

# “Computer Cowboys” and “Ass-kicking Techno-babes” Challenging Cyberpunk’s Conventional Representations of Gender and Sexuality in the Futuristic Digital World of *Moxyland*

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## Summary

This article analyses the effects created by Lauren Beukes through her use of the cyberpunk genre in her first novel, *Moxyland* (2008). Because of its challenge to conventional ideas of embodiment and identity formation, together with its counter-cultural punk ethos, cyberpunk would seem to offer the prospect of transgressive versions of gender and sexuality. However, various critics note that instead of realising this potential, cyberpunk endorses heterosexual masculinity in its narratives, while repressing or marginalising the feminine and homosexual relations. In *Moxyland*, Beukes actively engages with the conventions of cyberpunk in order to subvert such reactionary reiterations and the conventional gendered power structures that underpin them. Through techniques such as exaggeration, splitting and exploring contrasted forms of masculinity she criticises the cyberpunk genre’s conventional treatment of gender, as well as the patriarchal power relations it promotes. Beukes also refutes cyberpunk’s tendency to restrict the transgressive potential of its empowered female characters by portraying them in terms of sexualised femininity. She challenges essentialist notions of gender as she depicts women characters in active relation to technology. Her version of the female cyborg conveys a potentially transgressive blending of technology and biology, dramatised outside the conventional lens of the masculine gaze.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel ontleed die effekte wat Lauren Beukes bewerkstellig deur haar gebruik van die kubernpunkgenre in haar eerste roman, *Moxyland* (2008). Omdat dit konvensionele idees van verpersoonliking en identiteitsvorming in twyfel trek, en ook vanweë die teenkulturele punk-etos, sou ’n mens dink dat kubernpunk die moontlikheid van oorskrydende voorstellings van geslag en seksualiteit bied. Verskeie kritici wys egter daarop dat pleks daarvan om hierdie potensiaal te verwesenlik, kubernpunk heteroseksuele manlikheid in sy verhale steun terwyl die vroulike en homoseksuele verhoudings onderdruk of gemarginaliseer word. In *Moxyland* werk Beukes aktief met die konvensies van kubernpunk ten einde sodanige reaksionêre herhalings en die

konvensionele geslagsgebonde magstrukture wat dit onderlê, omver te werp. Deur tegnieke soos oordrywing, ondervdeling en verkenning van teenstellende vorme van manlikheid, kritiseer sy die kubernpunk-genre se konvensionele hantering van geslag, sowel as die patriargale magsverhoudings wat dit bevorder. Beukes weerlê ook kubernpunk se geneigdheid om die oorskrydende potensiaal van sy bemagtigde vroulike karakters te beperk deur hulle uit te beeld vanuit die oogpunt van geseksualiseerde vroulikheid. Sy betwis essensialistiese denkbeelde van geslag, aangesien sy vrouekarakters uitbeeld in aktiewe verwantskap tot tegnologie. Haar weergawe van die vroulike kuborg dra 'n potensieel oorskrydende vermenging van tegnologie en biologie oor – gedramatiseer buite die konvensionele lens van die sturende manlike blik.

Lauren Beukes's first novel, *Moxyland* (2008), is set in a near-future version of Cape Town featuring numerous advanced technological innovations. The society depicted in the novel is clearly bifurcated, exaggerating present socio-economic conditions in South Africa through its depiction of the divide between the wealthy, but corrupt, "Corporates" and the impoverished "Rurals" whom the Corporates control through advanced technology. The novel is focalised in alternating chapters by four young characters, Toby, Tendeka, Lerato and Kendra, as they attempt to rebel against the system in varying ways. *Moxyland* has been categorised by many scholars as a typically cyberpunk novel (e.g. Stobie 2012; Smith 2012; Alexander 2015), and through this genre Beukes explores a number of social issues that are relevant to South Africa at present, particularly in terms of capitalism and globalisation. Through the characterisation of her four protagonists Beukes considers the influence of technology on the physical and social lives of individuals, and challenges problematic conventions with regard to the cyberpunk genre's established representations of masculinity and femininity.

Cyberpunk is a sub-genre of science fiction that typically depicts a technologically-enhanced urban society set in a near future. This future is conventionally dystopian, portraying a reality in which "globalisation and capitalism have led to the rule of multinational conglomerates, while marginalised individuals live in a post-industrial setting defined by cold metal technology, virtual reality and crime" (Lavigne 2013: 11). Cyberpunk considers how digital and cybernetic innovations have altered the human condition, addressing this theme with "the anti-establishment attitude of punk" (Harrison 2012: 210). The world of cyberpunk is a dark one, and frequently features themes such as murder, drug use, prostitution, and war alongside its central preoccupation with technology (Heineman 2012), within a setting of urban decay (Cavallaro 2000).

Cyberpunk has gained recognition as a socially significant literary genre because of the marked connection it draws between the historical present in which it is written and the fictional future it imagines. Although the technological features it depicts are usually not (yet) realistic elements of our world, the society that cyberpunk portrays is one "we can easily imagine our own one becoming, located somewhere between a simple fiction and the

‘facts’ of the present day” (Harrison 2012: 212). Cyberpunk narratives thus typically base their fictional elements on technological and societal features of the present, extrapolating them to extreme, but not entirely impossible, future imaginings. Cyberpunk offers potentially insightful commentary on our present, given its ability to dramatise recognisable versions of the modern predicament and gesture towards the potential implications of contemporary social changes (Balsamo 1996).

Stylistically, cyberpunk narratives are fast-paced and typically postmodern in their deliberate blurring of the lines between reality and fiction, their fragmented presentation, their references to popular culture and their use of technical jargon (Heineman 2012). Jenny Wolmark draws attention to cyberpunk’s status as a hybrid genre, claiming that it displays a “self-conscious crossing of generic boundaries, both within popular culture and across the binary division between high and popular culture” (2013: 119). Cyberpunk is influenced by numerous genres, including science fiction, hardboiled detective fiction, dystopian narratives, postmodernist fiction, and the Gothic (Cavallaro 2000). Its preoccupation with the “revolutionary redefinition of the relationship between humans and machines brought about by the science of cybernetics” (Cavallaro 2000: 12) is furthermore connected to an attitude of punk resistance to mainstream culture, effectively linking ideas of science, logic and control, with those of rebellion, anarchy and chaos in order to “represent a paradoxical culture riven by conflict and contradiction” (19). This punk attitude is clearly identifiable in cyberpunk’s commitment to showing “how and why dominant ideologies marginalise dispossessed strata of the population” (20). Cyberpunk also draws on punk’s tendency to employ “highly idiomatic language, a willingness to use obscenity, sensory overload, and an emphasis on paranoia and sexual and psychic violation” (21). Elements of “cyber” and “punk” thus constantly interact in cyberpunk narratives “to produce varying constellations of the relationship between the glossy world of high technology and the murky world of addiction and crime” (24).

Much of the fictional world portrayed in *Moxyland* appears like the real world at present, and references to Cape Town’s famous sites together with issues such as poverty, Aids, and xenophobia position the setting as distinctly South African. The comfort afforded the reader by this realism is, however, quickly interrupted by its commingling with unfamiliar elements. The role of technology is heightened in *Moxyland*’s Cape Town. Cell-phones, for example, are the means by which all monetary transactions take place, and also the means by which the Corporates maintain social control, with police able to administer shocks to offenders through their cell-phones. The harshest punishment dealt by law enforcers is that of disconnecting offenders entirely – “relegated to homeless, out of society, cut from the commerce loop, no phone” (Beukes 2008: 85) – and the Rurals live in constant fear of receiving this sentence. Other fantastical technological elements are slipped into the narrative as normal, everyday features of this world.

*Moxyland* is thus typically cyberpunk in its straddling of the line between reality and fantasy, and in the centrality of technology in the narrative. It is also clearly a dystopian text that extrapolates social issues of the present to problematic imagined extremes. In typical cyberpunk fashion, all signs of a democratically-elected government seem to have dissolved, with only the capitalist-driven corporations remaining as the enforcers of law. The wealthy, powerful Corporates inhabit a different part of the city from the Rurals, who are restricted to disease-ridden slums, and this divide in society is guarded by over-zealous police with technologically-enhanced dogs called Aitos. The punk element of the text is introduced through the attempts of the protagonists to challenge the status quo.

Carlen Lavigne (2013) argues that one of the key preoccupations of cyberpunk is speculation about the perceived changes in human nature and identity that are taking place through the blending of technology and corporeality. A central theme of the genre's consideration of embodiment is the enhancement of the human body through technological means, producing a cyborg. The mixing of the biological and the technological in these narratives has been hailed as a potentially significant transgressive act, producing characters whose identities are fluid and permeable. Although the fusion of the technological and the biological could be seen to herald the disappearance of the body, Danni Cavallero notes that it also opens up opportunities "for experiment, recombination and play" (2000: xv). The potential of the figure of the cyborg is most famously articulated by Donna Haraway (1991), who reveals its metaphoric breaching of the boundaries that delineate various identity categories. She argues that the crossing of the boundary between humans and machines calls into question what it means to be human, and in so doing casts doubt on the dualistic categories that have traditionally been used – including that of gender. Haraway argues that the figure of the cyborg allows for the possibility of envisioning a world that is beyond gender categories.

With its challenge to conventional ideas of embodiment and identity formation, its stylistic impulse to cross borders and mix modes, and its countercultural punk ethos, cyberpunk would seem like a genre ripe for the depiction of transgressive versions of gender and sexuality. However, several critics have argued that cyberpunk has failed to fully explore this potential, and that it instead continues to privilege heterosexual masculinity in its narratives while repressing or marginalising the feminine and non-heterosexual relations (Ertung 2001). David Heineman argues that while gender in cyberpunk should be read as fluid and ambiguous because many characters change their identities through technology, this fluidity is only an illusion, as "it is common for characters to use technology to attain hypermasculine or hyperfeminine ideals of physical appearance or emotional character" (2012: 56). Katherine Harrison (2012) similarly notes that despite the disruptive potential that the genre gleans from its connection to punk, it is limited

through stereotypical representations of masculinity and femininity. Anne Balsamo likewise observes: “The widespread techno-logical refashioning of the ‘natural’ human body suggests that gender, too, would be ripe for reconstruction”; however, “as is often the case when seemingly stable boundaries are displaced by technological innovation (human/artificial, nature/culture), other boundaries are more vigilantly guarded” (1996: 216-217). These boundaries are guarded through the genre’s conventions with regard to the centrality of the male hero in the narrative, and the highly sexualised representations of the secondary female characters who feature in his story.

In *Moxyland* the presence of four protagonists, varied in terms of gender, sexual orientation, race and class, works against the cyberpunk convention of focussing its narratives on a single, male protagonist, and thereby decentres the dominance of this masculinity that many critics have identified as the problematic core of the cyberpunk genre. The traits associated with the archetypal cyberpunk protagonist and his female cyborg sidekick are shared among Toby, Tendeka, Kendra and Lerato, combining with their embodiment of gender and sexuality to interesting effect. By engaging in play with the conventions traditionally employed by the genre Beukes challenges the gendered power structures that underlie them.

Wolmark argues that the cyberpunk genre can be defined not just by contemporaneity but also by an idealised masculinity, making cyberspace a place in which the loss of traditional identity categories becomes something to fear, rather than celebrate. The threat to the gender status quo that is suggested by the interface of humans and machines in the figure of the cyborg is thus most often contained by the cyberpunk narrative through the re-assertion of gender and sexual norms. Despite the genre’s eagerness to cross borders in terms of genre and writing style, Wolmark maintains that cyberpunk narratives persistently retreat from the potential implications of the crossing of gender boundaries. Ceylan Ertung similarly argues that “in most cyberpunk fiction the roles assigned to men and women remain conventionally hierarchical and bifurcated” (2011: 82). He claims that cyberpunk “is thoroughly and insidiously entrenched in the masculine, reiterating (or resuscitating) the sexist attitudes of early science fiction – and patriarchy in general” (81). While the genre offers the revolutionary promise of cyberspace as a gender-free space, it instead replicates gendered power dynamics that perpetuate inequality.

Beukes challenges the dominance of this problematic version of masculinity in *Moxyland* by dividing the key characteristics of the prototypical cyberpunk protagonist between two markedly different characters. The prototypical heroes of cyberpunk narratives are “marginalised male loners who live on the fringes of society trying to manipulate the system’s technological tools for their own profit” (Ertung 2011: 80). It is typically this alienated hacker protagonist who undertakes the key “hero quest” of the narrative, which involves using computer skills to undermine corrupt ruling multinationals.

Toby embodies nearly all of the cyberpunk hero's key qualities to excess, revealed in exaggerated selfishness and sexism, and for most of the novel the reader is encouraged to be critical of the version of masculinity he embodies. Meanwhile, the most positive element of the cyberpunk protagonist, his commitment to engaging in acts of rebellion against the corrupt multinationals who govern his world, is transposed onto the character of Tendeka, who is far more positively portrayed in his embodiment of a principled and compassionate masculinity. Tendeka is also homosexual, which works to undermine the genre's typical glorification of heterosexual masculinity.

Toby traverses the dingier streets of Cape Town undertaking part-time, often illicit, jobs after abandoning a Master's degree in literature and being cut off by his wealthy parents as a result of his drug addiction. He does not cultivate meaningful relationships, but pursues casual affairs with women, and his chapters are written as though he is directly addressing an audience as he records various aspects of life on his BabyStrange (a coat with cameras sewn into it) and publicises them on his streamcast. He describes this as: "Your weekly round-up of Toby's astounding life: good drugs, good music, sexploits with exceptionally beautiful girls, regular skirmishes with the motherbitch, and, most recently, some para-criminal counter-culture activities" (Beukes 2008: 17). Alienated, misogynistic, cynical, steeped in technology, and thriving in a dark world, Toby thus embodies the proto-typical cyberpunk hero. His use of language is, moreover, typically cyber-punk, and his crude expressions are classically punk.

In documenting both his life and the world around him Toby often acts as a kind of informal anthropologist, providing some wry but accurate insights into the way in which his society operates. Wolmark suggests that Toby can therefore be read as a *flâneur* for the modern, digital age; a figure which Petra Désirée Nolan describes as a modern male "urban wanderer and observer" (2004: 63) who records the urban terrain to understand the bewildering contemporary world. The *flâneur* is at home among the crowds of the city; however, he remains detached and alienated, although he is always on the lookout for a desirable woman as he wanders the streets. Toby takes the pursuits of the *flâneur* into a digital realm through the use of his BabyStrange, which he uses to record events in the streets. While he keenly documents his world, however, Toby is selfish and unsympathetic and does not actively participate in trying to change it as Tendeka does.

Detachment and cruelty characterise Toby's interpersonal relationships and he charms his way into forming superficial connections that are useful to him. When he goes to meet Tendeka, who is orchestrating acts of rebellion against the Corporates, for example, it is clear that Toby is only helping Tendeka out of self-interest: "I score quality vid that'll push up my streamcast's rankings, and he gets his exploits recorded for posterity" (Beukes 2008: 14). While Tendeka believes passionately in the fight he is undertaking for the betterment of society, Toby is only involved in the rebellion as it is advantageous to him

personally. He does not appear to harbour any deep ideological concerns about the society he lives in, and cruelly dismisses Tendeka as a “Mr Steve Biko-wannabe” (17).

Toby’s lack of connection with others is clearly demonstrated in his romantic life and the casual attitude he displays towards sex, relationships and cheating. He frames women as irrational and unreasonable for expecting commitment from him, and his narcissism and exploitation of his partners are portrayed problematically. Toby’s tendency to objectify women also connects to the masculine gaze of the *flâneur*, and his search for desirable women in the streets of the city. Drawing on the work of Lacan, Aruna D’Souza and Tom McDonough argue that there are two modes of the male gaze: the scopophilic, which preserves patriarchal power by positioning women as “the objects of an erotic and covetous look” (2006: 10), and the narcissistic, which suggests that “if the look is a way of taking the other as an object, it is actually in an effort to repair a fundamentally lacking self” (10). D’Souza and McDonough argue that the gaze of the *flâneur* can thus, on the one hand, be read “as an assertion of male authority over women on the city streets by recasting them as erotic objects” (10), but on the other, it may be indicative of an unstable masculinity. Aligning themselves with the latter reading, the authors suggest that the *flâneur* could be understood as “an ideological construction or representation that had as its purpose the making invisible of the instability at the heart of masculinity” (10).

Toby’s condescending, and at times vindictive, attitude towards women could thus be interpreted as an act of over-compensation, in a bid to assert an allegiance to a patriarchal ideal which he falls short of in other areas of his life, such as in his lack of career success and financial security. Toby’s unwillingness to connect with women emotionally and his tendency to reduce them to sexual objects enable him to maintain control in his casual relationships, as he feels that this is a domain in which he can exert a masculine dominance which is lacking in other spheres of his life. This desire for control is clearly displayed in his vexation when Kendra initiates sex with him.

While Toby may not embody all the qualities associated with patriarchal hegemonic masculinity, he does assert an allegiance to it through his treatment of women. Beukes constantly encourages readers to be critical of Toby, especially in his attitude to women, and seems to suggest that both this version of masculinity, and a world which idealises it, are problematic. In so doing she mounts an implicit critique of the cyberpunk genre’s conventional treatment of gender, as well as the patriarchal power relations it promotes. She further highlights this point by rendering excessive Toby’s typical cyberpunk version of masculinity, and by her displacement of the one characteristic of the cyberpunk protagonist that is perhaps his most redeeming quality – his commitment to rebellion against the oligarchy – onto another character. In *Moxyland* Toby is merely a sidekick to the “hero quest” undertaken by

Tendeka, who embodies the ideals of the cyberpunk protagonist fighting the evil powers in his world.

Tendeka is Toby's antithesis as a highly principled and compassionate individual, and through his characterisation readers are strongly encouraged to support Tendeka's worldview and understand his desire for change. Although from a middle-class family, Tendeka has chosen to live with the Rurals as he strives to help others and improve society. Tendeka paints a recognisable version of the present reality in South Africa in his angry description of the overcrowding, danger and poor living conditions they are condemned to. Readers are urged to see that these problems will only persist and intensify in the future while those at the top of the power structure refuse to do anything to help those at the bottom.

Tendeka's commitment to helping others is evident on multiple levels, from his personal life, to his community, to society at large. Although Tendeka is heterosexually married, it is soon disclosed that he is actually homosexual, and in a committed relationship with a man named Ashraf. The marriage is a means of helping a refugee named Emmie gain permanent residence in the country. Tendeka and Ashraf also help her financially, and plan to adopt the baby she is expecting. Although less radical than Tendeka, Ashraf is also a compassionate man, and together they run a number of social outreach programmes, including a soccer club in the township where they live, which acts as a safe haven for children.

Tendeka's dedication to his ideals, coupled with his zeal for fighting for tangible change in society, make him an exemplary leader for a revolution, but as the novel progresses he becomes fanatical. Although Tendeka's reasons for wanting to oppose the corporates are legitimate, his commitment to doing so reaches radical heights after he makes an online acquaintance with someone known only by his on-screen moniker "skyward"\* , who recruits Tendeka to run a number of protest operations in the city. Tendeka encourages a number of street children to take part in a protest mission, reasoning that as these children are already disconnected, they have nothing to lose in engaging in illegal acts of resistance against the Corporates. Readers are inclined to side with Ashraf, who is furious that Tendeka is willing to risk the lives of children.

Ashraf's worst fears are realised when the police release the M7N1 Marburg virus at the protest, and everybody present becomes infected. The virus is fatal to those who do not check into a vaccine centre within a few hours, where they will surely face severe consequences. As Tendeka lies dying in an alleyway the reader realises that he is unwittingly to blame for sending numerous people to their deaths. It furthermore transpires that skyward\* was never an activist, but an agent provocateur inciting a rebellion by the Rurals that would give the police reason to increase measures against them. Tendeka's desperation to bring about change makes him an easy target for manipulation, and he unintentionally becomes instrumental in the decimation of the very people he is trying to save. The reader's criticism of Tendeka is



tempered by constant reminders that his faults stem from a desperate desire to improve a deeply problematic society. While both Toby and Tendeka identify problems in their society, Toby never shows any inclination to try and help anyone but himself, and Tendeka’s passion contrasts favourably with Toby’s apathy. Tendeka and Ashraf’s relationship is also portrayed as loving and respectful, unlike most of the heterosexual relationships in the novel, which are generally characterised by casual sex. While Tendeka is a flawed character, the version of masculinity that he represents is preferable to Toby’s. The end of the novel, which sees Tendeka dying a gruesome death while Toby survives, thus urges the reader to critically consider the influence that the society portrayed in the novel has on these representations.

As Tendeka’s body begins to rapidly deteriorate he convinces Toby to record his final moments so that proof of the Corporates’ actions can be published online as his last act of protest. Toby has unknowingly been passed a form of nanotechnology from Kendra through their sexual encounter, which is working to eliminate the virus from his body. As he starts to feel better, he becomes convinced that the virus is not real and treats the situation as a joke. It is only when Tendeka dies a ghastly death that epitomises cyberpunk’s preoccupation with the grotesque, that Toby’s humanity is glimpsed. For the first time Toby conveys some degree of compassion as he breaks down in sobs. When he checks his BabyStrange and finds that Tendeka’s death has been recorded, as per his final request, Toby is relieved and claims that he will honour Tendeka’s wish to ensure that the world sees how he died as a result of the corruption of the Corporates. For a moment, the reader is invited to believe that Toby has undergone a positive personality change, and that perhaps he will continue Tendeka’s fight for a better world.

This moment is, however, short-lived. Once Toby realises that he is safe because of the nano, he quickly regains his nonchalance. He learns that Tendeka is being hunted down by the police, framed as a terrorist, and he muses: “I have the total sony exclusive on the untimely death of a terrorist. Or a martyr. Depends who’s paying” (Beukes 2008: 289). Toby’s brief moment of compassion for Tendeka, and the cause he was fighting for, is thus quickly erased by an overriding desire for personal advancement, and the end of the novel is left ambiguous, with no certainty provided as to what he will actually do with the footage. Cheryl Stobie argues that Toby’s brief but intense reaction to Tendeka’s death should not be discounted, and suggests that the novel’s open-endedness activates “a heartfelt desire for Toby’s better instincts to prevail, even while experiencing a profound scepticism” (2012: 374). For those in whom this scepticism prevails, Beukes suggests an alternative reading which is still saved from being entirely pessimistic. In an interview with Shaun Green (2014), the author herself suggests that the unlikelihood of Toby undergoing a positive personality change at the close of the novel can, paradoxically, be read as a point of optimism. Given his promiscuous lifestyle, Toby may, Beukes argues, continue to pursue casual

sexual relationships with women, and therefore pass on the nanotech to them, just as Kendra passed it to him. Unintentionally, then, he may gift the disenfranchised with the technology that was manufactured for the Corporates, and the physical benefits that go with it. This is beyond the scope of the actual novel, however, and thus remains but one speculation among many potential readings of the ending, which Beukes allows for by leaving her ending open and ambiguous.

Although the reader is repeatedly encouraged to be critical of Toby it is thus, ironically, with him that hope in the novel is placed. Beukes's decision to do this, rather than placing hope in the more likeable character of Tendeka, may seem to be counterintuitive; however, it invites the reader to be critical of the society in which these events have played out. As many scholars have noted, the deaths of the most sympathetic characters, Tendeka and Kendra, at the end of *Moxyland*, while the most negatively portrayed characters, Toby and Lerato, thrive, highlights the injustice of their society. Through the descriptions of the setting of *Moxyland*, which foreground social and economic problems, Beukes encourages the reader to see the textual world negatively. This criticism is further heightened by the connections she draws between the issues that are prevalent in our historical present and those she presents in the imagined future. That hope in the novel hinges on Toby's most negative qualities – his desire for meaningless sexual encounters and his misogynistic treatment of women – furthermore urges us to question the gender dynamics that are played out in this world. It is Toby's complicity with patriarchal ideals that allows him to survive in this world, and on which hope in the novel depends. Far from suggesting that these should be praised, Beukes's repeated negative positioning of Toby's character suggests that a world where this is possible is deeply flawed. This is reinforced by the largely positive presentation of Tendeka, especially with regard to his relationship with Ashraf. Contemplating Tendeka's gruesome death urges the reader to be critical of a world that has allowed this. With regard to gender and sexuality, a nuanced reading thus suggests that Beukes criticises contemporary society's elevation of detached, casual, hyper-sexualised relationships over committed and loving ones, implying that they work to re-establish a patriarchal status quo despite the feminine agency and nonconformist attitude they seem to espouse. In addition, Beukes's positive representation of homosexuality highlights a propensity for meaningful, loving connections that goes against discourses positioning it as depraved or grotesque. Displacing the most heroic elements of the cyberpunk protagonist onto a homosexual man also undermines the hegemony of heterosexual patriarchal masculinity that is traditionally portrayed in the character.

Beukes's challenge to the version of masculinity conventionally celebrated in cyberpunk narratives is further complemented by the way in which she manipulates the characteristics of the archetypal female cyberpunk character. Dani Cavallaro (2000) and Stacy Gillis (2007) argue that the policing of

gender norms in cyberpunk is most evidently displayed in the highly sexualised portrayal of its female characters. Both writers note that typical female characters in the genre are tough, independent, in control of their environments, and have often undergone extreme bodily enhancement. These characters thus appear to challenge traditional ideals of submissive femininity; however, the authors argue that this challenge is ultimately undermined by the highly sexualised terms in which they are couched. Gillis describes the female characters of cyberpunk as “ass-kicking techno-babes” (2007: 7), and brings cyberpunk, *noir*, and postfeminism into dialogue with one another to argue:

The ass-kicking techno-babes of cyberpunk film and fiction should be read as examples of the (post) feminist [*sic*] subject. These women are positioned as very much at home in the traditionally masculine domains of both technology and physicality, remarkably so given the gender arrangements involved in *noir* and gothic fictions. Yet this articulation of female agency is mediated by the ways in which the bodies of these cyborgic women are reduced to either a sexualised or monstrous femininity.

(10-11)

Gillis claims that the female cyborg presents a potentially powerful figure in its merging of femininity, with its connotations of irrationality, nature and emotion, with technology, and its connotations of rationality, science and intelligence. However, she argues that the potential of this figure is never fully realised, “as the femaleness of these cyborgs is contained by a *hyper-feminised hyper-sexuality* which draws upon the long history of representing women through sexuality” (11, emphasis in original). While the women of cyberpunk may appear to challenge the tropes of traditional, subordinated femininity, they are thus always contained by their participation “in a fetishistic rendering of femininity and femaleness” (12).

Gillis also argues that while in cyberpunk both male and female bodies have been cyborgised, the male body is traditionally positioned as the active key interface with technology while the female body is passively acted upon in being made cyborgic. She argues that the handling of gender in cyberpunk is heavily influenced by the detective narratives of *noir*, with the male hacker of cyberpunk descending from the detective figure who prizes rationality and reason over all else, and who exerts authority over the bodies of the female characters. The women of cyberpunk are similarly closely aligned with the *femmes fatales* of *noir* in their portrayal of “non-reproductive femininity whose expression of sexuality is perceived as fatally dangerous to men and the heterosexual family structure” (14). Gillis also notes that while these cyberpunk women often appear to have exerted agency in choosing to alter their bodies into cyborg form, “they often do so for a male gaze and/or for male consumption. Indeed, in some cybertexts, it is sexual pleasure which is paramount in these body alterations” (15). Despite the promise of escaping

the traditional confines of embodiment offered in cyberpunk, the cyborgic female body thus remains one “which is predicated and controlled in ways which are deeply embedded within Western epistemologies and ontologies” (15). While the cyborgic female body promises much in its transgressive potential, “its promises are always contained by the models of femininity validated by patriarchal discourse” (16).

As with the male cyberpunk protagonist, Beukes plays with cyberpunk’s conventional representation of women by dividing the key characteristics of “the ass-kicking techno-babe” between two very different characters. Kendra fulfils the role of the cyborgic female in the novel, volunteering as a test subject for a form of nanotechnology that the Corporates are developing, and her body thus becomes the site of the intermingling of biology and technology which calls into question the essentialism of each of these categories, and casts doubt on the legitimacy of others. Kendra, however, is no “ass-kicking” character in her portrayal of submissive and passive femininity. The toughness of this figure is instead transposed onto the character of Lerato, who embodies a number of traditionally masculine qualities. Significantly, through both of these characters, Beukes challenges cyberpunk’s tendency to reinforce a traditional gender hierarchy, using the genre’s conventions with regard to the representation of its female characters in unexpected ways. Lerato, although highly empowered and highly sexual, is never presented in sexualised terms, and Kendra’s decision to volunteer for the nano based on its health benefits, rather than solely for its cosmetic effects, emboldens her to gradually begin to take control of her life, rather than enhancing her sexual objectification.

Like the typical female cyberpunk characters that Gillis and Cavallero identify, Lerato is a tough, independent woman who is “very much at home in the traditionally masculine domains of both technology and physicality” (Gillis 2007: 10). Unlike the other three characters, Lerato is not subject to the difficulties of life in the Rurals’ sections of the city, but instead lives in the wealthy corporate section. She has not always lived a privileged life, having been orphaned after her parents died of Aids and placed in a trade school where she was trained as a computer programmer with thousands of other children. In order to better her circumstances, Lerato has had to become tough, competitive and ruthless. Lerato embodies many traditionally masculine qualities in her lack of emotional attachment to people, her work ambitions, and her computing skills. She is moreover alienated, extremely cynical, and becomes embroiled in illegal hacker activity, which aligns her character with some key characteristics of the typically male cyberpunk protagonist. Her role as a hacker, significantly, places her at the active key interface with technology – a position usually reserved for the male protagonist – subverting the convention in which the female body is merely passively acted upon by technology in being made cyborgic. By combining her female body

with a number of traditionally masculine traits, Beukes effectively challenges an essentialist conceptualisation of gender.

Lerato’s character is also distanced from stereotypical conceptions of femininity that are associated with being nurturing, emotional and relational. Her lack of emotional attachment and capacity for cruelty are revealed in her treatment of a co-worker named Mpho, with whom she has a short affair. Like Toby, Lerato has a distinctly casual attitude towards sex and relationships, and she becomes cruel to a besotted Mpho. Lerato has little regard for other people’s feelings; being successful at her work, and thus achieving prestige and financial benefits, are her priorities. These qualities distance her character from a stereotypical version of femininity, and instead align her with various key masculine traits.

Lerato is depicted as a highly sexual character, much akin to the *femme fatale* in her portrayal of a “non-reproductive femininity” (Gillis 2007: 14), but is never positioned in sexualised terms, and this works to counter the tendency to undermine the transgressive potential of cyberpunk female characters that Gillis identifies. Lerato is never sexually objectified, but maintains control and power in all of her romantic connections, in much the same way that Toby does. This works to further align her with traits that are traditionally masculine, playing out Judith Butler’s contention that gender is a set of bodily and relational performances that are theoretically available to anyone, rather than essentially linked to one’s biological sex.

At the end of the novel Lerato finds herself in trouble, when her employers detect her illegal activity. An elaborate conspiracy is unveiled, revealing that her company created the skyward\* persona from whom Tendeka has been taking orders, to incite a rebellion that would allow the Corporates to increase their control. The company has used Lerato as a central player in this scheme, and now threatens to kill her unless she agrees to continue helping them, by consciously creating terrorists who will justify heightened levels of societal control. Although obviously forced under duress to take the position, her closing lines suggest that this is more than just an involuntary decision. “It makes perfect sense”, Lerato says. “The process has to be managed. Fear has to be managed. Fear has to be controlled. Like people” (Beukes 2008: 282).

Although the female agency that Lerato portrays is not contained in the narrative through death or marriage, as the *femme fatale* traditionally is, or through her sexual objectification, as the female cyberpunk cyborg traditionally is, it is represented as problematically complicit with an unjust, oppressive regime. Although Lerato represents a highly empowered version of femininity, her ambition, confidence and self-sufficiency make her a cruel character whom the reader is encouraged to view critically. The potentially transgressive power of the version of femininity that she represents is not undermined through her sexualisation, but instead through her complicity with a social structure that is determined to hierarchise human life and control those in subordinate positions. Beukes refuses to replicate a problematic

gender dynamic which is oppressive to women, and challenges essentialist notions of gender by creating a female character who embodies a number of masculine characteristics. She also challenges discourses that frame technology as a masculine domain, by having Lerato take on the role of the traditionally male hacker in her cyberpunk novel. However, she is critical of a version of femininity that seeks to oppress others in a bid to get ahead, and one which knowingly colludes with an unjust power structure.

Beukes instead advocates a version of femininity that is compassionate and empathetic through Kendra's narrative in the novel. Kendra is a young former art student who dropped out of university after her father died of cancer. Her forte is photography, and she carries around with her an old analogue camera that requires film – an anomaly in a technologically advanced world. At the start of the novel, Kendra is recruited by a corporation to test a new form of nanotechnology, which is injected into volunteers' bodies, providing immunity to all injuries and diseases, and enhancing physical appearance. In volunteering to be injected with the nano, Kendra comes to represent the cyberpunk cyborgic body which blends together the natural, biological body with scientific, technological elements. Kendra comments:

The cosmetic effects are the most obvious, but it's the stuff you can't see that counts; the nano attacking toxins, sopping up free radicals, releasing antioxidants by the bucket-load. It's a marathon detox and a fine-tune all in one. And the nano's programmed to search and destroy any abnormal developments, so I'll never have to go through what dad did, the cancer chewing its way through his stomach, consuming him from the inside out.

(60)

Although Kendra is aware of her appearance, and mentions the cosmetic benefits of the nano, in this passage she highlights its promise to keep her healthy, and to protect her from the disease which killed her father. Unlike most cyberpunk cyborgic enhancements, the cosmetic benefit of the nano is thus presented as a secondary effect, both in terms of what it does (making her skin look luminescent) and Kendra's emphasis on its importance. Kendra decides to get the nano without discussing it with her manager and lover, Jonathan, and she keeps it secret from him long afterwards. The agency she displays in choosing to alter her body in this way, as well as the fact that it is not done "for a male gaze and/or for male consumption" (Gillis 2007: 15) or for sexual pleasure, positions Kendra's cyborgic transformation as a potentially empowering act.

Significantly, Kendra also uses the natural notions of adaption and evolution to describe bodily responses to the injection of the synthetic nano, implying a seamless blending of the biological and the technological, thereby challenging them as distinct categories. Later when Toby notices the logo of a soft drink which has been branded on to her wrist (a side-effect of the nano) he notes its difference from a tattoo because "this isn't sub-dermal. This *is* her skin"

(Beukes 2008: 19, emphasis in original), and thus similarly highlights the complete merging of biology and technology that she represents as a cyborg.

Kendra’s embodiment of the merging of technology and biology provides the key transgressive theme that is traditionally found in cyberpunk texts. Unlike the prototypical cyborgic female character, however, Kendra is neither tough nor independent, but instead portrays a version of femininity that is self-deprecating and passive in her interactions with men, especially in her “relationship” with Jonathan. Like Toby, Jonathan treats Kendra casually and with a lack of consideration. Although Kendra is not blind to this, her desire for meaningful human connection makes her desperately want to believe that he does love her, and she is unable to stand up to him or leave him. Jonathan repeatedly reminds Kendra that their relationship is casual and she knows that he is seeing other women. She claims that she is “cast in the role of Poor Thing. The doomed unrequited who can’t quite let go” (64), which serves to deepen her lack of self-confidence. “I am afraid,” Kendra says, “that he’s right. That without him, I am a nonentity” (186). She tries to comfort herself by claiming that this is a mutually beneficial relationship, as she gets accommodation and career guidance in exchange for sex with Jonathan. However, her feelings of hurt and anger make it clear that she pines for a more emotional connection with him, and Jonathan’s refusal to grant her that means that he maintains control in the relationship.

Kendra is portrayed as a likeable character through the empathy and compassion she displays for others, but her embodiment of a stereotypically passive and subordinated version of femininity becomes a source of frustration for the reader, who is urged to be critical of her inability to remove herself from such an unfulfilling relationship. Kendra is, however, not without some agency, and she uses her photography, in particular, as a means to exert a measure of control over her life. Like Toby, Kendra is preoccupied with documenting the world around her, although, while he relies on advanced technology, she uses a Nikon analogue camera. Kendra’s love of using film stems from a fascination with the flaws that it produces in the photographs, as well as the mystery involved in not knowing how the pictures will turn out. Kendra’s photography empowers her, as is shown when she explains that an old camera has no automatic functions, so the role of the operator is vital. Toby notes, “she’s completely composed now, as if it’s the camera rather than the nanotech inside that smooths out her edges” (27). The control that Kendra is able to exert on the world through her photography thus becomes a means of managing the lack of control she feels in her relationship with Jonathan.

Kendra’s decision to be injected with the nano also becomes a source of empowerment to her. Meeting Jonathan a few days after receiving the nano, she says: “My secret makes me feel smug and secure, counterbalancing the elation, like a fish jumping in my chest, that I can’t keep down at seeing him” (61). She goes on to describe not telling him about the nano as her “amulet of protection” (65), a counter to all the times he has treated her cruelly. Her new-

found confidence is dented, however, when she finds out that Jonathan was the one who recommended her for the nano, and that the mutation she has undergone is not a secret but ultimately of Jonathan's doing. This realisation ignites an anger that finally gives her the courage to leave him. She decides to get her own apartment and make her own friends, and goes to meet Toby at the club where he works as a disc jockey. Kendra reacts to Toby with far more confidence and assertiveness than she has shown previously, challenging him in conversation, initiating sex with him and leaving him without second-guessing herself when he is unforgivably hurtful to her.

Kendra's growing display of confidence and independence is, however, thwarted just as it begins to flourish. Worried about how the nano may interact with the virus after she is infected at Tendeka's protest, Kendra goes to the medical centre and expresses a desire to have the nano removed. In doing so, Kendra is no longer promoting the interests of the company, and is portraying the wrong image for their marketing campaign through her association with the protesters in the subway. As a result, Kendra is effectively "put down" in the same way that the Aitos are when they are no longer considered useful. In a prior conversation Kendra asks the doctor if the Aitos cannot be used as guide dogs, or adopted, but the doctor replies that it is impossible as "it's our intellectual property. It's very closely guarded" (285). This description firmly frames the technologically enhanced dogs as "property" or objects, rather than animals, and given the way in which Kendra is killed she too is framed as property, rather than human, thereby denying her the basic rights and ethical treatment she should be entitled to.

The empowerment that Kendra felt as a result of her injection of the nano thus proves to have only been illusory: as soon as she starts to gain agency and make decisions for herself she is considered to no longer be a useful piece of "property" to the corporation, that cannot easily control her any more and use her body as a site for projecting a version of femininity that is beneficial to their interests. Although Kendra attempts to assert herself, as many contemporary women do in various ways, Beukes reminds us that these attempts are always played out within a larger, unjust power structure which curtails the impact of individual choice and agency. Her refusal to couch Kendra's cyborgic transformation in sexualised terms, however, shows a significant departure from cyberpunk norms and positions the intermingling of biology and technology in the female body as a potentially empowering act, rather than reducing it to a means of merely appeasing a masculine gaze.

As a cyberpunk novel, *Moxyland* amalgamates elements of science fiction, *noir*, and the gothic, extending storytelling "into and across various gaps and fault lines" (Moulthrop 1999: 200), and Beukes extends the transgressive potential of the genre by further engaging in play with the genre's conventions, especially with regard to its representations of masculinity and femininity. In doing so, she invites readers to recognise the ways in which her text conforms to the cyberpunk genre's conventions in order to grasp the ways



in which she departs from them. In identifying several elements of *Moxyland* as being distinctly cyberpunk, it is possible to read the characterisation of her four protagonists in relation to the genre’s conventions and so explore the ways in which she manipulates these conventions in order to challenge cyberpunk’s tendency to reiterate “the sexist attitudes of early science fiction – and patriarchy in general” (Ertung 2011: 81). She does this by challenging the centrality of the male cyberpunk protagonist, decentring his dominance in *Moxyland* by dispersing the narrative between four focalisers who embody the character’s key traits in combination with a variety of genders, sexual orientations, races, and classes. In Toby, she highlights the cyberpunk protagonist’s most negative qualities, urging us to be critical of the detachment and selfishness he embodies. She also frames the sexist attitude inherent in the character as deeply problematic, and suggests that this could be read as a bid to over-compensate for a masculinity which is flawed and falling short of a patriarchal ideal. In Tendeka, she furthermore challenges this ideal by coupling the most heroic quality of the cyberpunk protagonist, his attempt to fight against the Corporates, with a sympathetic portrayal of homosexuality.

Beukes also rebels against cyberpunk’s tendency to restrict the transgressive potential of its empowered female characters by framing them in terms of a highly sexualised femininity. Lerato challenges essentialist notions of gender in her portrayal of a number of stereotypically masculine traits, and challenges discourses that see femininity and technology as being at odds with each other through her positioning as the hacker character who is able to skilfully manipulate the technology in her world. Through Kendra’s decision to become a cyborg, Beukes additionally allows the potentially transgressive blending of technology and biology, and specifically technology and femininity, to be played out without limiting it by making her transformation a spectacle for a masculine gaze. Throughout the novel, however, Beukes is ever mindful of the fact that challenges such as these take place within an unequal power structure, and are thus limited as long as those who relish having power over others, and who try to maintain it through unjust and violent means, remain dominant in society.

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“COMPUTER COWBOYS” AND “ASS-KICKING TECHNO-BABES”: ...

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