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From the Editor: The Sexual Politics of Website Publishing

Donna Haraway's well-known 1991 essay "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" includes a metaphor that makes me warm up to its chilly vision of a feminist politics both benefiting from and critiquing a world, and the mythology of a world, in which technological advances have made us all cyborgs — "creatures simultaneously animal and machine," "a condensed image of both imagination and material reality." Haraway points out that the trouble with cyborgs, though it could turn out to be advantageous trouble, is that "they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential." I like that metaphor because I am the illegitimate offspring of a rich college student and a middle-aged woman from the working class who was at the time of my conception by date rape, 1950's style, earning a living playing piano in a dance band. In Haraway's terms, that should qualify me for cyborg status: I am not of a unity, the joining of husband and wife in matrimony, but of the boundaries between social classes, age groups, and gender classes in mid-20th century Virginia, and their transgression. The metaphor of the cyborg as an illegitimate child is a sentimental personification of the present-becoming-future in an essay that rightly warns us against nostalgia for the past. Yet Haraway betrays a greater loyalty to "the father" than mine in assuming that the origins of illegitimate offspring are located in the missing father; I have seen mine as located in the mother and felt "naturally" affiliated to feminism. What she also doesn't mention is that the cyborg is the illegitimate offspring of two "fathers." How profound would that offspring's disloyalty have to be to veer it away from the path that its fathers laid out for it, through

militarism, greed, the glorification of all the Western myths that Haraway tells us cyborg myth can undermine? In many ways the Internet offers the most concrete daily version of cyborg culture. So, if we are to follow Haraway's advice and attempt to move feminism forward with that culture — and specifically, in the terms of this essay, the recent excitement about website publishing, a genuinely progressive, transgressive aesthetics and politics for poets — we must critique the sexual politics of literary website publishing in its current incarnation. In this essay I will argue that at this moment, the path website publishing seems to have taken in regards to gender is a path that Haraway foresees when she mentions in her essay the "high-tech, gendered imaginations [that] are produced [in the culture that manufacturers video games], imaginations that can contemplate destruction of the planet and a sci-fi escape from its consequences." Haraway warns her readers not to indulge a nostalgia for past oppressions and "disrupted unities"; on the literary websites no unities have been disrupted but are reproduced in familiar form. But in other areas of the Web, and through email, subversive efforts are at least visible, albeit in relatively small numbers.

I have come to suspect that despite Haraway's feminist intentions, and the leftist claims of many other writers who employ postmodern strategies, using concepts and terminology that are the insider jargon of an academic clique, their approaches are, like the literary websites currently available, manifestations not so much of a fresh outlook on dualisms and/or their social/political consequences, but of a failure of will, political exhaustion, a deferring of the need to address oppression in art and in society away from those who are most motivated to address it towards both the future and the privileged. Political exhaustion experienced by those who are tired of fighting for political change can manifest itself in a kind of magical thinking, a dream of winning the high-tech lottery: perhaps something so very different is happening it will require change all by itself, and we will finally get to rest while it sweeps us up along with it. I still feel hope for cyborg culture on the Internet myself — though so far that hope is pinned by the needle of a very few feminist offerings — all non-literary — to a haystack of patriarchal self-aggrandizement and faithful reproduction of traditional gender/sexuality castes in literary websites. So, if

Haraway's optimistic outlook on cyborg culture is to be fulfilled in website publishing, literary websites must be established that deliver what existing ones only promise: a publishing venue that offers a genuine alternative — in terms of their sexual politics.

Though much of Haraway's argument depends on an indictment of older feminist theories, such as so-called "radical" feminism, as "essentializing," "naturalizing," and "totalizing," and she announces her own approach to be "ironic" early in the essay, it's hard to miss the essentializing, naturalizing, and totalizing implications of her discourse on the unavoidability of the cyborg life. The consistent use of future tense obscures the agency behind, and necessity of, that future. The first person plural suggesting its force seems not so much responsible for the future as floating passively along with it, taken up by the cultural current: not an effective attitude for those who would be unfaithful to their origins, or unconventional in the way they define them. That Haraway examines several prose works in her essay, but hardly mentions poetry, should get the attention of poets of either (any) gender, no matter their political affiliation to feminism; that omission may suggest something about a traditional connection of poetry to the feminine that, if cyborg mythology does affect culture in the way Haraway foresees, could have conflicted implications for the future of poetry. Poetry has traditionally, and recently, been seen as an art of vision, intuition, emotion and connection with the body and with nature; though in the politics of literacy and publishing poetry has been a patriarchal form like any written medium, it was one in which men took up the symbolic qualities of the feminine. How might poets, and feminists, accept the challenge to become an active part of cyborg culture without losing what is definitive of poetry, and of feminism, which share a "naturalized" "feminine" common ground? The potential of the cyborg is discussed in ways that might not seem to threaten their traditional symbolic bases but only open them up for critique if not for the energy and swiftness with which the demand for critique has been popularized — and which is being practiced in ways that retrench conventional dualisms in a cyberspace mirroring of patriarchal political practices and ideologies. Both poets and feminists are few in number compared to Web users and antifeminists in all their various stripes, and there generally seems to be little openly

acknowledged crossover between the two former groups; seemingly contradictory postmodernist calls have been issued to critique identity politics — the success of which has led to a kind of "identity politics" status for postmodernists themselves — and to continue the critique of patriarchy — which critique can be, and is, easily made to fall to the critique of identity politics. We could be entering a world that, far from Haraway's vision of blurring and transgression of boundaries, has set them up more stubbornly than ever in cyberspace and cynically guarded them with the very language once hoped to assist in undermining them. "The acid tools of postmodernist theory and the constructive tools of ontological discourse about revolutionary subjects might be seen as ironic allies in dissolving Western selves in the interest of survival," she says; but the force of fashion is with what she calls "the acid tools," and enthusiasm for fashion is itself a totalizing and sentimentalizing influence that invites us to turn away in embarrassment — perhaps of the professional kind, since most of us are academics and academics are expected to keep up with their fields. But the politics of poetry, and the politics of feminism, are not monolithic, not essentially or monolithically or practically imperialistic, and not monolithically anti-progressive. Academic feminists, like Haraway, are to be noted, though not congratulated, for rather "hysterically" mistaking growing support for feminism in the 1980's as a "new empire" — and then setting out to undo it. Haraway's new dualism, announced in the pairing of "acid tools" and "constructive tools," could well be as politically destructive to the best interests of two traditionally progressive "tools" as the old dualisms were. Or they might provide a cover for the advancing of anti-progressive ideologies behind a smokescreen of postmodernist jargon that could as well support what it is used to demolish — but fell into the hands that already held most of the power to make a practical effect in the world.

I'm probably not the only poet in the U.S. to have been startled by the AWP's "technology for writers in the new millenium" conference theme for 2000. I hadn't really taken more than a cursory look at literary websites until the AWP conference announcement. In fact, I hadn't spent much time looking at websites at all. I didn't have Internet access until 1995, and then only through my university, a

limited availability which seemed adequate for the little use I put it to — or wanted to, since it seemed to me to eat up a lot of time for little reward, except when I ordered books. I'd bookmarked a few sites, mostly political; the literary sites I'd looked at hadn't seemed as interesting, or as necessary, though I liked the idea of the interactive *Crazyhorse* site and assigned my classes to read an essay and post comments on the bulletin boards there, a task they fulfilled with less success than usual due to their own ignorance and reluctance to participate in the rituals of going "on line." I wasn't enthusiastic about researching literary websites, or the idea of "hypertext" poetry and fiction, which terminology I wasn't sure I understood. I knew a few websites — like Webdelsol, which links to numerous others — and I did a net search for "hypertext poetry" and found more. One site, called "Beehive," provided a list of literary bookmarks with links. I found myself moving more or less methodically down the list instead of wandering through cyberspace using links; the oblivion-inducing quality of following links feels uneasy to me, not because it's not "linear," as I read some hypertext theory claiming, but because it is; linking creates a path through cyberspace neither more nor less linear than usual, just one without reference points — the purpose of the back button and the list of previously visited sites your computer keeps for you, for me a sorry substitute for my finger marking pages and an apparently unconscious excuse to abdicate responsibility for remembering. The constant intrusion of Net advertising, which often popped up as an unavoidable part of the passage from one site to another, was an annoying reminder of the heavy corporate presence behind, and part of, the Net. And, throughout this journey through website publishing, I felt forced: forced by newness, by fashion, by money, by professional necessity, by popular demand. I did not feel driven by intellectual curiosity. I felt forced to conform.

In the back of my mind everything I'd heard hyping website publishing was repeating like the corporate-presentation graphics on a website: it was the way everything would go. If you don't learn it, you'd be left out. If you didn't like it, you were conservative, reactionary, opposed to progress and even thrift for poor writers, since it is "free" — to those who own the equipment, a point usually mentioned only in passing by Net enthusiasts. My department paid

about $3500 for my computer four years ago, and upgraded it again this year for a few hundred; it isn't anywhere near "state of the art," and though I buy a lot of books, it is a rare year when I spend a thousand dollars on them. Mentioning this arithmetic to others brings puzzled looks from most (maybe I need graphics to liven things up), but it seems obvious to me that the "democraticization" touted for the Net is a long ways down the road without government (or corporate?!) funding for computers with Net capabilities for everyone in the U.S. — a highly unlikely possibility in a nation that has become very twitchy about "welfare." So those who can afford the money — and the time, still most available to those white males who have a wife to do the low-tech housework and child care — to get in on the Net now can do precisely what has already begun there: reestablish a kind of privileged, self-selected ghetto of expertise there, a white flight suburb for white males, outstripping the currently impoverished — or uninterested — and retrenching the lines of class in precisely the same places in cyberspace as currently exist in life. It is hardly surprising the literary websites have taken shape this way. The time, the money, the inclination to consider tinkering a good time — white male writers tend to have more of these things *whether or not they are well-published in print*; it is their privilege, something they often seem to feel (or to wish?) they don't have, and rhetoric like Haraway's can be useful to them. They beat me to the Net, and I am a privileged white female, very conscious of what that means in terms of my political relationship to other women around the world; I am a privileged white female who has only lately felt enough social and/or professional pressure — from the AWP — even to investigate what is already a massive phenomenon — though it is not just snobbery among those who have already published in print behind the notion that most website writing is not of high quality. But there's something else that white males want, and others as well, but which white males have historically used for purposes that those excluded find destructive to their well-being: they want a place of their own. They want a private club. They want a place where they will not be criticized by outsiders for overindulging. For the time being, at least, on literary websites, a new "gentleman's club" atmosphere has come into being.

And, as in the real world, where there are many more "gentlemen's clubs" than Women's Resource Centers, when I did a net search for "hypertext poetry" I turned up such an abundance of sites I quickly wearied of examining them; but a search for "feminist poetry" turned up only a handful of listings, almost all of them archives of Adrienne Rich's or Emily Dickinson's work. A female student who keeps up with the tech-world news — her husband is a computer science major — tells me she recently heard that there are now as many women using the Net as men. I can't imagine how such numbers are verified, but if that one is accurate, they must be using it in different ways from men. She also knows of the existence of a number of websites for women. I've consulted a couple she's recommended, though except for the Ms. Magazine site, which features bulletin boards on which the level of feminist discussion is often both pungent and sophisticated, they reminded me of ordinary women's magazines so much I wasn't tempted to return. That is, of course, because they *are* women's magazines — or "zines," as the parlance goes. Their focus is on current events, news that is not literary but specifically political, economic, or scientific: areas that matter more to the fundamental preservation of life. These "zines" are designed, maintained, participated in, and directed towards a younger and less well-educated feminist audience than I. My own privilege is undoubtedly showing when I skip over accounts of women experiencing discrimination in ways I don't have to worry about anymore — I hope. But despite my dissatisfaction with these feminist "zines," I am far more troubled by the superficially leftist political stance the literary sites take towards "free speech" — a stance that seems paranoid grandstanding judging from the content of most of the work on the sites, and which has seen the most public exposure in recent decades in First Amendment court decisions striking down hate speech or pornography regulations — decisions that could hardly be said to have represented major feminist victories, no matter what feminist ideology you think you hate the most. More troubling still, but completely in line with this all-too-familiar political dynamic, is a gender/caste system in terms of who actually "authors" the graphically violent and/or sexual content you can find on the websites: most of the men's work avoids such subjects, and a sizable percentage, perhaps one-third to one-half, of the women's addresses them consistently, usually with such an ambiguous tone, narrative

stance, or implied context that it's difficult, if not impossible, to know whether their texts ought to take a feminist or an antifeminist reading, almost as if the whole idea were to obscure the politics of the writer, though one could assume that the writers do know how politicized their subjects have become. Is this "postfeminism," which, according to something I read on a "postfeminist" site, linked to Alt-X, still "knows" gender is an important subject, but just doesn't "want" to talk about it anymore, now that feminism has become a "hegemommy" — despite the absence of feminist literary sites or any kind of overt feminist politicizing on the "alternative" sites other than "free speech" rhetoric? (One female writer is described on the Webdelsol site as a "being unchained, transcendent as a mythical angel" — but this is the only "freedom" mentioned in relation to a woman writer, and it is, well, "mythical," not to mention sentimental.) Is everyone operating by "choice"? Do I get to point out that women writers seem to get attention for writing about what they also get attention for in real life — a non-critical focus on sexuality? Women writers have every feminist reason to write about sexuality, as well as every anti-feminist reason: in a patriarchal culture, female experience tends to revolve around sexuality and reproduction in a way it does not for men. If feminist writers are to explore the consequences of patriarchal sex-culture in women's lives, then they must take the risk of writing on subjects that some male editors are going to appreciate mostly for titillation. But how to prevent those male editors from *using* the work they accept for publication in such a way that the titillation factor is put to service for a patriarchal sexual politics, not the feminist one that may have been intended? And how to give women writers the power to resist the need to titillate in order to be noticed at all?

In the mainstream print publishing that websites supposedly provide an alternative to, women poets often generate a vision of their speakers as "nurturing"; but there, in that supposedly more conservative realm, less emphasis on gender division is seen when male poets as well often dwell on the subjects of childrearing and gardening, and though there are book reviews and critical essays, and their authorship is male-dominated, there is seldom the enthusiasm for "theory" that tends to be associated with the male writers on the

websites that underscores the traditional association of men with philosophy and "reason," not emotion, not "intuition," not the body — not the stuff of poetry. Is the "experimental" antipathy towards sentimentalism — which I share, though in different terms, since for me real-world examples deflate sentimentality — motivating a move into the electronic ghetto where speech is supposedly more free than usual? Is enthusiasm not a measure of sentimentality to the "alternative" writers? Does only an emphasis on the symbolically traditional-feminine, the "nurturing," qualify as such, even (perhaps especially) when played out by male writers — which would make them merely sexist, determined to maintain traditional gender roles associating "reason" with men and "emotion" with women? But what about cyborg sentimentality, an enthusiasm that fails to go anywhere near far enough in acknowledging its own dangers, its own twin fathers, sentimentalized in our culture already through those heroes, the soldier and the business tycoon? Don't soldiers and businessmen always sentimentalize their "entertainment," too, their career quests, their self-serving legal and economic principles, their strip clubs, their "sex industry"? And if the idea is that print publishing is oppressive, and turning to the web is the way to become free — if, that is, this new freedom is not actually a very old one staking out a new frontier — why are these castes developing? There are political assumptions surrounding all the pro-website publishing hype, traditional dualistic assumptions about gender, race, and class, that underlie the free speech and democraticization hype; but, in contrast to the non-literary women's "zines" that are set up and run by women with feminist attitudes and interests, reflected in the content of the "zines," the literary sites are set up and run by men, even when they're associated with print journals edited in part by women, as in the case of *Puerto del Sol*. It reminds me of a strip club when I read the work and notice the gendered subject matter, and the men are philosophizing, and the women are perhaps "writing the body," but the context, the graphics, everything designed to conventionally gender-specific terms, overwhelm or distort their work politically. There are "postfeminist" sites linked into the web directory that the most well-known sites are part of — but no feminist sites. "Postfeminism" proclaims its weariness with feminist critique; it proclaims the interest of "postfeminists" in being "pretty" and "having a good time" and "not

wearing ugly shoes." The men associated with website publishing are not weary of critique; they interview one another frequently, and they do not say they are so tired they only want to be "pretty" and "have a good time."

For years I've been trying to get somebody to talk to me about what seems so obvious to me I can hardly tolerate having to go in silence about it: the way the concept of the "aesthetic" is used by writers, and editors, to avoid engaging the concept of the "political." We say we approve of the "aesthetic" of someone's work; we are too seldom required to support that statement with specifics, perhaps especially in the world of "avant-garde" writing, which comment even Marjorie Perloff has made in an analysis of the striking aesthetic similarity between a poem by Denise Levertov — supposedly avant-garde — and another by A.R. Ammons — supposedly mainstream. It is not socially acceptable in the literary community to talk about the "politics" of a writer's work, unless that writer is openly political in her or his association with a political movement, like Adrienne Rich or Amiri Baraka. And the most socially acceptable politics for writers of any stripe is "free speech" politics, though few seem to notice that the workshop itself interferes with "free speech" in ways writers accept willingly, if often with hurt feelings, if they are called "aesthetic" and not at all if they are called "political." "Politics" in its most general sense means something like "power exchanges in human interactions"; thus it is impossible either to write or to publish without participating in it, impossible to write on any subject without invoking it. "Aesthetics," then, must always factor politics into its own considerations. But it does so without open acknowledgment in most instances, especially, it seems to me, outside mainstream writing and publishing — which would be quite the opposite of what I assume most "alternative" or "experimental" or "hypertext" writers want us to believe. Their manifesto-like statements are political by definition, an open attempt to rearrange power dynamics and/or standards that shape them, and those statements are informed by either open assertion or implication of political progressivism. The free speech rhetoric implies that writers are forever avoiding trouble with censors, yet only the NEA conflicts that are now eclipsed in their threat by the demise of the NEA have conformed to anything like a traditional

concept of censorship. But since website writers don't mention such specifics, old news by now anyway, it seems likelier to me that they are indeed chafing against the hate speech regulations discussed from a very conservative perspective in the articles that ran last year in the *AWP Chronicle*, attacking a feminist hegemony that, for a hegemony, certainly failed to defend itself with impressive power. An interest in the Beats and postmodernism manifested on many "alternative" sites suggests a nostalgia for the fifties, when a writer like Allen Ginsberg could get in real trouble for saying "provocative" things — for at least a little while, though after the trouble was past, it became a driving force for publicity that actually made Ginsberg's career more visible and interesting to the readers he was writing for in the first place. Maybe life is so easy these days in terms of our real troubles with censorship that we long for the good old days; we are having trouble "making it new," though some postmodernists still cling to that dictum as if *it* were new, and we can only fall back on the political conflicts of the past because we find our more recent ones, involving race, class, and gender, too difficult to reconcile with our exhaustion and/or our idea of our threatened privilege. Either we are confused or we are duplicitous. So if we fear certain arguments so utterly we just don't speak of them at all, or we conceal them in other terms, we fear even more to consider the possibility — a possibility that postmodern theory does not overrule examination of, though its proponents might — that there are forces at work that subdue our free speech well before we even get to the computer, let alone type a poem or story there, let alone publish it, in print or in hypertext, and maybe it doesn't make a whole lot of difference.

What does make a difference, however, is editorial selection on websites like Webdelsol. Despite a proud announcement on the home page — right at the top, so you won't miss it — that Webdelsol and the ACLU (the American Civil Liberties Union, not Nikki Craft's Always Causing Legal Unrest, which has a much more politically provocative website) are joining forces to wage a holy war for free speech (Complete with invocation of "Excalibur," and I wouldn't want anyone to overlook the phallic resonance), the majority of the writers featured there aren't writing anything they could get censored for. So the free speech hype seems to come from nowhere — until we make the

"gentlemen's club" connection, and then the dynamic explains the hyperbole. The women's work functions as the women's work performed in "gentlemen's clubs" always has, just as the "free speech" of strippers has been upheld in courts, a supposedly feminine "speech" clearly designed and controlled by the demand of male consumers, and the excerpting of those passages in their work that emphasize this function is a bit of editorial manipulation that helps create this highly politicized effect. Since some of these women writers had previously appealed to my own feminist sensibility, I was startled to see them represented in this way. The first page of Denise Duhamel's "chapbook" links through an excerpt from "House-Sitting" to a page with what appears to be the complete piece, in which a woman with feminist questions about *Playboy* finds herself masturbating to it anyway. The last line of that piece equates her reaction with "any man's"; that page didn't end with a period, so I was hoping to click on and find out if Duhamel had complicated this conclusion, but there was no button to take me anywhere but "home." Since it's not news that women can be and are "aroused" by images of the economic/sexual exploitation of women, a writer investigating that subject, especially when she begins from a feminist stance, might want to take the implied argument a step farther instead of backing off into the too-easy, "If it turns her on, she must be just like a man!" But I don't want to blame Duhamel here; I want to blame the website editor, who has excerpted Duhamel's work in such a way that Webdelsol imitates *Playboy* itself, boasting of "free speech" liberalism to maintain the availability of titillating "women's work" for the voyeuristic pleasure of men, whose work is not titillating but "philosophical," i.e. "serious." This dynamic is anything but new. It is nostalgia for old oppressions, this time experienced by those I suspect would claim to agree with Donna Haraway. Duhamel's "House-Sitting" uses the phrase "proper response" to describe how the female character questions herself about *Playboy*, a clear indictment of the feminist ideologies I saw on postfeminist sites labeled "hegemommy"; but maybe we need to ask ourselves what the "proper response" is to men who want us to like *Playboy* — especially if they are editors.

What would it actually require of a woman to come up with that feminist proper response the Duhamel piece seems to dismiss? There

she is, with *Playboy*, feeling aroused; the pro-Playboy proper response says, simple enough, "If it feels good, do it!" and the pro-feminist proper response insists on investigating *why* it feels good: to see clearly the cultural connection to, and control of, sexual response. Indeed it would be difficult to reflect much of that order of thinking through the dominant contemporary aesthetic in poetry and fiction writing: leave out more than you say. Indeed the force of will in resisting is involved. That is perhaps what has been most distressing to men about feminism: it has given women an angle on developing force of will, which traditional femininity flatly denies them by making them economically dependent, through the requisite sale of their sexuality, on men (as women writers are to male editors). And, through that force of will, women writers might be expected to critique patriarchal visions of gender, sexuality, and every other cultural manifestation of patriarchal power without finally falling back on the pro-patriarchy "proper response"; but if the aesthetic ground fails to support them as the political ground erodes, women poets in particular, easy prey to accusations of "confessionalism," may find it difficult to use the first-person speaker — and the force of will it can convey — at all. Recent enthusiasm for poetry that focuses on "language" further erodes the aesthetic/political ground; and that that movement is aligned with the "avant-garde" pretentions of the established literary websites increases my suspicion that the fact I can click from those websites to "postfeminist" sites but not to feminist ones is not meaningless coincidence but the kind of political "conspiracy" that happens by accident: people who agree behave in the same ways, spontaneously and individually, without ever having to speak a telltale political word, thus generating a powerful political movement well protected from being indicted or even identified as such — even, and especially, by its workers. Those who set up websites don't and can't control who links their websites to others. But what the links reveal is how the websites are seen as related by "readers" with a certain political consciousness. The links they create align with the political connections they perceive; and those perceptions contribute to the establishing of those political connections in the perceptions of others who follow their links.

But there is a resistance. Because of the pressures I have described, it is largely anonymous, even among well-published women writers, who went from not wanting to be condemned as left-wing feminist harridans directly into not wanting to be condemned as right-wing feminist harridans. This resistance is underground. It is oral history; therefore it is in great danger of never being recorded, never being taken seriously by those who want to believe it isn't there at all — and probably never see much living evidence of it, because who would tell them? The underground of women writers' resistance is shrewd about who's safe to talk to; because I am an "out" feminist I am known to be safe. So I hear the stories like the one a woman graduate student told me today, about being sexually harassed on the wide-open spaces of the Tulsa Turnpike by a man who drove alongside her car at 75 mph while masturbating to a *Playboy*-like magazine propped on the steering wheel; Duhamel's "House-Sitting" doesn't apply to possibilities like that one, to which the answer "Women are just like men" no longer seems comforting or remotely accurate. Feminist jokes conveyed widely by email are one medium-tech form of the resistance. Two recent ones show the meaning that winning the lottery has taken on as a symbol of the magic, the unexpected blessing from a higher power, seemingly necessary to resolve the traditional problems of "women" — who apparently uses her cyborg skills primarily to make her traditional complaints in cyberspace. This one makes most women laugh: A woman rushes home, slams the front door, shouts to her husband, "Honey, pack your bags! I won the lottery!" Husband says, "Wow, that's great! What should I pack for, mountains or seashore?" Wife says, "I don't care. Just get the hell out!" This one makes a darker point that no one seems to find very funny: Woman prays to God, "Dear God, please let me win the lottery! I'm about to lose my job, and then I'll lose my house, and then I'll lose my husband." But nothing happens. Woman prays to God, "Dear God, I lost my job, I lost my house, I lost my husband; please let me win the lottery, or I'll lose my kids too." But nothing happens. Women prays to God, "Dear God, I'm at the end of my rope, I lost my kids, now I've even lost my car; please let me win the lottery." Huge crack of thunder and lightning bolt, and the voice of God says: "Hey, Mary, help me out! Buy a ticket!" The women I talk to are writers. Sometimes even very well-published ones — "famous" ones, though so far as I have seen, no

woman poet can become famous enough to avoid being mythologized as either insane or a bitch or both — have whispered revolutionary names to me, like "Catherine MacKinnon" — a conspiratorial whisper, a whisper of a secret password, as slaves must've whispered, or political dissidents in totalitarian regimes. The whispers grow softer as the publishing record of the woman writer grows longer and more impressive, since then she fears she has something to lose. This resistance of women writers is what we whisper to one another when there are no men present; and the brave new world of website publishing, which, if it were truly what it says it is, "alternative," "transgressive," would offer us some relief from our fear, has so far only made me more afraid.

Let's go back to Beehive and see what else it lists. Offerings include Kathy Acker, Alt-X, bohemianlink, Burning Press, Coach House Books, InterText, King Log, Literary Review Online, Lance Olsen's Cafe Zeitgeist, and The Marquis de Sade . . . The Marquis de Sade? Because I had found so many ideological connections between others of these sites, I clicked on that link too; a page of quotes titled "Words of Wisdom and Inspiration" included this passage:

> If the objects who serve us feel ecstacy, they are much more often concerned with themselves than with us, and our own enjoyment is consequently impaired. The idea of seeing another person experience the same pleasure reduces one to a kind of equality which spoils the unutterable charms that come from despotism.

And if the sexual politics of that language isn't enough to inspire you with its wisdom, there's this as well: "What does one want when engaged in the sexual act? That everything around you give you its utter attention, think only of you, care only for you . . . every man wants to be a tyrant when he fornicates." These quotations feature prominently among numerous others remarking on the delights of "evil" and atheism — which perhaps serves as the justification for those "liberal" readers who want to avoid the effort of making not-so-fine distinctions between Sade's animosity towards the church — a powerful political institution — and his animosity towards those "objects who serve us." Yet all of Sade's comments betray the powerful

hold the church has on him. And it's hard for me not to generalize the assumption to the website "authors" who claim traditionally liberal political causes for themselves, like free speech, at the same time they shape their cyberspace environs into an analogue to the sexual hierarchy Sade describes; both the Sade site and the postfeminist sites operate through web links in a way analogous to a Norton Critical Edition, giving us a critical interpretive key in another section of the "text" that is not announced to be the party line but which, after all, is what's there. The support for sexual sadism that has come to seem most of what's left of leftist politics in the U.S. thrives today for the same reason right-wing politics do: they are the same. And to see them create a new realm for their dominance in cyberspace, in the literary community as it is so far represented there, gives me an uneasy feeling. Maybe there's finally no community left that is not obviously reactionary and projecting its conservatism on what little is left of the left. I run the risk of being called conservative for even using the language "sexual sadism." I run the risk of being called reactionary by all those whose understanding of politics can tell them only that whatever seems "new" must be "progressive." But the "philosophy" of Sade is not new. Like recent politicized attacks on the hegemony of free verse in contemporary American poetry, it represents a reactionary attitude itself, protected by a lack of understanding, or inclination to understand, history: what you wouldn't really expect from writers who often claim more loyalty to academic theorizing than most "mainstream" poets of recent decades. Something else is missing here, something I have always trusted writers for, the reason my own leftist politics have always felt not just safe but welcome among writers: the imagination, and the ability to use it empathically to occupy the lives of others who are *not* socially privileged. No doubt that's been easier for me than for some, since, due to my illegitimacy, my "cyborg" status on the boundary of respectable society and unnamed, unowned, unmoneyed, socially excluded disreputability, I didn't grow up in social privilege beyond what was extended to me as reward for my white skin. But I can understand how the privileged feel because I understand that measure of my privilege. Some of the "hypertext" or "alternative" "authors" are very serious about the "authority" they want to claim for themselves, and already hail from socially and politically — and not

at all serious about practicing the writerly ability to imagine the lives of those not so privileged as themselves.

So perhaps, after finding Sade in the same directory of links we find so many well-established literary websites, we have another way to understand the hyperbolic language in Robert Kendall's article "The World Wide Web: Publishing's Awakening Giant," first published in *Poets and Writers* and available through a link from the Webdelsol site, where it is described as the best article on website publishing currently available. Some of the language in Kendall's *P&W* article sounds as if he imagines the Web as Viagra for publishing, a way to free its limitations from the material once and for all, to make it unstoppable, eternally capable of reproducing itself, lasting into infinity, never spent; as Kendall puts it, it "isn't limited," there is "reduced production time," "the elimination of the often lengthy process of raising capital," "issues can come out with greater frequency and regularity" (!!), into an "ever-expanding anthology," so that "many Web publishers have abandoned altogether the paradigm of periodical publishing"; and furthermore, this makes Web publishers "free" to "organize work by author [When *did* that word sneak back into our vocabulary?], genre, or theme, rather than publication date" — and who can stop us if we set up self-selected cyber-ghettos, ever-expanding anthologies that cannot be influenced by those who demand that published texts feature more women and writers of color, because the Web will also "take publishing out of the hands of the censors" — as if Kendall were writing somewhere besides the United States, where "the censors" are editors, and Web editors are editors like any others — the ones with the skills, and the money, to access the means of production in the first place. And though when he lists the names of writers whose work appears on websites with that "frequency and regularity" he admires, he lists a woman first, if you look at those sites, you'll see the same old percentages familiar from print journals and every other place where people compete for entrance. Little has changed in the numbers. Nothing has changed in the strategies of tokenism: name the woman first, and maybe nobody will notice the rest of the names are men's. Here sequencing becomes a symbolic substitute for real political change, a bad faith gesture shaped to resemble its opposite.

Those who have gotten to the Web first prove where their political and economic sympathies lay. They have not been inventive but obedient to their habits. If technology is a tool like language, available to the inventive possibilities of the human imagination, there is no reason to assume it more "liberating" than existing languages; and I would not want to rely on pseudo- or real scientific descriptions of the brain, another technology too thoroughly hyped in our time, but one suspects that the kind of thinking involved in typing codes to set up websites is very different from that required to write poetry and fiction that makes us care about it for itself. One suspects that the intelligence that sets up websites operates primarily as a diversion from the poetic intelligence. What else would we expect from a technology originally invented for use in the Pentagon? What else would we expect from a technology so remunerative it has created, and continues to support, the wealthiest people of our time? I can't begin to describe here all the economic dangers to writers, which it's probably safe to assume we all know too well anyway; but I can say that writers who run for cover from them to website publishing aren't doing so out of an impulse to fight the system but to live out a kind of "manifest destiny" sensibility through it that will imbue its cyborg culture with precisely the same colonializing oppressions as that sensibility has consistently generated in the past. The sexual sadism in the work of website authors is not new in society or in literature, as its power to make women conform is not new, as "postfeminism" is actually "prefeminism," and as white male excitement about possibilities to expand forever is not new but merely masculine essentialism projected onto technology. All that seems new is the bait and switch political guardianship, the posting of free speech censors at the website gates to keep out feminist critique.

I want to agree with Donna Haraway when she first thanks feminists of a prior age, Audre Lorde, Susan Griffin, and Adrienne Rich, for enriching our political imaginations and then offers the possibility that they have limited us as well. I want to believe that cyborg culture, which seems unstoppable anyway, could offer a "post-gender" remedy for that limitation, that to explore "boundary transgressions" as Haraway invites us to do, is a new avenue for

feminism, and the Web could help. But what I see on the supposedly avant-garde literary websites is not boundary transgression but boundary retrenchment using the language of "transgression" to conceal its political *action* behind conflicting political *talk*. I want nothing more than to cast off the old dualisms, the old ways of understanding hierarchy — but I think I would be a fool to obey that advice until all those who live by them stop ordering me to. Haraway's attack on Catherine MacKinnon as having "obliterate[d] the authority of any other women's political speech and action" betrays not only Haraway's competitiveness and un-feminist failure to appreciate the near-miraculous feat of a feminist woman achieving that kind of theoretical power at all but her naïveté about the ease with which that power could be "obliterated" in turn by a theory that men could embrace too and not because of their passion to advance feminism. Radical feminist theory is theory that conventional men do not like because its critique of masculine constructions of gender and sexuality presents a very real threat to those constructions; postmodern theory is theory that they do like because, in self-interested male hands or cowardly female ones, it can be used to forestall real critique of patriarchy forever.

There are a few possible responses writers with genuinely egalitarian impulses — which are, to date, always genuinely transgressive as well — can make to the politics of website publishing in its current form. They can boycott, which most of them are already doing, albeit more or less accidentally — a strategy which the 2000 AWP conference theme has certainly interrupted in my own life; they can analyze the situation and call for change, as I am doing in this essay; and/or they can set up websites themselves that offer an active and obvious political alternative to the conformity already falling into place there. That last remedy offers no solution to the problems of classism and racism that website publishing can worsen a lot more readily than it can cure, but it's still the one I'm likely to attempt next. The cyborg I am is, like all others, part conformist; but anything I allow on the website I'm imagining will attempt what I have always attempted in my conformity to the demands of print publishing: to widen the mainstream, to subvert it, which, if the idea is to transgress boundaries, is a more relevant strategy than setting up a shadow

camp that only mirrors the existing hegemony it pretends to oppose — an accusation far more often made against feminists than the male pseudo-liberals whose strategies it more accurately describes. I have long trusted my feminist stubbornness as not mere lockstep loyalty to a "hegemommy," a set of beliefs in something that can't be seen but which delivers orders anyway, but the logical response to a lived and very specific experience — beginning with my own birth as the illegitimate child of a rape of a working class woman by a wealthy man and following a path chronically influenced by the economic and social consequences of that rape — that a certain set of philosophies described accurately — and only *then* I believed them. I have often felt I was figuring things out just in time to be too late to prevent them. But at the same time I have been relatively untouched by the magical thinking that announces the future with trumpets and then looks the other way. By this time the Net and its cyborg realities are not futuristic but real, still new enough to be carried forward on the waves of evangelical advertising zeal, but old enough to have a record too: and its politics are new only to those who think that political history started thirty years ago. In 1991 Donna Haraway saw cyborg as embodying potential for a "powerful infidel heteroglossia." But what currently exists in website publishing is only what she wanted to be rid of: the "dream of a common language" — a common postmodernist language that conceals behind its promise of newness a set of suspiciously undisrupted unities. It is the new hegemony, driven by the money and sentimental urge to aggrandizement of its two fathers as well as that of its cousin: academic/aesthetic patriarchy; and our best strategy in regards to it is probably, at this moment in the continuum of rapid change-that-stays-the-same that has been the 1990's, a specific analysis of specific manifestations of patriarchal retrenchment. The critique must be announced at every step *as* a critique of *existing* constructions; and if, as I suspect, this effort would eventually lead to the same conclusions as one that was not hindered by the demands of the new hegemony to extend postmodernist politeness to what it's hiding behind its jargon, perhaps we will at least be able to face the next wave of political fashion with improved insight into what will befall us if we don't take action quickly to tread, and to transgress, whatever new boundary we have been presented with, both lightly — and dangerously.