Digital Decodings? Becoming-Ungenderable in Online Spaces

Emerson Hurley, The University of Melbourne

Abstract

The online self is a new kind of body, producing new kinds of affects and offering new opportunities for self-expression. This paper draws on the ontological framework developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their seminal work *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1983; 1987) to explore the operation of gender in digital space. The constitution of the (gendered) self online is understood as a deliberate, measured act, allowing users to curate their identities in ways more fully expressive of their desires than is possible offline. Two possibilities thus emerge: the imposition of gendered subjectivities may be resisted – and perhaps escaped altogether – or the masculine/feminine binary may be further entrenched through the visual medium. In either case, the Internet Age is characterised by more dynamic, creative and intense modes of gender politics.

Keywords: Digital gender studies, self-representation online, xenofeminism, deterritorialisation, Deleuze and Guattari.

Since its appearance at the end of the last century, the internet has developed into a powerful force for social transformation. Although the consequences of this process have been far-reaching, and few could deny its significance, much of the work of studying digital phenomena sociologically remains undone. This paper seeks to explore the ways in which systems of gender have been affected by new forms of self-representation online. The question will be approached through a theoretical framework informed by Deleuze and Guattari's machinic ontology, conceptualising gender as a systemic structuring and over-coding of a body's affects.[1] These two thinkers have a great deal to offer the field of gender studies, but syntheses of their work with staples of feminist thought – such as Connell's concept of gender order and Butler's concept of performativity – remain in their early stages. This article will discuss online technologies of the self (Foucault, 1988) as means by which the flows that constitute the Deleuzian subject can be intensified, accelerated and perhaps liberated from the gender order. Online spaces allow considerable freedom in shaping the presentation of the self, offering users unprecedented means to resist processes of gendering. This paper examines the potential of such utopian glimpses while remaining attentive to reterritorialising processes by which gender norms are upheld. Finally, this paper will conclude that the internet is a site of gender-political struggle where forces that resist the gender order and forces that reinforce it are in constant tension.

The gender-machines

The basic ontology of this article draws on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of bodies – be they the anatomical bodies of human beings or the social bodies of whole cities – as machinic assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983; 1987). These thinkers identify an unjustifiable privileging of fixed, static identities in Western thought, which they seek to replace with a focus on processes of becoming. The question, derived from the work of Spinoza, is never 'what is a body?', but rather, 'what can a body do?' (Deleuze, 1968). A body is understood to be a network of relations or flows between its parts, which align to produce characteristic affects – a body, in this respect, is a machine. Flows both constitute a body and traverse it,

connecting it to other bodies. A human being is a body constituted by flows of biological matter, ideas, language. The internet is a body constituted by flows of electricity, radio waves, ones and zeros, information, meaning. Self-representation of the body, then, is the work involved in manipulating the body's affects to alter the flows of signification and interpretation between bodies. A Deleuzian analysis is useful in exploring this question because it is resolutely anti-dualist and, as such, is resistant to the most dangerous pitfall facing sociologists studying the internet: the creation of a strict ontological distinction between the online and the offline (Coffey, 2013).

What are the implications of such an ontology for our understanding of gender? First, it is clear that if bodies are to be conceptualised as machines producing affects rather than static identities, any kind of gender essentialism must be abandoned. Instead, gender must be understood to be a dimension of a body's affects, 'one of the ways in which the affective capacities of bodies become organised and produced' (Coleman, 2009: 142). Coffey (2013) synthesises this analysis with Connell's (1987) theory of gender order through the concept of a 'binary machine' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Connell argues that gender is a product of conformity or resistance to hegemonic gender ideals in the form of gendered archetypes – strong, active and dominant 'hegemonic masculinity', and weak, passive and compliant 'emphasised femininity' (Connell, 1987). The binary machine 'territorializes' individuals' bodily affects (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), forcibly connecting flows of self-presentation, interpretation and desire to these ideal gendered bodies. Challenging gender norms means decoding these flows, forcing a break with the binary machine, scattering affects freely in all directions.

These concepts have some affinity with Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity. Both conceive of gender as a process, not a stable state; both deny naturalist readings in favour of an emphasis on gender's social contingency. However, there are important differences. Deleuze and Guattari are highly sceptical of the idea of a performing subject. A body's affects, including its gendered affects, are not simply enacted by it, but rather constitute it. Butler's emphasis on subjectivity is consistent with the positionality of her thought, situated as it is within the psychoanalytic tradition – a tradition with which Deleuze and Guattari sought decisively to break. A synthesis between Deleuzian and Butlerian theories of gender would nevertheless be a valuable undertaking, although it is well beyond the scope of this paper.

Decoding gender online

Self-presentation online, much more so than in person, is a controlled, intentional act. Unlike the offline body, which is flesh and blood, the online body is composed of deliberate speech acts – blog posts, comments, images – and there is no affect of this body that cannot be manipulated with a few clicks of a mouse. Thus, body work – the practices that individuals undertake to modify their bodies in day-to-day life (Gimlin, 2007) – is greatly simplified. Sharp and Shannon (2020), writing in the context of queer theory, describe the process of online self-representation as 'identity curation':

> 'Curated' may connote a considered particularity to the kind of embodiments one chooses to perform [...] By piecing together various forms of symbolism, communication, and information, queers construct identities and embodiments that are representative of their most desired self.
> — (Sharp and Shannon: 139)

Through the process of identity curation, users of the internet can gain considerably more agency in their representation of self than they can offline. This is a distinction of quantity and intensity rather than of quality. To put it another way: the offline body is a complex machine, with many parts and many flows

producing affects that are difficult to control, while the online body is a much simpler machine, constituted and traversed by greatly more manipulable flows, producing affects that can be controlled much more easily.

The implications for gender politics are significant. Challenging gender norms means radically transforming one's bodily affects – reconfiguring the flows that constitute the body through a process of body work in order to decode the flows that connect it to other bodies and alter the way they are interpreted. It is tempting to identify the gender-challenging subject par excellence with non-binary people, viewing them as natural enactors of resistance to gender norms. Such naturalism, however, runs the risk of reproducing the very concepts of gender essentialism that Deleuze and Guattari's ontology so powerfully challenges. Applying a Deleuzian analysis to non-binary individuals requires interpreting non-binary-ness, not as a static identity, an innate characteristic of certain types of people, but as a process of becoming – affects and ways of acting that seek to escape systems of gender norms. The term 'non-binary people' in this section thus refers to people actively engaging in these processes, which might be called, in the style of Deleuze and Guattari, becoming-ungenderable. I am here bracketing issues related to the role of subjectivity in these processes, including the question of the extent to which people enacting these kinds of (un)gendered becomings understand them as a form of resistance to hegemonic norms. These are important questions, but the present analysis, with its Deleuzian ontology, is ill-equipped to address them; consequently, I limit myself in the following analysis to a discussion of the possibilities for self-representation created by the internet without claiming to address the way these possibilities are experienced.

Individuals have sought to radically alter the way in which their body is gendered since long before the advent of the internet. But enacting this process offline entails a great deal of difficulty. West and Zimmerman (1987: 133–34) relate an encounter with a person who presented themself in such a way that efforts to gender them were confounded. The description pores over the person's body in minute detail, examining some of the features – facial hair, chest, shoulders, hands, voice and general manner of interaction – that could be used to categorise them as a man or woman. Indeed, West and Zimmerman argue that it is precisely in those cases in which gender is most difficult to determine 'at face value' that scrutiny of the body is most intense (West and Zimmerman: 133–34). A person who does not wish to be gendered offline must undertake considerable body work to alter affects that are interpreted as masculine or feminine. And the more they succeed in this work, the more intensely they will find their body interrogated by the people with whom they interact. Consequently, becoming-ungenderable offline is an arduous process.

The curated nature of online self-representation, however, means that this process is much easier on the internet. Simply by being discerning about photographs they post and using a gender-neutral username, a user of the internet can make their digital body almost impossible to gender. Large regions of the online landscape can be traversed in this way. The game of cat and mouse described by West and Zimmerman – in which the observer strives persistently to gender the observed and the observed strives to avoid being gendered (West and Zimmerman: 134) – plays out online just as it does in person, but here the tables are turned. The intensity of the gendering gaze, its capacity to read the signs of a person's body and thus territorialise it against their will, may frequently be less than the intensity of that person's capacity to manipulate those signs in order to resist territorialisation. The intentionality of online identity curation allows becoming-ungenderable to be enacted with great success.

As well as simplifying the process of altering gendered affects, the internet facilitates the critical exploration of gender identity through the construction of communities of solidarity and safe(r) spaces. For non-binary people, creating networks of support offline is often very difficult. The capacity of the internet to collapse

physical distance and connect like-minded individuals who might otherwise never have met has enabled the development of strong communities in which solidarity is practised in many forms (Yeadon-Lee, 2016: p. 23). Information about non-binary ways of being is shared, allowing users access to 'critical gender pedagogies' (Sharp and Shannon, 2020: 141), such as transition narratives and concrete advice. In these ways, the legitimacy of non-binary bodies is affirmed, and non-binary people gain access to an 'archived toolkit' of techniques for challenging gender norms (Sharp and Shannon, 2020: 143). Online spaces also allow for effective management of risk. People who do not conform to the gender binary are at risk of violent gender policing (Butler, 1990). The element of distance inherent in online interactions means that it is safe(r) to explore one's desired self-representation on the internet (Siebler, 2016).

Through identity curation and communities of solidarity, the internet creates both the means and the space for gender norms to be challenged through radical transformations of bodily affects. These developments, however, are not unprecedented. The great novelty of the internet is not that it produces new types of relations, flows and affects. Identity curation, solidarity and management of risk are all quite possible offline. Rather, the transformative power of the internet is speed. The faster a flow's movement, the more resistant it is to territorialisation (Noys, 2014). As self-representation and self-desire are accelerated and flow with ever-greater intensities, their territorialisation within the binary machine becomes increasingly untenable.

Complications and reterritorialisations

The liberatory promise of internet gender politics should not obscure the ways in which online practices reinforce the gender order. Herring and Kapidzic (2015) provide an overview of tendencies in online self-representation among teenagers, highlighting gender differences. On social media profiles, girls are more likely to emphasise friendship and post 'cute' pictures, whereas boys are more likely to post self-promoting content, with themes including technology, sports and humour, as well as risk-taking behaviour such as alcohol use. Girls are significantly more likely to present themselves using sexualised language on dating sites. In terms of visual representation, girls are understood to be more concerned than boys with representing themselves as attractive. Girls are more likely to post images framed in a suggestive manner, or wearing a suggestive dress, than boys, who are more likely to post images in which they appear dominant, idealised or simply distant (Herring and Kapidzic: 149–50). Girls 'aim to please boys and facilitate social interaction', while boys' online behaviour 'reflect[s] assertiveness in both style and tone' (Herring and Kapidzic: 154).

This data suggests that traditional gender norms are alive and well in teens' presentation of self online. Young people's behaviour reproduces the fundamental binary of ideal gender archetypes – 'the sexually available woman and the strong, emotionally distant man' (Herring and Kapidzic: 150). This is the dynamic, essential to the gender order, between emphasised femininity and hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987). Identity curation goes both ways, and the internet's potential to decode systems of gender norms may be matched by its potential to reproduce them. The issue of subjectivity is again bracketed. The extent to which young people attribute their gender-conforming online behaviour to their own agency is an interesting question for empirical study. With regard to the possibilities produced by online bodies, it is clear that the same processes that enable resistance and deterritorialisation also enable acquiescence and conformity.

Two interpretations of this phenomenon offer themselves, depending on which subject is centred in analysis. If an individual user of social media is taken as the subject, these tendencies seem to be nothing

more than the extension of offline gender performances into the online sphere. A teenager moves, speaks, dresses and interacts with others in certain ways offline, performing gender in certain ways, and then they reproduce those performances when they log on to Facebook to post photographs. The processes that produce gendered affects flow smoothly, without a break, from one medium to another.

If, on the other hand, a different subject is centred – the body of the internet as a whole – a different interpretation offers itself. This body, too, is in a perpetual process of becoming. Social media has its origins in the messaging boards and chatrooms of the 1990s and early 2000s. Driven by text, not images, this was an environment in which manipulation of the digital body, including its gendered affects, was perhaps simpler than at any other time[2] (Herring and Kapidzic, 2015: 150; cf. Nakamura, 1995). The increased propagation of images complicated such processes of online self-transformation. The consequences of these developments are discussed in *The Xenofeminist Manifesto*:

> The potential of early, text-based internet culture for countering repressive gender regimes […] has clearly waned in the twenty-first century. The dominance of the visual in today's online interfaces has reinstated familiar modes of identity policing, power relations and gender norms in self-representation.
> — (Laboria Cuboniks, 2015: 0x13)

The visual turn in social media introduced the tools of gender policing back into the internet. The subversive affects produced by a body whose parts were ungenderable people were thereby blunted. The Deleuzian concept of relative deterritorialisation is useful in understanding this process. Relative deterritorialisation is always accompanied by reterritorialisation. Flows of self-representation territorialised by the gender matrix are deterritorialised through the creation of ungenderable online bodies, and then reterritorialised through the visual turn to produce the kind of affects presented at the beginning of this section (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987).

Conclusions

The tension between the liberatory potential of the internet and the entrenched power of gender norms resembles the collision between unstoppable force and immovable object. The gender order is profoundly embedded in every part of life, and its capacity to territorialise bodies seems limitless. But the power of the internet to accelerate and deterritorialise flows seems just as inexorable. The interaction of these forces turns self-representation online into a site of struggle between processes of becoming-genderless and processes of gender conformity. The utopian possibilities suggested in this essay may remain unrealised, or be realised only incompletely. It is clear that, at present, the internet is a highly ambivalent space for gender politics. But the reterritorialising power of the gender order holds back a vast potential for radically new ways of being – and nobody knows when a break might appear, to bring the whole edifice crashing down…

Acknowledgements

Endnotes

[1] Deleuze and Guattari were deliberate in their decision to define the terms they coined obscurely, or to leave them undefined. In doing so, they hoped to force the reader to think in novel ways. The definitions I have provided for characteristic Deleuzian language are only approximations; efforts towards any greater precision would be contrary to the theorists' intent.

[2] Stone's 1991 paper 'Will the real body please stand up?', with its discussion of 'computer crossdressing', is an interesting discursive artefact of that time.

References

Butler, J. (1990), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, New York: Routledge.

Coffey, J. (2013), 'Bodies, body work and gender: exploring a Deleuzian approach', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 22 (1), 3–16.

Coleman, R. (2009), *The Becoming of Bodies: Girls, images, experience*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Connell, R. (1987), *Gender and Power: Society, the person and sexual politics*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Laboria Cuboniks (2015), 'Xenofeminism: A politics for alienation', available at https://laboriacuboniks.net/manifesto/xenofeminism-a-politics-for-alienation/, accessed 30 May 2020.

Deleuze, G. (1968), *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.

Deleuze, G. and F. Guattari (1983), *Anti-Oepidus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. R. Hurley, M. Seem and H. Lane, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, G. and F. Guattari (1987), *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. B. Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Foucault, M. (1988), 'Technologies of the self', in Foucault, M., L. H. Martin, H. Gutman and P. H. Hutton (eds.), *Technologies of the Self: A seminar with Michel Foucault*, Amherst MA: University of Massachusetts Press.

Gimlin, D. (2007), 'What is 'body work'? A review of the literature', *Sociology Compass*, 1 (1), 353–70.

Herring, S. C. and S. Kapidzic (2015), 'Teens, gender, and self-presentation in social media', in Wright, J. D. (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2nd edition, Oxford: Elsevier, pp. 146–52.

Nakamura, L. (1995), 'Race in/for cyberspace: Identity tourism and racial passing on the Internet', *Works and Days*, 13 (1&2) 181–93.

Noys, B. (2014), *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism*, Alresford UK: Zero Books.

Sharp, M. and B. Shannon (2020), 'Becoming non-binary: An exploration of gender work in tumblr', in Farris, D. N., A. P. Herrera and D. R. Compton (eds.), *Gender, Sexuality and Race in the Digital Age*, Switzerland: Springer, pp. 137–50.

Siebler, K. (2016), *Learning Queer Identity in the Digital Age*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Stone, A. R. (1991), 'Will the real body please stand up?', in Benedikt, M. (ed.), *Cyberspace: First steps*, Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 81–118.

West, C. and D. H. Zimmerman (1987), 'Doing gender', *Gender and Society*, 1 (2), 125–51.

Yeadon-Lee, T. (2016), 'What's the story? exploring online narratives of non-binary gender identities', *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social and Community Studies*, 11 (2) 19–34.

Glossary

Body: Broadly speaking, an assemblage of parts. It need not be corporeal – an online profile, constituted by a collection of images and text, is a body. For Deleuze and Guattari, bodies are like *machines* in that the relationships between their constituent parts produce new affects. Both these internal relationships and the affects they produce can be understood as *flows*.

Deterritorialisation/reterritorialisation: When a flow *intensifies* and breaks free of the organising structure in which it has been *coded*, it is said to have been *deterritorialised*. *Reterritorialisation* is the process by which flows and bodies are *recoded* within a new organising structure.

Flows: Dynamic processes of change connecting one body to another. Language, for example, is a flow of information. *Coding* (or *over-coding*) is the process by which flows are shaped into bodies. Often this involves the exercise of institutional power. As the *intensity* of a flow (the 'speed' at which an affect is produced) increases, it can be *decoded*, freeing itself from the structures that direct and constrain it. See *deterritorialisation*.

Gender order: A theory advanced by Raewyn Connell. She argues that gender as a social system is organised around the opposed concepts of *hegemonic masculinity* and *emphasised femininity*, broadly associated, respectively, with strength and weakness.

Gender performativity: A theory advanced by Judith Butler. They argue that gender, rather than being an innate characteristic, is acted out in accordance with socially prescribed rules. This view stands in contradiction to an *essentialist* conception of gender, which identifies gender as immutably grounded in a person's identity.

Gender policing: Violence directed against individuals and communities who fail to conform to the roles demanded of them by the gender order.

Xenofeminism: An accelerationist form of feminism that argues for the liberatory potential of digital technologies.