# Behind the Poetics of the Female Asian Cyborg: A Techno-Orientalist Other

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*Abstract:* In 1985, Donna Haraway conceived a political myth of the cyborg, a cybernetic organism, hybrid of machine and organism, that refuses to be attributed to existing definitions used to explain the human body. Over the years, Haraway's cyborg has continued to find itself in the center of academic and creative discourse. Given the prominence of Haraway's model, in this paper, I will examine the cyborg poetics of two contemporary female Asian poets, Franny Choi and Sally Wen Mao, under the framework of Haraway's cyborg. Both liken their self to cyborgs. Both take the perspective of cyborgs. Both are equally drawn to Haraway's cybernetic dream. I will explain how Haraway's cyborg is a fitting metaphor for the female identity and a relevant conduit for its expression, and how it facilitates the reckoning and rejection of the historically constituted female body. Finally, I will interrogate applicability of Haraway's cyborg to the female Asian body by cross-referencing the cyborg with orientalism and techno-orientalism. I will argue for the exclusive nature of Haraway's cyborg and its inadequacy in constituting a liberating space for the female Asian body.

*Keywords:* gender, poetry, orientalism

## 1. Introduction

As human life increasingly transcends into cyberspace, it does not seem a surprise that the cyborg captures the human imagination. After all, Haraway herself describes her cyborg to be an "imaginative resource" for feminists coping with the dilemmas of the post-industrial society. [1] Indeed, the cyborg provides bona fide source material for any creative wishing to rethink their human identity or looking for an alternative to the binaries that have defined (and confined) them for millennia – what Haraway calls "troubling dualisms", among which are male/female, self/other, and mind/body. The cyborg by nature rejects these dualisms: it is sexless and genderless to begin with; it is a hybrid of human and non-human, the original and unoriginal; it is a fusion of fiction and lived bodily experience. The cyborg derives pleasure from the transgression and confusion of boundaries. As such, it offers a platform in which the subject can theoretically refrain from self-labeling, free of the restricting binaries that have historically served to construct, subjugate, and alienate the Other. Haraway aims to foster a collective unity and eschew conventional social groupings by disrupting the categorizing methodology at its core. Her "ironic" dream is a dream of sameness.

In practice, though, the cyborg as portrayed in film and literature is almost always gendered, and therefore still subject to male/female binaries. But the cyborg excels at reminding its viewer that it is a man-made creation and a product of human violence. Physically speaking, the cyborg is a human construction of material coded with a program. More broadly, it is the "illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism," [1] hence the difficulty of imagining the cyborg as biological or natural. This is especially evident in Franny Choi's *Soft Science*. While Choi's cyborg is gendered, it does not forget that its gender is not an inheritance, but an assignment procured with violence: "//*where did you come from* // man comes / & puts his hands on artifacts." [2] As such, the cyborg draws an effective parallel between the discomforting female bodily experience and process with which the cyborg is created and its gender assigned. "This idea of accepting the violence in the core of the self is related to how I identify with the cyborg," Choi says in an interview. [3] This violence begins with the biblical genesis, the making of Eve, and continues throughout history. Choi quotes Haraway in the epilogue *Soft Science* that women are "excruciatingly conscious of what it means to have a historically constituted body". She is painfully aware that, like the cyborg, her gender, its connotations, and she herself are made into existence. In this way, the cyborg shares a close kinship with the Feminine Other and questions the foundational architecture of the patriarchy.

At the same time, by being inherently "illegitimate" and inorganic, the cyborg offers a lens through which the notion of gender as a performed social construct is accentuated and thus excels at sidestepping the essentialist filter instinctively employed when perceiving biological humans. "When a cyborg puts on a dress, / it's called drag. // When a cyborg gets down / on her knees, it's called // behavior" Choi writes in "Making Of", [2] highlighting the performative nature of gender and the process of materialization through "a forcible reiteration" of regulatory norms, [4] in the words of Judith Butler. Haraway summarizes this advantage as the "cyborg position". She explains that traditional, phallogocentric myths and fictions are keen on placing the masterful "I" in an authority position where it becomes easy for the viewer to lose sight of the "apparatus of the production of that authority". [5] The viewer is made to believe that he is a natural and organic member of the social structures of reproduction, colonialism, etc., and therefore forgets he is himself oppressed by it. Conversely, the cyborg positions itself both beneath and above this apparatus. The cyborg acknowledges its subjugation to a fraught world and the illegitimacy of its own identity, and by acknowledging it, distances itself from the full might of the oppressive apparatus observed. From this vantage, Franny Choi's cyborg gains clarity and heightens its awareness of oppression. This way, as Mary Catherine Harper acutely observes, the cyborg is liberating because it invests in "possibilities both within and beyond the constraints of a culture's determining narratives." [6]

Thus far, Haraway isn't naively optimistic nor nihilistic but offers instead a generally balanced view of the cyborg, claiming it to be "a painful as well as promising, monstrous existence." [7] But what happens if the cyborg is already fraught with the boundaries that Haraway attempts to confuse? If the cyborg opens up possible reconfigurations of the woman, does it have the same effect upon Asian women? Do Choi and Mao consider the cyborg identity a liberating space? When is the cyborg a "promising" existence, and when is it simply painful?

## 2. The Original Cyborg

The following sections, with closer reference to Choi and Mao's poetics, will examine how Haraway's cyborg fails in application to Asian women, whose cyborg writing often reflect their identities as the Original Cyborg.

Haraway understands the power of writing well, particularly cyborg writing written by colonized peoples, or otherwise communities who are perpetually categorized as the Other. "Cyborg writing is about the power to survive…on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as

Other," she writes. [1] Survival, being key to all marginalized communities, resonates especially well with women of color, who stand at the intersection of the feminine Other and the racialized Other. But a story of survival does not automatically translate into liberation. Likewise, if the cyborg identity is itself not a liberating space, a cyborg survival story might not be as triumphant as Haraway would expect it to be. This is made clear by Franny Choi in *Soft Science* and Sally Wen Mao in *Oculus*. The cyborg isn't fulfilling in either poet's imagination. In Choi's, the cyborg is traumatized, pained, constantly sexually exploited and figuratively assaulted. In Mao's, the cyborg is trapped in a racialized trope and stuck in her time. Interestingly, neither the Asian robot damsel in distress nor the hypersexual servant cyborg girl is a recently conjured image. Unlike the white female cyborg, the Asian female cyborg has always played a fixed and seemingly immutable part in the popular imagination. Cyborg poetics did not create but helped manifest the ways female Asian poets express identity.

All this can be traced back to the nature of the female Asian identity. Anne Anlin Cheung, who Mao quotes in the epilogue of *Oculus*, points out that "Asiatic femininity has always been prosthetic. The dream of the yellow woman subsumes a dream about the inorganic. She is an, if not the, original cyborg." [8]

Indeed, in Western popular media and throughout history, Asian women are consistently portrayed as exotic without fail. One of Mao's most important subjects in *Oculus*, Anna May Wong, is an early example of the obedient on-screen servant-like persona that caters to the white male fantasy of domination, of woman and of the Orient simultaneously. Afong Moy, the first Chinese woman to travel to the United States and who also plays a special role in Mao's poetry, was part of a live exhibition where an audience is invited to spectate her exoticness. Mao writes in "The Diary of Afong Moy," "In their eyes I was a hothouse / flower, a goddess of $$$$$$$$$$$$$$...I was a breathing mannequin / on my brocade throne." [9] Not to mention, the first Asian women to arrive in California were almost all trafficked and sold into prostitution, their primary patrons being the white men of San Francisco. Undoubtedly, the beginnings of the female Asian identity as imaged by the West has its roots in capitalism and colonialism. Orientalist imaginings continue to fuel the white male desire for conquest and domination, which is why the Asian woman is seen as both desirable and untouchable: desirable in her sexuality, subservientness, and profitability; untouchable in the perceived inferiority of the Orient and its peoples, combined with the Otherness of woman.

## 3.    The Orientalist Cybernetic Space

Haraway muses in *A Cyborg Manifesto* that cybernetics would allow a new distinction of roles, based on neither sex nor race. [10] She expects the cyborg to be a force that deconstructs the feminine and racialized Other by providing humans with the liberty and agency to construct themselves on every level. The catch, then, is whether one has enough agency to construct oneself in a cybernetic space. Haraway's agency hinges on the cyborg identity being a "novelty". She acknowledges that the cyborg is illegitimate and has been present since World War II, but the cyborg identity is uncorrupted, uncharted territory for white women exclusively. To be sure, prosthetic sexualization of white women in cyborg and cyborg-related pornography is a prominent reality, but the tenacles of the patriarchal apparatus haven't reached far into the cybernetic world yet, at least not in popular media.

On the other hand, boundaries have already been drawn for the female Asian cyborg. In fact, the cyborg has been used not to dispel, but to reinforce stereotypes. Reflective of the popular imagination of the female Asian human, the female Asian cyborg is often the submissive servant, the exotic sex symbol, or simply absent altogether. In Alex Garland's *Ex Machina*, Kyoko, the scientist's Asian robot assistant, has no voice, does not understand English, and is programed to fulfill the scientist's (a white man) sexual and domestic needs. Kyoko is ultimately rebellious, but her character is widely considered to be "nullified by her overtly pornified presentation that conforms to prejudiced

assumptions about Asian women." [11] The billboard cyborg geisha in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* similarly serves to strengthen and confirm the orientalist imaginings of East Asia. The film draws on what is imagined of East Asia's past to procure an unsettling and precarious setting of cyberpunk future. The vintage geisha-like cyborg sex doll in *Anomalis*, the robot geisha in *Westworld*…the list goes on. The Asian woman is computerized, but not freed. In the case of Rupert Sanders' *Ghost in the Shell*, the Asian woman is rendered completely invisible, replaced with a white woman. [12] In her poem "Ghost in the Shell", Mao writes from the perspective of the Asian heroine played by Scarlett Johansson: "In late summer's cyberpunk heaven, / I wake up with a different face." [2] Mao's cyborg gains consciousness, only to realize that she is still absent – she is still invisible.

Because the Asian female is the Original Cyborg, Western imaginations of the female Asian cyborg becomes particularly potent. This further fuels and corrupts the cybernetic space for Asian women. The counterintuitive fusion of desirability and undesirability of the Asian woman is reinforced as a Western response to Asia's cultural, economic, and political ascendency. [13] This is what David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu call techno-orientalism, an extension of orientalism and a "representational containment" [14] through the alterity of Asian bodies. The Asian body and culture are represented, but only under certain conditions and in certain environments. Usually, as Chloe Gong argues, the Asian cyborg is an artifice commonly used to equate technology to sub-human and the Asian world to the fallen Western world. [15] In many science fiction films, the cyborg protagonist isn't fully non-human, which helps the audience derive a sense of satisfaction from learning that the cyborg hero retains certain human characteristics, emotions, and qualities. Against the backdrop of the "sub-human" Asian cyborg and the nihilistic, neon-colored, Asian-coded cyberpunk world, the audience rejoices in the hero's very specific triumph: human awareness, rejection of cyberpunk, and return to humanity. In the cybernetic space, Asian women continue to take up peripheral space in order to highlight the white hero or heroine at stage center one way or the other. Choi reckons with the fate of the female Asian cyborg. Her cyborg finishes "& O Bright Star of Disaster, I Have Been Lit" by evoking Afong Moy: "isn't that / what you paid for? isn't that what you came / to see? a god, on loop, failing?" [2] Like Anna May Wong, Afong Moy, and most other Asian women in history, the female Asian cyborg is either invisible or a spectacle. Often, she is both.

## 4.    The Lack of Original Innocence

One could argue that the crux of the cyborg identity is its complete departure from original innocence. Haraway's cyborg visualizes a world without gender, which by extension is a world without genesis, without the Garden of Eden, and certainly without salvation. Further, it does not desire or strive towards a return to innocence. These myths are ripe with metaphors for rebirth and ground themselves upon reproductive sex. The cyborg, however, makes peace with its illegitimacy and embraces its uninherited and uninheritable nature, thus being "suspicious of the reproductive matrix." [1] Because the cyborg is unencumbered by the heritage of the Western origin story, it is not tethered to the model of the original family, and therefore allows for a reimagining of the female identity as something other than the supposedly inherited and inheritable "skill in mothering and its metaphoric extensions." [1]

If the freshness of Haraway's cyborg stems from its rejection of original innocence and all related myths, then the same logic does not apply to Asian women. When Asian women are already originally perceived to be illegitimate, the illegitimate cyborg, when gendered and racialized, offers nothing new. In "The Cyborg Wants To Make Sure She Heard You Right", composed using Tweets directed at Choi herself, Choi realizes she will suffer the same insults and assaults both in human form and as a cyborg. [2] Unlike Haraway's cyborg, the female Asian cyborg has trouble detaching and differentiating itself from the human subject. Both Choi's and Mao's cyborg poetics confirm the reckoning of the historically constituted body, but they hardly ever see the cyborg as a tool or an

"imaginative resource" as generously as Haraway does. Artistically and as a metaphor, the cyborg offers an effective conduit, but it is not considered as a methodology. This is simply because Asian women like Choi and Mao are not afforded the luxury of telling their cyborg self from their human self. For Haraway, it seems that it is difficult to imagine oneself as a cyborg, as she spends much of her manifesto demonstrating to the reader the realness and relevance of the cyborg. This explanation is perhaps redundant for Choi and Mao, whose perception of the cyborg identity is urgent and visceral. Asian woman had been portrayed and perceived as cyborgs long before they could voluntarily come to such an identification. Their cybernetic portrayal is policed by the same boundaries that police their human bodies, so much so that the cyborg has already been built into Asian Otherness, and vice versa. This way, their cyborgs are no less painful than their human bodies, and their surroundings no less predatory than the world Choi and Mao physically inhabit. "anywhere it doesn't hurt / that's where / I end," writes Choi. [2] In "Chatroulette", her cyborg realizes that she is an "image, icon, rumor of a god" [2] that is to be consumed, presumably by the white male viewer. For Haraway, the cyborg is promising because it offers possibility and fluidity, because the cyborg confuses boundaries. For them, the cyborg identity is limiting because it is ripe with the same perilous taxonomies.

Interestingly, Choi explains in an interview that it's still extremely urgent to continue to expand the category of 'human' to include everyone who has historically not been allowed in." [3] Her focus on humanness seems out of place when her entire poetry collection is centered around the cyborg, who is at best half-human. But when placed in the context of the female Asian cyborg, it is easy to see that Choi argues for the expansion of the category of human because the cyborg is not an identity she can escape to. Haraway's cyborg is ultimately autonomous and liberating, but Choi's cyborg is just as if not more limiting than the human body. The former is extra-human, whereas the latter is dehumanizing. Ultimately, Choi and Mao desire to the return to the human body because there is no real safe house, no haven, no cybernetic utopia for them. In "Anna May Wong Stars as Cyborg #86", the cyborg actress identifies as a cyborg because she is consistently portrayed and treated as sub-human and non-human. The cyborg is simply an extension and reminder of her entrapment.

## 5. Conclusion

Though Haraway's cyborg is a generative lens through which women can reconsider and reimagine their identities, it is ultimately flawed. It acknowledges and rejects the historically constituted body, but the premise of its liberating power does not apply to the feminine and racialized cyborg. With techno-orientalism in mind, it is easy to see how and where Donna Haraway's cyborg fails when it is gendered and racialized at the same time. The problem is three-fold: 1) the Asian woman is not imagined to be originally innocent but as the Original Cyborg, and therefore cannot find refuge in the cyborg, 2) the cyborg identity has already been imposed upon the Asian woman in popular media, and therefore has become more lived reality than fiction, more identity than tool, and 3) the boundaries that Haraway wishes to confuse are already present and solidified in the female Asian cyborg.

Though cyborg fiction has long existed in film and literature, Franny Choi and Sally Wen Mao are one of the first to challenge the cyborg as a cyborg. Their cyborgs are not divorced from the human body but desire humanness, not because they consider technology to be sub-human, but because they live the realities of being denied full membership to humanness for being the feminine Other, the Asian Other, and the cyborg Other. They expose the very notion of the cyborg to be a driver and a victim of techno-orientalism.

However, in dealing with cyborg writing, Haraway is right to recognize that "we are responsible for boundaries". [1] To avoid unproductive and regressive cyborg writing, writers hold a responsibility. Choi and Mao's cyborg poetics strive to purify the idea of the cyborg by acknowledging pollution. They acknowledge the fact that the female Asian body is perceived as

cyborgs and accordingly imagine Asian women to be cyborgs. They take responsibility for their own narrative by breaking a historical narrative thrust upon them. "Darlings," the cyborg Wong says at the end of "Anna May Wong Stars as Cyborg #86", "let's rewrite / the script. Let's hijack the narrative, steer // the story ourselves." [9] Choi and Mao's poetics rewrite the past by reimagining it, and in doing so also write the future.

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