

#WomenTechLit

Edited by María Mencía

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CONTENTS

Foreword: <i>Why #WomenTechLit?</i> By N. Katherine Hayles	xiii
Introduction By María Mencía	xvii
I. HISTORIES OF DIGITAL WRITING PRACTICE	3
Women Innovate: Contributions to Electronic Literature (1990- 2010) By M.D. Coverley // Marjorie Coverley Luesebrink	5
Women making new media at the trAce Online Writing Community 1995-2005 by Sue Thomas	31
At The Speed Of Light: Cyberfeminism, Xenofeminism and the Digital Ecology Of Bodies by Maria Angel and Anna Gibbs	41
Latin American Electronic Literature: When, Where, and Why by Claudia Kozak	55
A Kaleidoscope of Slovak and Czech Electronic Literature by Zuzana Husárová	73
A Diorama of Digital Literature in Spain by Dolores Romero López	97
Digital Poetry Evolution and the Art of Machines by Jeneen Naji	115
Digital Letterisms: Alternumeric Orders By Natalia Fedorova	131
II. DIGITAL WRITING PRACTICE: PRACTITIONERS	153
Generative Activity in Art and Literature By Kate Armstrong	155
<i>Between Page and Screen</i> By Amaranth Borsuk	165
Notes on the Composition of <i>Notes on the Voyage of Owl and Girl</i> By J. R. Carpenter	177
	vii

<i>Transient Self-Portrait: The Data-Self</i> By María Mencía	189
The Evolution and Actualisation of #PRISOM: a Literary Anti-Surveillance Game. By Mez Breeze	211
Literary and Musical Dialoguing: Sound, Voice and Screen Synergies By Hazel Smith	225
Excavating <i>Underbelly</i> By Christine Wilks	241
A “Rhetoric for Creative Authoring” and the Author’s Intent By Odile Farge	253
III. CRITICAL OVERVIEWS OF DIGITAL WRITING PRACTICE	263
Gender as Patterns: Unfixed Forms in Electronic Poetry By Giovanna di Rosario	265
In Search of a Female Technological Identity in Electronic Literature: Dancing with the Spanish Domestic Cyborg by María Goicoechea and Laura Sánchez	281
Surface Reading <i>The UpsideDown Chandelier</i> : Interface “Mastery” and Feminism by Kathi Inman Berens	298
Poetic Tweets from the Avant-Garde to Digital Literature By Angelica J. Huizar	313
R(e)orienting Poetics and Lived Spaces “Between” By Laura Shackelford	325
A Comparative Study of Shu Lea Cheang’s Brandon By Maya Zalbidea Paniagua	349
IV. THE MIGRATION OF FORMS	359
The Legacy of Judy Malloy By Dene Grigar	361
<i>its Name was Penelope</i> , a Generative Hypertext By Judy Malloy	375

<i>Marble Springs: A journey of an electronic work from the pre-dawn of the Internet to today's Golden Age</i> By Deena Larsen	391
The Making and Unmaking of <i>Califia</i> By M.D. Coverley // Marjorie Coverley Luesebrink	403
The Death and Re-Distribution of <i>V</i> By Stephanie Strickland	411

MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS OF SHU LEA CHEANG'S BRANDON

BY MAYA ZALBIDEA PANIAGUA

This essay offers a close reading of *Brandon* (1998), a hypermedia work by a prominent figure of new media art, Shu Lea Cheang. The metaphors of this hypermedia project explore sexual politics and present the problem of the ideal of the normative sexuality, through real cases of transgendered and intersexual people. Cheang's artistic and poetic representations of how the imposition of normative sexuality destroys the subject will be explained using Judith Butler's theories of the body and the self. I will also use Jacques Lacan's theories to interpret in which sense might Cheang be using the concepts of "psychosis," the "Other," "ego," "symbolic," and "imaginary" to develop a systematic analysis of the work. This research shows that Shu Lea Cheang's *Brandon* is an artistic and literary hypermedia that pays homage to one of the figures who inspired trans and intersexual activism. It is also a text that fosters developments in queer theory. As a hypermedia text it challenges the normative idea of the self and how it is constructed through the apprehension of the self-image and the gendered body. Visual metaphors in *Brandon* invite spectators of new media art and readers of electronic literature to understand alternative sexualities and subjectivities.

The *Brandon* project by Shu Lea Cheang was originally unveiled on June 30th, 1998, by the Guggenheim Museum. She presented her first artistic project commissioned for the World Wide Web exploring issues of gender fusion and the technobody in both public space and cyberspace. The project is presently online and can be read and watched freely at the site <http://brandon.guggenheim.org>. *Brandon* will be analyzed to discuss how personal challenges of intersexuals and transsexuals subvert misogynist, homophobic and racist norms of oppression, and how the digital medium permits denunciation of abuses and permits freedom of expression without censorship. *Brandon* consists of digital images and hypertexts which make reference to real and fictional narratives of intersex and transsexual people whom society has discriminated against and constrained. Some of these people such as Brandon Teena were victims of violence and murder. However, Cheang's *Brandon* is not only a Web project about victims but rather a homage for those who, like Brandon Teena, fought against rules and conventions to follow their own needs. "The Website uses his story as a vehicle to explore the broader issues of gender identity and Internet phallogentrism; it interrogates discourses around the intersections of bodies and identities" (Bingaman, Sanders, and Zorach, page 237).

This web-based project also represents cyberspace as a symbolic place where identities can change without restrictions. According to Verena Kuni:

the *Brandon* project thematizes the utopias and realities of transgressing gender boundaries, then it appears to be quite characteristic that as transgender subjects, their real and fictitious protagonists are frequently perceived by society as «monsters»—while they identify themselves in a positive way as cyborgs. (n.p.)

Apart from using a cyborg identity, a figure popularized through Donna Haraway's philosophy, cyberspace is a convenient place to make reference to Brandon Teena's case because he is an icon for transsexual activism in the World Wide Web. Other real stories of victims of sexual assault on the Internet are remembered in the project. As a review of the project cites: "[t]aking this case into the environment of gender play and multi-identity of cyberspace, *Brandon* extends its case study to include other legal cases where gender ambiguity constitutes points of interrogation" ("Brandon: Bodies of Evidence," n.p.). In this essay I analyze the two interfaces that are currently online in the project: "Bigdoll" and "Roadtrip," as well as the following five hypermedia: "Brandon in transit," "JIM," "GARLAND," "BARBIN," and "VX." Some interfaces which used to be in the project but are currently offline will not be analyzed, these were called: "mooplay" and "panopticon" and these were netlinked to a forum used during the period of time in which the project was under construction.

The title of the project: *Brandon* makes reference to Brandon Teena, a 21-year-old transman from Nebraska, who was raped and murdered in a hate crime in 1993. In Lea Cheang's project the imagotype of the transsexual Brandon Teena embodies those intersexuals and transsexuals who have ended up being victims of hatred crimes. When we open the website we find a motion picture of a baby icon whose shape changes into the body of a man and in the end this man turns into a woman.

This image of a baby whose gender changes from male to female is representing the situation of an intersexual or transexual person who may be born with a determined sex but during his/her life begins to feel like a person of the opposite sex. The icons of restroom public toilets symbolize how public institutions have determined the notion of two sexes: male and female. By clicking on the icon of the baby a collage appears.

It consists of a square with pictures and sentences making reference to transgender sexuality and especially to Brandon Teena's transsexuality. The set of images is full of symbolism of sexual organs: the flowers represent female genitalia, the eggs make allusion to ovaries or testicles and there is a prosthetic penis that may represent the one that Teena Brandon used to wear.

According to John M. Sloop, girls used to think that she was a man because she "stuffed socks into his shorts" or would "wear a dildo" (178). There are also images of medical schemas representing how doctors analyze the human body and name its parts. There is even an image of the parts of a penis from a clinical analysis. These

medical graphics symbolize the "institutional regimes of gender classification" ("Brandon: Bodies of Evidence," n.p.). Clicking on some of the images of the collage there is a hidden collage. Collages in *Brandon* produce the same effect on the spectator as Dada and Fluxus art: shock, repulsion and incomprehension, and like Dada and Fluxus artists new media artists like Shu Lea Cheang try to stir up scandal. In this collage an arrow whose shape is full of curves represents the tumultuous path of Brandon's life. The whole collage represents a fragmented human body. In "Electronic Literature and the Effects of Cyberspace on the Body" (2014), Xiana Sotelo and I explain my theory that in cyberspace bodies are fragmented, distorted and narcissist. *Brandon's* collage represents this characteristic of how the body appears in cyberspace.

In one part of *Brandon*, the eyes of the body are reflected on a rear-view window. This is a metaphor of Brandon's conscious of "self," an allusion to Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage. Jacques Lacan explained that the mirror stage "marks a decisive turning-point in the mental development of the child. In the second place, it typifies an essential libidinal relationship with the body image" (12). The rear-view window symbolizes that Brandon's identity is in constant transition, his self is travelling as if it were on a highway. If we look at the hidden collage in the "Bigdoll" interface in more detail we will realize that there is a prosthetic arm and a prosthetic leg which symbolize how body organs can be restored artificially.

The prosthetic leg is an allusion to the figure of the cyborg in cyberspace. In the middle of the collage there is a chastity belt, an image of an ambiguous small penis or red vagina and a medical graphic of a pink phallus at the bottom. These hybrid sexes represent the existence of a double sex and the red color is a clear symbol of blood. Blood evokes menstruation or a gash as genitalia. This symbol might be an allusion to Brandon Teena's rape. Clicking on several images of the collage reveals the "Roadtrip" interface. This road symbolizes Brandon's trip when he moved from Lincoln to Falls City in order to find a place where nobody knew that she had female genitalia. At the same time the road trip can be seen as a metaphor of the paths followed by users in cyberspace. In this interface, in the first place there is an image of a boy who looks like Brandon and the title is: "Brandon in Transit." The use of the word "transit" here refers to his/her condition as a transsexual in transition, a state in which, according to Judith Butler: "Identity is in the process of being achieved" (142).

Clicking on "Brandon in Transit" reaches the hypertext "Fiona McGreggor" in which a narrator tells an imaginary story in which he meets Brandon. He explains that he read about Brandon's murder and when he comments that he was raped he automatically changes the gender of Brandon and starts to use the pronoun "her" instead of "him" in a sexist way, as if only women could be raped. At the end the narrator's discourse turns into Brandon's imaginary discourse: "Brandon returns, we are all haunted.

The indistinctness of his voice, embroidering his pauses words chosen by others. Saying: "All I ever wanted was to be a boy. I just wanted to be normal, find a woman and love her, live my life." The name written at the end of the hypertext is Fiona McGregor, the author of this hypertext, one of the artists who collaborated to create *Brandon*. The scroll moves automatically and the reader continues clicking on other images to find another hypermedia. This time it is a collage with a Dada style like the previous one. There is a square with an image of a hand with a cigarette and the picture of a black man smiling. By clicking on the link the destination node is a hypermedia about a woman, Annie Lee Grant who posed as a man for economic interests. The following image shows another transgendered woman, a she-male wearing a hat. This is a picture of Elvira Mugarietta, a woman who was born female but she passed as a man between 1892 and 1936 becoming first a journalist and later a soldier. Just like Brandon she used false identities and was officially detained several times. According to William N. Eskridge:

There was nothing new about Mugarietta [...] Fairies had cavorted in New York City before 1890; women passed as men and married other women throughout the modern era. What was new was the publicness and self-consciousness of their deviation from male and female roles, and society's anxious perception that many people shared their inclinations. (17-18)

In "Garland" (Fig. 4) the reader learns that Elvira's husband hypnotized her so that she could not speak, the spell worked and she had to travel the country using a paper and a pen to communicate. She wrote letters to her husband begging him to release her from the hypnotic spell, then: "he promised to meet her in Oakland, when she should be dressed in female attire, and he would break the spell."

The images of the black person hiding her mouth and the double teeth on the left symbolize Elvira's incapability to speak.

By clicking on the right picture of the black person wearing a hat we will enter into another hypermedia "Under a hypnotic spell". A face of a black person represents Elvira looking at herself in a broken mirror.

This mirror represents Elvira's self-image which is damaged because of the hypnotic spell that her husband cast on her. In the following hypermedia the reader finds some incomprehensible graphics and a hypertext which reads: "Jacques Lacan Schema 1 a psychotic state of mind where Brandon meets Garland." Like in other hypertext fictions,

the fact that the narrative takes the form of a hypertext influences the perception of the reader, who, like a psychoanalyst, has to find clues to understand the origin of the protagonist's psychological problems which are reflected in loss of

the sense of reality and temporality. (Zabildea 2014, page 203)

Both, Garland and Brandon suffer from a psychotic state because they are punished by society for their transexuality. Psychosis in their case is a consequence of loss of freedom. In *Bodies that Matter* (1993) Judith Butler explains how the normative ideals of gender and sexuality are imposed by society and psychosis takes place as a response to censorship:

Lacan maintained that sex is a symbolic position that one assumes under the threat of punishment, that is, a position one is constrained to assume, where those constraints are operative relations of cultural life [...] Psychosis appears not only as the prospect of losing the status of a subject, and, hence, of life within language, but as the terrorizing specter of coming under an unbearable censor, a death sentence of sorts. (Webster 2002, n.p.)

We find Lacanian terms in the hypermedia in a chaotic order: mirror, Other, ego, symbolic and imaginary.

This anarchic drawing full of crossing outs and the broken mirror of the previous hypermedia make allusion to Lacanian theory of the mirror stage.

At the beginning of the development of Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage he pointed out that the mirror stage is part of an infant's development from the ages of six to eighteen months. Looking at himself/herself in the mirror the child acquires the dual relationship (*relation duelle*) between the Ego and the body, which is always characterized by illusions of similarity and reciprocity, but also by the relation between the Imaginary and the Real. The visual identity given from the mirror supplies imaginary "wholeness" to the experience of a fragmentary real. In "The Cult of Lacan" (2002), Richard Webster explains that during the 1950s Lacan's concept of the mirror stage evolved: he no longer considered the mirror stage as a moment in the life of the infant, but as representing a permanent structure of subjectivity, or as the paradigm of "Imaginary order." Garland's self image in the mirror is broken because she does not recognize herself with the image she sees in the mirror. Brandon and Garland have an imaginary conversation:

Garland: How did you get here? Brandon: I'm having a sexual identity crisis.

Garland: A sexual identity crisis? Brandon: I don't know what that is. Garland: How can you have a sexual identity crisis if you don't know what that?

In this fictional conversation there is a strong criticism of the therapist's diagnosis of Brandon's sexual identity crisis. According to Carolyn Gage:

Brandon's history would have included twelve pending charges of forgery, a possible charge of sexual assault on a minor, an untreated rape in October 1990, eating disorders, binge drinking, and an ongoing sexual relationship with a fourteen-year-old girl. (n.p.)

The therapist diagnosed a "gender identity disorder" and sent Brandon home with information about "gender reassignment" surgeries. However, the therapist did not take into account that Teena was a survivor of child abuse and what she suffered was rather a Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, "a syndrome commonly associated with survivors of child abuse, and especially survivors of incest" (n.p.). Both Brandon and Garland suffered homophobic treatments. Brandon Teena presented a record of years of untreated child sexual abuse, a report of a recent rape, an escalation of criminal activity, a history of multiple identities, sexual predation toward under-aged girls, extreme risk-taking behaviors, avoidance of medical care from fear of routine examinations, eating disorders, suicidal ideation, terror of being in a female body, expressed fear of men, preference for protective clothing, and compulsive bathing. Garland was hypnotized and repressed by her own husband for wearing man's clothes when the only reason why she did it was to be allowed to work in a male professions such as soldier.

In the hypermedia the readers can read: "What's the Name of your Father?" which is another allusion to Lacanian psychoanalytical theory. For Lacan, "The Name of the Father" is the fundamental signifier which permits signification to proceed normally. It confers identity on the subject, naming and positioning the subject within the symbolic order, and signifies the Oedipal prohibition, which is the "no" of the incest taboo. If this signifier is foreclosed, in the sense of being excluded from the symbolic order, the result is psychosis. Lacan described how the refusal of "The Name of the Father" operates as a drastic form of self-defense such that psychotic subject is then shut out of the symbolic. The subject refuses the rule of the signifier that names him/her in the structure of the family. Garland and Brandon both refuse "The Name of the Father," they reinvent their names and identities, escaping from the symbolic order and moving to the imaginary order. Later on, there is another hypermedia in which there is information about Herculine Barbin and quotations from the biography of this transgendered person in the nineteenth century whose biography was published by Michel Foucault in 1980. Alexina B., later officially called Herculine Barbin- (1838–1868) was a French intersex person who was treated as a female at birth but was designated a male identity after a physical examination. In *Brandon* there is a hypertext about a sensual chapter of Herculine Barbin in which Alexina embraces a girl whom she used to sleep with when she lived in an ursuline convent. In the images in motion here is an image of a stove symbolizing the gas stove Herculine Barbin used to commit suicide. In this hypermedia there is also an image of Brandon with angel wings, Brandon has been

historically appreciated by intersexual and transsexual communities, his real case was used as an impulse for transsexual and intersexual social movements in the US.

(Image 9.jpg goes here).

And finally, following the highway, the reader gets to the last hypermedia the title of which has two consonants "VX," representing the acronym of the name Venus Xtravaganza. Venus Xtravaganza was a transgender American man who saved money for sex reassignment surgery while earning a living as a prostitute in New York City. His life was taken by a violent man who mutilated him and killed him when he discovered that "she" was a man, a crime, like Brandon Teena's murder, based in transphobia. Butler asks, in her analysis of *Paris is Burning*, a documentary by Jennie Livingston about transgender communities in which Xtravaganza was featured, "whether parodying the dominant norms is enough to displace them; indeed, whether the denaturalization of gender cannot be the very vehicle for a reconsolidation of hegemonic norms" (Butler 1993).

Having analyzed the symbolic systems in Brandon, as well as documentation on those novels and films about real cases of intersexual and transgendered people that it makes reference to, we can conclude that this hypermedia investigates how the imposition of compulsory heterosexuality produces erroneous medical interventions and incites transphobic crimes. According to Judith Butler a way to stop transphobia could be to:

Undo [...] restrictively normative conceptions of sexual and gendered life. Lives and identities of individuals are not static, they are sometimes becoming, in some cases transsexual identity is in transition, it can even be always in transition. And not only the transsexual condition may change, also that one of any kind of individual. (Butler 2004, p. 80)

Shu Lea Cheang's *Brandon* pays homage to one of the figures who inspired trans and intersexual activism. It is a classic work of new media art and exemplary of how new media art has been influenced by the Dada and Fluxus movements. It also vindicates transgender rights by questioning the normative idea of the self and how it is constructed through images of the body. In conclusion, I would like to propose that working on hypertexts about gender issues stimulates the reader to understand alternative sexualities and subjectivities.

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