Cyberfeminism and Artificial Life
Sarah Kember
itself, as this chapter hopes to show, can make a difference. My project, as has already been suggested, is by no means pristine and is, in a sense, doubly contaminated – not just by the sciences it moves (slightly) closer towards but by the position it started from. I do not mean to trace a linear trajectory from ignorance to enlightenment, not least because accusations of scientific ‘illiteracy’ fly all too often in the face of feminists from scientists entrenched in the science wars and invested primarily in preventing any form of outside intervention. What I do mean to trace is the problem of entrenchment and a possible means of averting – in the case of alife – the stalemate of science wars. Dialogue does not entail a one-way movement but a two-way dynamic, and a step into ‘no-man’s’ land for feminism is predicated on the apparent break in biology’s ranks. The unfortunate macho metaphors of combat which suggest themselves in this context signal all too clearly the problem which needs to be addressed. This book is inevitably part of the problem, and where I started from is where I am now but with some hopefully significant differences which developed during a process which I am calling dialogue (not emergence). These differences do not centre so much on greater degrees of assent or dissent between the values of feminism and alife, but on the kinds of complexity opened up through internal contestation and made available to diffraction.

Since I am rejecting a teleology of feminist engagement with alife, what follows at least indicates the need for a genealogy attendant on the gaps and inconsistencies in both clearly non-homogenous discourses. My sustained interest and investment in discourses of alife is strongly informed by debates within cyberfeminism. Cyberfeminism may be defined in relation to its origins in feminist theory and practice of the late 1980s and early 1990s (Kennedy 2000: 285) which engaged with the emergent technologies of the information revolution. It was in part a response to the anarchic politics of cyberpunk (Squires 1996), characterised by both Andrew Ross (1991) and Rosi Braidotti (1996) as a realm of middle class adolescent male fantasies centred on a rebellion against the parent culture and a disdain for physicality, or the merely mortal. Computer hacking and science fictional depictions of transcendence as ‘getting out of the meat’ (Springer 1996) are associated with the then ‘new’ technologies of the Internet and virtual reality (VR), and with the notion of cyberspace as, in Woolley’s (1992: 122) terms, the ‘new frontier’. The new final frontier, rather like the old one, was swiftly colonised by cowboys and so cyberfeminism was in part a kind of Calamity Jane for the new media, creating anarchy more specifically within patriarchal culture and strategically employing anachronistic or essentialist images of women. There were the Riot Girls (Braidotti 1996: 14) and VNS Matrix (1994) whose computer game heroine called Gen sabotages Big Daddy Mainframe and does for Circuit Boy (‘a fetishised replicant of the perfect human HeMan’) by bonding with DNA sluts and consuming plenty of G-slime. Where parody and humour may have mitigated against the troubling aspects of essentialism here, the same cannot be said for Plant’s (1995) analogy of weaving, women and cybernetics in which a supposedly feminised technology is described as being autonomous, self-organised
'A wonderful work....Sarah Kember's mastery of such an astonishing range of sources is an incredible achievement – not least because she is equally at home with all of them and has excellent powers of exposition to reach audiences in A-life, evolutionary biology, cultural studies and feminist theory.'

Alison Adam, Reader in Information Systems, Salford University

'...This work makes a significant contribution to the fields of A-life and feminist science studies, and will serve as a useful introduction to A-life as a science and culture.'

Janine Marchessault, Chair, Department of Film and Video, York University, Toronto

Cyberfeminism and Artificial Life examines the construction, manipulation, and re-definition of life in contemporary technoscientific culture. The book takes a critical political view of the concept of life as information and traces it through the new biology and discourse of genomics, incorporating the changing discipline of Artificial Life and its manifestation in art, language, literature, commerce and entertainment. Using examples from cloning to computer games, and incorporating an analysis of hardware, software and 'wetware', Sarah Kember demonstrates how this relatively marginal field connects with – and connects up – global networks of information systems.

Refocusing concern on the ethics, rather than the 'nature' of life-as-it-could-be, Kember proposes that Artificial Life is in part an adaptation to the climate of opposition surrounding Artificial Intelligence. From a feminist perspective, and with a set of concerns related to the role of the body, the self and the species in the production of life-as-it-could-be, Kember points to a strategy for change that rests on a dialogue between 'nature' and 'culture', ontology and epistemology, science and the humanities.

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Cultural Studies / Gender Studies / Cyberculture