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The Part-Time Cyborg: Asserting Self-Care under Persistent Surveillance

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Abstract

This article introduces the part-time cyborg as a Black feminist framework for navigating and resisting the demands of visibility, labor, and surveillance in digital and institutional spaces. Drawing on Donna Haraway's cyborg theory and Black feminist thought, the part-time cyborg reclaims rest and refusal as strategies for survival and defiance. The article argues that mundane authoritarianism operates through small, everyday demands that normalize compliance, particularly for Black women, whose bodies have long been sites of scrutiny and control. By turning off a camera or withdrawing from hypervisibility, the part-time cyborg disrupts these systems, asserting autonomy in the face of extractive logics. In an era of intensifying surveillance and control, these micro-resistances are vital tools for imagining and building more just and equitable futures.

Control doesn't arrive as spectacle; it seeps into the mundane, where the demands of visibility, labor, and surveillance shape our lives—especially for Black women. This is where our work begins: resisting the quiet architecture of compliance with radical acts of self-care and refusal. In the digital spaces of academia and the workplace, visibility is often framed as a requirement for participation, professionalism, and productivity. For many, the expectation is to be constantly visible—whether through video calls, public-facing roles, or social media engagement. Sometimes, this seems like a minor concession to the demands of modern life. However, for Black women, this demand is far from innocuous. It echoes a long history of surveillance, objectification, and control, wherein our bodies have been scrutinized, commodified, and rendered hyper-visible while our voices and autonomy are often marginalized or silenced.

In predominantly white institutional spaces, this pressure to be visible is intertwined with a deep-seated entitlement, particularly from white colleagues, to monitor and manage Black women's presence, labor, affect, and comportment. This entitlement is not just a relic of the past; it is actively maintained and enforced in contemporary digital

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environments, where the insistence on visibility becomes a tool of control and conformity.

In response to these pressures, I offer up the concept of a part-time cyborg—a theoretical and practical intervention that allows Black women to navigate these digital and institutional spaces on our own terms. The "cyborg" concept in feminist theory, originally coined by Donna Haraway in her seminal essay *A cyborg manifesto* (1991), refers to a hybrid entity that blurs the boundaries between human and machine, reality and fiction, the organic and the technological.

As a metaphor, the cyborg challenges rigid binaries and invites us to think about identity and embodiment in more fluid, adaptable ways. The part-time cyborg, then, is a figure that embodies this hybridity, allowing Black women to move through digital and institutional spaces with a mix of visibility and invisibility, presence and absence. While I describe the part-time cyborg as an aesthetic, I use that term liberally and expansively—to signal a posture, an ethic, a way of moving through time and space disciplined by institutional logics with strategic refusal. It is a figure of friction, born of the lived politics of access, exhaustion, and Black feminist modes of resistance.

The part-time cyborg operates as both an orientation to the world and a strategy for survival, resisting not only personal exhaustion but also the creeping normalization of control. By navigating between visibility and invisibility, the cyborg disrupts the subtle authoritarian demands that enforce compliance and erode autonomy. It recognizes the complex realities of living and working in environments where visibility is both demanded and weaponized, and it offers a way to engage with these spaces selectively, preserving autonomy, well-being, and dignity. The part-time nature of this figure is shaped by the institutional and capitalist logics of time—those that demand 24/7 availability, performances of productivity, and affective compliance. Though it carves out refusals, the part-time cyborg is also formed by the pressure of these logics, moving through them with tactical friction rather than full detachment or disengagement. To name oneself as "part-time" is to acknowledge being formed by these logics while still insisting upon slowness and withdrawal. This is a kind of subversive—and at times dissonant—calibration within systems that expect constant performance. By adopting the part-time cyborg identity, Black women can navigate the pressures of constant surveillance and control, choosing when to be visible and when to retreat, when to engage and when to rest. This strategic engagement not only preserves the individual's sense of self but also disrupts the expectations of constant accessibility, challenging the systems that seek to commodify our labor and presence.

The part-time cyborg is my response to the relentless demands of visibility. It is a figure that recognizes the exhaustion and dehumanization that come with the expectation to perform super-human feats of endurance and resilience in a world that often refuses to see us as fully human. The part-time cyborg is a virtual-physical assemblage, following Puar (2012), equipped to both travel through and make worlds for Black feminists who seek refuge, feminist discourse, and methods for moving through online spaces. The part-time Black feminist cyborg is able to move as Black women so often do: as part of a side-hustle, as part of an informal, widespread Black aesthetic devoted to hustling in the margins, seeking and performing community support and maintenance, gaining insight from other places and people to be repurposed toward Black flourishing. It allows for strategic disengagement, for moments of rest and retreat, and for the preservation of self in a society that too often seeks to consume us. By embracing the part-time cyborg, we reject the notion that our value is tied to our visibility. We assert our right to control how we are seen, when we are seen, and by

whom. This manifesto explores the theoretical underpinnings of the part-time cyborg, drawing on feminist cyborg theory, Black feminist thought, and the lived realities of Black women navigating digital and institutional spaces today.

When I began developing the concept of the part-time cyborg in 2020, the world was on the cusp of a dramatic shift in how we lived, worked, and interacted. The rise of telework, driven by the global COVID-19 pandemic, forced many of us into digital spaces for nearly every aspect of our lives—teaching, socializing, accessing news, and continuing our education. Suddenly, cyborg theory, which once seemed like a quirky, niche academic issue, became profoundly relevant to the day-to-day existence of millions.

At the onset of this project, I faced the challenging task of convincing others that a Black feminist cyborg was a necessary construction rather than niche, peripheral, supplementary, or even luxurious—far from the core concerns of academia and daily life. However, as the pandemic unfolded, digital landscapes were not just supplementary; they are among the primary terrains in which we navigate our professional and personal lives. Social distancing measures and stay-at-home orders confined many of us to our homes, with no recourse but to engage with the world through screens. What had once been optional or even experimental—the use of online platforms for teaching, socializing, and political engagement—quickly became essential for survival in the academy and beyond. As homes became offices and bedrooms became classrooms, there were new and unexpected pressure points in the process of determining new norms of professionalism and how we perform being present and compliant.

This rapid and often painful adaptation to digital life underscored the relevance of cyborg theory, particularly for those of us who had already been thinking critically about the intersections of technology, identity, and power. For Black women, navigating these digital environments required not only technical skill but also a deep understanding of the social dynamics at play—dynamics that are often shaped by race, gender, and historical legacies of surveillance and control.

The Black feminist part-time cyborg, as an aspirational aesthetic, emerged from this context as a timely strategy for movement, understanding, and communication. Here, I use "aesthetic" to signal more than appearance and tone, but rather to gesture toward a mode of being and orientation—one that holds poise, friction, and refusal within systems of extraction. The part-time cyborg is the survival poetic in motion and at work. It serves as a reminder to Black people that, amid struggle and in the face of arrogant perception (Lugones 1987), we adapt. We retain our humanity, maintain our playfulness, and crucially, we rest. The part-time cyborg is not about endless endurance or unbroken engagement—it is about knowing when to step back, when to recharge, and when to prepare for the next challenge. As a response to these theoretical pressures, the part-time cyborg offers practical tools for navigating, resting, and resisting.

1. Strategic withdrawal: the cyborg at rest

Rest for the Black feminist part-time cyborg is both a radical act and a necessary survival strategy. It is an intentional disengagement from the demands of visibility, a refusal to be constantly available for the consumption of others. In a society that prizes productivity and constant engagement, rest becomes a form of resistance, a way to reclaim autonomy over one's body and mind. The mundanity of these demands—the expectation to always be present, always be productive—is what makes them so insidious. They accumulate

into a quiet architecture of control, eroding our autonomy under the guise of professionalism and engagement.

In practical terms, rest might look like turning off the camera during a Zoom meeting as an act of self-preservation. It might involve stepping away from social media platforms that demand constant engagement, or taking time to reconnect with oneself through creative or restorative practices. Rest is about setting boundaries—both digital and physical—that allow for the maintenance of one's mental and emotional health.

For the part-time cyborg, rest is also about reclaiming time—time that is often stolen by the demands of a capitalist society that values output over well-being. In late capitalist society, time is not our own. The part-time cyborg navigates time as contested terrain, reclaiming fragments from the landscapes of academic and digital labor. It is about carving out moments to simply be, without the pressure to perform or produce. This might involve finding solace in solitude, engaging in activities that bring joy, or simply allowing oneself the space to breathe and reflect.

Rest is a form of resistance against the expectation that Black women must always be strong, always be present, and always be available to serve others. It is a rejection of the Strong Black Woman archetype, which demands that we sacrifice our own needs for the sake of others. The part-time cyborg understands that rest is not a luxury, but a fundamental right, one that is essential for maintaining our health, our creativity, and our sense of self.

In the broader context of digital and institutional spaces, the act of resting challenges the very systems that seek to exploit our labor and our visibility. It is a declaration that our worth is not determined by our productivity or our willingness to conform to the expectations of others. It is a reminder that we have the power to set our own terms of engagement, to decide when and how we will participate in the world around us. By embracing rest as a core component of the part-time cyborg identity, we reject the notion that we must always be on, always be visible, and always be productive. We assert our right to exist in a way that honors our humanity, our needs, and our well-being. In doing so, we create a model for how to navigate the demands of the digital age in a way that is both empowering and sustainable.

2. Rest as Resistance: The Case of Black Women with Their Cameras Off

In the digital spaces of academia and the workplace, the act of turning off the camera during a meeting can be loaded with meaning, particularly for Black women. What begins as a debate over keeping a camera on in a meeting is not trivial—it reflects how systems of control operate through the mundane. Authoritarianism, and the creeping specter of fascism, embed themselves not with grand gestures but through the normalization of small, everyday demands that condition us to accept surveillance and control as ordinary. In this context, even the smallest acts of refusal—turning off a camera, stepping out of visibility—become meaningful micro-subversions, quietly pushing back against a system that thrives on the unexamined patterns of our acquiescence.

The accommodation statement I often use ("I want to acknowledge that I often have my camera off during meetings, and I understand this might be different from what some are used to. For me, it's an important way to create the best conditions for focus and connection, allowing me to contribute effectively despite the challenges posed by chronic physical and mental health conditions") is a tool I deploy to navigate the expectations of a predominantly white institution. It is a carefully crafted code switch

that allows me to justify my need for rest and disengagement within a framework that is legible and acceptable to those who might not otherwise understand.

However, this accommodation is not only about personal comfort or health; it is a response to the broader dynamics of visibility and control that Black women must navigate daily. Even among my most supportive colleagues, there is often an unspoken pressure to be "on," to be visible, smiling, and masking any discomfort or fatigue. This demand also draws from ableist norms, presuming a neutral baseline of wellness, energy, and emotional regulation. The labor of masking chronic illness and neurodivergence is rendered invisible under the banner of professionalism and social nicety. This pressure is not always conscious; in fact, many of my colleagues struggle to articulate why they find it difficult when I choose to keep my camera off. There is rhetoric about "balance" and "equality"—the idea that, if others have their cameras on, I should too, to maintain some perceived sense of fairness or mutual engagement.

But this rhetoric obscures a deeper, more instinctual reaction. Turning off my camera unsettles many of my colleagues in ways that exceed the practical dynamics of communication. Their discomfort reveals an underlying entitlement to visibility and access—a dynamic deeply rooted in the histories of power and control over Black bodies. Their discomfort stems from an instinctual response to the lack of access to Black women—a response rooted in a sense of entitlement to our visibility, our labor, and our affect. This shows up in many ways, but particularly in the expectation that Black women will offer approval through nods, smiles, and affective labor that reassures others that everything is fine, that they themselves are fine. This demand does not just apply to neutral situations; Black women are asked to perform this serene agreement in moments of harm. We are asked to signal that these harms are not too bad, too taxing, too painful, too much of an ethical or personal breach. Most importantly, we are asked to affirm with our affect that we do not believe people harming us are bad people. The performance of comfort becomes a shield for others' fragility. When I turn my camera off, I withhold that shield. I remove the opportunity for others to be soothed by my composure, and that removal is sometimes felt by others as a kind of loss. The resentment it generates is as much about entitlement to my complicity as it is to connection or communication. The Black feminist cyborg side-hustle is one which pays in security, heightened ability, heightened perception, and occasionally heightened suffering.

This entitlement is not new. It is a continuation of the historical dynamics that have always placed Black bodies under scrutiny, which have demanded our visibility while simultaneously marginalizing our voices. In the context of a video call, the inability to monitor my affect—to see whether I am smiling, nodding, or appearing "engaged"—triggers a discomfort that is less about the mechanics of communication and more about the loss of control. My colleagues may not fully understand why they react this way, but their responses are informed by these deeper dynamics of power and entitlement.

The demand for visibility is not exclusive to Black women, of course. In the digital age, there is a general expectation that everyone should be constantly accessible and constantly visible. These small demands operate as checkpoints of compliance, conditioning us to accept the everyday intrusions of a world that assumes access to our time, our labor, and our bodies as its right. For Black women, this demand takes on a particular urgency. When we choose to disengage, to turn off the camera, to rest, it is often met with negative reactions disproportionate to the act itself. This is because, in these moments, we are challenging the very systems that seek to control us. While these dynamics may feel clearest in faculty meetings or peer interactions, they are no less operative in pedagogical spaces. Passion for our work, our students, and the craft of

teaching may inspire a part-time cyborg to show up—visually or otherwise—in ways that feel reciprocal, vulnerable, and accessible. But we must also sit with the discomfort of imagining a Black woman teacher or mentor who might withhold this kind of affective sacrifice. It insists that pedagogical care, too, must be allowed boundaries, and that care offered on our own terms is no less real than more expected performances of care. As part-time cyborgs, we are asserting our right to exist on our own terms, to protect our well-being, and to resist the demands for our constant availability.

This instinctual response from colleagues, then, is not just about maintaining "balance" or "equality" in the meeting. It is about the discomfort that arises when the usual dynamics of visibility and access are disrupted. When I turn off my camera, I am refusing to participate in a system that demands my visibility at the expense of my autonomy. I am challenging the entitlement that says my face, my affect, and my labor are always available for others to consume.

The discomfort that this creates in my colleagues is, in many ways, a reflection of internalized expectations and assumptions. It is a reaction to the disruption of a norm that has been so deeply ingrained that it often goes unexamined. The rhetoric of "balance" and "equality" is a way of masking this discomfort, of framing it as a matter of fairness rather than control. But at its core, this reaction is about a desire to maintain access to Black bodies, to continue the historical patterns of surveillance and scrutiny that have always been used to maintain power and control.

The language of privacy can be a helpful buffer, especially when justifying camera-off practices in institutions that do not make space for mess, care, or contradiction. Yet privacy itself is a fraught and fleeting resource, historically withheld from Black women and often now denied in digital environments. For the part-time cyborg, turning off the camera is less about disappearing into the private sphere and more about the intentional cultivation of opacity and selective legibility. The demands of visibility, then, are not just about ensuring that everyone is "present" in a meeting. They are about maintaining the status quo, about ensuring that the systems of power and control that have always marginalized Black women remain intact. By choosing to turn off my camera, I am disrupting these systems. I am asserting my right to rest, to disengage, to protect my autonomy in a world that too often seeks to take it from me.

In doing so, I am not just making a personal choice—I am engaging in a form of opposition that challenges the very foundations of how we are expected to navigate digital spaces. The part-time cyborg is a response to these pressures, a strategy for navigating these environments in a way that preserves our humanity and our dignity. It allows us to set our own terms of engagement, to decide when and how we will be visible, and to resist the demands of a system that has never served our interests.

3. Honoring the part-time cyborgs in our midst

When we choose to turn off our cameras, or to rest, to step back, we are not merely opting out of participation; we are resisting the forces that seek to commodify our presence and labor. We are asserting our right to exist on our own terms, to engage selectively, and to protect our well-being in a world that too often demands our all. Even if that means, "I don't want to put my wig on this morning." Even when it means, "I can't hide my reactions today."

The part-time cyborg offers a framework for understanding and navigating these pressures. It recognizes the exhaustion that comes from being expected to perform super-human feats of endurance and resilience in environments that are not designed

for us. It allows us to set boundaries, to take the rest we need, and to engage in ways that are sustainable and empowering.

In a world that thrives on our compliance, every act of refusal—every moment of self-preservation—is a declaration that our humanity cannot be surveilled, consumed, or controlled. The work of the part-time cyborg is not just about individual survival—it is about challenging the norms that govern our interactions in digital spaces. It asks us to reflect on why we feel discomfort when a colleague chooses to be camera-off, why we equate visibility with productivity and professionalism, and why we assume that everyone should engage in the same way. These are not neutral assumptions; they are shaped by the same dynamics of power and control that have historically marginalized Black women.

In calling for reflection, the part-time cyborg urges us to consider how we can create spaces that accommodate diverse needs and experiences, which respect the autonomy of all workers, and that recognize the value of contributions that are not always visible. It asks us to move beyond the rhetoric of "balance" and "equality" and to engage with the deeper questions of equity, justice, and respect.

The part-time cyborg is a reminder that we do not have to be constantly visible to be valuable. It challenges the expectation that our worth is tied to our visibility, and it asserts our right to engage with the world on our own terms. As we move forward, let us carry these reflections with us, creating spaces that honor the full humanity of all individuals, whether they choose to be on or off camera. In embracing the part-time cyborg, we are not just finding a way to survive in a digital world—we are forging a path toward a more just and equitable future, where all voices are heard, all bodies are respected, and all are valued for the full range of their contributions. Our humanity is not up for negotiation, and our resistance—quiet, daily, and deliberate—proclaims that we will not be burned out and made fuel by systems that seek to consume us.

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