

INVITED REVIEW ESSAY

## Xenofeminist Hope and Dread, or How to Move Beyond Patriarchal Technocapitalism

*The Xenofeminist Manifesto* By Laboria Cuboniks, London: Verso, 2018 ISBN 978-1-78873-157-7

*Xenofeminism* By Helen Hester, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018 ISBN 978-1-5095-2062-3

Ingrid Hoofd

Department of Media and Culture, Utrecht University, Muntstraat 2a, 3512 EV Utrecht, the Netherlands  
Email: [i.m.hoofd@uu.nl](mailto:i.m.hoofd@uu.nl)

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Who said manifestos are dead? Some thirty years after the publication of Donna Haraway's illustrious *A Cyborg Manifesto* (Haraway 1991), fifty years after Valerie Solanas's angry and delightful *SCUM Manifesto* (Solanas 1967), and 170 years after Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's influential *Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels 1848), a new manifesto in town in fact bears traces of all these and then some: *The Xenofeminist Manifesto*. This manifesto, which comes in a gorgeously designed booklet version as well as in a colorful and nostalgic 80s computer-culture website with nerdy hexadecimal page numbers and related Twitter account, is a work from the "xenofeminist" collective Laboria Cuboniks. The name of this collective, whose members are from various parts of the globe, is actually an anagram of "Nicolas Bourbaki," a largely French collective of mathematicians in the early 1900s who sought to affirm abstraction, rigor, and generalization (Laboria Cuboniks 2014). Together with a firm foot in cyberfeminism and a strong penchant for the abstract and universal by way of the logic of computing *against* the arguably flawed universal of "nature," the manifesto also clearly bears the marks of feminist ecocriticism, new materialism, queer theory, and technological accelerationism. The two books under review bring various activisms and insights together in an original way, and do so clearly with an eye toward reviving the cyberfeminist spirit through, among others, ideas from Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectics of Sex* (Firestone 1970). This pairing certainly had me excited, since, as I argue elsewhere, I am, together with Haraway's original cyborg manifesto, firmly of the opinion that feminisms of all kinds should intervene in and contribute even more radically to contemporary techno-culture and philosophy of technology. This is because clearly, new media and genetic technologies are at present some of the most powerful techniques by which we live and probably will live in the near future, and because these technologies are intimately interwoven with Eurocentric masculinism, heterosexism, militarism, and capitalism (Hoofd 2016, 225, 229).

Yet, though I eagerly opened the books and websites with a healthy amount of nerdy feminist expectation, the latter got immediately overshadowed with a sense of impending dread. I was hoping that the manifesto would be ground-breaking, but despaired that it would not be so; or worse still, that the book by Hester and the manifesto by the collective would ultimately manifest (and I use this term on purpose) themselves as *any* other text or image today, merely traveling, as Internet critic Jodi Dean argues in her excellent “Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics,” as mere bits and bytes through the wires and servers of exactly those contemporary media technologies that have as their primary purpose capitalist circulation and consumption of “radicality” (Dean 2005, 59). After all, hope and terror are, in following the modern Cold War logic of ideological seduction and technological deterrence, the twin sisters (or perhaps, rather, brothers) of our fundamentally Janus-faced, consumerist, and unsustainable lifestyles. Through such life-styling, capitalism endlessly seeks first to produce and then cater to new needs and desires—and, I would add, even possibly to that seemingly “authentic” desire for feminist empowerment and emancipation through those very new technologies. Obviously, the way in which the books’ titles—their simultaneously estranging yet also familiar use of the prefix “xeno” (its roots in the Greek ξένος meaning “strange,” but also its infamous connection to “xenophobia” as the darker political manifestation of the prefix)—managed to arouse both expectation and dread in me illustrates that the stakes for a feminism capable of confronting today’s militarist, hetero-normative, and masculinist techno-capitalism are at present very high indeed.

The books indeed admirably take on this challenge by boldly selecting from the aforementioned theories and practices in terms of their “utility” for an unabashedly fist-on-table, properly renewed, and sufficiently queered and trans\*-ed feminist project (Hester, 3). In Hester’s book, this is done largely by critiquing and partly expropriating 1970s feminist struggles such as those done through female healthcare collectives and feminist eco-criticisms (the work of Maria Mies here especially, as in past cyberfeminist writing, receives a fair amount of disapproval from Hester). Hester convincingly argues that these feminisms have been too keen on an essentialist and too-female idea of “nature” for defining their politics, either through an exclusivist idea of what or who counts as “female” (mostly white, heterosexual, middle-class women with reproductive capacity), or through a faux-futurist politics of “the child” (by claiming that “women” care for “the future” because they supposedly bear children). Although convincingly brought, these critiques from Hester are nonetheless hardly new. Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* in the 1990s of course already critiqued the ways in which a certain heteronormative feminist politics parades as universal by making an appeal to the supposedly universal categories of “woman” or “women.” Butler thus famously illustrates that in the end, “nature” (or sex) was always already *cultural*, or rather a performance of gender derived from an ongoing repetition from the very outset (Butler 1999, 11). However, the manner in which Hester seeks to cobble together whatever can be saved from early cyberfeminism and feminist eco-criticism for “xenofeminist” activism is certainly novel. The novelty here lies in how this activism understands that it cannot remain an old-fashioned revolutionary project, but that it, like the continuously transforming and changing face of contemporary patriarchal techno-hetero-capitalism, necessarily needs to keep morphing and mutating through times to come.

Hester’s book here silently also echoes feminist and poststructuralist insights from the works of Simone de Beauvoir or Jacques Derrida, even if Hester would probably

find poststructuralism's textual politics too limiting. These insights nonetheless also understand that a subversive (feminist) politics based on static notions of identity or of "the system" tends to ultimately shoot itself in the foot as it fails to realize how "identity" and "system" are always mutually constitutive. Steeping itself foremost in a very nicely narrated "mutation" of the work of early antinaturalist feminists Firestone and Valerie Solanas (whom she never mentions, but whose "cutting-up-men" manifesto could be grasped as proto-gender-abolitionist), Hester imaginatively seeks to do such a metamorphosing through recalling a device with a fascinating medical-feminist lineage that had me shiver with delight and apprehension, namely the Del-Em—a DIY menstrual extraction tool used in 1970s North American feminist collectives that could also be used to terminate early pregnancies. The Del-Em, Hester argues, included "the activation of networks of community support and solidarity" around a host of issues, such as access to affordable healthcare, housing, childcare, and police brutality (Hester, 124). As such, it is imperative for queer and trans\* feminism mindful of ecological disaster today to see how the re-engineering of certain devices with similar potential as the Del-Em can once more create the activation of such networks of "kin-making"—a conceptual and biological practice Hester borrows from Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*—fit for present-day challenges (Haraway 2016). However, in doing so, Hester, for my taste, relies rather too heavily on a discourse of "freedom," "control," and "autonomy" that sees freedom largely in terms of reappropriating the shackles that currently oppress via a common experience of alienation. This discourse no doubt has its admirable precedents in, for instance, Sadie Plant's cyberfeminist *Zeroes and Ones* (Plant 1998) and Marx's "Fragment on Machines" (Marx 1973), which also argue for revolution via the very experiences and tools of alienation. But though such a willful complicity with modern technologies, as well as Hester's demand for the continued utility of the theories and tools under discussion, certainly may have as its outlook radical political change and solidarity, I worry that this gesture remains empty if not accompanied by a more acute analysis of the extremely differential *effects* of these tools across lines of class, gender, and race. And though obviously the general claim to more freedom and autonomy is paramount to an emancipatory politics by those oppressed or marginalized groups who in the past have had to suffer from severe lack of access or movement (whether actual or virtual), such a claim is also rather symptomatic of the general cybernetic logic that suffuses contemporary culture and society, in which such demands and their terminology have possibly entered a moment of reversal. In other words, the "prosumer" logic of current techno-capitalism renders such emancipatory demands eerily—if perhaps not totally—in tune with current structures of cybernetic oppression and subjugation instead of being subversive of these structures; the stakes of feminist intervention have therefore possibly also been raised *beyond* the simple purview of "freedom," "autonomy," or empowerment. The constant demand for "utility" is within such a reversed logic typical of the prevalent instrumentalism of techno-capitalism, and indeed of a widespread masculinist and militarist world-view in which the human agent is hubristically and problematically seen as the wielder of "tools."

In light of this, I suggest that the extrapolation that Hester undertakes from 1970s DIY implements like the Del-Em to contemporary info- and bio-hacking tools, even if such contemporary tools should, according to her, be scrutinized first for their potential to be diverted away from gatekeepers, repurposed, scaled, and intersectionally applied—and thus become part of what she calls "protocol feminism"—risks becoming too complicit in militaristic techno-capitalism by neglecting the fact that such a

cybernetic reversal has taken place (Hester, 78–79, 108). Surely, after all, the aesthetic and political affordances and properties of the nonnetworked and elegant Del-Em are extremely different from those of the genetic and networked tools? One could also object that the erosion or circumvention of gatekeeper and expert authority, and the subsequent rise of “self-help” groups in past decades, has not only thoroughly ambiguous consequences for groups marginalized along lines of class and race, but is also again symptomatic of the continuous emphasis on self-activity, participation, and self-sufficiency in our neoliberal, “user-centric” times. What typifies this lack of understanding by Hester—of how cybernetic technologies partly lock the individual into a form of submission that is discursively sold to them as empowerment—emerges also in the total lack of discussion by Hester around *surveillance* as a central logic of techno-capitalism, also and *especially* when its trans\* subject discusses their issues, for instance, on a “subreddit” online forum (Hester, 135). The demand for a “feminist protocol”—a term that Hester niftily takes from Alex Galloway’s *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Galloway 2004)—also forgets how some early cyberfeminism fell into the trap of arguing that new media technologies supposedly had a certain “rhizomatic,” and hence “decentralizing,” logic, all the while forgetting that the Internet was from the very start, and still is, an utterly hierarchically organized, military and corporate network (Hester, 108, 114). Although the Del-Em, then, indeed may have easily led to a “protocol of dissemination” relying on human solidarity, coalition, and publicly available yet underground facilities, the Internet is in fact the hard-wired substitution (or, one could say, the reversed or inverted material apparatus) for such human affective relations, its infrastructure all too intimately bound up with contemporary, faux-empowering, “prosumerist” surveillance practices.

I also miss some acknowledgment of the differential “messiness on the ground” when intersectionally implementing such tools of “freedom” and “autonomy,” even if Hester touches upon some potential complications in the final chapter of her book. What to make, for instance, of the Del-Em as a much more *ambiguous* tool itself, in which access to the Del-Em collectives, as the mark of a lack of privilege, also puts such underprivileged women, as women’s healthcare worker Louise Tyrer in “The Case against Menstrual Extraction” suggests, in danger of disproportionate physiological risk? (Tyrer 1993). Closer to the kind of “protocol xenofeminism” that Hester imagines, what indeed about the “hydra of black-market pharmacies that have been made accessible in the digital age” that dangerously offer “new opportunities for people to route around judicial and medical institutions” (Hester, 90)? Situations and their contexts, as well as so-called “tools” to be “re-engineered” from those contexts, are always infinitely more fraught with ethical complexity than a mere adding of the demand for intersectionality and feminist utility might suggest. This is also to say that technologies as such are better thought of as what Derrida calls “pharmaka” (φάρμακα) or poison and “medicine” all in one (Derrida 1981, 97). In other words, one cannot so easily split off, while simply “discarding what is unhelpful,” an ethical, feminist agential “use” of any technology from its dark or immoral hetero-masculinist uses; these two always go hand in hand (Hester, 129). This means that technologies certainly can have subversive effects, but these effects express themselves, rather, beyond the (xeno)feminist agent, as unforeseen *accidents* or events in which any technological or ideological system, insofar it seeks to eliminate “the other” through extending its controlling grasp, radically deconstructs itself. It is this accident that we see happening today, for instance, through the ways in which ecological disaster increasingly marks the limits of current techno-capitalism, even if such a disaster—and I certainly thoroughly agree with

Hester here—is also a simulation brought on by our problematically pristine image of “nature” and “the child.” Even so, “the master’s tools can dismantle the master’s house” indeed, but what this then requires is, as Haraway also stressed in an interview with Mike Gane more than a decade ago, as a logic of “noise” or “breakdown” in light of the new “techno-biopower” (Haraway and Gane 2006, 151–52).

All this therefore leads me to worry that Hester’s xenofeminism may in fact hamper a more radical or delightfully monstrous imagination around queer and trans\* activist possibilities, even if it acknowledges that it itself is riddled with “internal tensions” insofar its ultimate aim should indeed be “to transform political systems and disciplinary structures” (Hester, 148–49). Given all this, the actual Laboria Cuboniks *The Xenofeminist Manifesto* and website (Laboria Cuboniks 2018), in fact, even if at first glance seemingly more entangled in that cyber-surveillance web by way of its online instantiation, remain delightfully more ambiguous and impenetrable in their more obviously spectacular and nostalgic seduction. The manifesto then offers quite a different kind of proposition from Hester’s no doubt compelling book, which nonetheless remains a more classically argued academic text and as such firmly implicated in the performative logic of theorizing and critique as part of the consumerist circulation of academic information. As *The Manifesto* most frighteningly proposes: “We want neither clean hands nor beautiful souls, neither virtue nor terror. We want superior forms of corruption” (Laboria Cuboniks, 47). Indeed, my being otherwise affected by the manifesto then possibly illustrates how *hope and dread* keep forcing themselves to the foreground as central affects in relation to these critical manifestations, both virtual and real. And this in turn, I argue, usefully points toward a potentially more ingenious xenofeminist politics of sneaky consciousness-raising and *fatality* around these books’ entanglements with techno-capitalism—the fatal finally being the more expedient “stranger” to its cyber-logic.

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**Ingrid M. Hoofd** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Media and Culture at Utrecht University, the Netherlands. Her research interests are in issues of representation, feminist and critical theories, philosophy of technology, and information ethics. She is the author of *Higher Education and Technological Acceleration: The Disintegration of University Teaching and Research* (Palgrave, 2016), and *Ambiguities of Activism: Alter-Globalism and the Imperatives of Speed* (Routledge, 2012). Her research analyzes the ways in which alter-globalist activists, as well as left-wing academics, mobilize what she calls “speed-elitist” discourses and divisions in an attempt to overcome gendered, raced, and classed oppressions worldwide.