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Shoshana Magnet

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Feminist sexualities, race and the internet: an investigation of suicidegirls.com

SHOSHANA MAGNET

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA

Abstract

This article analyzes representations of feminism and sexuality on Suicide Girls (www.suicidegirls.com), a commercial site which features the online journals, profiles and nude photographs of young, heavily tattooed, punk women. It highlights the ways in which this site attempts to subvert the male gaze by changing contemporary photographic practices. It also interrogates the way in which the feminist potential of this site remains constrained by its inclusion of only a limited number of women of colour and only as a marketing 'strategy' of diversity. It argues that rather than a critical race feminist commitment to inclusivity and structural change, this strategy of 'diversity' is reflective of the internet tenet which holds that 'content diversity is good business'. Thus, it concludes that rather than a feminist site which operates in the hope of broadening understandings of female sexuality, this site prioritizes profit to the detriment of feminist content.

Key words

commodification • cyberfeminism • cybersex • race

INTRODUCTION

I recently overheard a heterosexual couple discussing their membership of the website Suicide Girls (www.suicidegirls.com). Remarking that they loved the 'feminist community' on the site, they commented that the 'queered sexuality' represented on Suicide Girls differentiated it from other commercial erotica they had seen. 'It's not exploitative,' they stressed to a third person standing with them, 'the women take the photos themselves.' The third person in the group described herself as a 'pro-sex' feminist and part of a feminist erotica collective. She vociferously interrogated their membership in the site.

This conversation parallels the discussions of cybersex found in academic texts concerning the liberatory potential of cybersex in the face of the increasing commodification of the internet. A simplistic rendering of the debate posits two versions of cyberfeminism: cybertopian feminism which understands cybersex as liberating, and cyberdystopian feminism which sees cybersex as exploitative. Although recent treatises on cybersex have attempted to break down this false binary, these two opposed positions remain – sometimes mirroring Second Wave feminist debates which occurred with respect to pornography (Segal, 2004).

This article considers the impact of cybersex on sexual expression and interrogates the contradictory ways in which women's bodies are constituted online. The analysis of the website Suicide Girls demonstrates that 'utopian' and 'dystopian' cyberfeminist perspectives both diverge and parallel each other more closely than they acknowledge. They share common oversights: both tend to fail to consider the impact of racism and commodification on the liberatory potential of cybersex.¹ The analysis interrogates the way in which both utopian and dystopian cyberfeminist understandings of sexuality assume whiteness as normative and fail to emphasize the importance of race to feminist understandings of online sexuality. To do so, it considers the competing and conflicting discourses of cyberfeminism and the enriching scholarship of critical race feminist internet theorists. It also takes into account the intersection of feminist and political economic theories in order to interrogate practices of commodification on Suicide Girls.

Suicide Girls is a commercial site which features the online journals, profiles and nude photographs of young, heavily tattooed, punk women. This study examines cybersex from a feminist perspective that is committed to combating intersecting systems of oppression, including those resulting from racism, classism, ageism, sexism, ableism and heterosexism or homophobia. In keeping with the history of feminism and the critiques of exclusionary practices of Second Wave feminism and its initial failure to rely on and to make central women of colour, disabled, poor and queer women,² it defines feminist representations of sexuality as those which include the depictions of women in sexually empowered positions that do not endorse sexist, ageist, racist, ableist or heterosexist stereotypes. It concludes that some of Suicide

Girls' unique online practices do open up feminist possibilities. However, rather than a location of liberation or of feminist sexuality, cybersex on Suicide Girls significantly reproduces the commodification of women and reinforces racialized hierarchies of sexual subordination.

METHOD

To interrogate the possibilities for the feminist representations of female sexuality offered by Suicide Girls, the text and photos of the models and members are analyzed. All the documents cited are public documents and may be accessed by any user. The names cited are adopted by the models themselves and thus do not reveal the user's identity. With respect to text, the methodology consists of a discourse analysis of the profiles of the models, as well as of the threads attached to the 'feminist' and 'equal opportunity'³ groups within the 'politics and activism' category of the Suicide Girls website. Combining Lindlof and Taylor's (2002) method of discourse analysis with the methodology of Glenn Stillar (1998), this analysis attempts to determine whether and how feminist representations of sexuality occur on the Suicide Girls website and the understanding of these representations by the members of this online community. The purpose of interaction (how it might encourage or discourage online participation), the temporal context of the study, the form of computer-mediated communication (CMC) being studied and how it might alternately facilitate or constrain interaction, the characteristics of the participants and the external research context, are considered to determine how feminist constructions of sexuality are produced and constrained (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). With respect to visual texts such as photos, Sturken and Cartwright's (2001) methodology for studying visual culture is combined with that of Nicholas Mirzoeff (1999), each of whom emphasizes the constructed nature of both visual texts and 'practices of looking' (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001).

SUICIDE GIRLS: ITS FEMINIST LEANINGS AND LIBERATORY INTENTIONS

Site description

Established in 2001 by site owners 'Spooky' (male) and 'Missy' (female), Suicide Girls is a for-profit site allegedly developed as a response to the plethora of oppressive images of plastic, blonde, fake-breasted women which have dominated pornography on the internet (Tomlin, 2002). Described as a site featuring erotica which 'challeng[es] social mores of beauty' (Trumbull, 2004), Suicide Girls is regularly lauded for being a site which focuses on both beauty and brains. As one female member describes the site: 'These are girls that I can respect' (<http://suicidegirls.com/tour/>). Models must apply for acceptance. If accepted, their obligations include posting photos of themselves and participating in an online journal. They are paid for their participation at a rate of \$100 to \$200 per photo shoot.⁴ Both members and models may

participate on bulletin boards and online journals, but models must participate regularly. Each model is introduced by a descriptive paragraph written by site owner Missy. Although some members join only to look at the photographs of the models, other members indicate that their reasons for joining consist of the opportunity to be part of a sex-positive community which includes women who are 'beautifully imperfect' (*Nerve* magazine, <http://suicidegirls.com/tour/>) and who, far from being the usual silent plastic pin-ups, are feisty and intelligent, as witnessed from their written participation on the site.

Feminism and Suicide Girls

While the owners of this site do not use the word 'feminist' to express its ideological affiliation, Suicide Girls is frequently described as a feminist website by the media which have reviewed the site, including publications ranging from *Bitch Magazine* to *Wired*. However, it is not the reviews of this site, or the popularity that it has attained among Third Wave feminist communities as a result of its inclusion of feminist content, that is responsible for the site's feminist identification. Rather, it is that the site explicitly attempts to interrupt the male gaze through the subversion of the standard photographic practices utilized by more traditional forms of pornography. Film theorists such as Laura Mulvey (1975) and E. Ann Kaplan (1983) have theorized the ramifications of this 'penetrative' and 'structuring' gaze. In her landmark article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Mulvey defined 'to-be-looked-at-ness' as the way in which women are 'simultaneously looked at and displayed' in film and then coded for 'visual and erotic impact' (1975: 7). Mulvey concluded that the male gaze produced by cinematic texts tied 'woman down to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning' (1975: 6). Kaplan furthers Mulvey's assertion in arguing that while the gaze might 'not necessarily be male (literally), to own and activate the gaze, given our language and the structure of the unconscious, is to be in the 'masculine' position' (Kaplan, 1983: 30). Clearly, pornography too has been subject to this structuring gaze and its ramifications.

However, on Suicide Girls, the production of this gaze is by the objects themselves – helping the site to meet Kaplan's call for women to 'own the gaze' (1983: 24). In a deliberate effort to interrupt the structuring male gaze, the women themselves decide how revealing their photos will be, how each shot will be staged and which photos will be made available online. One of the liberatory potentials of textual cybersex is that 'the penetrative gaze of pornography is absent' (Gillis, 2004: 96). In taking the cameras back into their own hands through staging their photo shoots, the models on Suicide Girls are redirecting the objectifying male gaze described by Mulvey – transforming 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. Women become the subjects and objects of their own desiring gaze rather than its passive recipients. Furthermore,

instead of being alienated from the means of production, on this website the models are the cultural producers of their images. This is a very important difference with respect to the agency that they are able to access and is a change meant to facilitate their empowerment. These models are not '[a]ssigned the place of object (lack)' only 'passively appearing rather than acting' (Kaplan, 1983: 26).

Neither do the Suicide Girls models construct their sexual pleasure 'only around [their] own objectification' (Kaplan, 1983: 26). Many models assert that they enjoy participating on Suicide Girls because it gives them a chance to subvert these very stereotypes about women in the sex industry: 'posing nude is a way to try to change inhibitions and ideas about nudity and female sexuality' (<http://suicidegirls.com/groups/Feminists/topics/128470/>). The women describe themselves as the *réalisateurs* of their fantasies. The photographic methods are identified as a key reason that many women are keen to become paid members of the site (despite the limited monetary compensation). It is a fantasy that is difficult to realize: for every potential model who is chosen, 350 apply (Tomlin, 2002).

The models on Suicide Girls sport extensive piercing, tattoos and dyed hair – all traditional signifiers of the female grotesque (Braunberger, 2000). The eroticization of these markers of 'deviant' femininity is meant to disrupt the conventional norms of female beauty. An overwhelming number of the photographs are of women's faces. Focusing on the face rather than the body is a highly unusual practice in pornography, and may be used as a deliberate photographic technique which visually indicates an emphasis on the mind (Valdivia, forthcoming).

This photographic practice is in accordance with an emphasis on the minds of the women on Suicide Girls, who must answer a number of questions in order to be selected for the site. As a result of the models' required contributions to the Suicide Girls community through journaling and posting on the bulletin boards, the models are emotionally as well as physically fleshed out (Tomlin, 2002). The models' journals deal with life events, ranging from their issues with sexual harassment at work (<http://suicidegirls.com/groups/Feminists/topics/131311/>), to their worries about schoolwork (<http://suicidegirls.com/girls/Aya/>), to their views on women in the sex industry (<http://suicidegirls.com/groups/Feminists/topics/128470/>). Rarely is the content of their journals erotic. Suicide Girls has a group devoted to feminist discussion, with threads ranging from discussions of *Roe v. Wade* (410 U.S. 113 (1973)) to sexual harassment. This is a highly unusual, perhaps unprecedented, practice for a site featuring nude photos of women. It is important to note that Suicide Girls itself claims a subscription rate that is approximately 50 percent women. Although it is impossible to verify this claim, a strong female presence is evident on the site.

Before proceeding with a further analysis of *Suicide Girls*, both cyberfeminist and critical race literature about the possibilities for women's sexual expression in new media help to shed further light on the ambivalent position that *Suicide Girls* occupies with respect to scopophilic pleasure and the history of pornography.

CYBERFEMINIST APPROACHES TO CYBERSEX: UTOPIAN AND DYSTOPIAN PERSPECTIVES

Utopian cyberfeminist perspectives on cybersex

Sadie Plant is representative of those cyberfeminists who claim the potential for a utopian view of cybersex and its possibilities for women. Plant argues that cybersex is the 'epitome of disembodied pleasure, contact free sex without secretions in a zone of total autonomy' (2000: 460). Plant grounds her claim in the assertion that cybersex is free from the unpleasant 'side effects' of sex which disproportionately affect women, including 'conception, diseases and the sad obligations of emotional need' (2000: 460).

It is partially the potential of cybersex to create a post-corporeal world through the use of virtual bodies which has led cybertopian feminists to be laudatory about its emancipatory potential for women. These cyberfeminists challenge feminism's 'pathological need to worship goddess figures at the altar of the natural body', which 'if it ever existed to begin with, was no more' (Senft, 2002: 539). Certainly, the models on *Suicide Girls*, who resemble cyborgs⁵ more than goddesses, attempt to interrupt the beauty mythology surrounding the 'natural' body. As noted, in order to become a model, it is necessary to have a number of 'body modifications' such as large tattoos, multiple piercings or dyed hair. A combination of all three is preferred (as made explicit by the women who choose the models: <http://www.wweek.com/story.php?story=3716&page=3>).

Utopian cyberfeminists argue that online, women are freed from the rigid norms that traditionally restrict female sexuality. Rather than being reduced to passive female objects that must conform to male desires, cybertopian feminists argue that in 'feminist-inspired virtual worlds' a female body is 'staged as active, intelligent and polymorphously sexual' (Steffensen, 2002: 217). Many of these characteristics emerge from the profiles of the models on *Suicide Girls*. In the 'Favourite Books and Films' section, both models and members list a wide range of explicitly feminist literature. Another section asks the models what 'makes them happy', what 'makes them sad' and what 'gets them hot'. *Suicide Girl* Ada refuses to respond to the 'makes me sad' section and instead says: 'I'm going to pretend that this says "pisses me off"'. Other models have changed this section to read 'things I hate'. In the 'makes me hot' section, Ada lists 'sex with the lights on' and 'girls who look like me'. These responses may be read as discursive attempts to subvert notions of passive female sexuality, as may the fact that vibrators and other sex toys are

commonly listed in the '5 Items I Can't Live Without' section of both the female members' and models' profiles.⁶ Thus these profiles represent a form of CMC that facilitates the interruption of traditional notions of female sexuality, in large part because they are used as spaces where the models can subvert these narratives discursively by explicitly giving voice to both their anger and their lust. In a sense, the purpose of this interaction may be understood as an attempt on the part of the models to tell their viewers how they wish to be read (as subjects, not objects) and to encourage a certain kind of (feminist) participation on the site.

Cybertopian perspectives: the fluidity of gender and sexual orientation online

The number of models who cite their attraction to other women confirms the assertion of theorist Nina Wakeford (2000) who argues that women are able to experiment with sexual orientation more readily in cyberspace. Asserting that many women who self-identify as 'straight' in real life may play with masculinity, transsexuality, bisexuality or lesbianism online, Wakeford argues that this may help to facilitate the 'coming out' process for queer women in a safe space where they are not subject to the same heteronormative pressures which dominate real-life experience. Certainly, there are a number of models who refer to relationships with their boyfriends while simultaneously making reference to their desire for women. For example, suicide girl Ada writes in her journal about her attraction to the other suicide girls, but the 'current crush' section in her profile lists 'my boyfriend'. After new pictures of a model are posted, women⁷ (both models and members) usually cluster on the boards to discuss and to praise the model. It is clear from their comments that the female models and members find the photos of women erotic. For example, Bracket (a model) commented on suicide girl Amina's photoset with the following:

OMGOMGOMG!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! [Oh My God] *fallin off the chair* *runing [sic] to exchange panties* omg. 😊 wow. 😊😊😊😊😊😊
(<http://suicidegirls.com/girls/multiple/photos/Two+of+Hearts/>)

This frank expression of queer sexual desire from a model or a female member is a common response to a new photoset.

Cybertopian feminists claim that the internet's anonymity enhances female agency. They argue that women are able to 'transcend their sexual and gendered particularities' by being able to say yes or no to sexual propositions 'without fear of reprisal' (Blair, 1998: 208; Foster, 2000: 445). A recurring theme on Suicide Girls is models who note that they feel limited by their real-life personas, but freed by their ability to 'shed' them on Suicide Girls. For example, in reply to why she decided to do Suicide Girls, model Ada says: 'Because I'm a shy exhibitionist.'

Orgasm in cyberspace

Asserting that the emphasis on the orgasm achieved through vaginal penetration has undergone revision in cyberspace, utopian cyberfeminists argue that women who participate in cybersex describe a new possibility for sexual fulfilment: the cyberorgasm. In sharp contrast to the heteronormative understanding of an orgasm as requiring the insertion of the penis, the cyberorgasm does not involve physical stimulation. Rather, it is an orgasm that occurs in the mind as one types up one's sexual fulfilment. Discussions of cybersex have helped to open up discussions around female masturbation. It is accepted that this is the usual way that women achieve pleasure through cybersex. Certainly, female masturbation and sexual pleasure for women are common topics on *Suicide Girls*. There are several groups devoted to women's sexuality – including a 'gay girls' and a 'girls only' group. The discussions on these groups – which range from femme–femme relationships to finding a good lubricant – helpfully debunk many of the myths that surround female sexuality, where women are frequently understood to experience neither sexual desire nor sexual fulfilment. Interestingly, cybersex is often touted by utopian cyberfeminists as a catalyst which will motivate women to get online (Cumberland, 2002). The hope of cybertopian feminists is that these women will become part of a 'force that is changing computer environments from a masculinist "virile reality"' (Cumberland, 2002: 180) to a space that enables women to express and participate freely in the making of their own sexualities. *Suicide Girls* represents one online space that is making attempts to meet the above requirements.

More recent scholarship on online sexuality attempts both to problematize and temper this utopian perspective while retaining optimism about the feminist potential of cybersex. Kath Albury (2003) is one of Australia's premier researchers of pornography on the internet. In her work, Albury attempts to clarify the distinction between morality and ethics with respect to online pornography. While Albury concedes that a particular text might be 'immoral' for a number of reasons,⁸ she asserts that morality is not a helpful framework from which to examine online pornography. It imposes a simplistic binary of 'good' versus 'bad' representations of sexuality. Instead, Albury proposes using ethics as a framework from which to understand online porn, as it allows for the celebration of the broadening of sexual experiences and sexuality online while understanding that not all spaces allow for this diversification of possibilities. Thus Albury facilitates an understanding of the internet as a space which 'is not necessarily utopian' (2003: 208) if it meets basic ethical standards, paving the way for critiques of online pornography if they are contextualized within a community-based or personal process, but refusing an external 'all bets are off' relativism in which all cybersex is uniformly condemned. This theoretical approach best describes

most members' understanding of Suicide Girls. Suicide girl Aya sums it up when she says:

SG [Suicide Girls] isn't perfect – some critics ALMOST get it right. Let's be realistic – if SG was a forum for women to empower themselves by getting naked, SG wouldn't charge nor would they pay us.
(<http://suicidegirls.com/groups/Feminists/topics/20807/>)

Yet she also asserts that this site does have feminist potential, arguing that the proof is in the fact that models are participating for sheer enjoyment, not only for the money:

You see it where Bettina says she'd take naked pictures of herself just because. Where girls are doing it to proclaim or reclaim their sexuality.
(<http://suicidegirls.com/groups/Feminists/topics/20807/>)

In noting the complexity of Suicide Girls as a feminist site, this posting helps to set the stage for a closer look at more critical cyberfeminist considerations of the possibilities of cybersex, to which this article turns below.

Dystopian cyberfeminist perspectives

Perhaps the greatest difference between utopian and dystopian cyberfeminist perspectives is their attitude towards the internet's potential for disembodiment and the implications of this possibility for women's sexual emancipation. Cyberfeminists who are more suspicious of the liberatory possibilities of women's sexuality online, from Melanie Stewart Millar (1998) to Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein (1999) and Donna Hughes (1999), argue that it is important to remember the lived realities in which women's bodies are grounded. In suggesting that the internet is postcorporeal, cyberfeminists such as Sadie Plant are giving voice to the idea that cyborgs have no history: 'Whatever avatar you select for your scene, you cannot resist becoming cyborg as well . . . it will be post human whatever it is. Suddenly it always was, you always were' (Plant, 2000: 466). In making this suggestion, Plant is conveniently able to ignore the history of sexual inequality in which women's bodies have been mired offline, asserting that these inequalities will melt in the heat of sexy new technology.

Although the Suicide Girls website is full of self-praise for its own 'liberating' sexual practices and considerable time and energy is invested in distinguishing the site from traditional pornography and in arguing for its feminist potential,⁹ the models themselves acknowledge the complex ways in which they are positioned by the discourse of the site. The following was posted by Aya:

I view pornographic modeling [as an] . . . active, discourse-challenging activity. There has always been a notion of female pornography models as a vile entity that threatens [sic] society because of the fact that these women are actively sexual (or at least perceived that way). The fact of the matter is, I'm doing this mostly because I enjoy it. It's pleasurable to ME and I'm DOING – whatever else is secondary. That's progress.

I can't speak for all the of [sic] the girls on the site.

I'm not going to say that this site promotes a 'realistic' portrayal [sic] of women all the time, nor would I say that this site alone promotes positive images of women – there are other places that do similar things.

But what it FACILITATES is what's important. The girls are known as sexual BEINGS and not just sex objects. The notion of community and the fact that I can at least pretend I have half a brain by posting this adds a certain depth – people may jerk off to my pictures but they can also plainly see that I have opinions, thoughts and beliefs and that I'm not just a dumb girl.
(<http://suicidegirls.com/groups/Feminists/topics/32259>)

This post demonstrates the overlap between both utopian and dystopian cyberfeminist perspectives in that it acknowledges both the feminist potential of Suicide Girls and the way in which it challenges the traditional, objectifying discourses around pornography and female models, while admitting that the site sometimes may endorse these oppressive narratives. However, what Aya fails to address is the limitations of an agency that comes from being a fleshed-out 'sexual being' as opposed to a 'dumb' (read: voiceless) model.¹⁰ She also ignores the bodily risks to which the models may be subject. Although the models may exert their individual agency in participating on the site and many of the models derive both payment and enjoyment from participating, some are clearly only modelling out of necessity. One of the profile questions is: 'Why did you do SG?' Many models reply, 'For the money.' Furthermore, Aya ignores the fact that participating on Suicide Girls may place one at risk.

Critical cyberfeminist theorists have suggested that more utopian cyberfeminists have conveniently ignored the implications of a medium that has led to the growth of large-scale trafficking in women (Doring, 2000). They argue that rather than protecting women, the anonymity of the internet has made it an effective tool to engage in the wholesale buying and selling of women and children. Critics dubious of the liberating potential of the internet for women's sexuality argue that the 'standards and values of the net are being set by the sex industry and its supporters' rather than by the average female user (Hughes, 1999: 158). Certainly, the internet has allowed for the unequalled objectification of women.¹¹ Websites exist where men can rate sex trade workers on everything from the firmness of their flesh to the scars on their bodies (Hughes, 1999). Many sites on the internet demonstrate 'an awareness of racism, colonization, global economic inequalities and sexism' (Hughes, 1999: 159) that is restricted to understanding how to profit from these systemic inequalities. For example, the site World Sex Guide (www.worldsexguide.com) is organized by country and men participate from all over the world in ranking how 'docile' or 'authentic' the sex workers of a particular country are.

In addition, the freedom associated with the anonymity of the internet has contributed to a deluge of online sexual harassment (Branwyn, 2000). Neither does online harassment end with unwanted come-ons; virtual violence and

virtual rape also occur (Dibbell, 1998; Kendall, 1996) and real-life stalking and violence may follow. The 'bodily dimension' of many of these sites 'opens up a field for a new kind of harassment based on actions and objects rather than just on spoken discourse' (Woodland, 2000: 426).¹² New users are particularly vulnerable to online violence. Lori Kendall describes the experience of a woman who was trying out a multi-user domain (MUD; online video gaming) for the first time and who had lagged out temporarily. Another user took advantage of her being temporarily unable to issue commands and pretended that her virtual body was committing sexual acts. By the time 'she unlagged, the person in question was gone and she was left with the equivalent of an obscene phone call on her screen' (Kendall, 1996: 212). Online harassment and violence may not only cause women to avoid certain chat areas or to cancel their memberships to particular lists, but may deter them from going online in the first place (Branwyn, 2000: 401). These experiences can be particularly harrowing for women who are victims of violence, bringing back the memory of real-life trauma (Doring, 2000).

Online violence may be more subtle than virtual rape. For example, cybersex may occur with only the 'partial' or 'half-hearted' consent of women who are 'unable to safeguard the equality of their interests in hierarchical relationships' (Doring, 2000: 870). This type of behaviour is encouraged by gendered suggestions around cybersex, such as the ones found in an internet sex guide written by and for women:

If you need some ideas about what men want women to say or do to them, read a few *Penthouse* letters, or watch a X-rated video. Most women (if they're honest about it) have faked an orgasm or two. Just fake it on the screen. (Skirloff and Gould, cited in Doring, 2000: 870)

This is a severely limited understanding of cybersex which exemplifies Albury's assertion that all online spaces are not utopian places engaged in the process of transforming traditional understandings of sexuality.¹³

Certainly, anonymity is insufficient protection on a site such as Suicide Girls where community formation and contact between the members and the models is encouraged by the site owners. Suicide girls are regularly recognized on the street by members of the site (<http://www.wweek.com/story.php?story=3716&page=4>). The risks to the models were highlighted in an article about the site:

Bailey Maxwell, a 22-year-old SG model, admits that the blurred lines between girls and members admit potential trouble. 'I worry and I know Missy and Spooky do too, that the girls are too trusting of the members because of the strong sense of community the site has', she writes by email. 'I try not to post too much personal information on my journal.' (Phillips, 2002)

However, such self-protective measures are limited in their impact. The web makes it increasingly easy to track down a user's personal information

such as home telephone number and address and the threatening nature of some posts makes the vulnerability of the models clear. In response to model Aya's first photoset, one member wrote:

I am an instant fan. I want more photos and if I have to fly to Canada, hunt you down and just capture some candid stakeout pictures of you on my Sony digital, then goddamn it I will.
(<http://suicidegirls.com/girls/Aya/photos/Cotton+Candy/page2/>)

Other members, who have been absent from their journals, tend to resurface with apologies and explanations that they had temporarily 'disappeared' because they were being harassed by someone on the site. A particularly harrowing story concerned one of the models who had been having difficulty getting paid by a photographer, only to realize that the same photographer had been accused of murdering an actress in the making of a snuff film (<http://www.livejournal.com/community/sgirls/2004/03/24/>; NBC, 2004). The dangers of online female sexual expression need to be acknowledged further by utopian cyberfeminism as well as addressed by Suicide Girls.

RACISM IN CYBERSPACE

Before conducting further analysis of Suicide Girls, it is necessary to investigate the way in which neither of these cyberfeminist perspectives fully consider the impact of ethnicity and racism on cybersexuality. Interrogating the intersectional oppression of women of colour is integral to an understanding of the impact of cybersex on women's sexual autonomy. Critical race feminist scholars from Ella Shohat (1998) and Sherene Razack (2002) to Patricia Hill Collins (2000) have noted the existence of a matrix of domination in which systems of oppression work mutually to reinforce one another. The impossibility of fighting only one location of oppression is described by Sherene Razack: 'We fail to realize that we cannot undo our own marginality without simultaneously undoing all systems of oppression' (2002: 5). Any analysis of cybersexuality must attend both to the impact of ethnicity and racism and must not essentialize women either as completely sexually empowered or victimized.

The utopian theorizing of cyberfeminists who suggest that cyberspace is postcorporeal has been criticized by critical race internet theorists such as Lisa Nakamura. Unconvinced that the internet remains free from the discrimination that contaminates 'real life', Nakamura suggests that gender, class and race hierarchies have been carried onto the internet. Using the metaphor of the after-image to describe 'a particular kind of historically and culturally grounded seeing or mis-seeing' of the postcorporeal body (2002: 322), Nakamura asserts that although the body may be left behind

upon entering cyberspace, the after-image of the body's ethnicity, gender and class lingers. This implies that 'fluid selves are no less subject to cultural hegemonies, rules of conduct and regulating cultural norms than are solid ones' (2002: 325). Nakamura gives a number of examples of the way in which online personas continue to be mired in bodily vulnerabilities. Her example of Kozmo is particularly striking. Kozmo, an online service that delivers food and an array of convenience items, refused to deliver its products to certain zip codes. It did so, not because they were not affluent, but because these zip codes represented affluent African American addresses. Thus, Nakamura argues that

in order to think rigorously about posthuman and virtuality, one must ground one's critique in the lived realities of humans ... online identities can never be truly fluid if you live in the wrong zip code. (2002: 328)

Beth Kolko reinforces Nakamura's argument in her article 'Erasing @race'. Here she notes that the default ethnicity is set to white on most MUDs. Asking how 'the interface of virtual worlds came to efface @race and create a default whiteness for the worlds' (2000: 216), Kolko notes that the absence of ethnicity is particularly surprising in a medium that dramatizes other aspects of identity, including gender. Kolko concludes that the fact that MUDs are missing the '@race verb ... speaks volumes about the assumptions technology designers carry with them' (2000: 225). Thus, Kolko argues that the internet is far from a postcorporeal utopia, but is instead a space which has retained a 'cultural map of assumed whiteness' (2000: 225).

Internet sex is described regularly as the last place to have 'safe sex', a space where one never has to interrupt the flow with awkward questions. However, if the default user is assumed to be white, women of colour are often 'passing' online unless they explicitly articulate their racial identity. Therefore, cybersex where one user writes 'I run my tongue along your creamy back' is not necessarily experienced as 'liberating' by an African Canadian woman who must choose either to disrupt the spontaneous flow of sexual discourse by 'coming out' as a woman of colour, or engage in cybersex as a white woman.¹⁴ Moreover, the possibility that a user of colour will be subject to racism upon disclosure means that, rather than a postcorporeal sexual haven, the internet may become a postcorporeal hell, replete not only with all the usual racism but with additional discrimination particular to the medium. For the global consumer who is depicted as white, the internet serves as a glass window from which 'users can consume the sights of travel as if they were tourists' (Nakamura, 2000: 19). The queer user may enjoy the 'anonymity of the closet' while remaining 'connected to the sociality of public spaces' (Woodland, 2000: 417).¹⁵ Yet, for users of colour, there are few such spaces. The window in their closet serves primarily as a one-way mirror: although

persons of colour may be able to see out, they are stuffed relentlessly into a space that makes them invisible – that is, until ‘commerce and discourse come into play’, at which point the racialized body is mercilessly outed (Nakamura, 2002: 329).

The Suicide Girls website is a prime example of an online space in which whiteness is made normative. Racialized models are largely excluded. When a woman of colour is profiled, her body inevitably becomes a signifier of the exotic. It is this ‘othered’ position that is put forward as the signifier of her desirability. For example, Aya is one of the few Asian Canadian models on the site. In Missy’s introductory paragraph for Aya, she is described as a ‘delicate beauty’ and is constantly praised for being ‘graceful’ and ‘like a pretty little doll’ – despite the fact that this explicitly contradicts her online persona, which is of a vocal, highly-politicized feminist. Comments which encapsulate orientalism follow Aya’s photosets:

oh wow. i have a thing for Asian ladies. you are one of the cutest ever.
(<http://suicidegirls.com/girls/Aya/photos/Cotton+Candy/page3/>)

Neko, a model of colour who appears African American, is also described using radicalized metaphors. In her introductory paragraph for Neko, Missy asserts that she has the ‘fullest lips and most soulful eyes here’ (<http://suicidegirls.com/girls/Neko/photos/Bathroom+Time/>). It is Neko’s racialized features which signify her position as a sex object. None of the white models are introduced in this way. White suicide girls tend to be described as ‘strong’ (<http://suicidegirls.com/girls/Absinthe/photos/Listen+Up/>), ‘feisty’ or ready to ‘kick you in the teeth’ (<http://suicidegirls.com/girls/Sphinx/photos/Beat/>). Thus, on Suicide Girls, ‘images of displayed ethnic and racial difference’ are used ‘in order to bracket them off as exotic and irremediably “other”’ (Nakamura, 2002: 89), failing to meet Ella Shohat’s challenge that feminism ‘seek a non-essentialist approach to aesthetics’ (1998: 29).

Racist comments made by members are largely ignored. For example, comments such as ‘so exotic’ or ‘just like a china doll’ go unremarked, despite the fact that bulletin boards are usually a form of CMC that facilitates interaction and discussion. A further example of un-commented-on racism occurred in a response to the posting of photos for a South Asian woman – ‘India’. India’s photos are interesting in that they generated not only the usual orientalism (‘I LOVE Indian girls!!!1 LOVE LOVE LOVE!!!!’ <http://suicidegirls.com/girls/India/photos/Smily+Face/page2/>, and ‘Very exotic looking’ <http://suicidegirls.com/girls/India/photos/Smily+Face/page3/>), but also explicitly racist comments. Generally, the response to new photos posted on Suicide Girls follows a particular format. After a model posts photos, there are a number of flattering posts commenting on the model’s beauty and/or sexiness. The only negative comments that were found

in response to a photoset occurred after India had posted her first shoot. One member posted:

How did she become a SGirl anyway, doesnt [sic] make the cut in my opinion. ☺
(<http://suicidegirls.com/girls/India/photos/Smily+Face/page13/>)

What serves to distinguish India from the vast majority of other models on the site is her ethnicity. In raising the issue of who 'belongs' on the site, this post may be understood to be referencing India's racialization – which is construed as 'inappropriate' for the site. Although this comment was highly out of the ordinary and unsuitable according to the site conventions, it went unaddressed.

This desire to ignore references to ethnicity and racism has been documented by Kolko et al. in *Race in Cyberspace* (2000). Here, they note that usually, ethnicity is not only erased online, but any attempt to bring ethnicity out of the virtual closet is met with resistance. As an example, they cite the response to one of their postings on a scholarly listserv that argued that ethnicity was not a biological reality but was instead a social construct. This posting began a flame war where the author of the post was denounced as a 'dangerous relativist who didn't believe in the real world', a person capable of thinking that a 'white couple could produce a baby with brown skin and epicanthic folds' (Kolko et al., 2000: 2). Highlighting ethnicity in this case was grounds for brutal *ad hominem* attack.

Although racism on Suicide Girls's bulletin boards goes uncommented, both the members and the site owners are aware of the lack of diversity on the site. Member response may be noted partially from the comments which follow the posting of photos of women of colour. These tend to include '[i]t's so nice to see some different women of color' (<http://suicidegirls.com/girls/India/photos/Smily+Face/page2/>) and 'it is nice to see a little more diversity on this site' (<http://suicidegirls.com/girls/India/photos/Smily+Face/page13/>). Aware of the criticism of the site for the paucity of models of colour, Suicide Girls has posted the following 'affirmative action' notice:

Suicide Girls encourages women of color to apply. We aim to be a more diverse site and we need your help. (<http://suicidegirls.com/model/>)

In interviews with site owner Spooky, he agrees that where the site 'may be failing' is in the endorsement of white femininity or, as he terms it, 'the idea of beauty that is [in] Western media' which he admits 'permeates how we choose girls' (Tomlin, 2002).

To the extent that the site claims to be 'committed to diversity', this is arguably evidence of the 'commodification of difference' by a corporation in order to sell a product (Shohat, 1998: 3), namely exotic women of colour. Rather than coming from a critical race feminist commitment to inclusivity

and structural change, this strategy of 'diversity' is reflective of the internet tenet which holds that 'content diversity is good business'. It is relatively cheap to include more information online and 'diverse' content widens the net cast for consumers (Duggan, 2003: 268). This is an example of what Appadurai terms 'the principle that more difference is better' as opposed to a commitment to 'creating a habitus where diversity is at the heart of the apparatus itself' (Appadurai, 1996: 26). As Ella Shohat reminds us in her introduction to *Talking Visions*, a commitment to 'diversity' through the limited strategy of affirmative action will never 'offer a fully adequate response to the dumb structures of domination' (1998: 6). Limited diversity (read: racialization) broadens the appeal of the site to a white target market. To date, *Suicide Girls* seems to fall into this category of commitment to inclusivity. The way in which race and ethnicity are commodified on the site will be dealt with in more detail below.

RACIALIZING THE FEMALE GROTESQUE

As previously noted, traditionally tattoos, piercing and dyed hair have been signifiers of 'bodies in revolt' or of the 'female grotesque' (Braunberger, 2000). Mary Russo argues that the 'grotesque, particularly as a bodily category, emerges as a deviation from the norm' (1995: 11–12). The bodily differences sported by the models mark their bodies as deviantly female:

Normalization as it is enforced in what Teresa de Lauretis has referred to as the 'technologies of gender' ... [is] harsh and effective in its highly calibrated differentiation of female bodies in the service of a homogeneity called gender difference. (Russo, 1995: 11–12)

Both large tattoos and unusual piercings (such as the nipples or septum) are symbols of hypermasculinity and serve as a reminder of the unstable and performative nature of gender (Butler, 1999; Halberstam, 1998). Additionally, both disrupt traditional notions of demure female beauty and sexuality, causing them to be read as 'unfeminine' (Halberstam, 1998; Sturken and Cartwright, 2001). They transform the female body into a display of 'bodily excess' and resist the ever-present normalizing discourses which attempt to govern femininity:

In a culture built on women's silence and bent on maintaining silence as a primary part of the relationship between women's bodies and cultural writing, the rules have been simple. The written body may only speak from a patriarchal script that tries to limit women's voices and bodies to supporting roles and scenery. (Russo, 1995:13)

Tattoos, piercing and punk hair reframe male/female, center/periphery relations. They subvert the gaze so often trained on women's bodies by both

recognizing and inviting viewers to look. Whereas a 'woman's body is a sex object, a tattooed woman's body is a lascivious sex object' (Braunberger, 2000).¹⁶ Moreover, in signifying 'female masculinity' (Halberstam, 1998) tattoos may be coded as a form of butch lesbian identity – thus implying a subversive form of femininity or sexuality.

It is these depictions of 'monstrous beauty' or subversive forms of femininity that partially have given rise to the excitement about the feminist potential of Suicide Girls. What has been neglected is the way in which tattoos are coded differently for white women and for women of colour. In part, the models are intriguing because they are largely depictions of sweet, white femininity which has been desecrated. While a tattoo coupled with white femininity that be an erotic depiction of transgressive female sexuality, a tattoo or an unusual piercing on a racialized body is more likely to be read as 'primitive' or 'tribal' on an African American or African Canadian body and as exotic on an Asian American, Asian Canadian or Latina body. A website such as Suicide Girls is read as a progressive form of representation of female sexuality because of the way in which these body alterations suggest a deviant form of (white) femininity. However, if it is only the white models who are depicted as transgressing the traditional boundaries of femininity, whereas the same marks on women of colour are used to endorse racialized narratives around 'primitive' or 'exotic' sexuality, the site remains highly problematic. Furthermore, as bell hooks (1992) has argued, the commodification of transgression and its signifiers strips them of their radical potential.

COMMODIFICATION, ETHNICITY, GENDER AND SUICIDE GIRLS

The internet is a space ripe for the commodification and depoliticization associated with the consolidation of corporate capital. In *Digital Capitalism: Networking the Global Market System* (1999), Daniel Schiller asserts that the utopian promise of new information technologies tends to be derailed by the capitalistic framework within which they are located. Schiller argues that new information technologies such as the internet are more likely to facilitate commercialization rather than democratization and that this trend has meant that a wide range of online practices are undergoing commodification. Schiller suggests that this is in large part because the internet has facilitated both the spread and consolidation of corporate rule. Here, this article is particularly concerned with the way in which the internet facilitates the commodification of difference. Below, a brief review is conducted of the way in which the commodification of difference has occurred with respect to the gay community¹⁷ and communities of colour, and the implications more generally of this corporate tactic for political disengagement. Finally, this analysis is extended to an interrogation of how capitalism and the commodification of feminism and ethnicity are manifested on Suicide Girls.

Commodifying queerness

Alexandra Chasin's book *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market* (2000) asserts the dangers of the commodification of queerness for corporate profit. She argues that the capitalist market serves to depoliticize queer activist movements and assimilate their members – drawing 'social movements focused on winning rights' into 'market-based tactics and objectives' (2000: xvii). In this way, the market promotes assimilation to a homogeneous national culture, encouraging identity difference only to the extent that it serves as a basis for niche marketing' (Chasin, 2000: xvii). In a related vein, Katherine Sender's book *Business, not Politics* (2004) on the making of the gay market, traces the development of this newly-visible entity and the intensification of corporate efforts to secure this niche. Sender demonstrates that corporations pitched the expansion as a matter of 'business, not politics', identifying politics as the realm of the 'irrational . . . biased towards the interest of one group and . . . utterly incompatible with – even damaging to – the needs of a healthily functioning economy' (2004: 3). Despite disavowals about the political nature of its 'business decisions', this incorporation of a politicized community has significant ramifications. Sender argues that marketing directed towards the gay community is a discourse through which sexuality is both constructed and produced, fundamentally altering the meaning of gay/lesbian/bisexual/transsexual (GLBT) identity. While Sender makes the case that this market discourse is neither 'exploitative nor liberatory' (2004: 9), she acknowledges its potential to reduce an inclusive queer community to a monolithic white, male, affluent gay consumer.

Commodifying ethnicity

A second illustration of the commodification of difference is documented by Ann duCille's article on the marketing of 'ethnic' Barbies by Mattel. duCille attributes the Mattel 'ethnic innovations' of the 1970s to its increasing 'awareness of the growing black and Hispanic middle classes, who [had] more disposable income than ever before and hence more money to spend on Barbie dolls and their accessories' (1999: 109). duCille is less interested in what motives drove the Mattel corporate strategy than with the question of how it managed to 'produce multicultural meaning and market ethnic diversity' (1999: 111). She concluded that Mattel decided that the 'cost of mass-producing dolls to represent the heterogeneity of the world would be far greater than either corporation or consumer would be willing to pay' and thus produced difference by 'reproducing stereotyped forms and visible signs of racial and ethnic difference' – signifying otherness, not by replicating the individual differences of real bodies but by mass marketing the discursively familiar, by reproducing stereotyped forms and visible signs of racial and ethnic difference' (1999: 111). That is, Mattel signified ethnicity with tinted plastic and a change of costume – simply representing their signature white

doll in a racialized form but never going so far as to 'break the mould' and attempt to produce a diversity of representation.¹⁸ On the strength of this example, duCille argues that

the toy industry is only one of many venues where, multiculturalism posed as an answer to critical questions about inclusion, diversity and equality, has collapsed into an additive campaign that augments but does not necessarily alter the Eurocentric *status quo*. Barbie 'gone ethnic' by way of dye job and costume changes seems to me but a metaphor for the way multiculturalism has been used as kind of a quick fix by both liberal humanism and late capitalism. Made from essentially the same mould as what Mattel considers its signature doll – the traditional blonde, blue-eyed Barbie – tawny tinted ethnic reproductions are both signs and symptoms of an easy pluralism that simply melts down and adds on a reconstituted other without transforming the established social order, without changing the mould. (1999: 112)

This passage is worth quoting at length to demonstrate the ease and the breadth of the corporate 'strategy of diversity', as well its ability to depoliticize movements for social change. When difference is manipulated into a palatable commodified form, it succeeds only in reinforcing the norm rather than effecting substantive change: 'things fall apart, but the centre holds remarkably firm' (1999: 127). The case of 'ethnic' Barbie reveals that the 'other' dolls served only to reinforce the signature white doll as the standard, while her racialized sisters remained the exception.

Implications of the commodification of difference for Suicide Girls

How do these two examples of the commodification of difference inform our understanding of the contested position of Suicide Girls? Unlike the commodification of queerness, in which corporations attempt to distance themselves from a 'political' agenda, Suicide Girls explicitly attempts to capitalize on its apparent feminism. In addition to the inclusion of feminist content through groups, bulletin boards and profiling of feminist members, the homepage features quotes designed to illustrate the site's 'feminist potential'. These include quotes from female members saying that the models on the site are 'women they can respect', as well as reviews from publications claiming that the site breaks down conventional 'social mores' around beauty. Suicide Girls goes still further, featuring quotes that are designed to distance it from a purely business model and to correlate the site to a pseudo-activist movement or a 'grassroots phenom' (*TimeOut New York*). Its models are referred to as 'post-modern pin-up girls for the alternative nation' (*Boston Phoenix*) and the site is described as 'not just monetary but a cultural icon' (Chuck Palahniuk, author of *Fight Club*, <http://suicidegirls.com/tour/>).

In contrast to the corporate market for the gay community, which makes explicit its desire to distance itself from social change and to emphasize consumption, Suicide Girls is engaged in the important political work of

subverting the characteristic male gaze of pornography. Although the site increases marketability by including the additional category of 'feminist' into the mix, it also modifies fundamental practices of looking through transformation of photographic norms. In this way, it does achieve one of the liberatory promises of cybersex, the claim that the structure of sex would be altered.¹⁹ The photographic practices of Suicide Girls allow for a change in the objectifying, exploitative male gaze characteristic of so many other visual texts.

However, although this gaze may no longer be specifically misogynist, it remains a racialized gaze which maintains whiteness as normative and women of colour as othered. Although the website claims to transcend capitalist practices – its motto is 'SG is not a lifestyle brand, it's a lifestyle' (<http://suicidegirls.com/tour/>) – the website draws on traditional marketing practices of the gendered and racialized body. This results in the commodification of women of colour in order to diversify 'product offerings' and improve profits. The site adheres to racist media ideals which idealize white femininity – the safest and most reliable product. Moreover, when racialized models are included on the site, they are used to demonstrate the way in which ethnic difference may be shored up in order to stabilize whiteness as normative. Much like 'ethnic' Barbie, the answer to duCille's question 'how does difference look?' (1999: 114), is 'like familiar racist stereotypes', including a 'delicate' Asian Canadian model and a 'soulful' African American model. Suicide Girls understands multiculturalism as a call to sell a more diverse range of products with no broader commitment to changing the social order. Like Barbie, in which all the dolls are made from the same mould as is its 'signature' white doll, the models on Suicide Girls perpetuate the easy additive which poses little threat to the established order or to racist understandings of beauty. Ethnicity on Suicide Girls has fallen into 'the category of precious ready-to-wear difference' in which 'to be profitable, racial and cultural diversity – global heterogeneity – must be reducible to such common, reproducible denominators as colour and costume' (duCille, 1999: 116) without producing a diversity of representations. The site maintains these very narrow representations even though no additional manufacturing costs would be incurred. It would be no more expensive for Suicide Girls to include a diverse range of women, women whose bodies might challenge the normative standards of beauty to which the site adheres.

A final example illustrates the way in which the site emphasizes profit to the exclusion of a political agenda. This phenomenon is highlighted by the treatment on the Suicide Girls site of one of its models, 'Frenchie'. Frenchie continually uses racist and homophobic rhetoric, including vicious racial epithets (<http://suicidegirls.com/girls/Frenchie/>), despite a policy discouraging racist or homophobic language on the site. Frenchie is a very

popular model. Many of Frenchie's supporters are members who share the racist views that Frenchie freely expresses and that they cannot express for fear of being 'toaded' (i.e. being expelled from a site by erasing a person's user information). To date, the site owners have failed to remove Frenchie to avoid angering some of their paying members.

CONCLUSION

The problematic position occupied by Suicide Girls is clarified by the insights of both utopian and dystopian theoretical frameworks of cyberfeminism and the ways in which they overlap. Utopian cyberfeminism would emphasize the photographic practices of Suicide Girls, which allow the models to attempt to subvert the scopophilic gaze by staging their own photo shoots. Dystopian cyberfeminism would highlight the relatively low pay offered by Suicide Girls and the vulnerability of these young women to both online and real-life harassment. Both frameworks are restricted by their failure to account for ethnicity. Complicating the attitudes of utopian cyberfeminists and dystopian cyberfeminists by taking ethnicity into account reveals the way in which women of colour are either essentialized or neglected. Suicide Girls claims to eroticize deviant forms of femininity such as cyborgian sexuality or the female grotesque. However, an examination of the characteristics of the female bodies displayed on the site demonstrates the way in which racism prevents an understanding of the bodies of women of colour as deviantly female. Instead, their bodies are framed by racist stereotypes which result in their objectification, or they are simply excluded altogether. As a result, the ways in which both whiteness and commodification operate on Suicide Girls limit the site's transgressive potential. This limitation occurs because the website draws on traditional marketing practices of the gendered and racialized body to produce a profitable website.

Although Suicide Girls does fundamentally alter oppressive photographic practices which rely on the objectification of women for the male gaze and provides a space that acknowledges female desire, ultimately it belies its feminist potential. The site's ability to broaden understandings of female sexuality remain limited by 'the intertwining of patriarchy and capitalism' (Meehan and Riordan, 2002: ix), the commodification of difference for profit and the way in which the site maintains whiteness as normative. Even though Suicide Girls diverges from the corporate approach to the gay market, ultimately these strategies converge as both are commodified and, in this process, their ability to effect change is constrained. A capitalist emphasis on profit as a primary motive rather than on a critical feminist commitment to inclusivity and structural change means that the site uses new technologies to represent old inequalities.

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Notes

- 1 I include both textual and graphical depictions of sexuality within the category of cybersex.
- 2 Of course, these categories do overlap. The Second Wave of feminism initially emphasized only the concerns of middle-class, white women and failed to consider the implication of 'race' and class (Bulkin et al., 1984; hooks, 1989; Lorde, 1984; Monture, 1986), sexual orientation (Cain, 1993; Lorde, 1984; Majury and Young, 1995) and disability (d'Aoust, 1994; Masuda, 1992).
- 3 'Equal opportunity' is the name given to the group that discusses issues of ethnicity and racism.
- 4 Given that the models are required to participate in the online community through writing in their online journals and posting on the site (a good deal of extra work) one would expect their pay to reflect this extra effort. Yet, these models are not paid any more than the average, and sometimes less. The average dollar amount for a photo shoot is \$200; suicide girls make from \$100–\$200.
- 5 Cyborg here refers to Donna Haraway's article entitled a 'Manifesto for Cyborgs' (1991), in which she defines cyborgs as mixtures of animal and machines, constructs which blur the boundaries between the natural and the real. In redefining the boundaries which formerly separated machines from humans and making them more fluid, Haraway argues that women are no longer tied to the natural body and thus can be pigeonholed no longer according to essentialized stereotypes which restrict them to rigid gender roles.
- 6 It should be noted that these references to sexuality may also be read as an attempt by the models to code themselves as sexual beings. In keeping with the terminology used on the site, if I refer to a 'suicide girl', this means a woman who is a model for Suicide Girls. If I refer to a member, this means someone who has paid to access the site.
- 7 Of course, online it is not possible to be certain that a stated gender is biological. In this article, I assume that the stated gender is the actual gender. If a comment is made by a model, the gender of the model is 'known', as they must post their own pictures and journal on the site.
- 8 Albury asserts that a particular pornographic text might be immoral if it induces the women involved to become "'alienated" from their own sexuality, since pornographic sex is performed as labour, rather than simply for the purposes of recreation or procreation' (2003: 198).
- 9 For an extended discussion of whether or not Suicide Girls is exploitative pornography, see <http://suicidegirls.com/groups/Feminists/topics/20807/>
- 10 Equating agency with the ability to speak has long been problematized by feminist disability theorists such as Susan Wendell (1996) and Rosemary Garland Thomson (1997).
- 11 An article in the Canadian newspaper *The Globe and Mail* discussed the 'Camgirls' phenomenon, where young women (mostly teenage girls) have personal websites which boast webcams, online diaries and wishlists of Amazon.com items. Those who enjoy viewing these sites can pick an item to send to the young women. Although the 'Camgirls see themselves as holding the controls', security officials believe that 'it's only a matter of time before a stalker tags a victim who has volunteered too much information'. The Camgirls phenomenon is seen by many as the logical extension of

- consumer culture: 'They have taken commodified girl power to its logical extreme – they have objectified themselves' (Anderssen, 2002: A3).
- 12 A well-known case of virtual rape is the example of 'Mr. Bungle' in *Lambdamoo*, where a user manipulated a sub-program known as a voodoo doll in order to virtually rape a female player (Dibbell, 1998).
 - 13 The utopian perspective may be summed up by the now infamous MCI commercial: 'There is no race. There is no gender. There is no age. There are no infirmities. There are only minds. Utopia? No, internet' (cited in Nakamura, 2000: 15).
 - 14 It would be different if this woman had chosen to represent herself as white as a form of identity exploration. However, many women are forced into passing not because they have decided explicitly to alter their ethnicity, but because of the normative assumptions that surround it on the internet.
 - 15 It should be noted that the internet has been touted often as a utopia for queer-identified individuals (Foster, 2000).
 - 16 This is in keeping with the photographic practices adopted by the site – where the women are understood to be inviting the camera's stare through the staging of each shot.
 - 17 Following from Sender (2004), I use 'gay' community to designate the queer community, as companies are primarily marketing only to affluent gay men, rather than lesbian, transsexual/transgendered or other queer individuals.
 - 18 However, this is not to suggest that a doll which had stereotypical signifiers of blackness would be more 'authentic'. This would be a highly problematic proposition. It is simply to note that producing white dolls in darker plastic is not a way of significantly transforming the norm or, as duCille notes in the case of Barbie, the mould.
 - 19 As noted above, one example given by cyberfeminists as proof of the potential for cybersex to transform traditional understandings of pleasure is the cyberorgasm.

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SHOSHANA MAGNET is a PhD candidate, SSHRC Doctoral Fellow and video artist at the Institute of Communication Research, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and a researcher for the 'On the Identity Trail: Anonymity and Authentication in a Networked Society' project, University of Ottawa. Her published work has appeared in *Qualitative Inquiry*, *The Journal of Communication Inquiry*, *Canadian Women's Studies/Les cahiers de la femme*, *The Journal of Men's Health and Gender* and *Atlantis*. Her videos have screened at festivals in Canada, Europe and the USA. Address: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 228 Gregory Hall, 810 South Wright Street, Urbana, IL 61801, USA. [email: magnet@uiuc.edu]