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## The Dialectics of Engendering: A Feminist Perspective on the Right to Communicate

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«Dialectique de la sexualisation :  
une perspective féministe sur le droit à communiquer»

[\(French version\)](#)

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### ▲ Abstract

This paper provides a brief summary and analysis of some of the central tensions and debates arising out of the Gender Perspectives Working Group of the Virtual Conference on the Right to Communicate and the Communication of Rights, hosted in the summer of 1998 by Videazimut. The paper explores three central dialectical openings: virtual reembodiment, space and place, and regroupment and agitation in counter public spheres.

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**Key words:** gender, right to communicate, engendering, public sphere, feminist practice, technology, Internet, embodiment, dialectical opening, hybrid, cyberfeminism.



### ▲ Summary

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### ▲ Introduction

American feminist media scholar, Lana Rakow, while considering the question which haunts feminist treatments of technology - is technology gendered? - suggests that technologies are, in fact, gendered because they "both constitute and express a model of social relationships. The contemporary meaning and experience of gender does not exist somewhere outside of and distinct from technology; gender is articulated through it" (Rakow, 1988: 68). Drawing upon Rakow, I suggest that we can say that technology engenders, namely that it is both product, and productive, of gendered social relations.

In the summer of 1998, I had the opportunity to serve as the Moderator of one of five on-line working groups during the Videazimut Virtual Conference on the Right to Communicate and the Communication of Rights. For a period of five weeks, approximately 40 women "spoke", and approximately 50 more "listened", in an online contemplation of the intersection of gender and the right to communicate. What better forum in and through which to contemplate processes of technological engendering than in the Gender Perspectives Working Group of a virtual conference?

Both the process and the content of this virtual experience offer an interesting interrogation of virtual conferencing and cyberfeminism. In this brief essay, I explore some of the major lines of discussion in the working group. Rather than presenting a summary, however, I attempt to situate the problematics and issues in a broader context of debates in virtual spaces and politics, interrogating cyberfeminism as a virtual political practice.

The first question which must of course be asked, is why a gender perspectives working group at all? Did this result in the marginalization of gender concerns to one working group? Inevitably. Would the concerns, issues, voices have been heard had the group not been marked? I am not sure. Perhaps the more interesting questions arise when one moves away from the binary all-or-nothing-choice of separation versus integration, of outside versus inside, to consider the dialectical openings created in and through these very tensions, to appropriate a term used during the conference by Bram Abramson and Alain Ambrosi. Dialectical openings change questions from either/or to both/and. The contemplation of an issue as a dialectical opening refuses closure, refuses determination, but rather, creates space, simultaneously holding in tension (and in play) competing, if not conflicting, notions. Dialectical openings produce, rather than conclude. The virtual conference environment, with its multi-thread conversations, time-lagged interventions, and multiple voices, resulted in a non-linear, unresolved, space of possibility.

As both an engagement with the content of the Gender Perspectives Working Group, but also as an exploration of the process of feminist virtual conferencing (virtually feminist conferencing?), I explore three dialectical openings which engender, and were engendered, within our group. These three openings sit at the curious hybrid that is the virtual conference: virtual reembodiment, space and place, and practices of regroupment and agitation.

### ▲ 1. Virtual Reembodiment

Attending a conference is an intensely embodied experience. You may meet people "in person" whose work you have only read, or whom you have met previously only by e-mail; you may stay up too late,

get up too early, or perhaps over-indulge in bodily activities; the labour of the body has often raised the necessary travel money. Often a dynamic develops when a group of diverse women's bodies come together in space and time - an energy is generated that individuals take away with them and use to motivate their activities long after the conference concludes. Bodies also constitute sites of contestation within gender discourse, the markers of sexed difference, of gender performance, of race, of age, of class, and sometimes of sexuality. Bodies mean. Particularly at conferences exploring questions of gender.

But what do bodies mean in cyberspace? What of the claims made by technothorists ranging from Sherry Turkle (1995), Howard Rheingold (1991), Shannon McRae (1996), Mark Dery (1996), and others, that identity as inscribed on material bodies is rewritten/reworked in cyberspace? In this reworking, what becomes of the sexed body? What dilemmas does this pose for a political practice for which the sexed body is while not definitive, never irrelevant? Notwithstanding more than a decade of interrogations of our cyborg selves, in feminist practice, the notion of the body, at least, remains.

The repressed returns in questions of who has access to events such as virtual conferences - overwhelmingly, participation derives from a body situated within a learning institution, a body in the North, a body with an adequate technological cultural capital. Working Group participants were exclusively English speaking, overwhelmingly from industrialized countries, with an obvious comfort level with on-line communication practices. Resources of the conference did not permit community access point to be set up, nor training to be offered to women who might need it to participate. Access certainly engendered participation in our working group.

The repressed returns as a site of negotiation, of resistance, of struggle. Women's bodies have long been the site of medical, legal, political, and social surveillance, discipline, and violence. The international nature of the virtual conference evidenced the differential imbrication of women's bodies in webs of media globalization, consumer capitalism, and technological convergence. Some women struggle for visibility, others for voice, others for control over the representations of their bodies. Ironically, or not, in the medium continually touted in the Western popular press as a liminal zone of disembodiment, feminist discussion of the right to communicate sought to ground practices in embodied citizens.

In this way, there was a virtual reembodyment in our space of potential disembodiment. This played itself out in two ways. First, as is often the case in fora marked with 'gender', gender became a signifier for woman, rather than a marker of a multiplicity of sexes, sexualities, and identities. The Gender Perspectives Working Group became a woman's group, considering debates of feminist practice. The ways in which online practice constructs masculinity did not arise. Men did not participate in the group. Gender as social construct became fixed to the female body, virtually reembodying the online interaction.

Second, virtual reembodyment within the conference was evidenced in a moving past simple notions of disembodiment through information technology to the recognition of the Internet as a site for one of many political, and communicative, practices. While interaction took place without bodily contiguity, participants' discourse was very aware of the embodied nature of women's oppression, and of an effective feminist political practice - both online and off. Virtual environments, strategies, and discussion spaces were seen as a way to explore and resist the exercise of gendered power on women's bodies and to explore ways to communicate with less gender hierarchy than state-controlled or market-based modes of communication.

## ▲ 2. Space and Place

In addition to being a site of virtual reembodyment, cyberspace, the Net, the Web, is defined as spatial.

Michael Heim echoes the claims of many when he frames the space in cyberspace. Cyberspace supplants physical space. We see this happening already in the familiar cyberspace of on-line communication. When on line, we break free from bodily existence. Telecommunication offers an unrestricted freedom of expression and personal contact, with far less hierarchy and formality than are found in the primary social world. The computer network appears as a godsend in providing fora for people to gather in surprisingly personal proximity without the physical limitations of geography, time zones, or conspicuous social status (Heim, 1993 : 99). Yet what of Michel de Certeau's distinction between space (*espace*) and place (*lieu*)?

De Certeau suggests that a place is an order in which elements are distributed in relationships; the law of the "proper" applies to place. "A place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability" (de Certeau, 1984: 117). Space occurs at the intersection of mobile events, "actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it" (de Certeau, 1984: 117). Unlike place, space is unstable and not governed by the law of the proper. We write stories that constantly transform spaces into places and places into spaces (de Certeau, 1984: 118). Space is therefore produced from practices and interactions, not delimited by legal boundaries; it is volatile, mobile. Place is mapped space, defined and delimited, of an order which can be managed. How do many on-line practices rewrite space as place?

Virtual conferencing attempts to collapse certain boundaries of place, permitting interactions which might otherwise not be possible; at the same time, a conference succeeds in part through its success in generating a space. Too often, perhaps, the assumption is that the Internet as a medium is always, already spatial. Perhaps not surprisingly in such a virtual conference, the Internet emerged as a complex, and yet, doubled-edged tool of resistance and political change for women. A number of participants suggested the Internet as a preferred medium of speech for women; one participant described it as a "superb vehicle for mass activism on gender imbalance around the globe". Others challenged that perspective, concerned over access, relevance, and domination of the North.

The tension between space and place arose in explorations of questions of information technologies and public policy. Calls were made for the greater regulation of online access, for greater efforts on the part of states and service providers to ensure that women have the opportunity to get online. The challenge of how to limit regulation to access, and not activity, inevitably arises, namely how to maintain and mediate virtual interaction as both space and place. Space and place co-exist in our on-line practices opening up possibilities of actions not feasible in the face of the governors of geographical location, in the face of existing cartological constraints. At the same time, humility is required in reading our stories of rewriting (and perhaps redoing) place into space. Is the global information society truly without its lines of latitude and longitude? How do our stories of mapping space, our spatial cartologies, produce place?

### ▲ 3. Regroupment and Agitation

In a recent contemplation of the construction of on-line activity, two scholars note, "Because of [its] proclaimed emancipation from the pitfalls of embodiment, cyberspace is now offered as the panacea for the perceived deficiencies of contemporary cultural and political organizations" (Gunkel and Gunkel, 1997: 130). I agree and suggest more specifically, that online interaction is offered as a digital public sphere, reminiscent of Jürgen Habermas' formulation (1989). The Internet, including its pockets of online working groups, becomes an ideal and idealized space of communicative action, a space where one practices one's citizenship through one's communicative practice, and where one is evaluated on the merits of one's ability to communicate effectively and with reason. I draw on the work of Nancy Fraser, in her still productive analysis, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy" (1989) to interrogate the assumptions of this model,

gendered and otherwise.

At the heart of the liberal public sphere, and of online conferencing I suggest, is a discourse of publicity where a space characterized by accessibility, rationality, and the suspension of hierarchies is produced by citizens. Fraser correctly recognizes that this discourse of publicity is, itself, "deployed as a strategy of distinction" (Fraser, 1989: 57) and creates "a space of zero degree culture" (Fraser, 1989: 64).

Fraser challenges the historical origins, and thus the claims to authenticity, of the single public sphere with the characteristics noted by Habermas and so desired by proponents of democratic online culture. Recognizing that history has produced many different publics and that a number of competing publics may well produce more and better democracy, she calls for subaltern counterpublics, or "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser, 1989: 67). She suggests that "in stratified societies, subaltern counterpublics have a dual character. On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics" (Fraser, 1989: 68). The emancipatory power of the subaltern(et) counterpublic resides in that difficult dialectic.

In the Gender Perspectives Working Group of the Virtual Conference, there were numerous calls for a politics of separatism, reaffirming the need for withdrawal and regroupment. The Internet can be used effectively as a tool in that practice. Less in evidence was the effective use of subaltern counterpublics as training grounds for the production of effective, alternative norms of public speech, effective counterdiscourse. These difficulties were evidenced particularly within attempts to develop a feminist public policy practice. How to engage in a communicative practice which has the legitimacy to be heard, but which remains agitational? How to avoid being part of yet another "list" of recommendations about questions of access, gender, and telecommunications which has no effectivity? How to shift the terrain of policy discourse away from corporate parlance and parties, towards meaningful citizenship rights, for women and men.

To participate in any public sphere, women must be both visible and have a voice, a status not yet, and not easily, achieved within some contexts. Perhaps in the rejection of the marketized model of the single liberal public sphere, and the embrace of a diversity of subaltern counterpublic spheres, women can produce autonomous public zones for democratic practices, including specifically feminist practices. The Internet is but one tool in that process; it does not replace struggles over, and public zones created by, other forms of media. The Gender Perspectives Working Group evidenced clearly that public policy struggles have not gone "out of date" with the shift from state to market regulation -- they may be more important than ever. The practices of training for feminist agitational activities directed towards wider publics is at the heart of a right to communicate which is always, already about women, too.

#### ▲ 4. Engendering possibilities

In a sense, my musings have really been about two hybrids, the virtual conference and cyberfeminism, both of which function as "chimerical, condensed word forms that are cobbled together without-benefit-of-hyphen in the hyperspace of the New World Order, Inc., ... communicat[ing] the promiscuously fused and transgenic quality of its domains by a kind of visual onomatopoeia" (Haraway, 1997: 3). What this hybridity makes clear is that practices of binary orderings may have to be replaced by an exploration of dialectical openings, hybrid possibilities, in the pursuit of a right to communicate which is about rewriting our practices of power, gendered and otherwise. Information and media technologies are critical to this process for as Arturo Escobar suggests "any technology



represents a cultural invention, in the sense that it brings forth a world; it emerges out of particular cultural conditions and in turn helps to create new ones" (Escobar, 1994: 211). And the work of creating new cultural conditions, is at the heart of a meaningful right to communicate for women, at the heart of engendering new possibilities.

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