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Elsewhere, After the Flood: Glitch Feminism and the Genesis of Glitch Body Politic

By Legacy Russell
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I first began to realize the potentiality of my glitch body at the age of thirteen. If not thirteen, maybe even a few years younger—eleven, even—when I signed up on Yahoo! under the handle of "LuvPunk12" and began fucking around online. When I say "fucking" I mean it in the literal sense. I lost my digital cherry to a person with the handle of Jephthah, ironically, while my parents made spaghetti marinara in the next room of our tiny studio apartment.

Some history: in Old Testament Jephthah led the Israelites in battle against Ammon (now known as Amman, capital of Jordan) and, after defeating the Ammonites, apparently sacrificed his own daughter, the outcome of some sort of vow he had made before the war. Other versions of the story say that Jephthah's daughter wasn't really sacrificed—as in, she wasn't *killed*—but that instead she was condemned to perpetual virginity, guaranteed by placing her body into solitary confinement, a veritable death in itself. I'd like to lend this daughter some more credit than she's typically given—to imagine that perhaps, when left alone, she spent her remaining years exploring the limits and freedoms of her own body, overturning the confinement by seizing the solitude as a proverbial room of her own. But history is funny that way—biblically or otherwise, all too often bodies like this, narratively identified as female, are locked away, and, as Emily Dickinson once wrote, "shut up in Prose", spoken on behalf of, and, in their sacrifice, never provided an opportunity to speak up for themselves.

I called Jephthah "Jeph"; I never knew what Jeph was—man, woman, or floating somewhere in-between these suffocating dualities. But I knew what I could be. As a kid, I could be a teenager. As a teenager, I could be a woman. As a woman, I could be a man. As a man, I could be a cyborg (thanks, Haraway). Shape-shifting between all of these projected selves, I could forget that I was a browned queering body that, in being born and ejected into the world, had had femininity forced upon it by the unforgiving mores of sociality. Trying on these different corporeal conceptions, I came to redress—and undress—the fictive illusions of *sex* and *gender*.

Years later I think back on this time as a time where I first realized that the construct of "Away From Keyboard" (AFK), pitted against "In Real Life" (IRL)—what theorist Nathan Juergenson calls "digital dualism"—was truly false. Though I hadn't yet found the language to express this, the experience kicked off a longer journey of unravelling my own liminal identity. It was via virtuality that I was able to exercise this muscle first. I use

the word "virtuality" for lack of a better term, yet, I still take issue with it. That which is "virtual" is assumed to not be *real*, yet it needs to be asserted that what happens in these vast digital landscapes is, in fact, very real, and non-negotiably so.

So how does the "glitch" enter into all of this? And in what way is the glitch body catalyzed by—or disrupted by—the histories of feminism? Is the glitch body a [feminist] fantasy? Or is it the future of body politic, a signaling of a next chapter, an opportunity to amend the violence and divisive conservatism of normativity?

Feminism in its essential practice aspires toward attaining and defending equal rights for women. In its many strands it fingers class (anarcha-feminism), race (black and postcolonial feminism), the environment (ecofeminism), and more, as sources for amending prejudice. However, within feminism is the central problematic of *difference*, and this difference—the split between that which we associate as "man" versus "woman", "masculine" versus "feminine"—cannot ever be truly resolved as long as our constructions of the body remain unchanged. Feminism as we know it is codependent upon the same structures it aims to fight against; it cannot exist without accepting and acknowledging the systems that are already in place. In this acceptance and acknowledgement, true progress becomes implausible. The real problem, the core prison, is the body itself. A body identified as female will never be equal, as the permissions involved in making this so would require male-identifying bodies and those who claim masculinity as an agent of power to systematically relinquish primary aspects of their privilege and provide reparation for complex histories of institutionalized disenfranchisement and silencing. In a society that rewards a body for being born male, and equates ascendancy with masculinity, hoping for the aforementioned relinquishing is somewhat of a delusion. The body has been manipulated as a tool of coercive culture-making, and it is the desperate resistance to let go of material constructions of the body that make the aspiration toward "equality" somewhat trite, and draw attention to the fact that in order to evolve past these outdated systems, a new system needs to be put into place. Working within the systems that have failed us, with the same tools and language that have undermined us, will ultimately ruin us. The institution of the body is cancered, and it is time now to let it expire—or to kill it off ourselves.

Enter: the glitch.

There are two facets of the glitch. The first borrows from the rhetoric of the sexual revolutions of the '60s, '70s and '80s and has the goal of unwrapping a new form of intimacy that has yet to get the air time it deserves. This is the aspect of the glitch that is, as noted in *The Glitch Feminist Manifesto*, " . . . the rainbowed spinning wheel, the pixilated hiccup, the frozen screen, or the buffering signal that acts as a fissure, that jars us into recognition of the separation of our physical selves from the body that immerses itself in fantasy when participating in sexual activity online." (Russell, "Digital Dualism And The Glitch Feminism Manifesto", *The Society Pages*, 2012) The second facet highlighted in this manifesto is the element of the corpus. This can be approached as a sliding between identifications, a nod toward trans politic that extends beyond the notion of "trans" as fixed to modifying notions of assigned sex, the psychology of gender, and the histories of self-naming, but rather *trans* as a means of extrapolating liminal variations of *self*. *Trans-* is a Latin noun, but also a prefix that means *across, beyond, through,* or *on the opposite side*. Judith Butler observes: "A male in his stereotype, is a person who is unable to cope with his own femininity." (Judith Butler and Beatriz Preciado, *Têtu* magazine interview, April 20, 2012) Conversely, a woman, in her "stereotype", is a person unable to cope with her own masculinity. Thus, the glitch encourages a slipping across, beyond, and through the stereotypical materiality of the corpus, extending beyond a coping mechanism in its offering of new transfigurations of corporeal sensuality.

Philosopher and "countersexual" Beatriz Preciado calls this a " . . . process of virtual transformation", noting that the "widen[ing of the scope of] sexuality . . . [means leaving] the body and turning . . . towards an immaterial, informative, if not actually a digital space" (Beatriz Preciado, Buffalo Zine). In the same interview Preciado queries, " . . . the question we can ask ourselves is if this technical transformation of sexuality will be useful for the old genre—masculine/ feminine—and sexuality—hetero/ homo—reaffirmation, or if it will give rise to new political configurations that will escape from the norm . . ." Vicky Kirby dubs this issue "the problematic nature of corporeality" (Kirby, *Telling the Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal*, 1997); N. Katherine Hayles attends to it by musing on a potential "erasure of embodiment" (Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 1999); Carolyn Guertin hails these next steps as "a celebration of multiplicity" (Guertin, *Gliding Bodies*, 2002).

There was a time when the word "queer" was confined solely to the realm of the pejorative. "Glitch" as a term within technocultures is also often placed within a similar category, steeped in negative connotations. The reclamation of *queer* is to material body politic as *glitch* is to digital corporeality; the two are, to use a term coined by Lauren Berlant, inherently "juxtapolitical" (Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 2008). Thus, *glitch* offers up a queering of constructions of the body within digital practice, carrying forward the torch lit by groups such as ACT UP or Gran Fury in respect to queerdom, or collectives like the Old Boys' Network with their "100 Anti-Theses of Cyberfeminism," the VNS Matrix, or SubRosa, as linked to cyberfeminist histories. *The Glitch Feminist Manifesto* observes:

"In a society that conditions the public to find discomfort or outright fear in the errors and malfunctions of our socio-cultural mechanics—illicitly and implicitly encouraging an ethos of "Don't rock the boat!"—a "glitch" becomes an apt metonym. Glitch Feminism, however, embraces the causality of "error", and turns the gloomy implication of glitch

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imperialist wrecking-ball of globalization—processes that continue to enact violence on all bodies—may not, in fact, be an error at all, but rather a much-needed erratum. This glitch is a correction to the "machine", and, in turn, a positive departure."

The glitch body is inherently a threat to normative systems, just as digital geography is a threat to those who uphold the fantasy of that which is "real life". The concept of future-building has to be reexamined within the trajectory of digital practice. What it is to "make" and "reproduce", to "replicate" and to "disseminate", all take on new meanings within digital communities, meanings that are yet to be fully examined, or even have their potential realized in entirety.

AFK and *IRL* are Westernized myths, dualities that support the notion that what happens online does not have the capacity to impact and affect real change. Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and the recent the London riots are all prominent illustrations of the continuous loop between that which takes place on and off screen. Just as it has taken centuries to shape the structures that support the binaries that largely limit gender within our society to "male" or "female", so we find ourselves at the genesis of that journey within digital practice, signifying that we have an opportunity to resist repeating history, making the same mistakes, and falling victim to plugging in the same archaic modes of heteronormativity that have come to dominate world systems beyond our screens. Glitch Feminism and the construction of the glitch body transforms error—what Preciado has called in her "Queer: History of a Word" (2009) an "injury history"—into something that promises to be productive and, what's more, a galvanizing force for the politic of embodiment.

As long as we are lulled into believing that world-making within digital geographies and practice cannot be a breeding ground for new constructions of identity, politic, sociality, and potentiality, we limit ourselves to mimicking and replicating the same structures that

have wounded us throughout history. It is up to us to begin to realize these new paths, and re-route. System error, commence—let the #GLITCH begin.

Legacy Russell (LEGACY) is a writer, artist, and curator. She has worked at and produced programs for The Bruce High Quality Foundation, Creative Time, the Brooklyn Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY. Legacy is one-third of the curatorial production team Limited Time Only. In September 2011, she was appointed as Art Editor of BOMB Magazine's renowned online journal, BOMBlog, where she has since stayed on as a Contributing Editor. Outside of BOMB, her work can be found in a variety of publications: DIS, Canteen, The Well & Often Reader, Exit Strata, The Society Pages, Guernica, berfrois, and beyond. Her most recent performance, "The Initiation", debuted December 2012 as a commission for The Museum of Arts and Design in New York.

A candidate for an MRes of Visual Culture at Goldsmiths University in London, her creative and academic work explores mourning, remembrance, iconography, and idolatry within the public realm. Follow her on Twitter: @LegacyRussell.

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