

MATIÈRES RÉELLES: VIRTUAL UTOPIAS OF THE XENOCORE

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In recent years, the significance of political events and social movements found within social media has grown immensely. It has been host to a second layer of social interaction that contributes to the identities of its many participants. The online origin and development of a subculture called Xenocore in part fulfils this idea of internet-defined identities, whilst simultaneously having a very tangible presence in the real world. In particular, gender identities are expressed and experimented with, using information and communication technologies to deconstruct humanist binaries and transform biological bodies. Using the posthuman cyborg as a model, Xenocore artists visually alienate themselves from humanist ideals in order to construct real identities that reject social, political, and economic dichotomies in the pursuit of a cyberspace utopia.

Xenocore is a hyper-specific subculture that originated in the avant-garde depths of artist Instagram and which I believe has a very relevant and upward trajectory in the fields of art, fashion, and visual culture as a whole. Its adherents, of which there are currently few, appear wildly different from the majority of others who share content on the app—an effect that seems both alienating and enticing to those outside the subculture. WGSN beauty editor Emma Grace Bailey first noticed the emergence of the subculture back in 2016, when artists who worked “in the macabre and the dark” drew in fans who “reveled in their rejection of classic beauty norms” with the “dark, gothic, [and] alien.”¹ It is here where I find the foundation of the Xenocore movement; it centres itself around the grotesque and abject de-humanising of the body’s form, resulting in agender, fleshy aliens from which I derive the *xeno-* prefix, meaning ‘other’.² The artists constructing Xenocore seem acutely aware of their own otherness, even prior to their transformation, using it as an impetus to visually manifest feelings of alienation and desires to transcend.

At the core of the subculture are two distinct Instagram accounts which seem to have converged into a set of signifiers that have influenced its newer participants. These are @001011___ and @matieresfecales, the former of which is run by Welsh artist Lillith Morris and the latter by Canadian designers Hannah Rose Dalton and Steven Raj Bhaskaran. The two accounts share heavily-photoshopped yet decidedly corporeal self portraits, all of which feature blacked-out eyes and Elizabethan hairlines. These alienating cosmetic changes, along with a variety of creative additions, subtractions, and modifications of the limbs (that vary by the day) designate the essence of the Xenocore

aesthetic. In one image, Dalton's legs are fused together into a veiny appendage that extends downwards like the shaft of a crucifix (see fig. 1).³ In another, Morris is transformed into a pale-pink quadrupedal chimera who Morris has affectionately named "bitch slut".⁴ The visual language that the two accounts have invented seems reliant on this idea of constant transformation—not a permanent shift into the alien but a constant oscillation between all possible forms of other. Using technology and usurping biology, Xenocore's obsession with the other not only finds its roots in posthumanist theory but attempts to entirely construct a virtual utopia of the posthuman world.



Figure 1. @matieresfecales. "All dressed up but nowhere to go." 2020.

Such a world could not be imagined without the writings of Donna Haraway, whose *Cyborg Manifesto* established a feminist posthumanism around the central idea of the cyborg: an ontological being who is responsible for rupturing the previously fixed notions of gender, race, and species. The cyborg, Haraway writes, is "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism...in a post-gender world".⁵ It uses cybernetic tools, much like we would a phone, to expose the arbitrary dichotomies that

divide society, while attempting to decentralise the human in the process. Many of these dichotomies—capitalistic progress vs. stagnation, culture vs. nature, self vs. other—are structured around what Haraway calls “the territories of production, reproduction, and imagination,” where she promotes “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries” between such territories.⁶ This is the ontological basis of the cyborg; its primary directive is of progressive political work through the scrambling of societal, economic, and biological borders by way of cybernetics. This action is inherent in Xenocore—the use of machines to remove the human from its Enlightenment pedestal. Machines, in this case, may resemble the digital photo-manipulation tools that warp and mutate the body, or they may be the networks of cyberspace through which such photo-manipulations are shared. Like the cyborg, Xenocore artists harness new technologies of information systems to specifically remove the humanist boundaries from their own bodies. As much as Xenocore artists expose the dichotomies of a greater society, their actions are self-inflicted; they become the site upon which activism takes place. This is not for lack of content, as the artists could easily diffuse their posthuman ideas onto others, gluing latex prosthetics on friends or photo-manipulating images of strangers. It comes down to the simple fact that what I call Xenocore *is* the identity of its artists. As transgender and non-binary individuals, the artists express and blur their gender identities through an alienating outward appearance. At the heart of Xenocore is identity, where the aesthetic is not performative but rather a very personal and authentic extension of non-cisgender bodies and ideals. Using Haraway’s cyborgian ideology, the artists harness new technologies to both further cement their gender identities and liminally situate them to achieve posthuman utopia.

With this in mind, I will be making no distinction between the artists themselves and their Instagram-based images, for their self-expression is their self-identification. Dalton and Bhaskaran, for example, frequently emphasise this point, being open about the reactions and responses that their appearances garner. “This is our reality and the reality of so many,” the couple writes in the caption of one post, “[c]onstant abuse on a daily basis... [n]o matter how fearless we can feel with our self-expression.”⁷ The two had just faced transphobic harassment in public and this was their response. “Provoke society” is a maxim they often preach,⁸ and their Xenocore appearance enables this provocation that combats societal boundaries. At the centre of this provocation is their openly alternate gender identities, which disseminate posthuman utopian ideals online as much as they do on the street. Cyberspace is used by Xenocore artists as a site of progressive political work, where the online presence of non-binary and transgender women’s bodies is posthuman praxis. Haraway discusses one example of this use of cybernetics, referring to new technologies as a result of our post-industrial society which have given rise to the cyborg.⁹ Women’s Studies professor Esperanza Miyake, in her essay *My, is that Cyborg a little bit Queer?*, emphasises the value of cyberspace in the

context of online queer expression. Incorporating the language of Haraway, Miyake likens this online expression to “enter[ing] the grid of control,” where the collective cyberspace presence of queer individuals can confront the humanist norms of gender and sex.¹⁰ As “[c]yberspace is... a space that reflects and refracts culture,” actions taken within it—such as Xenocore’s posting of “society-provoking” images—constitute valuable self-expression akin to walking down the street.¹¹ Miyake’s reification of cyberspace establishes the photo-manipulations of Xenocore as real, further validating the transgender/non-binary identities of its artists.

These imagined visuals of the subculture, constructed through both photo-manipulations and practical special effects, are key for understanding how Xenocore artists find value in the in-between of binaries. One of the movement’s most overt cyborgian references is its fusing of organism and machine. In the work of Dalton and



Figure 2. @matieresfecales. “Mutated princess.” 2019

Bhaskaran, the distorted body is often paired with neck braces, respirators, and repressive harnesses that hint at a twisted technological ascension.¹² Another adherent of Xenocore, @genesisfawn, uses Photoshop in one image to create a mohawk of steel hardware that feeds a conduit into their ajar mouth.¹³ One can visualise the mutualistic relationship formed between flesh and tech; the body seems both at the mercy of the machine yet greatly benefitting from it. This is another trait of Haraway's cyborg that is found frequently in the works of Xenocore artists; it is oppositional and able to contain *contradictory* standpoints.¹⁴ Often such contradictions are taken to the extreme, where the extravagant pink ball-gowns donned by Dalton are violently juxtaposed with unnatural protrusions of the flesh. The power in internal contradiction, according to Haraway, is the ability to see different viewpoints from the constructed partial identities within the contradiction. Uniting the unacceptable with the acceptable perverts the latter. Dalton's hyperfeminine gown upholds traditional values of womanhood, but when combined with fleshy, phallic growths these values are rendered inert, or worse: corrupted with a manhood that threatens the gender binary (see fig. 2).¹⁵ A similar contradiction can be found in the images of Morris, where she takes on an affectionate role of mother, spawning offspring on whom she innocently dotes "[B]itch slut ate too much paint again, so I had to climb through her digestive system to make sure she's ok," reads one of her captions,¹⁶ implying it to be some sort of quotidian task like removing a toy from a toddler's mouth. However, her children are not borne from sexual reproduction, nor do they carry the same human appearance as their parent. They are beastly creatures built solely from the body of Morris, like the asexual cyborg reproduction that Haraway likens to ferns and invertebrates,¹⁷ further distinguishing the aesthetics of Xenocore from signifiers of humanity. Morris is just one of the Xenocore artists who incorporates zoological imagery in their photos, obscuring the boundary between animal and human.

Haraway identifies that Enlightenment's humanism established an ontological boundary that divides animal and human through the production of culture.¹⁸ This has been slowly eroded due to the recognition of evolutionary theory, which emerged alongside the same science and empiricism that would later give rise to the new technologies of the cyborg. Haraway elaborates that by the late-twentieth century, "language, tool use, [and] social behaviour" between human and animal was discovered to be so similar that nothing could convincingly settle the divide between the two.¹⁹ The negation of this human-animal boundary is central to the writings of posthumanist scholar Rosi Braidotti. Her book, *The Posthuman*, contains arguments that work in tandem with Haraway's cyborg goals of de-dichotomisation. She uses Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian man as an example of Humanism's idea of the perfect self, instead devising an alternate paradigm of post-anthropocentrism, in which such a figure is no longer ideal.²⁰ Furthermore, Braidotti introduces the vital concept of the zoe, or the "dynamic, self-organising structure of life itself" that we can understand to be encapsulating all of life and its systems. In contrast, humans occupy just the *anthropos*, which only makes up a small part of the overall zoe.²¹ Shifting the worldview to humans located inside a greater structure decentres them in a similar fashion to Haraway's dissolution of the human-animal boundary. Both authors argue that such a boundary has never been more vague and imagine that, in the posthuman world, such a boundary is

entirely absent. In its absence, “cyborgs signal [a] disturbingly and pleasurablely tight coupling” between animal and human that fuels the zoomorphism of Xenocore.²² From the beginning, the subculture’s photo-manipulated morphs have never been rooted wholly in some abstract idea of the alien other; rather, parts and organs from a multitude of other species have been cobbled and fused together into hybrid mutants by Xenocore artists. Some of the earliest work by Dalton and Bhaskaran concerns these hybrids: human eyes have been rendered reptilian, the round pupil flattened into a vertical slice on slime-green sclera; lavender-like proboscises droop from hidden folds in the neck; ears have been magnified and shifted upwards on the skull to resemble the predator-detecting adaptations that evolution has gifted to prey organisms. Nature appears in the unexpected, where the artists act as twisted deities, abstracting traits of flora and fauna onto humanoid forms. @anthr0morph has taken the dissolved human-animal boundary to the beautiful extreme, producing fleshy beings that seem to be devolving back into primordial selves.²³ Their animal references are clear, with the faces being replaced by a petri-dish containing the specimen responsible for their splicing.

In a return to Haraway’s cyborg, which is dedicated to “irony, intimacy, and perversity... completely without innocence,” a clear connection can be made with the artists’ decision to exhibit the body so frequently in the nude.²⁴ It is jarring to see the agender nude form in such blatant presentation on a public platform, but this disruption of hierarchies is what the cyborg intends to accomplish. Being “no longer structured by the polarity of public and private,” the cyborg takes issue with the concept of bodily concealment in the polis.²⁵ The photos by Dalton and Bhaskaran infringe on the public: the models stand on the sidewalk, exposed to scandalised onlookers whose shock is apparent in the background of images. Scantly clad, the duo reveals nipple-less breasts through fabric that does not seem at all concealing enough for their social environment. Occasionally, the taboo features of the nude are accentuated, such as with the latex chest plate that stretches out the nipples into overt, pointed barbs.²⁶ However, these same vignettes can also be backgrounded by very domestic spaces, inviting us to the private realm: we see Dalton washing her hands in a sink and Bhaskaran urinating into a toilet (see fig.3).²⁷ The indifference that the two give to the conventions of public space is carried into the private realm, which is exactly the sort of posthuman action that Haraway imagines when she insists on a “revolution of social relations in the *oikos*, the household.”²⁸ Through their voyeuristic participation, the viewer is brought into the unclothed intimacy that Dalton and Bhaskaran endorse in both private and public spheres, flattening the hierarchies of space that delineate the two.

Though much of the Xenocore aesthetic is established by the nude, it carries no weight of gender or sexual dimorphism, existing as a cyborg in the post-gender world of Haraway. "Cyborg replication is uncoupled from organic reproduction," rendering the dimorphic reproductive organs which define sex and gender useless.²⁹ Instead, technologies of intervention allow for the separation of women's bodies from societal expectations of their instrumentality in sex.³⁰ From the speculum to genetic engineering, Haraway identifies these new technologies as methods of intervening in the process of sexual reproduction.³¹ However, she emphasises a concern for misuse of these technologies through dynamics of control and the possible absence of consent.³² As the cyborg is necessitated by the growth of dominating information systems, it is important to also keep in mind its intent to commandeer the technologies of these systems.³³ Mimicking the cyborg here, Xenocore uses new technologies to remove sexual specificity from the body and collapse the male-female division. Gender-based dichotomies are



Figure 3. @matieresfecales. "Caption this." 2020

visually nullified through a combination of three predominant techniques: the warping, trans-ing, or removing of sex characteristics; the rejection of gendered dress (if any); and the deviation from heteronormative familial and reproductive structures. In one image created by Morris, the groin has been neutralised on a body, strung up like a piece of meat. There is also no trace of procreation, with both the nipples and belly button being decidedly absent from the humanoid. The removal of primary and secondary sex characteristics may imply that this figure arose from technological replication rather than biological reproduction. In another example, she used photo-manipulation to insert a humanoid body into the digestive tract of a grotesque quadruped, perverting the image of a natural and biological childbirth. This is a concept with which Dalton and Bhaskaran also engage. In one photo, two figures appear equally pregnant, with the chest of one restricted by a technical leather harness, and the other with their breasts exposed without nipples. The duo often applies transformational shifts away from gender outside of the body as well: they seem equally committed to ridding fashion of its gender binary, and dress based on pure aesthetic and theme, rather than preconceived notions of for whom a garment is made.

The possibilities of the cyborg post-gender are not limited to biology alone; it is in the synthesis of biology and technology that the cyborg acquires meaning. Miyake uses the French performance artist Orlan as an example here; to the queer cyborg, the natural body is nothing more than a costume that can be altered through new technologies. Most relevant of these technologies to Orlan is plastic surgery, whose seven procedures have furthered her face and body from problematic humanist ideas of how biological womanhood should look.³⁴ Gender-affirming surgeries can be considered similarly posthuman, modifying the “natural” body to align with an individual’s gender identity. Morris has been open about her goal to transition with surgery, writing how her dysphoria makes life “a painful battle with [her] body and the world”.³⁵ anthromorph has also publicly discussed their struggle with dysphoria, wishing to “erase bones of the face that grow on testosterone based (sic) puberty, and act as ‘gender signifiers’ due to cultural conditioning”.³⁶ Like Morris, they hope to achieve this through surgery. Both artists have used crowdfunding platforms to raise money for their gender-affirming procedures, which, also taking place on the internet, supports the idea of cyberspace being a site for progressive political action for queer individuals and groups. This positions surgery in Xenocore as analogous to photo-manipulation: a new technology being employed by Haraway’s cyborg that blurs boundaries in order to validate gender identities.

Between photo-manipulation, beauty and cosmetic props, clothes, accessories, and even surgery, the Xenocore artists are in a constant state of transformation, shifting between organism and machine, animal and human, private and public, male, female, and beyond. Their posthuman theoretical undercurrent provides an aesthetic which distinguishes them from mere humans both on the street and online. “People are nowhere near so fluid, being both material and opaque,” writes Haraway, whilst “[c]yborgs are ether, quintessence”.³⁷ Like the ethereal cyborg, Xenocore artists have channeled new communicative technologies of post-industrial society, such as cyberspace, to remain shifting in-between societal boundaries like the cyborg. The

cyborg never has a fixed state of being and is always undergoing transformation due to the fact that it is a "creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction".³⁸ Being so directly reliant on the nature of social reality, which is constantly nebulous and evolving, it would be normal for the cyborg to do the same. It picks up on social stimuli and responds accordingly, using its body as site for progressive political work. Xenocore artists mirror this, manipulating their appearances with a variety of cybernetics, with the goal of gender self-expression and queer liberation. The subculture finds unity in transness, its artists turning to extreme and abject imagery as an extension, or perhaps exponent, of their trans/non-binary bodies. With such bodies either fitting in the liminal space between the gender binary or outside of it entirely, the alienating aesthetics of Xenocore serve to accentuate their artist's otherness whilst exposing the arbitrariness of Humanist societal dichotomies. Thus, due to the importance that these alienating aesthetics have on defining the identity of Xenocore artists, I argue that what I call the subculture of Xenocore is actually the personal and authentic visual expression of othered gender identities. Despite their self-directed actions, Xenocore artists also work to guide others into the border territories of binaries, provoking society through contradiction, perversion, and constant technological transformation. Like the cyborg of Haraway, Xenocore artists rupture the previously fixed notions of gender, race, and species through their own shifting identities in the pursuit of a postgender, posthuman utopia.

NOTES

¹ Clementine de Pressigny, "why is everyone obsessed with alien beauty," *i-D*, October 10, 2018, https://i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/7x3dy9/why-is-everyone-obsessed-with-alien-beauty-instagram-fecal-matter.

² "xen-," Merriam-Webster.com, accessed March 13, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com>.

³ Hannah Rose Dalton and Steven Raj Bhaskaran (@matieresfecales), "All dressed up but nowhere to go." Instagram photo, August 1, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CDXEVNJBRpo/>.

⁴ Lillith Morris (@001011____), "so bitch slut ate too much paint ~~again~~ so I had to climb through her digestive system to make sure she's ok ~~again~~," Instagram photo, April 25, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BwslCwKADaS/>.

⁵ Donna Haraway, "A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late 20th century," in *The international handbook of virtual learning environments* (Springer, Dordrecht, 2006), 150.

⁶ Haraway, 150.

⁷ Hannah Rose Dalton and Steven Raj Bhaskaran (@matieresfecales), "A safe place doesn't exist," Instagram photo, August 21 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CEKsVxIBfqT/>.

⁸ Hannah Rose Dalton and Steven Raj Bhaskaran (@matieresfecales), "Provoke," Instagram photo, June 27, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CB9A5kJB-Md/>.

⁹ Haraway, 152.

¹⁰ Esperanza Miyake, "My, is that Cyborg a little bit Queer?," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 5, no. 2 (2004): 54.

¹¹ Miyake, 54.

- ¹² Hannah Rose Dalton and Steven Raj Bhaskaran (@matieresfecales), "Shook to the core," Instagram photo, May 13, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Biu3hqABKrw/>.
- ¹³ (@genesisfawn), "mashed potato ♡," Instagram photo, June 21 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBteVqnpBv8/>.
- ¹⁴ Haraway, 154.
- ¹⁵ Hannah Rose Dalton and Steven Raj Bhaskaran (@matieresfecales), "Mutated princess," Instagram photo, June 7, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BybEAFahOVY/>.
- ¹⁶ Morris 2019.
- ¹⁷ Haraway, 150.
- ¹⁸ Haraway, 152.
- ¹⁹ Haraway, 152.
- ²⁰ Braidotti, Rosi. *The posthuman*, (John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 13.
- ²¹ Rosi, 60.
- ²² Haraway, 152.
- ²³ anthromorph (@anthr0morph), "Cicada King," Instagram photo, October 25, 2019. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B4DdUWbgb04/>.
- ²⁴ Haraway, 151.
- ²⁵ Haraway, 151.
- ²⁶ Hannah Rose Dalton and Steven Raj Bhaskaran (@matieresfecales), "The Virgin and the Child." Instagram photo, June 27, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BzOhkx1h59x/>.
- ²⁷ Hannah Rose Dalton and Steven Raj Bhaskaran (@matieresfecales), "Caption this." Instagram photo, September 17, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFQKFHvBkAo/>.
- ²⁸ Haraway, 151.
- ²⁹ Haraway, 150.
- ³⁰ Haraway, 169.
- ³¹ Haraway, 169.
- ³² Haraway, 169.
- ³³ Haraway, 161.
- ³⁴ Miyake, 55.
- ³⁵ Lillith Morris. 2020. *salvia's transition fund*. <https://uk.gofundme.com/f/fmff5g-salvias-transition-fund>.
- ³⁶ anthromorph. *anthromorph's transition fund*. https://www.gofundme.com/f/help-anthromorph-get-a-face-ffs-trans-fund?utm_medium=copy_link&utm_source=customer&utm_campaign=p_lico+share-sheet.
- ³⁷ Haraway, 153.
- ³⁸ Haraway, 153.

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