

Defiance of Amphibians: Neology as an Act of Alienation

Part of Feminisms

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Fritz Lang's Maschinenmensch with emoji frog.
Image courtesy the author.

New words – authored or anonymous – emerge at times when it is not possible to address a certain phenomenon with the lexical representations available in a given language. Linguistic efficiency or representational capacity thus depend on time and practice, as lexicology does not operate on the basis of trial and error. A new word in English is generated every ninety eight minutes or 14.7 words per day.¹ However, most of them are never integrated into widespread use due to lack of accord over their meanings, which can only be reached upon elaboration. Neology or wordsmithing enable languages to expand their representational capacity into the present and the future.

1. "Number of Words in the English Language", *Global Language Monitor*, viewed 25 April 2018.

In *Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation*, the collective Laboria Cuboniks seeks to "articulate a technologically minded counter hegemonic gender politics fit for an era of globality, complexity, and alienation" (Avanessian & Hester 2015). Their text, otherwise known as the XF Manifesto (Laboria Cuboniks 2015), describes xenofeminism via three compound words: *techno-materialist*, *anti-naturalist* and *gender-abolitionist*. These seemingly vague and even idiosyncratic terms go through subjective elaboration and reveal themselves to be relevant and practical concepts for thinking about feminism in the light of current techno-political circumstances. Moreover, their disambiguation helps build a vocabulary of emancipatory politics that is appropriate for each and every subjective gendered reality without prioritising one over the other.

Today, nature is willingly "enhanced" in favour of corporate interests. Buttressed by theological institutions that craft pseudo-ethical concerns deeming essentialism unquestionable, such enhancements are never granted to the subversive universal framework that Laboria Cuboniks envision. Critical of the perception of nature as immutable, the international feminist group refuses to consider "the natural" as a given, fixed and sacrosanct attribution amongst living beings. Without situating anti-naturalism in opposition to the biological, the XF Manifesto frames nature as a space for political contestation. It also calls for the widespread emancipation of anything which has been deemed "unnatural", cast out of normative society or subjected to discrimination by the so-called law of nature and dominant gender binary in favour of patriarchy. The xenofeminist rationality also asserts that nature needs to *be changed* if it is *unjust*. For such subversive tasks to fulfil their emancipatory potential, xeno-revolutionaries should consider humans, cyborgs and non-human animals akin.

Promising biological studies with revolutionary goals are often hypocritically denounced by creating public controversy around them or undermining them through budget cuts. Thus, one might consider the fact that a number of pesticides are either well tolerated or have escaped the attention of policy-makers and public influencers as there are significant findings on the gender-bending effects of herbicides. For example, Atrazine affects various life forms that inhabit contaminated aquatic environments, particularly that of amphibians like frogs, causing infertility and hermaphroditism, and moreover threatening their reproductive capabilities – their "sexuate diversity", as Laboria Cuboniks calls it. ² With regards the case of the Atrazine-induced amphibian African clawed frog (*Xenopus laevis*), humans need to come to terms with their non-human kin in an act of collective survivalism and unselfish cohabitation. If not, inter-species extinction on Earth and impending environmental cataclysm become unavoidable.

2. In the United States, no legal action has yet been taken because the indicated risks on humans were very limited.

Male amphibians that develop female bodies under Atrazine fit into Laboria Cuboniks' discussion on "gender abolitionism" as they argue for the construction of "a society where traits currently assembled under the rubric of gender, no longer furnish a grid for the asymmetric operation of power" (Laboria Cuboniks 2015, Chapter 0x0E). Arguing for the proliferation of genders, rather than the undoing of differences to become identical or uniform, the collective declares: "Let a hundred sexes bloom!" Their objective is neither impairing the world's reproductive ability, nor is it reducing its sexuate diversity. So, what needs to be revoked is not gender itself (or its infinite possibilities) but the unjust systemic conditions that classify gender into categories. And the only way to do that is to erase the hard-coded, gender-based traits and their cultural markers from society. Inciting inequality and harbouring injustices, growing oppressive tendencies explicitly manifest themselves over the Internet. Driven by white supremacy and misogyny, racism and genderphobia are able to shapeshift between online and material forms and influence one another.

As the XF Manifesto also claims that technology is neither neutral nor inherently progressive now that the cyber-utopian days of the 1990s are over, while critically unpacking the notion of "techno-materialism". Declared as a hate symbol by the Anti-Defamation League, the cartoon character Pepe the Frog is subject to

constant online exploitation.³ The infamous amphibian that once had a neutral image recently became the foremost meme used to disseminate hate speech by the resentful, the betas and various other forms of trolls currently reigning over the Internet. As demonstrated in several cases such as the #Gamergate controversy, (Parkin 2014), the 4-8chan culture and the alt-right or incels are the most commonly known examples amongst other underexposed web-based communities with oppressive tendencies. They exploit anonymity and accelerated forms of communication supported by technological mediation. "Just as the invention of the stock market was also the invention of the crash, Xenofeminism knows that technological innovation must equally anticipate its systemic condition responsively" (Laboria Cuboniks 2015, Chapter 0x08). In such a context, the primary objective of technological innovation should therefore be auxiliary to identify, scrutinise and, most importantly, counter-attack such threats.

3. See Anti-Defamation League, viewed 19 May 2018.

The impact of networked feminism and the technology-driven acceleration in cyberfeminism can be likened to that of a tsunami in scale. In order to break through, a slow subsumption must be directed to overflow into what the preceding three waves of feminism had crushed. Even though the XF Manifesto does not incentivise infliction of direct damage in search of rapid overthrow, it explicitly targets the elimination of the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. To overpower such deep-rooted adversaries will not be as simple as following a ready-made programme with grassroots revolutionary ideas, or using technological processes. Language, as the source code we have, needs to be reprogrammed to engender a Promethean subjectivity fit for the task. The manifesto proposes the construction of such a language with high level programming which requires a strong abstraction from the computer's instruction set architecture. Parallels can be drawn between such labour and LISP, "the programmable programming language" that allows systemic changes to the operation of a computer programme, via small adjustments to the actual code – analogous to neology – to reduce limitations on the expressivity set by language. "Not only can you program in Lisp (that makes it a programming language) but you can program the language itself" (Foderaro 1991).

The aforementioned context suggests the foundation of an anonymous, accessible, inclusive and utilitarian language, which enables a universal attunement to an emancipatory form of gender politics, and that an egalitarian feminist sensibility is exigently needed. Its absence requires a thorough but indefinite formulation in continuum, if it is to operate as an interspecific framework capable of fostering extensive social change for all of the alien kin. The methodology for building such a language that can potentially generate "a better semiotic parasite" is uncertain. To start with, it might be necessary to reconfigure human desires to tranquillise the so-called irrational.⁴ In the best case, we move towards the inception of a Promethean era of freedom and justice. In the worst case, it will become a thaumaturgical task to save humans from further self humiliation and prevent inter-specific environmental catastrophe. Considering the technological advancements available to us, emancipation is something that should not be given up so easily, handed over to disciplinary state power or mourned over. Instead, it should be demanded unselfishly and equally for everyone and everything.

4. The modern times scapegoat that is accused of all kinds of atrocities caused by the human species.

If a new world is to be built, it ought to be constructed word by word. Alienation of semantics through premeditated ambiguation of existing words with cultural

markers could be considered a viable intervention to a lexicon that could potentially activate widespread action. "To learn without desire is to unlearn how to desire", as Raoul Vaneigem remarks (1995). Resetting the meaning of words and redeploying them back into flux could be a practical inception towards engendering a subjective reality for the world-building cause. According to Laboria Cuboniks, alienation is "an impetus to generate new worlds". It does not mean estrangement of the working class from their labour through derogatory, automated minute tasks, assigned under debilitating employments, but rather, it is a generative and productive force to reevaluate the conception of what is human. As the collective puts it, "new knowledge, new phenomena or concepts that make an appearance in the world, can change the way we understand ourselves and our position within it" (Reed 2017). Therefore, this form of estrangement could serve to cultivate emancipation by processing newly-acquired knowledge as an ontological update for what is human as a generic category within species.

Challenging the timeliness of the current Turkish lexicon in the field of gender studies within the purview of cyberfeminism, the recent collective endeavour to translate the XF Manifesto into Turkish can be seen as an inspiring attempt to alienate one's own native language from an archaic framework of meanings and their oppressive memory.⁵ This exercise certainly went beyond a mechanical act of translation, allowing an open-ended process with multiple perspectives on the manifesto. Contributors from different political spheres and generations confronted their subjective notions of gendered realities within the material and virtual world, while negotiating words from the text's earlier translations and their meanings. Striving to think like lispers, the objective of this collective effort was to reconfigure the semiotic disposition in Turkish, by subverting words and translations deriving from the XF manifesto, while simultaneously revoking linguistic restrictions to widely engage with the latent feminist discourse. In this era of growing complexity, the human is inherently capable of learning but not so much of unlearning what is set to be fixed, permanent or given. The act of unlearning could only be practiced via Promethean knowledge that calls for "not less but more alienation" (Laboria Cuboniks 2015, Chapter 0x01).

5. The seven-week long programme, including public meetings as well as reading and working groups, took place at Istanbul-based art space AVTO in January 2018.

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