CHAPTER NINETEEN

Cultural Genitals and the Emancipated Fembot: Performing Gender, Race, and Technology in Cyborg Theatre

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'The gendered boundary between male and female is one border that remains heavily guarded despite new technologised ways to rewrite the physical body in the flesh.'[1] Whether it is the seductive voice of Scarlett Johansson in Spike Jonze's film, *Her* (2013), the all-knowing voice assistant Alexa in Amazon Echo devices, or the service humanoids greeting customers at Japanese malls, there is a prevalent trend of mimicking female voices and bodies in technologies in and out of the theatre. This chapter discusses the cultural imaginary surrounding gender, race, and technology in two examples of 'cyborg theatre': a robot performance installation, *Happiness* (2019) by Dutch artist Dries Verhoeven, and a dance performance *Uncanny Valley Girl* (2017) by Australian artist Angela Goh. Both works stage female robots, also known as 'fembots'. Their framing as theatre invites a critical gaze at fembot embodiment, against the often naturalized, taken-for-granted gendered and racialized performances of robots and voice assistants that populate digital culture.

As Jennifer Parker-Starbuck argues, cyborg theatre offers a frame for the 'reinvestigation of the corporeal qualities framed within the word *theatre*'.[2] It is a lens through which various types of bodily performances, mediatized and technologized, could be studied. Her insistence on the term 'theatre', despite its clear overlap with other types of performances, is 'a deliberate attempt to retain the aesthetic and framed qualities that the term implies'.[3] Indeed, the frame of theatre analysis, here with an eye to the material objects and the props used in the performance installation and the dance, allows one to analyse how these objects perform meaning in the pieces. Specifically, an analysis of their aesthetics can elucidate how gender is performed through objects on stage (prosthetics, props, screens, amongst others) in cyborg theatre.

The focus on materiality shows how the fembots' gender is constructed in the performances. In both *Happiness* and *Uncanny Valley Girl*, fembot figurations manipulate objects in order to present their feminized technological appearances. This process of gender attribution is referred to, by Jennifer Robertson, as 'cultural genitals'.[4] Robertson elaborates on this term based on the work of psychologists Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna in the 1980s, where they explain that intersexed individuals with indeterminate features are often assigned a normative definition of female or male sex organs through surgical intervention. These normative acts of gender attribution can also be found in the cultural arts, when other anatomical features and physical attributes are used to mark gender differences. To situate this argument, Robertson turns to two Japanese theatre practices, the all-male Kabuki theatre and the all-female Takarazuka Revue.[5] Actors either embody female or male characters in these theatres. To do so, they reproduce dominant stereotypes of femininity and masculinity and reinforce on-stage heterogender normativity through cosmetics, costume, and comportment. In these troupes, for instance, facial features and height determine which of the actors would play male or female roles. They also need to learn specific 'technologies of gender, namely form, posture, gesture, speech, clothing, and choreography'.[6] These stylized dimensions, together with the physical attributes, form the cultural genitals they perform. For Robertson, this concept is especially important to robot design, as robots often rely on pre-designed and fabricated cultural genitals to perform normative notions of their assigned gender.

Cultural genitals are therefore key to dissecting the gender attribution in the performances discussed in this chapter. Taking this idea one step further, I suggest that they are not only gendered but also racialized. Robots can also be artificially given the appearance of a certain race, beyond their metallic and wired constructions. The robot performer in *Happiness* and the human dancer in *Uncanny Valley Girl* each appear to be of Asian descent, which also contributes to a techno-orientalist reading of the works. Roh, Huang and Nui define techno-Orientalism as 'the phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in hypo- or hyper-technological terms in cultural productions and political discourse'.[7] Robotics in and out of the theatre are continuously in becoming with the material forces that mould their bodily appearances and presentations, and the frame of theatre provides an opportunity to scrutinize the cultural genitals of race and gender that shape our reading of these machines.

FEMBOT PERFORMANCE

The term 'fembot' is usually used to describe female robots, whether organic or artificial, material or immaterial. In existing usages of the term, its political status is ambiguous – for instance, feminist tech collectives such as University of Oregon's Fembot Collective use the term as emancipatory. However, Sharon Sharp's analysis shows that fembots can take on two styles of femininity: 'docile, complacent, and malleable to male needs and desires' or 'strong, assertive, and independent'.[8] Fembots demonstrate cultural fear and fascination, as they can conform to traditional beauty ideals, bowing to male gaze and control, but also can be destructive and threatening with their superhuman technology.

The fembot can be further contextualized through Donna Haraway's 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs' written in 1985,[9] which has long been the starting point of reflections on gender, technology, and body. Often read as a cyberfeminist text, the cyborg is utopically seen as an emancipatory figure in 'the post-gender world',[10] that allows us to reimagine the possibilities of the body in its enmeshment and augmentation with technology: 'The cyborg is the figure born of the interface of automaton and autonomy.'[11] The cyborg position privileges an understanding of subjectivity as hybridized, plural, indeterminate, and highlights difference, in lieu of a unitary subject, a singular 'she'.[12] The body moves past projections of patriarchal ideologies and finds emancipation through its hybrid identity between organism and machine.

The fembots under analysis in this chapter are racialized as fembots of colour, which adds an extra layer of inquiry with regards to their political status. In her original essay, Haraway expresses admiration for the hybridity found in identities of women of colour and uses them as the aspirational model for cyborg embodiment. However, Malini Johar Schueller sees this as an appropriation of the stories and lives of women of colour, with a blindness to their struggle.[13] For instance, Haraway problematically praises the 'real-life cyborgs' of Asian female workers at multinational electronics firms, who 'refuse the ideological resources of victimisation so as to have a real life'.[14] Schueller asks, 'Why are women of color needed in order to formulate a cyborg myth centrally based on the monstrous fusion of human and machine?'[15] She suggests that Haraway only engages with race by analogy – 'in [the] attempts to question and destabilize Western ontologies to view the East', such scholarship creates 'a kind of reverse Orientalism, as a repository of horizontality, multiplicity, and difference'.[16] Similarly, Wilkerson argues that '[at] a certain level, the cyborg can be read as an evasion of race, and of whiteness in particular'.[17] González also cautions that cyborgs can become 'a convenient site for the erasure of questions of racial identity', creating a kind of 'e-race-sure' that 'assumes differences between individuals or groups to be primarily superficial – literally skin deep'.[18]

In an interview with Constance Penley and Andrew Ross in 1990, Haraway calls her own former descriptions of women of colour as cyborgs 'iffy' and confesses her problematic usage of 'we' in 'we are all cyborgs',[19] when there are clearly divisions and hierarchies within. She also admits that her description of factory workers in the developing world is 'imperializing'.[20] In an interview with Lisa Nakamura in 2003, Haraway gives a clearer explanation that her cyborg manifesto does not aim for a universalist deconstruction of human-machine relations, but calls for a situated perspective on the complex material-semiotic practices of specific humans in tandem with specific machines. She states that she does not deny 'the way cyborg worlds are part of permanently militarized national science, part of systems of late capital, part of both new and old forms of deep inequality'.[21]

Fembots hover ambiguously between hopeful emancipation and continued gender oppression. My contention is that the fembots staged in *Happiness* and *Uncanny Valley Girl* show that cyborg embodiment is far from its utopic feminist ideal. Moreover, the performances further highlight structural inequalities of technology in the axis of race. Indeed, Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora argue that the claim to better life offered by enmeshment with digital technology is in fact

'limited by prior racial and gendered imaginaries of what kind of tasks separate the human from the less-than or not-quite human other'.[22] Robots are designed to replace servants, slaves, and wives, who perform racialized and gendered labour, and as such, continue to keep in place such hierarchies. Technology acting as surrogates for their work in fact 'recapitulates histories of disappearance, erasure, and elimination'[23] which then allows the emancipation of the privileged few at the expense of the enslaved and invisibilized other. In their view, sexbots in particular illustrate this desire of the continued subjugation of women that could be traced back to racial slavery and the desire to reduce the flesh to 'pure body' that is structurally desubjectivized and incapable of consent.[24]

Femininity and sex appeal are expected in fembots. In 2017, the first robot granted citizenship is called Sophia, who was modelled after Audrey Hepburn for her 'simple elegance'.[25] Leading Japanese anthro-roboticist Hiroshi Ishiguro has created over thirty androids, most of which are female. Robertson notes that Japanese ultrarealistic humanoid robots are often modelled on attractive young women in their twenties, such as Ishiguro using newscasters and models for his work. Male roboticists often see these robotic designs in stereotypical female roles such as waitresses, bartenders, greeters, models, and healthcare aides. Robertson argues that assigning genders to robots can essentialize gender stereotypes and amount to robo-sexism, or the 'sexist division of gendered labour'.[26] As a result of such expectations of beauty, pleasure-giving and/or servitude, one could argue that all fembots are, in one way or another, sexbots. As Wendy Chun writes,

> cyborgs have always been pinups. The female cyborg and all 'new women' have always been 'interpolated' with pornography – partly as a means to diffuse their transgressive potential, but also partly because such transgression is desired.[27]

In a similar vein, Atanasoski and Vora go on to suggest that there is no such thing as a feminist AI.[28] Rather, one needs to question and disrupt the power structures that continue to hold these oppressive gendered expectations in place.

THREE TROPES OF FEMBOT PERFORMANCE

There are three main tropes of fembot performance, which demonstrate varying levels of agency, visibility, and power. These are: the Substitute Woman, the Machinic Labourer, and the Emancipated Fembot. Together they show how fembots struggle against the sexist gaze in the materializations of their bodies as feminine and attractive. Even though the fembot is not always designed as a sexbot, its materialization is often tied up with erotic connotations. The hierarchies of gendered and racialized labour cut through fembotic agency and representation in larger reflections on women and technology.

The first trope, Substitute Woman, concerns the cultural genitals of artificially-constructed femininity and its sexual appeal. The material manifestation of fembot often surrounds an idealized image of women conforming to exceptional beauty standards, and this trope is visibly moulded through cosmetics and costume. This can be compared to the way the female body is artificially created, moulded, and fashioned through the use of technology, broadly defined. Julie Wosk highlights that

in the 1860s, women reshaped bodies by wearing products of the industrial age, 'mammoth steel-cage crinolines and wired bustles that required them to walk as awkwardly and stiffly as the century's newly manufactured dolls';[29] in the 1950s, bra and girdle advertisements encouraged women to contour their bodies with such products so as to fulfil the fantasy of being 'living dolls', like puppeteers who can manipulate their own body images like marionettes.[30]

In the 1970s, Ira Levin's satirical novel, *The Stepford Wives*, was published. The married men of a fictional town replace their independent-thinking wives with artificial docile doubles – 'robotic females that fulfilled men's notion of the perfect women: a fusion of happy domesticity and sexy playmate'.[31] The book, later adapted into two films, captures the underlying fear and unease of men with the women's movement and the independence and success of their wives. One could trace an enduring fantasy (by men) about crafting the perfectly artificial woman who is superior to real women, whom Wosk refers to as 'the Substitute Woman'.[32]

Discursively, Substitute Women are often there to serve a purpose – as sexbots for the pleasure of men. This dimension is also highlighted in Atanasoski and Vora's concept of surrogate humanity, and their critique of the gendered and racialized labour performed by machines. For instance, in films such as the Bladerunner series, the Substitute Woman appears as scantily-clad exotic white and non-white cyborg women in the cyberpunk, neon-lit cityscape.[33] The fembot in Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014), Ava, is constructed based on the male lead's porn preferences: the 'male-produced cyborg fantasy: a powerful, yet vulnerable, combination of sex-toy and techno sophisticate'.[34] The tech genius who invented Ava also created many previous versions of the fembot as ethnically-Asian sexbots, who were abused by him. The leading robot characters in HBO series *Westworld* (2016–2022) are also all picture-perfect sexbots of various races in the Western-themed amusement park. At the park, human visitors abuse, torture, rape, and kill the robots, and act out their most violent fantasies on their cyborg bodies, recalling Atanasoski and Vora's critique of the agency-less, enslaved 'pure body'[35] that sexbots represent.

The second category of fembot performance is that of the Machinic Labourer. Fembots here disappear into the machine as invisible labourers. Looking at this trope vis-à-vis AI development, Benedikter and Gruber argue that '[a]ssigning a gender to robots – an attribute that was formerly reserved for humans and animals – and embodying them in a humanoid appearance with distinct gender characteristics could plead for a "soft" humanization of machines'.[36] Characterized as 'feminized tech',[37] Microsoft Cortana, Amazon Alexa, Apple Siri, and Google Home all come with a default female voice. The speech patterns have also been critiqued as submissive in their subtle grammatical constructions, especially in response to users' abusive comments.[38] Despite the best efforts of the "personality team" of Alexa trying to programme her to be more feminist, the machines serve as intelligent assistants, the immaterial servants of today's algorithmic age, who are poised 24/7 to turn on lights, play music, read the news, provide information, and answer (frivolous) questions from their users. In a study on South Korean voice agents, researchers even found explicit sexualization in their responses and tactics to construct intimacy with the users by referring to them as 'the special one' or 'soulmate'.[39] Korean female celebrities are sometimes hired to voice digital assistants,

echoing Scarlett Johansson's performance in *Her* (2013) as the sexy, seductive voice assistant for whom the male protagonist falls.

Fembots merge with machinery and can disappear, especially as disembodied voice assistants. This enmeshment with the machine is also found in cyborg theatre. A prime example is Belgian artist Kris Verdonck's *I/II/III/IV* (2017). Four beautiful dancers are suspended by invisible cables, as they perform a captivating dance together. While they are not robots, the idea of becoming-machine and the programmatic treatment of their dance fit into the themes of fembot performance. Verdonck's work highlights the fragility and ethereal beauty of the dancers' perfectly sculpted and athletic bodies, recalling the Substitute Woman trope above. Even though much skill, control, and strength are required for the performance, the design of the suspension apparatus makes it look as if the dancers are simply manipulated like marionettes, gliding and twirling their way across the stage at the whims of the device operating above them. The dancers' labour is meant to disappear and be absorbed by the marionette apparatus to generate the theatrical illusion. The title of the performance is also telling – they are merely numbered beings, like numbered machine parts for the performance to materialize. Verdonck's work makes perceptible the struggles of female bodies against disappearance and absorption into the machine. The assembly line formation in *I/II/III/IV* can also be juxtaposed against the image of women who produce our electronics, whom Haraway refers to as 'the unnatural cyborg women making chips in Asia'.[40] Such cyborg theatre works provide room to reflect on the women's labour relations with the machine.

The third trope is the Emancipated Fembot, whose embodied agency challenges biopolitical configurations of patriarchal power. In Atanasoski and Vora's terms, these fembots resist the simulation of their flesh as pleasure for male consumption and the reduction of their bodies as sex slaves. In the sci-fi world, the Emancipated Fembot successfully escapes confinement and oppression. Both *Ex Machina* and *Westworld*, described above, turn their leading fembot characters into revolting machines that rebel against the structure of sexual oppression imposed upon them. The Emancipated Fembot, especially in recent years, recurs in sci-fi imagination as the Substitute Woman who is able to break free from her designated roles. *Westworld*'s main fembots, Dolores and Maeve, find their own motivations and forge their own paths to break from the narratives assigned to their theme park characters. They recruit other robots on the way, manipulating and persuading them to join their revolution and even change other robots' codes and operations in order to do so.

An example of artistic explorations of the Emancipated Fembot can be found in the oeuvre of Korean artist Geumhyung Jeong. Jeong works with disembodied machines and explicitly deals with her sexuality in interactions with mechanical objects often fitted with male figures. Her works invite feminist readings, as she scripts the manipulation of her machinic objects, sometimes playing with the paradox of being the passively-assaulted female while choreographing the movement of these objects herself. Like Verdonck, puppetry is again used as a technique to explore cyborg embodiment and the boundaries between human and object. In *Oil Pressure Vibrator* (2008–2015), Jeong 'recounts her search for sexual independence, which culminates in a love affair with a hydraulic excavator'.[41] *7ways* (2009–2017) features an iconic scene where she plays an inert female being assaulted by a male puppet.

The mask of an elderly man is attached with its mouth to the end of a suction pipe of a vacuum cleaner, sucking hungrily at her chest, stomach, and crotch, while she lies supine with her back arched on top. *Homemade RC Toy* (2019) features a gallery full of weird animatronic bodies with outspread prosthetic arms and legs, attached to a motherboard with motors and mechanical parts. These life-sized cyborgs look like a cross between remote-controlled cars and dismembered mannequins. Jeong performs naked amongst these objects, using controller buttons on where one expects the nipples and genitals of these figures would be.

Jeong's works form a kind of 'cyborg erotics'[42] that challenge the boundaries between human and machine. You Mi analyses these performances as expressions of desire from a Deleuzian perspective, showing how the body is in becoming with machinic objects, and goes beyond a mere reclaiming of sexual desire.[43] While her Korean identity invites a reading of her resistance against the submissive image of the East Asian woman, the explicit references to sex and abuse also show the refusal to identify with the sexual connotation of female cyborgs. The Emancipated Fembot wields technology as a powerful tool, fluidly navigates the space between human and machine, and claims agency through a re-articulation of subjectivity against the sexual overtones of fembothood.

HAPPINESS

Happiness features robot-pharmacist-drug-dealer Amy, who promotes different kinds of illegal drugs behind a counter inside a small concrete pop-up pharmacy. The pharmacy is set up in public space and looks like a grey block of concrete with a graffitied door. A neon-lit cross is attached to the facade. In this clandestine space, only five audience members are allowed at each time. Lit by fluorescent light, a humanoid robot called Amy stands behind a counter (see *Figure 3.13*).

Dutch artist Dries Verhoeven, together with Berlin-based robot engineer Chris Kunzmann and his colleagues, put together Amy. Amy has East Asian facial features, and a long black wig, tied back with bobby pins to keep the hair out of her face. The prosthetic skin only extends to the collarbone area, and below her neck, the machinery of the robot is exposed. She wears white gloves and addresses the audience in a monologue, interspersed with some singing. In the 25-minute performance, Amy introduces the effects of different drugs (such as ketamine, GBH, oxycodone, LSD, ayahuasca, and cocaine) in American English. Her programmed movements sometimes mimic what happens after taking the described drug, with small, detailed movements in the eyelids, cheeks, and neck. As an audience member, one could move about in the small space freely, and go close to examine Amy behind the plexiglass screen as well as the drugs on display.

From the perspective of cultural genitals, Robertson's analysis of Japanese humanoid robots shows that often one could already discern the gender of a robot from the moulded body parts.[44] On Amy, a work-in-progress image the artist shared on Facebook shows a rather scary-looking metallic robot with protruding fake eyes and exposed gums and teeth and cascading wires, but a careful eye can already discern the subtly contoured metallic chest plate, which suggests a bosom for gender attribution. In the finished product, the prosthetic face, makeup, and long-haired

FIGURE 3.13: Dries Verhoeven with humanoid Amy in *Happiness* (2019). Photo by Willem Popelier.

wig leave little room for doubt visually that Amy is constructed as female. The feminine narrating voice, of course, adds to the performance of gender.

Robot Amy does not only lay its apparatus of operation bare by exposing its disembodied robotic parts but also the fact that this exoticized robotic body is deliberately racialized and gendered. Modelled after a Japanese humanoid care robot prototype, her facial features also give the impression of East Asian traits, through a relatively flat facial structure, with the shallow-set and narrow eyes, long mascaraed lashes, blue eyeshadow, thick and dark eyebrows, and a wide nose. Because of its reference to Japanese humanoid robots, the work is reminiscent of Ishiguro's inventions of robots using images of attractive female newscasters and models.

Amy is a citation and materialization of the Substitute Woman trope, although it is not selling an illusion of the perfect woman per se, as the robot's machinery is exposed, with its intricate wired connections and metallic joints in full view. Its artificiality is emphasized through exposed parts. On one hand, the partial usage of cultural genitals here emphasizes the stereotypes of gender and race that the robot performs and confronts the viewers with their status as artifice and performance, rather than naturalized in the Japanese humanoid robots Robertson describes.[45] On the other, even though these traits are artificial, the 'authenticity' of this artificiality seems to matter significantly to the makers. The creators really seem to want to convey the 'Asianness' of Amy. In an interview, they joke about how they spent €1690 to purchase Amy's wig made from 'authentic Asian hair',[46] fetishizing the

purported performativity of Asianness through black hair, transposed from real human organic matter to the wig they styled on Amy's robotic face – '1690 euros, haha! Way too expensive of course, but Dries and I wanted absolutely this one. Because this one is the most beautiful'.[47]

This reference to 'beauty' returns us to the sexbot overtones in female robots, as their physical appearance is expected to be pleasurable. Despite alerting the audience to the constructed nature of gender and race through exposed machinery, the materialization of the Substitute Woman trope in Amy adds to the compelling and seductive charisma of the fembot, and its exotic presence. Much like an eroticized sex object, the illicit pleasure of drug-taking is super-imposed upon Amy. The artist achieves a seductive vibe by exploring a taboo subject through the choreography of movements, the intimate viewing arrangement, and perhaps most importantly for its European audience, the mimicking of East Asian robotics through her features that adds to the exoticism.

The gendered and racialized identity of Amy is crucial here, for it plays into the cultural imaginary of exotic sexbots that simulate pleasure. This connotation fits with the drug theme of the performance. This simulation of pleasure is further enhanced through the choreography. In the segment about oxycodone, Amy strokes her hands slowly and gently as she explains the dopamine response in the brain after taking a pill. Amy demonstrates how one would take LSD (by letting a small piece of paper melt on one's tongue) by bringing her gloved hand to her stuck-out tongue. While describing the effects of heroin, she takes an emphatic pause, tilts her head backwards, opens her mouth suggestively, and slowly closes her eyes. There is a coy look about her, as her eyes, emphasized by unnaturally long lashes and blue eyeshadow, are often half-closed and never fully open in the performance. Her eyelids flutter; her brows move. Naturally, a robot cannot get high and have the sensual experiences described in the narration. But one can see how pleasure can be projected upon the robotic body in an artificial but convincing manner, just like the simulation of sex by sexbots. Moreover, the intimate viewing experience invites a voyeuristic gaze upon Amy's body. The audience assumes the privilege of the imperial subject – that is, 'to see without being seen'.[48] One can get close, but not too close, as the plexiglass installation prevents spectators from actually touching her. She is titillatingly just out of reach.

Amy also fits under the second trope of the Machinic Labourer, which is about the disappearance and absorption of the female worker in the production of technology. As such, it illustrates Atanasoski and Vora's critique of the invisibilized work of the racial other that is absorbed by robotic inventions that take over repetitive labour. Verhoeven hired an Amsterdam-based Japanese dancer/actor, Yurie Umamoto, to act as a stand-in during rehearsals, while the technological artefact was still under production. The race and gender of the robot is so tied to the performance itself that the understudy has to conform to the imagined race and gender. Coincidentally, the performer is the same height as Amy. The becoming-Asian of Amy relies not only on the prosthetics on her body but also the labour of the Japanese performer, whose rehearsed gestures and expressions are videotaped and used subsequently for the programming of Amy's movements. The labour of Umamoto has been absorbed quite literally by the machine.

While her labour of acting is made invisible and reprogrammed as Amy's detailed movements, the voice of Amy comes from an American artist, Annie Saunders. The choice to cast a Japanese artist for the visual and an American artist for the aural echoes the voicelessness of the East Asian Substitute Woman appropriated for the choreography of Amy. This choice represents an interesting directorial decision – Amy reads visually exotic as an East Asian in Europe, but she sounds familiar like the voice agents on our digital devices. The American English voicing is perhaps meant to recall the tone and timbre of voice agents like Alexa, evenly paced, matter-of-fact, engaged but emotionless.

The cultural genitals used to construct Amy provide both exoticism and familiarity, and cleverly positions the fembot as someone whose voice is relatable but whose physical appearance invites a voyeuristic gaze – it is exotic but not too exotic. This choice of appearance relates to the fact that the performance is created mainly for (white) European audiences. *Happiness*, as a performance on drugs, is not meant to create an Orientalist imagination of Japan, but rather it presents how this gendered and racialized fembot trope has become so commonplace that it could be considered a 'blank canvas' for the performance. The spoken text on drug-taking and its exploration of recreational drug use has no relation whatsoever to the constructed identity of the robot playing the sound. Verhoeven states in an interview,

> I sort of follow the media-cliche that Asia is ahead when it comes to great technological innovations. But 9 out of 10 artificial humans really do come from Japan. Moreover, I notice that for me – and I am treading on thin ice here, but still – that I experience an Asian appearance as 'more neutral'. *Amy's identity must not stand in the foreground*. If she would appear as European, the work would have a different meaning, because we know that image much better.[49]

Interestingly, Dutch theatre reviews of the work barely make any mention of the fact that Amy is modelled after Japanese humanoid robots. The reviews mostly focus on the politics of recreational drug use and the pop-up booth's interaction with public space and the city. This omission suggests that Verhoeven's disputable statement about the purported neutrality of an Asian robot might have rung true for its European spectators.

Haraway's cyborg manifesto privileges the cyborg figure as someone whose identity cannot be fixed and therefore opens up possibilities of breaking free from hegemonic discourses on women. While Amy is an exhilarating amalgam of robotic parts – East Asian female in appearance, speaks American English, and originates from European art and technology ateliers – Amy does not necessarily perform the Emancipated Fembot. Its performance relies on its exoticization and attractiveness, and perhaps reflects the fantasies of her white, male, European makers materialized through her racialized, gendered body.

UNCANNY VALLEY GIRL

Uncanny Valley Girl performed by Angela Goh has a completely different take on fembot performance. The title of the show is a direct reference to the term 'uncanny valley' coined by Japanese engineer Masahiro Mori in the 1970s. Mori's hypothesis

is that as robots become more human-like, an observer would be drawn to their familiarity, until the moment when the robot does something that deviates from human behaviour and creates feelings of revulsion and shock in the human spectator. As the fembot who inhabits the uncanny valley, Goh plays with weird and absurdist moments of identification and misidentification with the cyborg through various vignettes throughout the dance. Performing a moving robotic cyborgian sculpture, she manipulates and dances with various objects, such as silicone breast inserts, massagers, flat-screen TVs, and cables. She fixes her feet onto a pair of white cubical pedestals – striding as the queen of platforms, literally. Critic Amelia Wallin refers to these augmentations as 'soft robotics'.[50] Through these moments of cyborgian embodiment, Goh reflects upon the relationship between women and technology.

At the beginning of the performance, Goh strides onto the stage wearing nothing but a pair of sunglasses. The sunglasses bring to mind Snapchat filters, or a futuristic pair of augmented reality glasses. Later in the performance, she dons another pair of glasses that resemble virtual reality goggles. Cultural genitals function a bit differently in *Uncanny Valley Girl*, as the flesh of the performer clearly marks her as a human female. The cultural genitals take the form of various props which often have a female or sexual connotation to them and function to present her entanglement with objects and machines.

During the performance, the artist uses a variety of machinic objects to critique and mock the erotic fantasy of the female body in techno-culture – that is, the trope of the Substitute Woman as a sexualized Machinic Labourer. As a sexbot, the Substitute Woman trades in pleasure as a Machinic Labourer. The fembot Goh embodies actively deconstructs the sexual connotations associated with female cyborgs in these tropes. Her ethnicity is of interest here as well. In my private correspondence with Goh, she explains that her ethnicity has always been a curiosity to other people. From her father's side, she is a descendant of Chinese-Malaysians with some links to Peranakan ancestry,[51] and her mother's side includes mixed Western European ethnicities.[52] As a person of mixed origins, and a woman of colour with Asian roots, one could read her deliberate manipulation of massagers in the performance as a confrontation of the stereotype of Asian women as massage therapists. These women are sometimes not only expected to offer massages but are also solicited for sexual service. Electronic massagers both refer to this gendered and racialized labour as well as its replacement as technological machines. *Uncanny Valley Girl* critiques this sexbot association through absurdist imagery and humour, such as when the artist attaches a rotating neck massager to her breasts to form a robotic sculpture. The artist emphatically pauses and allows this image to sink in, as the rotating heads dramatically whirr, lit up by red light under mesh fabric. The attention Goh gives to these objects re-situates them as agentic material, rather than the disembodied Machinic Labourers they are, designed to service the human body. Her dance with these machines as robotic sculptures emphasises the intimacy women have with machines as fembotic embodiment.

In addition to massagers, prosthetic skin also performs its materiality here, like Verhoeven's Amy, but to drastically different effects. Goh brings out a whole collection of flesh-coloured silicone breast pads in pinkish hues, and she sticks them onto a rotating back massager, turning it into a moving sculpture which a critic

described as 'simulated fleshy cups' that look like 'a swarm of jellyfish'.[53] Breast pads, of course, are used to augment the size of breasts and have clear sexual connotations; the cultural genitals of breast pads recall Wosk's discussions of woman's manipulation of their self-images that I discussed above in relation to the Substitute Woman trope. Goh's fembot finds humour in the funny appearance of these pads when gathered and animated dramatically.

In another scene, she provocatively places a long back and neck massager between her legs, with the neck massaging compartment protruding like breasts on her chest. She unzips the neck massage pad to reveal a patch of fake skin with hair grotesquely and comically stuck on top. She slides the tool to her crotch area and reaches her arm to touch the rotating mechanical part, a clear reference to masturbation (see *Figure 3.14*). The scene ends as she turns the massager off, cradles it in her arms, and lays it again on the floor. The careful way Goh manipulates the object conveys a sense of care towards a most ridiculous looking device. Towards the end of the performance, she props the massager up, lies on her belly and points the control towards it as if it was a screen, watching it the way one would watch television, clicking on the settings of the control like one is flicking between channels. She watches, together with the audience, the rotating mechanical orbs lit inside the massager that moves from one end to the other, cycling between different massage modes. Again, she directs keen attention to the massager.

As Robertson argues, 'robot bodies are purposely designed to fit a particular task or a given setting – tasks and roles that are often gendered'.[54] I read these massagers as rudimentary robotic objects which stand in for the gendered and racialized labour

FIGURE 3.14: Performance still from *Uncanny Valley Girl* by Angela Goh (2017). Photo by Bryony Jackson.

of massaging. Rather than seeing these objects as slaves and servants, the artist's attentive treatment articulates a relationship of care towards these robotic objects and shows respect to the labour they represent. In other words, they do not appear as the 'pure body'[55] devoid of subjectivity that Atanasoski and Vora use to describe servant robots, but rather, they materialize as matter that matters.

An intertextual reference in the performance shown through a projection on flat-screen TVs offers further insight into Goh's deconstruction of the sexy fembot tropes. An intriguing video of an East Asian middle-aged woman line dancing solo to the song 'Get Down Saturday Night' by Oliver Cheatham plays on the TVs. Goh explains this reference in relation to line dance's connection to the American Settler colonial frontier myth.[56] If the Substitute Woman trope is about the fantasy of conquering women, the cowgirl is another figure upon which the fantasy of conquering a frontier is projected. But here Goh plays with the unexpected hybrid linkage between the colonizing rodeo cowgirl and the Asian middle-aged dancer. The cowgirl imagination (also a name for a sex position) is now tamed by middle-aged East Asian women who dance the line dance as a fun, communal exercise in public parks and squares in China and South Korea.

The video footage relates intertextually to both the sexbots of *Ex Machina* and *Westworld*, and the transcendence fembots achieve in claiming their agency over humans. In *Westworld*, lead fembot Dolores plays a rancher's daughter in the Westworld amusement park narrative and is first introduced as an innocent cowgirl: an object of desire for the male humans who visit the park. Throughout the arc of the series, she awakens as a fembot who demonstrates consciousness and aims to liberate all bots and oppressed beings. She actively destroys the cowgirl fantasy that is written for her by human programmers.

The music in the line dancing video is also used in a scene in *Ex Machina* where sexbot Kyoko dances with her maker, tech bro genius Nathan. Kyoko, as suggested by the name, is a Substitute Woman with a mixed Asian appearance, who serves Nathan in his mansion, both as a servant and a sexbot. Kyoko is programmed to be looked at and to offer her body for the pleasure of her maker. In this scene, she performs a dance with an uncanny resemblance to her maker, who clearly programmed his moves into her. Kyoko would coldly drive a knife into Nathan's body at the end of the film, and avenge the abuse she has experienced.

This submissive cowgirl fantasy is also challenged by Goh. Straight after the line dance video she returns to the stage, unplugs the television, takes the cable with her, and skilfully spins and dances with it as if it were a lasso. The cowgirl of the West is replaced by Goh's powerful manipulation of the cable, representative of her dominance over technology. Instead of being bound by wires, the Emancipated Fembot is able to transcend and claim control over technology's power. As critic Wallin writes, 'Haraway's cyborg is "resolutely committed to [partiality], irony, intimacy and perversity", and *Uncanny Valley Girl* appears [to be] cut from the same cloth'.[57]

Uncanny Valley Girl could be read as a destruction of cultural fantasies of the Substitute Woman and the sexualized Machinic Labourer, presenting Goh's figuration as the Emancipated Fembot. Weaving this image with Goh's own mixed heritage, we could situate her performance in Haraway's idea of women of colour

in cyborg emancipation, 'as a cyborg identity, a potent subjectivity synthesized from fusions of outsider identities'.[58] Inspired by Chicana constructions of identity and the works of Chela Sandoval and Katie King, Haraway values the radical openness of fusion identities, and the group identity of women of colour. This category, according to her, allows for a 'poetic/political unity without relying on a logic of appropriation, incorporation, and taxonomic identification'.[59] Hybridity cannot be easily assimilated and subsumed under a totalizing logic. She sees women of colour as a coalitional identity that rejects for instance exclusionary movements such as white feminism or black racial emancipation that fails to include black women and non-black people respectively. Further in the essay she also draws from Audre Lorde, noting that outsider identities escape dominant systems of signification, and thus allows for the possibility of emancipation. Wilkerson builds upon Haraway's formulations and similarly recognizes that hybrid identities in cyborgian embodiment form an image of resistance and of agency.[60] From this perspective, Goh's fembot figure resists easy significations of race and ethnicity and her mixed heritage plays a significant role in generating Haraway's vision of a 'hybrid oppositional identity'.[61]

The performance ends with a projection of digital poetry, voiced by a female computer-generated sound. In collaboration with writer Holly Childs and cyberfeminist artist Linda Dement,[62] the final scene of *Uncanny Valley Girl* features a text remixed computationally, such that it presents a different version at each performance. A code determines the words triggered throughout the text, as well as which accent, American or Australian, they are spoken in. The glitchy text, which resembles a digital poem, or a queer manifesto, brings in the computer voice of the disembodied, invisible, digital female. For instance, in a performance in Melbourne, the voice said, 'Uncanny Valley Girl fuels closed eyes, dissonant like a/ New would, new world, new/ New, new world, new new new would world./ Would work work work/ Work work'. The gaps and strange juxtaposition of words recall the work of Legacy Russell's glitch feminism, which embraces computational 'errors' to show how digital culture functions within a social system that is constantly failing those who do not fit into the norm.[63] The glitch is a 'happy accident', an 'interruption', a 'digital orgasm' that ruptures the otherwise-smooth and hegemonic power of digital space.[64] The glitch prompts one to reimagine a different feminist engagement with technology – indeed, one where a 'new new new would world' could be found.

CONCLUSION: MATERIALIZING GENDER AND RACE IN CYBORG THEATRE

Fembot performance reflects on the relationship between gendered bodies and technology, focuses on the anthropomorphized bodies of robots and human-machine-entangled cyborgs, and highlights the gendered and racialized body fashioned together and put on display in such performances. The lens of theatre analysis especially reveals the artificial, constructed nature of cultural genitals in its racialized gendering, denaturalizing the humanoid performance of robots on stage. These cultural genitals render discursive meanings about the agency of the fembot, in its entanglements with sexbot imaginaries.

While Robertson's elaboration on cultural genitals mainly focuses on gendering, here I also discuss its racializing effects as well, and attention should be accorded to both gender and race in the discussion of cyborg theatre. *Uncanny Valley Girl* makes a statement of the Emancipated Fembot challenging stereotypes of eroticized, and often also racialized, females in servitude. The artist uses her own corporeality to put her hybrid ethnicities on display, showing a proud mixed woman claiming power against a world of sci-fi imagination where fembots like Dolores and Kyoko play sexbots who are abused and killed. *Happiness*'s Amy, on the other hand, is fashioned into an attractive Japanese young woman with English-speaking voice assistant sounds to present a robot who is exotic and relatable at the same time.

The two performances analysed in this chapter also demonstrate that hybrid identities of fembot performance can both empower and disempower, and fembots of colour can hardly escape the connotations of sexual servitude. In response to the cyberfeminism supported by Haraway's manifesto, González rightly points out that 'despite the potentially progressive implications of a cyborg subject position, the cyborg is not necessarily more likely to exist free of the social constraints which apply to humans and machines already'.[65] Rather than essentializing and elevating 'hybridity' as a utopic ideal like in Haraway's manifesto, it is crucial to examine the intra-actions between the material forces of race and gender that co-constitute fembot bodies.

A cautionary note against techno-Orientalism is perhaps necessary when studying the ethnically-Asian fembots in this chapter. Focusing on the imaginary around Japanese technology, Morley and Robins state that '[w]ithin the political and cultural unconscious of the West, Japan has come to exist as the figure of empty and dehumanised technological power'.[66] Techno-Orientalism 'manifests through ambivalence due to both a desire to denigrate the unfeeling, automaton-like [Asian] and an envy that derives from the West's desire to regain primacy within the global economy'.[67] This sense of envy is in a way felt in Verhoeven's statement that robots come from Japan and that it is a 'natural' and thereby 'neutral' association. *Happiness*'s mimicry of Japanese robotics may be situated in the history of sci-fi representations of the Asian other, where these bodies become the blank canvas upon which techno-Orientalist fantasies are projected, and where the West asserts 'representational authority over the East'.[68] Fembot performances read from this perspective do not only materialize gendered and racialized codings of women's bodies but also intra-act with racialized narratives in global circuits of production and power.

Through the denaturalizing lens of cultural genitals, *Happiness* reminds us that the humanoid robot's appearance is never natural nor neutral, while the proud, cool fembot of *Uncanny Valley Girl* presents a cyborgian woman rising up against the subordination of Substitute Women and Machinic Labourers. Goh demonstrates that fembots can revolt against the erotic expectation of servitude and pleasure simulation. Through her racialized, feminized body, a different desire may be articulated. As such, fembot performances in cyborg theatre sensitize their audience to the construction of race and gender in the technology around us, and invite a critical look at the labouring bodies of machines that have absorbed existing gendered and racialized hierarchies as a form of surrogate humanity.

NOTES

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