

Long Read Review: 'Repurpose your Desire: Xenofeminism and Millennial Politics' by Mareile Pfannebecker

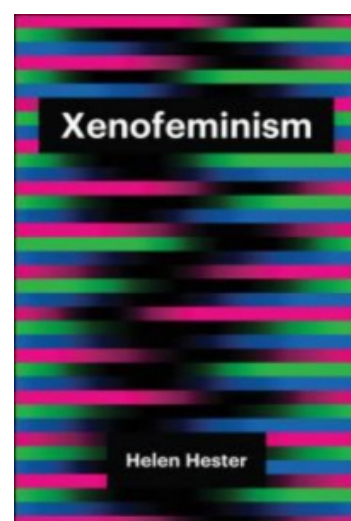
How do we conceive of a gender politics and feminism responsive to the technoscientific infrastructures that shape everyday life? In this long read review, Mareile Pfannebecker reflects on Xenofeminism, authored by Helen Hester, and its attempt to offer a queer- and trans-inclusive communist feminism that is rooted in our bodies' inextricable relationship to technology and focused on 'repurposing', rather than outright refusing, the tools of capitalist technoscience.

Repurpose your Desire: Xenofeminism and Millennial Politics

Xenofeminism. Helen Hester. Polity Press. 2018.

Find this book: 

What if you don't like what you want? Two takes on the politics of desire have turned heads on academic social media in early 2018. [Andrea Long Chu](#), writing for *n+1* with admirable boldness, makes the case that the gender experience of trans women like her rests not on identity but on desire. As such, Chu argues, it is not only painful and remains at best half-fulfilled – 'your breasts may never come in, your voice may never pass, your parents may never call back' – but it is also bound to defy political ideals. In this instance, trans women's embodiment of an originally patriarchal aesthetics of femininity clashes with radical feminist demands (whether of the 1970s or 2010s) to abolish the same. Making the point that desire generally arrives unbidden, her conclusion is that 'nothing good comes of forcing [it] to conform to political principle'. Partially in response to Chu, [Amia Srinivasan](#) in the *London Review of Books* cautiously pursues digital culture's sexual politics to the example of dating apps and sites. She points out how apparently innocuous 'personal preference' categories police romantic and sexual encounters to algorithmically reproduce the mechanisms of domination and exclusion inherent in misogyny, racism, ableism and transphobia. In the face of how technoculture cuts desire down to size, Srinivasan concludes that while there can never be an obligation to desire anyone in particular – 'nobody wants a mercy fuck' – there may be a 'duty to transfigure, as best we can, our desires'.



Two contrasting arguments, they are both based on the acknowledgement of quite how political the personal is; they only differ in their response. Taken together, they also figure as academic instances of what a Janus-faced millennial culture does best, and what is often misunderstood as 'snowflake' hypocrisy by a baby-boomer commentariat. For one, there is the remarkable new prevalence of cultural criticism as part of popular culture as such (as opposed to an earlier model of 'applying' critical insights to a pop culture separate to them). 'Wokeness', whatever its pitfalls, at the very least means that it has become cool to assess your individual social position against the hierarchical structures to which everyone is tied, and this is manifest, on- and offline, in calling out others as much as in 'checking' your own privilege. For all that, there is little bra-burning going on and no hair shirts in sight; instead, many reserve just what Chu demands in an interview for [The Point podcast](#): 'the right to desire what is bad for you'.

Instances are diverse. The 'slutwalks' of 2011 were an early sign of a generation of cis and trans women insisting very publicly on the right to wear high femme clothes and make-up alongside the scars of their patriarchal sexist significations. A recent edited collection by Rhian E. Jones and Eli Davies marks the mood in its title: [Under My Thumb: Songs that Hate Women and the Women who Love Them](#). A certain daring, open-eyed complicity also goes beyond gender issues in the strict sense: for example, where younger millennials chronicle their vulnerabilities on social media with insouciant grace and baroque detail, in the full knowledge that the data harvesters will comb every last digit of their online lives, and that employers and institutions will judge them on what they find. These examples, barely scratching the surface of today's internet-supported adventures in 'not giving ground relative to your desire', as Jacques Lacan once defined the ethics of psychoanalysis, at least show that both are possible: following personal desires that have come to you from places as bad as, say, imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, and the impulse to challenge their structures wherever a foothold presents itself.



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This, I think, is a useful background on which to read *Xenofeminism*. Helen Hester, member of the feminist collective [Laboria Cuboniks](#), offers this short book in [Polity's Theory Redux series](#) as her elaboration of the collective's manifesto, '[Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation](#)'. The book, like the manifesto, wants to offer a queer- and trans-inclusive communist feminism that begins with our bodies' inextricable relationship to technology. As a 'technomaterialism', it aims to resist capitalist technoscience not by refusing its tainted means but by 'repurposing' them. The gesture is disarmingly simple: we know that this biotechnoculture has been bad for us, and that we are in many ways its products; therefore, 'absolute caution', as the manifesto puts it, is impossible, but instead of surrendering, we can begin resistance by taking possession. The aim, shared with left accelerationists [Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams](#) as well as others in the current left publishing renaissance, is to directly challenge the ownership and control of the technoscientific infrastructures of everyday life, and so combat paralysing no-alternative neoliberalism that has rendered political activism and academic cultural criticism impotent for decades.

In outlining how a *xenofeminism* might give shape to this challenge, Hester touches on the pragmatic sharing of medical knowledge and resources in the 1970s women's self-help movement, the ambitions for digital intervention in 1990s cyberfeminism and the potential of bringing both together in the 'biohacking' practices of people who want to change their gendered bodies beyond pharmaceutical capitalism and institutional gatekeeping. One example given for the latter is the *Open Source Gender Codes* project, which seeks 'to enable people to grow their own hormones at dedicated community hubs using transgenic tobacco plants' (143). Thus trans people and others who find ways to self-experiment with hormones outside institutional constraints today are positioned as the heirs of women who seized the tools for (early) abortion by adapting the Del-Em menstrual extraction device in the 1970s.

As with other left accelerationist work, the political force of the gesture lies in the challenge that links immediate, guerilla intervention in extant technologies with the horizon of the structural change that it renders imaginable. Alongside Hester's examples, one might place the cyber activists Electronic Dance Theatre's 'Transborder Immigrant Tool', a mobile phone app designed to allow migrants to bypass border patrols at the US-Mexico border. This, in [Tiziana Terranova](#)'s invocation, points to alternative uses of the technologies that generally subsume mobile bodies under capital and, finally, to 'another machinic infrastructure of the common'. In the first instance, then, Hester's work is part of a larger movement of a pragmatic, politically optimistic left accelerationism that is unfazed by the extent to which we begin as bodies under and subjects of technocapital.

Beside its emphasis on activist pragmatism, *Xenofeminism* also appeals to its millennial audience as a project of feminist theory. As such, apart from Hester's effort to reclaim the technological utopianism of 1970s radical feminist Shulamith Firestone, much of the book recalls Donna Haraway's 1980s fusion of poststructuralist with socialist feminism. Indeed, it does this to an extent not quite captured in Hester's claim that xenofeminists are 'Haraway's disobedient daughters'. Like Haraway in 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (1985), recently republished in [Manifestly Haraway](#) (2016), Hester takes women's bodies hybridised by technology as the basis for an 'anti-naturalism' in the sense of anti-essentialism; like Haraway, Hester concludes that this refusal of the ideological tricks of natural wholeness show up gender, class and race as historical categories of oppression ripe for abolition. She also follows Haraway in rehearsing the crucial achievement of 1980s feminists of colour like bell hooks, Angela Davis, Hazel Carby, Kimberlé Crenshaw and others, who forced the acknowledgement that those categories of oppression function intersectionally (as in the [paradigmatic case](#) of reproductive unfreedom in the US, where white women fight for reproductive choice principally as a matter of control over their own bodies, while women of colour also have to contend with the systemic violence and threat of death directed against the bodies of their children). Finally, Hester, like Haraway, rejects the ideological abuse of narratives of reproduction centred on the nuclear family, and concludes that where claims of natural unity have proved so dangerous, a political coalition must be based on affinity rather than identity.

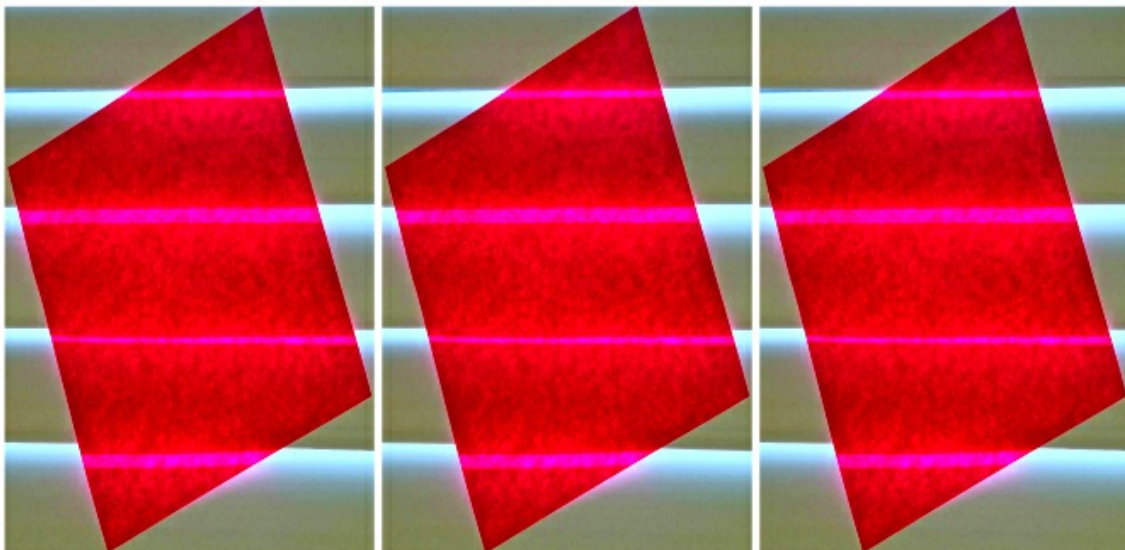


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With so much agreement, the question arises as to what difference more than 30 years have made, and what meaningful distinction there can be between xeno- and cyborg feminism. It is instructive to consider the case of gender abolition. In 1985, Haraway proposed that 'we require regeneration, not rebirth, and the possibilities for our reconstitution include the utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without gender.' Here, gender abolition is in the first instance a utopian trope, one cyborg image of regeneration amongst others (it is directly preceded by injured lizards re-growing duplicate limbs). Whatever its considerable rhetorical uses, this narrative cannot easily speak directly to a moment where pharmacologically-altered gender has become a mainstream cultural reality and is met by very real cultural violence. Having gained some hard-won visibility, trans people today are condemned by self-declared 'gender-critical feminists' who deny them, and trans women in particular, the right to exist in public at all. This sort of attack, however often it tries to harness the complaint that trans women perpetuate patriarchal gender ideals, always comes down to the unwillingness to share and change the shape of womanhood, and thus to the defence of an essentialist gender identity category. So, if we were all cyborgs then, we are showing it more now; and yet identitarian gender boundary policing – technologically enhanced, via online trolling and doxxing – is thriving.

Here might be another place where the contemporary appeal and the political promise of *Xenofeminism* come in. Not only does the accelerationist outlook translate cyborg stories into concrete activist goals, it also marks a change of tone. The emphasis is on a multiplication of possibilities: 'Let a hundred sexes bloom!' and 'Not gender austerity – gender-post-scarcity!' are the slogans of this outlook (30, 31). The overall goal to overcome gender as a system of domination is translated into an offer of creative bodily autonomy. 'Fully automated luxury communist gender proliferation', then, to adapt [Aaron Bastani](#)'s phrase: the utopian charms of wanting to have everything for everyone. Perhaps this approach to gender politics harnesses a millennial instinct for autonomy; perhaps that instinct has been built out of the scraps of a neoliberal legacy of consumerist individualism. But if so, it is turned towards an offer of autonomy that has solidarity as its logical consequence. Self-determined healthcare for all impregnables and access to the tools for changing gendered embodiment for all who want them. The demand for reproductive freedom also requires that social reproduction be freed of classist and racialised violence; the demand for women's rights also means the right for everyone to be a woman, or not, or anything else. Accordingly, a cheerful insistence on personal bodily entitlement broadens into the communist endeavour to change the shape of the entire polity. It is certainly possible to imagine how this discourse, if it continues to grow, might disarm violent policing of organicist gender ideals in the long run.

This, then, might be the xenofeminist way to repurpose your millennial desire: to stay on the side of what you want without moralism or obligatory consciousness-raising, but to do so in the spirit of a solidarity that aims for systemic political change. The simple answer offered to the messy experience of complicit desires alongside the will for political change seems to be – do your thing, but in your spare time, work collectively to change the technosocial infrastructures required to make different desires possible (64). Accordingly, the problems Chu and Srinivasan pose – sexual desire for patriarchal gender aesthetics that go against your own feminist political ideals, and your own sexual desire inculcated by social media algorithms of social oppression – need only be ultimate problems if we assume that neither patriarchy nor technologies can ever change. Who dismisses all this as naïve might do so at their peril: a political demand for autonomy is not necessarily the same as a belief in identitarian individualism, and a utopian horizon supported by technological possibility is not the same as ignorance about the scarcity of resources and the recalcitrance of technocapital. Frederic Jameson was no doubt right to diagnose, in some postmodernist anti-utopian thought, the conservative effects of conflating a critique of the 'totalities' of Western metaphysics of presence, individualism included, with a critique of the political will to change the social system, well, totally.

Xenofeminism's ambitions are enormous, and the one idea that decisively sets it apart from early cyborg feminism is the unequivocal embrace of the 'universal'; as Hester explains [elsewhere](#), universal not in the sense of the 'bloated particularity' of white western man parading as such, but as the 'intersectional universal' that tries to accommodate 'the needs of every human'. This is a bold, and not rhetorically ineffective, attempt to fuse the humanist universalism of old and the poststructuralist insistence on context; but it is perhaps also where the project reaches what are, for now at least, its limitations. When Hester discusses the finer points of how gender proliferation will move towards this intersectional universal as a time when gender holds 'no extraordinary explanatory power' and is freed of 'signifying something beyond itself', this gets close to implying the unmarked, extra-textual purity explicitly rejected elsewhere in the book and manifesto. Desire, meanwhile, always signifies something beyond itself. If, as Raymond Williams suggested, communism will be far more complex than capitalism, then xenofeminism and other accelerationisms will no doubt find space to consider how utopia can meet culturally complicit desire on its way to other, incalculably impure futures.

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.