

Glitch
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Feminism

A Manifesto | Legacy Russell

THESE ARE THE AXES:

**1
BODIES ARE INHERENTLY VALID**

**2
REMEMBER DEATH**

**3
BE UGLY**

**4
KNOW BEAUTY**

**5
IT IS COMPLICATED**

**6
EMPATHY**

**7
CHOICE**

**8
RECONSTRUCT, REIFY**

**9
RESPECT, NEGOTIATE**

Mark Aguhar, *These Are the Axes*, 2012

00 – INTRODUCTION

As a tweenager I logged on as LuvPunk12 and spent the following years wandering the highways of haunted machinery, occupying chat rooms and building GeoCities GIF fantasies. Growing up on Saint Mark's Place in the center of the East Village I learned how to construct and perform my gendered self from the punk kids I met on my stoop, from the drag queens who took the stage at Stingy Lulu's and dominated yearly at Wigstock in Tompkins Square Park, as well as from the Boricua culture, all of which was, at the time, part of the bedrock of the East Village and Lower East Side.

LuvPunk12 became a symbolic amalgam of all this flow. I chose the name when I spotted *LUV PUNK!* on a candy-apple-red heart-shaped sticker adhered to a phone booth outside of my apartment building. I was twelve. I peeled it off and stuck it to my Trapper Keeper, wearing it as a badge of pride. It became a rooted reminder of home as I transitioned in and out of spaces beyond the East Village that often felt alienating to me.

LuvPunk12 as a chatroom handle was a nascent performance, an exploration of a future self. I was a young body: Black, female-identifying, femme, queer.¹ There was no pressing pause, no reprieve; the world around me never let me forget these identifiers. Yet online I could be whatever I wanted. And so my twelve-year-old self became sixteen, became twenty, became seventy. I aged. I died. Through this storytelling and shapeshifting, I was resurrected. I claimed my range. Online I found my first connection to the gendered swagger of ascendancy, the thirsty drag of aspiration. My “female” transmogrified, I set out to explore “man,” to expand “woman.” I toyed with power dynamics, exchanging with other faceless strangers, empowered via creating new selves, slipping in and out of digital skins, celebrating in the new rituals of cybersex. In chatrooms I donned different corpo-realities while the rainbow wheel of death buffered in the ecstatic, dawdling jam of AOL dial-up.

Those dulcet tones of dial-up were Pavlovian: they made me salivate in anticipation of the worlds that lay just beyond the bells. I was a digital native pushing through those cybernated landscapes with a dawning awareness, a shyly exercised power. I was not yet privileged enough to be fully formed as cyborg but, in reaching, surely on my way.

And I was not alone.

Away from the keyboard (or “AFK”), immersed in a rapidly gentrifying East Village, faces, skin, identities like my own and like the mixed communities I had been brought up in were slowly disappearing. I was becoming a stranger in my own territory, a remnant of a past chapter of New York. Creative families of color like mine who had built the vibrant landscape of downtown New York were being priced out of the neighborhoods. Suddenly those living next door were increasingly white, upwardly mobile, and made visibly uncomfortable by my presence and the presence of my family. The “old guard” were coming up against a generation of trust-fund children. These new arrivals were intrigued by the mythology of the East Village as a cultural bastion yet displayed little interest in investing in the necessary fight to protect its legacy.

Beyond my doorstep, my queer femininity found itself, too, in a vulnerable passage through channels of middle school heteronormativity. My prepubescent body was exhausted by social mores, tired of being told to take up less space, being seen and not heard, systematically erased, edited out, ignored. All I wanted to do was move. But in the light of daytime, I felt trapped, always shifting uneasily under the weight of incessant white heteronormative observation.

Under this sort of surveillance, real innocence and childhood play seems suddenly unviable. Instead I searched for

opportunities to immerse myself in the potential of refusal. I commenced to push back against the violence of this unconsented visibility, to take control of the eyes on me and how they interpreted my body. It was clear to me, as I stood at a volatile intersection, that the binary was some kind of fiction. Even for a fledgling queer Black body, a DuBoisian double-consciousness splinters further, “double” becoming “triple,” consciousness amplified and expanded by the “third eye” of gender.

Looking through these veils of race and gender but never being fully seen myself, with limited reference points in the world beyond, I was distanced from any accurate mirror. For my body, then, subversion came via digital remix, searching for those sites of experimentation where I could explore my true self, open and ready to be read by those who spoke my language. Online, I sought to become a fugitive from the mainstream, unwilling to accept its limited definition of bodies like my own. What the world AFK offered was not enough. I wanted—demanded—more.

The construct of gender binary is, and has always been, precarious. Aggressively contingent, it is an immaterial invention that in its toxic virality has infected our social and cultural narratives. To exist within a binary system one must assume that our selves are unchangeable, that how we are read in the world must be chosen

for us, rather than for us to define—and choose—for ourselves. To be at the intersection of female-identifying, queer, and Black is to find oneself at an integral apex. Each of these components is a key technology in and of itself. Alone and together, “female,” “queer,” “Black” as a survival strategy demand the creation of their individual machinery, that innovates, builds, resists. With physical movement often restricted, female-identifying people, queer people, Black people invent ways to create space through rupture. Here, in that disruption, with our collective congregation at that trippy and trip-wired crossroad of gender, race, and sexuality, one finds the power of the glitch.

A glitch is an error, a mistake, a failure to function. Within technoculture, a glitch is part of machinic anxiety, an indicator of something having gone wrong. This built-in technological anxiety of *something gone wrong* spills over naturally when we encounter glitches in AFK scenarios: a car engine calling it quits; getting stuck in an elevator; a city-wide blackout.

Yet these are rather micro examples in the broader scheme of things. If we step back further, considering the larger and more complicated systems that have been used to shape the machine of society and culture, gender is immediately identifiable as a core cog within this wheel. Gender has been used as a weapon against its own

populace. The idea of “body” carries this weapon: gender circumscribes the body, “protects” it from becoming limitless, from claiming the infinite vast, from realizing its true potential.

We use “body” to give material form to an idea that has no form, an assemblage that is abstract. The concept of a body houses within it social, political, and cultural discourses, which change based on where the body is situated and how it is read. When we gender a body, we are making assumptions about the body’s function, its socio-political condition, its fixity. When the body is determined as a male or female individual, the body performs gender as its score, guided by a set of rules and requirements that validate and verify the humanity of that individual. A body that pushes back at the application of pronouns, or remains indecipherable within binary assignment, is a body that refuses to perform the score. This nonperformance is a glitch. This glitch is a form of refusal.

Within glitch feminism, glitch is celebrated as a vehicle of refusal, a strategy of nonperformance. This glitch aims to make abstract again that which has been forced into an uncomfortable and ill-defined material: the body. In glitch feminism, we look at the notion of *glitch-as-error* with its genesis in the realm of the machinic and the digital and consider how it can be reapplied to inform the way we see the AFK world, shaping how we might participate in it

toward greater agency for and by ourselves. Deploying the Internet as a creative material, glitch feminism looks first through the lens of artists who, in their work and research, offer solutions to this troubled material of the body. The process of becoming material surfaces tensions, prompting us to inquire: Who defines the material of the body? Who gives it value—and why?

These questions are challenging and uncomfortable, requiring us to confront the body as a strategic framework and one that is often applied toward particular ends. Yet, along this line of inquiry, glitch feminism remains a mediation of desire for all those bodies like mine who continue to come of age at night on the Internet. The glitch acknowledges that gendered bodies are far from absolute but rather an imaginary, manufactured and commodified for capital. The glitch is an activist prayer, a call to action, as we work toward fantastic failure, breaking free of an understanding of gender as something stationary.

While we continue to navigate toward a more vast and abstract concept of gender, it must be said that at times it really does feel, paradoxically, as if all we have are the bodies we are housed in, gendered or otherwise. Under the sun of capitalism, we truly own little else, and even so, we are often subject to a complicated choreography dictated by the complicated, bureaucratic, and

rhizomatic systems of institutions. The brutality of this precarious state is particularly evident via the constant expectation that we as bodies reassert a gender performance that fits within a binary in order to comply with the prescriptions of the everyday. As political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott writes, “Legibility [becomes] a condition of manipulation.”² These aggressions, marked as neutral in their banality, are indeed violent. Quotidian in nature, we find ourselves fending off the advances of binary gender as it winds its way through the basics of modern life: opening a bank account; applying for a passport; going to the bathroom.

So, what does it mean to dismantle gender? Such a program is a project of disarmament; it demands the end of our relationship with the social practice of the body as we know it. In his 1956 novel *Giovanni's Room*, writer and activist James Baldwin's protagonist David darkly muses, “It doesn't matter, it is only the body, [and] it will soon be over.” Through the application of the glitch, we ghost on the gendered body and accelerate toward its end. The infinite possibilities presented as a consequence of this allows for our exploration: we can dis-identify and by dis-identifying, we can make up our own rules in wrestling with the problem of the body.

Glitch feminism asks us to look at the deeply flawed society we are currently implicated by and participating

in, a society that relentlessly demands we make choices based on a conceptual gender binary that limits us as individuals. Glitch feminism urges us to consider the *in-between* as a core component of survival—neither masculine nor feminine, neither male nor female, but a spectrum across which we may be empowered to choose and define ourselves for ourselves. Thus, the glitch creates a fissure within which new possibilities of being and becoming manifest. This failure to function within the confines of a society that fails us is a pointed and necessary refusal. Glitch feminism dissents, pushes back against capitalism.

As glitch feminists, this is our politic: we refuse to be hewn to the hegemonic line of a binary body. This calculated failure prompts the violent socio-cultural machine to hiccup, sigh, shudder, buffer. We want a new framework and for this framework, we want new skin. The digital world provides a potential space where this can play out. Through the digital, we make new worlds and dare to modify our own. Through the digital, the body “in glitch” finds its genesis. Embracing the glitch is therefore a participatory action that challenges the status quo. It creates a homeland for those traversing the complex channels of gender's diaspora. The glitch is for those selves joyfully immersed in the in-between, those who have traveled away from their assigned site of gendered

origin. The ongoing presence of the glitch generates a welcome and protected space in which to innovate and experiment. Glitch feminism demands an occupation of the digital as a means of world-building. It allows us to seize the opportunity to generate new ideas and resources for the ongoing (r)evolution of bodies that can inevitably move and shift faster than AFK mores or the societies that produce them under which we are forced to operate offline.

With the early avatar of LuvPunk12, I cloaked myself in the skin of the digital, politicking via my baby gender play, traveling without a passport, taking up space, amplifying my queer blackness. This experience of machinic mutiny was foundational to me, and gave me the courage to let go of the ambivalence that comes with fear of fossilizing in formation inherent to the upheavals of adolescence. I found family and faith in the future with these interventions, shaping my personal visions of a self that could be truly empowered in being self-defined, a futurity that social decorum regularly discouraged for a queer Black body.

Feminist writer and activist Simone de Beauvoir is famous for positing “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” The glitch posits: One is not born, but rather becomes, a body. Though the artifice of a simple digital Shangri-La—a world online where we could all finally be

“freed” from the mores of gender, as dreamt of by early cyberfeminists—is now punctured, the Internet still remains a vessel through which a “becoming” can realize itself. The glitch is a passage through which the body traverses toward liberation, a tear in the fabric of the digital.

This book is for those who are en route to becoming their avatars, those who continue to play, experiment, and build via the Internet as a means of strengthening the loop between online and AFK. This book will call on and celebrate artists who make critique of the body central to their practice, and share the hard fought-for rooms created on this journey as we seek shelter, safety, futurity. To quote poet, critic, and theorist Fred Moten, “The normative is the after-effect, it is a response to the irregular.”

As glitch feminists, we inject our positive irregularities into these systems as errata, activating new architecture through these malfunctions, seeking out and celebrating the slipperiness of gender in our weird and wild wander. Toward this purpose, this book is structured in twelve sections, each section intended to pose an alternative after-effect, allowing us to peer through the lens of new practices and politics to discover new ways that life not only imitates, but begins with, art. Each of the twelve sections begins with a declaration, a white wall against which to cast glitch feminism in

its slip, side, and manifesto. This text will travel from an exploration of *glitch* as a word to its reapplication within the context of (cyber)feminism, to a history of cybefeminism itself, challenging who has been made most visible in these narratives. Each section will apply the concept of the glitch in an investigation, and celebration, of artists and their artwork that help us imagine new possibilities of what the body can do, and how this can work against the normative. Beginning online, we will journey the online-to-AFK loop, seeing how glitch feminism can be used out in the world at large, inspired by practitioners who, in their rebellion against the binary body, guide us through wayward worlds toward new frameworks and new visions of fantastic futures.

01 – GLITCH REFUSES