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Sampling (hetero)sexuality: diva-ness and discipline in electronic dance music

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Cyborgs, fembots and posthumans: electronic dance music and the biopolitics of fucking machines

In the technophilic West, netizens, infomorphs and the audio digerati triumphantly-if-precociously herald this as the dawn of disembodiment. These reality hackers dream in binary code. They yearn to manufacture human–alien hybrids, ethical androids and genetically programmed clones. They already engineer digital soul divas, aural cyborgs, Nintendo's voluptuously overdrawn robo-bimbos, and the supernaturally and surgically perfect bodies purchased at Lasers R' US. They share the meat-hating philosophies of the cyber-protagonists of *Neuromancer*, *Snow Crash* and *Software*. They willingly computerise their passions via text sex, MUD-based gender masquerades, naughty newsgroups, techno-fetishistic video games, virtual reality-based erotic escapades, and pornosonic digital samples. Nonetheless, it seems that for the rest of us to join these intrepid cybernauts in their Age of immaterial Information, our too-solid bodies must first be anaesthetised with utopian visions and sounds of an incorporeal future. So electronic dance music, popular culture and modern science inject the flesh with fantasies of immortality, limitless pleasures, and unadulterated agency. With their tax-funded market research and their potent techno-imaginings, entertainment systems, netters, digital dance music producers, and radically hopeful scientists prepare human matter to be dematerialised and devoured byte by agonising byte. In other words, they passionately fabricate the human–machine hybrid also known as the cyborg, the fembot and the posthuman. These techno-organic entities traverse the space between desire and dread; their indeterminate forms simultaneously destabilise and reconfigure the dualistic limits of liberal humanist subjectivity. Each incarnation plots the feared consequences and perplexing possibilities of boundary transgressions between the human and the machine quite differently.

Although such volatile (con)fusions of the organic with the technological are ubiquitous in electronic dance music, they still sound uncanny. When human vocals are denatured, mechanised or otherwise tainted by technology, sonic cyborgs, fembots and posthumans are conjured into existence. Techno and house, the musical metagenres to which I devote my dancing self, computerise the organic via the following techniques:

(1) *The cut-up*. The voice is split into nonsensical bytes and then randomly regenerated with stuttering inaccuracy; listen to the Art of Noise and Coldcut for brilliant experiments in such sonic butchery.

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(2) *The Moebius loop.* A voice loop is staggered to produce a haunting echo that multiplies until it collapses upon itself in a series of surreal and interconnected ellipses; listen to Orbital's 'Halcyon' for deliciously eerie games with temporality and acoustical space.

(3) *The 'Planet Rock'/electro effect.* Normal vocals are force-fed through a vocoder and cartoonishly mangled into a 1950s-style robotised version of the original; listen to Madonna's 'Music', Fatboy Slim's 'Kalifornia' and the Beastie Boys' 'Intergalactic' for cheesy sci-fi-flavoured vocals,

(4) *Playing with speed.* Realtime vocals are slo-mo'd and freeze-framed into creepy alien-ness or pitched-up at freaky Alvin-and-the-Chipmunks-on-acid speed; listen to darkcore for scary and sluggish deconstructions of human sounds and check happy hardcore for 140 BPM of psychotically paced childish frenzy.

(5) *The diva loop.* The female voice is electronically eroticised and/or the exaggerated peak of one natural(ised) and ultrafeminised orgasmic cry is sonically spliced and mechanically (re)produced until it surpasses the borders of believability; listen to the subgenres of diva house and porno-techno for a plethora of pleasure-drenched climaxes.

Although I am intrigued by the bodily reconfigurations that accompany each of these sonic deconstructions, I will focus on how electronic dance music, to borrow Barbara Bradby's apt formulation, 'samples sexuality' in the diva loop (Bradby 1993). Does the musically mechanised femme synthesised by techno and house prove that 'patriarchy continues to uphold gender difference despite its willingness to relinquish other previously sacrosanct categories?' (Springer 1996, p. 68). But why would these digital dance genres fixate on sexual essences rather than human natures? In *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women*, Anne Balsamo (1996) observes that when 'seemingly stable boundaries are displaced by technical innovation (human/artificial, life/death, nature/culture), other boundaries are more vigilantly guarded. Indeed, the gendered boundary between male and female is one border that remains heavily guarded' (p. 9). This would suggest that electronic dance music alleviates its techno-anxieties over the crumbling human–machine interface by regenerating gender in a diva loop. Unfortunately, 'this preoccupation with sexual identity frequently translates into exaggerated, often stereotypical, representations of gender that provide little space for the disruptive subjectivity embodied by [Donna] Haraway's cyborg' (Fulton 1996, p. 3). To avoid confusing this conventionally sexed creature with the fluid cyborg of postmodern feminism, I shall henceforth refer to this hottie hybrid as a fembot. How do these two techno-organic beings differ in their configurations of the contours of sexuality and the binarised borders of gender?

The human–machine hybrid poetically envisioned by Donna Haraway in her influential article, 'A manifesto for cyborgs', advocates an ardently feminist position. Haraway's cyborg operates as a 'kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self', a hybrid being that ideologically questions the 'dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilised' (Haraway 1991, p. 163). By problematising the human–machine interface, Haraway's feminist cyborg sets off a philosophical chain reaction. As Claudia Springer (1996) elaborates in *Electronic Eros: Bodies and Desires in the Postindustrial Age*, 'When the boundaries between human and artificial collapse, all of the other dualities also dissolve, and their two parts become indistinguishable, displacing humans from the unique and privileged position they maintained in Enlightenment philosophy' (p. 34). A cyborg diva melts binaries, crosses genders, slips into other species and genres, samples

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multiple sexualities, and destabilises dance music with her stammered replies. He haunts humanism with his regenerated and denatured vocals. This cyborg's sexuality is a liquid loop, liberated yet situated by the circuit of its libidinal motions. The digital diva investigates interstitial places, third spaces, and musical margins. She is the gendered, androgynous, sexless and sex-filled diva who monstrously animates the warped conclusion of Wayne G's 'Twisted'. In this tribal house track, a British male voice is musically manipulated through radical tempo changes and computer processing into sounding by turns like a drugged-out robot, an ecstatic girlie bimbo, and a surly horny lad.

Unlike Haraway's fluid feminist subject, the fembot is the feminised machine that rearticulates and encapsulates the worst in sexual stereotypes. Her anatomically exaggerated attributes reassure the liberal humanist subject that not all dualities need give way. In fact, the salacious fembot allows heterosexual males to contemporaneously manage the threats posed by rampant technology and unbridled female sexuality. In 'The sex appeal of the inorganic: posthuman narratives and the construction of identity', Thomas Foster notes:

> At the same time, the mechanical woman represents a femininity safely under male control and therefore the possibility of dispensing with actual women, in a classically fetishistic operation. In this representational framework, the analogy between technology and female/sexuality confirms that both represent a threat to masculine power, while the conflation of the two in the form of the female robot allows for specifically fetishistic disavowal of both threats. (Foster 1996, pp. 289–90)

Sonically, the insatiable fembot is best symbolised by the sensual sighs and simulated cries of Donna Summer's seventeen-minute disco orgasm in 'Love to Love You Baby'. By artificially controlling and extending the pleasure of this sexy soul diva, dance music producer Giorgio Moroder electronically elicited a pornosonic confession that concomitantly testified to his mastery of nascent computer technologies and female sexuality.

Conversely, we might regard the fembot's hypersexualisation as an extravagant bid at organicising the technological, of giving meat to the mechanical. The fembot would thus sonically symbolise the ideological intertwining of the sexual with the technological that Mark Dery (1996) memorably christened, 'mechanoeroticism'. But perhaps this sexualisation of cyberspace and technologisation of the erotic is a strange mutation of what Paul Gilroy calls the 'biopolitics of fucking'. According to Gilroy (1997), the biopolitics of fucking offers an 'alternative articulation of freedom that associates autonomous agency with sexual desire and promotes the symbolic exercise of power in the special domain that sexuality provides' (pp. 98–9). Simply put, fucking bonds freedom with life. For the cybersubject (de)formed by liberal humanism and traumatised by the spectre of technological control, sex with fembots ironically convinces him that they are still autonomous individuals and human sexual beings. So if the cyborg represents the interrogation of multiple dualities, and the fembot resurrects binary borders (except those concerning human–machine hybrids, of course), what is the cybernetic posthuman? How does its diva loop redefine sexuality and code gender? Does posthumanism induce the death throes of the liberal humanist subject or is it the culmination of the Enlightenment's project of a universal mind liberated from the particularities of the flesh?

In *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, N. Katherine Hayles (1999) asserts that the 'erasure of embodiment is a

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feature common to *both* the liberal humanist subject and the cybernetic posthuman' (pp. 4–5). As a result, the posthuman's erasure of embodiment – via computerisation – can be easily recuperated as the Cartesian victory of idealised mind over despised body. In this apocalyptic narrative, subjective bodily differences are cybernetically excised in the name of liberal humanist universalism and objective rationality. But the posthuman's deletion of the flesh can also be read as a poststructurally informed and postmodern-inspired dismantling of a very specific notion of the body and the re-sequencing of an Other subjectivity. Hence, as Hayles (1999) hopefully conjectures, 'the posthuman does not really mean the end of humanity. It signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to the fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualise themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice' (p. 286). Therefore, the posthuman ends a dualistic system that celebrated the corporeal coordinates of the white heterosexual middle-class male. This version of the posthuman suffers from a 'terminal identity', a metaphysical condition that Scott Bukatman (1993) diagnoses as 'unmistakably doubled articulation in which we find both the end of the subject and a new subjectivity constructed at the computer station or television screen' (p. 9). I would argue that the posthuman diva is afflicted with a terminal sexuality. Her sexed-up samples lasciviously lampoon the hetero-natural but often remain defined by its dualistic deformations. The posthuman diva is a sassy mimic, parodying the natural with a musical masquerade that mocks the fixity of femininity. Yes, this techno-organic drama queen plays with gender/sexuality in her erotic loops. By manipulating the speed of the attitude-laden voice, the posthuman diva pivots from an ultra-femme breathy whisper to gay-boy theatrics to normalised girlie-girl. But can the posthuman siren sing a new sexual subjectivity into being or will s/he be trapped by terminal desires? One thing is clear, whether musically configured as postmodern posthuman, over-sexed fembot, or feminist cyborg, techno and house obsessively sample sexuality and unevenly mix gender politics into their computerised soundscapes. Let us now turn to more specific examples of the mechano-eroticism of electronic dance music.

Simulating (hetero)sex: the erotic confessions of a cybernymph(o)

Nowhere is the musical mesh of hetero-sexuality and technology more apparent than in the techno-organic diva's orgasmically charged loop. Deep house tracks, such as the Never Get Enough Mix of Xtravaganza's 'The Orgasm', perfectly stage the porno-sonic excesses of the fembot lost in a sensuous reverie. Unfortunately, the cyborgasmic loops of techno and house often focus almost exclusively on the pornographic peaks of the Nintendo bimbo and hardly ever include the synthetic pleasures of terminal posthumans, cunning feminist borgs, or other more flexible and indeterminate sexualities. Therefore, we must wonder why techno and house ceaselessly loop and repetitively re-enact the sexual essence of the cybernympho, a.k.a. the fembot. In *Hardcore: Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'*, Linda Williams (1989) examines the hetero-sexual desires and performance anxieties that have shaped hard-core video porn. She concludes that the 'animating male fantasy of hard-core cinema might therefore be described as the (impossible) attempt to capture visually this frenzy of the visible in a female body whose orgasmic excitement can never be objectively measured' (p. 50). If we accept Williams' formulation,

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we might hear the fembot's machine-fabricated hypersexuality as a 'frenzy of the audible' (Corbett and Kapsalis 1996, p. 103), a feverish sonic attempt to seize the ever-elusive secret of sex. Unfortunately, for the frantically inquisitive hetero-cybersubject, the mystery of the erotic often becomes hopelessly entangled with the riddle of race in the freaky figure of the fembot. For the prototypical nympho-diva not only renaturalises the technological with her organic orgasm, she also biologically essentialises the mechanical with her sonic racial coding. In other words, the classic fembot is a black diva who simultaneously samples hetero-sexuality and resurrects race.

In '''We are Family'': house music and queer performativity', Brian Currid investigates the ideological function of the sexy black diva. He argues that this cherished cliché of electronic dance music

> serves to project a colonial fantasy of black feminine embodiment and 'natural' sexuality. Rather than seeing the sound of the diva as a technological artefact, the historically located technological procedures used to generate diva-nity (echo effects, simulated crowds, the extension of high notes and disco orchestration) are identified as natural emanations from the fantasy body of the 'powerful' black woman. (Currid 1995, p. 189)

Therefore, each technologically crafted cry and artificially extended joyous moan ironically testifies to the unavoidable and primitive dictates of human physiology. The digital prowess of the DJ becomes musical mastery of the natural, a cybernetic disciplining of uncontrollable biology by containing it in a MIDI channel. Each sexy computerised simulation of the black female diva brings the hetero-cyber male achingly closer to those essential truths of sex and race. So if the digital diva sings, or rather sighs, of the infinity of sexual satisfaction, then we can all rest assured of libidinous liberation. Right?

Such a fantastic scenario would certainly satisfy a cyber-het male subject that craves the conventional freedoms of current cybererotics and colonially dreams of sexually dominating the black techno femme. However, he would have to blithely ignore the philosophical paradoxes ushered in by said cyber-nympho. For example, what are we truly to make of the fembot's constant reiterations of the sexual peak of desire? If her sexual pleasure can be mechanically assured, why must it be so anxiously repeated in electronic echoes? By obsessively performing the erotic heights of orgasm, does she truly enact the essence of sexuality? In 'Imitation and gender insubordination', Judith Butler analyses why heterosexuality feels consistently compelled to dramatise its desires. Butler muses:

> Indeed, in its effort to naturalize itself as the original, heterosexuality must be understood as a compulsive and compulsory repetition that can only produce the effect of its own originality; in other words, compulsory heterosexual identities, those ontologically consolidated phantasms of 'man' and 'woman,' are theatrically produced effects that posture as grounds, origins, the normative measure of the real . . . Hence, if it were not for the notion of the homosexual as copy, there would be no construction of the heterosexual as origin. (Butler 1991, pp. 21–2)

In so expertly-if-exaggeratedly mimicking the erotic summit of the human female, the fembot accidentally reveals gender as a panicked performance. Instead of evoking a sexual essence with her orgasmically delivered truth, the techno-organic diva's programmed climaxes recall the stubborn constructedness of normative hetero-sexuality and binarised gender. And for the hetero version of Homo Cyber, still seeking the objective fact of sex in the musical admissions of indiscreet fembots, erotic

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enlightenment must necessarily remain an enigma. Perhaps the cyberstrumpet's lascivious murmurs were not elicited by the digital skills of the sonic scientist. Maybe we can hear her ecstatic sexual responses as a secret soundtrack to her own masturbatory glee. After all, it is only the diva's sexed-up sample that gets looped in a sealed circuit of sexual desire.

Polymorphous performativity: queer(ed) samples and deviant divas

In *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*, Susan McClary (1991) claims that 'music does not just passively reflect society; it also serves as a public forum within which various models of gender organisation (along with many other aspects of social life) are asserted, adopted, contested, and negotiated' (p. 8). Although certain white hetero cybersexuals may try to fix the troublesome fluidity of acoustic space with their tired fantasies of ultra-orgasmic fembots, some digital listeners take advantage of this sonic motility to imagine and inhabit Other genders. Specifically, I am thinking of the performative posthuman, the diva who deviates from the hetero-sexual script with her gender-bending loop. How exactly do the over-the-top sexual theatrics of the posthuman diva dis-organise gender? Where do these polymorphous gender experiments unfold? Can listeners queer musical space by simulating the sample's over-dramatised sexuality? Before we can attempt to answer these questions, we must first detour through a house song that stages a sexual subjectivity which slips and briefly slides out of its binary borders.

In a dance track aptly called 'Drama' by Club 69, Kim Cooper, my favourite sassy black diva, sonically reveals the polymorphous and performative aspects of embodied sexuality. The song questions the given-ness of sexual biology by mutating Cooper's bitchy femme purr into the petulant voice of a gay-coded drag queen on the verge of a hissy fit. The track begins with the queer male diva proclaiming – amidst a stream of melodramatic sighs – that his 'life is a drama with a beginning, a middle and no end'. He continues to lament, 'It seems like everywhere you turn there is something traumatic waiting to happen'. After a few shuddering exhalations, he curses 'the drama of it all', pauses and campily drawls, 'Dawling, please!' At this point, the drum machine kicks in with its 'tribal' percussion and the fierce female diva takes over, declaring that 'the Drama starts here!' She playfully teases/threatens the listener in her sultriest voice ('Well, let me tell you something honey if you want drama you came to the right place because I'll give it to you'). But the tough-talking sister's bravado quickly fades. In fact, she seems to veer dangerously close to hysteria ('Sometimes I just want to be alone my nerves can't take it. Ohhh. The Drama'). Her voice deepens and begins to quiver as s/he confides: 'I need a break. The drama of it all. I don't think I can take much more of this'. S/he takes a deep cleansing breath but it doesn't seem to soothe those poor frayed nerves. S/he then pleads, 'Dawling please! Don't bother me right now – I'm having one of my moments! The drama of it all!' An extremely nervous giggle spills from the diva's lips. S/he bravely claims that s/he'll 'be alright in a minute' but her shaky, shallow breathing bespeaks another truth. When s/he does finally regain her composure, her voice returns to its 'normal' feminine register but she continues to blur the borders between bitchy femme and over-the-top drag queen by incessantly repeating the male diva's opening mantra ('My life is a drama with a beginning, a middle and no end').

By turning Cooper into a *de facto* techno-transvestite, 'Drama' deconstructs the

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naturalness of binary sex and gender distinctions. Marjorie Garber (1991) reminds us that the feminist force of transvestitism's critique derives not from its reversal of gender roles but 'because it denaturalizes, destabilizes, and defamiliarizes sex and gender signs' (p. 147). But even if Cooper did not disorganise the fixity of sex with her techno-transvestitism, 'Drama' would still expose binarised gender and normative hetero-sexuality as spectacular masquerades through its musical send-up of excessively emotional femininity. By hysterically over-performing the role of the racialised femme fatal, Cooper's voice cannot help but remind the listener that gender is about doing drag, race is about representing, and sex is about skilled performances. This posthuman diva may intend to sing sex into being with her vampy posturings, narcissistic preenings, and sensual sulking, but what her voice evokes is raced gender in all its stereotypical glory.

This detour through 'Drama' has answered a few of our queries. Namely, how the posthuman diva manages to musically destabilise gender and sonically shake up sex. But how do the drag queen's precarious performances interact with the listener's own theatrics? First of all, many of these polymorphous experiments with gender transpire on the dance floor of house and techno clubs. As listeners lip-synch along with the posthuman diva, they flirt with the dissolution of dualities such as male/female, straight/queer, black/white and human/machine. There are gender/sexual/racial disjunctions and links between their personal performances and the posthuman diva's charade. These connections and cleavages remind them of the constructedness of each identity-giving category to which they feel they naturally belong. Currid saliently adds:

> When the burden of embodiment is seen as glamorously worn by the lip-synching drag queen, the phantasmatic missing diva-body is enacted ironically in the identity performance of the dancing queen. The club and its sonic drag are then a site of the display of the always present incongruity between the recorded voice and the seen body; through the performance of this incongruity, the further incompleteness and failure of all performances of gendered identity is revealed. (Currid 1995, p. 190)

Polymorphous performativity denaturalises sex, destabilises race, and alienates gender from their presumed essences. The posthuman diva with her sonic drag encourages dancers to put-on foreign sexualities and try-on unfamiliar desires. Listeners queer the sexual essence of the sample with their unfaithful reproductions. Clubbers deconstruct the gendered and raced diva loop by overlaying it with their own faulty impressions. Their fiercely enacted fantasies may even erode some of the ideological power of bodily-indexed binaries and naturalised dualities. But even if we join the dancers in their musical masquerade, we probably cannot lip-synch our way into a new sexual subjectivity. As much as we might like to. As much as we might *need* to. For there are painfully real limits to this libidinal liberation. As Garber (1991) notes, 'For in political and social terms, in the lives of real people, male and female, straight and gay, there is finally no ''free play of the signifier.'' There is play, plenty of play, but ultimately nothing – and especially not sexual lifestyles – is free' (p. 161).

The sexuality of cyberspace rests exactly on this fallacy of freedom. But our close examination of fembots, cyborgs and posthumans unmasks the digital denizen's inability to imagine an erotics that is truly disembodied. Dery (1996) tellingly proclaims, 'Sex that is itself futuristic, as opposed to more of the same conducted against a futuristic backdrop, would require the revision of existing notions of human sexuality and embodied consciousness, perhaps even the engineering of

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radically modified bodies' (p. 187). But we do not need 'radically modified bodies' to begin questioning the deformations that dualism has wrought on our flesh and our fantasies. Cyborgs, fembots and posthumans can aid us in our interrogations of the binaries of liberal humanism but they cannot undo our Cartesian categories and Christian divisions for us. First, we must stop propagating the consensual hallucination that the erasure of embodiment will magically unite us in universal understanding and endless erotic bliss. This is a fatal and false solution to the problematics of an incarnated sexuality that has been marked by race, coded in gender, and tainted by other inscriptions. Instead of dreaming of disembodiment, we need to work at embodying flexible sexualities, performative sexualities, sexualities that confront the cultural signs that, for better or worse, have inextricably defined the limits and spaces of our desires. We have no choice but to envision the future of sexuality from the corporeal coordinates of our presents and pasts. As diva Kim Cooper theatrically proclaims, 'The drama starts here'.

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