and their technology. Oddly enough, the Binars are a genderless species as their reproduction, like their communication, mimics that of the asexual computer. I began to wonder about the intersection of gender and technology in the Star Trek universe and the ways in which it reflects our cultural preoccupations and anxieties. The proverbial lightning struck and, half way through my PhD program,
I changed my thesis topic and started reading all the science fiction that I could get my hands on.

Admission two: This thesis has been three years in the making. It might have been four, but I lost an entire year to illness so I do not like counting that one. Of the three years that I claim as productive, I have spent more than half of that time coping with persistent health problems. There have been countless days, weeks, and months spent in pain and frustration. The temptation to give up and stop my research and writing has always been present. I have become wary of academia, an institution that I observe all too often ignores the suffering of bodies. I have hated not having the concentration to write and meet my deadlines. I have resented spending my pain-free time writing instead of enjoying other aspects of my life. So what has saved this project from the dustbin of unfinished dissertations? In addition to the unfailing support and encouragement of my supervisory committee and my family and friends, it has been my new found love for science fiction. I can honestly say that science fiction – in particular, feminist science fiction — has rekindled my love of reading, sparked my imagination, and perhaps most important, faithfully kept me company during all those hours when I could do nothing else but read. I am writing this thesis as a testament to why science fiction matters, both for myself and for society at large. When all the aliens go home and the technology finally breaks down, we are left with only our vulnerable bodies to comfort and protect. Ultimately, the best science fiction
explores what it means to be human, and in this thesis I want to uncover both the horror and the hope inherent in such critical introspection.

Emerging out of feminist and cyberpunk science fiction of the 1980s, feminist post-cyberpunk SF\(^1\) is rife with anxieties over novel technologies – cloning, genetically modified foods, nanotechnology, virtual reality, telepresence, and artificial intelligence to name a few – as they infiltrate daily life and threaten to transform the definition of human being. In this project, I read the ways in which Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*, Nalo Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber*, Tricia Sullivan’s *Maul*, and Laura Mixon’s *Proxies* all give voice to the increasing shared cultural preoccupation with technology and the body. I am particularly interested in the way these texts expose – and insist upon – the vulnerability of the fleshy body, rather than perpetuate notions of technophilia and technological transcendence. Feminist post-cyberpunk challenges the reader’s perceptions of what it means to be human, asking: What constitutes human being? Can individual subjectivity be technologically mediated (in virtual environments, for instance) and still be considered human? What happens to corporeal boundaries when technology becomes part of the body? How do different kinds of bodies – gendered, raced, classed, and abled – interface with technology and to what ends?

\(^1\) Throughout this thesis, I will be using the abbreviation of SF for science fiction. As Brian Attebery wryly notes in *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction*: “One can easily label oneself an outsider by misusing a key element – by, for instance, wearing an earring in the wrong place or abbreviating science fiction as sci-fi rather than SF” (3).
In order to address these predominantly ontological questions, I frame my analysis of the narratives with the two primary theoretical areas of corporeal feminism and posthumanism, and with the secondary area of postcolonialism. At the centre of this project, however, is an examination of vulnerability as theorized by Margrit Shildrick in *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*. Shildrick investigates the ways in which the monstrous other both defines and threatens the normative, arguing: “Where normative embodiment has hitherto seemed to guarantee individual autonomous selfhood, what is monstrous in all its forms – hybrid creatures, conjoined twins, human clones, cyborg embodiment and others – disrupts the notions of separation and distinction that underlie such claims” (2). Using the apt phrase “normative anxiety” (29) to refer to the fear invoked by encounters with the monstrous (in all its subjective forms), Shildrick proposes that while all beings are vulnerable, normative subjectivity elides its own vulnerability by repositioning it as a quality of the monstrous other (68). Feminist post-cyberpunk explores the ways in which monstrous others – women of colour, mothers, homosexuals, the poor, and the disabled – reassert their humanity in the face of reproductive and telecommunication technologies that seek to exploit and marginalize them. By embracing vulnerability as an essential defining characteristic of the human experience of embodiment, feminist post-cyberpunk challenges privileged visions of a posthuman future as masculine and heteronormative.
I will return to Shildrick’s notion of vulnerability in the latter half of this chapter when I lay out this project’s theoretical framework in further detail. Before I delve deeper into theory, however, I want to first situate my project in the larger field of science fiction studies. In order to substantiate feminist post-cyberpunk as a viable SF subgenre, I will briefly trace the history of its progenitor subgenres, cyberpunk and feminist SF, and articulate the ways in which they address the relationship between technology and corporeality. Throughout my discussion, I will pay particular attention to the ways that SF conceptualizes the gendered, raced, classed, sexed, and abled body, as well as focusing on the attendant issues of the definition of human boundaries and material embodiment.

**Marginalization of SF in the Academy**

Working in the field of science fiction, I have discovered, is often an isolating and lonely task. When considering my interests in (post-)cyberpunk and feminist SF, the critical community to which I belong is notably small. When I explain to my peers that I am working with current SF writers – Lai, Hopkinson, Sullivan, and Mixon – I usually lose their attention as these names are largely unfamiliar. I try to recapture their interest by mentioning the cyberpunk angle of my project, but, unfortunately, many people have never heard of William Gibson either! Many critics within the SF community have taken up the issue of the marginalization of science fiction in the academy, and Gary Westfahl, in his book, *Science Fiction, Canonization, Marginalization and the Academy*, does an
admirable job of identifying the field’s major hurdles. Westfahl argues that

science fiction, unlike other “once-neglected” literature, still attracts the “most

academic resistance” (2) and that:

Within the field of science fiction criticism, there are debates about the
canon of science fiction that run parallel to larger disputes about the canon
of literature. Some prefer to focus attention on a few writers of undeniable
talents, like Philip K. Dick, Stanislaw Lem, Ursula K. Le Guin, and
[William] Gibson, but others have publicly protested about the over
attention to these writers and have called for more study of “neglected”
authors. (2)

Westfahl, observing that SF is unlike other fields of academic study, notes that SF
is “subject to another strong influence: the industrious science fiction community
consisting of dedicated readers who embody and maintain the traditions of the
genre, carry on their own painstaking research, and express their own views
concerning the quality and stature of its authors” (2). From my own academic
research and experience with the SF community at large, I wholeheartedly agree
with Westfahl’s explanations of its marginalization. SF is fun to read and watch
as a fan, but making an academic career out of it is risky at best.

In her excellent study of the cyberpunk movement and postmodernism,
Virtual Geographies, Sabine Heuser adds another difficulty facing SF scholars to
Westfahl’s list. Heuser argues that “science fiction takes place in a double field of
tension: between high and low culture, as well as between the ‘two cultures’ of
the natural sciences and the humanities” (xii). This tension creates further
problems for defining science fiction: how much science is necessary for a novel
to be considered science fiction and not something else? In Decoding Gender in
Science Fiction, Brian Attebery notes that “hard” SF is written for the largest audience possible and that it often iterates conservative gender values, whereas “soft” SF, written for “experienced and venturesome SF readers,” is more likely to “challenge rather than to uphold gender norms” (5). With Attebery’s tentative distinction in mind then, the texts of this project fall (unfairly so in my opinion) into the further marginalized genre of “soft SF,” long deemed unworthy of sustained academic attention. Also contributing to the difficulty of working with SF are the myriad distinctions among its subgenres. As Heuser correctly observes: “One problem with science fiction criticism has been the lack of attention paid to genre science fiction, which accounts for the vast majority of works published in the field” (xvii). This lack of attention to “genre science fiction,” a category in which the texts of my study are arguably situated, is a definite loss for both the particular field of SF criticism and for literary studies in general. I firmly believe that one of the strengths of SF lies in its multitude of subgenres, which exemplify the culturally-intuitive creativity of its writers and the enthusiastic critical engagement of its readers.

Despite its continued marginalization in the academy, SF criticism manages to attract some excellent scholars who are eager to spread their

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2 “Hard SF” narratives, such as those of Isaac Asimov, are male-centric: men are the heroes, the explorers, and the scientists. Hard SF is often grounded in engineering and other “hard” sciences. Women in “hard SF” are regulated to roles that assist and support the male leads. In “soft SF,” like that of Ursula Le Guin and Philip K. Dick, women and men – and often gender neutral or ambiguous characters– are both central to the narrative. “Soft SF” tends to draw inspiration from the “soft sciences,” like biology, and places greater focus on emotional relationships to technology.
enthusiasm for the field. Veteran SF critic Jenny Wolmark argues that “SF is increasingly recognized for its ability to articulate complex and multifaceted responses to contemporary uncertainties and anxieties, and metaphors drawn from SF have acquired considerable cultural resonance” (“Time and Identity” 156). Austin Booth and Mary Flanagan, editors of the comprehensive collection *Reload: Rethinking Women and Cyberculture*, simply state: “Science fiction is a vital source of narratives through which we understand and represent our relationships to technology” (2). In my opinion, no other literary genre comes close to articulating the anxieties and preoccupations of the present day as clearly and critically as SF, as it is a vital source for understanding newly emerging embodiments and subjectivities. “Due to the negotiated exchanges between different segments of culture,” Attebery explains, “there are so many options: hard or soft, eco-feminist and libertarian-militaristic, North American and Everywhere Elsian, SF on the page and SF on the screen” (170). As I have indicated, the process of defining what exactly is SF incites untold pages of debate both within and outside of the SF community. Therefore, for the purposes of my project, I want to spend some time defining what I mean by “feminist SF” and “cyberpunk” and the ways in which I see these two subgenres coming together in what I am terming “feminist post-cyberpunk SF.” As I am positioning the texts of my study as the present day feminist revisioning of 1980s cyberpunk movement, I will begin my discussion of terminology with cyberpunk and its place in SF.
Mirrorshades and Cyberspace: (Post-)Cyberpunk

Speaking from inside the 1980s cyberpunk movement, Bruce Sterling emerged as one of the genre’s greatest proponents when he wrote the iconic preface to the Mirrorshades Anthology, popularly considered to be the cyberpunk manifesto. With bravado and unfailing certainty, Sterling ventures that cyberpunk captures the moment in time where the institutions in power are losing their control over technology (345). He argues that since the “cyberpunks are perhaps the first SF generation to grow up not only within the literary tradition of science fiction, but in a truly science-fictional world” (344), they are in a unique position to critique those in power while simultaneously hacking the tools of technology – most often that of cyberspace – for their own means. While Sterling may have overstated the radical elements of cyberpunk, Heuser, writing thirty years later, acknowledges that “cyberpunk is the first literary movement or subgenre to grow up alongside the internet and its community” (15). Regardless of its progenitors’ actual experience with using the internet, cyberpunk literature has undeniably influenced the way in which popular culture and SF imagine cyberspace.

Reflecting on the impact of cyberpunk on SF, Thomas Foster writes:

The cyberpunk movement emerged in the late 1980s as a new formal synthesis of a number of more or less familiar science fiction tropes: direct interfaces between human nervous systems and computer networks; the related metaphor of cyberspace as a means of translating electronically stored information into a form that could be experienced phenomenologically and manipulated by human agents jacked into a

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3 Heuser also notes, ironically, that Gibson himself had a near complete lack of computer literacy at the time he wrote, on a typewriter, the foundational cyberpunk text, Neuromancer (16).
network; artificial intelligence, including digital simulations of human personalities that could be downloaded for computer storage; surgical and genetic technologies for bodily modification; the balkanization of the nation-state and its replacement by multinational corporations; and the fragmentation of the public sphere into a variety of subcultures. (“Meat Puppets” 209-210)

Cyberpunk creatively tapped into the cultural moment when the world was becoming “wired” – through advanced telecommunications networks, globalization, and international corporate conglomerates – for the first time. By tapping into the anxieties surrounding the pace of technological change, cyberpunk combined the technophilia of conventional SF with a sense of postmodern global malaise.

Most of the discussion surrounding cyberpunk deals with its formal characteristics: what sets cyberpunk apart from the SF which preceded it? In their introduction to Rewired: The Post-Cyberpunk Anthology, James Patrick Kelly and John Kessel offer a straight-forward list of the characteristics which define cyberpunk within the SF community. With the benefit of hindsight, they believe that the signature obsessions of cyberpunk are

[…] presenting a global perspective on the future. Engaging with developments in infotech and biotech, especially those invasive technologies that will transform the human body and psyche. Striking a gleefully subversive attitude that challenges traditional values and received wisdom. Cultivating a crammed prose style that takes an often playful stance toward traditional science fiction tropes. (ix)

Approaching cyberpunk from a more academic and canonical angle, Wolmark extends Kelly and Kessel’s definition by positioning cyberpunk alongside postmodernism. Wolmark suggests that early cyberpunk explores how
“technologically dominated near futures may be expressive of the collapse of the temporal into the spatial, and the erosion of a sense of history often remarked on by theorists writing about postmodernism” ("Time and Identity" 6). Negotiating both the academic and the popular SF definitions of cyberpunk, Heuser underscores the importance of cyberspace’s unique temporal and spatial fluidity in creating the narratives of the genre. She writes that:

The primary/framing fictional worlds of cyberpunk occur close to the contemporary present, at only one apocalyptic remove. [...] No time travel is involved. The narrative universe is set in one and the same time frame, to which the virtual world of cyberspace is parallel. It is not removed in time; nonetheless, it presents an alternate universe. The human body exists in two places at once: the framing narrative world and the world of cyberspace. (27)

For the purposes of this study then, cyberpunk is most identifiable as an SF subgenre that navigates cyberspace (and other advanced technologies that impact the body) with a postmodern aesthetic (non-linear and multiple narratives, fractured constructions of time and space) that embraces a punk, anarchist, DIY attitude towards technology and power.

Regardless of the debate over the precise formal parameters that establish cyberpunk as a subgenre both inside and outside of the academy, everyone agrees that “a major [cyberpunk] obsession was the way emerging technologies will change what it means to be human” (Kelly and Kessel x). At the heart of cyberpunk is the ways in which technology challenges preconceived notions of corporeality and embodiment: “cybernetics and genetic engineering combine to denaturalize the category of the ‘human’ along with its grounding in the physical
body; one result is to reveal how abstract and formalized that notion of ‘the’ body already was” (Foster 210). In addition to investigating the impact of cybernetics and genetic engineering, cyberpunk utilizes the transitional space of cyberspace to denaturalize the body. Heuser states:

Cyberpunk is best understood as an envisioning of cyberspace, analyzable in terms of interacting semantic fields created through the tension between extended metaphoric fields. These clusters of meaning exert a significant impact on the dislocation of such traditional oppositions as nature/culture, human/machine, and mind/body. (xxv)

Not only is the body brought into question then, but the notion of the mind (or the soul or spirit) is also, to use Heuser’s term, dislocated. Wolmark agrees that this dislocation of the body results in a larger fragmentation of the subject; because cyberpunk focuses on the destabilizing impact new technology has on conceptions of what constitutes embodiment, its narratives often collapse the distinction between experience and knowledge (Aliens and Others 110). The cyberpunk subject is one always in transition: the “real self” appears to transcend the body through technology (whether it be cyberspace, genetic experimentation, biotechnology and so on).

Despite, or more likely because of, the overwhelming attention paid to cyberpunk, its moment has now passed. In fact, its original practitioners no longer acknowledge the subgenre (Heuser xxxiii). Just as critics and fans alike agree on cyberpunk’s obsession with technology and the body, they also agree, for the most part, that the original cyberpunk movement is long over. Heuser argues that:

[Neal Stephenson’s] Snow Crash can perhaps be regarded as one of the first to parody the cyberpunk formula, and thus marks the boundary
between original and derivative contributions to the subgenre. By the early 1990s, cyberpunk was already stale: nothing appeared to both adhere to the subgenre any longer and contribute something significantly new. The novelty value of cyberpunk may have been rapidly fading, but the cyberpunk plot device of virtual reality has been permanently added to the pool of science fiction themes. (171)

While the majority of voices in SF lean towards the “cyberpunk is dead” angle, a minority of critics propose that cyberpunk has not disappeared, but has merely been transmuted into further generations of the subgenre.4 In The Souls of Cyberfolks, Foster calls currently active writers such as Greg Egan and Ken MacLeod “third-generation cyberpunk writers” and argues that their works preserve the original cyberpunk’s

…complex attitude toward embodiment as both a mutable or ‘plastic’ construct and as possessing a materiality that makes textuality or software inappropriate metaphors for this plasticity, because bodies can neither be reduced purely to problems of coding nor easily rewritten and edited. (xv)

I am inclined to agree with critics like Foster, who observe a transmutation of the cyberpunk subgenre, rather than a simple dispersal of its tropes into the larger field of SF. Published in 1991, Marge Piercy’s He, She, and It, with its focus on technological embodiment and place of the human in a rapidly inhabitable world, is an apt case of a text that bridges the gap between conventional cyberpunk and the current feminist evocations of the genre. While the original writers of cyberpunk no longer identify themselves with the movement, I suggest that, like

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4 I also argue that some of the material aspects of cyberpunk – in terms of fashion, music, and drugs – while no longer depicted in mainstream media, continue to exist in rave and hacker subcultures.
Piercy in the 1990s, Lai, Hopkinson, Sullivan, and Mixon all continue to write stories in the mode of cyberpunk.

I find Foster’s term of “third-generation cyberpunk” a bit unwieldy as a categorical description for the texts of my study. Instead, I want to adopt the term “post-cyberpunk” as it better encapsulates the ways in which the subgenre has grown and reorganized its priorities over the past three decades. In *Rewired*, Kelly and Kessel trace the ways in which 1980s cyberpunk has matured into today’s post-cyberpunk:

Originally “the street” in CP [cyberpunk] meant the shadowy world of those who had set themselves against the norms of the dominant culture, hackers, thieves, spies, scam artists, and drug users. But for PCP [post-cyberpunk] writers the street leads to other parts of the world. Their futures have become more diverse, and richer for it. Asians and Africans and Latinos are no longer just sprinkled into stories as supporting characters, as if they are some sort of exotic seasoning. PCP writers attempt to bring them and their unique concerns to the centre of their stories. PCP pays attention to the underclass, who do not have access to the transformative technologies that were the CP stock-in-trade. (xi)

Post-cyberpunk retains the original “adversarial relationship to consensus reality” (xii), but opens up the ranks of its characters (and writers) to include all of those who make up the global underclass. Again, access to technology is foregrounded, and as such, I would argue, the body remains a primary site of contestation. Kelly and Kessel explain that in post-cyberpunk stories “human values are not imprinted on the fabric of the universe because what it means to be human is always negotiable” (xi) and that as a result “reality itself is everywhere mediated, and what comes between the characters and reality must be constantly interrogated” (xii). Post-cyberpunk speaks directly to the anxieties over changing forms of
material embodiment in the present world – one that is finished with its first baby-steps into cyberspace and is now fully on-line and global.

**Earth Goddesses and Cyborgs: Feminist SF**

In addition to a deepened focus on racialized characters (and writers), as the body’s relationship to technology continues to be a central concern of the subgenre, women have taken centre stage in writing and representing themselves in post-cyberpunk to Kelly and Kessel’s post-cyberpunk list. It is at this point where I believe that, at least for Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*, Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber*, Sullivan’s *Maul*, and Mixon’s *Proxies*, these texts also emerge out of and extend the subgenres of both feminist SF and cyberpunk. In *Social and Virtual Space*, Laura Cherniak observes the trend that scholars like myself are establishing in the field of SF criticism:

> Those people [working in SF] who have a political project have tended to concentrate their teaching on works produced by women and men of colour, feminists, gay and lesbian writers, and other writers who, before the new social movements of the latter half of this century, would have had far more difficulty being published, or of gaining the “legitimacy” [of academic study]. (70)

In terms of this project, I am drawn to these relatively unknown writers for precisely their novels’ progressive political projects – such as inclusive human rights for all regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and class. Specifically, issues of race and gender are at the forefront of each novel and all the writers turn a critical eye to the role of technology in evolving our relationships to our racialized and gendered bodies. Feminist SF – from the
feminist utopias of the 1970s to the feminist dystopias of the 1980s – has a long-established relationship of pushing corporeal-technological relationships beyond “man uses machine” into territories wherein technology is both socially productive and regulating. While there is a body of critical engagement with older established feminist SF writers like Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler, Marge Piercy, Pat Cadigan, and James Triptree Jr., there is a stark absence of attention paid to the writers of my study, who comprise the latest generation of feminist SF writers. Before I engage with the contributions that I perceive Lai, Hopkinson, Sullivan, and Mixon to be making to feminist post-cyberpunk, let me first situate them within the field of feminist SF.

In their introduction to Reload, Austin and Booth explain that “Women’s science fiction came into its own in the 1960s and 1970s. Science fiction was a form in which women writers could tease out the implications of second-wave feminism, with a particular focus on manipulating cultural structures and hierarchies” (4). Feminist SF became an identifiable subgenre that afforded women writers the space to explore not only ideas of second-wave feminism, but also to imagine new concepts of gendered and racialized identity. Referring to the wave of feminist science fiction (which was often utopian) of the 1970s, Wolmark contends that:

Despite their ambiguous and sometimes embattled position within a genre that still appears to have a preponderance of white male authors and readers, these narratives have not only been able to make significant inroads into the dominant representations of gender, but they have also stretched the limits and definitions of the genre. (“Postmodern Romances” 231)
Indeed, the contribution of women writers from James Triptree (who challenged
gendered identity in the 1960s and 1970s male-dominated world of SF) through
Ursula Le Guin and Monique Wittig (writing the feminist utopias of the 1970s) to
Octavia Butler and Marge Piercy (bringing feminist SF into the SF mainstream
throughout the 1980s and 1990s) have left an indelible mark on SF for both
writers and readers. In all its evocations, feminist SF opened up a space for those
who may have felt previously excluded from the hard SF of the “foundational
fathers” such as Isaac Asimov and Jules Verne. Wolmark also points out that
feminist SF continued to evolve from its original inception: “A shift in emphasis,
however, can be discerned in feminist SF written from the 1980s on, as it
confronts the questions of gendered subjectivity more explicitly within the context
of the masculinist hegemony of technology” (“Postmodern Romances” 232). By
focusing on issues of technology, feminist SF began to pose difficult questions
about what it means “to be human” and sketch out the cultural limitations of
gendered bodies.

While acknowledging the importance of patriarchal critique inherent in the
subgenre, Marlene Barr, in Lost in Space, argues that the term “feminist science
fiction” limits the actual scope of the genre and thus stifles greater worthwhile
critical attention. She writes:

5 For example, Marge Piercy’s Woman on the Edge of Time (published in
1976) presents a scathing commentary on the forced medicalization of racialized
women without sustained attention to the role of technology. Two decades later,
however, her novel, He, She, and It, specifically investigates issues of
technologized embodiment and gender through the figure of a cyborg.
Although positing unnatural worlds, violating time restrictions, and transcending gender and reality in surrealistic worlds are surely pertinent to feminist science fiction, feminist science fiction writers are not routinely associated with Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein, and Virginia Woolf. Hence the term feminist science fiction blinds [sic] people to connections between feminist fiction’s recent past and present. (104)

Preferring her own classification of the genre as “feminist fabulation,” Barr draws attention to the diverse body of work written by women such as James Triptree, Octavia Butler, Suzy McKee Charnas, Zoe Fairbains, Katherine Marcuse, and Kate Wilhelm. Despite their varying historical time frames, Barr underscores their shared concern with patriarchal critique and the dismantling of heteronormative hierarchies and rigid masculinist boundaries, which is characteristic of the much more prominent canon of postmodernism. Wolmark echoes Barr’s connection between feminist SF and the postmodern canon, as she posits that “the erosion of critical and cultural boundaries is most convincingly and enthusiastically explored [in feminist SF], boundaries such as those between high and popular culture, nature and culture, self and other” (“Postmodern Romances” 230). In feminist SF the primary site of boundary-crossing is gender, with technology being the prime motivator. Wolmark goes on to argue that “feminist science fiction crosses the boundaries of both gender and genre in two ways: firstly, by drawing on the narrative fantasies of popular romance fiction to offer fantasies of female pleasure and power, and secondly by using the ‘hard

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6 Barr uses the term “feminist fabulation as an umbrella term that includes science fiction, fantasy, utopian literature, and mainstream literature (written by both women and men) that critiques patriarchal functions. Feminist science fiction, then, is at once a separate entity and a part of the super genre [called] feminist fabulation” (12).
science’ metaphor of the cyborg to redefine definitions of female subjectivity” (230). While the novels of my study do not contain literal cyborgs – the half-machine, half-flesh beings immortalized in the Terminator and RoboCop movies – they do bring to life a reworking of the cliché through clones, virtual reality avatars, and proxy-bodies. By introducing new forms of embodiment beyond the female cyborg, feminist post-cyberpunk addresses the notions of female pleasure and power and the ways in which they diverge, corporeally and psychically, from traditional masculine oriented SF.

Booth and Flanagan underscore the centrality of gender in feminist SF, noting that “feminist science fiction, like feminist theory, pays special attention to the cultural construction of gender, the gendering of the Cartesian divide between mind and body, the maintenance of social and sexual hierarchies under patriarchy, and multiple challenges to notions of unified, stable subjectivity” (3). Feminist SF is not merely a rejection of patriarchal hierarchies, but a deep exploration of how those gendered power constructions have influenced our cultural and personal conceptions of corporeality and identity. Baccolini notes that feminist SF writers over the past forty years have contributed to the questioning of masculinist discourses of traditional science fiction. Their novels have contributed to the breakdown of certainties and universalist assumptions about gendered identities: Themes such as the representation of women and their bodies, reproduction and sexuality, and language and its relation to identity, have all been tackled, explored, and reappropriated by these writers in dialectical engagement with tradition. (16)

In addition to Baccolini’s observations of feminist SF’s contributions, Wolmark contends that it “explores the possibilities for alternative and non-hierarchal
definitions of gender and identity within which the difference of aliens and others can be accommodated rather than repressed” (Aliens and Others 2). Perhaps out of all the various facets of feminist SF, its ability to delve into and articulate the experiences of aliens and human others is paramount in its revisioning of what it means to be gendered and to embody difference.

Speaking of the alien, feminist SF does approach often terrifying others with a critical eye towards our own human constructions of gendered and racial difference. Booth and Flanagan propose that:

Science fiction has long used the figure of the alien to invoke anxieties about cultural differences such as man/woman, white/black, upper class/lower class; however, much science fiction invokes these anxieties precisely to bolster these differences, rather than break them down. Women’s science fiction, in contrast, uses the figure of the alien to expose the ways in which racial and gendered boundaries are constructed and the ways in which those boundaries maintain hierarchies of domination and power (indeed to expose the very anxiety over boundary collapse itself as xenophobic and sexist). (6)

The alien in feminist SF, then, is not simply they-who-are-not-us, but a reflection of what-we-are and what-we-could-be. Octavia Butler is perhaps most well known for her innovative explorations of the alien in her Lilith’s Brood and Seed to Harvest trilogies. In Butler’s narratives, she displaces the human with the alien, allowing neither the privilege of claiming moral or ontological superiority. By incorporating such a postcolonial approach, feminist SF makes scathing cultural commentary on our own unspoken definitions of who gets defined as human. Not to be left out of commenting on any aspect of feminist SF, Wolmark addresses the potential for feminist SF to make acute postcolonial critiques: “There is also a
spatial dimension to the indeterminate futures that are imagined in feminist SF, for such futures are at once multiple and collective, global and inescapably postcolonial” (“Time and Identity” 169). Alongside an inherent concern with gendered bodies, the feminist SF of today challenges the reader to consider the current and future fates of racialized others. Throughout this dissertation, I will return to the notion of racialized bodies and suggest the ways in which feminist post-cyberpunk SF might deepen postcolonial critiques of technological enabled embodiment.

**Introducing Feminist Post-Cyberpunk**

At this point in my discussion, the connections and overlapping concerns of cyberpunk and feminist SF should be apparent. As feminist SF developed into the 1980s and the 1990s, more and more of its writers began incorporating substantial technological themes and tropes, many of which were reminiscent of those characteristic of the cyberpunk movement. Fortunately for this study, several notable SF scholars have also noticed the coming together of these two subgenres. Cherniak traces the development of what she (and others) calls “technofeminist” SF by identifying that “both cyberpunk and technofeminism are centrally concerned, as the names suggest, with science and technologies” (*Social and Virtual Space* 65).\(^7\) She further explains that in addition to the shared concern

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\(^7\) Cherniak elucidates that: “Technofeminist” or “cyberfeminist” SF developed from cyberpunk, as well as from the tradition of feminist science fiction. The term
with science and technology that “both cyberpunk and technofeminism deal with liminality” (106). I have considered using “technofeminist SF” as a way to categorize the novels of my study, but I feel that the term does not quite encompass the thematic and stylistic complexities of Lai, Hopkinson, Sullivan, and Mixon. With their shared critiques of capitalism and globalization, all four novels echo cyberpunk’s concerns with commerce and power, which is left unacknowledged in the term “technofeminist.” Instead, I prefer to use “feminist post-cyberpunk,” as I believe that both subgenres contribute to this latest generation of SF, which explores the relationship between technology and the body in a globalized world.

Perhaps one of the reasons that the term feminist post-cyberpunk SF has not been coined by anyone else (aside from it being unfashionably long), is that cyberpunk is often critiqued as deeply heteronormative, masculine, and seemingly incompatible with feminism. Several SF critics, most notably Wolmark and Nicola Nixon, have pointed out the hesitancy of cyberpunk’s progenitors to acknowledge the contributions of early feminist SF to the development of the subgenre. Partly, an acknowledgement of feminist SF might take away

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8 Nixon observes that “rising on the heels of the ‘70s feminist SF writers, however, was another SF ‘movement,’ one loudly proclaiming its ‘revolutionary’
some of the acclaimed “cyberspace cowboy” bravado of cyberpunk, which enjoyed characterizing itself as a new radical literature. Scoffing at such claims to radical status, Nixon argues that some critics have classified cyberpunk as dystopic in order to justify its claim to politically correct content in reaction to the real progressive work of women’s SF in the 1980s, such as Suzette Haden Elgin’s _Native Tongue_ (“Cyberpunk” 202). The most common response from the cyberpunk camp was to draw attention to the lack of technological engagement in early feminist SF (as in the utopias of Wittig), ignoring the contributions of those women like Cadigan and Piercy writing alongside cyberpunk through the 1980s (_Aliens and Others_ 5). Speaking to such criticisms, however, Wolmark retorts that: “Cyberpunk has its own absences, however, one of which is the unacknowledged influence of feminist SF, and cyberpunk narratives are marked by anxieties about gender relations” (5). I propose that these exact anxieties – about gender relations and technology – are at the centre of today’s feminist post-cyberpunk SF.

I suggest that feminist post-cyberpunk takes the best parts of cyberpunk – cyberspace, bio-technological engagement, urban dystopia – while rejecting its sexist masculine claims for both the subject and technology. One of the great sticking points for feminist scholars when reading cyberpunk has been the status: cyberpunk” (“Cyberpunk” 192). Wolmark echoes Nixon’s contention by directly stating feminist SF’s role in influencing cyberpunk: “What is noticeably absent from the many public declarations or ‘manifestos’ made by, and on behalf of, cyberpunk writers is any acknowledgement of the equally profound influence of feminist science fiction” (_Aliens and Others_ 108).
centrality of the cyberspace cowboy, usually a young man who plugs into the
feminized cyberspace matrix to become the idealized hacker-hero. Focusing on
the foundational work of William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* series, Nixon argues:

The political (or even revolutionary) potential for SF, realized so strongly
in ‘70s feminist SF, is regulated in Gibson’s cyberpunk to a form of scary
feminized software; his fiction creates an alternative, attractive, but
hallucinatory world which allows not only a reassertion of male mastery
but a virtual celebration of a kind of primal masculinity. (204)

Feminist post-cyberpunk rejects this “primal masculinity” – with its displacement
of the vulnerable body – in favour of a broader consideration of what it means to
be gendered in an age where technology exists both outside and inside of the
body. “Despite the main ethos of cyberpunk and its largely uncritical celebration
of the mysteries of the human-machine interface, its active engagement with
technology and its oppositional qualities are of considerable relevance to writers
of feminist SF” (5) contends Wolmark, again supporting the notion that it is the
human-machine interface associated with cyberpunk that attracts feminist SF
writers in the first place. Quite simply, cyberpunk and feminist SF writers situate
their shared concerns over embodiment and the definition of the human in
technology. Feminist post-cyberpunk then, I argue, is an incarnation of SF
literature that distinctively strives to challenge cultural conceptions of difference
and identity in a technologically mediated global world.
The Feminist Post-Cyberpunk of Lai, Hopkinson, Sullivan, and Mixon

One of the benefits of arriving to SF fresh-faced is that I had no preconceived notions of which texts I should or should not study. Instead of starting my search in academia, I performed my initial research in the SF community as I wanted to discover what was representative of current popular SF. Joining on-line SF fan community boards, I indicated my interest in obtaining recommendations for the latest and best in feminist and cyberpunk SF. Despite my having to dodge their arguments over the current viability of cyberpunk as a subgenre, these communities offered me many productive suggestions. After sifting through numerous titles, I ended up directing my attention towards those novels I felt best exemplified the emerging genre I have termed feminist post-cyberpunk. In some ways, I have followed the lead of critics like Booth, who notes that:

Women writers of cyberfiction tend to focus on the socially and economically marginal: Unlike classic cyberpunk tales of “hacker cowboy” outsiders, these novels are populated by women of color, illegal workers, handicapped [sic] characters, lesbians, the poor, and the homeless. Technology has not erased sexism, racism, and heterosexism in these works, so much as it has exaggerated them and given them new forms. (31)

Each of the novels I have chosen to focus on – Lai’s Salt Fish Girl, Hopkinson’s Midnight Robber, Sullivan’s Maul, and Mixon’s Proxies – are populated with such marginalized characters: women of color, clones, aliens, lesbians, children,

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9 A discussion thread about cyberpunk on www.williamgibsonboard.com was particularly helpful, directing me towards the work of Laura Mixon and Tricia Sullivan.
the poor, and the disabled. In each text, these figures directly interact with or literally embody technology and, by doing so, challenge normatively gendered, racist, and able-ist constructions of the human.

Up to this point in my discussion, I have indicated the impact of second-wave feminist SF on feminist post-cyberpunk. This is not to say, however, that aspects of third-wave feminism – such as Riot Grrrl, DIY, and a transnationalist attitude – have not also influenced this latest generation of writers, but that the very issue of third-wave feminist SF as a genre is still in need of analysis and categorization. Regardless of the specific feminist influences for Lai, Hopkinson, Sullivan, and Mixon, I believe that their work does resonate with the third-wave definition that: “Feminism is a critical awareness of how the world works and a conscious resistance to who gets what. Feminism is made up of infinite variety; its strength is based on its diversity” (Turbo Chicks 13). Just as the feminist SF of the 1970s and 1980s invested in expanding on the second-wave feminist SF explorations started by writers like LeGuin and Joanna Russ in the late 1960s, the texts of my study emerge out of both second- and third-wave feminism’s attention to marginalized women, postcolonial critique, and complicated forms of embodiment and corporeality. Keeping these feminist influences in mind, I would like to now briefly situate each of these novels as feminist post-cyberpunk SF and indicate some of the ways they act as critical inheritors of the 1980s cyberpunk and feminist SF subgenres.
Of the four writers I am focusing on, Nalo Hopkinson has received the greatest amount of academic attention. Often hailed as the “literary child” of Octavia Butler,10 Hopkinson’s literary oeuvre crosses the genres of SF, fantasy, and horror.11 Of all her works, Midnight Robber is the novel that most fully embodies the feminist post-cyberpunk sensibility that I am interested in. At first glance, the casual reader may question the categorization of Midnight Robber as an inheritor of cyberpunk SF, but as Jillian Enteen argues, “Hopkinson amplifies the performance of the cyberpunk novel, pushing its formal elements past chronological, hyper-paced narrative arcs in favor of plot interruptions and asides” (“On the Receiving End of Colonization” 266). The most notable “amplification” of the cyberpunk novel is Midnight Robber’s internal narrative of the alien world New Half-Way Tree, which appears at first to recall earlier feminist utopias and fantasy motifs. Surrounding this section of the story, however, is a pronounced cyberpunk exploration of technology, artificial

10 “Butler’s true literary child is Nalo Hopkinson” (400) states Charles Saunders in “Why Blacks Should Read (and Write) Science Fiction.” This is just one of many instances where I read this claim being made. Personally, I feel that the connection is not entirely fair: while both Butler and Hopkinson identify as black women and are formidable writers, the context out of which their work emerges is significantly different (Butler was an African-American woman writing in the 1970s through the 1990s, while Hopkinson is a Jamaican-Canadian, writing and teaching in the 1990s into today).

intelligence, and human ingenuity. The people in *Midnight Robber* literally embody the technology that both protects and restrains them. Enteen proposes that Hopkinson upsets the foundational individualism of cyberpunk by portraying not only the programmers and/or her protagonist, but an entire society of hackers. By leaving Earth, her characters have, in fact, chosen their outsider status, forging a new community by breaking and redeploying linguistic codes, previous laws, and technological functions. (269)

Hopkinson is ultimately concerned with the impact of technology – in particular those that transform human labour practices such as robotics, artificial intelligence, and nano-technology – in daily life. *Midnight Robber* explores the depths of societal attachment to technology and the ways in which technology continues to redefine human society and its interaction with the natural world.

The key element, in my assessment, that distinguishes *Midnight Robber* as a feminist post-cyberpunk text is Hopkinson’s attention to issues of race and colonization in terms of the reproduction of bodies and subjectivities in technologically (dis)located spaces. In addition to interrogating the relationship between technology and the body, Hopkinson goes further in wondering what those future bodies may look like and how they will be treated. In a genre traditionally inhabited by mostly white bodies, *Midnight Robber* rejects normative images of racialized others and proposes new diasporic communities of belonging. Comparing the novel to its cyberpunk predecessors, Enteen states:

Contrary to the Jamican Rastafarians or Voudon figures that are either fetishized by William Gibson or voiceless in the majority of cyberpunk, Hopkinson renders the complexities of multiple cultures in contact, the cross-fertilizations of histories, languages, and cultures, and diasporic dislocations. Building on Gibson’s and other cyberpunk authors’ flair for
forecasting digital futures, Hopkinson, like other Afrofuturist\textsuperscript{12} visionaries, fashions unconventional scenarios premised on technological development; she correspondingly provides unorthodox versions of yet-to-come societies. (263)

Hopkinson plays with the image of the cyberspace cowboy, exchanging the lone white male hacker of Gibson’s cyberpunk for a black female child displaced in the wilds of an alien planet. Like the cyberspace cowboy, however, this young girl becomes the corporeal node between technology and humanity. Booth cites Hopkinson as one of the writers whose work “draws connections between technology, magic, and spiritualism … information technology is an integrated part of the natural world, not set in opposition to it” (“Women’s Cyberfiction” 31). As a feminist post-cyberpunk novel, \textit{Midnight Robber} exemplifies the search for a balance between the technological and the natural, the automated and the human.

Larissa Lai’s \textit{Salt Fish Girl}\textsuperscript{13} exemplifies the way in which feminist post-cyberpunk SF establishes a new critical literature with its exploration of cloning and bio-technology in a world perishing under rampant capitalism. While the notion of creating new life with technology is nothing unusual, Lai’s treatment of the issue of cloning strikes a balance between condemnation and acceptance of such novel identities. Robyn Morris writes:

\textsuperscript{12} Catherine Ramirez defines Afrofuturism as: “speculative fiction that treats African-American concerns in the context of … technoculture – and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” (“Cyborg Feminism” 374).

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{When Fox is a Thousand} (1995) is Lai’s first novel and \textit{Automaton Biographies} (2010), a SF-inspired book of poetry, is her most recent work.
Characterised by intertextual layering, *Salt Fish Girl* interrogates the construction of identity through allusion to an older iconic sf western text, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Lai’s fiction functions as a contestation and complication of the literary and filmic perpetuation of an ideology of a pure, ordinary and unmarked “humanness,” a definition which has historically accorded the white, western, heterosexual male with a universal and centred subject positioning. (“What Does it Mean to be Human” 81)

I propose that Lai’s move to denaturalize normative constructions of identity and “humanness” speaks to the novel’s cyberpunk inheritance: “in cyberpunk fiction, cybernetics and genetic engineering combine to denaturalize the category of the ‘human’ along with its grounding in the physical body; one result is to reveal how abstract and formalized that notion of ‘the’ body already was” (“Meat Puppets or Robopaths” 210). Lai approaches genetic engineering from multiple angles: first, following in the footsteps of cyberpunk, she criticizes the corporate greed and capitalist amorality that creates factory-floors full of expendable cloned female workers (the clone becomes metaphor for the new “disposable worker” in the era of globalization); second, exemplifying the best of feminist SF, Lai explores what cloning means for gendered and racialized constructions of identity and the transformative impact it has on maternity and human reproduction (which I will address in Chapter Three).

As a feminist post-cyberpunk novel, *Salt Fish Girl* confronts modern notions of the body, identity, and legitimacy. Alongside her investigation of cloning, Lai takes on virtual reality and the ways in which it changes the definition of labouring bodies and social identity. Morris comments that “Lai’s novels work to reposition identity as a site of individual and social
transformation” (82). Undoubtedly, Salt Fish Girl defamiliarizes the very notion of human identity as the narrative’s clones go to great lengths to assert and preserve their humanity, despite being denied recognition as humans. In this way, Lai’s novel continues the tradition of feminist SF to question the role of the alien (or monster) in society. As Marlene Barr observes in Lost in Space, “Science fiction’s new feminist chapter expresses a longing for a richer plurality of human images by portraying women as gendered or social aliens who embrace, rather than quell, the invading monster” (99). At the centre of Salt Fish Girl is the role of the alien (cloned) other and what happens to the definition of human being when technology becomes the inspiration for corporeal design and corporate interests dictate the constitution of bodies.

Unlike Hopkinson and Lai, Tricia Sullivan’s work\textsuperscript{14} has to date been completely unacknowledged by academic readers. Perhaps the lack of critical attention stems from the simple fact that Sullivan’s novels arguably fall into the vast category of popular genre SF. Despite the lack of academic appraisal, however, Sullivan is a popular writer in the SF community, winning the Arthur C. Clarke Award for her novel Dreaming in Smoke, and having Maul short listed for the same award. Promoted as the “new face of Feminist SF” (front cover) and a “feminist-cyberpunk thriller” (back cover), Sullivan’s Maul reaches out to a broad reading audience. One of the elements that drew me to Maul is that it is set in a

\textsuperscript{14} Sullivan’s earlier works are Lethe (1995), Someone to Watch over Me (1997), and Dreaming in Smoke (1999). Double Vision (2006) and Sound Mind (2007) are her most recent novels.
world not totally unlike Gibson’s in his Sprawl series: the boundaries between bodies and technology are blurry, humanity is struggling for survival, and everyday violence is the norm. In my opinion, *Maul* is an excellent example of popular feminist post-cyberpunk literature for the masses – Sullivan’s writing mimics the terse punchiness of cyberpunk and challenges normative notions of gender.

Foster suggests that “what has survived from the original cyberpunk texts [is] a complex attitude toward embodiment as both a mutable or ‘plastic’ construct and as possessing a materiality that makes textuality or software inappropriate metaphors for this plasticity, because bodies can neither be reduced purely to problems of coding nor easily rewritten and edited” (*Souls of Cyberfolk* xv). Sullivan, in *Maul*, reflects this post-cyberpunk approach to the bodies displayed in her story to varying degrees of seriousness and parody. There is no mapping or possession of cyberspace *per se* in *Maul*, but rather an exploration of the way certain bodies interface with bio-technologies that have their own inherent programs and coding. In *Maul*, Sullivan creates bodies that ultimately fail in their attempts to maintain plasticity in the face of a human-made bio-technological catastrophe, where virile men have been nearly wiped out due to a “Y-plague.” Sullivan takes the 1970s feminist-utopia SF gender-role reversal to its extreme: in the world of *Maul*, women are in control of society and men are reduced to breeding stock. Instead of breaking out of restrictive gender norms, women end up reiterating pre-existing masculine and feminine social
constructions. Rejecting the earth-goddess centred feminist utopias of the 1970s, Sullivan explores the limits of human plasticity in a world, both real and virtual, where women are in control.

Laura Mixon has garnered moderate attention from both the academic and fan SF communities for her novels *Glass Houses* and *Proxies*. Both cyberpunk and feminist SF camps have claimed Mixon as their own, which bolsters my designation of her work as feminist post-cyberpunk. Of the few critics to address Mixon’s work, Foster stands out as he has taken up both *Glass Houses* and *Proxies*, focusing on Mixon’s use of telepresence technology. Using Judith Butler’s theories of performance and embodiment, Foster reads the ways in which the bodies in Mixon’s texts are either surpassed or reinscribed with technology ("The Postproduction of the Human Heart" 491). In particular, he observes how *Proxies* brings gender and its attendant notions of sexuality into question:

> In a social setting mediated through such technologies, binary distinctions between desire and identification, body and mind, material and virtual no longer map onto one another isomorphically. Desire is no longer exclusively associated with the material body, or identification with virtual space where supposedly disembodied minds can communicate. (483)

As a feminist text, *Proxies* complicates embodied notions of desire and identification. Mixon consistently upsets the conventional cyberpunk attachment to the machine interface as transcendent by underscoring the physical vulnerability of her characters. Like Pat Cadigan’s contributions to cyberpunk

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literature, Mixon’s work insists on making the corporeal experience of her characters take precedence over their virtual engagements.

Reading similar virtual/real bodies of the much discussed film, *The Matrix*, Wolmark argues that: “The relationship between body and cultural identity is persistently denaturalized in a narrative that enacts the pleasure to be gained from inhabiting the borders between the real and the virtual” (“Staying with the Body” 85). While Wolmark is not referring to *Proxies* directly, I believe that her observation of the way in which the body and cultural identity are denaturalized through the use of virtual reality aptly applies to the bodies of *Proxies*. Mixon investigates the pleasurable and practical applications of telepresence technology for both persons with disabilities and able-bodied subjects. As is characteristic of feminist post-cyberpunk texts, all bodies are impacted by technology, though Mixon is careful to point out that not everyone benefits equally, or is capable of maintaining their individual rights and freedoms along with their technological access. In *Proxies*, corporations still exploit the economically and socially marginalized of society, but there is hope that such exploitation may address questions of vulnerability and indirectly lead to a new definition of what constitutes material embodiment.

**Theorizing the (Vulnerable) Body**

At this point in my discussion of feminist post-cyberpunk, I will now further outline the theoretical framework of this project. There are three
overlapping areas of theory that inform my reading of the body and technology, broadly categorized as: feminism, posthumanism, and postcolonialism. In terms of the feminisms that I am drawing on in order to situate both my critical reading of the novels, as well as further nuance my concerns with posthumanism and postcolonialism, I find that I am equally influenced by both second- and third-wave feminist epistemologies. In “Jumping Generations,” Iris van der Tuin articulates the contested site of feminist thought that I have unintentionally found myself recuperating: with my interest in reading the body and technology, it is an approach that “jumps generations” (between second- and third-wave) (18). She argues that there has been a “renewed interest in matter and the material,” producing a new category of feminist investigations termed “new materialism” (18). Van der Tuin observes that “the interest in matter is generated by scholars emphasizing the importance of (the study of) (laboratory) technology, the body, and the effects of globalization” (26). In “Bodies that Matter,” Kaye Mitchell refers to this recent feminist return to the body, not as “new materialism,” but as “corporeal feminism” and cautions that “this is not, however, a return to the body in any naïve or essentialist sense, but rather an examination of the ways in which the ‘matter’ of the body is socially and culturally constructed” (114). Considering my attention to issues of (human and technological) embodiment and the body, I prefer to conceive of my approach as corporeal feminist. My analysis of the body

16 Van der Tuin explains that the “recent generation of new materialism cannot be captured by a (post-) classificatory mode. New materialist feminist theorists bridge feminist empiricism and feminist social constructivism” (28).
in this study strives to articulate the ways in which corporeality and embodiment are “socially and culturally constructed,” while paying particular attention to the influence of technology (and those who wield it) on their (re)construction.

As Mitchell suggests, corporeal feminism seeks not to reiterate essentialist notions of the body, but to articulate the body as a site of fluidity and potentiality. Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price explain further:

- Feminism from the start has been deeply concerned with the body – either as something to be rejected in the pursuit of intellectual equality according to a masculinist standard, or as something to be reclaimed as the very essence of female. A third, more recent alternative, largely associated with feminist postmodernism, seeks to emphasize the importance and inescapability of embodiment as a differential and fluid construct, the site of potential, rather than as a fixed given. (“Openings on the Body” 2-3)

As a way to further open up the reading of the body as a “site of potential,” I draw inspiration from Susan Wendell’s *The Rejected Body*, wherein she makes a careful examination of the disabled or ill body in feminist studies. Most feminist approaches to reading the body often ignore the negative adult experiences of the body, such as illness, disability, pain, and suffering (167). Wendell proposes that:

- Because the Western tradition particularly devalued women’s bodies and appropriated the authority to describe bodily experiences unique to women, feminist writings about experience of the body tend to focus on sexuality (heterosexual, lesbian, and bisexual), the changes of monthly cycles, pregnancy, birth, and mothering. Also in reaction to this tradition and its consequences, feminists have celebrated the body, emphasizing aspects of bodily experience that are sources of pleasure, satisfaction, and feelings of connection. These two understandable and valuable reactions, however, had led feminists to overlook or underestimate the fact that the body is also a source of frustration, suffering, and even torment. (167)

In each of the novels of my study, the bodies in question are bodies who suffer (from both physical and mental disabilities and illnesses). The question of
transcendence from the body, then, becomes problematized as “attempting to transcend or disengage oneself from the body by ignoring or discounting its needs and sensations is generally a luxury of the healthy and able-bodied” (Wendell 173). Given that much of the existing criticism of the body in both cyberpunk and feminist SF surrounds the issue of corporeal transformation or transcendence, corporeal feminism, influenced by feminist disability studies, offers my project a productive framework for investigating the anxieties that surround the cultural construction of the body and thinking through the implications of the fleshy body in non-material sites of embodiment.

Specifically, I am interested in the work of Shildrick and Elizabeth Grosz. As Shildrick and Price note, “The concern with the irreducible interplay of text and physicality which posits a body in process, never fixed or solid, but always multiple and fluid is on the resonates, implicitly and explicitly, in the work of theorists such as Elizabeth Grosz and Judith Butler” (6). In her foundational work *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Grosz’s attention to the “leakiness” of the body supports my argument that the corporealities in feminist post-cyberpunk reject essentialism and refuse containment. Grosz’s fascination with the “ability of bodies to always extend the frameworks which attempt to contain them, to seep beyond their domains of control” (xi) leads her to posit that “the body must be regarded as a site of social, political, cultural, and geographical inscriptions, production, or constitution. The body is not opposed to culture, a resistant throwback to a natural past; it is itself a cultural, the cultural, product”
By reading Grosz’s theory alongside the bodies of the crèche children (who are being artificially gestated) in Mixon’s *Proxies*, for example, the depth of their monstrosity *and* humanity becomes more apparent; if all bodies are cultural products, then no body can be deemed more monstrous—or more excessive, contagious, and non-normative—than another, as embodiment is neither pure nor privileged.

Building on this characterization of the body as cultural product, I am also attentive to Grosz’s insistence that the culturally marked and differentiated body is both porous and dangerous:

> Bodily differences, marked and given physical and cultural significance, are of course not restricted to the particular bodily regions in which they originate: they seep not only outside of and beyond the body, forming a kind of zone of contamination, but also into all other regions of the body, passing on a kind of aura or more of operation that is no longer localized or localizable. (206)

The ability of bodies to further contaminate themselves, as well as pose a threat to the spaces of their social interaction, enhances my reading of the marked female and technological bodies in feminist post-cyberpunk SF. Grosz’s corporeal feminism, then, is well suited to analyzing feminist post-cyberpunk as the writers all seek to challenge both essentialism and misogynist discursive practices. She posits that:

> Relying on essentialism, naturalism and biologism, misogynist thought confines women to the biological requirements of reproduction on the assumption that because of particular biological, physiological, and endocrinological transformations, women are somehow more biological, more corporeal, and more natural than men. (14)
Seemingly aware of such limiting assumptions, Lai, Hopkinson, Sullivan, and Mixon each challenge misogynist thought by denaturalizing women’s corporealities through the material inclusion of reproductive and telecommunication technologies into the body.

As I established at the start of the chapter, the other aspect of corporeal feminism that contributes strongly to my analysis is Shildrick’s conception of the vulnerable body in *Embodying the Monster*. Instead of rehashing readings of the body that focus on its “capacity to instantiate new norms of sexuality, production or reproduction,” Shildrick addresses “the consequences – ontological, epistemological and above all ethical – of viewing bodies as unable to comply with the norms through which they enter the space of discourse, and thus of what counts as reality” (2). Proposing to “read the body as a discursive construction” (78), Shildrick pays special attention to non-normative bodies, such as the maternal body17 and the disabled body. Building on the “seeping” bodies of Grosz’s evocation, Shildrick argues that “the disabled body, the body that resists the conscious control of the will, that is effectively out of control, may carry no infectious agents, and yet – regardless of the gender investments – it is treated as though it were contaminatory” (73). Unlike many popular images of disability, such as the wheel-chair bound soldier hero in 2009’s *Avatar*, whose vulnerability is emphatically redeemed, the disabled body in feminist post-cyberpunk often

17 I draw and expand on Shildrick’s examination of the maternal body in Chapter Three “Mothering Monsters: Technology, Reproduction, and the Maternal Body.”
becomes a site of cultural contestation wherein people turn to technology as a means of containment and cure.\textsuperscript{18} Beyond the shared aspect of “seepage and contaminant” in Grosz and Shildrick’s corporeal theory, I am interested in Shildrick’s insistence that all bodies are ultimately vulnerable. The disabled body is set apart because its vulnerability is visible: “What causes unease is not that those named as disabled are helpless – indeed the majority are far from it – but that the inviolability of their bodies, the inviolability that confers an aura of self-mastery, appears to have been breached. They are in other words visibly vulnerable” (76). From Miranda’s seeping durian-odor in \textit{Salt Fish Girl} to Meniscus’s azure-hued skin in \textit{Maul}, feminist post-cyberpunk is rife with the literal and metaphorical figures of the “visibly vulnerable.” I will return to the concept of vulnerable bodies – both visible and veiled – throughout each chapter, as it underpins my contention that feminist post-cyberpunk challenges normative constructions of the body as inviolable and whole.

Corporeal feminism is extremely important for this project and its concern with the way in which technology both exposes and enables the vulnerable body. Pairing this theoretical approach with feminist post-cyberpunk, as I have gestured towards, is a productive fit in theorizing technological corporealities. As Mitchell states

\begin{quote}
SF is able to shift the scope of the culturally intelligible, revealing the non-naturalness of our notion of intelligibility. The bodies of SF are not
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{18} I explore the idea of technology as a way to “cure” or “fix” the disabled and visibly vulnerable body in depth in Chapter Four “Technology as Cure? Virtuality, Proxies, and the Vulnerable Body.”
without constraints; rather they operate within constraints that may be quite different from those that shape us in the present, revealing how contingent and conventional our understanding of the body is – perhaps even pointing the way to new possibilities and modes of materialization. (“Bodies that Matter” 116)

The restraints that I am most curious about in my analysis are, of course, technological. While technology – be it cyberspace, virtual reality, cloning, and so forth – is often culturally deemed necessary for the shared notion of progress and thus assumed inherently transformative, it also places unexpected restraints on bodies. As Grosz and Shildrick observe, bodies, especially those which actively or passively reject normativity, require containment. Technology is often applied as the means to either “fix” or simply eradicate the most “visibly vulnerable.”

Such radical, and often unanticipated, technological incursions into the body foster anxiety as to what then constitutes the human, both for those deemed “visibly vulnerable” in Shildrick’s evocation, as well as for bodies who display the illusion of wholeness. Drawing on corporeal feminism, I am defining “the human” as both corporeally and ontologically vulnerable. Just as my study of the body in this project necessitates a care to avoid essentialism in favour of a generative framework, the human, as a cultural construct, can be neither singular nor certain. By characterizing the human as ontologically vulnerable – in that no cultural conception of the human can ever speak for all bodies at any given moment in time – I open up a critical space wherein I can productively read both “the body” and “the human” as taken up by feminist post-cyberpunk SF without falling back on the essentialism of second-wave feminist thought. Also, by
figuring the human as both corporeally and ontologically vulnerable, I am better able to trace the impact of technology on the body as the novels of my study are deeply concerned with the changing understanding of what constitutes human being and the body proper.

One of the most notable figures in SF that directly embodies technology is the cyborg. In addition to the cyborg being influential in reconceptualizing the gendered body, Mitchell notes that: “In general, the cyborg has been held up as facilitating a move beyond those nasty and confining ‘dualistic epistemologies’ of the post-Enlightenment world, and the ideas of self governance, boundary-crossing, and the breaking down of hierarchies oppositions are evidently of interest to feminist theorists” (113). Again, while there are no traditional cyborgs in the texts of my study, the influence of the cyborg figure and its centrality in theorizing the posthuman in both feminist theory and SF cannot be ignored. Undisputedly, Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” spurred a new wave of critical feminist interest in the cyborg. Reflecting on the technological and theoretical developments of the 1980s, Haraway’s manifesto introduced the notions of techno-feminism and posthumanism to a new generation of academic readers. While it now reads as an artifact of its time, “A Cyborg Manifesto” nevertheless continues to inform current feminist discussions of the posthuman. In particular, Haraway’s contention that we must eschew all notions of essentialism as “‘we’ do not want more natural matrix of unity and that no construction is whole” (157) frames the concept of the posthuman as an inherently cultural
product. “Our bodies, ourselves; bodies are maps of power and identity. Cyborgs are no exception” states Haraway, positing that “we are responsible for boundaries; we are they” (180). Echoing the theoretical tenets of corporeal feminism, Haraway imagines the cyborg as the co-constitution of culture and technology.

Current (feminist) posthuman theorists Elaine Graham and N. Katherine Hayles take up Haraway’s call to avoid essentialism and embrace cyborg boundaries. In response to “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Graham, in *Representations of the Post/Human,* gently proposes that “while full of critical power, Haraway’s cyborg writing is incapable of resolving the polarity between the technological/postbiological sublime (in the shape of the patriarchal sky-god) and a compensatory restoration of the ‘chthonic’ integrity of the earth-goddess” (201). In other words, while Haraway argues against essentialist duality, the structure of her ‘cyborg’ writing still reinscribes the same dichotomies. Graham then suggests that:

> It is imperative to rethink the model of ‘transcendence’ that informs representations of the post/human premised on a vision of immortality, omniscience, omnipotence and incorporeality. The task is not simply to interpret the symbol of transcendence in whose image technoscientific desires for omniscience and necrophilia are legitimated, but to change it. (220)
Graham’s appeal for changing the way in which we approach interpreting transcendence resonates with my project, as feminist post-cyberpunk SF rejects previously conceived models of the posthuman that are presented as transcendence. While corporeal feminism informs my approach to reading the gendered body, posthumanism focuses my attention on issues of technological embodiment and transitional spaces in feminist post-cyberpunk.

In its most basic evocation, “posthuman, [is] the fully technologized successor species to organic Homo sapiens” (Graham 9) or as Hayles explains in How We Became Posthuman, “In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals” (3). Both Graham and Hayles, however, resist valuing the posthuman, instead favouring an investigation into its potential for reconceptualizing notions of embodiment and corporeality. While technology is a crucial component in posthumanism, Hayles stresses that the posthuman subject does not need to be a literal cyborg (half biological, half machine) as the defining

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20 Hayles does list four key assumptions about the posthuman: first, the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life (2); second, the posthuman view considers consciousness … as an epiphenomenon, as an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show when in actuality it is only a minor sideshow (2-3); third, the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born (3); and lastly, and most important, by these and other means, the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines (3).
characteristics involve the construction of its subjectivity (4). Following this distinction, then, the fleshy bodies of feminist post-cyberpunk are all possible examples of the posthuman as technology is interwoven into their culturally constructed corporealities.

Both Graham and Hayles reject the contention that the posthuman requires the end of the human. Of importance to this project is the weight placed on the notions of change and transformation; Graham argues that the “end of the human” does not need to mean a choice between becoming fully cyborg or adopting a “natural” subjectivity, but that technology becomes a tool, not an impediment, to the formation of embodied identity (199). With a similar stance, Hayles echoes Graham’s claim, arguing that the posthuman “signals the end of a certain perception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice” (286). I deeply appreciate both Hayle’s and Graham’s attention to the lived realities of bodies; to be posthuman, in their invocations, means not to become cyborg, but to be aware of and open to the possibilities of ontological change, at least for those who have the privilege and wealth to afford such reflections. Instead of ousting the fleshy and vulnerable body from a posthuman future, both theorists ground their ideations in current sites of human experience.

One of the best summaries of this position comes from Sheryl Vint’s Bodies of Tomorrow. Regarding the place of the body in posthuman thought, Vint writes:
The ability to construct the body as passé is a position available only to those privileged to think of their (white, male, straight, non-working-class) bodies as the norm. This option does not exist for those who still need to rely on the work of their bodies to produce the means of survival, for those who lack access to technologies that can erase the effects of illness, and for those whose lives continue to be structured by racist, sexist, homophobic, and other body-based discourses of discrimination. The body remains relevant to critical work and ‘real’ life, both because ‘real’ people continue to suffer or prosper in the material bodies, and because the discourses that structure these material bodies continue to construct and constrain our possible selves. (9)

Throughout my analysis of feminist post-cyberpunk SF, I will engage with the ways in which reproductive, virtual, and telecommunications technologies are both liberating and limiting for the “real” fleshy bodies the writers depict in their narratives of the posthuman.

In terms of considering questions surrounding the posthuman and its attendant biases, SF is especially useful because, as Vint suggests, “it is a discourse that allows us to concretely imagine bodies and selves otherwise, a discourse defined by its ability to estrange out commonplace perceptions of reality” (19), and it offers “a space in which models of possible future selves are put forward as possible sites for identification on the part of readers” (20). As Vint eloquently writes, these possible selves continue to be defined by “racist, sexist, homophobic and other body-based discourses of discrimination” (9).

Science fiction, and feminist SF in particular, has been a powerful site wherein these discriminatory discourses are taken up and either dismantled or woefully reiterated. Lisa Nakamura has been an influential critic of new technologies, such as the internet and virtual reality, outing the hidden discourses of race that play
out in on-line interactions, and, by extension, in the SF narratives that idealize them. Nakamura’s ground-breaking research “on cross-racial impersonation in an on-line community reveals that when users are free to choose their own race, all were assumed to be white” (“After/Images of Identity” 325). The practice of eliding race in cyberspace carries over into the marketing of SF – Sharon DeGraw cites the well-known example of Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy having a white-woman depicted on the novels’ covers when the main character, Lilith Iyapo, is clearly described as African-American (“Delany” 112). While such blatant white-washing happens less frequently today, the long history of racial suppression and oppression in SF makes the need for careful postcolonial critiques, I argue, an urgent matter. In addition to speaking to gender, I believe that addressing the role of race is crucial to any discussion of the posthuman.

One of the most complex and problematic sites of identification in SF centers on race – both in terms of the inclusion of racialized characters and the visibility of non-white SF writers. In the field of SF at large, the lack of attention paid to racialized minorities has been much decried by academics and fans alike. In *Astrofuturism*, De Witt Douglas Kilgore states that: “Science fiction and popular science have been produced and consumed primarily by Euro-American males; given the gender and racial barriers institutionalized around science and technology in the twentieth century, this demographic narrowness should not surprise us” (10). Further deepening the debate around exclusion of people of colour from SF, “the lives of women of color are scrutinized, distilled,
whitewashed, and offered to a scrutinized, distilled, whitewashed American public,” as Elyce Helford notes in her discussion of the racist standards in the American publishing industry (“(E)raced Visions” 127). While feminist SF has traditionally been more inclusive in its depiction of racialized characters, Helford goes on to argue that “like the white-dominated women’s movement, which has not adequately attended to race and class as they affect diverse women, the white-dominated field of feminist science fiction has not adequately attended to race and class in depicting women” (128). After having done extensive research into feminist SF and cyberpunk criticism, I have to agree with Helford’s assessment; while postcolonial readings of texts are available and there are several well-known women of colour who publish in SF, they make up only a small percentage of the SF world. In choosing the texts of this study, I hope to level the playing field to some extent as Lai and Hopkinson both identify as “women of colour,” and all four narratives depict racially minoritized characters and attempt to address issues of race (as well as class to a certain degree).

In order to appropriately and productively talk about race in feminist post-cyberpunk, I will draw on the work of several SF critics such as Lisa Nakamura, Thomas Foster, Jenny Wolmark, Marlene Barr, and Anne Balsamo to name a few. The reason for the dispersion across several theoretical and critical texts is simply that there are not many academics working primarily on race in feminist or cyberpunk SF. Despite repeated calls for more extensive work to be produced in the area, most of the postcolonial criticism applicable to my study is either spread
out among larger discussions of the body in SF or contained within analyses of specific novels and writers (such as Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler for example). Inarguably, race remains neglected in much SF, but DeGraw suggests that the subgenre of cyberpunk\(^{21}\) offers a tenuous space within the larger field of SF for racialized narratives to perform visibly as the global, cyber focus of cyberpunk can work to lessen the importance of particular ethnic/racial/national groups, similar to science fiction generally. Yet unlike science fiction generally, the global focus also necessitates at least a token acknowledgement of such groups. In this tension, cyberpunk continues the contradictory stance of most earlier texts dealing with race – visibly highlighting race while simultaneously undermining its contemporary usage. (“Delany” 182)

I contend that feminist post-cyberpunk expands the global focus of cyberpunk, and, by doing so, addresses some of the racial tension that DeGraw rightly observes existing in much SF. Current critics of SF are optimistic about the new SF authors that are directly addressing the issue of race and the racialized body. DeGraw specifically sites Hopkinson as a writer who emphasizes ethnicity in her work (181) and Vint observes, “the new selves SF might help us imagine are both the problematic selves and unexpected others … [and] they remind us of the fragility of our boundary-making work and that the Other always is an aspect of the self made problematic” (21). As I progress through my readings of *Salt Fish Girl*, *Midnight Robber*, *Maul*, and *Proxies*, I will strive to articulate the ways in

\(^{21}\) Interestingly, DeGraw favourably compares Neal Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* to Piercy’s *He, She, and It* for their use of “cyberspace, cyborgs, and robots to investigate the complex construction of racial subjectivity in a postmodern era. In their focus on technology and computerization, both authors develop issues generally eschewed by Butler and only briefly discussed by Delany” (181).
which these feminist post-cyberpunk narratives reinscribe limiting visions of race as well as envision new racialized selves.

**The Meat of the Matter: Chapters**

I begin my critical analysis with Chapter Two “Technological Transgressions: Liminality and the Posthuman.” In this chapter I take up all four novels – Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*, Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber*, Sullivan’s *Maul*, and Mixon’s *Proxies* – in order to establish the ways in which the writers explore the limits of corporeality and technological embodiment. Progressing through each text, I highlight the modes of technology – cloning, virtual reality, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, and telepresence – that create psychic disruptions and foster corporeal indeterminacy. Drawing on Judith Squire’s notion of “liminality,” I argue that each novel makes visible the inherent vulnerability of the body as it attempts transformation into the posthuman. The main focus of Chapter Two deals with the ways in which bodies are negatively impacted by technological embodiment. I intentionally leave my critiques of technology and the posthuman open-ended in this chapter, seeking resolution in the following sections.

Next, I turn my attention to *Salt Fish Girl* and *Midnight Robber* in Chapter Three, “Mothering Monsters: Technology, Reproduction, and the Maternal Body.” I interrogate the ways in which Lai and Hopkinson explore issues of maternity and reproduction in posthuman worlds. Cloning meets reincarnation in
Salt Fish Girl, as Lai traces the journey of durian-odoured Miranda from adolescence to motherhood. I examine the ways reproductive technologies, like cloning, intersect with environmental pollution and new hybrid diseases. Miranda’s struggles with corporeal indeterminacy and “seepage” are reflected, I argue, in Midnight Robber’s Tan-Tan. Like Lai, Hopkinson exposes the particular vulnerability and monstrosity inherent in maternity as Tan-Tan struggles with self-actualization and non-normative embodiment. Straddling the worlds of technology (Toussaint) and unadulterated nature (New Half-Way Tree), Tan-Tan becomes a contested site of the posthuman. In this chapter, I argue that feminist post-cyberpunk, as represented by Lai and Hopkinson, situate the maternal body as both vulnerable and technologically adaptable.

Lastly, in Chapter Four “Technology as Cure? Virtuality, Proxies, and the Vulnerable Body,” I analyze Sullivan’s Maul alongside Mixon’s Proxies by paying particular attention to corporeal interactions with virtual space and telepresence technology. While conventional cyberpunk (and SF in general) imagines technology as aiding in transcendence from the body, I read feminist post-cyberpunk as problematizing the corporeal transition into the posthuman. In this chapter, I focus on the ways in which gendered, raced, and disabled bodies are simultaneously enhanced and exploited through virtual reality and telepresence technologies. The young male clone Meniscus in Maul finds himself transforming in the wake of virtually-enabled communication with sentient microbes, but I propose that he remains a highly vulnerable and indeterminate
body. Mixon’s use of telepresence and proxy-bodies in *Proxies* offers her characters access to technological embodiment, but at the cost of losing connection with their fleshy-body. Ultimately, I argue that feminist post-cyberpunk condemns the exploitation of the “visibly vulnerable” under the guise of “curing” the body and insists on recognizing the vulnerability of the flesh as a defining trait of what constitutes human being.
CHAPTER TWO

Technological Transgressions: Liminality and the Posthuman

Posthuman technology threatens to reengineer humanity into a new machinic species and extinguish the old one. Science fiction shows that this process will subvert human values like love and empathy, revealing that the intrinsic principles of these technologies fortify genetic discrimination, social fragmentation, totalitarianism, surveillance, environmental degradation, mind control, infection, and destruction. (Dinello, Technophobia! 273)

The way my body feels is not the totality of my experience. (Wendell, The Rejected Body 174)

Conventional cyberpunk is about transcending the body – leaving the “meat” behind in the real world, so that the unfettered self can actualize its full potential through technology. The loss of the body does not equate with a termination of personhood – or the “soul” – in these narratives. In feminist post-cyberpunk SF, however, it is the body, not technology, which ultimately determines and limits the possibility of transcendence and adaptation. In the texts of my study, technology’s colonization of the flesh problematizes the definition of what constitutes human being and shatters comforting essentialist ideals of body and mind. Daniel Dinello argues in Technophobia! that, “as emerging technologies shift the balance of power between human and machine, our concept of humanity alters. Rapidly accelerating computer intelligence joins an escalating series of ego-smashing scientific breakthroughs that diminish human self-image” (5). With the increasing use of technology to “improve” the human, cultural anxieties surrounding boundaries – between the organic and inorganic, human and machine, the flesh and the mind – are being exacerbated to an unprecedented
degree. “Definitive accounts of human nature may be better arrived at not through a description of essences, but via the delineation of boundaries,” (11) affirms Elaine Graham in *Representations of the Post/Human*. As I read the vulnerable and permeable bodies present in each novel, I want to trace the impact on the delineation of boundaries. This chapter is ultimately concerned with investigating the disruptions of human boundaries, and the fears and hopes that attend them, in Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*, Nalo Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber*, Tricia Sullivan’s *Maul*, and Laura Mixon’s *Proxies*.

Before I begin my analysis of the texts, I want to first expand on this notion of boundaries and the ways in which they are affected by technology. Along with the corporeal feminism of Margrit Shildrick and Elizabeth Grosz,1 I am also intrigued by science studies theorist Susan Squier’s *Liminal Lives*, wherein she provides an excellent discussion of boundaries, or more specifically, in her terms, liminality. Drawing on the corporeal feminist tenet of the body as a fluid cultural and material product, Squier defines liminality as: “A space of ‘potency and potentiality,’ ‘experiment and play,’ the liminal zone escapes the fixity and regulation of clock time into a realm between what is and what may be” and posits that “liminal lives are those that exist in that in-between or marginal zone” (4). While liminal lives have always existed, the plurality of them in our daily lives is increasing, as Squier observes: “As medical interventions are

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1 Refer to my discussion of Shildrick’s and Grosz’s corporeal feminism in Chapter One, “Bleeding Chrome: Reading the Body in Feminist Post-Cyberpunk” (34-40).
reshaping our ways of conceiving, being born, growing, aging, and dying, liminal lives surround us – in our schools, our families, our professions, our institutions, our representations – anywhere that the expected shape or span of human life is being changed through biomedicine” (4). Despite the constant presence of these liminal lives amongst us, Squier contends that “as quickly as these beings [liminal lives] are normalized, we lose awareness of them” (4) due to our tendency to wash over them in our narratives of the “body proper.” Squier argues that liminal beings demand our attention because “they are powerful and dangerous representations of a transformation we are all undergoing as we become initiates in a new biomedical personhood mingling existence and non-existence, organic and inorganic matter, life and death” (5). The feminist post-cyberpunk SF of my project is rife with liminal beings, as each author explores the possibilities of human reproduction, healing, and adaptation in the near and distant future.

Further complicating issues surrounding the body and technology is the question of embodiment. N. Katherine Hayles, in *How We Became Posthuman*, theorizes that: “Whereas the body is an idealized form that gestures toward a Platonic reality, embodiment is the specific instantiation generated from the noise of difference. Relative to the body, embodiment is other and elsewhere, at once excessive and deficient in its infinite variations, particularities, and abnormalities” (196-197). Hayles’s distinction between the body and embodiment is particularly useful when discussing feminist post-cyberpunk. Are liminal beings those that express themselves through embodiment, but not the body proper? As I stressed in
the introduction, Hayles insists that “the body produces culture at the same time that culture produces the body” (200). I am also sensitive to the notion that many of the bodies displayed in feminist post-cyberpunk are, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson terms, “atypically embodied” (“Making Freaks” 129). Referring to these singularly bodied people, like Meniscus in *Maul* and the crèche children in *Proxies*, as “freaks,” “disabled” or “monstrous,” is not to denigrate them, but to articulate that their atypical embodiments produce them as social subjects with “differentiated and marked bodies” (“Making Freaks” 131). In each of the novels of my analysis, the struggle to define the body and embodiment is exacerbated by the merging of technology with flesh. All bodies, in their encounters with technology, engage with border crossings, liminality, and their own tenuous grasp on actualized embodiment. As I move through each text, I will return to these theorizations of the body and embodiment as they lay an interconnected foundation that is identifiable as both corporeal feminist and posthuman. My overall purpose is to demonstrate the ways in which feminist post-cyberpunk SF checks posthumanist aspirations by rejecting the notion of a disembodied embodiment through the depiction of transgressed (or atypical) corporealities.

For reasons of coherence and intelligibility, my discussion of the novels will unfold in a linear fashion wherein I take up one text at a time. While my main concern is with the representation of body, it is important to note that each of the four novels of this study produces to a varying extent fragmented spaces, narratives, and corporealities. Jane Donawerth observes the general trope of
fragmentation in feminist dystopias of the 1990s: “Just as identity … is fragmented, so too is literary form. In these dystopic science fictions, either there are multiple narrators, or the narrator has multiple identities and memory gaps” (“Feminist Dystopia” 53). Echoing Donawerth’s observation, Jenny Wolmark proposes that these “fluid and often unstable temporal landscapes of feminist SF create a symbolic space within which fixed notions of subjectivity and identity are challenged, and the dynamic between being and becoming is explored” (“Time and Identity” 156). This propensity for fragmentation of space, narrative, and body continues in the work of Lai, Hopkinson, Sullivan, and Mixon, I argue, as they explore the limits of human subjectivity. Since fragmentation manifests differently in each text, I will signpost the forms (spatial, narrative, and embodied) that are most significant to my overall argument within each specific analysis. At the same time, for each narrative, I will highlight its unique critical engagement with the effect of technology on the body (and mind). Finally, I will address the ways in which these texts situate the ideological and social effects of technologies as fortifying genetic discrimination, social fragmentation and infection, surveillance, and environmental degradation (Dinello 273).

I will move through this opening literary analysis in the following order: Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*, Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber*, Sullivan’s *Maul*, and finally, Mixon’s *Proxies*. In each section, I will highlight the key social and environmental issues – along with the technological “fixes” – that have pushed humanity to the brink of the posthuman. While all the narratives address
discrimination and domination of the vulnerable body, each writer frames the influential power-relationships differently. *Salt Fish Girl* and *Proxies* both expose the economic and technological exploitation of the marginalized: women, the sick, and racially-minoritized. Concerned with issues of colonization, *Midnight Robber* focuses on the dynamic between colonizers and colonized (at both the global and familial level). *Maul* completely reverses conventional patriarchal power structures by situating women as the perpetrators of surveillance and control. Regardless of the framing narrative power structures, these feminist post-cyberpunk texts all ask: how will the “visibly vulnerable” be treated in the future? How will human embodiment be changed through technologies wielded by those who seek to elide vulnerability at all costs?

**Something Stinks: Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl***

Foregrounding the anxieties surrounding genetic, reproductive, and virtual technologies, Graham suggests that: “What is at stake, supremely, in the debate about the implications of digital, genetic, cybernetic and biomedical technologies is precisely what (and who) will define authoritative notions of normative, exemplary, desirable humanity into the twenty-first century” (11). In *Salt Fish Girl*, Lai attempts to answer what humanity might look like if technology and capitalism continue their current courses of progress. Central to the novel is Miranda’s durian-odour and the ways in which it is linked to the “sleeping disease” affecting those in the Unregulated Zone. Miranda learns that: “The
symptoms [of the disease] are so peculiar, and so unlike any other known disease – foul odours of various sorts that follow the person without actually emanating from the body, psoriasis, sleep apnea, terrible dreams usually with historical content, and a compulsive drive to commit suicide by drowning” (100). While no one seems to have any real information about the disease in terms of curing it, they theorized that it might be the product of mass industrial genetic alteration practices – that the modifications of agricultural products in recent years had contaminated the soil, that the microbes that lived in the earth were mutating and infecting humans. That humans could get diseases once only possible in plants, or that indeed, the new disease was a strange hybrid, combining those that affected plants and those that affected animals. (102)

In her book *Contagious*, Priscilla Wald studies the relationship between disease and humans. Hybrid viruses, as part of the uncontrollable environment, are particularly conceived as dangerous because, as Wald explains, “the most dangerous viruses are themselves frequently hybrids: the mutant strains produced when animal and human viruses recombine in animal hosts. In viral terms, hybridity is dangerous because it combines newness and familiarity” (260). The threat of hybridity looms over Miranda from the very moment of her conception as her mother became pregnant after eating a durian fruit from the Unregulated Zone. Her father initially warns Miranda’s mother about the durian fruit:

Only barbarians eat those kinds of things. You know if it doesn’t have a Saturna sticker it isn’t safe. Everything has been affected by these modified pollens. If it grows wild in the Unregulated Zone you have no idea what kinds of mutations have occurred. (32)

2 While not directly stated in the narrative, the reader assumes that all food is genetically modified in some way, as Miranda casually notes that one apple is large enough to feed four people (32).
Like the hybrid virus of the “sleeping disease,” Miranda’s non-normative corporeality – with its familiar appearance, but new unsettling plant-derived smell – appears to threaten conventional society.

The unknown route of transmission of the “sleeping disease” generates further anxiety in the narrative, which becomes displaced onto the female body. No one knows how people are infected and many rumours\(^3\) abound: “On the street of Painted Horse 3000, they say never to walk barefoot on the beaches where victims have walked into the sea and drowned. They say it spreads through the soles of the feet” (101). Simple interaction with the environment therefore becomes dangerous in *Salt Fish Girl*. Lai figures bodies as permeable, and therefore inherently vulnerable to contagion. Grosz conjectures that “body fluids flow, they seep, they infiltrate” (194) and that:

> It is not the case that men’s bodily fluids are regarded as polluting and contaminating for women in the same way or to the same extent as women’s are for men. It is women and what men consider to be their inherent capacity for contagion, their draining, demanding bodily processes that have figured so strongly in cultural representations, and that have emerged so clearly as a problem for social control. (197)

With their unnerving draw to water, a conventional feminine attribute, the bodies of the afflicted in *Salt Fish Girl* present themselves as threats to the social order.

\(^3\) Evie tells Miranda that the dreaming disease spreads by coming “up through the soil. Not everywhere but in certain areas, close to where they’ve grown GE potatoes. It comes up through the skin of your feet and gets into your blood-stream. Makes your skin all funny” (164).
that men like Dr. Flowers desire to maintain. Diseased individuals embody the breakdown of both bodily and communal borders:

We heard from customers of a girl who smelled of cooking oil, who remembered all the wars ever fought. She could recall and recount every death, every rape, every wound, every moment of suffering that had ever been inflicted by a member of her ancestral lineage. The only place she could find relief from this barrage of collective memory was in water. (85)

With access to a collective memory of war and suffering, the girl becomes a marker of social pollution. Searching for an answer to this facet of the disease, Dr. Seto suggests it “had been intentionally manufactured” (102) and that “people are catching a bug that gives them the memory structure of other animals – fish maybe, or elephants” (103). The risk of corporeal hybridity and social contagion then ultimately stems from human misuse of technology and irresponsible intervention with nature. The bodies inhabiting Salt Fish Girl are all vulnerable to the corrupted environment in which they live, as unnatural contagions seep into their permeable bodies and threaten to infect others.

In addition to suffering from the “sleeping disease,” many of those afflicted undergo illegal experimentation by the obsessive Dr. Rudy Flowers.⁴

Performing live dissections on TV, Dr. Flowers rearranges the “organs of the

⁴ Dr. Flowers' experiments go beyond his research into the “sleeping disease” into the realm of cloning humans. After meeting the cloned Evie, Miranda learns that Flowers has been making people since the fifties, mostly Sonias (who have carp genes) and Miyakos (who have cat genes). He kept one of the Miyakos as his wife and one of the Sonias as his daughter; the daughter, Evie, he sends to labour in a factory, while the wife kills herself (252). I will take up the narrative of Evie and other cloned Sonias in much greater critical depth in Chapter Three, “Mothering Monsters: Technology, Reproduction, and the Maternal Body.”
afflicted” and proclaims that “they are the new language of God … The body is
the language of the third testament” (76). Miranda witnesses Dr. Flowers’ work
first-hand when, led by her friend Ian, she is shown a secret facility below her
school. To Miranda’s horror, they espy “janitors” with

rectangular holes in their uniforms that ran away from the tailbone to the
base of the neck. The muscle and skin of their backs had been replaced by
some kind of transparent silicone composite so that you could see their
spines and behind them, their hearts pounding, their livers and kidneys
swimming in oceans of blood and gristle. […] They had been shifted, had
been carefully arranged like stones in a formal garden, mimicking the
asymmetrical aesthetics of nature, but with human intention. (76)

Afflicted by unwanted hybridity, Dr. Flowers exploits the patients’ fear of being
“out of order.” By rearranging their organs, the doctor creates an illusionary sense
of order as if the patients no longer embody the disease. The manipulation of their
bodies, however, only deepens their hybridity and apparent monstrosity. Graham
argues that:

Monsters bear witness to the power of the marginal, the Other, to
demarcate the known and the unknown, the acceptable and the deviant.
Monsters are keepers of the boundaries between human and Other, yet by
virtue of their inhabiting the ‘borderlands’ they promise liberation from
the very strictures of binary definition. Their hybridity challenges our
ontological hygiene. (60)

No amount of medical and technological intervention can contain the patients’
otherness and rid them of their hybridity. Through the figure of Dr. Flowers, I
argue, Lai suggests that a collective willingness to ignore the vulnerability and
hybridity of all bodies will continue well into the future. As technology continues
to progress and infiltrate all aspects of life, Lai insinuates that those in power will
turn to such nightmarish manipulation of the sick and dying in order to preserve
the illusion of social control and, as Graham terms it, ontological hygiene.

As their bodies move beyond normative definitions of life, Miranda and
the people stricken with the “sleeping disease” become the liminal beings of
Squier’s theorization. In *Liminal Lives*, Squier states that:

> Human beings have increasing difficulty maintaining discrete boundaries
> between states or realms, producing legal, psychological, social, and
> medical struggles explored by popular press, government advisory groups,
> theologians, ethicists, and scholars. [...] The limits of a human life have
> been negotiated repeatedly as different definitions of death are generated.
> (5)

As the novel progresses, Lai tests the limits of human life by pushing the notions
of collective memory and experience into the everyday. At home in their kitchen,
Miranda watches as her brother Aaron suddenly collapses; he recovers quickly
and explains: “Everything hurt. Like my whole body was on fire, and then I
thought I had disappeared, like I was sucked up into a vacuum, into nothingness
and then I was nothingness, I was gone. And then I was back and fine” (110). As
he gets up, Miranda notices that “on the floor, where he had been lying, was a
shadow in the shape of his fallen body. It remained there for a second, then faded
to nothing” (110). I read this scene as an instance wherein a collective memory of
death asserts itself into the normative everyday, effectively crossing the boundary
between the physical and metaphysical. For a brief moment, Aaron
(re)experiences the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima, as if the atomic fallout is
etched into the fiber of his being. Instead of eliding the experience of death, Lai
underscores the inherent liminality of the human: despite our creative and robust
expressions of life, we are vulnerable bodies (whether as individuals or as an entire population). Even the notion of what constitutes normative human experience is brought into question when Miranda meets a woman who reeks of radishes and, echoing the tale of Rapunzel, tells stories that “involved the stealing of fruit and young women rescued from tall towers. Her tales were clearly not based on any sort of factual reality, and yet there was a resonance to them that I couldn’t quite put my finger on. (Like mine … like mine … a whisper only)” (102). Environmental pollution and irresponsible science become the catalysts of creating a society of liminal beings: like the hybrid viruses of Wald’s study, these humans are both “new and familiar.”

In addition to playing out the fears that surround genetic modification and environmental damage, Lai complicates the Western world’s tendency to turn to technological-enabled entertainment as a means of distraction. Dinello suggests that of all the technologies he examines, “biotechnology elicits the greatest fear and the most passionate criticism” as it becomes the current day “technology-out-of-control” (Technophobia! 221-222). As Lai’s narrative of the “sleeping disease” indicates, the misuse of biotechnology is clearly a great source of anxiety. The same fears of corporeal manipulation and surveillance extend into the realm of virtual reality in Salt Fish Girl. At the outset of the text, Miranda explains her family’s love of old technologies, saying, “My mother belonged to that embarrassing era of sleek technology when everyone believed in the goodness of the world” (19). It is not until Miranda goes to school and befriends Ian that she
encounters “technology-out-of-control” in familial spaces. Visiting Ian’s house, she meets his parents both of whom have unnaturally gleaming white teeth; his father has “arm muscles [that] rippled unnaturally” and his mother’s “eyes were both prosthetic and had a terrible piercing intelligence to them. She was immaculately dressed in a stiff, shiny metallic dress. But she had an awful smell about her, like rusting iron only much more intense” (64). Like the high-tech nonsensical wallpaper of Ian’s home (64), his parents are also dressed in biotechnology as fashion. The intentional changes made to the bodies of Ian’s parents pervert the “natural” and expose the construction of the body. While those afflicted with the “sleeping disease” are also visibly vulnerable – as their bodies are open to viewing (and, for the patients of Dr. Flowers, their bodies are literally on display) – the “stiff, shiny metallic” corporeal embracements displayed by Ian’s parents suggest attempts at fortifying the boundaries of, and blocking access to, the body.

Going against technophilia, Lai refuses to mindlessly celebrate technology. Kaye Mitchell writes that utopian readings of technology and the body “rarely acknowledge the more pessimistic, Foucauldian possibility that technology may be working to perpetuate and extend the complicated network of power relations and modes of self-regulation already in place” (“Bodies that Matter” 110). Salt Fish Girl is certainly not a utopia and Lai denies her characters any solace in technology as even the seemingly safe escapist technology of virtual reality becomes a tool of domination and exploitation. Clad in his “Business
Miranda’s father navigates the virtual “Real World” as a glorified tax collector for the government. While in the virtual environment, Miranda’s bookish father appears on a view screen as: “tall and strong and solitary. As he approached, his face came into focus. It was my father, but a much younger, stronger, more heroic version of him, both like the man I knew and entirely without the soft, gentle, bookish demeanour with which he carried himself through family life” (26-27). Transformed on-line, Miranda’s father appears heroic and important. Miranda watches as her “father helped the helpless and swallowed increasingly long streams of razor disc birds that turned into numbers when he opened his mouth. The Business Suit made tax collecting into a marvelous adventure” (27). The “Real World,” like the internet of today, claims to change the mundane into the extraordinary, when in actuality, it is a technological reflection of the physical world. Instead of offering a reliable escape from the ills of the world, the virtual “Real World” further substantiates reliance on existing power structures (like government).

While virtual space often allows the user to transcend the body in traditional cyberpunk, “Real World” denies that corporeal escape to its virtual denizens. During a work day, Miranda finds her father retching into the “Business Suit” while writhing on the floor in pain as the General Receivers “extract taxes”

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5 The Business Suit “was a large black suit made of some shiny synthetic material, elastic and tight fitting. There were pieces for every part of the body – a torso piece, two leg pieces, detachable sleeves, boots, gloves, a hood, a terrifyingly anonymous black mask in the exact contours of my father’s face, but without features or colour” (25).
from his avatar: “In a dark door-way in a bombed out street, he stumbled, clutched the wall. His belly was round as a football. Two policemen appeared beside him … [and] with heavy truncheons began to beat him. My father leaned towards the wall and I thought I saw a stream of numbers erupt from his mouth” (27-28). Not only are beatings a routine aspect of virtual tax collecting, but “RealWorld” is rife with thieves and their attacks also result in real physical consequences. Looking in the monitor one day, Miranda sees: “A gang of spindly tall children with mutilated faces … [sticking] their long sharp fingers into his pockets, into his mouth and ears. A free flow of digits streamed up their fingers, up their arms, shoulders, cheeks, into their mouths” (29-30). In response to such scenes of brutality, Robyn Morris argues that “Lai exposes the technological as a paternal and profit-driven process; a process that, in this future city called Serendipity commodifies identity and complicates our past conceptions of humanness as realness” (“What Does it Mean to be Human?” 85). The experiences of Miranda’s father in “RealWorld” complicate traditional notions of “humanness as realness” and embodiment. Since the virtual beatings translate into real bodily suffering, the boundaries between the real self and the virtual self are therefore revealed as extremely permeable just as they are for those afflicted by the “sleeping disease.” Throughout Salt Fish Girl, Lai demonstrates the ways in which technology transgresses corporeal boundaries and exacerbates the vulnerability of bodies.
Little Girl Lost: Nalo Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber*

Jane Donawerth observes that in feminist dystopia, “the machine is both abling and disabling for humanity – and especially for women” (“Feminist Dystopia” 56). As my initial analysis of Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* suggests, this ambivalent technological trend continues in feminist post-cyberpunk SF. Nalo Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber* also surveys the “abling and disabling” effect of technology in women’s lives. Through a fragmented narrative (alternatively voiced by Tan-Tan and Granny Nanny), a temporal-geographical split in the novel (technologically advanced Toussaint and “primitive” New Half-Way Tree), and a character struggling with a split personality (Tan-Tan becomes the Robber Queen), Hopkinson traces the ways that the technological clashes with the organic as Tan-Tan struggles into a conflicted adulthood.

Set in the far distant future, *Midnight Robber* is a novel split between worlds: Toussaint and New-Half Way Tree. Toussaint is a planet governed by the Grande Anansi Nanotech Interface of the Marryshow Corporation, known familiarly as Granny Nanny (2). The people of Toussaint are all connected to Granny Nanny through nanomite receivers in their ears; labour is done by technology and, for the most part, citizens are free to do as they please.

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6 Nanomites move through out the body, aiding and enhancing normal human senses. For example, while outside on a bright day, “The sun had come way out, was burning down full. Registering the way Tan-Tan’s pupils contracted against the glare, the nanomites in the vitreous humour of her eyes polarised, dimming the light for her” (55).
The narrator explains that Granny Nanny was created with great intelligence but with no experiential knowledge. As “she” learned, the AI developed a complex language to comprehend the multiple dimensions of being it discovered. As the pedicab runner Maka explains to Antonio, in order to communicate to people, “Nanny create a version [of computer language] we could access with we own senses. Nannysong is only a hundred and twenty-seven tones, and she does only sing basic phrases to we” (52). With a shared language and an apparent investment in caring for one another, Granny Nanny cannot be characterized as a mere machine nor the citizens of Toussaint as simply human. “Although the ‘posthuman’ differs in its articulations,” writes Hayles, “a common theme is the union of the human with the intelligent machine” (2). In this sense, the inhabitants of Toussaint – in concert with Granny Nanny – are the epitome of the posthuman.

In Virtual Geographies, Sabine Heuser argues that the distinctions between artificial intelligence and the human “are increasingly blurred in cyberpunk science fiction, in a very postmodern concern with fragmentation of the human subject” (93). Hopkinson takes up this familiar cyberpunk rumination and further problematizes it by creating an AI who is relied on for moral judgments: “no-one could override Nanny’s privacy protection. Nanny only chose to reveal information that she judged would infringe on public safety” (50). While the AI may keep certain information about Toussaint’s citizens private, they have little claim to personal privacy. Reacting to the pedicab runner’s proposal of a private message exchange, Antonio thinks:
Private messages! Privacy! The most precious commodity of any Marryshevite. The tools, the machines, the buildings; even the earth itself on Toussaint and all the Nation Worlds had been seeded with nanomites – Granny Nanny’s hands and her body. Nanomites had run the nation ships. The Nation Worlds were one enormous data-gathering system that exchanged information constantly through the Grande Nanotech Sentient Interface: Granny Nansi’s Web. They kept the Nation Worlds protected, guided and guarded its people. But a Marryshevite couldn’t even self take a piss without the toilet analyzing the chemical composition of the urine and logging the data in the health records. (10)

Granny Nanny – along with the accompanying technology that enables its interaction with humans – is the mortar that keeps the people of Nation Worlds united, but at the cost of their privacy and, arguably, their autonomy. While there exists a pedicab runner community7 who live outside of the Web and are tolerated by Granny Nanny (“it had been designed to be flexible, to tolerate a variety of human expression, even dissension, so long as it didn’t upset the balance of the whole” [10]), they are not representative of Toussaint society. On the surface, Toussaint is seemingly harmonious, but cracks in its utopic façade appear again when Tan-Tan asks the house eshu about Toussaint and its douen8 inhabitants before the arrival of the Marryshow Corporation. Eshu answers: “Searching …’

7 Descended from the “programming clan,” the pedicab runners know how to use “nannysong” to ask for privacy (52). They live in small communities focused on human labour without technological intervention. As mayor, Antonio defends his tax on their labour because of “’the way all you insist on using people when a.i. could run a cab like this. You know how it does bother citizens to see all you doing manual labor so. Break-back ain’t for people.’ Blasted luddites” (8).

8 In Trinidadian folklore, the Douen are believed to be the ghosts or spirits of dead unbaptised children. All Douen are said to bear the distinctive trait of having their feet “on backwards” (the heel facing the front). Hopkinson adopts the term “douen” to refer to the native inhabitants of both Toussaint (who are long dead) and New Half-Way Tree.
the eshu whispered quietly. Usually it could get information instantly from the web data banks. ‘I don’t know plenty about them, young Mistress,’ it said finally. ‘Indigenous fauna, now extinct’” (33). Despite Granny Nanny’s supposed moral perfection and tolerance of others, the AI is not simply a guardian but a weapon of colonization. On Toussaint the technological completely dominates the organic and suppresses the non-normative.

In stark opposition to the technological embodiment expressed on Toussaint, the mirror-planet of New Half-Way Tree lacks technology and the exiled humans must learn to co-exist with the native douen (aliens). At the start of *Midnight Robber*, the voice of Granny Nanny explains:

You never wonder where we send thieves-them, and the murderers? Well master, the Nation world does ship them all to New-Half Way Tree, the mirror-planet of Toussaint. […] But where Toussaint civilized, New Half-Way Tree does be rough. […] You know the way a shadow is a dark version of the real thing, the dub side? Well, New Half-Way Tree is a dub version of Toussaint, hanging like a ripe maami apple in one fold of the dimension veil. (2)

I read the disjuncture between Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree as Hopkinson’s reimagining of the way in which conventional cyberpunk fragments space. Unlike cyberpunk, where Graham argues there is no “nostalgic desire for the unadulterated body” (194), Hopkinson uses New Half-Way Tree as a site where

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9 Graham notes:
The urban wasteland characteristic of cyberpunk is similarly divided between the fabulously wealthy – liberated from physical imperfection, bodily confinement, even death, by advanced technologies – and the urban underclass. It is also distinguished by its dystopian mood, indicative of a loss of bearings satisfied by neither futuristic technophilia, technocracy nor nostalgic desire for the unadulterated body. (194)
the posthuman returns to the physically unadulterated human as people are forced to survive using only their corporeal bodies. On Antonio and Tan-Tan’s arrival at the human settlement, Junjuh, Aislin tells the young girl that survival depends on their labour. “Back-break not for people,” Tan-Tan replies, to which Aislin rejoins: “We not people no more. We are exiles. Is work hard or dead” (135). Being “exiles” in New Half-Way demands that people reconceptualize themselves as material labouring bodies.

Reiterating the corporeal feminist tenet of fluid embodiment, Susan Stryker posits that: “The body, then, is always the body-in-flux, an unstable field rather than fixed entity, a vacillation, a contested site for the production of new meaning. It is tenuous matter, caught between the energetic poles of subject and culture, constantly engaged in transformation” (“Transsexuality” 596). On New Half-Way Tree, exiles lose the benefits of the nanomites, but unlike the adults around her Tan-Tan’s young corporeality negotiates the embodied technology differently:

When adult exiles got punted to New Half-Way Tree, the trip through the warps of the dimension veil caused their earbugs to cease functioning. But Tan-Tan’s earbug had still be growing with her growing body; its nanomites hadn’t yet calcified permanently into a transmitter-receiver. The nanomites had become infected and had nearly killed her. (138-139)

As the nanomites fester in her ear, Tan-Tan becomes a liminal being – neither simply human nor fully posthuman. On New Half-Way Tree, Tan-Tan becomes a literal expression of Stryker’s “body-in-flux” as she is caught between the technological and the “natural” body. During her first night in Junjuh, Tan-Tan
falls sick with fever: “Eat you up, beat you up, the candles told her. Her head pounded. Brigand a miduit allez mangez’o. Everything looked blurry” (136). The candles threaten her with violence and consumption, mirroring the terror of transformation she experienced coming through the dimensional veil:

Tan-Tan felt as though her tailbone could elongate into a tail, long and bald like a manicou rat’s. Her cries of distress came out like hyena giggles. The tail-tip twitched. She could feel how unfamiliar muscles would move the unfamiliar limb. The thing standing beside her looked more like a man-sized mongoose than her father. He smelt like food, but she wasn’t supposed to eat. Family. Tan-Tan sobbed and tried to wrap her tail tightly around herself. (74)\textsuperscript{10}

Instead of emerging from the transportation unadulterated (like Antonio and the other exiles), Tan-Tan’s embodiment remains divided between Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree.

Hopkinson further characterizes Tan-Tan as a body-in-flux by elaborating the girl’s secondary identity as the Robber Queen. Returning again to the notion of fluidity, Graham observes that: “Human subjectivity cannot be equated with a single privileged aspect, such as mental functioning. Rather, the mind and the self are themselves intertwined with physical and proprioceptive transactions. The subject is always an organic-technological body-in-relation” (198). For Tan-Tan, the Robber Queen identity becomes an integral part of her “organic-technological body-in-relation” as it allows her to cope with fear and, eventually, live with

\textsuperscript{10} For a discussion of such images of animality in \textit{Midnight Robber}, I recommend reading Madhu Dubey’s article, “Becoming Animal in Black Women’s Science Fiction.” Dubey argues that: “In common with other women writers of science fiction, Octavia E. Butler and Nalo Hopkinson use the trope of woman becoming animal in order to defamiliarize the modern Western discourse of the human” (35).
extreme trauma. Tan-Tan first turns to the Robber Queen identity during Antonio’s duel on Toussaint to cover “up some of her scared feelings” (53), but it is his abusive transgressions on New Half-Way Tree that ultimately splits Tan-Tan’s personality in two. On her ninth birthday, Antonio rapes Tan-Tan for the first time, and the division of self begins:

Daddy was two daddies. She felt her own self split in two to try and understand, to accommodate them both. Antonio, good Antonio smiled at her with his face. Good Tan-Tan smiled back. She closed her mind to what bad Antonio was doing to her bad body. […] She wasn’t Tan-Tan, the bad Tan-Tan. She was Tan-Tan the Robber Queen, the terror of all Junjuh … Nothing bad does ever happen to Tan-Tan the Robber Queen. Nothing can hurt she. (140)

The Robber Queen is a powerful figure that reminds Tan-Tan of her previous controlled and comfortable life on Toussaint. Not only does the masquerade identity offer her with a mental escape from abuse, it provides her with a new self in which to engage the difficult world of New Half-Way Tree.

Like other forms of violence and corporeal fragmentation, sexual trauma is not an uncommon trope in feminist SF. Marlene Barr draws attention to the plight of women in far too many narratives (both fictional and real); she states: “Woman is silenced; she lacks control; her individuality is eradicated. She is the construction site, the bulldozed sentient hole, the earth opened and raped to become the foundation of man’s monument to himself” (“We’re at the start” 201). Antonio succeeds in impregnating Tan-Tan twice\(^\text{11}\) and renders the child Tan-Tan

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\(^{11}\) Tan-Tan first becomes pregnant at 15 and has an abortion. She carries the second pregnancy to term. I analyze Tan-Tan’s reproductive and maternal
mute as she must turn to the Robber Queen for action and reaction. During his last attack on Tan-Tan, she feels:

The scabbard. With the knife inside. A roaring started up in her ears. It couldn’t have been she. It must have been the Robber Queen who pulled out the knife. Antonio raised up to shove into the person on the bed again. It must have been the Robber Queen, the outlaw woman, who quick like a snake got the knife braced at her breastbone just as Antonio slammed his heavy body right onto the blade. (168)

Becoming the Robber Queen allows Tan-Tan to exercise control (by killing her abuser) and to regain speech. As a hybrid figure, exiled Tan-Tan lives with the douen, but visits the scattered human settlements as the Robber Queen. Despite her liberation from Antonio’s tyranny, Tan-Tan dissolves into the Robber Queen personae when she encounters scenes of wrong-doing and violence. During a visit to an outlying settlement, Tan-Tan witnesses a woman abusing her son and “words welled up in the somebody’s mouth like water. Somebody spoke her words the way that the Carnival Robber Kings wove their tales, talking as much nonsense as sense… Somebody’s words uttered forth from Tan-Tan’s tongue” (245). Forgetting herself entirely, Tan-Tan becomes the Robber Queen, which empowers her with misplaced bravery and locution. The more she transforms into the Robber Queen (regardless of the apparently productive outcomes), the further her individuality as Tan-Tan erodes, obfuscating her damaged psyche.

Perhaps the greatest threat Tan-Tan faces is that of losing herself entirely in the fictional Robber Queen. Stemming from her biotechnological narrative in “Chapter Three: Mothering Monsters: Technology, Reproduction, and the Maternal Body.”
transformation during the dimensional crossing and from enduring Antonio’s
abuse, Tan-Tan’s sense of embodiment is conflicted and extremely fragile.
Continuing her theorization of the non-normative body, Graham contends that
“one of the ways in particular in which the boundaries between humans and
almost-humans have been asserted is through the discourse of ‘monstrosity’.
Monsters serve both to mark the fault-lines but, also, subversively, to signal the
fragility of such boundaries” (12). Being the Robber Queen pushes Tan-Tan into
the realm of monstrosity and hybridity (or in Squier’s terms, liminality),
especially as her core identity becomes further bent through her interaction with
the douen. During her first night in the daddy tree, Tan-Tan has a nightmare about
her father from which “she woke up sweating, to the sound of tree frogs singing
out sunrise. She felt unreal. In which world she living in; this daddy tree, or the
nightmare daddy world” (213)? Once again, Tan-Tan exemplifies the body-in-
flux, as her time spent within the douen community influences her highly
permeable boundaries of self-conception. Coming into the town of Chigger Bite
after her long stay with the douen, Tan-Tan sees a woman and: “For a little bit,
Tan-Tan just stood and stared at the strangeness of her; her round face with
neither beak nor snout, her two legs-them that bent to the front not the back. She
would use them to walk, not hop. It came strange to Tan-Tan. She felt her own
body beginning to remember that it was human not douen” (239). Moving
between the douen as Tan-Tan and the humans as Robber Queen deepens the
divide in her identity; the Robber Queen is no longer a costume put on for
comfort, but a liminal being skirting the monstrous. After several more “visits” to Chigger Bite, Tan-Tan:

Was beginning to hear whispers: how she was a duppy, the avenging spirit of a woman who’d been beaten and left in the bush for dead; how she was a hero like Nanny and Anacaona of old, come to succour the massive-them […] how she was a witch who sucked the blood of sleeping pickneys. She could scarce recognize herself in the stories. (256)

Displaced and pregnant, Tan-Tan literally loses herself in the Robber Queen. With every incursion into the human world, the myth of “Tan-Tan the Robber Queen” grows until even Tan-Tan struggles to determine fact from fiction. Like the duppy spirits of her childhood, Tan-Tan has become a ghost of her human self through her extended identification with both the duoen and the Robber Queen persona. Through several splits and folds in the narrative, Hopkinson creates worlds wherein the body is in constant flux and in danger of dissolving into either a technological fantasy or mere memory of the unadulterated body.

The Microbe and the Mall: Tricia Sullivan’s Maul

The next novel of my study also examines a body-in-flux in a narrative split between two worlds. While Hopkinson explores two different physical realms in Midnight Robber, Tricia Sullivan’s Maul draws attention to human embodiment, specifically by looking at an immune system brought to “life” by virtual technologies. Heuser observes that conventional cyberpunk stories play with the perception of the world, where there is “the overthrow of one perceived world for another or the unveiling of an illusion, where the primary fictional
world is uncovered as false and the secondary fictional world emerges as the ‘true’ one” (5). Both Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree are true worlds in *Midnight Robber*, acting as the inverse of the other, but in *Maul*, the secondary fictional world of virtually-enabled Mall blurs the legitimacy of the primary fictional world in the narrative. As *Maul* unfolds, the reader follows two narratives: that of Meniscus and the women who experiment on him, and that of Sun, Suk Hee, and Keri, who are virtually mediated avatars of Meniscus’s immune system. For the purposes of my analysis in this chapter, I want to focus on the real world segments in order to trace the ways in which Sullivan creates a technologically permeable and permeated body that approaches the posthuman.

“The proliferation of old and new viruses confirms that humanity lives at the mercy of the microbe. While technology and progress have helped eradicate some diseases, they have exacerbated others” argues Dinello (250-251). In addition to addressing the issue of which bodies are deemed important for technological “cures,” Sullivan’s novel precisely explores these current anxieties about the threat of a plague that would pit humans against the microbe. In *Maul*, the once powerful scientist Dr. Bernie Taktarov, Meniscus’s clone father, theorizes in his so-called “Bug Exegesis” that: “Because sex was only ever an

12 I take up the narrative of Sun and her friends in “Chapter 4: Technology as Cure? Virtuality, Proxies, and the Vulnerable Body.”

13 Sullivan uses the terms “bugs,” “micros,” “viruses,” and “parasites” interchangeably to refer to “microbes” throughout *Maul*. For simplicity and clarity, I will use the terms “microbes” and “virus” in my analysis unless otherwise noted.
invention of evolution, sprung out of the war against the micros, the parasites who try to pick the locks of our immune system. Throughout history they have been our invisible foes, and sex is our weapon in the chess games of lock-switching, which explains why almost everything we do can be traced back to sex in the end” (170). By imbuing the Y-Plague microbes with intent, Sullivan articulates the militaristic language of fear that attends the threat of viral disease in current medical discourse. Dinello explains that,

> Whether by an inherent property or by an incidental set of circumstances, technology looms as an oppressive force that poses a direct threat to human freedom. Science fiction taps into these existential fears while reinforcing our concerns about the misanthropic humans who serve as technology’s collaborators in domination. (6)

Sullivan puts a twist on this conventional SF narrative device by having the female characters place blame directly on men. The influential G-Ma contends that men are the victims of their own technological missteps. During a confrontation between G-Ma and Dr. Maddie Baldino, the reader learns that:

> “Men got themselves into this one. The first Y-plague was designed by a team of men. They find death sexually exciting. They have to, it’s programmed into them. Otherwise why would they go out hunting mammoths when they could eat nuts and berries” (209)? The threat of plague then becomes twofold: not only are microbes intentionally infecting and sterilizing humanity, but the actions of men – and the women they left behind – further exacerbate the danger. Faced with a decimated population and resulting sex imbalance, reproduction becomes the number one preoccupation for both humans and microbes.
As the key figure in the novel, Meniscus complicates normative definitions of reproduction and the human. Identified by disability and “atypically embodied” (Garland-Thomson, 129), Meniscus’s life is spent passively enduring experimentation perpetrated by Maddie and her company. Cooped up in a viewable laboratory cage in the middle of a mall amusement park, Meniscus is “Y-autistic. Everyone says so. The psychic detachment of this inherited condition is all that saves his personality from disintegration when the bugs enter his body. They seed him and they make him grow neurochemicals, and then Dr. Baldino harvests them” (15). Due to his apparent “psychic detachment,” he survives round after round of invasive tests. In *Liminal Lives*, Squier looks at the various far-ranging experiments on food, reproduction, and so forth, and contends that “human beings living in the era of these biomedical interventions are liminal selves, as we move between the old notion that the form and trajectory of any human life have certain inherent biological limits, and the new notion that both the form and trajectory of our lives can be reshaped at will” (9). In many ways, Meniscus is a direct expression of such a liminal life – not only does Sullivan develop his character in non-normative ways, but because he is initially defined as other, no defense of his abuse by the scientists is required at the outset of the narrative. Like Dr. Flowers’ dispassionate experiments on those suffering with the “sleeping disease” in *Salt Fish Girl*, the worthlessness of liminal lives like that of Meniscus is confirmed by Maddie’s reflection that “nine years of infecting
Meniscus’s tissues had rendered her cold. If she had ever really known that he was a person, she had long ago forgotten it” (43).

Meniscus’s role in “aiding” Maddie’s research becomes problematic, however, as he begins to change from the latest strain of Y-plague applied to his skin. Spurred on by a visit from Bonus (Maddie’s clone daughter), Meniscus suddenly becomes aware of the 10E virus as it works its way through his body: “They want him, and they like it when he hurts, because now he and they know he’s alive. And it hurts a lot. It hurts so much that he can’t think. Old, ancestral instinct stands up inside him and looks around. Something must be done. He cannot stand by” (15). From this point in the narrative, Meniscus begins to resist Maddie’s experiments as he slowly transforms his corporeality from the inside out. “The human bios is changing so quickly that zoë, the simple fact of being alive, is no longer stable” (9) suggests Squier, and I read Meniscus’s liminality and ensuing transformation as an apt illustration of this theory. The more Meniscus changes – developing azure skin, intentionally growing his finger nails and hair (91) – the more powerfully the microbes interact with his body. The new contact moves him beyond the human and destabilizes normative conceptions of life as a stable state. Maddie observes “an actual DNA exchange between 10E and human” (100) in his body, creating a new hybrid form of “zoë.” Through the microbes’ infiltration and interaction with his body, Meniscus unsettles definitions of the human by visibly exemplifying the vulnerability and permeability common to all bodies.
Central to the plot of *Maul* is the virtual space that soothes Meniscus and enables the microbes to communicate with him. Mimicking traditional cyberpunk, Sullivan uses technology to enable his transformation. “Technology is the fetish of cyberpunk: desire is translocated from the heterosexual norm onto the technology itself and onto the heavily fantasized cyberspace that it generates” states Amanda Fernbach (“The Fetishization of Masculinity” 245). Through Mall (its full name being NoSystems Mall7), Meniscus literally conjures up the people and events in Mall as a way to cope with the experiments on his body. As explained in the story:

NoSystems Mall is the first VR system to permit the direct expression of unconscious material in a tangible form that is essentially invented by the game-user. Popular because it recreates the halcyon days of turn-of-the-mill consumerism and sexual freedom pre Y-plagues. […] In case of viral infiltrations, NoSystems Mall7 was effective due to its unique ability to render both psychological complexes and chemical influences as virtual personalities, enabling the subject to literally confront his demons. (41)

Sun and her crew are the virtual personalities of Meniscus’ immune system and 10Esha and her crew represents the virus thriving in his body. Meniscus’s body, therefore, becomes the battle ground between the tools of technology and the human user. In addition to Mall, the other “cure” technology touted in the text is MUSE (MultiSEnsory),

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*Sullivan defines MUSE:*

The MUltiSEnsory wasn’t simply a more intimate projection of the graphs and sims that you could do on a visual monitor, although the same data that came through a MUSE could be processed in that linear way. A MUltiSEnsory was far more sophisticated, subtle, and therefore more chaotic. Yet, equally, the MUSE was not as subjective as a game like Mall, with its sense-tickling, dreamlike VR interpretations of cold data.
bodily functions, inside and out. After Bonus acts as a catalyst for Meniscus’s microbes, Maddie had her MUSE “tuned a few degrees above subliminal to allow Meniscus’s tissue readings to feed into her senses on a low level, like TV turned on in the background” (44). When working in conjunction with the I-MAGE unit (the main computer complex where information is taken in, stored, and sent out), not only does the MUSE allow information to cross the boundary of the subconscious into the conscious, it allows Maddie to cross the physical barriers between her body and Meniscus’s. His body becomes what Heuser refers to as the “liquid architecture of cyberspace” (46) (with the I-MAGE machine as the interface and Maddie’s MUSE as the monitor). Acting as the passive source for information, Meniscus has no control over this exchange of information or body. While Mall provides him with a degree of self-control in terms of pain management, Meniscus’s outer corporeal reality remains constructed and controlled by others (much like the bodies of Miranda in Salt Fish Girl and Tan-Tan in Midnight Robber).

Bodily boundaries become even more tenuous as the microbes are able to use the Mall technology to communicate with their human host. Activated by Meniscus’s sudden interest in Bonus, the microbes make use of Mall to

The name, MUSE, might mean multisensory, but Maddie suspected that its makers had also chosen the name because of its allusion to music. A MUSE presentation of data came into the “space” of your head like a piece of music. You could “hear” different parts that seemed to have their own identity, like voices or instruments; but you could also hear the orchestrated whole. A MUSE sent data into your mind through sound, colour, shapes, motion and sometimes smell, all at the same time. (44)
overwhelm his fragile corporeal autonomy: “He has the feeling of trying to wake from a dream and finding himself in another dream that encloses the first one. … [He] tries to come of Mall but he can’t because the game is getting bigger and bigger, around him, over him, under him” (16). Wald points out that it is typical of contagion narratives for the microbe threat to be anthropomorphized as an invading force gaining ground. She argues that, “scientists emphasize the microbes’ lack of conscious agency. But the animation of the microbe invariably surfaces during the course of these accounts. It begins with a reminder that microbes are living parts of an ecosystem and that the primary objective of organisms is to survive” (42). As the story progresses, the corporeal and mental boundaries between Meniscus and the microbes become more permeable and indistinct, as the 10E virus grows in consciousness and exerts its own will. Sullivan underscores the autonomy of the microbes as they wage battle against Meniscus’s immune system. Sitting in his cage:

The bugs were munching on Meniscus’s nerve endings. He saw himself in the plexi and was blue like djinn; the bugs were going to grant his wishes but only if he’d serve them. He couldn’t tell their desires apart from his own anymore. It was like he had no skin, nothing to separate interior and exterior; his skin was a blue sky of possibilities and the bugs were going to write on it. (94)

The more the microbes transgress Meniscus’s bodily boundaries, the more liminal he becomes: as a body-in-flux, Meniscus neither appears nor functions within normative definitions of humanity.

Bodies in Maul are further marked as liminal through their ambivalent and blurred gender boundaries, as men, carriers of the plague, are noticeably marked
as vulnerable and other. The blurring of physical markers of gender is best exemplified in the character of Dr. Bernie Taktarov. Meniscus remembers that the “Doctor’s face is an odd face, its gender identifiers mixed in his memories, though at the time it was the only face he knew. Tapered at the jaw and Adam’s apple-less like a woman’s, yet stubbly like a man’s, Doctor’s face had been smiling at him since he was a baby” (79). Throughout the novel, Bernie appears either as ambiguously gendered or wearing women’s clothing in order to emphasize his lack of masculinity.\textsuperscript{15} Regardless of his own designation as a liminal being, Meniscus is ashamed by his clone-father’s appearance. Arriving to save Meniscus, Bernie appears in “clearance-rack Gimbels print dress and old-lady practical shoes– and his hasty, garish make-up” which makes Meniscus feel “weird and ashamed” (177). Bernie neither looks like a father nor a hero and he does not act like one: he makes “submissive” nods (178), weeps easily (179), and woefully complains that he has lost his “career, manhood, and mental health” (178). Commenting on the status of the carrier in virus narratives, Wald writes:

> Hovering on the border between sickness and health, the carrier turns the focus on other borders as well: the porous and permeable borders of the body and the equally permeable borders between social units – among classes, neighbourhoods, municipalities, and even nations. Constituting a threat to those borders, the carrier, one of “the individual parts,” comes dangerously close to being equated with the dissociable disease organ. (77)

\textsuperscript{15} Trying to save Meniscus from the same emasculating fate, Bernie urges that Meniscus cooperate with the experiments, saying: “And it will be better for you. You’ll be protected this way. You’ll stay male, you won’t become a half-thing, neither girl nor boy” (79).
As a previous carrier of the plague, Bernie’s body openly displays its liminality and indeterminacy through its association with both gendered characteristics. Due to the effects of the virus, the bodies permanently express their “porous and permeable borders” as they are stripped of heteronormative masculine characteristics.

In response to this apparently abhorrent feminization of men, the surviving women turn to cloning and other scientific procedures to procreate. Reflecting current societal anxieties over technologies such as cloning and in vitro fertilization, reproduction is a strong theme throughout Maul. Considering recent reproduction technologies, Graham contends that they share the capacity to extend expectations regarding possible methods of conception, gestation and parturition. They also confound ideas of ‘naturalism’ in relation to parenthood, fertility, and reproduction. Their potential to redraw the boundaries between born and made, organic and biotechnological, the human and non-human, lies in their reconstitution of taken-for-granted ‘natural’ processes such as conception or gestation, and for their capacity to redraw the ‘cultural’ categories of parenting, fertility and inheritance. (111)

The zealousness for pregnancy and children in the novel becomes the real site wherein Sullivan explores the boundaries between “the born and the made.” The evil villain of the novel is Charlotte West, an elderly woman who calls herself G-Ma (short for Grandma) and obsesses over her own reproductive capabilities.

Arriving at G-Ma’s lush estate, Maddie learns that the old woman has plans for Carrera’s sperm (as he is one of the first known males to exhibit a natural immunity to the Y-plague). G-Ma explains that she wants to “make Chiefs. To make Boyz, Y-immune males, and they’ll all have my genes. I’ll be the new Eve”
As an aggressively active character, G-Ma’s excessive and obsessive fecundity and her desire to be the “new Eve” surpass the passively situated monstrosity of Meniscus. Doane posits that: “Technology promises more strictly to control, supervise, and regulate the maternal – to put limits upon it. But somehow the fear still lingers – perhaps the maternal will contaminate the technological” (27). Pushing gendered reproductive anxieties to the extreme, Sullivan parodies this fear of the maternal through G-Ma’s maniacal desire to reproduce on a large-scale. As she tells Maddie, “[Men] were fucking up the world. […] And anyway … it doesn’t matter because it suits me, and I profit by it, so I’m going to carry on going the way I’m going. Them’s the rules of nature” (209). The figure of G-Ma is a threat to both the technological and natural – her single-minded pursuit for reproduction pushes heteronormative desire for procreation to a monstrous degree. Referring to a slightly different scenario in Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner, Doane contends that: “Here the terror of the motherless reproduction associated with technology is clearly located as an anxiety about the ensuing loss of history” (27). In Maul, the terror is not motherless reproduction; rather it is focused on fatherless reproduction and the loss of history (the history of men) that will come with it. G-Ma’s excessive femininity threatens to further undermine conventional masculine power structures in order to create new posthuman lineages.

Virtual technology and biomedicine merge in Maul, creating new threats – and possibilities – for the survival of the human. While Sullivan’s writing verges
on cyberpunk pastiche at times, *Maul* nevertheless encourages readers to reflect on current-day uses (and misuses) of biomedicine and other cutting edge technologies designed to better life for the small fraction of humanity able to afford it. In “Hyperbodies, Hyperknowledge,” Mary Flanagan writes:

> Many women’s cyberpunk stories, however, explore the consequences of virtuality, the negative aspects of the manipulation of the body, and challenge the very concept of “perfection” of physical bodies. Interestingly, two particular themes reoccur in women’s cyberpunk. First, women writers tend to explore ideas about imperfect bodies in their texts, utilizing physical disabilities and deformity as themes in their work. Second, women tend to explore the manipulation of both male and female bodies, complicating the notions of gender norms, heterosexual desire, race, and class. (433)

In each of the novels I have discussed so far – Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*, Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber*, and Sullivan’s *Maul* – the authors explore the “perfection” of bodies through technology. These projects of perfection, however, are continually problematized by issues of containment and contagion. Whether the threat to the body proper manifests itself through disease, as evident in *Salt Fish Girl* and *Maul*, or physical abuse apparent in *Midnight Robber*, these feminist post-cyberpunk texts trouble the notion of a “perfect” inviolable physical body.

**Bodies without Bones: Laura Mixon’s *Proxies***

For the last text of my analysis, Laura Mixon’s *Proxies*, the same feminist post-cyberpunk preoccupation with technological interference in corporeal materiality rises again. In *Proxies*, however, Mixon focuses intensively on the potential consequences of altering both able and disabled bodies with technology.
Similar to Meniscus in *Maul*, the “visibly vulnerable” (Shildrick, 76) bodies of the crèche children in *Proxies* are controlled and “cured” through technology. Set in the near future, Mixon’s novel interrogates the kinds of liminal lives born out of—and perhaps saved by—virtual technologies. Squire uses the term “liminal lives” to refer “to those beings marginal to human life who hold rich potential for our ongoing biomedical negotiations with, and interventions in, the paradigmatic life crises: birth, growth, aging, and death” (9). *Proxies* looks at how each life crisis connects with technology and brings forth new definitions of the human.

In the future world Mixon imagines the environment has become dangerous for people to live in due to unchecked pollution and resulting climate change. Carli D’Auber, the protagonist, muses:

> The world was stewing in its own pollution. The Earth was on the brink of becoming uninhabitable. And even if all the fixes worked – the orbital power stations, the stratospheric bacteria, the massive cloud seedings – it was too late to go back, too late for the more than a billion humans who had died or the billions more who were dying. Too late for tens of thousands of animal and plant species already extinct. (83-84)

Adding to the environmental disaster is the emergence of new diseases and resulting social decay.\(^{16}\) While Mixon does not overtly write about the dystopic state of society, it is a constant backdrop to the story. Instead, at the forefront and centre of the narrative are the technologies, virtual and telecommunicative, that

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\(^{16}\) An apt example of the average impoverished citizen is Tania, a young drug-user who occasionally stays with Carli: “Tania’s skin was raw-patched paste that lay gingerly across the bones and tendons of her face, neck, shoulders, arms. She was covered with tiny scars and open sores; her hair was straw. Behind her ear, a fingernail-sized patch of spider black fur grew. The Mold. […] Tania was broken. She had shattered against the world like a china doll” (104-105).
allow people to mentally leave their bodies and inhabit mechanical ones.

Referring to similar narratives, Graham theorizes:

> In contemporary genres such as cyberpunk … the ontological hygiene between non-human nature, humans and machines is tested to its limits. Yet the consequences are to regard the boundaries of post/humanity as rhetorical and constructed, and effectively to move towards a more contingent and non-essentialist model of what it means to be human. It offers the possibility to portray the post/human as something that is always already mediated through, and constituted by, its environment and artifacts. (177)

The North America of *Proxies* is one where people are divided into two main camps: those who can afford the appropriate technology to survive in the environment, and those who cannot. Humans in Mixon’s world are barely capable of living in the unmediated environment and so they turn inwards, experimenting with technologies that allow them to leave their bodies in order to travel, do business, or simply escape from the confines of their damaged bodies.

The technology that enables this inward turn and reconceptualization of the organic-technological body is telepresence. People mentally operate robots called Waldos through a process colloquially termed “beanlinking.” The narrator explains that Waldo Inc. is “one of the largest multinational corporations in existence” (247), after providing the privileged of the world with:

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17 Carli, like the other economically-advantaged people, wears a “cool suit,” to protect here from the outside weather (17). As she’s walking to the train she is able to access the Net (23) and receive PSAs such as: “20 HEAT STROKE DEATHS OVERNIGHT, 82 ADDNAL CASES OF SEVERE HEAT STROKE, 14 DEATHS 6 INJURIES DUE TO REFUGEE ACTIVITY WEST OF CITY. WARM FRONT PREDICTED […] UNSUITED INDIVIDUALS ARE ADVISED TO REMAIN INDOORS” (24).
The technology of which the company was founded was a web of coated nano-wires implanted within the human brain, and the development of linkware that allowed the brain’s electrical impulses to be amplified and translated into radio broadcast signals that could control a machine’s actions. This technology had become known as beanlinking. (246) The waldo technology is enhanced with a communication technology breakthrough developed by Carli. Co-opted by another corporation called OMNEX, Carli’s work “the omni, they called it now. It was transforming interplanetary communications and making all sort of breakthroughs in space exploration possible” (36). Using these technologies together, the brilliant and insane Dr. Patricia Taylor beanlinks young children and infants. Permanently sealed in special crèches, the children live out their entire lives in virtual environments and navigate the real world using proxies, sophisticated human-like waldos.

In “Shooting Up Heroines,” Bernadette Wegenstein suggests that “these simulacra of human bodies [the proxies] are almost indistinguishable from real humans. In a Baudrillardian sense we could say that they are hyperreal, because they are the ‘better version’ of the humans themselves” (346). The crèche children of Dr. Taylor’s study cannot remember their fleshy embodiment— for them, bodies are interchangeable and specially enhanced. In many ways, I read the proxies as fulfilling the same narrative role as cyborgs in feminist SF. Considering the role of the cyborg, Claudia Springer notes that: “Creation versus destruction of life is not only a central thematic concern but also a site of dispute in cyborg texts. The ability to engender life is divided between men and women and between humans and technology. Women are typically associated with biological reproduction
while men are involved in technological reproduction” (“Pleasure of the Interface” 50). Mixon revels in the technological details of the proxies' creation, allowing both adult and child characters to experience proxy-embodiment. While both sexes are able to engender technological life in the text, I want to note that the process in which a proxy-pilot transfers him or herself to the proxy-body is femininized. The proxy-pilot enters (and the crèche children are confined in) a crèche, which is a large womb-like tub:

The crèche was a large bathtub with a lid, three-quarters full of warm solution: they cycled saline, glycerin, and soapy water through, in turn; right now it was salt water. Next to the crèche were a Lung and an air tube with a floating ball. … Various physiological monitors lined the tub’s edge, as well as an auto-drip IV filled with a nutrient solution hooked to a computer, and a mess of green, yellow, and black wiring. (140)

The very structure of the crèches and proxies technologizes the process of human reproduction. Physically afloat in the warm closed crèche, the individual is reborn as their proxy-self. Embodiment in Proxies is always elsewhere, especially for the crèche children. The crèche acts as the outer structure of the human body, allowing the proxy pilots to render their own flesh inert.

Of course the process of transferring one’s consciousness to a machine is not without its drawbacks. Speaking to a captive Carli:

“You might have heard the term beanie-burn,” Taylor said. “Long-term waldo pilots end up suffering a host of mental disorders, with alarming frequency. Everything from aggravated phobias, depression, drug and sex addiction, bipolar disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorders to hallucinations, catatonia, fits of rage, paranoia, and delusions.” (287-288)
Entering into the crèche and “beanlinking” to one’s proxy has the effect of doubling oneself.\textsuperscript{18} How much of a person’s individuality – their personality, memories, emotions – are connected to their body? Throughout \textit{Proxies}, Mixon suggests that the connection between mind and body is integral to personal psychic cohesiveness. By splitting the mind from the body, the proxy pilot must confront their own instabilities and liminality. Reading the similar kind of brain-body disjunction in cyberpunk texts, Springer argues:

> In fictional cyberworlds, computer memory facilitates, and even heightens, the role that repressed emotions play in human and computer existence. Cyborgs are frequently troubled by emotional memories and are motivated by a desire for revenge. ("Sex, Memories, and Angry Women" 167-168)

Throughout \textit{Proxies}, beanlinked characters – adult or child – suffer from a host of repressed memories that often express themselves violently. Due to the childhood trauma of witnessing his brother’s death, Daniel is particularly susceptible to abusing his proxy-enhanced abilities. While on a surveillance mission, Daniel kills a roving gang of starving children (called whips) when they attack a woman (90). After his violent outburst, Daniel calls for help from “Austin,” and “the word, as he subvoked it, lashed into his ears like a schizophrenic whisper” (93).

Resonating with Tan-Tan’s experience of duality in \textit{Midnight Robber}, Daniel’s corporeal experience is split between two places (Austin and Albuquerque) and his psyche is rent in two: he is both reacting to the present and reliving the past.

\textsuperscript{18} As Daniel undergoes the procedure to enter his consciousness into the proxy: “A moment of jumbled sensation – the taste of green squirted into the back of his eyes, the squirms and twitches of his proxy body crawled across his sight like worms – the smell of someone else’s voice tickled the back of his throat” (142).
This anxiety over technological versus fleshy embodiment is a persistent concern throughout *Proxies*. Even though the transgressed corporealities are both adult and child, much of the unease stems from the modifications to the children’s bodies and their conception of their enhanced physical reality. “In the place of the natural body or the socially constructed body over which the individual has no control, the cyberpunk aesthetic often hails the modified body as harbinger of, and vehicle for, individual freedoms: the ultimate body-in-isolation” ("Feminism, Technology and Body Projects” 242) argues Victoria Pitts. Mixon does play with this notion of the “body-in-isolation,” but her narrative proposes different conclusions than traditional cyberpunk (such as *Neuromancer*, wherein cyberspace cowboy Case actively chooses to be such a body). The bodies modified in *Proxies* are those of children who have been manipulated by their caretakers: “Pablo and his crèche-mates, of course, all had their proxy bodies on; they had no choice. Unlike the adults, their flesh was confined to the crèche by a lifetime of disuse. And their immune systems were disabled; even if they had been physically able to leave, death from disease would soon follow” (2). Much like Meniscus in *Maul*, the crèche children are treated as experimental bodies and their embodiment is mediated through virtual reality and telepresence. They are barred from experiencing their flesh first hand and denied access to corporeal autonomy. As Byron explains to Carli, the children have “spent their developmental years immobile, in a low-gee environment, with just enough electrical stimulus of their musculature and nervous systems to keep their bodies
from failing. Their bodies haven’t grown normally. And they’ve been altered surgically and biotechnically. They can’t survive outside their crèches” (323). The crèche children are “bodies-in-isolation,” but not willing ones, and the resulting disjuncture from their flesh renders them incapable of living as fully embodied human beings.

The deformity of the crèche children becomes a site of major contestation in the novel. As Flanagan observes, “the conflict between the child ‘others’ and science as an institution supposedly liberating them from their ‘marked’ bodies is an unanswered tension throughout the text” (“Hyperbodies, Hyperknowledge” 434). Since science has provided the children with “better” bodies than nature and society afforded them, the question at the heart of the narrative that Mixon raises is: does the material of our bodies matter? The character of Dane Elsa Cae articulates the disjuncture between the bodies of flesh and bodies of synthetic material as she observes the manufacturing area of the proxy bodies: “So that’s how our bodies are made, Dane thought. She thought about the others – those like Carli and the people she’d met during her wanderings; the ones whose bodies were constructed differently – and wondered what process was used to manufacture those bodies” (336). For Dane, and for the crèche children, the production of bodies involves outside mechanical construction so that any sense of the “natural” and organic body is lost. While Dr. Taylor believes she has freed the children from their sick bodies, Hayles contests the fantasy that “because we are essentially information, we can do away with the body” (12). Mixon too
makes the same contestation as she characterizes the crèche children as incapable of corporeal empathy. Responding to Marsh’s explanation of cancer, Pablo says:

“‘Don’t try to fool me. Flesh doesn’t get cancer; bodies do.’ […] Uncle March gave Mother a look. ‘It’s that damn religion of theirs. Where do we start’ (409)?

For the children, “flesh” represents the person who cannot die, while “bodies,” like their proxies, are simply replaceable mechanical tools. Unable to experience corporeal embodiment, the crèche children exist as liminal beings.

Due to their immersion in virtual environments and resulting disjuncture from their bodies, the crèche children, like Meniscus and Tan-Tan, exhibit a deep fracturing of their personalities. Wegenstein argues that perhaps the real multiplicity of the proxy experience is: “not merely a multiple vest, a body one can slip into in cyberspace, but rather and more profoundly the multiplication and diffusion of consciousness in one’s own body, the alienation of the body in relation to its traditional centre in the soul” (346). The existence of Pablo/Buddy/Dane Elsa Cae exemplifies the alienation of a child from his or her “soul” or unified psychic and corporeal centre. In order to illustrate the original double personality of Pablo/Buddy, Mixon uses a vertical line on the page, representing a sort of mental wall, in order to separate the two personalities from one another (57). In order to read these exchanges, the reader must try to take in both sides simultaneously in order to produce the narrative; inevitably, any reading strategy necessitates the privileging of one voice over the other. The potential confusion of the reader from experiencing two narratives at once is
mirrored in the character Dane Elsa Cae. Upon reaching consciousness for the first time, Dane panics and violently reacts, killing a security guard:

She was in two places at once. Someone, somewhere, was playing drums. Thump-THUMP! Thump-thump-thump. She should know a good many things she did not. She didn’t know what the other body was, nor who she was. She couldn’t remember her name or anything about her past. She had nothing to hang on to – she was no one. (13)

Dane’s reaction suggests that without a physical body grounding her to one place (i.e. the body of Pablo hidden away in his crèche), she is ultimately unmoored from any sense of a core identity or conventional reality.

It is not until the novel’s denouement that Dane discovers that she is another personality of Pablo. Meeting in a virtual simulation that recreates Buddy’s murder of Krueger, Dane speaks to him: “We sealed a man into his crèche and killed him. I remember now. [...] His screams birthed me, didn’t they?” (263). By accessing the memory of her “birth,” Dane begins the process of psychic reunification with the other personalities, but Pablo/Buddy is not able to fully comprehend her existence in relation to his own divided self. Heuser argues that “memories and personalities are only presumed … to be easily interchangeable because the cyberpunk universe depends on a hidden assumption: that all ‘personal’ information can be abstracted as data or merchandise, which is independent of its material storage device” (22). As the existence of both Buddy and Dane19 suggests, Mixon also contests the notion that the “personal” can be

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19 Mixon plays with the notion of memory and body through Dane Elsa Cae. When she first awakens: “Without will, his eyes came open and his body sat up. His hands disconnected the probes and pressed his skin back into place. A
fractured and disseminated away from its original “material storage device” (i.e. the body of Pablo) without loss and damage. Pablo’s lifetime immersion in environments that separated him from his physical flesh has rendered him incapable of conceiving wholeness. It is Dane, embodied in a toddler proxy, who finds the sleeping two-year old Pablito at the core – or, as Wegenstein suggests, “the soul” – of Pablo/Buddy/Dane: “He’s our center, she realized. She could feel the strands that united her – and Buddy, and Pablo – to him. He’s our father, and our child. Unless he awakened, they would never be whole. They would always be in fragments – at odds with each other, in pain’ (431). Instead of becoming freed from corporeal embodiment and its accompanying challenges, the crèche children, like Pablo, suffer extensive splintering and fracturing of their identities, leading to repressed memories and violent outbursts.

**Corporeal Transgressions and the Ethical Posthuman**

Mixon, like Lai, Hopkinson, and Sullivan, rejects technophilia and instead focuses on the ways in which technology makes corporeal liminality visible, forcing recognition of the cultural construction of the body. Feminist post-cyberpunk insists on foregrounding the body as vulnerable as it works out anxieties surrounding new technological developments. As a way to connect my initial analyses of vulnerable embodiments in the four novels, I want to...
rearticulate my discussion of the relationship between technology and the body. Wolmark’s excellent work on feminist SF and posthumanism is concerned with placing the posthuman conversation in the appropriate social and cultural context; she rightly observes that the context “for the representation of posthuman bodies is, arguably, provided by current developments in information technology and artificial intelligence, and much contemporary science fiction has responded to these developments by focusing on the interface between the body and technology” (“Staying with the Body” 76). Information technology and artificial intelligence carry with them an aura of transcendence – thinking, or being, without the need for corporeality. Of course, I want to interject, this way of conceiving technology ignores the real labouring bodies that create it in the first place and are required to sustain further technological development and maintenance. In *Salt Fish Girl*, for example, Lai’s description of “Real World” denies virtual reality the illusion of transcendence by showing Miranda’s father in serious pain as his avatar is beaten and attacked. The great AI Granny Nanny in *Midnight Robber* requires the labour of the pedicab community in order to exist, and, when its citizens are exiled to New Half-Way Tree, they too become labouring bodies.

The novel areas of embodied experience offered by virtual space, cloning, proxies and so on, are only made possible through situated human bodies. While this is not exactly the intent of Wolmark’s article, her argument regarding the figure of the “disappearing body” in cyberpunk literature resonates with my own
concern with reinstating the material embodiments in both real and virtual spaces with technology. She argues that the “disappearing body” is “a form of embodiment in which the idea of the ‘natural’ body is left unchallenged, allowing the unstable subject to be restored to a unitary wholeness that excludes difference of any kind” (76). In opposition to the “disappearing body” of cyberpunk, Wolmark suggests that the posthuman subject is one in which the concept of the “natural” body is challenged by the meshing of body and technology. With this in mind, she then posits that “the posthuman subject, no longer sustained by the idea of a fixed and unified self, appears to be marked by instability” (78). Throughout the feminist post-cyberpunk novels of this project, the writers emphasize the instability of the emerging posthuman subject. The azure-skinned Meniscus’s liminality approaches true monstrosity in Maul, while Mixon’s crèche children lack the most basic psychic connections with their own bodies in Proxies. While none of the four writers deny the possibility of a posthuman subject, they are all concerned with exposing the consequences of the technological interfacing with the corporeal, especially for those without access to social and economic power (such as women, clones, racialized minorities, the disabled, and children).

Perhaps due to virtual technology’s transcendental appeal, Lai, Hopkinson, Sullivan, and Mixon all critically engage with virtuality to some extent in their novels. While obviously not all feminist post-cyberpunk SF takes place in virtual space or even cyberspace, the concerns raised by those who study these technologically mediated interactions are nevertheless relevant to this discussion.
as they take up issues surrounding corporeal liminality and embodiment. Dianne Currier explains the draw cyberspace holds for corporeal feminist critics:

Many reasons thus exist to orient an investigation of cyberspace around the question of bodies. First, bodies are active and undeniable sites of difference and, more important, sexual difference. Second, bodies are an important site of the social articulation of subjectivity. Third, insofar as bodies are volatile and excessive, they stress those structures that articulate subjectivity, possibly giving rise to avenues of transformation. And finally, bodies are material points of contact with technological objects. (“Assembling Bodies in Cyberspace” 521)

In terms of cyberspace, embodiment becomes an issue of boundary crossing, as the validity of the marked body is brought into question. Currier suggests that:

“The movement of transformation offered by disembodiment is in transcending these marked [by race, age] and compromised [by infirmity] bodies” (524).

Again, the infirmity – or vulnerability – of bodies is the sticking point of transformation. Can a person truly transcend their embodiment marked by race, age, gender, and ability? In this chapter, I investigated the consequences of attempting such transcendence from the body, whether it is through virtual reality or biotechnology. The novels examined here suggest that while technologies like cyberspace, proxy bodies, nanomites, AI, and cloning offer the promise of pure technological transformation, the cost of becoming an ambiguously embodied being – or in Squier’s terms, a liminal being – is ultimately disruptive and damaging to both the corporeal and psychic facets of humanity.

Feminist post-cyberpunk eschews technological dis/embodiment in favour of uncovering the short- and long-term corporeal consequences inherent in such posthuman aspirations. What Lai, Hopkinson, Sullivan, and Mixon tell us in their
narratives is that all technology has a cost – both social and personal. As the
definition of life becomes more complex, the anxieties surrounding decisions
about reproduction, death, and sustainability intensify. Graham observes that “it is
not only a question of coming to terms with the economic and cultural impact of
new technologies, but of engaging with their capacity to stir up questions of
ontology. To place the contours of human nature under such pressure, however, is
also to invite a range of reactions, positive and negative” (5). In the following
chapters, I will focus on the ways in which these feminist post-cyberpunk texts
redefine ontology: in particular, Lai and Hopkinson reimagine reproduction and
maternity, while Sullivan and Mixon examine the effect of technological
embodiment on visibly vulnerable bodies (and their psyches). In this chapter, I
have articulated the various ways in which technology transgresses already
unstable corporeal boundaries, creating visible liminal (and hybrid) lives that
either skirt the monstrous or suffer psychic splintering. While all bodies are
capable of changing into the posthuman, not everyone has the access or even the
desire to embody such transformations. In the next chapters I will analyze the
ways in which feminist post-cyberpunk challenges posthumanism and its implicit
proposal that the human body, as a product of culture (or as Stryker’s body-in-
flux), will always be at the centre of technological change.
CHAPTER THREE

Mothering Monsters: Technology, Reproduction, and the Maternal Body

Like other women, mothers, as a highly discursive category, have often represented both the best hopes and the worst fears of societies faced with an intuitive sense of their own instabilities and vulnerabilities. (Shildrick, Embodying the Monster 30)

I thought, we are the new children of the earth, of the earth’s revenge. Once we stepped out of mud, now we step out of moist earth, out of DNA both new and old, an imprint of what has gone before, but also a variation. By our difference we mark how ancient the alphabet of our bodies. By our strangeness we write our bodies into the future. (Lai, Salt Fish Girl 259)

Clones, extraordinary multiple births, “test tube” babies: these are just a few of the emerging realities arising from recent advancements in reproductive technology. Unsurprisingly, such technological savvy opens up new spaces for questioning the limits of the human. If we are able to recreate ourselves outside of normative procreative contexts, then what will the future of the human, and more specifically, a “mother,” look like? In this chapter, I explore the ways in which feminist post-cyberpunk takes up the maternal body as a vexed site of technological struggle. Advancements in reproductive technologies are often used to control the “visibly vulnerable” maternal body, but in Lai’s Salt Fish Girl and Hopkinson’s Midnight Robber they fail to constrain indeterminate female corporealities. Feminist post-cyberpunk examines the ways in which normative constructions of authority attempt to shape reproductive bodies through reproductive technologies. In defiance of such manipulation, the maternal bodies
in these texts acknowledge and embrace their “monstrosity” (vulnerability and otherness): by owning their bodies, Lai and Hopkinson’s protagonists create their own narratives of difference, extending being through maternally embodied memory.

Before I begin my analysis of Salt Fish Girl and Midnight Robber, I will first briefly define further what I mean by the maternal body in the context of both Shildrick’s and Grosz’s evocations of the leaky, vulnerable, and monstrous body. In addition, since the maternal body in these novels complicates the basic tenet of posthumanism as being beyond the fleshy body, I want to connect this corporeal feminist approach with posthumanism. I posit that feminist post-cyberpunk SF investigates the possibility that technology offers humans a chance to experience embodiment beyond that of our ancestors through the replication of difference, while at the same time suggesting that women’s bodies always connect to a non-normative embodied maternal past.

Shildrick’s Embodying the Monster, in particular her chapter entitled “Monstering the (M)other,” offers my analysis of technology, reproduction, and the maternal body in feminist post-cyberpunk SF a productive starting place. Bringing the notion of “normative anxiety” to the foreground, Shildrick examines the:

inherent monstrosity of the maternal body, which far exceeds a postnatal retrospective marking of error on the part of the mother. It is not just that the mother is always capable of producing monstrosity, but that she is monstrous in herself. It is above all the very fecundity of the female, the capacity to confound definition all on their own that elicits normative anxiety. (44)
As I have established in the previous chapter, feminist post-cyberpunk lays out the current cultural anxieties surrounding the interaction between the body and technology while interrogating the ways in which bodily boundaries are disrupted and transgressed. Shildrick’s study aptly expresses the persistent troubled connection that exists between emerging technologies and women’s bodies, arguing:

In turning away from the ‘natural’, the concepts of fetal independence, of disputed paternity, and of the perfect child are hinged today on advanced reproductive technologies, on genetic engineering, and on cloning – all of them grounded on women’s bodies. The aspiration to fix the uncertainties and to override the unruliness and excessiveness of women and their reproductive powers remains undiminished. (44)

While new telecommunications and reproductive technologies change the ways in which all bodies are lived and, indeed, are produced, the female body stubbornly remains a contested site between the “natural” and the “engineered.”

Of course, “natural” female bodies have a long history of being characterized by heteronormative cultural constructions as (dangerously) permeable and pregnancy further compounds their liminality. As Grosz emphatically states in Volatile Bodies: “Body fluids attest to the permeability of the body, its necessary dependence on an outside, its liability to collapse into this outside (this is what death implies) to the perilous divisions between the body’s inside and its outside” (193). The body of interest in Grosz’s study is the female body, because “there remains a broadly common coding of the female body as a body which leaks, which bleeds, which is at the mercy of hormonal and
reproductive functions” (204). Shildrick builds on Grosz’s argument by tracing the ways in which the maternal body is made monstrous by its supposed proclivity for transformation: “In particular, the pregnant body is not one vulnerable to the external, but actively and visibly deformed from within. Women are out of control, uncontained, unpredictable, leaky: they are, in short, monstrous” (31).\(^1\) Pregnancy thus deepens the heteronormative anxiety that surrounds women’s bodies – the growing fetus, itself a liminal being, visibly alters the supposed “wholeness” of the body. The maternal body is one which announces its excessive corporeality, exposing the discursive limits of the anxiously controlled material construction of all human bodies.

Keeping Shildrick’s and Grosz’s characterization of the boundary-excessive, even monstrous maternal body in mind, I want to suggest that women are and have always been posthuman in some sense if one of the key defining factors is an ability (real or projected) to reconstruct one’s boundaries through the inclusion of outside influences. At the outset of How We Become Posthuman, Hayles states that: “The posthuman subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries

\(^1\) In “Monstering the (M)other,” Shildrick focuses on the pre-19th century beliefs that:

The concept of the maternal imagination, or maternal impressions as it was more often known, held that the disordered thoughts and sensations experienced by a prospective mother during pregnancy were somehow transmitted to her foetus such that at birth the child’s body, and sometimes its mind, was marked by corresponding signs. (32-33)

She concludes that this tradition of mothers marking their children as monstrous is still with us today as the growth in reproductive technologies (to control the effect of the natural maternal body on the developing fetus) demonstrate.
undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” (3). In Hayles’s definition of the posthuman, she avoids gendering the subject, but I propose that the maternal body, perhaps more than any other subjectivity, already undergoes “continuous construction and reconstruction” with each new development in reproductive technology. As greater attention (and capital) is drawn towards the medicalization of Western childbirth practices (from in vitro fertilization to the increasingly commonplace practice of caesarean section delivery), “what it means to be human – for mother and baby – is couched in terms of objectification and management, in which the normal, healthy condition is to be a patient” (Graham 114). The medical discourse of maternity is already wrought with posthumanist discourse – the maternal body is something to be controlled, contained, and characterized as “patient” (instead of as mother, able-bodied, or autonomous).

Graham also importantly observes that existing institutionalized prejudices may increase the potential for the exploitation and misuse of reproductive technologies. While in vitro fertilization and pre-natal screening may assist some people in making positive reproductive choices, Graham proposes that the new reproductive technologies “represent both a proliferation of opportunities for parenthood and an intensification of medical selectivity and control over those deemed socially suitable” (115). In addition to strengthening the characterization of the maternal body as patient, reproductive technologies offer the means to control and shape populations on a grand scale. Debates about who should have the right to access reproductive technologies are already being played out in the
media. The case of “Pregnant Man” Thomas Beatie\(^2\) is just one example: in 2008, and then again in 2009, the transgendered Beatie carried to term and gave birth to two children. Pictures of the bearded and heavily pregnant Beatie were displayed in magazines and websites everywhere. Beatie’s case has fueled the existing – and sadly, continuing – debate about whether gay, lesbian, and transgendered persons should be allowed to have equal rights to parenting as heterosexual couples. In addition to the danger of further institutionalizing homophobia (if gay, lesbian, and transgender people are denied access), Graham’s caution inherently addresses the issues of racism and ablism: who has access to reproductive technology and who controls it?

Feminist SF has an established record of querying technological challenges (and changes) to the body and dismantling the Western definitions of maternity and reproduction. Marlene Barr has taken up these lines of inquiry in her collected work of essays, *Lost in Space*:

Discussions of pregnancy and power in feminist science fiction do not adhere to Darko Suvin’s well-known definition of science fiction as “a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the authors’ empirical environment” (Suvin 7-8). The depictions of reproductive technology in feminist science fiction reflect existing conditions in the authors’ empirical environments. (82)

I draw attention to this particular passage from Barr’s book because it speaks to

\(^2\) Beatie’s story and image can be found at numerous internet sites, such as: CNN.com and abcnews.go.com. More information about Beatie and other transgender men who have given birth can be found http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Male_pregnancy.
the division of thought between the posthuman and the seemingly “unadulterated body” (Graham 194). While the SF that Darko Suvin speaks of is free to conjecture futures wherein the (male) writer’s empirical environment is surpassed by their imagination of an alternative one, for many feminist post-cyberpunk writers, the world that they inhabit already mirrors these alternative environments where women are no longer needed. Articulating the dangers inherent in the technological reality of today for women, Barr continues to explain that: “In an environment that includes the reality of woman as birth machine, it becomes increasingly difficult for feminist science writers to address reproductive technology in terms of science fiction; their imaginative frameworks regarding this technology are components of reality rather than alternatives to reality” (83).

In this chapter, I look at the ways in which feminist post-cyberpunk imagines the far-reaching impact of technologies (such as cloning and nanomites) on the maternal body. I begin the analysis with an examination of the ways in which technology exacerbates the creation of monstrous mothers – human, machine, and alien – and their equally monstrous children. Then, I argue that Salt Fish Girl and Midnight Robber, as they critically evaluate the potential of reproduction technologies, encourage an embracement of technology to further substantiate maternal difference and reify human vulnerability.

The focus on reproduction is a common thread in both cyberpunk and feminist SF. As Mary Ann Doane suggests in “Technophilia,” “A certain anxiety concerning the technological is often allayed by a displacement of this anxiety
onto the figure of the woman or the idea of the feminine” (20). This anxiety often expresses itself around the issue of reproduction; Doane explains “that is not so much production that is at stake in these representations [of the mechanical female body] as reproduction” (21). While the majority of the bodies of my study are not mechanical, they all nevertheless follow the same trajectory of desire for and fear of female reproduction. Barr further articulates that this anxiety over reproduction often appears in women’s SF:

> The writing of women’s dystopian science fiction is intimately related to the realities of reproductive technologies and their threat to women’s autonomy. The battle between the sexes over the control of women’s fertility and, correspondingly, infertility, as represented in these texts should serve as a warning. These texts are not only stories. (*Lost in Space* 93)

A reproductive technology of particular concern to SF critics and writers alike is cloning. Again, Barr is careful to tie the fantasy of cloning to the lived facts; she notes that SF “is busting out all over to cause psychological problems regarding the rapidity with which it influences as well as becomes reality. Cloning’s viability is the latest anxiety to result from science fiction made real” (“We’re at the start” 195). Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* specifically takes up anxieties surrounding cloning. While the issue of cloning is not directly addressed in *Midnight Robber*, I argue that the underlying anxieties surrounding “unnatural” pregnancy in Hopkinson’s novel are inherently the same anxieties that attend cloning. Both novels wrestle with the notion of material indeterminacy in terms of liminal corporeal boundaries and non-normative parental origins.

For the following literary analysis, I will start by detailing the ways in
which the gendered and racialized female body is both created and controlled through normative modes of technology. Situated as liminal and monstrous bodies, Miranda (and Evie) in *Salt Fish Girl* and Tan-Tan in *Midnight Robber* (along with their mothers) struggle and succeed to define themselves within heteronormative constructs. I will then articulate the ways in which these novels situate the maternal body as monstrous and the strategies undertaken by maternal bodies to own their difference, despite (or because of) technological encroachment. By remaking their technologically unnatural bodies as natural, both Miranda (and Evie) and Tan-Tan create new corporeal definitions for the maternal. Finally, I will end my analysis with a discussion of Lai’s and Hopkinson’s shared emphasis on the importance of narrative and memory in asserting the autonomy of the maternal body in the wake of overwhelming reproductive technological control.

**Monsters in the Making: Liminality and the Gendered Body**

Reading the gendered body in cyberpunk, SF critic Anne Balsamo focuses on the threat of boundary disillusion and the resulting motivation to police boundaries against ambiguity. Balsamo observes that as “natural” boundaries succumb to technological infiltration there is a renewed impetus to maintain familiar distinctions (such as male/female) despite “new technologized ways to rewrite the physical body in the flesh” (“Forms of Technological Embodiment” 216-217). In Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*, Miranda often encounters the breakdown and
blurring of boundaries. One memorable instance occurs during her father’s dedicated experiments with traditional medicine to “cure” Miranda of her durian odour: “Once I had to drink a soup made from embryonic chickens still sleeping in their eggs and coated in mucousy egg white. I don’t know why I should find such things unpleasant. I eat eggs and I eat chicken. Why should I be horrified by the liminal state between the two”? (59)? I read Miranda’s, and arguably the Western reader’s, discomfort with consuming embryonic chickens as evidence of what Balsamo would consider an instance of boundary transgression. It is the liminal state between egg and adult chicken that reminds Miranda of her own corporeal vulnerability.

Citing the process of reproduction as a site of indeterminacy and deep uncertainty, Shildrick claims:

The new reproduction technologies with their complication of the lines of paternity (and maternity) have opened up anew the horror of indeterminacy. Just at the moment when technological advances have enabled the extension of surveillance to the womb itself, and when sperm and ovum may be processed prior to fertilization, the fear of what goes unseen in the recesses of the body may be relocated to uncertainty about origins and foundational narratives. (44)

Feminist post-cyberpunk reflects the cultural fear regarding uncertain origins stemming from seemingly alien reproductive processes.³ In Salt Fish Girl, Lai uses Miranda as the voice of apprehension and horror over cloning. On entering

³ The little-known Raelian cult’s shocking (and later proved false) claim to having successfully cloned a human in 2002 is one instance where such anxiety and fear of the unknown reverberated through the media. (Information about the Raelians is scattered across the internet, but for a succinct summary, go to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raelism).
Dr. Flower’s experimental laboratory hideaway in the mountains, Miranda follows Evie and sees “the fridges where all the DNA was kept, the vials of fertilized and unfertilized eggs, the cold steel tables upon which the act of creation took place. All these tidy attempts to control the mud and muck of origin upset me” (268). Like the embryonic chicken eggs, Lai uses “mud and muck” to reiterate the liminality of reproduction (as “mud and muck” are somewhere between water and dirt). Dr. Flower’s experiments with cloning translate literally into attempts at controlling paternity and maternity. Yet faced with evidence of the creation of viable clones, the normative imagination (as represented through Miranda’s reaction) must reassess what constitutes human origins and foundational narratives.

In *Midnight Robber*, pregnancy and paternity are similarly transformed as the human inhabitants of New Half-Way Tree struggle to reestablish their origins and foundational narratives in an alien world. Hopkinson gestures towards Western culture’s discomfort with indeterminacy during the initial meeting between Chichibud⁴ and Antonio and Tan-Tan: the douen mistakes Tan-Tan for a boy at first, eliciting a puzzled look from Antonio (94). Noticing the human confusion, Chichibud merely replies: “He, she; oonuh all the same” (94). Considering the douens’ expressly alien gender boundaries – females look like birds, males look like goat-lizards, and their children look like everything in between – Chichibud’s comment acts as both a joke (the ubiquitous racist refrain:

⁴ Hopkinson may be playing with the Caribbean slang, “chichiman,” which is a derogatory term for a homosexual man.
“all you people look the same”) and as a signpost of the human insistence that
gender markers are obvious. Hopkinson then extends the blurring of normative
boundaries further through Antonio’s sexual exploitation and impregnation of
Tan-Tan. The heteronormative familial lines that define their relationship dissolve
immediately on their arrival to New Half-Way Tree, as Antonio tells Tan-Tan:
“You is all that leave to me now. You dear to me like daughter, like sister, like
wife self” (76). Antonio’s incestuous declaration is further ritualized on Tan-
Tan’s ninth birthday when he gives her his wedding band (139). Hopkinson uses
the other-dimensional world of New Half-Way Tree as a site of unpolicing
boundary transgression. On technologized and surveilled Toussaint, such abuse of
power and corporeal violation would have been nearly impossible.

The horror of reproductive indeterminacy is no more poignantly expressed
than it is through Tan-Tan’s admission of her incestuous pregnancy to Abitefa:
“He rape me, Abitefa. He put his baby in me, like the one before. He was forever
trying to plant me, like I was his soil to harvest” (260). Wishing that she could
claw at Antonio with her feet and poke out his eyes with her beak, Abitefa must
gently remind Tan-Tan that she cannot, as she is not a hinte (female douen). Tan-
Tan sobs: “Not a hinte, not nothing with value” (260). For Tan-Tan, the horror of
non-normative paternity causes her to imagine escaping from her own “valueless”
corporeality into that of the alien other. Ultimately, however, the long series of

5 Laughing at Tan-Tan’s confusion over the hinte and the children’s
varying appearances as everything in-between, Chichibud says: “We and them is
same-same one. Only tallpeople does come in like the other beasts and them.
Allyou woman does look like man, or pickney” (182).
Antonio’s transgressions force Tan-Tan to confront her own corporeal vulnerability and permeability. In *Volatile Bodies*, Grosz theorizes that in terms of reproduction, men attempt to extend their corporealities through the impregnation of women:

> Man sees that his “function” is to create, and own, at a (temporal and spatial) distance, and thus to extend bodily interests beyond the male body’s skin through its proprietal role, its “extended corporeality” in the mother whom he has impregnated and the child thereby produced, making them *his* products, possessions, responsibilities. (199)

Hopkinson’s novel rebels against this notion of male “extended corporeality,” however, through Tan-Tan’s struggle to repossess her own body. While the fetus growing within Tan-Tan is a result of Antonio’s attempts to possess her, it also offers Tan-Tan the opportunity to reclaim her body, and her body’s production, as her own. Only after accepting the fetus as *her* child – and not Antonio’s duppy self (262) – can Tan-Tan begin to experience corporeal (and psychic) autonomy.

The competition for dominance over women’s reproductive capabilities becomes further complicated in both *Midnight Robber* and *Salt Fish Girl* as issues of racial exploitation heighten normative anxieties about what kinds of bodies get reproduced. Barr attests to the striking fact that “the media are almost silent in regard to cloning people of colour” (“We’re at the start” 202). Reading an account of cloning in Ursula Le Guin’s “Nine Lives,” Barr concludes that “for women … cloning yields eradication, not reproduction” (197). The threat of eradication is doubly present for women of colour as they contend with the legacy of racist
reproductive policies. Accordingly, Elyce Rae Helford addresses the necessity of reading race carefully in SF works that deal with reproductive choices. When critically analyzing SF by black women that contain scenes of maternity and child-rearing, Helford insists that the reader must consider the work in the context of race and class:

A pro-choice attitude is often a pro-abortion attitude for mainstream feminists. This position may be alien or even offensive to women of color (especially of lower classes) who historically consider abortion an unsatisfactory solution to economic oppression which necessitates limits to family numbers. [...] With these factors informing our understanding of historical race and class divisions among women, motivations and character-development strategies for feminist science fiction writers of color like Butler are clear: oppression must not destroy the individual or the race; and the individual, in much of Butler’s fiction, is the race. (“(E)raced Visions” 131)

While Tan-Tan terminates the first of her pregnancies in the novel, I argue that Hopkinson nevertheless follows in Butler’s footsteps in terms of addressing the issue of pregnancy and power – for both the individual and their community. While unsuccessful in terminating her second pregnancy, Tan-Tan does succeed in stopping the source of her exploitation by killing her father. As she flees into

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6 Alcena Madeline Davis Rogan traces the history of the sexual oppression of black women in greater detail in “Tanaranive Due and Nalo Hopkinson Revisit the Reproduction of Mothering.” Rogan states that “in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the practice of doctors performing tubal ligation on black women and women of color without their informed consent, as well as the vilification of black motherhood in politics and the media, has complicated the issue of reproductive choice” (76). See also, Dorothy Roberts’s historical study, Killing the Black Body.

7 Recalling her abortion at fourteen: “The memory of the rending pain was still strong in Tan-Tan’s mind. Is only because of the cramps and bleeding had her so sick after the abortion that Jasinette hadn’t striped her backside with blows over that one” (145).
the woods with Chichibud, the douen tells her: “When you take one life, you must give back two. You go keep douen secrets safe? You must swear” (174). On the one hand, Chichibud’s demand serves to ensure the douens’ safety, but on the other, Tan-Tan’s oath to “give back two” supports the viability of the fetus as well. Regardless of the indeterminacy of the child’s origins, Tan-Tan must not cede to her father’s oppression – their joint survival signals the hope for a livable life on New Half-Way Tree.

Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* also explores the consequences of non-normative reproduction for racially minoritized bodies. Writing in the late 1990s as the emerging issue of cloning fueled Western imaginations,8 Barr imagines that “the most dangerous issue is not duplication but, rather, the lack of mass production of certain humans: gays, Jews, people of colour, women” (“We’re at the start” 203). Going against Barr’s particular dystopic fear of the erasure of sexual and racial minorities, however, Lai instead imagines a world wherein the cloned bodies are *only* women of colour. Lai explores the very scenario that Barr does not predict – what would happen if mass produced clones are those of bodies already exploited by the global capitalist system?

In *Salt Fish Girl*, Evie believes that her genes might have originated from a Chinese woman named Ai who was interned in the Rockies during WWII, but most likely, the Sonias are genetic composites pulled from the “Diverse Genome

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8 In 1997, global media outlets focused intense attention on “Dolly,” the first cloned sheep created by Scottish scientists at Roslin Institute. For a discussion of Dolly framed by gender and health studies, see *Global Nature/Global Culture* by Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury, and Jackie Stacey.
Project” which “focused on the peoples of the so-called Third World, Aboriginal peoples, and peoples in danger of extinction” (160). In Lai’s dystopic scenario, it is a small leap to make from the exploitation of racialized women’s labour in the present world to the one of 2044 where women of colour are mass produced solely for the exploitation of their labour. The bodies of the Sonia clones are treated as tools of production: Evie tells Miranda that she is one of “at least a hundred thousand” (158) clones bred and forced to work for Nextcorp, a corporation that produces Pallas shoes (157). The worker clones are controlled by an implanted mechanical device, their “Guardian Angel,” which “looks after us, monitors our body temperature, notes the presence of disease, helps rescuers find us if we get lost” (159). The Sonias are neither autonomous beings nor are they human – they are literally manufactured manifestations of the posthuman. “When bodies are constituted as information, they can be not only sold but fundamentally reconstituted in response to market pressures” Hayles warns, addressing the danger of stripping bodies of their inherent humanity for profit (42). *Salt Fish Girl* proposes that the bodies of racially minoritized women are the most vulnerable to exploitation as mass-produced information and labour units. And, because they

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9 Having ripped the “Guardian Angel” from her back, Evie exposes her scarred body to Miranda:

At the base of her spine was a series of numbers […] the digits were raised ridges filled with some kind of powdered black metal. They could be read by touch, Braille beneath the skin. She raised her T-shirt higher, revealing something infinitely more horrific. A scar along the valley of the spine, a shiny red hollow, and across the shoulder blades bumpy red ridges as though wires had been ripped from beneath the skin. And between the ridges was an odd scalloped pattern, giving the distinct impression of feathers. (156)
transcend normative human corporeality through their non-normative creation, clones are ultimately deemed lesser beings as the whims of the marketplace determine their value.

Deepening the racialized otherness of Sonia clones is the indeterminacy of their origins. Miranda is shocked by Evie’s admission of her illegal non-human status (158), as she explains that her “genes are point zero three percent Cyprinus carpio freshwater carp. I’m a patented new fucking life form” (158). Taken out of the realm of the human, Evie and the other Sonia clones are reduced to their patented genes – they become nothing more than tools for production. The Sonia’s indeterminate humanity disturbs Miranda more than their role as exploited workers. This point is taken up by Robyn Morris, who argues:

The figure of Evie, and her human/fish genes, exists in a liminal state, neither fully human nor non-human. This ambiguity surrounding her identity is one way that Lai complicated conceptions of humanness as whole, centered, complete; “the real thing.” (What Does it Mean to be Human?” 92)

The liminality of Evie, with her indeterminate human and piscean origins, is disturbing to Miranda in the same way as the embryonic chickens she had to consume. Despite recognizing her own corporeal difference, Miranda nevertheless feels that “there was something sordid about [Evie’s] origins” (158). I read her discomfort with Evie as a reflection of the current anxieties surrounding cloning as a technology that challenges normative definitions of what constitutes human being and brings into question who (or what) is ultimately responsible for human agency and creation.
Cloning exposes the persistent underlying anxieties that surround human procreation. While reproductive rights are integral to the foundation of any women’s rights movement, cultural and political institutions increasingly use technology to police women’s bodies and their reproductive freedom. Doane observes that “technology promises more strictly to control, supervise, regulate the maternal – to put limits upon it. But somehow the fear still lingers – perhaps the maternal will contaminate the technological” (“Technophilia” 27). The controversy following the media-dubbed “Octo-mom,” Nadya Suleman, is an apt example for this discussion. The public outcry over her excessive fecundity spawned a debate about a woman’s right to access reproductive technology and points to the collective fear of a woman out of (reproductive) control. Regardless of the nuances of Suleman’s procreative choices, her case illustrates the complex and anxious relationship being forged between reproductive technologies and women’s bodies. At what point does the technologized maternal body become unrecognizable as “human” and categorized as monstrous?

As the rest of this chapter will now explore, in Salt Fish Girl and Midnight Robber maternal bodies are marked by monstrosity in two ways: through the boundary-crossing practice of pregnancy and by technological/unnatural manipulation of the procreative process. Reading the gendered body in SF,

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10 In January 2009, Suleman became the first woman in recorded human history to give birth to eight surviving babies at once. In addition to the octuplets, Suleman also has six other children. All fourteen children were conceived through in vitro fertilization (IVF). The doctor who performed the procedures, Michael Kamrava, was expelled from the American Society for Reproductive Medicine in October 2009 for his role in Suleman’s unprecedented use of IVF.
Wolmark observes that the new forms of embodiment imagined within the genre are disruptive and monstrous as they are often “emergent and incomplete” (“Staying with the Body” 79). This disruption, though, does not necessarily mean that the body is then defined only by its lack, but that by making the culturally constructed body visible, it can be exploited to better examine the defining boundaries of human embodiment. As Shildrick’s study suggests, the maternal body inhabits a special site for this interrogation of the normative body as it is already transgressive and monstrous. The technologized mother, then, so thoroughly disrupts hegemonic constructions of the body proper that she always must exist within the realm of the monstrous posthuman. I want to interject, however, that the maternal bodies in feminist post-cyberpunk are not simply characterized as monstrous, nor are they evocations of the 1970s feminist SF earth goddess. Rosi Braidotti notes the difficulty of moving away from notions of monstrosity without reiterating essentialist gender norms:

Contemporary “monstrous Others” blur the dividing line between the organic and the inorganic, thus rendering superfluous the political divide between technophobia and technophilia. The issue becomes how to redefine the techno-body in such a way as to preserve a sense of singularity, without falling into nostalgic reappraisal of an essential self. (“Cyberteratologies” 153)

I maintain that feminist post-cyberpunk takes up Braidotti’s challenge to redefine the “techno-body” without falling back on nostalgic essentialism. In Salt Fish Girl, Lai redefines motherhood as an experience that exceeds the normative understanding of the body contained and inviolable. Despite her monstrosity, Miranda/Nu Wa embraces human vulnerability while bravely evolving.
*Midnight Robber*, Hopkinson traces the divide between maternal technophobia and technophilia and challenges the notion that any easy binary divide between the two poles exists.

**Replication of the Maternal in *Salt Fish Girl***

In *Salt Fish Girl*, Lai uses the births of both Nu Wa and Miranda as a way to interrogate normative constructions of self and motherhood. The conception of both women is unnatural: neither of their mothers are heteronormative, nor the circumstances of their births usual. Through seemingly monstrous interventions, Nu Wa and Miranda are connected to a life cycle that is beyond the “everyday” human experience of reproduction. Veronica Hollinger describes the potential situated within these non-normative SF bodies: “As has been frequently pointed out, the technobody reiterates itself through replication, not through reproduction, and it does not require the heterosexual matrix as the space within which to duplicate itself” (“(Re)reading Queerly” 205). While Nu Wa may not be exactly what Hollinger means by “technobody,” her undeniably different body fits the notion of reiteration through replication, not reproduction. Making her way from the lake of her origin, Nu Wa walks on painfully earned new legs to find the woman who will be the first of her many human mothers. Falling into a water cistern, Nu Wa shrinks herself so that when a woman draws a cup of water “and lifted the cup to her lips and down I went in the first gulp. I glided down her throat and slid into her womb. Nine months later I emerged as a bawling black-haired
baby girl” (48). In this scenario, Lai turns the “heterosexual matrix” upside down. Nu Wa’s life is both dependent and independent from her mother – while her mother does not pass on a genetic heritage, she does act as a site of replication for Nu Wa. Further denaturalizing the concept of motherhood, Lai depicts women who are not instinctively maternal. Nu Wa describes her mother as the type never “meant for motherhood. If it hadn’t been expected of her, if she had had other options, she’d have been an empress or a poet or a martyr. Something grand, and perhaps a bit tragic” (49). By choosing a woman who was already outside of normative gender ideals (by not wanting children), Nu Wa redefines the expectations of the maternal body.

Lai traces Nu Wa’s rebirths into Miranda’s story. Taking refuge in a durian seed, Nu Wa again continues her cycle of replication: “Though I held the heart of the fruit, the fruit held me. […] I found a small hole in the seed. I scaled down further and crawled inside. I became the seed and seed became me. Whatever grown from it will be mine” (209). Of course, the fruit that grows from the durian seed/Nu Wa is Miranda, a girl whose mother was sixty-three years old the year she gave birth (11). Though Miranda has no direct knowledge of Nu Wa’s past lives, her mind and body replicate the essence of the ancient serpentine woman. Recalling the circumstances of her birth, Miranda reflects:

As for the precise nature of my conception in this incident, what shall I say? That the third gender is more unusual and more potent than most imagine? That my conception was immaculate, given the fact that my mother was a good eight years past menopause? I can tell you none of these things because I know nothing about them. From time to time I get an inkling, enough to sense that there was something I knew before this
moment, but whatever it was flooded away from me in that instant, before I could grasp a sense of what it was that was leaving. (15)

Miranda sees herself as a “third gender,” a person outside of the heterosexual matrix. Both Miranda and her mother are “unnatural” corporealities that exceed normative boundaries – Miranda’s body is literally marked (with the durian smell) by her mother’s transgression of eating the durian fruit. Miranda’s indeterminacy is further made evident throughout the novel as she finds scales on her legs and her drawings of her mother eventually transform into “Nu Wa and Fu Xi, the snake-bodied brother and sister who were supposed to have created the first people” (187). Miranda has two mothers – one human, one monstrous – and each marks her as a (techno)body outside of the heterosexual matrix.

Not only does Miranda transgress the boundaries of the human as the reborn Nu Wa, but she is also the technobody of Hollinger’s invocation. In addition to her ancient origins. Miranda is arguably the product of genetic engineering gone awry, as her mother conceived her after eating a durian fruit from the “Unregulated Zone.” Evie explains that the impregnating durian fruit trees exist because scientists “were implanting human genes into fruit as fertility therapy for women who could not conceive. And of course the pollen blew every which way and could not be contained” (258). With this revelation, the full extent of Miranda’s monstrosity becomes clear. It is not only Nu Wa’s cycle of

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Having escaped from her confinement by Dr Flowers, Miranda swims ashore, falls asleep and awakens to find herself covered in scales: “They were so naturally embedded in my skin I couldn’t imagine they hadn’t always grown there” (213).
replication that others Miranda, but the fact of her unnatural, yet man-made, conception. After the truth about the durian trees comes out, Flowers tells Evie: “You don’t know what monstrosities might have come of those births. Those trees have been interbreeding and mutating for at least three generations since the original work. The fertility those durian provided was neither natural nor controllable” (265). By using the word “controllable,” Flowers articulates the real threat posed by Miranda, Evie and the free Sonias: like the genetically-modified pollen, they are bodies that evade control and have exceeded the normative notions of what it means to be human. These new maternal corporealities reject the medical designation of patient or experimental body (and all of its attendant conditions of externalized management) in favour of autonomous control over their reproduction.

Braidotti argues that the redefinition of the human is the ultimate worth of science fiction as it “displaces our worldview away from the human epicenter and that it manages to establish a continuum with the animal, mineral, vegetable, extraterrestrial, and technological worlds. SF points to a posthumanist, biocentered egalitarianism” (150). Through the character of Miranda, Lai accomplishes something close to Braidotti’s vision of a “posthumanist, biocentered egalitarianism.” Miranda is extremely human in her capacity to feel pain and empathize with others, but her unique corporeality establishes a continuum with other worlds of being. Her connection to the non-human – and to the monstrous – becomes most apparent through her own durian-fruit induced
pregnancy as Lai blurs the line between biotechnology and human relationships (as Miranda is in love with Evie). Unaware of her impregnation, Miranda suddenly realizes her condition while in jail: “Suddenly I could feel my roundness, my body ripe as a pear about to drop. There was a clear logic to the stretching, a soundness to the movement. Soft pear, succulent sweet. And ready to rot, already dreaming of the return to earth” (259). Miranda senses her body’s connection to the earth and the inevitable cycle of life and death. Using the image of a desirably ripe pear, Lai transforms the word “rot” into rebirth, leaving behind connotations of terminal death and decay (as well, by using “rot,” Lai insists on the connection between life and death). Without conscious knowledge or intent, Miranda continues the cycle of life that Nu Wa, the original mother/child, began eons ago:

I dreamt of shoes and inside me something turned. Something without feet. Something yet without arms or legs, something long and coiled. I dreamt that it spoke. This is the best hour of the day, right now, as I hang here in your womb as though asleep in some ancient garden. [...] Here I hang, long and coiled with large bright eyes that can sense more than they can see. Serpentine. It’s one of the oldest forms going, and I’m not ashamed to say I find it comfortable. (227)

Like Miranda and the others before her, the fetus is beyond human – it is serpentine, yet its nascent liminality is defined by humanness (arms, legs, dreams). Refusing to express anxiety or horror over its unfamiliar corporeality, Lai underscores the history of the fetus’s lineage (“oldest forms going”) and its comfort with otherness.

_Salt Fish Girl’s_ emphasis on making the technologically unnatural natural
is also emphatically evident through the cloned Sonia’s reproduction. As I have
gestured towards, control over women’s bodies and reproduction is at the heart of
*Salt Fish Girl*. The reproducing Sonias are a double-threat to normative society:
first, they embody the liminality of pregnancy, and, second, they move beyond
normative bounds of parental origin. Upon entering Evie’s dilapidated house and
meeting the other Sonias and their girl babies, Miranda wonders: “Who were the
fathers of these quiet children” (223)? The inclination to ascertain paternity, or
origin, is reiterated through Miranda’s questioning and nervous gaze of the house
and its inhabitants. Of course, the children are products of the genetically-
engineered durian fruits – the same fruit that brought Miranda into being. Living
outside of the factories, the Sonias are able to exist outside of the heteronormative
matrix. Instead of resigning themselves to technologically mediated indentured
service, the Sonias exploit technology for their own reproductive purposes.\(^\text{12}\)

Turner argues that

> clone scenarios offer popular culture consumers an opportunity to re-
> imagine the maternal and reproduction – that is, they demonstrate the all-
> too-familiar images that naturalize women and their bodies as infantile,
> mad, wild, and animal-like – but they also suggest points of departure
> from these images from which we can re-imagine women, reproduction,
> and the uncanny families they have the potential to create. (112)

The Sonias reject subjection and control by those who deny them their humanity

\(^\text{12}\) Robyn Morris, in “‘What Does it Mean to be Human?’” reads this
development in *Salt Fish Girl* as:
The Sonias reject any assumption of Western domination by ripping the
“Guardian Angel” out of their backs. It is however, their chance discovery
of the reproductive capacities of the durian seed … that allows the Sonias
a sense of freedom and a chance of longevity that is denied to them on the
factory production lines. (90)
and insist on creating new lives, literally, for themselves. While Lai warns against the exploitive use of cloning and genetic modification, she also proposes that when taken up outside of the dominant power structures, such technologies can be enabling for the visibly vulnerable by offering them novel modes of replication. Lai situates her liminal characters as operating competently and creatively within their society despite exclusionary cultural constructions of identity.

Monstrous Maternity in Midnight Robber

In Midnight Robber, Hopkinson also interrogates the connections between the technological and the maternal, but goes one step further by placing the posthuman in a non-human world (as New Half-Way Tree is characterized as alien, natural, and without the benefit of “civilizing” technology). According to Wolmark, “the posthuman subject can … be envisaged within a frame of reference that enables bodies to escape categorization in terms of familiar binaries” (“Staying with the Body” 77), and Hopkinson plays with the frame of reference by moving the posthuman body (Tan-Tan) into New Half-Way Tree, where familiar binaries are made alien. Through Tan-Tan and her mothers, both biological and surrogate, Hopkinson explores the inner and outer epistemological boundaries of the maternal body. Defining the site of the body as that which “occupies the liminal space between self and not-self, between nature and culture, between the inner ‘authentic’ person and social persona,” Vint draws attention to the importance of recognizing the shifting boundaries of self (16). As I discussed
in Chapter Two, Tan-Tan, through displacement, abuse, and incestuous pregnancy, finds herself in an indeterminate liminal space that disrupts her control over her “inner ‘authentic’ person” and her “social persona.” Throughout the novel, Hopkinson returns to the mothers, both technological and fleshy, as key influences on Tan-Tan’s psychic and corporeal development.

From the outset of *Midnight Robber*, Hopkinson disrupts the heteronormative notion of motherhood as being a natural desire for women. Ione, Tan-Tan’s mother, is an apparently disinterested and distant mother, who is excessively sexual and “restless” (6). Like Nu Wa’s first mother in *Salt Fish Girl*, Ione is characterized by her un-motherly qualities: she gives birth out a sense of social duty, not because of any innate maternal instinct. Appearing spiteful and harsh, Ione is not a “natural” mother, as her initial interaction with Tan-Tan demonstrates:

> Antonio looked to Ione, but the cut-eye of contempt he got in return was enough to slice skin, oui. She reached out her two arms to claim her property. Antonio put the baby into them. But Ione grasped her too roughly. The pickney woke up and started to cry. (47)

Giselle Anatol reads Tan-Tan’s birth and Ione’s apparent disregard for the child as scenes that “function less as an extension of the idea of the ‘naturally’ apathetic Black mother, and more as a comment on the ways that the devaluation of Black lives has penetrated our collective consciousness” (“Maternal Discourses” 6).

While I agree with Anatol’s reading of the implications of race here, I also want to suggest that Ione represents the mother who rejects the idea of “natural” all together and defers parental responsibility to technology. Tan-Tan’s birth scene
equally involves her parents and technology: “From the first birth pangs hit Ione, it was as though she realized she didn’t have the taste for hard labour, oui. As soon as she pushed the baby out of her, Ione took one look at it and shouted at Antonio to activate the wet-nurse, purchased to help Ione with the breastfeeding” (46). I argue that Hopkinson uses “labour” here to mean more than the labour of childbirth. There are three kinds of labour resonant throughout *Midnight Robber*: childbirth, child care, and “hard” labour (i.e. service labour or “slave labour”). For Ione, the employment of technological others for child care and house work is a marker of status and, I argue, can be read as a reversal of racialized labour divisions (such as the white American plantation owner who exploited black labour). By characterizing Ione as an absent mother who is reliant on technology, Hopkinson is able to deepen her critique of the Toussaint colonization of New Half-Way Tree (where the black population repeats white domination of the native population). Ione’s supposed moral monstrosity stems from her exploitation of other’s labour, but it is not uncommon to the world of Toussaint where there is an eshu in every house and Granny Nanny surveys all.\textsuperscript{13}

For most of Tan-Tan’s life on Toussaint, the mothering role of personalized technology supercedes that of Ione. Doane notes the increasing interplay between technology and the feminine: “As technologies of reproduction seem to become a more immediate possibility (and are certainly the focus of

\textsuperscript{13} As I discussed in Chapter Two, the notable exception is the pedicab community. Their “headblind houses” (9) are exempt from the constant surveillance of Granny Nanny and they live solely by their labour (10).
media attention), the impact of the associative link between technology and the feminine on narrative representation becomes less localized” (25). This dislocation is evident throughout Midnight Robber, as technology shadows every aspect of Tan-Tan’s childhood and her relationship with her mother. For instance, as Tan-Tan is put to bed, Ione sings “a lullaby to her from across the room” (26) while “her earbug echoed it in her head as eshu sang along” (26). While this scene can be read as further evidence of Ione’s failure as a mother (as her distance is both physical and emotional), I argue that Hopkinson is questioning the integrated role of technology in parenting. In Virtual Worlds, Pramod Nayar notes that within feminist cyberpunk, robots and women commonly are demeaned: “Feminist cyberpunk describes the creation of systems of difference and discrimination within technocultures. Therefore, the popular cyborg image is female in such texts, and serves to demonstrate how women and robots (female robots or ‘fembots’) are constructed and dehumanised in similar ways” (306). By drawing connections between human mothers and service robots, like the wet-nurse, Hopkinson underscores the culturally constructed role of the “mother” and emphasizes the ways in which maternal labour has always been outside of the “human.”

Yet childcare on Toussaint remains firmly in the realm of women and with feminized technology. While Ione does not immediately tend to Tan-Tan at her birth, Antonio only does so under the tutelage of a robotic wet-nurse (47). From the beginning of her life then, Tan-Tan is as reliant on her parents as she is on
technology (the wet-nurse, the minder, the house eshu, Granny Nanny). Tan-Tan’s rearing is a shared event; Ione’s failure as a mother appears to be the result of her apparent willingness to abdicate her parental control to these feminized technological others. It is important to note that Tan-Tan is not overtly harmed by Ione’s lack of maternal instincts. Service robots and house eshus, ubiquitously present on Toussaint, are an important part of Tan-Tan’s familial identifications. After arriving on New Half-Way Tree, Tan-Tan realizes that she “was missing Nursie and eshu just as much as Ione” (108). While Ione is her birth mother, the house eshu is Tan-Tan’s primary source of knowledge about the world – both through play and through formal education: “No-one else would play with her, so she talked to the eshu. Not just for her lessons in math and history and art, but for all the questions the grownups wouldn’t answer for her” (30). The house eshu and, by extension, Granny Nanny, are surrogate mothers to Tan-Tan as they provide her with supervision, education and protection (which are, of course, traditional maternal functions that are being “outsourced” to technology).

Throughout Midnight Robber, Hopkinson maintains a careful ambivalence about these technological surrogate mothers. Instead of simply inverting the human/machine dichotomy by turning the machines into idealized mothers, Hopkinson uses them to further denaturalize the notion of a nurturing maternal femininity. Right from the start, the reader is confronted with Granny Nanny’s not so feminine colonization of Toussaint: “New Half-Way Tree is how Toussaint planet did look before the Marryshow Corporation sink them Earth Engine
Number 127 down into it like God entering he woman; plunging into the womb of the soil to impregnate the planet with the seed of Granny Nanny” (2). Granny Nanny is both nurturer and colonizer; her presence on Toussaint fertilizes a new society while simultaneously eradicating the world’s previous inhabitants. I agree with Anatol’s conclusion that:

Ambivalently, then, Hopkinson opens the dialogue for a rethinking of maternity that complicates patriarchal, masculinist ideologies; eurocentric visions of feminism that discount cultural and historical codes; and second-wave feminist critiques that view maternity as a hindrance to woman’s full potential. The s/mothering Nanny possesses the power of influence through nurturing but also political power; she can be centered and grounded and yet mobile and active; she can stifle and yet she can also be free. (4)

Mothers in *Midnight Robber*, both flesh and technological, are not idealized or essentialized. Through the dispersal of maternal care, Hopkinson confronts the notion of a “natural” motherhood by exposing the culturally constructed role of maternal bodies and their attendant responsibilities.

As much as Tan-Tan is the product of her technological minders, Hopkinson counterbalances this picture of shared rearing with the portrait of Quamina and the douen. Upon arriving in Junjuh, Antonio and Tan-Tan meet Aislin and her mentally disabled daughter, Quamina, who “ain’t have all she wits. Lin tells us she have the mind of a four-year-old” (129). On seeing Quamina and learning that she is his daughter, Antonio reacts in disgust while Aislin rebukes him: “You see what does happen to the child when you send a pregnant woman up the half-way tree” (131)? In Aislin’s case, technology violates the boundaries of the maternal body and marks her child as vulnerable. Quamina, warped by the
dimensional shift, exists somewhere between infant and adolescent. Once again, New-Half Way Tree is a site of indeterminacy for its exiled inhabitants. Tan-Tan, herself confronted with corporeal liminality in her crossing over, finds kinship with Quamina (132). While it is the actions of the technology on Toussaint that injure Quamina, the douens on New Half-Way Tree aid in her mental recovery as their medicine has helped her “grow-up”(129). Maternal responsibility on New Half-Way Tree, then, is shared with the “natural” indigenous inhabitants. Not only does Quamina benefit from the douens’ intervention in her care, but Tan-Tan receives positive mothering from them as well. Recognizing the tension between the technological parenting of Toussaint and the alien parenting on New Half-Way Tree, Anatol argues that Tan-Tan is better served by “those who are not genetically related to her than she gets from her birth parents” and that, when compared to the douen, those Toussaint care-takers are “simply sentient and not truly ‘alive’”(6). As fleshy vulnerable beings, the douens are able to interact with Tan-Tan in ways that are more relevantly human. In New Half-Way Tree, the douen community replaces Toussaint’s technological model of child care with compassion, shared parental responsibility, and holistic (non-technological) healing. Through the illustration of the surrogate care-givers roles, Hopkinson further denaturalizes the traditional role of mother by dispersing labour amongst both technological and alien others. The “mother” is neither inviolable nor natural, but a performed cultural product.
Chichibud and his family teach Tan-Tan that douen parents of any gender, as well as the community at large, nurture and care for the children. From the start of their interaction with one another, Chichibud demonstrates tenderness towards Tan-Tan. He praises Tan-Tan for noticing the sugar-maggot trails: “Gently Chichibud touched her forehead with the back of his hand, once, twice. ‘Good, little tall people. Sense behind you eyes’” (100). It is Chichibud, not Antonio, who feeds, clothes, shelters, and protects Tan-Tan on her arrival to New Half-Way Tree. During her introduction into the douen community, Tan-Tan is threatened by one of its members and finds refuge under Benta: “The packbird raised her body so that Tan-Tan could get out. But it was safe right there so in the musty dark that Benta had made. Tan-Tan didn’t move” (181). Despite being mistaken for a simple “packbird,” Benta nevertheless protects Tan-Tan as well. Anatol explains that: “A crucial aspect of Hopkinson’s presentation of this maternal bond

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14 For her part, Tan-Tan is immediately confronted with her knowledge of “douen” not matching up with the reality of Chichibud and his people. Tan-Tan, alarmed at the creature calling itself a Douen, thinks: “Douen! Nursie had told Tan-Tan douen stories. Douens were children who’d died before they had their naming ceremonies. They came back from the dead as jumbies with their heads on backwards” (93). While Antonio is unable to look past Chichibud’s alienness, Tan-Tan quickly warms to him, calling him “mister” (94) and asking his name (96). This is the first step in Tan-Tan’s re-education in the concepts of parental responsibility and community.

15 Despite Antonio’s hostility, deceit, and lack of trade goods, Chichibud gives Tan-Tan water (94); he notices that she is cold and gives her a cloth to cover herself (96); Chichibud finds them safe shelter under a tree (101) and he saves Tan-Tan from the mako jumbie that enters their camp due to Antonio’s negligence (111-112). In many ways, from this point on, Antonio abdicates his patriarchal authority in his relationship with Tan-Tan as Chichibud takes over the role of father.
is the community, rather than the individual parent, who will raise the child. [...] The community privileges chosen family over biological ties” (9). Both of Tan-Tan’s first-contact scenes speak of the douens’ generosity and seemingly shared instinct for paternal care. Even the pubescent Abitefa reiterates her community’s ethic of care: Tan-Tan struggles to communicate the horror of her pregnancy to Abitefa, but for “all she tried, Tan-Tan hadn’t really been able to make Abitefa understand. Easy for her. When Tefa came of egg bearing age, if she couldn’t or wouldn’t look after one of her own pickney, her chosen nestmates would, or another nest” (236). It is only through observing and living among the douens that Tan-Tan can redefine her concept of familial relationships and community. Unlike the programmed minders and house eshus on Toussaint, the douens appear more real, more alive, and indeed, more empathetic in their interactions with one another and with the exiled Tan-Tan.

Of the many mother-child relationships in Midnight Robber, perhaps the most complicated, and poignant, one is between Tan-Tan and her unborn baby. Throughout her pregnancy, Tan-Tan refers to her “parasite baby” and “monster baby,” feeling that it “is eating out my insides” (236). Madhu Dubey interprets the negative associations Tan-Tan makes: because she “is impregnated by her father at the age of sixteen, she cannot view pregnancy and childbirth as anything but monstrous aberrations” (“Becoming Animal” 42). The indeterminacy of the child’s origin completely disrupts Tan-Tan’s sense of identity. Confiding to Abitefa about her pregnancy, Tan-Tan says: “What I go call it, eh? Son or
brother? [...] I can’t give birth to this thing, Abi. It is a monster. I rip one of the brutes out of me once, I could do it twice” (233). Tan-Tan feels that her pregnancy is a continuation of Antonio’s violations of her body. From the onset of her second pregnancy, Tan-Tan sees it “as not only a war between parasite and host but also between her predator father and her preyed-upon self” (Anatol 8).

For Tan-Tan, there is little distinction between the baby and Antonio, as she feels possessed with his spirit. On the run from Janisette, “The baby bounced like a watermelon in [Tan-Tan’s] belly, slowing her down, like it wanted to get caught. Antonio’s duppy self, haunting and hunting her from within” (262). As long as Tan-Tan identifies the fetus with Antonio’s violent transgression of her body, she is unable to conceive of herself, or the fetus, as autonomous beings.

In order to achieve corporeal and emotional autonomy from her father, Tan-Tan must break the psychic connections that bind him to her. Symbolically, Ione’s wedding ring is one of the major symbols of Antonio’s abuse of Tan-Tan and she trades it in the hopes of obtaining an abortion:

All those years wearing it, and every time her hand brushed it, it propelled her back to that birthday night, to Antonio touching her, hurting her, to the smell of liquor on his breath. She had taken it on its leather thong off her neck the second night in the daddy tree. She could use it to buy herself freedom from the monster child. (237)

While Tan-Tan fails to terminate her pregnancy, by ridding herself of the wedding ring she begins to reclaim her body and regain her sense of corporeal autonomy.

Along with such acts of paternal separation, Tan-Tan’s positive familial
relationships with Chichibud, Benta, and Abitefa, teach her that neither her baby
nor herself is monstrous (she is not “bad Tan-Tan”). Dubey contends that:

[Tan-Tan’s] growing psychological identification with the douens gradually allows her to de-pathologize her own body, sexuality, and pregnancy. Through a process of critical distancing from human patriarchy, Tan-Tan is finally able to attribute “monstrosity” where it really belongs – to the sexually abusive human male rather than to the female body or to nonhuman, animal nature. (42)

Antonio’s violation of Tan-Tan causes her to misconstrue her sexuality, body, and pregnancy as pejoratively monstrous.\(^{16}\) It is only after emerging from the woods and her time with the douen that Tan-Tan is able to refigure her sense of monstrosity as generative (as Miranda and Evie do in Salt Fish Girl) and enter into a dynamic relationship with a human male.\(^{17}\) In the end, as Dubey observes, the real monsters in Midnight Robber are not mothers (whether technological, assigned, or chosen), but the men (and women) who misuse their power and access to technology to control others.

Maternal Narratives and the New Human

Throughout Midnight Robber and Salt Fish Girl, mothers (and their children) push the definitional boundaries of what constitutes human being. Both

\(^{16}\) Before coming to live with Chichibud and his family, Tan-Tan struggles to understand her sexuality and power: “Rick, Pappy, Antonio; you could rule men easy, with just one thing. Sometimes she wished for something more, wished that they wouldn’t make it so easy” (151).

\(^{17}\) After kissing Melonhead for the first time, “She stopped, stood knowledge struck in the street. Touching Melonhead made her feel good, an unalloyed pleasure untainted by fear or anger. So different than she’d ever felt before” (313).
novels end with extraordinary births: Tan-Tan gives birth to a baby boy, Tubman, and Miranda gives birth to a “black haired” baby girl. Each woman exceeds normative human boundaries and their journeys towards motherhood are fraught with anxieties about their seemingly excessive corporealities and place in society. “Where the monstrous other, and more particularly the monstrous mother, has figured an anxiety about the disorganization of the embodied self, the move has been to effect strategies of exclusion and vilification that deny full humanity to those who are ostensibly different” theorizes Shildrick in *Embodying the Monster* (46). Hopkinson and Lai refuse to deny their characters humanity, however, regardless of their genetic and technological differences. Despite the fact that “the anxieties generated by corporeal difference have most often resulted not simply in assimilation but in a violent policing of boundaries, both practically and metaphorically, and may continue to do so” (Shildrick 47), Miranda and Tan-Tan stand in direct opposition to those who aim to police their corporeal boundaries.

Both Lai and Hopkinson underscore the value of negotiating indeterminate boundaries and the importance of practices of self-determination. In *Midnight Robber*, Tan-Tan battles with her own liminality, not being able to make peace with her difference until she finally confronts the truth of her past. By recounting Antonio’s abuse at a masquerade gathering, Tan-Tan defeats her step-mother Janisette and frees herself from her father: “Tan-Tan knew her body to be hers again, felt her own mouth stretching open in amazement at the words that had come out of it. Is she, speaking truth; is truth!” (325-326). Through the telling of
her story, Tan-Tan is able to recognize her autonomous identity again and reclaim a human community for both herself and child. A similar affirmation of belonging despite difference occurs in *Salt Fish Girl* as well. Entering into a hot spring, Evie and Miranda undergo corporeal transformation, ending with the birth of baby girl:

> She stretched her tail through mine and out coiled interlocked and slid through one another and then all of a sudden I felt myself breathing these great heaving breaths. […] I howled with the pain of womb spasming deeply, and then a head emerged six inches below my navel, from an opening in my scaly new flesh. The head had a wrinkled human face. Evie reached under the water, guided the thing out, black-haired and bawling, a little baby girl. Everything will be all right, I thought, until next time. (269)

Lai plays with and against the traditional heteronormative happy ending of a birth. By insisting on Miranda and Evie’s queer difference, Lai disrupts the familiar and resists assimilation into the mundane and supposed natural. Lai and Hopkinson both end their novels *without* the simple reproduction of sameness. Instead these feminist post-cyberpunk novels propose that “next time” – the next generation of the human – will always be different, but still vulnerable.

In order to reject the notion of reproduction as sameness (in favour of replication, not reiteration), both Lai and Hopkinson highlight the importance of resisting heteronormative history and its control over women’s bodies. Alcena Rogan reads Hopkinson’s earlier work, *Brown Girl in the Ring*, arguing that “through Ti-Jeanne, Hopkinson illustrates how the survival skills of a single black parent, well-honed through her exposure to the tyrannies of institutionalized racism and familial sexism, might translate into her best hope for the future” (“Reproduction of Mothering” 96). Rogan’s comments, I believe, also apply to
Midnight Robber as Hopkinson carefully outfits Tan-Tan with the necessary survival skills to survive by herself on New Half-Way Tree after leaving the institutionalized and technologically reliant Toussaint. In her final confrontation with Janisette, Tan-Tan, for the first time, identifies the child she carries as hers: “Whose? She’d carried the monster all this way. The damned pickney was hers” (321). It is only after she tells her story and rejects Antonio’s claim on her body that Tan-Tan finds corporeal and psychic unity. With her return to a relatively integrated identity, she is able to separate herself from the Robber Queen personae as well. After telling her story, she stood “just being Tan-Tan, sometimes good, sometimes bad, mostly just getting by like everybody else. She felt the Robber Queen relaxing into a grateful slumber. Daddy was dead, her baby was alive. Now was time to put away guilt” (326). By putting “away the guilt,” Tan-Tan succeeds in reproducing life outside of the control of her father. She rejects Antonio’s “natural” claim to paternity – neither her nor her baby are his property.

In Salt Fish Girl, Evie and Miranda seek to reject heteronormative control over their bodies through the queer nature of their relationship. Evie, in particular, must struggle to carve out her own history, distinct from her father/creator, Dr. Flowers. Focusing on the racialized body, Morris states that

Evie’s narrative is a determined effort by Lai to situate the woman of colour’s story outside of the discourse of both paternal and white Western origins. Evie does not regard herself as a fallen angel and … does not return to her father in search of a prelapsarian grace and harmony” (“What Does it Mean to be Human?” 89).

Like Tan-Tan in Midnight Robber, Evie undoes her relationship with her father –
not only through the act of stabbing him (257), but by refusing to live by his preconceived conditions of her being. In both novels, women seek out ways in which to reproduce their own narratives, and their own bodies, on their own terms. Tara Lee argues that “Lai proposes a fertility where commodities can produce autonomously, not just be reproduced, and in doing so, reveals the body’s continued capability to claim a ‘home’ for itself. The body thus becomes a tool of resistance” (“Mutant Bodies” 1). Not only do the maternal bodies in Salt Fish Girl and Midnight Robber threaten the continuation of “normal humanity,” but they cleverly and passionately replicate themselves using the technological tools originally created to control them. Moreover, as feminist post-cyberpunk writers, Lai and Hopkinson reject the reproductive utopias found in second-wave feminist utopia SF, where the site of “women’s liberation” was always elsewhere (such as the planet Winter in Le Guin’s Left Hand of Darkness or the alternative earth, Whileaway, in Joanna Russ’s The Female Man). By contrast, the maternal bodies in Salt Fish Girl and Midnight Robber do not require an “elsewhere;” rather, these texts localize the sites wherein women are free to replicate themselves in indeterminate and unfamiliar ways that substantiate their corporeal autonomy.

Integral to the efforts of resisting heteronormative gendered control in Salt Fish Girl and Midnight Robber is the women’s embrace and manipulation of technology. Returning to my discussion of the posthuman at the beginning of this chapter, I suggest that ultimately both Hopkinson and Lai imagine a technological maternal body that is neither posthuman, nor simply unadulterated flesh. In
Bodies of Tomorrow, Vint seeks what she calls an “embodied posthumanism” that foregrounds the body, instead of looking past it at technology. She theorizes that:

Embodied posthumanism has the power to expand our capacity for responsibility and our connections with others. It is inevitable that technoscience will continue to enact changes on the current state of human embodied existence. Thus it is imperative that we develop an ethically responsible model of embodied posthuman subjectivity to ensure that such bodily modifications make us more than – rather than less than – human. (26)

Vint's generous evocation of the posthuman nears Hopkinson’s revisioning of the human at the close of the novel. As Tan-Tan gives birth, the narrative switches back to the voice of Granny Nanny talking to baby Tubman. Granny Nanny explains that, unlike the adult exiles who lost their connection to her system, the AI was able to control the nanomites that survived the dimensional shift in young Tan-Tan’s body:

She instruct the nanomites in your mamee blood to migrate into your growing tissue, to alter you as you grow so all of you could feel nannysong at this calibration. You could hear me because your whole body is one living connection to the Grande Anansi Nanotech Interface. Your little bodystring will sing to Nanny tune, doux-doux. You will be a weave in she web. Flesh people talk say how earbugs give them a sixth sense, but really is only a crutch, oui? Not a fully functional perception. You now; you really have that extra limb. (328)

Unlike the adults on Toussaint who exchange their privacy and autonomy for the protection and control of Granny Nanny, little Tubman will be able to benefit from his connection to the AI without it placing constraints on his corporeality. Ideally, Tubman’s posthuman subjectivity will make him more attentive to the needs of the humans on New Half-Way Tree, helping them build a more inclusive
society that can avoid both the pitfalls of technological reliance and corporeal essentialism.

Like Vint, Hollinger is another SF critic who seeks a middle ground when theorizing about the interaction between technology and the body. In her article, “Cybernetic Deconstructions,” Hollinger posits that:

The postmodern condition has required that we revise science fiction’s original trope of technological anxiety -- the image of the fallen humanity controlled by a technology run amok. Here again we must deconstruct the human/machine opposition and begin to ask new questions about the ways in which we and our technologies ‘interface’ to produce what has become a mutual evolution. (187-188)

The nanomites in baby Tubman’s ear reflect this mutual evolution in Midnight Robber – for the first time, technology operates as a bridge between the body and the outside world, instead of acting as a tool of domination. No where is this shared transformation more poignantly stated than in Lai’s Salt Fish Girl.

Miranda, on learning the truth of the genetically engineered durian trees, thinks to herself:

We are the new children of the earth, of the earth’s revenge. Once we stepped out of mud, now we step out of moist earth, out of DNA both new and old, an imprint of what has gone before, but also a variation. By our difference we mark how ancient the alphabet of our bodies. By our strangeness we write our bodies into the future. (259)

Through Miranda, Lai expresses hope for a future wherein maternal bodies (and, indeed, all bodies marked as “visibly vulnerable”) are not constrained within repressive systems of reproduction. The marked bodies of Miranda and Evie, as well as that of Tan-Tan and baby Tubman in Midnight Robber, represent an
imagination of a future where corporeal boundaries can exceed normative boundaries and yet not threaten their status as human beings.

Lee contends that *Salt Fish Girl* “provides an alternative to ‘nostalgia’ with the birth of a child that neither retreats into nature, nor glorifies a purely scientific body. Control over reproduction is achieved not by taking over factories and laboratories, but by leveraging the productive capabilities that are contained in the body itself” (9). While I agree with Lee’s point, I find her reference to nostalgia interesting and think that it unintentionally speaks to another radical aspect of the construction of maternity in the two novels. Not only do Lai and Hopkinson advocate for new forms of maternal embodiment, but they also insist on recognizing that maternal histories of struggle have always been present in our collective memory, no matter how neglected and maligned. Repeatedly, Lai advocates the notion of memory over history – it is as if memory is more corporeal and more in keeping with human experience than history.18 Evidenced by her fistulas,19 Miranda’s body is marked by the memory of Nu Wa. While her

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18 Throughout the novel, in both Nu Wa’s and Miranda’s sections, Lai reiterates that memory always connects mothers and daughters, regardless the time passed. For instance, Nu Wa returns home and meets her very aged mother: “My mother reached out and touched my cheek fondly as though there were a part of her beyond her loss of memory that recognized exactly who I was and loved me spite of all the pain I had caused” (174). The same insistence on maternal memory repeats itself for Miranda, as she sings her mother’s song, Clara Cruise at the cabaret: “As I sang, I felt a presence at the pit of my belly that could be no one but her. My long-lost mother. I felt a sense of comfort that I had not felt in a very long time” (196).

19 A fistula is abnormal permanent passage between two organs or an organ and the exterior of the body.
mother tells her the fistulas are there for “cleaning the bone marrow” (107). Miranda believes that “they served the function of memory, recalling a time when we were more closely related to fish … This is why, when pressed, the liquid they release smells of the sea” (107-108). The fistulas serve as literal sites of “seepage,” underscoring Miranda’s non-normative corporeality and familial inheritance. In addition to her physical expression of maternal memory, Miranda also senses time outside of normative linear history. When she first meets Evie in Dr. Flowers’ lab, she feels a connection to Evie and recalls that: “I had the distinct impression the past was leaking through the present, though I could not have explained this” (105). Despite the centuries that have passed, Miranda and Evie still maintain the memory of Nu Wa and the salt fish girl. I read these scenes as indicative of a persistence of embodied memory, a relationship to a tied past that contests the rote repetition of history. Miranda’s memory is both inherited and lived: “I am your grandmother I wanted to tell her. I am the maker of your maker. Both of us, such putrid origins, climbing out of the mud and muck into darkness. But I did not want to unmake what I had made, imperfect and wicked as it was” (253). In this way, Lai creates an indeterminate maternal body that extends itself through time, resisting domination by and elimination through technology.

Hopkinson, like Lai, also emphasizes the empowering role of memory in her text. The connection between Tan-Tan and Ione often appears tenuous in the story, but Tan-Tan never forgets her mother. On her ninth birthday, Tan-Tan looks at her reflection in water and notices that: “Mummy’s hair had been mixup-
mixup like that, some straight, some coiled tight like springs, some wavy. All bloods flowing into one river. She looked like Mummy for true” (137). Tragically, Antonio exploits Tan-Tan’s relationship with her mother for his own perverse gratification, which, in turn, makes it difficult for Tan-Tan to identify with Ione. Stripped of a relationship with her mother, Tan-Tan benefits, however, from the maternal power of the douen community. Anatol argues that

… recognizing “maternal power” and affectionate bonds that are separate from biological reproduction are also crucial to validating the transhistorical experiences of people of the African diaspora, and necessary for rebuilding a communal identity that refuses to be bound by the individualism and potential isolation inherent in the biological model. (10)

Like Nu Wa’s story being retold through every life time, the communal identity of the douen resonates throughout each successive generation. Tan-Tan’s inclusion into their history fosters a dynamic sense of identity and communal experience for her that she otherwise would not have had. Tan-Tan’s choice of name for her baby, Tubman, also speaks to the persistence of a diasporic maternal memory: “Tubman: the human bridge from slavery to freedom. She give you a good name, doux-doux. A seer woman might have name you that” (329). Along with Granny Nanny, the douens become part of Tubman’s maternal inheritance; with all of those “bloods flowing into one river,” he represents the hope of bridging the two disparate worlds of Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree.

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20 Tubman, “she of the underground railroad fame, the Moses of the black slaves” (Clemente 23).
As feminist post-cyberpunk novels, Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* and Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber* expose the maternal body – human or posthuman – as, in many ways (outside of the biological), cultural artifice. As I indicated at the start of the chapter, framing the maternal body as medicalized “patient” is just one restrictive way in which it is controlled and policed. By approaching the maternal body as monstrous, however, feminist post-cyberpunk makes evident what Shildrick describes as the “radical otherness and the always already other at the heart of identity” (28). The characters that Lai and Hopkinson bring to life in their stories illustrate the radical otherness and generativity of the maternal bodies they depict—Miranda’s corporeality stretches across eons, the clone Sonias replicate themselves outside of patriarchal control, and Tan-Tan, surviving extreme trauma, gives birth to the next generation of the (post)human. Through their “visibly vulnerable” differences, these women reject normative discourses of reproduction and forge new ways of imagining human embodiment.

Instead of returning to an idealized “earth mother” stereotype characteristic of feminist SF of the 1970s, feminist post-cyberpunk seeks to explore the infinite variety of the human maternal experience. Observing the inclination to return to essentialist ideas about the body when faced with difference, Hayles argues that: “Essentialism is normative in its impulse, denoting qualities or attributes shared by all human beings. Though it is true that all humans share embodiment, embodied experience is dispersed along a spectrum of
possibilities” (201).\textsuperscript{21} Perhaps due to its already indeterminate boundaries, the maternal body is a particularly powerful place to articulate the possibilities of embodied experience. While monstrosity usually denotes the undesirable, the freak, and the unwanted, Lai and Hopkinson transform their monstrous mothers into generative and adaptable bodies. “Monsters, then, are deeply disturbing,” writes Shildrick, insisting that they are “neither good nor evil, inside nor outside, not self or other. On the contrary, they are always liminal, refusing to stay in place, transgressive and transformative. They disrupt both internal and external order, and overturn the distinctions that set out the limits of the human subject” (4). In feminist post-cyberpunk the maternal body disrupts corporeal boundaries and, recognizing its differences, embraces its liminality as a sign of its potential transformation and differentiation from gendered, heteronormative constructs. Reproductive technologies have the capacity to reshape human being in unexpected and frightening ways. Feminist post-cyberpunk articulates the dangers inherent in adopting any new technology – cloned slaves, surveilled bodies, and controlled populations – but remains optimistic that the maternal body will continue to replicate on its own terms and in unforeseen ways.

\textsuperscript{21} Through their shared rejection of essentialist identities, feminist post-cyberpunk writers align themselves with the basic tenets of third-wave feminism. See Chapter One (25-26).
CHAPTER FOUR

Technology as Cure? Virtuality, Proxies, and the Vulnerable Body

“Flesh marks the very province of our humanity.”
(Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human* 188)

“This was no waldo, no robot, no mere extension of his consciousness. It was his body: it fit him like a favorite, well-worn shoe; it was home.”
(Mixon, *Proxies* 2)

In this chapter, I want to expand on the ways that feminist post-cyberpunk SF uses technological spaces – such as virtual reality and proxy-bodies – in order to problematize cultural constructions of the body. While technology is often considered a “silver bullet” for the multitude of deformities and ailments of the vulnerable human body, feminist post-cyberpunk cautions against technophilia and “technology as cure.” In *Maul* and *Proxies*, Sullivan and Mixon position the idea of a virtual “body-free universe” as one that both parallels and conflicts with the reality of the lived bodies that populate and enable it. In contrast to the maternal female bodies examined in the last chapter, the bodies undergoing transformation in *Maul* and *Proxies* are predominantly male (and adolescent). A large part of the action in these novels occurs within technologically mediated spaces, and both writers imagine how these non-corporeal sites conflate the conventional boundaries between body/mind, inside/outside, and single/multiple. Instead of "curing" the body of its perceived vulnerabilities, technology instead exposes and exacerbates that vulnerability, which leads to a disruptive mental break with the flesh (as I established in Chapter Two). Feminist post-cyberpunk
argues that in order for human forms of embodiment to survive, psychic unity with the vulnerable body is necessary.

As I have extensively discussed in the previous chapters, “the responses of disavowal of and identification with the monstrous arise equally because we are already without boundaries, already vulnerable” (Shildrick 6). In Chapter Two, I began analyzing the ways in which feminist post-cyberpunk interrogates the relationship between the body and technology, expressing anxieties about boundary dissolution and psychic disruption. While people often use technology to disavow the inherent vulnerability of the body, the resulting forms of embodiment are frequently more monstrous than any supposed lack or excess present in the “natural” body. By examining reproductive technologies and maternity in Chapter Three, I illustrated how feminist post-cyberpunk (in particular, Lai’s Salt Fish Girl and Hopkinson’s Midnight Robber) reiterates Shildrick’s contention that the body is always already vulnerable. Instead of succumbing to normative gendered systems of technological control, maternal bodies adapt to changing boundaries and establish an enduring presence through narrative and memory. In this chapter, then, I want to take up two popular sites wherein SF writers often explore technological transformation and control of the human body: virtual reality and proxy-bodies. Before I delve into my analysis of Maul and Proxies, I will first briefly revisit the notion of the posthuman desire to transcend the body through technology in order to highlight the ways in which it raises and troubles the issues of transhumanism, multiplicity, and essentialism.
In *Volatile Bodies*, Grosz observes that “bodies are not inert; they function interactively and productively. They act and react. They generate what is new, surprising, unpredictable” (xi). Like the maternal bodies examined in the previous chapter, all bodies are capable of adapting to technological advances and, in some cases, they must even rely on embodied technology for continued existence. Such apparent malleability of the body when in the presence of technology, however, creates anxiety over the future of the human: if the flesh is no longer necessary for existence, then *what* are we? Hayles suggests that such ontological questions are becoming more urgent as humanity is faced with radical climate change and economic uncertainty: “The sense that the world is rapidly becoming uninhabitable by human beings is part of the impetus for the displacement of presence by pattern” (37). One of the ways in which such fears find rest is in the notion of transhumanism. Like technophilia and technophobia, transhumanism is a common attitude (and SF trope¹) towards technological embodiment. Graham explains that “transhumanism celebrates technology as the manifestation of human liberation from bondage to nature, finitude, and the vagaries of diseases, decay and death. … [W]hether the body is augmented, rebuilt or obsolete … the essential, rational self endures unimpeded” (9). While there are inarguably extensive threads of transhumanist sentiment throughout popular culture and SF, I believe that feminist post-cyberpunk SF rejects transhumanist trajectories.

¹ Graham quotes Stephen Clark’s contention that: “Much science fiction is imbued with transhumanist sentiment, driven by a desire for the subjugation, even the effacement, of vulnerability, contingency and specificity” (9).
Whereas conventional cyberpunk favours subjugation of the body in favour of mental transcendence, feminist post-cyberpunk maintains that the connection between mind and body – and embrace of the body’s vulnerability – is essential to productively and responsibly transforming our understanding of human being.

Reading cyberpunk literature, Claudia Springer notes the danger in turning to technology to resolve our transhumanist anxieties. She warns that “devising plans to preserve human consciousness outside of the body or to simulate human consciousness electronically indicates a desire to redefine the self in an age when the future of human existence is already precarious” (Electronic Eros 27).

Springer’s comment forces the question: what is the future of human existence in the wake of so much tumultuous upheaval and technological progress? Critics who espouse posthumanism expend a good deal of energy mapping out what will become of the human – for better or worse. Reiterating the importance of human community, Vint suggests that:

> While many visions of the posthuman desire to transcend the limitations of the human body through technology or genetic redesign, I argue that it is important to return to a notion of embodied subjectivity in order to articulate the ethical implications of technologies of bodily modification. Technological visions of a post-embodied future are merely fantasies about transcending the material realm of social responsibility. (8)

Vint’s evocation of social responsibility dovetails with my own concerns with reading the construction of gender and race (and to a lesser extent, sexuality, class, and disability) in these feminist post-cyberpunk texts. I argue that, as much as the writers imagine the consequences of technological change, they are equally
concerned with the social, political, and cultural realms of human existence. To separate the human element from the technological is, as Vint suggests, to avoid the ethics of social responsibility. Both novels deal with the exploitation of gendered and raced others (where the most vulnerable are ill and disabled children) under the guise of humane medical intervention and research. While conventional cyberpunk literature embraced virtuality and related technologies as ways in which to “liberate” the mind from the failing body, feminist post-cyberpunk interrogates the personal and social cost of such psychic liberation from corporeality.

In her discussion of virtual embodiment, Hayles underscores the fact that “human being is first of all embodied being and the complexities of this embodiment mean that human awareness unfolds in ways very different from those of intelligence embodied in cybernetic machines” (284). While cyberpunk was particularly interested in the embodiment displayed by cybernetic machines and the humans who sought to become like them, feminist post-cyberpunk strives to detail the ways in which human being is emphatically different from technological being. Human being requires an engagement with human ethics; feminist post-cyberpunk proposes that such ethics must begin with acknowledgement of the vulnerable and monstrous body. Hayles cites Gibson’s

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2 The cowboy-hacker, Case, in Gibson’s Sprawl series (beginning with Neuromancer) desires to be permanently “jacked in” into cyberspace rather than deal with his chemically deteriorating body. In Pat Cadigan’s Synners, “Visual Mark” uploads his consciousness into the ‘net when he goes rogue from the cyberspace experiment wherein he is a test subject.
Neuromancer trilogy is a prime example of a narrative wherein “the contrast between the body’s limitations and cyberspace’s power highlights the advantages of pattern over presence. As long as the pattern endures, one has contained a kind of immortality” (36). Like many readers of Neuromancer, Hayles cites the character of Dixie Flatline as a transhumanist figure who, as a personality construct, achieves technological immortality; what goes unnoted, however, is that Dixie’s one desire as an “immortal” being is to be permanently erased (Neuromancer 106). I argue that feminist post-cyberpunk takes up figures like Dixie Flatline and asks: What is the definition of life for a disembodied being? Is a recognizable and maintainable human consciousness possible without the flesh?

One of the major consequences of dislocating the mind from the body, as both Sullivan’s Maul and Mixon’s Proxies suggest, is having to navigate multiple modes of embodiment. In Virtual Worlds, Nayar Pramod observes the variance between male-written cyberpunk and the later evocations of the genre written by women (like Pat Cadigan): “Male cyberpunk writers tend to privilege disembodiment and search for techno-transcendence. The separation of mind and body in cyberpunk leaves masculinity undisturbed and unthreatened. In feminist cyberpunk the female protagonists do not want to ‘leave’ their bodies” rather they see virtual space as “a means of enhancing or multiplying embodiment” (307).

Multiplicity of being, however, results in unprecedented boundary transgression.

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3 As Case prepares for an attack on the AI Wintermute, Dixie agrees to help under the condition that “when it’s over, you erase this goddam thing [his personality construct]” (106).
and the novel forms of embodiment become sites of corporeal anxiety. Observing the fears that arise from the development of new technologies like virtual reality, Lisa Nakamura states that “the dream of a new technology has always contained within it the fear of total control and the accompanying loss of individual autonomy” (“Race In/For Cyberspace” 718). As I articulated in Chapter 2, with every new technology (especially those that purport to transcend the corporeal realm), there is the attendant threat that users and non-users alike are in danger of succumbing to, or even falling behind of, progress and losing familiar touchstones of identity. As a response to the threat of the loss of a coherent identity in the wake of multiplicity, Judith Squires argues that: “In the face of insecurities about our limits and the realization of the possibility of continuity, we all too often witness, not the celebration of new possibilities, but a retreat into fortress identities, the strategic use of the massive, regressive common denominators of essential identities” (“Fabulous Futures” 362). The novels of my study all attempt to deconstruct essentialist identity in favour of articulating fluid modes of embodiment (that are generative rather than corrosive). I suggest that *Proxies* and *Maul* attempt to reiterate an integrated embodied identity, while at the same time avoiding the pitfalls of essentialism.⁴

Since gender and race remain contested sites of embodied identity, feminist post-cyberpunk attempts to unmoor those culturally-constructed markers

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⁴ Feminist post-cyberpunk’s attempt to avoid essentialism while foregrounding the importance of the body is yet another way in which the genre aligns itself closely with third-wave feminist, or “materialist” thought (van der Tuin 22).
from essentialist assumptions regarding corporeality. Reading similar scenarios in SF, Vint suggests that “computers do not just change our body images, but also influence our thinking and perception; the body and the self are both influenced by information technology” (Bodies of Tomorrow 119). Virtual reality and proxies are technologies that impact both the body and “self” (one’s constructed identity) simultaneously: the body must undergo specialized alteration or adaptation (i.e. computer hardware must be worn or implanted) and the mind must be trained to conceive of and endure multiple embodiments. Is it possible then, in the face of radical ontological change, for a person to successfully reconcile their long-held identifications with gendered and racialized categories of being? While virtuality and proxy-bodies allow for the reimagining of the embodiment, I am influenced by Booth and Flanagan as they remind their readers that, despite myths to contrary, such technologically mediated spaces retain class and cultural hierarchies (Reload 13). They argue that even though there is the possibility to forming new kinds of bodies, “gender and racial categories are kept remarkably intact – the body that emerges is a particularly white body” (Reload 15). Throughout my analysis of Maul and Proxies, I will emphasize the ways in which the writers manage (and, at times, fail) to destabilize gender and race as components of corporeal identification.

Both Sullivan and Mixon examine the inherent vulnerability of the flesh and express Western culture’s collective desire to overcome and elide any sign of
physical disability. Addressing the long history of pathologizing the othered or “atypically embodied,” Garland-Thomson posits that:

[Medical] pathology transforms hybridity into abnormality. It converts the freak to the specimen. Whereas the spectacle of the freak exhibit tries to expand the possibilities of interpretation through sensationalism and exaggeration, the spectacle of the specimen attempts to contain those possibilities through classification and mastery. (137)

Echoing Garland-Thomson’s observation that medicalization converts the “freak into the specimen” in order to contain and control the non-normative body, Shildrick observes that “above all, vulnerability must be managed, covered over in the self, and repositioned as a quality of the other” (68). Throughout both novels, “visibly vulnerable” bodies – Meniscus in Maul and the crèche children in Proxies – are figured as “the other” and, as such, are subjected to invasive and depersonalizing experiments (under the guise of “cure” research). Unfortunately, those bodies figured as vulnerable are denied equal agency over their bodies. As Shildrick further notes:

Regardless of ethical intent, those on the receiving end of (limited) beneficence are never able to claim equal agency while their vulnerability remains. Vulnerability is positioned, then, as that which impairs agency in the ‘damaged’ other while inspiring moral action on the part of the secure self to make good the perceived lack. (77)

Both Maul and Proxies investigate the consequences of such moral intervention on the bodies of those deemed “damaged.” Through the narratives of Meniscus and the crèche children, Sullivan and Mixon illustrate the ways in which the desire to cure or control the vulnerable body with technology initiates a disjuncture between the mind and the flesh, resulting in a loss of autonomy and a
meaningful connection to physical reality. As I move through my analysis of

*Maul* and *Proxies*, I will articulate the specific ways in which virtual reality and
proxy-bodies interact with the vulnerable body, limiting agency and intensifying
dislocation of the psyche from the flesh.

**The Virtual and the Vulnerable**

Following in the tradition of early cyberpunk, *Maul*’s narrative centres on
virtual reality, the interactive game Mall, as a technologically-mediated space
wherein the user (in this case, Meniscus) can experience “liberation” from his or
her body. ⁵ Reading similar texts, Sabine Heuser proposes that: “The animism,
organicism, and personification of cyberspace are special effects of metaphors,
creating the liquid architecture of cyberspace as an entirely verbal by-product”
(*Virtual Geographies* 75). In *Maul*, the vulnerable body becomes the literal
“architecture” for virtuality (like cyberspace) as the entire secondary narrative of
the avatars, Sun and her friends, occurs within Meniscus’s subconscious. In this
sense, Meniscus appears more than human as his body both *relies on* and *acts as*
an embodied space for the virtually-enabled beings (which are avatars of his
immune system and of the 10E virus). As Dr. Bernie Taktarov, Meniscus’s clone
father, warns Maddie, “We won’t be the same species anymore, if Meniscus’s
DNA is altered by 10E [virus]” (171). From the outset then, Sullivan challenges

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⁵ As I noted in Chapter Two, Meniscus is a “Y-autistic male” who has
been donated to Hibridge Labs as charity clone (9-10). Under the direction of Dr.
Maddie Baldino, the lab’s lead scientist, Meniscus undergoes successive rounds
of experiments for years.
the normative construction of the human – not only is Meniscus a clone, but his interface with virtual technology places stress on the limits of his corporeality. Instead of embracing Meniscus as an example of the posthuman (as his body is genetically-modified and serves as a virtual gateway), the female researchers conceive of his body as monstrously other. Shildrick argues that monstrously embodied selves, like Meniscus, are “fundamentally disturbing in that they cannot be accounted for within the binary parameters of sameness and difference, in which the latter is measured in terms of the former” (75). Meniscus’s ability to identify and be identified by those around him as human is inhibited by two mediating factors: one, by the virtual technology with which he must interface; and, two, by the researchers who reduce him to monstrous other as his “visibly vulnerable” body threatens to expose their own material constructions.

Mary Flanagan reflects that “computers, like the body, are permeable, and this permeability is dangerous as it allows contagion as well as content to enter; the contagion, like physical or computer viruses, might consume our histories and our knowledges” (“Hyperbodies, Hyperknowledge” 448). In Maul, Meniscus’s body is the most permeable and therefore the most at risk of contagion; it is also the body most infiltrated by technology under the guise of medical research. Sullivan introduces Meniscus as an adolescent who is denied corporeal autonomy as he is deemed disabled and a danger to public health (being both a “y-autistic” male clone and potential carrier of the Y-plague). He is able to endure the viral experiments on his body only “because he remained physically passive. He used
Mall as a distraction and as an outlet for his energy; to temper the pain, to reconcile himself to the deadly invasion and survive in spite of it. What happened outside of his body shouldn’t matter to him” (11). For Meniscus, his corporeal permeability disallows him any sense of his own history. His embodiment is regulated by Maddie, who limits the scope of his physical being and monitors his cognitive processes. Meniscus’s sense of individual identity is so fragile that when Bonus triggers a reaction in his body, Mall ends up taking over his awareness:

A cascade of effects flows from the actions of the Azure bugs like silk thread and weaves a tapestry of responses in him. Statistical functions too small and fast to see accrue and send agents across cell membranes, rearranging his molecules. He fights not to drown in the bugs’ otherness – fights to retain his self-awareness. (14)

Fighting a two-front war on his body, Meniscus struggles to maintain a sense of himself that is distinct from his designation as an ever-permeable, always vulnerable, laboratory subject.

With his humanity stripped, Meniscus becomes little more than expendable “meat” to the women who exploit him. Springer notes that the term “meat” is used in cyberpunk novels to refer to the body: “In this context, ‘meat’ typically carries a negative connotation along with its conventional association with the penis. It is an insult to be called meat in these texts, and to be meat is to be vulnerable” (“Pleasure of the Interface” 39). By placing a male body in the

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6 Having snuck into the lab, Bonus talks to Meniscus and: “Looking at her makes his whole body go suddenly dark, and when she leans against the glass and speaks the stars come out in him” (13).
derogatory role of “meat,” Sullivan reverses the typically female status of “meat puppet” in conventional cyberpunk texts (such as Molly in Neuromancer). As a cloned male in a female dominated world that privileges the “natural,” his body is further marked as the other that requires containment. For Meniscus, virtual reality offers not only escape from his tortured body, but an alternative way of being in the world. In pain and his privacy violated, Meniscus turns to Mall, which,

… is really useful at times like this. When he first started playing it, he could do nothing but regulate the heat and electricity and water services, occasionally managing to subtly influence buying patterns. But since Naomi painted him with Set 10E, Dr. Baldino’s newest Azure design, the sensory detail has become richer, so that sometimes Mall seems more real than his familiar habitat. And he is getting to know the people who inhabit it, especially the employees. Security guards, salesgirls, janitors have become transparent to him. He moves them around so as to make himself feel better; just as he moves around the planets of the reward stones. It is all play. (11)

All that matters to Meniscus occurs within the thin membrane of body that exists between the inner self (his mind, Mall) and the outside world (the laboratory). His skin literally becomes the war zone between himself and the world. For Meniscus, the world is no larger than his body. The boundary between self and other (in this case, the virus) is indistinct and threatens to erase normative notions of a stable identity completely. This indeterminacy is further reflected within his subconscious, as the avatar Sun struggles with determining where the world

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7 Sullivan offers the reader tortured images of Meniscus tearing at his own flesh: “He’s on his feet, consumed with agony, and he starts tearing at his treacherous skin. Even as it turns blue, he attacks it with his own nails and teeth” (17).
begins and ends. She thinks: “The world. It’s supposed to be big, but it’s very small. It was never ‘out there,’ it was always in here” (260). “In here” has two possible meanings: one, it could mean the “here” of Meniscus’s subconscious, or two, it could mean that the world is only the consciousness within each of us. Sullivan seems to play with the Cartesian duality of the mind-body split on both levels – within the virtual space of Mall and within the real world. Regardless of how I read “in here” it is evident that Maul expresses anxiety over what boundaries constitute the self when confronted with the technological.

Dis-embodied Children

Mixon’s Proxies, much like Sullivan’s Maul, utilizes virtual space as a site of “cure” for the body, but it also includes the technology of telepresence and the proxy body as another realm wherein the characters complicate notions of embodiment and identity. Similar to Meniscus in Maul, the bodies that undergo the greatest technological transformation are those easily manipulated: the crèche children are racially-minoritized children from underprivileged socio-economic backgrounds that have been “adopted” by Dr. Patricia Taylor in order to use in her experiments with telepresence and proxies. Flanagan comments that: “The proxy narrative space Mixon develops is unusual, even for ‘hard’ science fiction. Knowledge here is multiple, heterogeneous, and conflicted; multiple aspects and characteristics of the narrative bubble up and at times contradict each other” (“Hyperbodies, Hyperknowledge” 437). This multiplicity in narrative and
knowledge in the novel is due to the fact that Mixon employs both the use of virtual reality and proxies as alternate sites of embodied experience. One person is not limited to one body. In this multiplicity the crèche children in *Proxies* challenge the definition of the human. Mixon directly confronts this contention throughout the novel, often using the character of Carli D’Auber as the voice of the body. In discussion with Carli about the seemingly disembodied lives of the crèche children, Byron relies on philosophy to defend the experiments on them: “Haven’t you read any of Hans Moravec’s work, or Marvin Minsky’s, or Li Chan Thunder’s? We’re not our bodies. What makes us unique is our intellect. Information, sentience. Intelligence. That’s what defines us as human” (322).

Carli, defending practical and lived reality over intangible discourse, simply responds, “Oh, bullshit” (322). In order to access experiences of corporeality, the crèche-confined children embody proxies and virtual reality avatars; Mixon delves into the ways in which these technological spaces impact their conception of humanity. Carli, unnerved by the unnaturalness of the proxy bodies, tells Byron that she “can’t get used to these bodies that aren’t people’s real bodies” to which he responds, “They’re real. Just not flesh and blood” (323). Patently evident in their conversation is anxiety over the definition of “body” – Mixon challenges the reader to consider the view (or alternatively, the threat) that

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8 During her defense of the experiments on the crèche children, Dr. Taylor tells Carli that: “The very idea of the human proxy was developed initially to give the children a sense of their humanity, in fact” (299).
perhaps bodies are pure constructions and therefore their materiality (flesh or plastic) is irrelevant.

Noting that the crèche children in Proxies have a strong interface with virtual reality systems in order to explore embodiment, Foster argues that their connection to their own physical bodies is correspondingly weaker. As such, he concludes:

The plot of Proxies resolves primarily around this conflict between what the novel presents as two equally naturalized understandings of embodiment and reality, and the key interpretative question is whether these two sets of assumptions can exist in a productive, critical relationship to one another or whether they are simply incompatible and can never coexist. (“Postproduction of the Human Heart” 475)

While I agree with the general tenets of Foster’s argument, I believe that Mixon is performing a much more creative and critical task than simply proposing a binary understanding of embodiment and reality. Instead of addressing the typical heterosexual white male cyberpunk hero, Mixon interrogates the relationship between the most marginalized (and therefore most vulnerable) members of society and technology. Dr. Taylor implies that she has “saved” the disabled crèche children from poverty and racial discrimination⁹ – as those markers are

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⁹ It is also possible to read Dr. Taylor’s “saving” of the children in the contexts of transnational adoption. In Figurations, Claudia Castañeda states that: “Considered as one among other reproductive technologies, adoption can be seen to participate in this history of racial reformulation insofar as it involves racialized figurations of the adoptee” (86). One of the difficulties that Castañeda identifies existing within the discourse of transnational adoption is the adoptee becomes figured as “both a racialized body, and as one whose racialization is culturally insignificant” (91).
erased or hidden by the technology – and from experiencing human suffering.\(^\text{10}\)

By freeing the children from their imagined bleak futures, Dr. Taylor and her team end up fostering disembodied consciousnesses that are unable to relate with the physical limitations of human being – marginalized or otherwise. For example, as the adults fight over Taylor’s plan to murder the crew of the spaceship they intend to commandeer, Pablo thinks: “He didn’t understand why the others were so distressed when it was just bodies they were talking about killing. But that was the way it worked in similes, too, so maybe that was just how they were supposed to act” (334). By the time Carli confronts the children with their own (pre-)existing bodily vulnerabilities, they remain uncertain as to how they fit into their larger human community. After Dr. Taylor’s death, Buddy fumes that she “had succeeded in her attempt to isolate them from the rest of humanity. […] Mother had convinced them that they were monsters – pariahs, who’d be shunned by the rest of humanity. He knew they’d be welcomed as the heroes – no, superheroes – they really were (430).” Of course, both Buddy and Dr. Taylor are wrong, as neither fully acknowledges the complex relationship between the mind and body to which others bear witness. Through such scenes of violence, Mixon, like Sullivan, challenges the transhumanist tenet of using technology as a quick fix for transcending vulnerable bodies.

\(^{10}\) Dr. Taylor arrogantly boasts to Carli that the crèche children are “never distracted by the demands of the flesh” (308) and that they “have all the abilities their humanity gives them, and vastly superior mental organization as well” (308).
Transgressed Boundaries and Multiple Selves

Now that I have discussed how virtuality and proxy-bodies trouble notions of corporeality under the guise of “curing” the body, I want to take a closer look at the types of bodies that emerge out of these liminal spaces. Virtual reality, much like cyberspace, enables users to complicate projections of embodiment for themselves and others. As Graham notes, “Whether the body is discarded, retained or mutated in virtual media, it is clear that one of the effects of cyberspace is to render taken-for-granted concepts of embodiment problematic” (176). Arguably, technologically-mediated spaces trouble traditional notions of embodiment because they demonstrate that all embodiments are culturally constructed. Investigating the effect of virtual reality on perceptions of the body, Anne Balsamo explains that:

In short, what these VR encounters really provide is an illusion of control over reality, nature, and especially over the unruly, gender- and raced-marked, essentially mortal body. It is not a coincidence that VR emerges in the 1980s, during a decade when the body is understood to be increasingly vulnerable (literally, as well as discursively) to infection as well as to gender, race, ethnicity, and ability critiques. With virtual reality we are offered the vision of a body-free universe. (“The Virtual Body in Cyberspace” 127)

I am suggesting that Sullivan and Mixon expose the myth of the “body-free universe” by directing attention towards the vulnerable bodies that enable its existence. As I stated at the start of this chapter, feminist post-cyberpunk is invested in imagining the body within technologically mediated spaces in ways that problematize the heteronormative boundaries between body/mind, inside/outside, and single/multiple. Graham posits that “the literal body may not
be communicated within the Net, but it is possible to conceive of a ‘multiplicity’ of ways of being a virtual body that reflect a subjectivity which inhabits many levels of corporeal existence” (190). In the following discussion of Maul and Proxy, I will focus on the ways that the virtual body and the proxy-body exceed conventional human boundaries, while at the same time, allowing for the development of corporeal agency previously denied to the vulnerable human body.

Perhaps Sullivan’s most productive investigation of the virtual body in Maul occurs in the passages that detail the collapse of the boundaries between the body and technology, the inner self and the outer world. Defining the typical traits of cyberpunk fiction, Heuser suggests that: “Personas, roles or personalities can be equally complex, superimposed, and overlaid [as the urban environment or cyberspace]; a single identity cannot always easily be deduced” (65). Meniscus undergoes moments of transformation wherein identity appears both dislocated and indistinct. He realizes he has changed on the inside because of the virus: “There were new awarenesses running all over the place, and he wasn’t even sure which points of view belonged to his own body, which to the bugs. The whole issue of the body/bug boundary had become marshy and unpredictable” (125). The boundary between himself and the microbes inside of him is permeable and spurs a reinterpretation of the notion of a single identity. Due to the integration of the 10E virus into his body and consciousness, he experiences a new mode of embodiment and psychic awareness:
Meniscus was a language that no one else understood. Teeming hordes built bridges and towers of chemicals in his body. His immune system primed to racetrack efficiency held thousands of surprises like embers waiting to be stoked to life. His fever was like a jungle because he was more alive than anyone or anything. (227)

His body represents the actualization of a fully technologized body. The separation between the mind and body – at least in the virtual space of Mall – no longer exists for either Meniscus or the embodied viruses. Within this virtual space Meniscus is something other than a singular vulnerable body: through contact with the microbes, he is able to experience multiple embodiments and, for the first time, corporeal agency as he begins to regain control over his body.

One of the most overt comments Sullivan makes about the collapse of boundaries between the body and technology in virtual space occurs through the avatar Sun. As Meniscus learns to experience the multiple embodiment enabled by Mall, his progress is reflected by Sun’s own recognition of self:

Then I saw a live picture of myself in one of the TVs. I stuck out my tongue just to be sure. It’s a well-known fact that TV is more real than real life so when people say get a life what they really mean is, get on TV. Because either you’re watching TV or you’re on it, and if you’re doing neither it’s a little like Schrödinger’s cat,11 neither alive nor dead till observed. (162)

Sun’s own body only becomes a distinct entity to herself when she sees it represented on the television – with the visual confirmation on the TV screen, Sun’s corporeality appears whole and inviolable (despite her true designation as an avatar, a body without embodiment). For Meniscus, Sun’s confirmation of

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11 Schrödinger’s cat is a well-practiced thought experiment (and paradox) in quantum mechanics, developed by Erwin Schrödinger in 1935. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schr%C3%B6dinger%27s_cat).
embodiment reflects his own struggle to become corporeally consciousness and “whole.” In this way, Sullivan appears to suggest that for Meniscus to become conscious of the new discursive limits of his embodiment, the process requires the integration of technology into the body. Noting this fluidity between flesh and computer, Heuser states that:

> Cyberpunk offers a uniquely fluid capacity to change gender, name, age, culture, race, role, and personality in the process of moving from one world into another. Both spaces, urban and virtual, are presented as complex domains with difficult borders, fractal geometries, and a multiplicity of cultures. (64)

The viruses within Meniscus’s body utilize the virtual space of Mall to transition into embodied beings that reflect the diversity and complexity of the outside world. Of all the characters, 10Esha is most involved with this kind of virtual integration. As she represents the experimental virus being tested on Meniscus, 10Esha is responsible for wiring the mall with technology that allows her (a black racialized female) and Sun (a Korean racialized female) to communicate between themselves, and ultimately, with Meniscus (187). This cobbled-together communication network ultimately leads to Meniscus’s corporeal transformation, as the microbes in his body and his consciousness work together in a moment of corporeal-technological synchronicity.

Within Mall, Sun and the other avatars lack any real world corporeality, but they are essential components of Meniscus’s construction of identity. “If persons have no fleshy substance in cyberspace, then this raises the question of whether it is still appropriate or meaningful to link traditional ideas of identity,
freedom, agency or community with notions of corporeality or physical space,” proposes Graham when considering the issue of flesh-less bodies (188). For Meniscus, his projected consciousness, as represented by the female teenagers in Mall, is the only realm wherein he has any sense of freedom as his body is under the control of Maddie and her lab. Meniscus’s bids for control and autonomy in the real world present themselves only as obscure extensions of his actions in Mall: “Usually he played with the planets [stones] at the same time as he roamed Mall, and the simple stone-game acted like a reflecting agent of the sophisticated virtual game – the stones were physical place-holders in a mathematics only he understood” (77). It is not until Meniscus “makes contact” with the virus in his body, mediated by the virtual game, that he is finally able to project his inner experiences of “identity, freedom, agency or community.” After his self-immunization of the Y-plague, Meniscus marks his accomplishment through his violent disconnection from technology: he “hefted the crowbar and started smashing the hell out of the I-MAGE unit. Sparks flew, plastic cracked, error messages came up, and finally the thing died. ‘I don’t need anybody to know what I did, or how I did it. That’s my business” (230). As his first act of autonomy, Meniscus destroys the technology – and the virtual space of Mall – that kept him controlled and under surveillance. By breaking the human-machine interface, Meniscus embraces being in control of his body for the first time.

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12 I will address the importance of Meniscus’s cross-gender identification with the female avatars in Mall in the second-half of this chapter.
Mixon’s exploration of virtual bodies differs slightly from Sullivan’s, as the crèche children are fully aware participants in the virtual spaces they inhabit. Whereas Meniscus experiences multiple selves at a subconscious level, the children in *Proxies* are able to consciously control their appearance and bodily interaction in their virtual simulations.\(^{13}\) Jenna tells Carli that the children “wear their cruising software like clothes. They’re constantly immersed. You could almost say that English is a second language to them; programming languages, mathematics, logic theory – these are their first languages” (308). The virtual environment for the crèche children has become their primary reality, as they are disconnected from their fleshy bodies. Jenna goes on to explain that while most people use the “nets” as an extension of the world, for shopping, entertainment, socializing, and information, for the crèche children “the nets are the real world” (309). Nakamura cautions against reading such comfort with virtual expression as the freedom from all cultural constructions. She argues:

> Chosen identities enabled by technology such as online avatars, cosmetic and transgender surgery and body modifications, and other cyberprostheses are not breaking the mold of unitary identity, but rather shifting identity into the realm of the “virtual,” a place not without its own laws and hierarchies. “Fluid” selves are no less subject to cultural

\(^{13}\) During Dane Elsa Cae’s first experience within the virtual space of the crèche children:

> The body she rode in was a gigantic lizard man, and his hand gripped the other wrist behind the body’s back. Most of the rest of the meeting attendees were also strange beasts: she spotted a centaur, a ten-foot-tall stick creature with a clown face, a giant wolf, a glitter-skinned, flitting fairy, a drool-dripping insectoid alien in a space suit, and so on. About two dozen strange creatures were listening to the speaker: some seated, some floating, some standing. (277)
hegemonies, rules of conduct, and regulating cultural norms than are “solid” ones. (“After/Images of Identity” 325)

Despite the children’s lack of experience in the “outside” world, they nevertheless organize themselves in a hierarchy (the older kids lead, everyone has specific job duties) and identify their fluid selves by individualized actions. Sitting in on one of their meetings, Dane Elsa Cae observes the crèche children:

Words washed past in trickles, streams, torrents, but she was content to let them go by without straining to understand them; Buddy would handle that. Instead, she studies the faces and bodies and hands. She noticed that the hands spoke as much as the mouths did. Each creature had a characteristic set of gestures that made him or her identifiable, even in disguise. (278)

Despite their undisputed ease and mastery over the tools of their virtual embodiment, the children nevertheless recreate specific codes of conduct and express individual differentiation. They might be able to appear as any creature imaginable, but they are not able to “free” themselves from markers of personal identity and cultural construction.

Responding to such critiques as Nakamura’s, Vint proposes that the “juxtaposition of the desire to escape the consequences of having a body with representations of the material consequences faced by non-privileged bodies is one of the ways in which cyberpunk interrogates embodied reality” (108). Instead of playing the two textual elements off one another, Proxies explores the consequences of non-privileged bodies (the socio-economically disadvantaged crèche children) that are only able to use the transitional spaces of virtuality and proxies to experience embodiment. This disjuncture between their virtually
constructed identities and material bodies causes the children to ritualize the flesh in alien ways. For example, as Buddy guides his proxy through the crèche chamber, he observes: “Flesh-tender robots crawled along tracks set amid the banks of icon-decorated crèches; he ritually raised his fingers to his lips as he passed them; the machinery whispered greetings” (73). The crèches are decorated in icons and the flesh-tender robots are treated like high priests. Dr. Taylor becomes a “goddess”\textsuperscript{14} to the children as they deposit “gifts of coin, toys, and food at Mother’s crèche” (74). I read the “sacredness” of these scenes as the representation of the children’s reverence of the body as an object beyond their known reality. By refusing to appear to the children “in the flesh” herself, Dr. Taylor further encourages the children to mystify their own crèche-contained flesh, severing their identification with their bodies as themselves in the process.

Due to their confinement to virtual reality, the children simply do not conceive of flesh and body as the same. Buddy tells Dane Elsa Cae that they need to hurt Carli, explaining: “Don’t worry, it won’t be like the other time. We’re not going to harm her flesh, just her body” (279). Through their continuous access to virtual reality and proxies, the crèche children inhabit a different sense of embodiment and presence – “flesh” is necessary for base survival while the “body” is expendable. This disjunction between the limits of corporeal and technological embodiment allows the children to “twin” themselves: their minds

\textsuperscript{14} During one of their virtual meetings: “Mother appeared in the middle of their simile, and hung inside the virtual replica of the habitat like a floating goddess. The crèche-born stopped what they were doing and turned to face her” (363).
split into two or more personalities and, by extension, they can control multiple proxies at one time.

[The] kids swapped bodies all the time without the adults’ knowledge. They’d even made a game of switching out and fooling the ID software during some of Aunt Jenna’s proxy and psych tests, just to see if they could, and they’d never been caught yet. It was hilarious to stand there while the grown-ups were talking to their bodies, thinking they were talking to one child when they were actually talking to a different one … and not understanding all the children’s giggles and significant looks.

(79)

The crèche children lack the understanding and knowledge of what it means to have identity tied to one material body. While their abilities to “twin” (i.e. split) their consciousnesses demonstrate fluidity and multiplicity, it also speaks to their lack of connection with their own vulnerable and medically-compromised bodies.

In addition to the realm of virtual reality, the children (as well as select adults) have access to proxies that allow them to interact with people as if they were flesh-and-blood embodiments themselves. The proxies act like advanced cyborgs – while the body is completely mechanical, it is a human consciousness inhabiting and directing the body. Without a “real” person operating it, the proxy is an inert piece of high-tech machinery. Balsamo stresses that “the high-tech image of the cyborg reminds us to question the assumed naturalness of the body and its function as a marker of difference” (“Reading Cyborgs, Writing

\[15\] Daniel explains the technological wizardry of the proxies to the military: “They’re superstrong, can attain very high rates of speed, and have expanded sensory capabilities – particularly sight and sound. The biggest advantage over flesh and blood is that they’re invulnerable [to] … just about everything: heat, cold, vacuum, toxins, small arms weapons. Even moderate levels of radiation” (384).
Feminism” 151). Mixon takes up the proxy as site of difference, and many scenes throughout *Proxies* involve multiple readings and misreadings of the proxy-body. For the crèche children, the proxies allow them access to adult interactions as “they all wore adult proxies these days, ex-face. (In face, they wore just about every kind of avatar imaginable.)” (4). For Dane Elsa Cae, her self-awareness (of her body and identity as a person) is one born out of trauma as her consciousness awakens within a two-toned, adult female proxy. She feels her synthetic body parts and thinks:

> Was this not, then, how human bodies were constructed? She probed down into her mind for the other one she vaguely remembered being – the male who knew it was OK to have a machine body, who believed this was all a game. Phantomlike, he retreated from her. The other, then – the face. Mentor. Captor. The one who had sent her here. Mentally she pled for him to come to her aid. Only silence met her inner cries. (121)

Of course, as the reader learns, Dane Elsa Cae is a personality called into being by Buddy, Pablo’s “twin.” Pablo is unaware of this new person(ality), as he is busy inhabiting a proxy under the guise as someone else. Passing as Krueger – an influential man murdered by Pablo under Dr. Taylor’s order – Pablo thinks: “This was no waldo, no robot, no mere extension of his consciousness. It was his body: it fit him like a favorite, well-worn shoes; it was home” (2). For Pablo and the other crèche children, any “body” has the potential to be “home,” and they can inhabit several simultaneously. The proxies and telepresence technology complicate the normative construction of “one identity, one body” as any person (with access to the technology) is capable of embodying multiple bodies.
Plastic Parts with Human Hearts: Challenging Gender

While inhabiting virtual space and proxy-bodies, users are able to experience dynamic and unconventional modes of embodiment. Gendered modes of embodiment are challenged to some degree, as the techno-bodies experiment with multiple and unfamiliar ways of being. When confronted with radical boundary transgression (as the dichotomies of body/mind, inside/out, singular/multiple are deconstructed) the traditional hierarchal frameworks of gendered and racialized power take on intensified immediacy and importance.

Addressing the issue of gender and the posthuman, Wolmark contends that:

The posthuman subject, no longer sustained by the idea of a fixed and unified self, appears to be marked by instability. The provisional and contested nature of such a subject allows for greater flexibility in thinking about gender in the context of shifting sets of relations between human and machine, the natural and the unnatural. (“Staying with the Body” 78)

Both novels seek to undo the notion of a “fixed and unified self,” which includes unmooring gender from the “natural.” Through technological spaces, the body is able to free itself – momentarily or permanently – from naturalized conceptions of gender and race in the narratives. I will begin this section of my analysis with a discussion of gender crossings and reconstructions in Maul’s virtual space, Mall. My primary focus deals with the conflicted figure of Meniscus and the highly-gendered avatars he projects within Mall.

In her work on cyberpunk and gender, Springer argues that cyberbodies (virtual bodies and cyborgs), “tend to appear masculine or feminine to an exaggerated degree” (“The Pleasure of the Interface” 41). Given that the novel is
heavily influenced by conventional cyberpunk, the exaggeration of gendered qualities is certainly evident throughout *Maul*. I propose that Sullivan attempts to denaturalize gender from sex by taking gender roles to an extreme in both the “real world” and virtual narratives. While the “real world” plot line of *Maul* offers up numerous instances of gender boundary crossings and reiterations of heteronormativity, I find the virtual narrative of Mall far more critically productive. The gendered bodies with whom Meniscus physically interacts, such as Maddie, Bernie, Ralf, and Carrera, are simple parodies: muscles, mustaches, and aggression equal masculinity, while emotional instability, soft features, and a flair for fashion equal femininity. Without an equal balance of both sexes, the gender relations in the world of *Maul* have gone awry. Subverting traditional gendered hierarchy, Sullivan places women in the masculinized roles of overseer and tormentor. Unable to challenge the threatening female masculinity of his oppressors, Meniscus uses Mall to experiment with, and eventually subvert, this gendered hierarchy. As avatars of his immune system, Sun, Suk Hee, and Keri are reflections of the fleshy women Meniscus encounters – but whereas Maddie and the other women are selfish, incompetent, and overly emotional, the avatar teenagers are aggressive, but also resourceful, intelligent, and team-oriented. By exploring gendered identities through virtual reality, Meniscus attempts to understand and modify his own embodied sense of gender.

Representations of masculinity and masculine bodies are tightly controlled in Mall, as Meniscus uses the game to work out his own feelings of vulnerability
and autonomy. Wolmark argues that “cyberspace is inevitably dominated by anxieties about masculinity that can never be resolved, and as the interface between human and technology continues to be structured around masculinity, any attempt to incorporate difference is repressed” (*Cybersexualities* 8). Instead of projecting his insecurities onto male figures (which he had no access to until the introduction of Carrera), Meniscus identifies most strongly with female bodies. Through the avatars of Sun, Suk Hee, and Keri, his subconscious struggles to reconcile itself with his state of powerlessness and subjection. The gender-power exploration begins with Sun and Suk Hee’s insistence that women are not passive victims, but perpetrators of action. Using the image of wolves, Suk Hee details how “the alpha female fights the other females to complete for who gets to mate with the alpha male. The alpha males sometimes fend off other males who want to mate the females, but not as ferociously as females fight” (19). The avatars’ refusal to identify with ascribed female weakness reflects Meniscus’s desire to become autonomous and powerful; he too aspires to attain “alpha” status. Through Suk Hee and Sun, Meniscus utilizes the virtual space of Mall in order to challenge the boundaries of gender norms. His exploration of gender can occur within Mall as it is a safer place wherein alternate forms of embodiment can exist without threatening real world gendered constructs.

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16 Sun muses that women are “the engines of life. We’re it. And men think we’re their victims. How did that happen? Are we really that sneaky” (5)? While defining women as “the engines of life” and “sneaky” is hardly counter-normative, Sun’s refusal to see herself (a representation of Meniscus’s subconscious) as a victim is the first hint of her character’s aspiration to adopt a more traditional masculine power structure.
Sullivan further complicates Meniscus’s relationship to gender and power as he undergoes physical transformation due to the 10E virus. Taking power from the communication breakthrough between his body and the virus facilitated by Mall, Meniscus’s corporeality exceeds the boundaries of both masculinity and the human. As a direct result of his explorations within the virtual program, Mall, Meniscus develops a unique form of embodiment. As they discuss the transformative power of the virus taking over Meniscus’s body, Bernie emphatically asks Maddie: “Are you now a member of a single-gender planned humanity that will be eaten alive by the pretty little critters who earn you your living? Or is it time to stop the war by mating with the microparasites and have you made Meniscus the white-veiled hymeneal bride” (172)? Bernie’s questions suggest that Meniscus has moved beyond his maleness by becoming a feminized receptacle of the masculinized microbes. At first it appears that Meniscus becomes the ambivalently gendered “half-thing” (79) that Bernie feared. Through his exploration of gender in Mall, however, Meniscus begins to emulate the “alpha status” played out by the avatars Sun and Suk Hee. Not satisfied with subtlety, Sullivan represents Meniscus’s autonomy through extreme masculinized action in the real world plot line: Meniscus takes over a racing car on a life-size HotWheels track and causes havoc during the “Pigwalk” competitions (249). He then encounters Carrera, the ultimate He-man, who provides Meniscus with approval of his hyper-masculine transformation. Through experimentation with

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17 Meniscus describes the microbes in masculine terms, such as calling them his “little Greek soldiers” (241).
gender norms in Mall, in particular his identification with Sun and Suk-Hee, Meniscus appears to transcend his human (and femininized) vulnerability. While *Maul* unfortunately ends up reiterating heteronormative constructions of gender – as Meniscus becomes more normatively human once he proves his masculine virility – Sullivan does seem to suggest that virtuality has potential as a generative space for marginalized identities.

Like the cyborgs of 1980s, the proxy body disrupts binary notions of gender and power. Wolmark explains that “by providing an opportunity for feminist SF to explore possibilities for the redefinition of gender identity in the context of cybernetic systems, the cyborg disrupts the gendered power relations of technology” (“Postmodern Romances” 232). Balsamo goes further by suggesting that:

Female cyborgs are as much stereotypically endowed with feminine traits as male cyborgs are with masculine traits. [...] however, female cyborg images do more to challenge the opposition between human and machine than do male cyborgs because femininity is culturally imagined as less compatible with technology than is masculinity. (“Reading Cyborgs, Writing Feminism” 149)

She argues that this is because “female cyborgs embody cultural contradictions which strain the technological imagination. Technology isn’t feminine, and femininity isn’t rational” (149). Proxies, rather than Mall’s virtual reality, are the key technological sites for gender experimentation in *Proxies*. Of all the proxies

18 While I necessarily must focus my discussion of gendered identity on the crèche children, the adult relationships in the novel are also worthy of attention. Foster suggests that because of the “multibody and multisensory experiences proxy pilots have, sexuality in bi- or multi-sexed terms is normalized
in the novel, Dane Elsa Cae’s appears as the most feminine and most irrational. From the moment of her conscious awakening, Dane Elsa Cae challenges normative expectations: “While his hands were disconnecting the probes, he glanced as his naked body, at the high round breasts and the broadened hips, the triangle of pubic hair with no male genitalia. It shocked him. He – no, she – had faced into a gender blender” (10). Without a real body for reference, Dane Elsa Cae enters into the female proxy with only a basic instinct towards gendered reactions and confused use of pronouns. While she at first identifies as male, the switch to identifying as female is relatively quick and uneventful, pointing to the arbitrariness of gendered identity.

Dane Elsa Cae moves through the narrative deeply conflicted: her feelings are neither overtly gendered, nor entirely human. She cannot make sense of the “gender blender” she inadvertently finds herself in and those who encounter her and reflects the multiple nature of perception and subjectivity as proxy pilots. In fact, desire and agency, or at least voyeurism, transcend human bodies altogether” (435). While desire and agency might transcend human bodies in the novel, the realization of them requires the body to be present. Much of Daniel’s frustration with Teru – his lab partner and former lover who wears a male proxy most of the time – stems from his inability to connect with her real body: “Damn you, Teru, he thought, you and your plastic testicles. Damn your breasts, damn your gorgeous thighs and that warm, wet, aromatic place between them that you’ve got locked away in a crypt. The renegade wasn’t the only one with a confused sense of gender” (242). Despite Daniel’s obvious aversion to homosexuality in the narrative (242), he nevertheless is unable to rid himself of his desire for Teru, even while she remains in a male proxy. In such scenes, Mixon opens up the space to interrogate bi-sexuality, homosexuality, and transsexuality.

19 Born out of the personality of “Buddy,” Dane Elsa Cae at first finds: “The idea of being in a female body was arousing. Obedient, this body’s nipples went hard, and an ache grew in her lower abdomen. Odd; faintly – somewhere– she could feel a penis growing hard as well” (10).
are also unable to determine exactly whom or what “she” is – not even the
scientists responsible for the proxy technology are able to situate Dane Elsa Cae.
After being tracked down by Daniel, Teru’s profiling tests come back with
ambiguous results, failing to identify the gender of Dane Elsa Cae (“This person
has no consistent sense of gender identity” [240]). Daniel and Teru are also
unable to apply any normative cultural definitions to her: “Gender identity is such
an important ingredient in cultural analysis, though. It’s making everything ten
times more difficult. English doesn’t seem to be her first language. On the other
hand, nothing in the system seems to be her first language” (240). The
experiments to ascertain Dane Elsa Cae’s gender and language speak to the
cultural anxiety that stems from not knowing how to read unfamiliar forms of
identity. By seeking to define her by gendered (and racialized) constructs, Teru
and Daniel not only hope to learn her identity, but to have access to the
established social constructions that can aid in controlling her.

Dane Elsa Cae, as a feminized personality of Pablo/Buddy, is the first of
the three personalities to access the intensely domestic memory of their mother
and nursing (a physical act of maternal care):

A memory surfaced – Dane didn’t know whether it was real, or merely
something she’d seen in a simile – of being cradled in the arms of a giant,
enfolded in those warm, bare arms, looking up at a woman’s face, a
woman with dark, dark skin and rich skin smell, of grabbing at the black,
tightly curled locks of hair that tumbled down, barely within reach. A
woman who murmured comforting words in a strange language as she
(354)
Dane Elsa Cae’s existence troubles the stability of Pablo/Buddy’s masculinity. Perhaps because of this volatility, Mixon relies on using Dane Elsa Cae’s femininized personality as the one which is closest to infancy and the experience of being mothered. Like in the narratives of maternal inheritance present in *Midnight Robber* and *Salt Fish Girl*, embodied memory once again ties the female child to the mother. While Mixon uses telepresence and proxies as technological ways to escape embodiment, her use of Dane Elsa Cae as the “original child” signifies how gendered experience is still connected to specific bodies. It is only though Dane Elsa Cae, that Pablo/Buddy can resolve the dissonance between his multiple selves. Throughout the narrative, Mixon resists the temptation to remove desire and agency from the flesh – Pablo/Buddy/Dane Elsa Cae desperately desires the physical maternal love severed by their technological confinement – while attempting to unmoor essentialist gendered identities from sexed bodies.

**Race Troubles**

In addition to problematizing the cultural assignment of gender in *Maul* and *Proxies*, race undergoes similar processes of dislocation from the body (either intentionally or unintentionally). “While telecommunications and medical technologies can challenge some gender and racial stereotypes, they produce and

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20 Perhaps due to an oversight of this pivotal scene, Foster posits that in *Proxies*, “telepresence represents a temptation to escape embodiment, or to use this technology to acquire a safer form of embodiment as an interface with the outside world. It is in this way that the novel intervenes in the traditional gender narrative that associates women with domesticity” (*Souls of Cyberfolk* 131).
reflect them as well,” Nakamura reminds readers (“After/Images of Identity” 325). In my analysis, I think that each author “produces and reflects” racialized stereotypes to varying degrees. While both Sullivan and Mixon explicitly challenge gendered constructions of the body, their attempts at unmooring race from identity are not as successful. Shildrick frames the difficulty of dislocating race as another way in which we elide the recognition of all bodies as vulnerable:

> The desire to protect the unity of the ideal social/racial body is instrumentalised always through a programme of measures that speak not to strength but to uncertainty, to an implicit recognition that vulnerability is not on the side of the other, but is embedded in the heart of normativity. (71)

With Shildrick’s contention in mind, I want to read Maul and Proxies as works that set out to problematize race as connected to the vulnerable body, but ultimately end up reaffirming unproductive racial stereotypes. While all bodies are indeed vulnerable, these particular feminist post-cyberpunk texts nevertheless frame the racially-minoritized body as inherently more vulnerable (or at least, as more vulnerable to exploitation). In addition to my criticism of the way in which these texts take up the issue of racial vulnerability, I also want to establish that these narratives reflect a common SF trope of favouring the notion of a collective human race. Specializing in reading race in SF, Sharon DeGraw observes that: “The speculative element of science fiction, then, tends to highlight the collective human race rather than a multitude of human races, human commonality rather than difference” (“Delany” 111). As I move through my discussion of racialized bodies in Maul and Proxies, I will articulate the ways in which each writer
criticizes institutionalized racial inequalities (deepened by technological misuse), which they problematically propose can be resolved through recognizing human commonality (i.e. we are all vulnerable bodies).

Although the real world scenario in *Maul* is predominantly a “white” space, the narrative of virtual Mall is populated primarily by Korean, Latina, and Black teenagers. While it is understandable that Meniscus identifies with female avatars (as he has few male role models to emulate), the fact that Sullivan characterizes them as racially minoritized others, and moreover, as engaged in urban gang warfare, is highly problematic. Nakamura describes the taking on of racialized personae as “identity tourism.” She states: “Tourism is a particularly apt metaphor to describe the activity of racial appropriation, or ‘passing’ in cyberspace” (“Race In/For Cyberspace” 714). In the virtual space of Mall, Meniscus is engaging in a form of passing as his avatars are represented as Asian. Speaking directly about the appropriation of Asian personae, Nakamura argues that they “reveal that attractions lie not only in being able to ‘go’ to exotic places, but to co-opt the exotic and attach it to oneself. The appropriation of racial identity becomes a form of recreation, a vacation from fixed identities and locales” (715). For Meniscus, immersing himself in virtual reality is not only a form of recreation, but a needed “vacation” from bodily suffering. Through Sun and the other racialized avatars, Meniscus escapes his own fixed identity as a white male test subject. Echoing the same contentions as Nakamura, Balsamo posits that:
Cyberspace offers white men an enticing retreat from the burdens of their cultural identities. In this sense, it is apparent that although cyberspace seems to represent a territory free from the burdens of history, it will, in effect, serve as another site for the technological and no less conventional inscription of the gendered, race-marked body. (“Virtual Body in Cyberspace” 131)

Interpreting the Mall narrative generously, I suggest that Sullivan establishes virtual reality as a site wherein Meniscus can free himself of his cultural identity—an identity that, in the context of his female dominated world, is marginalized and exploited (mirroring the reality of race relations in our modern world). Through his creation of the racially minoritized avatars, Meniscus finds a community of similarly vulnerable bodies.

Sullivan structures the fictional virtual world of Maul in a way that seemingly allows for this kind of racial appropriation. While Sullivan provides her characters an “out” when they engage racial stereotyping, she nevertheless engages in identity tourism throughout the novel. Despite the supposed progressiveness of the avatars’ gendered identities, Sullivan relies on racialized stereotypes to flesh out her characters. The most problematic racial stereotyping,

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21 Sun recounts overhearing a uniformed woman say: “‘So these gang-bangers walked right out of here as if they were employees?’ shrieked the women in outraged Jewish tones. (Remember, I’m allowed to say this shit, I’m half-Jewish)” (81).

22 Sun’s racialized otherness is then emphasized repeatedly throughout the text. For example, Sun questions her correct use of English: “Grammar, like I said before, I wasn’t born here and I can never be totally sure” (123). This stereotyping of the Korean immigrant with a poor grasp of the English language is carried throughout the novel with the figure of Sun’s mom. The first introduction of Sun’s mother is full of “dropped articles & shitty grammar” (3): “Sun, what you do? Tell me what you say little-brother” (3). Sullivan also reinforces Suk Hee’s
however, involves the characterization of the other female avatars that represent the Y-plague microbes. The “bugs” infecting Meniscus manifest themselves in virtual Mall as the Bugaboo gang, which is comprised of violent, racially minoritized teens (for example, the 10E virus strain manifests itself as the dark-skinned 10Esha). During his initial exposure to 10E, Meniscus feels “scared. 10E likes it. 10E takes his fear and turns it into poison. He turns to Mall in hope of exerting some control, but 10E knows about Mall. It’s there, waiting for him. The 10E bugs want to talk to him. Want to own him, enfold him” (15). The Bugaboo gang, as avatars of the 10E microbes, is thus characterized as a threat to the white male body. Nakamura theorizes that identity tourism allows for the participant to re-enact familiar power relations:

This vacation offers the satisfaction of a desire to fix the boundaries of cultural identity and exploit them for recreational purposes. As Said puts it, the tourist who passes as the marginalized Other during his travels partakes of a fantasy of social control, one which depends upon and fixes the familiar contours of racial power relations. (715)

In the case of Maul, the “familiar contours of racial power relations” are played out in two ways: first, Sullivan is merely replicating the stereotypes of racialized violence for sensational effect, and second, as I optimistically would like to argue, racialized “Asian-ness” throughout the text as well. For instance, when Suk Hee sees a pair of shoes that she likes: “She runs with tiny, cute little steps as if her feet are still bound in some kind of race-memory thing” (20).

Watching the Bugaboo gang arrive, Sun observes: “Look at those Latina chix with their big tits, and that Swedish-looking emaciated blonde … And the fat one – of course, the obligatory fat one who is all attitude and Heavy Style” (22). All of the Bugaboos are marked by racial otherness, characterized by a propensity for violence.
is that she does so in order to emphasize the disjuncture between the “visibly vulnerable” body (one that is deemed unfavorably marked by race) and the social body proper (the heteronormative white male body). Like the overly-racialized bodies of Sun and Suk Hee, the bodies of the Bugaboos are marked with otherness that sets them apart from the technologically advanced “white” space of the laboratory that confines Meniscus. While Meniscus may arguably find identification with the vulnerable bodies with which he populates Mall, the fact that it is the color of their skin that marks them as visibly vulnerable is entirely problematic. Meniscus’s new azure skin marks him, arguably, as posthuman, whereas the colour of the avatars’ skin marks them as racialized others. Sullivan reduces race to an issue of corporeal embodiment, rather than as positioning it as belonging to the same set of normative social constructions that define gender.

At times, Mixon also falls back on the same racial stereotypes to create characters in Proxies as she attempts to highlight the significance of race. As I noted at the outset of this chapter, feminist post-cyberpunk is concerned with the social and political ethics of human being. Proxies is a good example of a narrative that addresses the socio-economic inequality that many racial minorities face in the Western world. Highlighting the key issue of access to technology, Hayles proposes that:

A significant difference between information and durable goods is replicability. Information is not a conserved quantity. If I give you information, you have it and I do too. With information, the constraining factor separating the haves from the have-nots is not so much possession as access. (39)
While Sullivan gestures towards the issue of unequal access to technology (Meniscus has only limited access to Mall predicated on the beneficence of Maddie and Bernie), Mixon explicitly addresses the power structure that enables technological access and possession in Proxies. The number of passages in the novel that deal explicitly with racialized bodies are few but they are particularly notable scenes wherein Mixon highlights the exploitation of the racially minoritized crèche children under the watch of Dr. Taylor and her colleagues. The bodies of the crèche children are triply marked as vulnerable: they are disabled, from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, and are racially minoritized (which Mixon establishes through the character of Pablo/Buddy/Dane Elsa Cae).

The proxy bodies that Dane Elsa Cae (and Teru24) employ are particularly loaded examples of the racialized body. The fact that Mixon racializes mechanical bodies (instead of virtual bodies) is fitting for a feminist post-cyberpunk novel as Victoria Pitts posits that conventional cyberpunk’s “futurism envisions high-tech hardware and software as tools for change and customization, and it assumes and sometimes champions the breakdown of traditional categories of subjectivity that are seen to be located in the body, such as sex and race” (“Feminism, Technology and Body Projects” 242). By focusing on the appearance of the hardware (in this case the proxy-bodies), Mixon illustrates the reactions an indeterminate racialized

24 In the case of Teru, she is a white woman who prefers to be in proxy as a “black teenager with a scarf tied around the forehead” (140). Daniel performs a brief sexualized blazon of “her-his” features, noting the “tight mesh” of hair and “classically African” features (238). Teru’s proxy body is both highly raced and sexualized.
body would encounter. The introduction of Dane Elsa Cae’s proxy, whose skin “was mottled, cocoa and alabaster” (10), is an apt example of a body that resists normative racial identifications. Upon meeting Dane Elsa Cae, Carli calls her the “pinto woman,” as she observes: “[Dane] was six feet tall and totally naked. […] Her skin was a canvas someone had spilled buckets of paint on, cocoa and vanilla, like a pinto. Her body was unusually long and slim all over. Wiry. Her hair and facial features, though as varicolored as the rest of her, were Negroid” (210). As a sub-personality of Pablo, Dane Elsa Cae’s “pinto” appearance indicates the splintering of the self (Pablo) made into flesh – Dane Elsa Cae is neither black, nor white, and neither fully human, nor robot. She is a supposed amalgamation of racialized identity, and yet, Mixon’s choice to mark her with “Negroid” features secures Dane Elsa Cae’s position as other in the text.

Perhaps the most important comment Mixon makes about race in the novel is that all of the crèche children come from socio-economic marginalized families, including the Hispanic Pablo. Dr. Taylor tells Carli that: “The kids’ parents were too poor to properly care for them. A few had been abandoned to the system. We explained as much of our program as we were allowed to their parents, those who still had parents, and they gave the children up as wards of the state” (299). Pablo and the other children become objects for Dr. Taylor’s experiments – as wards of the State, they lose their rights to their previous familial identities.25 “Some

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25 Castañeda argues that “in the case of transnational adoption, the child-body in particular is figured as transnationally and transracially flexible. […] the child is figured through the incorporation of global differences and embodies
bodies, such as those of women and racial and ethnic minorities, are more vulnerable to territorialization than other, to underexposure (in terms of their own definitions of self) or overexposure (in terms of their usefulness as spectacles or commodities)” (235) explains Pitts. Keeping Pitts’ articulation of racialized exploitation in mind, I suggest that Mixon is interrogating how marginalized and racialized bodies are commodified as test subjects by white-dominated science and medical research. Like Meniscus in *Maul*, Pablo and his crèche mates are chosen precisely because they are the most vulnerable, as they lack the socio-economic power to defend their rights.

The figure of Pablo/Buddy/Dane Elsa Cae is the most complex racialized body in the text. Citing the example of Pablo’s character (with his alter-identities), Foster argues that:

Pablo has to recover his racial and ethnic roots in order to resist the effects of immersion in cyberspace, while at the same time that immersion renders his gender more basically and irreversibly indeterminate, since one of his personalities is feminine. This tendency to represent gender as subversive play and race as resistant materiality and fixed identity is a weakness not just in these narratives but in contemporary technoculture itself, and one that requires more critical attention. (495)

While I agree with Foster’s contention that race in *Proxies* is characterized as “resistant materiality and fixed identity,” I want to suggest that Mixon strives for a critical interrogation of race and technology to some extent as she does not elide brown and black bodies in favour of whiteness. While working with Byron on the ‘harmonious’ global relatedness: the child *becomes* the global” (106). In a similar way, the crèche children become Dr. Taylor’s idealized versions of the “global:” they are no longer situated in racialized sites of being, but inhabit the “identity-free” realms of the “nets” and proxies.
omni problem, Dane Elsa Cae pilots a toddler proxy towards Carli: “There stood an angel: a boy-child not more than three, hand on the door-jamb, toes barely touching the floor, with curly, black hair with reddish undertones, dark skin, and huge, gorgeous, amber-brown eyes” (393). As I discussed earlier, technology is often represented by white bodies – as evident in the real world narrative of Maul – and so by underscoring the children’s variance from “whiteness,” Mixon refuses to allow technology to elide racialized identities.

Since they only experience embodiment in either virtual space or in the proxies, the crèche children have no inherent understanding of either race or gender being tied to the body. Instead of further exploring the children’s apparent lack of identification with their marked bodies, Mixon, like Sullivan, unfortunately ends up falling back on racialized stereotypes to illustrate their vulnerability. I read the scene of Carli confronting Pablo with his fleshy-body as one that is uncomfortably similar to World Vision ads of starving African children. Carli throws open Pablo’s crèche:

There in a blob of gel lay a hairless, skeletal figure. […] His skin and feature were Negroid. With his body so underdeveloped, his head was a good deal larger in proportion to it than that of a typical teenager. The face though would suit an angel. His eyes were huge and dark in a child-man’s face, and his lips were full and round and sweet. So vulnerable. So frail. The face was achingly beautiful and innocent. Nothing like those terrifyingly strong machine bodies. (462)

David Jefferess, addressing the image of the child in need of “sponsorship” in World Vision telethons, argues that such representations of the “emaciated or malnourished, dirty, desperate-looking child” appeals to “an image of donor
identity constructed in relation to the ‘needy’ other, utilizing structures of
identification reminiscent of earlier forms of colonial discourse” (“For Sale” 2-3).
The image of a white Carli “saving” the “Negroid” Pablo is indeed problematic,
especially considering Mixon’s consistent attention to unmasking the social
constructions of gender and drawing attention to the exploitation of racialized
bodies. Like Sullivan, Mixon falls back on using racial otherness as a way to
further mark the body as vulnerable and make projects of “rescue” possible.

In my analysis, both writers use the technological spaces of virtuality and
proxies to interrogate the essentialist body. While they succeed in demonstrating
that gender is a cultural construct, they struggle to remove race as intimately
connected to the body. Whereas both Lai and Hopkinson situate the racialized
body as generative (neither Tan-Tan nor the cloned Sonias require “rescue” from
their social identities by white bodies), Sullivan and Mixon characterize the
racially marked body as “visibly vulnerable” and in need of “saving.” In the
context of gender and racial inequality, the bodies of the crèche children and
Meniscus are positioned as the other, and, as such, they visibly display markers of
their difference (one of which, in these white dominated texts, is the colour of
their skin). Nevertheless, I propose that these writers do challenge the
transhumanist notion that technology will transform humanity for the better by
insisting on the vulnerability of the body (regardless of gender and race).
Healing the Mind and Body

Technology does not save people in these narratives from discrimination, exploitation, jealousy, and hate – instead it offers a space wherein people can explore their material identities and then return to the real world as more actualized human beings. In order for such a process to occur, the characters in Maul and Proxies must undergo a “healing” of the rift between mind and body. Although their forays into virtual reality and proxy-bodies provide Meniscus and the crèche children with the experience of embodiment, there is no unmediated knowledge of autonomous corporeal embodiment. Referring to the “powerful dream” of becoming a purely non-corporeal being, Hayles proposes that “it can be a shock to remember that for information to exist, it must always be instantiated in a medium” (13). The forms of embodiment attained through virtual reality and proxies are not reliable as neither the crèche children nor Meniscus have independent access and control over the technology. The narrative bulk of Maul and Proxies deal with disrupted and disturbed selves, but both novels end with the image of the individual as a corporeally instantiated vulnerable human being.

The coalescing of Meniscus’s mind and body is evident throughout both the narratives in Maul. Having survived the attempt to kill him, Meniscus awakes and thinks: “It was too late to go back now. He’d neutralized the Y-plague. He was fully conscious of his physical processes, and he was in no danger from any bug known to man. He and the Azure were in harmony with one another” (228). The same sense of integrated identity is mirrored within himself as the avatars
Sun and Suk Hee ride a motorbike away from the Mall. Passing by a bus, an elderly lady on board tells Sun to put on a helmet and Sun thinks:

All she knows is how to gossip with her friends and cook Thanksgiving dinner for sixteen and maybe a few other things that are totally inconsequential in the scheme of things. And yet, because of this stupid woman telling me put my helmet on, I feel different. (271)

Like the ending of the real world chapter, the conclusion of the Mall “game” also returns to the confines of a comforting, albeit traditionally gendered, order. The old lady is everything an old lady should be – domestic, gossipy, and maternal (a figure notably absent in Meniscus’s life). With Sun’s pronouncement of “I love the world” (271), stability and order return to Meniscus’s immune system. The violence within his body calmed – thanks to his interface with virtual Mall – Meniscus finally disengages himself from the fixed identity of “white, male lab experiment,” and attains a sense of corporeal autonomy.

The resolution of the rift between mind and body in Proxies is more complicated, as the process of the integration involves Carli re-educating the crèche children. Throughout the novel, Carli represents the fleshiness of the body, while the crèche children represent the disembodied mind. Through their interaction with one another, they mutually reach a better incorporation of the psyche and body (or in the case of the children, at least an understanding that such amalgamation is possible). For Carli, she “realized that her aversion to the crèches was not entirely honest. On some level … she wanted to follow the crèche children into their virtual world, where life didn’t take such a toll” (433). With this epiphany, Carli finds a sense of belonging with the children. She discovers a
sense of purpose for her life that had previously been missing: helping the crèche children discover their material humanity. In order to intervene effectively in their lives, Carli literally reminds them of their bodies by grabbing onto Pablo and yelling, “This is you. Not that muscle-bound thing you pilot around. This is what you’re killing, if you space those people in there. […] Can you feel my hands on you? This is your body. When it goes, you go” (462). It is only then – through the feeling of human hands on vulnerable flesh – that Pablo/Buddy/Dane Elsa Cae finds resolution. Together, Carli and the crèche children begin to resolve the disjuncture between the flesh and the mind.

The Flesh Persists

In the end, because of the time and effort spent in technological spaces, the characters in Proxies and Maul rediscover the centrality of the fleshy body in one’s conception of autonomous identity (whether it be singular or multiple). The flesh persists: it remains vulnerable and permeable to adaptation. Graham posits that “it is perhaps more appropriate, therefore, to think of cyberspace as a transitional state where the subject is both materially and digitally embodied” (189). In feminist post-cyberpunk, virtual reality and proxy-bodies offer the characters the opportunity to experience digital embodiment in order to

26 “Reality was exactly what the crèche children had been robbed of. An anchor to tie their flights of fancy to. They were modern-day Peter Pans, lost children, trapped in a house of mirrors: a world that comprised only abstraction, reflection, distortion, falsehood” (435) and Carli would be their “anchor,” and in many ways, the new mother.
(hopefully) better understand their material embodiment. Mixon tenaciously emphasizes the persistent presence of the flesh throughout *Proxies*. As the most vulnerable personality, Dane Elsa Cae is the first to articulate the importance of the flesh: “Pablito remembers touch. On our body. Our real body. He remembers Mama. Nursing, tickling, holding. [...] The bodies *are* their flesh” (463). Mixon pays careful attention to the needs of the body and articulates the demands of flesh: human contact (nursing, tickling, and holding) is essential for corporeal and psychic integration. In *Maul*, Sullivan employs a similar tactic to reinforce the inescapability of the body, although perhaps with less artifice. Carrera only accepts Meniscus as one of his “family” once he is able to prove that his urine is also stained black (a result of the natural immunity against the Y-plague). The only credential that Meniscus and the other “authentic” males require is evident, literally, from within the body. Despite his transformation and visible otherness, Meniscus finds belonging with the other men through their shared marked corporealities.

The vulnerable body persists in *Maul* and *Proxies* regardless of the technological enhancements used to “cure” it. Both Mixon and Sullivan take care to exemplify the fragility and impermanence of the flesh as they connect that vulnerability to the core of human experience. Springer observes that most

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27 Organizing themselves for an attack on the castellation, Starry Eyes tells his sons: “Thank you all for coming, now we’re gonna have a little test to be sure you’re all legit. You know what to do. Use that wall there.” As one, the men went up to the wall, unzipped their flies, and peed. Meniscus watched as the wall was stained black as ink” (239).
cybernetic women in conventional cyberpunk “fail to give us a radically nonhuman vision of computerized existence. Repressed human memories and heightened emotions continue to motivate these hardwired women even after they have redesigned themselves” (*Electronic Eros* 140). For Dane Elsa Cae, it is the repressed memories and emotions that make her mangled mechanical body recognizably human to Carli. Approaching Carli as a severely damaged proxy, Dane Elsa Cae asks: “I just need to know. Am I, am I human? Am I real? I think I must be going mad. I have these dreams, and they’re real, only they’re not” (212). Carli compassionately responds: “I don’t know if you’re human or machine … And I don’t know about voices in your head or anything else. But you’re just not a thing. You know what pain is. You’re real. Pain makes you real” (214). Suffering marks Dane Elsa Cae as a vulnerable body and engenders Carli’s identification with her, despite her embodiment as a high-tech robot. The fragility of the flesh re-establishes Meniscus’s humanity as well in *Maul*. At the end of the novel, he, along with Bonus and Starry Eyes, witness a wolf (a symbol of autonomy that recalls the “alpha” female discussion between Sun and Suk Hee) being hit by a truck: “[Bonus] didn’t see the small grey body go flying in the impact and the living shadow become just another piece of trash on the road. Meniscus saw it, though. It was so fast, and so unreal, that he almost couldn’t believe it. Of all the

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28 Throughout the novel, Carli reflects on the role of pain in life. Readying herself for the final decision to stay with the crèche children in space, Carli muses: “She and reality had a personal and intimate relationship; not always a good one – especially not right now – but it was hers, by God, with no intermediaries to interpret for her, to influence her thinking with their own opinions and prejudices. The things that brought her pain were priceless” (435).
things that had happened, this was the one that he couldn’t take as true” (268).

Despite all of the mayhem he endures, it is the death of the wolf that reinforces Meniscus’s own sense of vulnerability – his body might have changed, but his susceptibility to injury and death through random violent actions remains the same. Both Mixon and Sullivan remind the reader that it is our collective vulnerability – and our ability to recognize that same vulnerability in others – that makes us recognizable as human beings.

“It is not a question of leaving the body behind but rather of extending embodied awareness in highly specific, local, and material ways that would be impossible without electronic prosthesis” (291) Hayles theorizes, and I suggest that this is the ultimate perspective both Mixon and Sullivan strive to express in their novels. The technologies of virtual reality and proxies are “electronic prostheses” – they should not be used for corporeal transcendence simply for the sake of “leaving the body behind,” rather, they are best used as ways to extend the awareness of human capability and complexity. In her discussion of the suffering body, Wendell advocates for the “transcendence of the ego” (178) as a way in which to “take us into and then beyond [the body’s] sufferings and limitations” (178). The crèche children in Proxies struggle to come to terms with both their disabled bodies and technologically heightened awareness, but, with Pablo/Buddy’s realization that “for us, our bodies are our crèches” (465), they can begin the process of mapping out their sufferings and limitations. The crèches, like the lines of azure on Meniscus’s body, serve to mark the children’s
corporeality as other while at the same time enabling them to live out extraordinary lives. Mixon emphasizes the need to direct the crèche children’s extended awareness, a process which Carli fosters and pledges to further develop: “They were headed to infinity. Like it or not, they were the future of interstellar space travel. And they needed someone same along. Someone who understood them, who would help moor them to reality” (467). Under the guidance of Carli and aided by technology, the crèche children can fully actualize their potential. Likewise, in *Maul*, Meniscus undergoes a dramatic puberty thanks to the technology and viruses interacting in his body. Working together with the “consciousness bugs” (197), Meniscus emerges from his years as a laboratory experiment with a heightened awareness of his body and its processes. He realizes that: “I can change myself. My chemistry. The bugs talk to my cells for me. I can see inside myself” (181). Meniscus does not transcend his corporeality, but in fact, becomes more attuned to its possibilities. Like the crèche children, Meniscus is extraordinary, but he remains a vulnerable human being.

Advocating for social and political change, Pitts argues that: “Unless race, class, and gender stratifications actually disappear, individuals can be limited in the ways in which they can imagine themselves and shape their bodies and identities – even within a culture that celebrates such choice and freedom”

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29 After neutralizing the Y-plague, Meniscus appears: Unwashed black hair hangs raggedly to his shoulders. His skin looks like hieroglyphics or maybe a circuit board. There are blue-green lines and points and irregular splotches drawn just beneath the epidermis. It looks like his veins have been rerouted by a civil engineer to snap to a city grid. But the lines are only pigment, the by-products of 79 metabolism. (229)
(“Feminism, Technology and Body Projects” 231). While Sullivan and Mixon still reiterate certain limitations of the body (such as race), their feminist post-cyberpunk narratives nevertheless strive to imagine ways in which the human race can begin to dismantle essentialist stratifications of identity. In the end, I believe that feminist post-cyberpunk SF is a genre that both warns of the dangers of embracing technological “cures,” as well as envisions the possibilities of exceeding our current conceptions of identity and embodiment. In considering the potential of the human becoming the posthuman, Graham clearly states that:

> The choice is not so much about abandoning nature, because humanity has always culturally constructed nature; rather, it is about who benefits from the growing medical and economic rewards for manipulating nature and whose representation of ‘nature’ – its limits, imperatives and capacities – will stand as authoritative. (123)

Throughout *Maul* and *Proxies* (as well as through *Salt Fish Girl* and *Midnight Robber*), the question of whose authority determines the definitional boundaries of the human is central to the narrative. With the development of each new technology – whether it is virtual reality, proxy-bodies, cloning, or nanomites – there comes the risk of its misuse in order to exploit and control others. Feminist post-cyberpunk offers visions of a future where the misguided beneficence of the few can endanger those bodies which are “visibly vulnerable.” In order to prevent such exploitation, we must each recognize the inherent vulnerability of all bodies – especially our own. Vulnerability must no longer be positioned as a defining trait of the other, but embraced as an expression of our shared corporealities.
While technology might offer us the dream of transcendence from the body, “flesh marks the very province of our humanity” (Graham 188).
CONCLUSION

Visceral Intellects: Feminist Post-Cyberpunk and an Uncertain Future

“How easily we abandon those who have suffered the same persecutions as we have. How quickly we grow impatient with their inability to transcend the conditions of our lives.” (Salt Fish Girl, Lai 172)

“We are already without boundaries, already vulnerable.” (Embodying the Monster, Shildrick 6)

As I admitted in my introduction to this project, Star Trek: The Next Generation has been a source of critical inspiration for me (in particular, Episode “11001001,” featuring the genderless Binars). It is fitting that I again draw on the rich SF world of Star Trek for my conclusion. I had been unsure about how to best shape my final thoughts, but I found an answer after a recent viewing of the film Star Trek: Nemesis (2002). In its dramatic denouement, a weary Captain Picard must confront his clone, Shinzon. Made monstrous by the “evil” Romulans who created him, Shinzon represents all that is “negative” about humanity in the world of Star Trek: greed, anger, revenge, and hatred. Picard tries to reason with Shinzon, telling his clone that it is not too late for him to change his murderous ways. In Nemesis, Shinzon (and in general, most clones represented by the Star Trek franchise) is presented as an aberration of the human – he is ultimately defined by his lack of humanity (or his lack of authentic “Picard-ness”). In fact, Shinzon openly states that he is “the shadow of the man, the echo of the voice.” Believing in the innate ability of humans to evolve, however, Picard passionately
declares: “To be human is to try to make yourself better than you are!” There is perhaps no other line in the series that better encapsulates the transhumanist appeal of *Star Trek*. Despite my obvious enjoyment of the popular space opera, I cannot refrain from framing Picard’s (and, indeed, *Star Trek’s*) optimism about the utopian future of humanity within the theoretical scope of my project.\(^1\) While there are no immediately apparent conflicts between *Star Trek’s* insistence on the ability of humans to evolve and feminist post-cyberpunk’s exhortation that the definition of what constitutes the human is always changing, I still wonder how *Star Trek’s* unyielding optimism would be framed by the feminist writers of my study.

If, “in the 1990s, it [was] much more difficult for feminists to dream of a better future than it was in the 1970s” (Donawerth 58), then the same task facing feminists today has become even more challenging. Since the inception of this thesis, organs have been grown from stem cells and successfully transplanted, distant planets have been discovered that may be capable of supporting life, nanotechnology has been used to design the smallest computers ever conceived, and the first artificial human cell has been made.\(^2\) In addition to these scientific developments, we have also faced increasingly dramatic climate change, the

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\(^1\) As a background note for the uninitiated, humanity in the *Star Trek* universe has eliminated poverty, war, disease, capitalism, and environmental pollution.

\(^2\) See “12 Events That Will Change Everything and Not in the Ways You Think” special edition of *Scientific American* (June 2010) and J. Craig Verner Institute <http://www.jcvi.org/>.
sinking realization that plastics are slowly killing us, growing world-wide poverty, and the poisoning of the Gulf of Mexico by one of the largest oil spills in recorded history.\(^3\) *Star Trek* asks its viewers to imagine ourselves beyond these modern day calamities, but feminist post-cyberpunk denies its readers the luxury of “a better tomorrow.” Writers like Lai, Hopkinson, Sullivan, and Mixon refuse to elide the social, political, and environmental ills of today. The protagonists of feminist post-cyberpunk novels do not strive to be “better than they are,” but instead, they are concerned with the much more difficult task of recognizing and accepting their corporeal vulnerability. Whereas the clone Shinzon – a “visibly vulnerable” body – must die for order to be restored in *Nemesis*, feminist post-cyberpunk proposes that lack of humanity (in terms of “moral goodness”) defines not the clone, but the corrupt society which created it. In Lai’s evocation of cloning in *Salt Fish Girl*, Evie and the other Sonias refuse to see themselves as less than human as they successfully challenge the society that created them. Instead of repeating a similar scene wherein the monstrous other must die so that order may return, Lai chooses to end her narrative of cloning with the replication of difference (through the birth of Miranda and Evie’s baby). Feminist post-cyberpunk SF proposes that since all bodies are vulnerable bodies, difference is always generative as it allows the body to adapt to technological and environmental change, expanding the terms by which we define humanness.

\(^3\) As of the end of June 2010, estimates place the Deepwater Horizon spill as the third-largest oil spill in recorded human history (behind the Lakeview Gusher of 1910 and the Gulf War oil dump of 1991) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oil_spill>.
One of the key messages that I have hopefully conveyed throughout this thesis is that, regardless of the distractions and promises offered by technology, the body matters. Grosz reminds us that: “If bodies are objects or things, they are like no others, for they are the centers of perspective, insight, reflection, desire, agency” (xi). It is those unquantifiable qualities – perspective, insight, reflection, desire, and agency – that uniquely define embodied being. They are qualities that technology cannot reproduce or replace. Technology is often positioned as a way in which to overcome the physical or mental limitations of the human body, but the quest to transcend the body ignores the lived realities of labouring, feeling, and suffering bodies. In this contention, I find encouraging support from feminist and postcolonial theorists like Nakamura, who eloquently writes:

In the end, despite academic and commercial postidentitarian discourses, it does come down to bodies: bodies with or without access to the Internet, telecommunications, and computers, and the cultural capital necessary to use them; bodies with or without access to basic healthcare, let alone high-tech pharmaceuticals or expensive forms of elective surgery. This is the paradox: In order to think rigorously, humanely, and imaginatively about virtuality and the posthuman, it is absolutely necessary to ground the critique in the lived reality of humans, in all their particularity and specificity. The nuanced realities of virtuality – racial, gendered, Othered – live in the body, and though science is producing and encouraging different readings and revisions of the body, it is premature to throw it away just yet, particularly since so much postcolonial, political, and feminist critique stems from it. ("After/Image of Identity" 326)

In its insistence on addressing the “lived reality of humans,” feminist post-cyberpunk sets itself apart from the transhumanist appeal of Star Trek and the posthumanist aspirations of conventional cyberpunk and other masculine-oriented SF. One of the strengths of feminist post-cyberpunk is the flexibility of the
subgenre’s approach to exploring the racial, gendered, and Othered body:

Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber* replays the narratives of colonialism and racism, through the kinship between an exiled black child and a society of alien others in the far distant future, while Mixon’s *Proxies* remains closer to the present day, imagining a near future where bodies are interchangeable, but at the cost of exploiting the most vulnerable (i.e. the racialized and disabled crèche children). In spite of their narrative differences, the feminist post-cyberpunk novels of this study are unified in their contention that the fleshy, vulnerable body is worth preserving.

“It is the ways that technology might change us – both planned and unimagined – that make it essential that we think critically about the posthumanism we embrace in the twenty-first century” (16) argues Vint, and I firmly believe that texts like *Salt Fish Girl* and *Maul* perform this critical task. When I was first conceiving the shape of this project, I was resistant to taking up the discourse of posthumanism. In my limited understanding at the time, posthumanism was a theoretical fancy for those people privileged enough to have the time, space, and economic means necessary to imagine a future beyond the everyday lived realities of most people. I thought: how can we talk of the posthuman when we are still struggling to meet the basic needs of billions of people right now? Fortunately for the critical framework of this thesis, I found that the posthumanism expounded by both Graham and Hayles echoed Nakamura’s insistence that we must ground our critiques in the lived material
realities of humans. At the very start of *How We Became Posthuman*, Hayles writes:

If my nightmare is a culture inhabited by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being, my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival. (5)

While I remain unconvinced that the posthuman is something to which we should aspire, I am heartened that the discussion of the posthuman includes feminist voices like Hayles. Her caution against embracing “fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality” is essential for any person creating or critiquing technology: if the privileged few give into such fantasies, the exploitation and marginalization of the underprivileged will most certainly continue.

Feminist post-cyberpunk – and many other SF genres – is important because of its ability to interrogate such notions of the posthuman in critically ethical ways. In my introduction, I indicated the ways in which the study of SF has been marginalized in the academy: categorized as “low culture,” juvenile, and unwieldy in its plethora of subgenres. By under funding the study of SF, academic programs miss opportunities to fully evaluate the impact of technology on the popular imagination. No other literary genre encompasses all of the anxieties and hopes that we as a culture experience over climate change, medical developments (like cloning and stem cell research), space exploration, and advancement in computing technologies. In their introduction to *Rewired*, Kelly and Kessel point
to the unique appeal of cyberpunk and its success in garnering greater attention to the field of SF:

The idea that the physical, mental, and moral structures that most of us live by are radically contingent is at the heart of science fiction. It is evident throughout the history of the art form, from H.G. Wells through John W. Campbell through Philip K. Dick and James Triptree, Jr. It pervades the New Wave, and the feminist science fiction of the 1970s. All cyberpunks, pre-, classic-, and post-, know this. Perhaps cyberpunk’s greatest contribution to the genre was its uncanny ability to broadcast this science fictional idea to the culture at large. (xiv)

Like Kelly and Kessel, I believe that cyberpunk is special in the way it managed to capture academic attention. No other subgenre of SF since the cyberpunk heydays of the late 1980s and early 1990s has received the same amount of sustained critical thought. While there are unarguably excellent scholars working with feminist SF today – Wolmark, Hollinger, Foster, and Barr to name a few – the field seems to come short in eliciting the same kind of wide-spread excitement generated by Gibson’s foundational cyberpunk text, *Neuromancer*. Regardless of the specific classification of the genre and its subgenres, SF deserves to be read and discussed in the classroom. There is a natural affinity between SF and ontological investigation. Graham, writing from outside of the field, recognizes the importance of SF as she states:

Fantastic, utopian and speculative forms of fiction – epitomized by science fiction – shock our assumptions and incite our critical faculties. As refractions of the same, as evidence for the ascribed and not essential nature of human nature, monsters, aliens and others provide clues for the moral economy or ‘ontological hygiene’ by which future categories of the human/posthuman/non-human might be decided. (13)
Ideally, I would like to see greater attention being paid to the emerging feminist post-cyberpunk writers of today, such as Lai, Hopkinson, Sullivan, and Mixon. The kind of SF being produced by these writers is anything but juvenile and derivative: it is deeply thoughtful, politically relevant, and ethically challenging.

In terms of the academic study of SF, in particular emerging genres of feminist SF (including feminist post-cyberpunk), the issue of race still remains on the sidelines. While there is a growing interest in post-colonial readings of SF, much discussion of race and the racialized body remains regulated to asides in larger works that focus on gender and sexuality. If I had been fully aware of the extent of this gap in SF critical literature, I would have deepened my research into postcolonial readings of feminist SF and taken this project in another direction at the outset. As it was, I did continue to search for postcolonial readings of SF throughout my writing process, but still was only able to discover a handful of relevant critical texts. I would strongly encourage existing and future academics working in the field of SF to consider rectifying this lack in the scholarship. In particular, Misha’s *Red Spider, White Web* (1990) is one feminist cyberpunk text that deserves a sustained study (and I would have included it in my study if I had found it sooner). Unlike any other SF novel that I have read, *Red Spider, White Web* is unrelenting in its bleak characterization of future humanity, but fascinating in its direct interrogation of the racialized body. Whereas racialized minorities play the supporting roles in conventional cyberpunk, Misha places her Aboriginal-others at the centre of the narrative. *Red Spider, White Web* is a tale of the future
told from the point of view of people whose history lives only in museums and on genetically-engineered farming colonies. Misha’s novel is just one of the many under-read and under-appreciated SF works that directly deals with a racialized post-human body. More works by non-white SF writers are being published, but academic attention to their contributions to the discussion of technology, the body, and the future of the human still lags behind.

In addition to advocating for more attention to be devoted to reading race in SF, I feel that addressing issues of disability and the suffering body as depicted in SF narratives (feminist or otherwise) is also pressing. As the pace of advancements in prosthetic and other computerized assisted-living technologies quickens, we, as a culture, find ourselves faced with new possibilities for disabled bodies and embodiments. As I have always been interested in disability studies, it is a regret that I did not better engage with theories of disability and the technologically enabled body in this thesis. My own experience with chronic illness and pain has deepened my interest in this line of inquiry, but I also believe that there is a need within the SF community itself to engage with more images of disability. During my participation at The 67th World Science Fiction Convention (WorldCon) in August 2009, I attended a panel discussion of disability in SF: the room was absolutely packed with people, most of whom identified as disabled. Throughout the hour, people shared their stories of identifying with specific

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4 Hopkinson, along with Uppinder Mehan, edited So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy, a wonderful collection of stories by “leading African, Asian, South Asian, and Aboriginal authors, as well as North American and British writers of colour” (backcover).
disabled (or bodily limited) characters and insightfully critiqued the technologies imagined within these SF scenarios. I found the communal desire to discuss disability, as it is represented in SF, overwhelming. I would encourage academics working in the field of SF criticism to pay closer attention to the representation of disability in SF narratives (particularly in terms of reimagining the possibility of transcendence from the suffering body), as the SF community has demonstrated its eagerness to engage with the material and it offers a rich site of investigation into questions of embodiment and identity.

Throughout this project, I have endeavoured to articulate the importance of SF – both for myself and for the academy. I did not haphazardly choose to group together Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*, Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber*, Sullivan’s *Maul*, and Mixon’s *Proxies* because they were simply feminist texts or third-generation cyberpunk texts. When I read them, I identified a shared concern with the body’s relationship to technology, not only in terms of the possibility of becoming posthuman, but an ethical awareness that all bodies matter, that all bodies are vulnerable. Perhaps I was most drawn to these texts because when I came to them I was struggling with my own vulnerability, and in them, I found stories of belonging and hope. While *Star Trek* appeals to a desire to escape from the everyday, to become “better than you are,” these feminist post-cyberpunk novels ground me in the realities of the present day: I cannot replace my body, technology will not cure me, and I am vulnerable. This is not to say that the future must remain as difficult or continue to be difficult in the same way. By stressing
the importance of the body, feminist post-cyberpunk asks us to recognize the
shared vulnerability that defines human being. These narratives provide us with a
starting point in which disparate bodies might come together to tackle the
increasing technological, political, economic, social, and environmental woes of
today. It is only after we see ourselves in the vulnerable other that we can begin to
fully appreciate our shared diversity and adaptability as we continue to evolve
towards an uncertain future.
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