How It Feels to Be Wired In: On the Digital Cyborg Politics of Mental Disability

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Abstract

This article explores the ways dominant theories of the online self depend on ableist assumptions about mind and embodiment. By drawing from disability studies critiques of Cyborg Manifesto, I suggest that the oft-romanticized notion of digital hybridity assumes a non-disabled subject, and consequently renders the relationship between mentally disabled people and digital technology problematic.

Résumé

Cet article explore la manière dont les théories dominantes de l'identité électronique dépendent d'hypothèses fondées sur les capacités physiques par rapport à l'esprit et à l'incarnation. En m'inspirant de critiques d'études sur les handicaps portant sur le Manifeste cyborg, je suggère que la notion d'hybridité numérique, souvent romancée, suppose un sujet non handicapé et rend par conséquent problématique la relation entre les personnes ayant une déficience mentale et la technologie numérique.

The cyborg is always more than human—and never risks to be seen as subhuman. To put it simply, the cyborg is not disabled.

–Tobin Siebers (2008, 63)

Introduction

In a 2010 TED Talk titled "We are all cyborgs now" anthropologist Amber Case addresses concerns surrounding the increasing use of cellphones and social media, arguing against the notion that the rise of digital technology use over the last ten years signals the domination of technology over humanity. She argues that humanity still survives as it always has, but that now it simply functions with the help of digital tools. "And so this is the important point that I like to study," she says, "that things are beautiful, that it's still a human connection—it's just done in a different way." Case describes communication tools as distinct from tools that came before in that "now what we're looking at is not an extension of the physical self, but an extension of the *mental self*, and because of that, we're able to travel faster, communicate differently" [my emphasis]. The image of the internet as a highway for the extended human mind promises many undeniably positive outcomes, particularly the extension of social consciousness across geographic space. These positive outcomes, as Case rightly wants us to understand, are not invalidated by the artificial digital nature of the technology that allows them. In this paper however, I seek to focus on and interrogate the theoretical process that must take place for minds to, as we tend to conceptualize it, extend across digital space.

How exactly does the human mind, if we chose to understand it in this way, get transported via digital vehicles? Does this occur naturally and seamlessly or is this process subject to malfunction? If so, are some minds better suited to it than others? If we are to think of, as Case (2010) says, the digital self as an "extension" of

the mind, I want to bring to light those minds that have already been rendered brittle and fragile within their social and rhetorical contexts. This article explores the ways dominant theories of digital life depend on ableist assumptions about mind and embodiment. I argue that the oft-romanticized notion of digital hybridity assumes a non-disabled subject and consequently renders the relationship between mentally disabled people and digital technology problematic. The overall goal of this article is to explore how mentally disabled people's embodied knowledge can provide new models of digital life that allow for fluidity as well as self-preservation and self-determination. I suggest that an acceptance of diverse minds allows for a more inclusive internet, one that does not force its users to compromise their real identities.

Although this article is about mental disability, the crux of my analysis draws primarily from the writings of disability studies scholars Tobin Siebers (2008) and Alison Kafer (2013) who have written primarily about physical disability. Throughout this paper, I draw from their work without making this distinction, in part because I believe their political conclusions are universal and also because mental and physical disability are intertwined. I use the term "mental disability" for the reasons disability studies scholar Margaret Price (2011) does in her book *Mad at School:*

> …this term can include not only madness, but also cognitive and intellectual dis/abilities of various kinds. I would add that it might also include 'physical' illnesses accompanied by mental effects (for example, the 'brain fog' that attends many autoimmune diseases, chronic pain, and chronic fatigue)…We should keep in mind its potential congruence with sensory and other kinds of disabilities—that is, its commonalities with 'people for whom access to human interaction is problematic.' (19)

Like Price, I use the term mental *disability* to reflect a political affinity with all people with disabilities and to reflect the ways in which I see mental disability as an embodied experience rather than as a set of symptoms or qualia. "Mental disability" acts as an umbrella term for all mental disorders, including those that might in other contexts be referred to as neurodiverse or neuro-atypical. I contend that the central tenets of disability theory, which laid the groundwork for abolishing the concept of minds and bodies as possessing flaws or deficits in favor of framing human variation as a political

and cultural identity and/or experience, have much to offer contemporary discourse on mental disability and identity more broadly.

This article is divided into roughly two parts. In the first half, I present disability theory critiques of the cyborg figure and assert that these critiques also map onto the abstract fetishization of some forms of mental disorders. Here I focus primarily on the idea that mental disability has been appropriated as an analogy by which to rationalize digitally-saturated life, usually in a way that reinforces normative ideas about the separations between mind, self, and technology. I argue that this rhetorical practice has concrete political consequences for people with mental disabilities and also bypasses disability as a potential source of knowledge. The second half of the article discusses the fundamentals of the public theory of mental disability that allow for it to be appropriated in the first place and what a new theory would have to do into order to mitigate appropriation. By drawing on a philosophical affinity between Siebers' (2008) and Linda Martín Alcoff's (2006) work on embodiment, I maintain that a new theory of mental disability must, in part by taking the lead from people with physical disabilities, emphasize the body as a source of knowledge. This also dovetails with feminist media scholarship that has problematized the liberal humanist ideal of post-race, post-gender online anonymity. While this article does not provide extensive solutions to the ideological mistreatment of mental disability in practice, it seeks to critically inject mental disability into the discourse on online identity.

The Problem with Cyborgs

In her chapter, "The Cyborg and the Crip: Critical Encounters," Kafer (2013) traces the rhetorical relationship between disability theory and Donna Haraway's (2000) "Cyborg Manifesto" and its philosophical legacy. Kafer highlights how people with disabilities often take on the role as the ultimate exemplar of cyborgism, yet their personal accounts and political activism are strangely absent in the vast deployments of the cyborg figure. In "Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway, Kafer points out, raises the subject of disability herself. "Perhaps paraplegics and other severely handicapped [sic] people can (and sometimes do) have the most intense experiences of complex hybridization with other communication devices" (Haraway 2000, 313). Yet this

reference to people with disabilities does not signal a turn in Haraway's essay, but an aside. "Once Haraway moves into discussions about political identification, or shifting affinities, or future formations, disability and the disabled figure drop away altogether" (Kafer 2013, 115). Kafer argues that the figure of the cyborg from the manifesto rhetorically depends on an idealized, depoliticized treatment of disability. "Disability may be a site of 'complex hybridization,' and disabled bodies may exemplify the cyborg, but their cyborgization appears as a type set apart from the rest of the cyborg politics discussed here" (113). Kafer sees potential for the cyborg figure, which has undergone extensive and constructive critique since the manifesto's publication and she credits it as being one of the first entry points of disability theory into critical theory. Her critique, which I seek to build on, is powerful because it shows that metaphors about disability are taken for granted even in the most critical texts.

Kafer's (2013), as well as Tobin Sieber's (2008) disability studies critiques of the cyborg, have led me to question the inclusivity of the narrative of digital hybridization, typified by Case's 2010 TED Talk that is casually taken for granted in progressive discourse on digitally-saturated life. This critique encourages us to consider how the blending of technology and the human body becomes problematized if we choose to broaden our understanding of what bodies looks like and how they function. Kafer (2013) asserts that, while cyborg narratives often may seem to celebrate difference, they tend to reproduce the cyborg/non-cyborg dichotomy, which stand respectively for disabled and nondisabled. "In news stories, 'cyborg' represents the melding of pure body and pure machine; there is an original purity that, thanks to assistive technology, has only now been mixed, hybridized, blurred" (108). Kafer argues persuasively that there exists an intrinsic rhetorical link between disability and popular cyborg myths. "Cyborg qualities become markers of difference, suggesting an essential difference between disabled people and nondisabled people" (110). While not all cyborg myths allude to disability, and not all disabled people are considered cyborgs, there exists an overlapping set of beliefs about the human relationship with technology between cyborgs and the "ideology of ability" (Siebers 2008, 9). Not the least among these is the belief that some bodies are pure, normal, and whole while others are not and

that assistive technology should be viewed as prosthesis for some and not others. I believe Kafer's analysis cuts to some very fundamental truths about the figure of the cyborg, which also apply to the social construction of mental disability in digital space.

I argue that insofar it has been integrated into the mainstream rhetoric of online identity, mental disability has been represented as a set of metaphors divorced from the experiences of mentally disabled people. To explore this hypothesis, I analyze the media portrayal of Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The public perception of both of these disorders over the last two decades has often been wrapped up in contemporaneous public concern over digital technology's impact on the human condition. As a result, ADHD and ASD have been used as mythologies through which to rationalize a changing and unsettling social environment. I see this as an analog to the use of physically disabled people in the construction of the cyborg figure both in Haraway's (2000) essay and more broadly. Kafer's (2013) analysis lays the groundwork for thinking about how images of disability often fill in the conceptual gaps that persist in cultural and philosophical analysis. Disability theory asks us to recognize how often we rely on images of people with disabilities to conceptualize post-modern fragmentation and self-contradiction. I want to explore what happens to our concept of digital life when we refuse to do this.

While other theorists have pointed out that ADHD and ASD have been used as explanations or scapegoats for cultural shifts in the digital age, I choose to focus on the more existential reasons for the preoccupation with mental disability. I argue that changes in digital culture have destabilized the liberal humanist concept of self (Smith and Watson 2014), resulting in existential anxiety and insecurity. The tokenistic mainstream acceptance of high functioning and otherwise privileged people with mental disabilities, combined with the indeterminacy of diagnosis, has allowed some forms of mental disability to exit the political and/or medical realm and enter the allegorical realm. I suggest that this aestheticization of mental disability misappropriates the real alienation from conventional selfhood experienced by people with mental disabilities. While the rhetoric that tells mentally disabled people that they cannot perform

selfhood and rationality correctly stems from systemic, institutionalized ableism, the subsequent appropriation of mental disability removes it from the political realm. As Kafer's (2013) critique argues, this kind of depoliticization fetishizes and erases people with disabilities and has concrete political consequences. While the same is true of mental disability, for the purposes of this paper, I am more interested in the nuances of how mental disability gets appropriated by the ideology of digital technology. Subsequently, I ask what consequences this has for the online experience.

ADHD and the Mental Experience of Digital Media

In a *Washington Post* article titled "Is the Internet Giving Us All ADHD?," Caitlin Dewey (2015) discusses psychological theories that posit that "otherwise healthy" peoples' use of the internet might be causing them to "experience symptoms of ADHD":

> After all, when you think about it, the Internet essentially promises two things: instant gratification and an endless, varied, hyper-stimulating buffet of entertainment and information options. If you don't like one thing within the first five seconds, you can…jump to something else. The Internet, it turns out, incentivizes the exact types of behaviors and thought processes that characterize ADHD. (n.p.)

Much coverage of ADHD since 2010 has hovered around the question of whether the internet and cellphones have increased the prominence of the disorder, despite the fact that scientific research strongly suggests that ADHD is neurobiological, innate, and genetically-linked (Solden 2012). While most writers do not go so far as to claim that digital technology causes the disorder, they nonetheless fixate on the idea that cellphones and the internet cause "ADHD-like" symptoms in adults and adolescents. Dewey's (2015) article and others like it, including "Researchers Say That Smartphones Are Causing ADHD-Like Symptoms in Adults" in *Vice* (Kivanc 2016), "ADHD and the relentless internet—is there a connection?" in *The Guardian* (Kiss 2015), and "ADHD: Is Our Information Culture the Cause?" in *Huffington Post* (Poldrack 2010), implicitly or explicitly insist that engagement with ADHD is a preferable framework through which to understand technology's social impact, despite admitting that there is no evidence of an empirical link between the disorder and these technologies.

Even when pressed to find different ways to explain new digital experiences, some writers hold steadfast to ADHD as the explanation. In response to a *New York Times* article titled "Untangling the Myths of Attention Disorder" by pediatrician Perri Klass M.D. (2010) that attempted to clarify that ADHD is not learned, but neurobiological, Russell Poldrack (2010) of *Huffington Post* retorted that we still need to consider "cultural ADHD":

> What about 'cultural ADHD?' It's clear (at least to me) that the inability to focus that is being driven by the speed and richness of our informational environment bears at least some resemblance to the inattention that marks ADHD. For example, some of the diagnostic markers for ADHD in the DSM-IV…include 'often has trouble keeping attention on tasks,' 'often avoids, dislikes, or doesn't want to do things that take a lot of mental effort for a long period,' and 'is often easily distracted.' Sound familiar? (n.p.)

Writers such as these do not claim to be talking about the disorder per se, but still insist on playing with the idea of the disorder to discuss the character and behaviors of the people around them. Given that each of these writers must clarify that they do not mean *actual* ADHD, but rather "cultural ADHD" or "something like ADHD," it raises the question of why they would find it expedient to refer to the disorder at all. This preoccupation with ADHD also seems to extend beyond the desire for clinical diagnosis. The media fixation on ADHD in recent years does not necessarily resemble a diagnostic, positivistic scavenger hunt in which ADHD and ADHDers are put under a telescope. The focus on the disorder persists *in spite of* the acceptance that ADHD has existed far before it was named and that it has more to do with brain chemistry and genetics than culture (Solden 2012). Rather than positing technology as the explanation for the rise ADHD, I would argue that, inversely, this discussion employs this non-psychiatric cultural specter of ADHD as an explanation for our experiences with and in technology.

The preference for ADHD as the lens through which to discuss digitally-mediated subjectivity seems to reveal a desire to describe that subjectivity not just in terms of culture or place, but as a mental experience. These articles imply that the internet does not just allow for increased information, but it also shapes how we experience the world and how our minds function on a fundamental level. Intriguingly, the multimedia and

the dynamic and rapidly changing nature of the internet is, to at least some people, most aptly described as the experience of a mentally disabled person. While it is important that journalists recognize that actual ADHD is not merely a learned behavior caused by video games and social media, this distinction between ADHD and "something like ADHD" does relatively little to mitigate harm to people with ADHD. This is one, because it allows anyone who thinks they understand what ADHD is to speak on it with authority, decentering the voices of ADHDers, and two, because they frame inattention and hyperactivity as inherent flaws that symbolize the ills of contemporary society, making it difficult for ADHDers to describe their symptoms on their own terms.

I would argue that on a deeper level this presentation of ADHD diverts attention (ironically) from the destabilizing and existentially troubling effects of digital immersion. The relegation of digital experiences to the language of diagnosis and/or pathology avoids the need to construct a detailed cultural theory of digital technology and the role it plays in life. As Tobin Siebers (2008) puts it, "disability has served throughout history to symbolize other problems in society. Oedipus's clubfoot signifies his hubris and overreaching. Tiresias's blindness symbolizes his gift of prophecy" (48). Here, ADHD provides a myth, even if we do not believe it to be factual, by which to rationalize a new form of life. As I will also explore in the next section, the fetishization of mental disability in the public sphere does not always mean the direct stereotyping of people with a given disorder. Mental disorders seem to lend themselves to being cast as moral archetypes that can act out the complex themes of contemporary life. But they can only do so when it is taken for granted that disability has nothing political at stake and that people with mental disabilities do not adequately know and understand their own experiences.

The invocation of the cyborg becomes dangerous for people with disabilities when it sensationalizes the fluidly symbolic nature of the human-technology relationship. The assumption is that, while it may at times map on to metaphors of cyborgism and hybridization, the (presumably non-disabled) mind will always maintain fundamental autonomy from the machine. This assumption requires that, conversely, the involuntary experience of digital chaos signifies a malfunction. When used in the way I have described,

ADHD provides a threshold between cognitive chaos and control by setting a conceptual limit on the existential consequences of digital hybridity. When the uncomfortable intimacy with the machine can be named by something clinical, outside of mundane human experience, it need not be interrogated or confronted. The lingering possibility that our relationship with technology is nothing more than a bug rather than a feature of our cognitive functioning, elides the possibility that technology radically changes the way we think. But this, again, does not speak to a desire to use actual ADHD diagnoses as a proxy for cultural analysis, but a desire to outsource existential dread out of culture and into the language of diagnosis. I am not primarily interested in suggesting that those who subscribe to the idea of "cultural ADHD" are in denial about the nature of their digital lives; rather, I simply seek to highlight the peculiarity of using mental disability as a metaphor for something other than itself.

The "Male Computer Geek" and the Problem with Cyborgs

In a scene in *The Social Network* (2010), the fictionalized Mark Zuckerberg (played by Jesse Eisenberg) describes the experience of writing code in a way that suggests cyborg-like, hyper-focused hybridity with computer technology. When Sean Parker (Justin Timberlake) attempts to introduce himself to one of the programmers at work at the preliminary Facebook headquarters in Silicon Valley, the programmer vaguely waves him off as Zuckerberg quickly interjects "—he's wired in!" The phrase "wired in" almost likens distracting the coders to disconnecting a hard drive before ejecting. Although playfully, it suggests that the programmer's use of the computer is best understood as a type of fusion. Jordynn Jack (2014) writes that the Zuckerberg appearing in *The Social Network*, as well as the one portrayed in mainstream news media, exemplifies what she calls the autistic-coded "male computer geek" trope (106). Zuckerberg, along with Bill Gates and other tech industry figures, have been encoded into what Jack, and Majia Nadesan (2005), have described as a cultural obsession with the relationship between people with autism and computer technology (Jack 2014, 106).

Jack's rhetorical analysis of the "male computer geek" deconstructs the myths and psychological misinformation that have allowed for the widely held

public assumption that Zuckerberg and Gates have ASD. Similar to ADHD, the mainstream media persistently looks to ASD as a parable for the rise of the tech industry, despite there being no conclusive evidence to support a fundamental link between the two. Jack (2014) points out, for example, that numerous mainstream news outlets have liberally engaged in public diagnoses of tech industry figures. "In 1994, the same year Asperger's syndrome was first added to the DSM, Microsoft CEO Bill Gates was popularly diagnosed as autistic in a *Time* magazine article titled 'Diagnosing Bill Gates'" (112). In addition, "In 2012, an article in the online blog *Gawker* 'diagnosed' the real-life Zuckerberg as autistic, mainly on the basis of secondhand accounts of his behavior and analysis of a video interview" (105). The public figure of the "male computer geek," who is often explicitly coded as autistic, is typically portrayed as being more at home with codes and computers than with people. Jack notes that these men are often represented as geniuses who lack social skills and even lack "concern for the human condition" (106).

While Jack's analysis rightly understands this scapegoating as being driven by a desire to maintain the value of traditional masculinity and a changing economic environment, I would also argue that the male computer geek exemplifies the disabled cyborg trope to which Kafer (2013) refers. Kafer's critique of the cyborg as a reinforcement of the artificial/natural dichotomy resonates with Jack's writing on the cultural alignment between computer technology and ASD. Many of the texts Jack analyzes seem to suggest that there is something characteristically autistic about Silicon Valley and digital technology by extension. If we take seriously the hypothesis that the "cyborg is linked more directly to disabled bodies than to able-bodied ones" (Kafer 2013, 110), we can see that advancing digital technology and ASD, two things that stand to unsettle traditional notions of the mind and self, get paired in a way that protects those traditional notions. That is, as in the case of ADHD, the disturbing aspects of digital life become associated with eccentric characters and marked as red herrings.

Today, the trope of the male computer geek who has an affinity with computer technology stands to allow people to conceptualize not just the rise of the tech industry at large, but their own individual relationship with technology. Jack (2014) opens her chapter with a series of quotations from liberal publications praising Mark Zuckerberg as the unlikely hero of *The Social Network*: "The *Wall Street Journal*'s reviewer wrote that the character 'combines a borderline autistic affect with a single-minded focus on a beautifully simple idea'" (105). *The Social Network* as a whole, I would argue, does not simply treat Zuckerberg as a freak or scapegoat, but also invites identification with him. The implication is that, at times, we all feel that we are so single-mindedly focused on our goals, typing away on our laptops, that we become machines, cyborgs. But we are never in danger of actually becoming Zuckerberg. He is a fiction, a metaphor detached from real life. These tropes provide a narrative by which the relationship between technology and minds can be known, classified, and delineated, eliding the possibility that mind and technology have entered into a chaotic, unpredictable relationship.

These kinds of problematic ASD tropes, for one, "risk presenting autism via stock characters that turn into stereotypes, deflecting attention away from a wider range of actual autistic individuals, not all of whom are computer geeks" (Jack 2014, 114). Jack's analysis clearly articulates that public myths about mental disorders are harmful to their subjects, yet they remain powerful and convincing to many. These myths maintain dominance because of the way mental disability provides a buffer between the conventionally held rational self and the flux of technological advancement and obsolescence. I want to think about the representation of mental disability in terms of how it breaks the fall of the existential deficit of the liberal humanist self. My point runs parallel to what Rob Cover (2014) describes as "a push and pull of multiple demands: the Enlightenment demand that one articulate oneself as a rational, reasonable, coherent, and intelligible subject and a decentered and fragmented subjectivity which fulfills the demand that we express identity in fleeting ways through forms of consumption that emerge at the nexus of late capitalism and post modernism" (61). Cover explains that the popularity of Facebook stems from its ability to assuage the tension between the permanent and impermanent self in a stage of late capitalism in which data and media are flowing more rapidly and unpredictably than ever. What Cover does not sufficiently explore is the shame and stereotyping that surrounds the relationship between the human mind/body and technology and how this

causes some people to experience that flux in ways that differ along lines of political marginalization.

Mental disability complexly embodied

In the rest of this article, I want to explore the theoretical steps that might be taken to reverse both the aestheticization and depoliticization of mental disability. Primarily, to return to my definition of mental disability in my introduction, I argue in favor of a theory of mental disability that understands it as an embodied experience. In the previous sections, I maintain that the objectification of digital cyborgs and hybridization rhetorically depends on the ableist misappropriation of mental disability. Jack's (2014) and my analysis of ASD and ADHD respectively point out the use of stereotyping and cultural myths that make up these rhetorics. I suggest that the solution to these falsities should not primarily involve directly disproving them, but rather centering the standpoint of mentally disabled people through attention to what Siebers (2008) calls "complex embodiment" (25). For Siebers, the concept of complex embodiment arises as a resolution to two competing models of disability theory—the medical and the social model: "The medical model has a biological orientation, focusing almost exclusively on disability as embodiment. The social model opposes the medical model by defining disability relative to the social and built environment" (25). Siebers writes that some theorists complain that the medical model focuses too much on embodiment while the social model leaves it out of the picture all together. Complex embodiment, by contrast, "views the economy between social representations and the body not as unidirectional as in the social model, nor non-existent as in the medical model, but as reciprocal" (25).

When I posit the complex embodiment of mental disability, I refer to that which cannot be captured by a universal archetype of any given disorder. The public narratives I described in the previous sections stress the idea of the disorder first and those who experience it second. The embodied knowledge of mental disability might include everything from the social rejection that comes with trying to navigate a space or institution built for neurotypical people, to one's personal, familial, or romantic relationships, to one's relationship with psychiatric medication. I would also argue that the embodied knowledge of mental disability speaks to its

intersectional aspects. For example, the ways in which women and girls experience ADHD differently than men and boys often comes down to a lifetime of micro-instances that constitute a way of moving through the world. Because young girls with ADHD less often exhibit hyperactive behaviors in the classroom, their struggle to focus often goes unnoticed, misinterpreted, and/or undiagnosed. In *Women with Attention Deficit Disorder*, Sari Solden (2012) writes about how this results in a distinct self-image for girls with ADHD who tend to internalize their failures as personal or ethical shortcomings and experience anxiety and depression at higher rates than their non-ADHD counterparts.

On the treatment of the relationship between body and identity in Western philosophy, Alcoff (2006), from whom Siebers (2008) draws inspiration for his theory of complex embodiment, wrote: "Although hermeneutic approaches maintain that the subject's location in any analysis of knowledge and experience cannot be eliminated, that location is conceptualized abstractly, without attention to any of its physical features. But 'location' is a mere metaphor here for the body, the real locus of horizon" (Alcoff 2006, 103). Complex embodiment resists the description of people in terms of mere location and demands attention to the specificity of how bodies carry knowledge and emotion within any given social or physical space at any given time. The Western concept of the mind independent from the body, which has been reincarnated in the neoliberal idea of the digital self, cannot be true at the same time as, if we are to understand ourselves as equally human, the notion that mentally disabled people's pathologies reducible to neurobiological malfunctions. Therefore, centering mentally disabled people as full, insightful human subjects stands to break the logic of the rational independent self alongside its self-contradiction. It is the disregard of embodied knowledge, I would argue, that results in inaccurate metaphors about identity, such as the notion that people who use prosthetics emblematize the contradictions of late capitalism or that mental disorders provide useful analogies by which to understand a changing technological environment.

When I refer to the embodied experiences of people with mental disabilities, I mean this to be analogous to feminist media scholarship that has problematized digital disembodiment of race and gender. In the earlier years of theorizing the internet,

some media scholars embraced the idea of anonymity to suspend the one-to-one association between identity and the physical body. This utopic vision, criticized by media scholars such as Lisa Nakamura (2014) who identifies this idea with the rise of neoliberalism in the 1990s, was conceived with the hope that, if human life could move into digital space, the dissolution of the body as a marker of identity could theoretically mitigate racist and misogynistic acts. However, scholars have pointed out that this optimism has not resulted in improvements for marginalized people on the internet, but rather has perpetuated a school of thought that favors the erasure of marginalized identities. "Further, by enabling anonymous communications, [the internet] allegedly freed users from the limitations of their bodies, particularly the limitations stemming from their race, class, and sex…" (Chun 2006, 2). As these feminist digital scholars have argued, an approach to online life that encourages representation of identity in isolation from the body dangerously ignores the ways in which historical, structural, and political oppression are tied to bodies. An anti-ableist political model of mental disability, informed by the experiences of all mentally disabled people, pushes back against the (digital) abstraction I have discussed and rejects the project of digital disembodiment. The ideas behind this disembodiment project falsely assume that racism, for example, only occurs as the result of conscious, rationally articulable prejudice, which, perhaps in a digital space, might be eliminated in the absence of racial markers. In reality, as a disability theory perspective encourages us to remember, oppression also takes place in the mundane ways bodies interact in social and physical space.

The issue of under-diagnoses occurs along racial lines as well as gender, multiplying the invisibility of women and girls of color. The link between racialized bodies and mental disability might be most obviously observed in the role it plays in police brutality. The death of Stephon Watts, a black American fifteen-year-old with ASD who was killed by a Camulet City police officer in 2012 demonstrates that ASD takes on entirely different connotations when viewed through a racialized lens. On the day of his death, Stephon was having an emotional meltdown, as he had many times in the past, because he did not want to go to school. As advised by his counselor, Stephon's parents called the police to help to get him under control. Stephon, who happened to be holding a butter knife, reflexively lunged at the armed police officers when they appeared. "Police say they drew their weapons and yelled for Stephon to drop the butter knife. He didn't. Moments later, two officers ended Stephon's life" (Fanning 2012). In this moment, the consideration that his ASD might cause Stephon to act in unexpected ways was snuffed out by the police's anti-blackness, which had already been ingrained into how they have been taught to use their bodies. When I speak about the embodied aspect of mental disability, I mean to capture those effects that take place unpredictably in space and time, but which constitute a way of being in the world sometimes with fatal results. I would argue that attention to these effects is essential to a politically just approach to mental disability.

As I alluded in my introduction, one way to think about this in the context of digital culture is to consider how people with mental disabilities experience online spaces differently. I became motivated to explore the intersections of mental disability and online experience in part because communities of mentally disabled people often form on the internet. For many mentally ill and neurodiverse people, the internet is the only social space in which they can connect with others who understand them and/or share similar experiences. While many scholars have rightfully focused on validating the positive impact of the internet on marginalized groups, I want to conclude this article by considering the limits of digital counterpublics from the perspective of complex embodiment.

Presenting the (Disembodied) Mentally Sisabled Self Online

Today, as media scholar Nancy Baym (2006) notes, "the Internet is woven into the fabric of the rest of life" (79). The internet is no longer subaltern. It is now arguably the site of the official public sphere. Therefore, the relegation of some identities and discourses to online spaces that are felt and experienced as marginal and removed from the rest of life does not speak to an arbitrary effect of internet technology, but rather to the internet's structural, ideological preferences for some identities over others. In her book of auto-fictional personal essays *So Sad Today*, popular Twitter blogger Melissa Broder (2016) (@SoSadToday on Twitter)

articulates what it is like to try to present the unstable relationship with one's mentally ill mind and body on digital platforms. What much of the book articulates vividly is how the purely mental or existential self can be approximated in the form of the online self as a way of reclaiming a sense of control: "I like that I can be somebody else on the Internet. I like that I can present one facet of myself and embody that. I don't have to live in a body on the Internet. It's so much easier to present an illusion of oneself than to contain multitudes. Illusion is easier than flesh" (200).

The internet, particularly mass social media, with its sleek, minimalist interfaces, time stamps, and linear organization, helps to flatten and mute the pain and confusion of living with mental illness. The ability to delete, sort, and disseminate that text creates a sense of controlled reprieve. This, I would argue, can be read as a form of cyborg praxis. As Broder goes on to articulate, however, this praxis often requires the acceptance of existential instability and alienation from the body as conditions of being mentally ill online. While this site of discursive practice may provide Broder with reprieve from societal alienation, it also requires her to transmute herself in a way that causes a schism between online and offline life: "I just don't see myself ever walking a middle path with the Internet…Once a cucumber turns into a pickle, you can't turn it back into a cucumber. And I've been pickled by the Internet for a long time" (82). A disability studies approach to mental disability online asks us to critically question this alienation. "When a disabled body moves into any space, it discloses the social body implied by that space" (Siebers 2008, 85). Viewing Broder's experience not as an eccentric, inspiring testament to digital culture, and instead as a disability narrative, demonstrates that the internet is built in a way that is hostile to the mentally disabled.

Broder's online presence might be understood in relation to two juxtaposing forms of digital feminist knowledge: as a site of discursive practice and as a source of embodied knowledge. Broder (2016) writes that the Twitter account allowed her to connect with people who have had similar experiences, and who found solace in being able to relate to her: "The more real I was, the more people could relate. It seemed like there were a shitload of people who were scared of life and death" (200). In her *New Yorker* article on the book,

Haley Mlotek (2016) reminds us that "the female authors who write about their sadness…provide a language for other readers, a direction for likeminded women to point themselves in, a rope to climb over a wall" (n.p.). Through varied, but generically consistent, micro-instances of communal recognition, the counterpublic generated by @SoSadToday provides a powerful source of discursive knowledge. At the same time, I would argue that the celebration of discursive spheres for marginalized identities like these often does not take into account the material and emotional conditions under which these spheres are formed. As in the case of ADHD and ASD, I would maintain that the difficulty with which mentally disabled people must try to survive in neurotypical society is often portrayed as a form of romantic cyborgism, fetishizing the resourcefulness of those for whom social architecture is not designed. A disability studies critique, however, asks us to invert our way of thinking and consider how the environment should bend to fit the needs of people with disabilities.

For Broder and other people with disabilities, the process of producing and procuring embodied knowledge online is a less seamless and intuitive process than that of discursive knowledge because the internet, through its emphasis on the diegetic over the mimetic, the perfect over the imperfect, and the virtual over the physical, does not lend itself to the representation of disability identities. In many ways, as I have discussed, the internet is hostile to all marginalized groups. However, as I have tried to demonstrate throughout this article, mental disability holds a unique precariousness because of the way the mind is widely disseminated as the principal metaphor to describe the general idea of online experience. Where Broder's mind ends and the digital space begins is unknown and, while this phenomenon may not be dangerous on an individual basis, on a larger political scale, it poses a threat to the autonomy and self-determination of the user. I believe that by maintaining a focus on mental disability within the discourse on online identity, we can come to more inclusive and fundamental conclusions of what it means to present the self online.

Conclusion

When considering the status of identity and disability in the digital realm, it is important to take note of how it may be shaped by antecedent

metaphysical assumptions about the relationships between technology, the body, and human life. If we assume that digital technology makes us all cyborgs, it raises the question of how we can explain the existence of disability identities online. The generalization that technology makes us all cyborgs provides the kind of normalizing impulse that might also convince us that computer programmers with ASD are somehow akin to all things digital or that ADHD minds embody the quick-paced, multimedia functionality of web browsing. Cyborg politics, if taken uncritically, can hybridize technologies and people in a way that insists on muddling disability rather than providing it with a platform. At the very least, this assumption makes it difficult to politically locate disability in the digital realm when it emerges. If we assume that digitization is always the "source…of new powers" (Siebers 2008, 63), we are not likely to take note of its problems.

When we imagine the best possible future for humanity, how do we envisage our relationship with technology? What would the result of the ethical advancement of humans look like? It is my sense that in an ideal world, as digital technology advances, our freedoms will increase. This might mean freedom from geography, social alienation, nature, linear time, pain, and, as I have suggested in this paper, freedom from the body. Uncritical cyborg politics ask us to praise Broder's (2016) resourcefulness in her use of the internet to produce new, alternative sites of discursive practice rather than asking whether the internet can meet her needs and desires as a person with a mental disability. When she writes that she cannot walk "a middle path with the Internet" (82), she implies that once identities become codified within digital sphere, they are often rendered incoherent in other spheres. I have argued that the critiques made of Haraway's (2000) cyborg can also be made of the cyborg politics that shape our perceptions of online identity. However, the critiques I have made and recounted from others do not conclude that the very concept of the cyborg is ableist. Kafer (2013) asserts that, in fact, if it can be critiqued and modified, the figure of the cyborg could provide a useful framework to disability studies. To my mind, the cyborg will lend itself best to people with mental disabilities when it allows us to transmute our identities between the digital world, the embodied world, and back.

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