

The body as a site of maintenance and innovation: Gendered labor divisions in wellness and body modification practices

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Theme: Labor, Technology, and Social Orders

Two years ago, I made the decision to undergo LASIK eye surgery. Within the span of minutes, I transitioned from needing glasses or contacts immediately upon waking to having 20/20 vision “naturally.” At the time, I was working at a technology company in the San Francisco Bay Area. Some reactions from my friends were as follows:

“That is so cool!”

“That is so terrifying!”

“So, you basically have robot eyes now?”

And, *“You’re a cyborg!”*

Fast forward to two years later, and I am a PhD student in Science and Technology Studies at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. I am preparing a paper for the Maintainers conference, and I tell my friends that I will be speaking on a panel entitled “Bodies.” Some responses I receive are as follows:

“That’s hot!”

“That sounds sexy!”

And finally, the succinct but illustrative: *“Bodies! Wow!”*

It is precisely this distinction between *cool* (or technologically impressive) and *hot* (or sexualized) that I hope to unpack further in this research—an inquiry that is not

seeking to merely describe popular semantics, but rather to make visible the hidden structures that organize the cultural understandings and valuations of the body and technology, which also extend into academic scholarship.

In Chapter 4 of *The Woman in the Body*, Emily Martin (1992) paints the broader picture within which our society constructs the definition of *labor*, which is significant to the theme of this year's Maintainers conference. She states, "In our way of thinking, as we have seen, the sphere of home and the sphere of work are sharply divided. Labor at a factory seems very different to us than housework or a woman's labor in childbirth because the one is sought and paid for in the marketplace whereas the others are not" (65-66). Martin finds ultimate irony in the fact that the exact same word, "labor," is used to describe what women do in childbirth and what all people do to produce things of value in a marketplace. Labor becomes a double bind for women—a construct within which their bodies are consistently exploited, and yet their worth is systematically ignored.

This, I would argue, is also the condition of current body and technology scholarship. The work of studying the body is placed upon those most invested in dismantling sexist, racist, and ableist viewpoints. Others can continue to study "technology" as if it were an artifact outside of themselves: an object inherently worth inquiry because of its link to cultural creativity, innovation, and productivity—not sex, reproduction, and the body. In my research, I've identified two literatures in which Anne Balsamo's (1997) "technologies of the gendered body" control the meanings that are made through and in conjunction with embodied, physical experience. They do so through the *apparatus* of gender, the

term apparatus referring to Foucault's original name for technology, or "the process of connection between discursive practices, institutional relations, and material effects that, working together, produce a meaning or a 'truth effect' for the human body" (Balsamo 1997, 21). Drawing upon Foucault's (1988) technologies of the self and Teresa de Lauretis' (1987) critique of Foucault's technologies of sex, Balsamo's technologies of the gendered body inform my analysis as I highlight biases against "natural," "feminine," and "body" technologies and begin to question what counts as "innovation" within two case studies: body modification and yoga.

Case Study 1: Body Modification, Gender, and Technology

The body modification literature is vast, including diverse practices such as tattoos, piercings, weight loss surgery, bodybuilding, and implanted digital devices. Given my time constraints, I focus on two chapters of *In the Flesh*, an empirical account published by Victoria Pitts (now Victoria Pitts-Taylor) in 2003. In her second chapter, she outlines a contested aspect of female body modification: the question of whether it liberates women from patriarchal cultural logics, or reinforces sexist expectations by encouraging women to undertake body projects that promote beauty and fitness. While some radical feminists view body modification as adornment, or just another form of female sexualization and gender inequality, others have argued that it depends on the content—if subcultural body modification is presenting a contradiction to normative ideals, it could be seen as a form of resistance.

A stark contrast to feminine body modification can be found later in the book in Chapter 5. The iconic image of the cyberpunk, fueled partly by popular science

fiction, is one of individual technical control, social rebellion, and active creation rather than passive consumption. Cyberpunk body modification includes more extreme technological experiments, such as the “third hand” of Stelarc¹—a performance artist who connects a third, mechanical arm to his body that is powered by the electrical signals of his muscles. Interestingly, cyberpunk body modifiers are said to employ a discourse that seeks to *deny* the body or argue for its obsolescence. Pitts-Taylor notes: “The disappearing body is often equated with freedom from the effects of power” (178). This disappearance, I would like to argue, implies that the technology used to transcend the body is what is considered innovative—not the flesh and blood of the body itself. The technology used, of course, remains embedded within societal power relations even when it attempts to rid us of them.

While Pitts-Taylor does question the individualistic, power-laden practices of cyberpunk body modifiers, she doesn’t explicitly address the way that gender is imbricated in the value of different body modification practices and their perceived contributions to technological innovation and progress. If tattoos are defined as sexy and cyberpunk body hacking is defined as a new, albeit morally troubling², form of technology, what does that imply about *who* is expected to create and innovate in the field of technology? Interestingly, it is a body hacker who has written the most comprehensive critique I have found on this subject. Rose Eveleth astutely states in the title of her recent online article: “Bodyhackers are all around you, they’re called women” (Eveleth 2010). She begins her piece with a compelling confession: “I have two cyborg implants. One is in my hand, and it lets me unlock

phones and doors by waving at them. The other is in my uterus, and it lets me control my own fertility.” She then questions why the smoke and mirrors of an implantable RFID chip garners a more intense reaction from people than an IUD—pointing to the link between technology and masculinity as the cause of this bias. To bring it back to my opening anecdote: the RFID chip (like LASIK) is linked to technological progress, while the IUD (like body research) is linked to sex. I will use my next case study of yoga as an opportunity to build on this powerful assertion.

Case Study 2: Yoga—Bodily maintenance or technological innovation?

Yoga has emerged as a topic of academic inquiry in fields such as history, cultural studies, and sociology, but is less understood from a Science and Technology Studies perspective. Lavrence and Lozanski (2014) analyze the ethos of Canadian yoga apparel company, lululemon athletica, in order to illuminate the intersection of neoliberalism, self-discipline, and consumption in the branding of yoga products, of which women are the primary audience. Their research therefore understands yoga as a practice where women’s subordination is forced upon them under the guise of personal liberation, much like feminist critiques of body modification practices. Within this logic, yoga is viewed as an embodied maintenance of neoliberal biopower.

In spite of sociological critiques of yoga and pop satire of larger self-care, self-help, and self-improvement conversations³, yoga is now a 27 billion dollar industry (Berila 2010) that is on the rise in American culture. But is yoga innovation? Is it body hacking? Based on our current definitions of technology, *could* it be? Or perhaps most importantly—*should* it be? If innovation is linked to

economic value and power, perhaps a more inclusive definition of innovation is necessary. While acknowledging the reality of unequal access to yoga and problematic interpretations of yogic practice, more recent yoga scholarship interprets yoga as embodied resistance. The edited collection entitled *Yoga, the Body, and Embodied Social Change: An Intersectional Feminist Analysis* (Berila, Klein, and Jackson Roberts 2016) highlights the potential of yoga to challenge and heal oppression.

Nonetheless, a quick review of circulating popular media shows certain trends in how yoga is portrayed. One portrayal, as mentioned previously, mocks yoga as a neoliberal fad taken up by thin, wealthy, white women who are too self-absorbed to care enough about real social change. A second popular portrayal reports on the proven benefits of yoga, legitimating an “ancient” practice through modern technoscientific means. According to this view, yoga is a practice that is good for the brain⁴, which should be performed by everyone⁵. The controlled breathing of yogic practice and meditation are valuable because they have proven benefits that calm the nervous system⁶. The list goes on. A third portrayal focuses on superhuman-type yogis who have managed to live exceptionally healthy, long lives through their yogic practice. Ninety-year-old women are shown in the midst of impressive physical contortion, defying the presumed limits of the decaying human body⁷.

The discourses that both approve of and critique yoga, therefore, are lined with the same biases *against* the flawed, human body and its close association with feminine “nature” and *for* the technology and science that masters and intellectually

explains the body. The radical potential of yoga is relegated to a consumerist, vain, and sometimes freakshow-like form of bodily maintenance and physical *labor* that is, like the labor described by Emily Martin, performed mostly by women. Following these logics, who can innovate, who creates technology, and by what physical means? As developed within this paper and planned for my future work, I intend to frame and investigate yoga as a practice that moves beyond neoliberalism and even beyond resistance. How might we look at yoga, the “ancient” practice, in the same way we have once looked at LASIK and RFID implants? How might we understand it as something exciting, innovative, and new?

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Notes

¹ See <http://stelarc.org/?catID=20265> Accessed March 17, 2017

² See <http://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/03/10/468556420/body-hacking-movement-rises-ahead-of-moral-answers> Accessed March 17, 2017

³ For recent examples, see <https://mobile.nytimes.com/2016/11/26/opinion/sunday/actually-lets-not-be-in-the-moment.html> and <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-politics-of-selfcare> Accessed March 17, 2017

⁴ See https://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/06/01/yoga-may-be-good-for-the-brain/?_r=0 Accessed March 18, 2017

⁵ See <https://www.nytimes.com/well/guides/beginner-yoga> Accessed March 18, 2017

⁶ See <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/09/well/mind/breathe-exhale-repeat-the-benefits-of-controlled-breathing.html> Accessed March 18, 2017

⁷ For recent examples, see <http://nypost.com/2015/09/29/a-97-year-old-yogis-tips-for-living-a-long-life/> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/26/fashion/tao-porchon-lynch-oldest-living-yoga-celebrity.html> Accessed March 18, 2017