Open Cyborgs at #ALTC

Rob Farrow

Editor's Note

This was originally posted to [Rob Farrow's blog [https://edtechbooks.org/-TqA]](https://edtechbooks.org/-TqA) on September 5, 2017.

I'm in Liverpool this week for the [annual ALT Conference [https://www.alt.ac.uk/altc]](https://www.alt.ac.uk/altc). I'm primarily here as part of the [UK Open Textbooks [http://ukopentextbooks.org/]](http://ukopentextbooks.org/) project to assist and understand the adoption strategy used by [OpenStax [https://openstax.org/]](https://openstax.org/).

In the opening keynote Bonnie Stewart encouraged us to understand embodied work and embodied perspectives as important as the 'rational' perspectives that have traditionally informed academic inquiry. She appealed to [Haraway's (1985) socio-feminist conception of the cyborg [https://edtechbooks.org/-sCa]](https://edtechbooks.org/-sCa) as a model for open practice in education. "The cyborg gives me a model of hope and possibility… not faithful to norms (as in a bell curve) but capable of inspiring actions and projects." My own reading of Haraway identifies this position with the following adjectives: genderless; un-alienated; independent; oppositional; un-hierarchical; rhizomatic; irreverent; subversive; quintessential; bodily; illegitimate; monstrous; inorganic. (Most of these appear to be negatively defined – i.e. defined by what they are not. This is also common for open approaches.)

Representation	Simulation
Bourgeois novel (realism)	Science Fiction (postmodernism)
Organism	Biotic component
Depth	Surface
Perfection	Optimization
Organic division of labour	Cybernetics of labour
Reproduction	Replication
Community ecology	Ecosystem
Freud	Lacan
Sex	Genetic engineering
Mind	Artificial Intelligence
World War II	Star Wars
White capitalist patriarchy	Informatics of domination

I found this table more helpful in explaining the difference between traditional, hierarchical positions and the "informatics of domination". (I left out some of the more esoteric elements of the table.) Here are a couple of quotes that also seem to be useful for understanding the position:

"The cyborg is not subject to Foucault's biopolitics; the cyborg stimulates politics, a much more potent field of operations." (p.302)
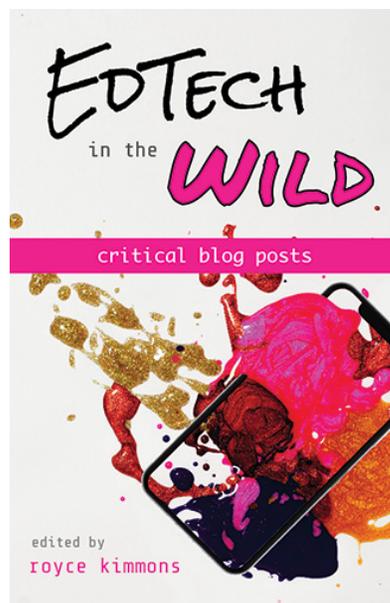
"One important route for reconstructing socio-feminist politics is through theory and practice addressed to the social relations of science and technology, including crucially the system of myth and meanings structuring our imaginations. The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self. This is the self feminists must code." (p.302)

I am not sure I understand the cyborg theory outlined in the paper well enough to say whether it really makes sense – but it's an interesting take on how to identfy the normative dimensions of openness. For me it's perhaps close to the kind of contrarianism presented in Deleuze & Guattari's (1972) *Anti-Oedipus*, perhaps because of the common interest in Lacanian decentralisation of the psyche. (Similarly, they also speak of 'desiring machines' and 'rhizomes'.)(Wikipedia reports that feminist Lacanians like Irigaray also an influence.)

Haraway summarises her argument as follows:

1. The production of total, universalising theory is a major mistake that misses most of reality (probably always and certainly now)
2. Taking responsibility for the social relations of science and technology means refusing an anti-science metaphysics, a demonology of technology, and so embracing the skilful task of reconstructing the boundaries of daily life, in partial connection with others, in communication with all of our parts

Cyborg theory is anti-essentialist and aims at overcoming the patriarchal dualisms, taxonomies and logics (self/other, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial) that have characterised Western history. This belief in emancipation and freedom is one that many open practitioners share, but here the approach is deconstructive.

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