

HACKING THE SYNTAGM: XENOFEMINISM AGAINST PARANOID PRAXIS

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The following text aims to map Xenofeminism (XF; as defined by the Laboria Cuboniks collective) within two overlapping semiotic grids: the first is that of the canon of feminist critique and politics, and the second is that of discursive analysis focused on XF as platform for rewiring the cultural syntagm. The syntagm is here understood as commensurate with the imposition of Lacan's Symbolic register. The description of "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I" will be mined as a useful metaphor for illustrating the dynamics underpinning a certain strand of feminist theory and praxis. Reading the post-structuralist feminism of Irigaray and Cixous through the function of the Mirror stage will be used as a point of departure for analyzing XF as a project of open praxis, one which elides the fixation on essence and identity politics of much contemporary mainstream feminism through abducting the cultural syntagm. The Mirror stage will in this essay provide a primal scene for the meeting of feminist drive towards emancipation, the imposition of the Lacanian Symbolic, and the syntagm of code. Laboring at the intersection of politics and digital design, XF is no longer driven so much by Cixous' gesture of flight from patriarchal syntax, but is rather predicated on cunning tactics, and on the cultivation of alternative codes which queer the patriarchal syntagm.

In her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" Hélène Cixous advocates for a women's mode of writing which would be free of the prerogatives of the Symbolic register. For Cixous, the Symbolic is identical with the patriarchal system, and she echoes the work of Luce Irigaray when she speaks about the exclusion of women from the structures of patriarchal signification, advocating for the development of a "universal woman subject," one who "must bring women to

their senses and to their meaning in history.”¹ Cixous’ writing dating back to the heady days of continental second-wave feminism is imbued with a pervasive sense of oppression which “women” suffer at the hands of the integrated patriarchal system – one which is portrayed as hegemonic, and wholly insular. She tentatively falls back on the conspiratorial notion which understands “patriarchy” as a unified subject of history, accepting its mandate for the Master Signifier at its own face value. Cixous writes: “Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal,” and goes on to add that “I’m speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history.”² Following Irigaray, Cixous believes that “the woman” is commensurate with an essential quality, one which aims to “break up, to destroy; and to foresee the unforeseeable, to project.”³ However, grappling with the perspective of the Symbolic order, she still accepts woman as an occulted essence which stands outside the bounds of signification, and is perceived as “only a hole, a shadow, a wound, a ‘sex that is not one.’”⁴

In her position as the zero which stands beyond the economy of signification, Amy Ireland sees woman as the “unrepresentable surplus upon which all meaningful transactions are founded: lubricant for the phallus,”⁵ and this burden of passivity constitutes one of the central lynchpins of second-wave feminist theory and its calls for emancipation. This double motion which sees the category of “woman” as being latently essentialized while at the same time understanding herself outside of the limits of phallic signification is a central trope for Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa,” and finds its update in the work of the 1990s cyberfeminists who would develop the same binary of patriarchal oppression vs. female freedom for the digital age. Tracing the developmental arc of the feminist project can be approached by establishing the connection between the individual writers’ treatment of syntagmatic relations. The project which the French post-structural feminism of Cixous, Irigaray or Kristeva was later picked

¹ Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” *Signs*, 1.4 (Summer, 1976): 876.

² Cixous 875.

³ Cixous 875.

⁴ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985) 50; Amy Ireland, “Black Circuit: Code for the Numbers to Come,” *e-flux*, 60 (March 2017): <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/80/100016/black-circuit-code-for-the-numbers-to-come/>, accessed 19 December 2019.

⁵ Ireland n.p.

up by the cyberfeminists in their shared focus on the subversion of a patriarchal syntax, one where the syntagmatic protocol is understood as a seminal feature, indeed the very *modus operandi*, of the power grid which supports the system of patriarchal signification.

In her distinctly post-structuralist manner, Cixous writes that

Such is the strength of women that, sweeping away syntax, breaking that famous thread [...] which acts for men as a surrogate umbilical cord, assuring them – otherwise they couldn't come – that the old lady is always right behind them, watching them make phallus, women will go right up to the impossible.⁶

Syntax is here explicitly equated with the specter of a neurotic patriarchal subject – the “men.” From today's perspective, such alibism in the face of gender complexity and non-binary spectrum is reductive, but Cixous shares this view with numerous feminist thinkers of her time. In this way, she posits femininity, or “the woman,” as working to dismantle syntax, and sees for the woman a line of flight opened up by means of navigating the combinatorics of free floating signifiers. Cixous writes: “Flying is woman's gesture – flying in language and making it fly.”⁷ She thus attempts to make woman ungraspable within the male-dominated system of signification, and attempts to carve out a space made for women and by women. This gesture underpins her project of feminine writing.

The Mirror Stage and the Syntagm of Patriarchy

To better understand Cixous' approach to syntax, it is useful to turn to the work of her contemporary Roland Barthes. In *Elements of Semiology*,⁸ Barthes further details the originally Saussurian distinction between the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic planes, and echoes the work of Roman Jakobson, writing that “the freedom to combine several ‘words’ into a sentence is real, although circumscribed by the syntax and in some cases by submission to certain stereotypes.” He argues that “syntax [...] is, so to speak, the ‘glottic’ version of the syntagm,” establishing the actual iteration of syntax as complicit with the primacy of speech and the politics of presence. Barthes sees the syntagm, which

⁶ Cixous 886.

⁷ Cixous 887.

⁸ Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Anette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986) 70.

for him is a sequence which structures diachronically iterated elements (words, garments, meals...) within an utterance, as circumscribing the “combinative freedom”⁹ of the potential virtual superpositions which underpin the paradigmatic system (where the relationship between the potential paradigmatic units is associative, rather than combinatory). “This freedom,” he writes, “remains under supervision [of the] syntax. In fact, the arrangement [of syntax] is the very condition of the syntagm.”¹⁰ The iterative quality of the syntagm, and the necessity of its repeated coherence, is seminal for shoring up the structures of power insofar as it supervises utterances. As such, the syntagm constitutes a protocol which binds the subject within the realm of the Symbolic.

Cixous’ understanding of the syntagm as the metonymical component which, for her, indexed the master signifier of “Patriarchy,” is thus very akin to Barthes’ structuralist approach which understands the syntagm (and the syntax as the embodiment of that virtual syntagm) as a protocol for regulating free-floating potentialities of the paradigmatic register. The stereoscopic overlap between these two views works to define a feminist critique of syntax, but one which leaves the ground disturbed in ways which mainstream feminism, with its unreserved acceptance of “patriarchy” as the structuring Master Signifier, might not find easily palatable. Barthes’ structural approach to defining the syntagm frees it of its purely gendered implications and opens a space for defining it as a linguistic phenomenon, one which does not necessarily favour the male in those ways which certain feminists complicit with the dynamic of what Mark Fisher famously termed “the Vampire Castle,” would have it.¹¹ The analogy is that a non-gendered universal subject (the “Ideal-I”) becomes integrated into the Symbolic register of the syntagm as a cognizing being, rather than as an a priori gendered subject.

This mechanism of structuring the “I” can be approached through Lacan’s theory of subjectivity formation as presented in his “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function.” There, Lacan addresses the process and the termination of the child’s development period which lasts from the moment of its formation of the “ideal-I” (which can happen anywhere between 6 and 18 months of age) and which is incepted through the infant’s seeing itself as a gestalt “being” in a mirror. Lacan writes that such a “total form of the body, by which the subject anticipates maturation of his power in a mirage, is given to

⁹ Barthes 62.

¹⁰ Barthes 69.

¹¹ Mark Fisher, “Exiting the Vampire Castle,” *Open Democracy*, 24 November 2013, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/exiting-vampire-castle/>.

him only as a gestalt [...] whose power should be considered linked to the species."¹² The ideal-I constitutes the moment when signification is still unstructured but, by means of evolutionary mechanisms, the child understands that it exists separate from the mother. It is also the period during which language acquisition is predicated on expanding free-floating signifiers largely having to do with the attractions/aversions and metabolic processes of the child.¹³ It is a stage which precedes the child's inscription into the Symbolic order which is constitutive of the social-I fostered through navigating communication protocols, for example integrating "shifters" whose adoption by the child, according to Roman Jakobson, coincides with the point when "the notion of time appears in the language of the child."¹⁴ The Mirror stage is thus only a passing moment on the child's journey into the Symbolic register of language, into the contiguity of the syntagm.

The integration into the Symbolic is, from the perception of the nascent subject, felt as an imposition upon the unstructured topology of the ideal-I, and is commensurate with its entrapment within a language of power. It is during the twilight of the mirror stage that subject becomes complicit with the Symbolic through the temporal and shifting structure of *langue*.

One of Lacan's great contributions was that he traced the repercussions of such an imposition onto the subject further, seeing the imposition of the syntagm onto the Ideal-I as engendering what he termed "paranoiac knowledge." Lacan writes that the mirror stage is a moment of "jubilant assumption of [the child's] specular image." Upon observing itself as a gestalt figure against the background of its environment, the child's "I is precipitated in a primordial form, prior to being objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject."¹⁵ Later in the essay, he writes that the mirror stage exists "prior to the paranoiac alienation that dates back to the time at which the specular I [brought about by the moment of recognition] turns into the social I [brought about by the child's inauguration into language]."¹⁶ The "specular I" is the period immediately following the onset

¹² Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function," *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002) 76.

¹³ Roman Jakobson and Krystyna Pomorska, "Dialogue on Time in Language and Literature," Roman Jakobson, *Verbal Art, Verbal Sign, Verbal Time*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985) 24.

¹⁴ Jakobson and Pomorska 24.

¹⁵ Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 76.

¹⁶ Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 79.

of the “mirror moment” while “turning into the social” is constituted through a gradual accretion of linguistic protocols associated with the Symbolic.

There is occasionally a pathological dimension underwriting the “feminist” impulse which echoes the dynamics of Lacan’s “paranoiac knowledge.”¹⁷

A closer look shows the reciprocal effect which problematizes the category of the integral “patriarchy” of the syntagm. By levelling the discourse and fetishizing the {Master Signifier, Patriarchy, Big Daddy mainframe}, a bigoted form of feminism disregards the greater ecology of alienation which permeates the subject’s relationship to the system of {syntagm, patriarchy, capitalism...}. On a virtual level, Lacan’s typology defuses the male/female binary inherent in the signifier “patriarchy.” Such de-gendering of patriarchy allows one to grapple properly with the Symbolic order, and to diffract the conspiratorial construct of the hegemonic syntagm into the analytics of syntactical ecologies. Regarding the integration of the Ideal-I into the Symbolic register, Lacan writes that

It is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into being mediated by the other’s desire, constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence due to competition from other people, and turns the *I* into an apparatus to which every instinctual pressure constitutes a danger, even if it corresponds to a natural maturation process. The very normalization of this maturation is henceforth dependent in man on cultural intervention, as is exemplified by the fact that object choice is dependent upon the Oedipus complex.¹⁸

Such a definition is equally applicable to the understanding of the system of patriarchal dominance in Cixous and many of the second-wave feminists, insofar as it identifies patriarchy with rigid gender demarcations circumscribed by the hierarchy of the Oedipus structure, one which makes women’s knowledge “mediated by the other’s desire,” where “the other” is the spectral signifier of “the male” or that of “patriarchy.” Just how “natural” such a process is will not be discussed at length here, in favor of accepting the tension between the “ideal-I” and the “social-I” as an integral phase of every human’s maturation process, regardless of sex.

¹⁷ Lacan, “The Mirror Stage,” 79.

¹⁸ Lacan, “The Mirror Stage,” 79.

Towards an Analytics of Power

Accepting such a standpoint can naively be seen as capitulation to “the system,” but in fact constitutes the dissipation of a primary narcissism which is yet blind to the very real power relations existing in the world, and which is problematized at every step by the shifters which complexify the primal narcissism of the Ideal-I. Lacan writes that the integration of the “ideal-I” into the Symbolic register “is experienced as a temporal dialectic that decisively projects the individual’s formation into history: the mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation.”¹⁹ This irruption of history into the formation of the subject is thus not only a passive acceptance, but is rather a drama which is pregnant with anticipation, and is commensurate with Cixous’ evocation of woman’s “shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her *suppression*.” The subject irrupts into history as much as history irrupts into her. Within the specific dynamics of gender politics, Cixous becomes tentatively proactive when she advocates for a feminine writing which will bring about “New Women.” The act of re-writing the phallic economy of lack will, according to Cixous, be “marked by woman’s *seizing* the occasion to *speak*.”²⁰

It is through this door that the subversion of the syntagmatic code can eschew paranoiac knowledge and rather, following Foucault, “move less toward a ‘theory’ of power [and more] toward an ‘analytics’ of power: that is toward a definition of the specific domain formed by relations of power.”²¹ Such an analytics of power mutates the very idea of a coherent and unified syntagm of power, and can be abstracted to what Jakobson calls the “dynamic synchrony”²² of language. The proper approach to the woman’s “shattering entry into history” is thus more about carving out a new future by means of what Cixous terms a “mutation in human relations,”²³ rather than a radical break with the language artifact.

In his treatment of the Mirror stage and its role in the formation of subjectivity, Lacan had thus identified a moment which structures any strand of subversive politics, and had warned against the creeping paranoid complexes on whose brink any such emancipatory endeavor inevitably teeters. The syntagm

¹⁹ Lacan, “The Mirror Stage,” 78.

²⁰ Cixous 880.

²¹ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998) 82.

²² Jakobson and Pomorska 6.

²³ Cixous 882.

which structures our action in the sphere of the socio-political (i.e., the sphere of language as such) must not be reduced to a rigid conspiracy mentality which only serves to affirm the theory of the Master Signifier and reify the dispossessed as victims, enshrining even further the big Other; rather it must work with the analytics which shore up the syntagmatic structures, and must work through them via recoding. It is this struggle for a praxis of the analytics of power which underwrites the efforts of Xenofeminism, which advocates for picking up the Master's code which everywhere lies scattered about.

Beyond the Master Signifier

In her book *Xenofeminism*, Helen Hester gives a tripartite definition of XF as “a *technomaterialist, anti-naturalist, and gender abolitionist form of feminism.*”²⁴ Through its focus on language, this essay focuses on the technomaterialist praxis of XF which understood as being 1) actively engaged with recoding the Symbolic (as opposed to remaining fixated on the paranoiac knowledge of the Master Signifier's economy of lack) through engaging with the social code and 2) and properly patching the poststructuralist legacy of “female writing” for the digital era. In this sense, XF is moving away from the prerogative of freedom *from* {the patriarchal order, capitalism...} in favor of a freedom *to* rework the material infrastructure which underwrites society. XF picks up Cixous' call for a flight from the patriarchal syntagm, but expands her post-structuralist project for the processual syntax of code, and the moment of the Mirror Stage here functions as a metaphorical pivot on which to base such an analysis. “If Nature is unjust, change Nature.”

XF directly salvages the theoretical and practical tools of cyberfeminism and digital politics, and works to rewire the social through the active praxis of recoding and of abducting the digital. XF departs from embracing a pure theory of power, and rather works to usurp the means of production through an analytics of power, echoing Foucault's call to not fetishize but rather deflate the hierarchies of power (“Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.”²⁵). Through a responsible gender abolitionist project, XF calls to move away from a position of paranoiac victimhood, one shored up by the category of the antithetical Master Signifier of “patriarchy,” and openly questions the lack inherent in the economy of the phallus.

²⁴ Helen Hester, *Xenofeminism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018) 6.

²⁵ Foucault 93.

“Let a hundred sexes bloom”²⁶ is an invocation meant to explode the illusion of a coherent gender politics in favour of a systemic patchwork of active collective agents. Hacking the syntax as a matter-of-fact (“Laboria Cuboniks” is an anagram of “Nicolas Bourbaki” a French group of mathematicians formed in the 1930s at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris) actively encroaches upon the standing syntagm of patriarchal dominance, and shows it to have been unravelled in the fallout of the digital revolution. XF labours to redeem the latent paranoia of contemporary feminism and the perceived imposition of the Symbolic through accepting the de-gendered nature of power as such. Although XF understands power as always being non-neutral, it leaves behind the “paranoiac knowledge,” underwritten by the familial drama which Lacan identified with the irruption of the syntagm into the Ideal-I, in favour of working through the Symbolic on terms which are distributed and dialogical.

The question of complicity with the patriarchal infrastructure comes to the fore, but is effectively defused by XF’s parallel project of gender abolitionism, and by their unapologetic willingness to salvage the dregs washed up on the shore of the post-internet semiotic landscape. When asked whether “the master’s tools [could] ever dismantle the master’s house,” Lucca Fraser answers

Yes. Both literally and figuratively yes. That’s what tools are—they’ve got uses that go beyond their masters’ intentions. And they’ve got weaknesses that can be exploited to make them do things they weren’t intended to do. Which is basically what hacking means. This doesn’t mean we shouldn’t invent new tools. The more the better. But yes, absolutely, the master’s tools can dismantle the master’s house. How could they not?²⁷

The technomaterialism of XF questions the double entendre which lies hidden in the conception of “freedom of information” and, following N. Katherine Hayles, they embrace the reality that information must be embodied.²⁸ XF in this sense regards language, as well as the underlying syntagm of code as also being

²⁶ Laboria Cuboniks, “Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation” (2018): 0x0E, http://www.laboriacuboniks.net/20150612-xf_layout_web.pdf, accessed 19 December 2019.

²⁷ Merray Gerges, interview with Lucca Fraser, “Xenofeminism and New Tactics for the Left,” *Canadian Art*, 6 February 2017, <https://canadianart.ca/interviews/xenofeminism/>, accessed 19 December 2019.

²⁸ See N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Post-Human* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

profoundly material. They aim to redesign the architecture of thought and praxis through a leveling of relations, working towards an abstract democracy of objects while retaining tight overlap with the, always material, hidden abode of production. The XF project thus seeks “to platform”: “Xenofeminism seeks to be a mutable architecture that, like open source software, remains available for perpetual modification and enhancement following the navigational impulse of militant ethical reasoning. Open, however, does not mean undirected.”²⁹

Their call to weaponize the code for subversive ends is a major XF trope, and deftly problematizes the feminist approach to the economy of the Symbolic and to the dynamics of power. If only through XF’s call for a “mesopolitical sphere,”³⁰ such a treatment diffuses the primacy of the Master Signifier within an ecology of relations which aims to micromanage power in all its forms. XF indeed understands very well that the social machine is structured like a language, and regards itself as “a platform, an incipient ambition to construct a new language for sexual politics”³¹ via active practice. The platform on which language rests is the syntagm of code.

In line with Louis Armand’s notion that “the syntax and grammar of thought” constitute the “psychic apparatus as a type of *machine made out of words*,”³² XF sets out to connect, disconnect, buffer, network, scrap, etc. various composites of code and language, and form novel couplings which would retain the plasticity of power. Such a hacker ethic makes XF stand against the notion of a universal grammar of the digital sphere, and drives it to cultivate a politics of particular, embodied, and virile agency uncontaminated by the “infection of purity.”³³

The fundamental political axiom of XF espouses emancipation and the “construction of freedom.”³⁴ Yet such a freedom is no longer posited as being usurped or wrested from the coffers of the Master Signifier, but rather constructed in complex complicity with power-as-such. Antonia Majaca and Luciana Parisi write that

the new subject can only be constructed from the hard labor of alienation, which includes understanding the logic of instrumentality, politicizing it,

²⁹ Cuboniks 0x10.

³⁰ Gerges n.p.

³¹ Cuboniks 0x19.

³² Louis Armand, *Literate Technologies* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia Books, 2006) 83.

³³ Cuboniks 0x10.

³⁴ Cuboniks 0x01.

and transcending it through usage itself. This requires building a non-paranoid imagination, and a radical denaturalization of both humanness and subjectivity as we know it.³⁵

Alienation, rather than a sense of specular belonging, is the direct result of decoupling from the nexus of phallic signification, and is carried by the prerogative of constructing and discovering languages built on codes heretofore unheard. Cixous' affirmative writing for women by women has blossomed into the realization that "the construction of freedom involves not less but more alienation; alienation is the labor of freedom's construction." XF thus unmoors itself from the feminist discourse which peddles in the signifiers of "patriarchy," "man," or "woman," and rather claims new territory without the need for validation by decommissioned gatekeepers.

³⁵ Antonia Majaca and Luciana Parisi, "The Incomputable and Instrumental Possibility," *e-flux*, 77 (November 2016), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/77/76322/the-incomputable-and-instrumental-possibility/>, accessed 19 December 2019.