

## ISSUE NO. 3

## Beyond the Cyborg Collective Book Review

**Roxanne Samer****Laurie Ann Carlson**

This review was conducted by way of a one-hour online video call. At the time, Alexandrina was located in Providence, Roxanne in Los Angeles, and Laurie in Bangkok. They then collectively transcribed the conversation and made minimal edits for the sake of brevity and clarity.

**Roxanne:** To begin, in general I see this book to be an intervening monograph on Donna Haraway's work and her career as a whole with the understanding that: A) not many broad interventions into her work as a whole have been written yet; and B) as the title suggests, scholars have not moved beyond her most well-known essay, "A Cyborg Manifesto." It seems like this project was developed with Haraway, or at least she was involved relatively early on, and is trying to be "thinking with her" through her work and doing so thematically, so that we have chapters that are called "Adventures with Haraway," "Natures," "Knowledges," "Politics," "Ethics," and "Stories," before a short essay by Haraway herself.

**Alexandrina:** The first chapter seems to be about their writing process—how they came to the project, how they wrote it together, their backgrounds—and included sections "On Adventure," "On Us," "On 'Beyond,'" "On Theory," "On Influence," and "On This Book."

**Roxanne:** They also give the layout for the other chapters which, though thematic, seem to all take up the different ways in which Haraway's work intervenes in different disciplines and bodies of knowledge. A couple, including "Ethics" and "Politics," are about philosophy while "Natures" and "Knowledges" are more about feminism.

**Laurie:** The authors also point out that it's not a matter of leaving the cyborg behind and moving into something new, but rather it's using the cyborg to branch out into Haraway's other theories. That's what they set out to do in the beginning, but this is not what they necessarily do.

**Roxanne:** I liked that the authors said they are pursuing a "hermeneutic of adventure" rather than a "hermeneutic of fidelity," so that even though they are thinking alongside and with Haraway they're not really after the truth of Haraway (3). And while that sounds really fun, it feels like a Haraway-ian adventure requires an acknowledgement

of difference or division within it, and in some ways the fidelity still feels like it's there for me. The introduction had me excited, but I'm not sure Grebowicz and Merrick followed through on their goals.

**Laurie:** I agree! I was excited for the introduction, and then I felt like the text went downhill and picked back up in the last chapter, "Stories," and I know Alex said she loved the last chapter too.

**Roxanne:** So while the other chapters are largely about disciplinary interventions and discourses, the sixth one, "Stories," is more about methodology and how science fiction can be used as theory making and how Haraway's writing complicates theory versus fiction, and we all agree that this last chapter was the most exciting one in here.

**Laurie:** The authors know Haraway and it's obvious. They start to lay out the cyborg as a means of negotiating between constructivism and materialism and that had me excited. I was expecting them to explain the cyborg, why it matters, and then branch off, but they don't really do that. They use one of my favorite quotes by Anne Balsamo where she says: "It's ironic the body has disappeared in postmodern theory just as women and feminists have emerged as an intellectual force in the human discipline" (31). This would be a perfect time to insert why the cyborg matters in theory, but the authors don't do that. Instead, they just touch upon it.

**Roxanne:** Overall, they're doing a lot of synthesis of Haraway reception.

**Laurie:** I'm frustrated that they put feminists and philosophers into two separate categories, and then they claim that feminists cite philosophers but philosophers don't cite feminists. But then they use white male philosophers to justify what Haraway is doing and it makes little methodological sense.

**Roxanne:** Right! And the authors are trying to lift Haraway up to Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak as the feminist philosophers par excellence and they say that Haraway "follows" Butler in this one section when the authors are citing something that Haraway wrote before Butler (43)

*[Laurie in background: I know! Exactly!]*

The authors are almost countering their own argument here if they say that Haraway has been writing about these subject matters, in this case a complicated take on

sexuality, for decades. But because Judith Butler is this pinnacle, the authors are still reverting to her in their advocacy for Haraway.

**Laurie:** And a side note! Who cares how many times Haraway was cited! Why does that matter? It's so weird.

**Roxanne:** I was impressed that Haraway was the third most cited feminist. But within the authors' argument, we should be talking about someone who's number ten or fifteen in citation ranking instead.

**Alexandrina:** It felt like they were still battling to prove Haraway's relevance. Instead of pointing out how she writes theory and uses science fiction as theory, the authors are still trying to validate her through citation—going against how the authors wanted to move away from the academic model of success in the first chapter.

For me, I struggled with how the authors gloss over Haraway's writing about interrelations between people, and instead focused on her writing about animals, which I found difficult because they used Haraway's phrases like "colonial organism." Coloniality is a human process, but the authors seemed to focus more on the "organism" in "colonial organism"—except for the discussion of *Avatar*.

**Laurie:** Haraway has written about *Avatar*, but the authors' writing about *Avatar* seemed like a tangent. It had nothing to do with the rest of the chapter "Politics."

**Alexandrina:** Right. But back to the chapter on "Knowledges." In thinking about Haraway's concept of "situated knowledges" where they are "real, particular locations with limited views, necessarily from somewhere" (58), what I would have liked to see was a full disclosure from the authors about their own situated knowledges. I feel like what the authors didn't talk about—particularly glaring for me was the nonexistence of discussions of race—came from how their knowledge is situated and limited in certain ways. For example, their use of Patricia Hill Collins to describe a raceless essentialist feminism, and ignoring that she wrote *Black Feminist Thought*, which explicitly deals with race and feminism, made me want to yell at them, "Did you read *This Bridge Called My Back*?!" There is so much writing about white women's racism in the feminist movement, and to write as if feminism is a homogenous entity is to write against women of color feminisms.

**Roxanne:** The introduction made it seem like there weren't going to be these kinds of problems. The authors had a whole section about how Haraway's own feminism could never come without the modifiers of left, socialist, anti-racist, or materialist. But then those modifiers drop out for the rest of the book, including the Patricia Hill Collins reference. Why not recognize how this is an intervention on black feminism's part?

And in relation to the animal, I recognize that the animality is very important to Haraway's scholarship, but I think there are ways you can talk about it in relation to different sorts of people. One of the main points of Haraway is to open up dichotomies, for example between animal and human. Why not talk about the different ways different animals engage with different humans based on situated location?

**Laurie:** I agree with you, Alex, about how the authors don't recognize Patricia Hill Collins as a black feminist. And they don't even use Collins' work—instead they use some secondary source's interpretation of Collins' work. Even if we go back to the "A Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway makes a direct association with women of color—and Grebowicz and Merrick don't do that. I feel like race is ignored in the book.

**Alexandrina:** Race is entirely ignored! And women of color scholars have engaged with the "Cyborg Manifesto," including Chela Sandoval, Catherine Ramirez, and Paula Moya. Moya has written at length about Haraway's theoretical misappropriations in the relationships between cyborgs and women of color.

**Roxanne:** It's not just race that gets left behind—the authors are thinking about feminism in this singular, monolithic fashion. One has to recognize that there are feminisms and some of those are complicated by race, as well as age, ability, class, and other politics such as socialism.

**Laurie:** Branching off of that, even though they talk about using Haraway politically, the authors don't define what they mean by democracy. There isn't one kind of democracy and one kind of feminism. Even in their discussions about Octavia Butler, they don't really mention race in her work.

**Alexandrina:** I know! Especially when race is so central to Butler's work. Her stories are not just about women in the future—the stories are about mixed race women, black women, and women who have racialized social locations.

**Roxanne:** And the theme of colonization. Butler's stories that Grebowicz and Merrick take up for discussion are ones so relevant to the idea of the "colonial organism."

**Laurie:** Octavia Butler's fiction is about what it means to be raced in a post-race world. This would be the perfect time to insert the negotiation of the cyborg between materialism and constructivism, but the authors don't do it. Butler's stories take place in a post-apocalyptic world. Humans have ruined their world and they have to seek refuge in another place or another planet. In this future world, race probably shouldn't matter, but the experience of living in a raced body still matters. The authors talk about *Xenogenesis*, where the main character Lilith is an African American who is awoken to be the person who starts the new human race, this new hybrid human race. Human beings as we know them will instead be a human hybrid construct, but they will come from a racialized body, and Butler's story focuses so much on that. Grebowicz and Merrick don't discuss this, and I'm bothered by it.

**Roxanne:** Even when Butler is presenting these very different and otherly worlds for us to think these issues through, they're also being connected to histories and lived realities. That story is also very much about the ways in which black women's bodies have been co-opted in reproduction time and time again. It's a part of the story even if Butler doesn't give it to us in the most literalist, realist fashion.

**Laurie:** That's true. Also, one of the interesting things about Butler is when she talks about slavery, it's not something that happened in the past; it's something that is continuous. It goes past the boundaries of time and space.

**Roxanne:** And morphs in how it looks and appears.

**Laurie:** Yeah.

**Alexandrina:** I started thinking about people that would be great in conversation with this book. I wrote down Alondra Nelson, Alexander Weheliye, Kodwo Eshun, and thinking especially about Graham Lock's conception of blutopia. It's the idea of envisioning the future, but remembering the history of black bodies tinged with the sadness of the blues. If we are going to talk about futures, race is intrinsically involved. I think that Butler gets that

**Laurie:** I agree with you. I wrote down three people. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*. I wrote down Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, regarding which they used

someone else's interpretation of Collins rather than Collins herself. Also, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson who in *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997) uses the figure of the cyborg to look at people with disabilities in a new light. I would be really interested in a discussion of race but also disability. Haraway specifically mentions in the "Cyborg Manifesto" that there are real, live cyborgs who exist with disabilities, and Grebowicz and Merrick don't talk about that either.

**Roxanne:** There are so many texts you could read alongside this book, including some sources they themselves at least briefly cite, such as N. Katherine Hayles' book on *How We Became Posthuman* and Anne Balsamo's work, which you, Laurie, already mentioned. But I was also getting really hung up (and this is on a different note than that of their lack of discussion of race) on their taking up in this monograph a particular academic project that looks at what they call the "critical theory machine" and success and fame in feminist scholarship. And I thought of Jack Halberstam's book *The Queer Art of Failure*, which addresses this institution of recognition and (from its own particular place of privilege) says "eff that" and asks what could happen if we tried to think scholarship differently and risk messing up in our playing around with standards. It seems like this could be one logical argument for where Grebowicz and Merrick are going with their criticism of academia, but instead they seem to fold back on themselves in trying to lift Haraway up to these standards that they themselves are critiquing at the same time. Why not pursue a totally different venture instead?

**Laurie:** You both mentioned that the "Stories" chapter is quite good, and why it's good is because they talk about the way Donna Haraway's methodology and philosophy are linked—each one supports the other. They get that her writing and philosophy are linked, but they themselves critique this whole idea of white Western philosophy but don't get how they are doing the same thing, and that's really startling to me. Particularly that whole chapter where there are so many people they could link to Haraway's work... They do seem to understand what Haraway is trying to do and why it's not always accepted. One of my favorite works by Donna Haraway is "Cat's Cradle," in which she talks about anti-racist theory and the interlocking elements that form a kind of cat's cradle. Grebowicz and Merrick don't do the same thing. They just keep going back and suggesting that Lyotard will lift up Haraway. I don't understand how, though they get her methodology, they themselves are doing the exact opposite.

**Roxanne:** Why not, instead of bringing in more of these already reified philosophers and thinkers, bring in more science fiction? Why not talk more about Samuel Delany

and Donna Haraway, for example? Instead, they go back to those who hold the esteemed places in the tradition that they themselves are critiquing. Why participate in it?

**Alexandrina:** Do we have anything to say about “Politics” and “Ethics”? Or do we want to move into “Stories?”

**Laurie:** Let me look. So, I get excited because they start talking about cyborg politics and why it matters in the chapter on “Politics,” but then again they just turn to Lyotard and *Avatar*. They understand cyborg politics. They just need to focus on it. I would be so much happier about this book and getting beyond the cyborg if they first explained what their interpretation of the cyborg is and then focused on *Modest\_Witness* or “Cat’s Cradle.” They cite all these works but don’t really get into depth with them. I love all these works. Missed opportunities.

**Roxanne:** In some ways the book isn’t about their own takes on Haraway’s work, so much as the location of Haraway’s scholarship in these broader fields. I feel as if another route to have gone would have been that of being more historical. Why not situate the development of her ideas across time and place more. Having not read Haraway as much as you, Laurie, clearly have, I’m confused when we’re sort of hopping between all these things she has written and not getting a clearer picture of how her own ideas developed. That maybe would have been a more productive monograph. Perhaps more traditional, but also maybe more useful.

**Alexandrina:** There was a section where the authors discuss indulging in miscegenation, which put up a big red flag for me (122). I’ve been using “A Cyborg Manifesto” in thinking about the future of mixed race identities. If Haraway was thinking about human parts and machine parts, what do two races together mean in terms of hybrid mixing? I’ve been trying to think through concepts of mixed race beyond simplistic black/white and machine parts/human body binaries, and how the Haraway cyborg can complicate thinking about multiracial individuals who don’t have a white parent.

Related to miscegenation, the authors discuss “the ongoing and complex relationship between monstrosity and woman, specifically in the history of discourses around procreation” in the “Politics” chapter (80). That brought me back to slavery and racialized bodies that the authors never discuss. In Hazel Carby’s book *Reconstructing Womanhood*, she talks about the construction of black womanhood and what it meant

to be a woman. The concept of woman was constructed on fragileness and white femininity, and that is why black women could be treated the way they were, because they technically weren't "women," they weren't people. So this idea of "monstrosity and woman" is sort of the same juxtaposition as that between enslaved black women and frail white women.

**Roxanne:** Are you saying that they needed to go more in depth?

**Alexandrina:** I think they needed to pick out a few things and go more in depth, just as you two were saying. As I was marking stuff, I would say I never really got a full understanding of where they were going. It was just a whole lot of toe-dipping all over the place.

**Roxanne:** Yeah, I guess what turned up being most interesting to me in this toe-dipping methodology or approach is that I did gather a Haraway-ian bibliography of readings, because they touch on them all and give me a greater insight as to what I could possibly find there that I didn't know already and wouldn't know just by looking at say the essays' titles.

**Laurie:** If they don't think other people go into depth in engaging her other work, this is a valuable opportunity to take the cyborg, as they say they are going to do, and connect it to all her other works, but they never do that. It's odd to me.

**Alexandrina:** So to go "beyond the cyborg," you have to get into the cyborg.

**Laurie:** Exactly.

**Roxanne:** Which they say they're doing. They say that the "beyond" is not the simple setting aside, and the cyborg certainly does pop up across all these different chapters, but they're certainly not taking it as the central reference to rework her other important thematics.

**Alexandrina:** What I think they do really well is set up these places to come back to. Grebowicz and Merrick offer concepts of "the beyond" and "elsewhere," and both ideas are non-fixed locations. I appreciate this lack of fixation, these non-stationary places, but then I get really frustrated, because these non-stationary places are *so* non-stationary that I can't make sense of them in the text. Maybe I love and am frustrated by the same thing.



**Roxanne:** Yeah, I think they're not giving us one route to follow but many. I haven't read many of those monographs on other preeminent scholars that they discuss, so I don't know for sure, but this doesn't feel like this does what a typical monograph is expected to do. It sends us out in all these ways, which is neat, but one gets lost in trying to follow them all.

**Alexandrina:** So I loved the "Stories" chapter, and I think that—free-standing, not knowing what their goal was for the whole book, alone—this is a really fascinating way of thinking about using literature as method, as a way of writing and a way of thinking and a way of theorizing.

**Roxanne:** They cite Haraway as saying "science is culture" in the sense that *how* we talk about science is a matter of storytelling and how you situate particular concerns and issues in relation to one another. I think the same thing could be said of all scholarship. In writing a book or an essay, we are telling a story, and if you are thinking about futurity, science fiction might have something to offer you in thinking about how you go about doing that. Grebowicz and Merrick are building off Haraway herself and making a strong claim for science fiction to be taken seriously in scholarship, and I greatly appreciate it.

**Alexandrina:** One of the items on the Haraway bibliography that I also starred was Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr, who they quote as describing the "Cyborg Manifesto" as SF in "imagining an alternative reality that can serve as a model for action in reality" (123). I really loved that. I really grabbed onto the idea of using possible futures to anticipate and imagine an actual future. That's what I think the strength of science fiction is, and I think that's what these authors see Haraway as being able to do.

**Roxanne:** In the short essay that Haraway contributes to this collection herself, she talks about Octavia Butler's *Parable* series, which does exactly that. She talks about how the protagonist is imagining a world for her people among the stars but in fact cannot get there in any immediate fashion, so instead begins creating community here on Earth. That is a parable of sorts in and of itself for what they're saying Haraway demonstrates about the productivity of science fiction in that in these imaginings and possibilities we can then begin building with the lived material realities of our lives, not knowing that we *will* get from point A to point B but that seeing point B on the horizon motivates us in the present.

**Alexandrina:** And I think what they do too that was a breath of relief was that they felt it necessary to give a brief overview history of feminist science fiction and flag certain moments and authors they found to be significant. I thought that anchored the chapter really well.

**Roxanne:** I've read Helen Merrick's *The Secret Feminist Cabal*, which is a history of feminist science fiction and an excellent book. I don't know how Grebowicz and Merrick's co-writing process worked, but I certainly saw the strengths of Merrick's historical knowledge coming through here. It felt much more grounded and thorough than other chapters.

**Alexandrina:** I felt like this chapter was playing on their strengths. They were not referring to the white European philosopher to try to prove their point. They were actually going into their archive to prove what they were doing.

**Roxanne:** It did read as the most unique contribution and reflection on this author's work.

**Laurie:** So, Roxanne, you mentioned something about Octavia Butler and her concept of community. I love Octavia Butler, she is my favorite writer, and in all of the works she creates this concept of community, which is a form of interdependence and interconnectivity. This concept really coincides well with the cyborg and I wish they had explored that more. However, what I like in this chapter is that they look at science fiction as a genre, a writing style, and a style of reading. It would have been wonderful if they had done more of that with Haraway in the rest of the book, because Haraway really invokes such reading and writing practices.

**Alexandrina:** Any other major loves?

**Roxanne:** I like that in Chapter 6, not only do they refuse to just align Haraway with these older accepted white male scholars, they also posit other feminist science/science fiction scholars as following Haraway's genealogy. At the very end they give both Joan Slonczewski and Amy Thomson as individuals that do similar work, and it is people like that I would have loved the authors to put in conversation with Haraway more, across the course of the book.

**Laurie:** I agree. I think that would be more in line with Haraway's philosophy, methodology, and writing, than the same white, elevated, accepted continental scholars.

**Roxanne:** Yes, because they both pursue the same work not just in terms of politics but the same methodology in that they do theory and science fiction together.

**Alexandrina:** I loved the way the authors envisioned science fiction as theory in the final chapter and it drew some links for me to my work in futurism. One of the sections in the chapter is labeled “Bag Lady Storytelling”—an Ursula K. Le Guin method “to explore how we might think of stories, culture, and evolution differently if we valued cultural artifacts such as containers more than tools and weapons” (131). Le Guin is interested in “how we tell stories, to whom, and for what purposes” (131). It reminded me of Erykah Badu’s song “Bag Lady,” not just for the song title similarity, but in particular the music video where she and other women dress in homage to the characters in Ntozake Shange’s “For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf.” Thinking about storytelling, culture, and evolution as theory is what “For Colored Girls” is about to me, especially when Badu re-imagines it. It comes back to Le Guin’s asking for whom and for what purposes we tell stories. That to me was very compelling; that “Bag Lady Storytelling” could be “Bag Lady” in so many different ways.

**Roxanne:** That’s really cool. I hadn’t thought of that. I will totally re-watch the music video with that in mind. Now I am wondering why they didn’t talk about music more generally. Why isn’t Janelle Monáe here? That would have been an interesting place to take the cyborg.

**Alex:** Maybe it was outside their realm of situated knowledges.

**Laurie:** They understand “situated knowledge,” they just don’t necessarily practice it. Again, I have to go back to the many types of feminism(s) and the missed opportunities in not relying more on feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins. Why cite Wylie’s interpretation of Collins?

**Roxanne:** They do a fair amount of citing secondary sources over original ones.

**Alexandrina:** What else have you wanted to say that we haven’t brought up in conversation that we can weave in? What else do either of you want to say?

**Laurie:** Like both of you, I was excited when they set up what they were going to write about in the first chapter, but they did not follow through. I loved chapter 6, but the thing I admire most about Haraway in her hybridity is the ways she looks at

interdisciplinary studies. They mention “A Game of Cat’s Cradle,” which to me is one of the most amazing articles in which she discusses her methodology and how it relates to her writing, and they don’t linger enough on such works. They recognize that her interdisciplinary nature is why she is not accepted more, or, as they would say, cited enough, but they do not branch off on this. It is a missed opportunity.

**Roxanne:** And it shows up in their own appendix, in their bibliometrics, in that they cannot quite assimilate all Haraway’s fields together and they thus have to qualify their means of measurement. If she is all over the place, then let her be all over the place. Maybe we don’t need to align them all together. Should we try to answer the question of who should read this book?

**Alexandrina:** I feel like anyone who is working in the field of science fiction would get something out of chapter 6. What the authors call alternative ontologies of method is fantastic. Anyone who works in science fiction could get something out of this book. Newcomers to Haraway could also get an overview from it.

**Roxanne:** This text would be good for those who have read the “A Cyborg Manifesto” and have thought, “That was pretty cool. Where else should I go?” This book would give you a few different paths based on your interests and what about Haraway excites you. I also think the last chapter would be good not just for anyone working in science fiction but anyone working in feminist, or anti-racist, or abilities-based scholarship, and those who are just thinking about how it is we tell the stories that we tell, in whatever field that might be. That’s what is so provocative about this chapter. I think this linking of the history of feminist science fiction and Haraway’s theorizing is exciting and worth tapping into.

**Laurie:** All three of us really work in the field of interdisciplinary studies and Haraway is a really wonderful model for that idea that feminist theory, and anti-racist theory, and disability theory have something to contribute to one another. I think it is really valuable for anyone who works in academia to consider that rather than working in these sectioned off areas of study, we can explore similar ideas in interlocking ways to expand each other’s disciplines.

**Roxanne:** So we all recommend chapter 6?

**Alexandrina:** Yes, because you have to get into the cyborg before you can go beyond the cyborg.

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## ONE THOUGHT ON "BEYOND THE CYBORG COLLECTIVE BOOK REVIEW"

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