

Be The Glitch

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ABSTRACT

This essay reviews Legacy Russell's *Glitch Feminism* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2020).

A manifesto is a difficult text to review—especially, as with Legacy Russell's *Glitch Feminism* (2020), when that manifesto seems to intentionally fail the genre. An effective manifesto might be described as proprioceptive: a text that facilitates the feeling of the present *as* something to be felt and oriented towards. It charges the present with a new polarity, or otherwise seems to render it plastic. What makes reviewing a manifesto difficult is that any assessment preceding that complex structure of feeling as it unfolds feels a bit like a foreclosure, and any description feels like a collapse.

To delay the review a bit longer, then, it feels important to say without qualification that *Glitch Feminism* affectively succeeds. It is exciting to read, a whirlwind tour anchored only by the conceptual promiscuity of “the glitch.” Each of *Glitch Feminism*'s thirteen chapters refracts the titular concept through a phrase: “Glitch Is Cosmic,” or “Glitch Throws Shade,” for example. These phrases lend Russell the freedom to introduce an expansive body of theorists, artists, and works. Importantly, insofar as this text positions itself within the lineage of cyberfeminism, readers will be pleased to find this constellation centering queer artists and theorists of color. The majority of artworks cited are from no later than 2010. For a tradition penned largely to the exclusion of these voices, *Glitch Feminism* feels overdue.

Central here is a broad theorization of “the glitch.” What begins as a descriptor of a technical error quickly becomes a mode of redress, a movement of subjectivity, and even a new model for a liberatory and intersectional sociality. Consequently, this is a text that will be many things to many people—everything from an introduction to a set of artists and ideas to a catalyst for organization. The range of readers that cyberfeminisms past have attracted has always been one of the lineages' strongest attributes, and *Glitch Feminism* is surely elastic enough to accommodate an even wider variety of encounters.

Evidently, then, *Glitch Feminism* does not “fail” as a manifesto, but rather occasionally tries to glitch the genre itself, to bring “The Manifesto” to failure. It is at these moments that the book engages in the kind of theoretical, political, and aesthetic work that provides an entry for review. The final sentence, for instance, unexpectedly recedes: “Let the whole goddamn thing short-circuit,” just at the moment when another manifesto might have granted its reader the kind of pithy commandment that makes circulation simple. *The Communist Manifesto* offered “Working men of

all countries, unite!,”¹ the *Cyborg Manifesto* rallied a desire to “be a cyborg rather than a goddess,”² and, more recently, the *Xenofeminist Manifesto* proclaimed, “If nature is unjust, change nature!”³

On the one hand, *Glitch Feminism* repeatedly denies its reader this kind of ready-made shorthand; here and elsewhere the book draws power from opacity, satisfied to explore its own logics and ways of being. Yet, on the other, it demands that it be felt, that by necessity the world *deal with it*. It is in these slippages that *Glitch Feminism* engages in a kind of politics of shameless obfuscation.

This seems, at first, to be oxymoronic. Shamelessness as a political strategy typically consists in performing whatever it is that might be expected to provoke a response of shame (and, often, taking pleasure in subsequent shaming). In contrast, the glitched-out politics framed by *Glitch Feminism* seem to work differently—indeed, Russell describes “the glitch” as a “strategy of non-performance.” Thus, “the glitch” is theorized as at once a refusal and a vector of unbounded growth. Of course, the politics of refusal, shame, and opacity have long histories, and *Glitch Feminism* mobilizes a number of texts from these discourses as stepping stones. Depending on one’s relationship to critical and queer theory in particular, the ways in which the text engages with these discourses may feel cursory to some and illuminating to others.

As Lauren Berlant reminds us, the structure and experience of shame, and the political ends and strategies associated with it, are not simple matters. They rest on layered indeterminacies spanning everything from personal feelings to vast infrastructures of management and control. If one proceeds simply from the self-understanding of being a “shamed” subject, one risks grounding one’s own subjectivity, let alone those comprising an intersectional public, in shame. Russell, in the more personal passages of the text, explores the relationship between structures of shame and her own early attempts at resistance. For instance, she recounts how her childhood adoption of the chatroom handle Luvpunk12 was a technical buttress behind which she could explore a queer identity without shame or judgement. Russell frames this navigation as the budding of her queer subjectivity-to-be, a vector of promising uncertainty rather than subjective ground. Her online persona allowed her the opacity to be whosoever she chose, a kind of early proof that the violence of normativity can always be short-circuited.

In other words, “the glitch” in *Glitch Feminism* presents itself as a tool for manipulating the pathways through which shame and oppression operate technically. The book finds optimism in the potential for new cross-wirings generated by the work of a number of artists, most of whom are queer people of color: “Let’s be beatific in our leaky and limitless contagion” (173). Clearly “the glitch” is not meant to act as a new subjective ground, but rather is a generalized tactic of multifaceted experimentation. It operates somewhere between affects and technics in a space we might think of as the space of reciprocities.

In Berlant’s words, a shameless politics takes “control over the making and breaking of the terms in which reciprocity will proceed, if at all...The affective event of performative shamelessness initiates, therefore, the potential for unraveling normative defenses.” The point *Glitch Feminism* insists on is that “the glitch” is non-performative. Its non-performativity is, paradoxically, a refusal to perform that nonetheless propagates positively along a trajectory all its own. That is, the space of non-performativity that “the glitch” produces is paradoxical because it aspires to form an unrepresentable body. From the perspective of the technical systems through which it travels, its motion appears stochastic, maladaptive. Experienced from within, however, advanced everywhere

from the curated Instagram posts of Lil Maquela to quotidian explorations of queerness online, “the glitch” proposes the possibility of an internal coherency without the need for consistency.

The most interesting theoretical deployment here is, surprisingly, “abstraction.” The book’s loosely unified uses of “the glitch” are bound by a process repeatedly referred to as abstraction. Indeed, peppered throughout the text is a theory of abstraction as the liberatory mechanism through which “the glitch” does its work. For many approaching the text, this will contrast with an understanding of abstraction primarily as an instrument of capital.

However, I sense that abstraction is functioning here in a novel, if sublimated, way. “The glitch aims to make abstract again that which has been forced into an uncomfortable and ill-defined material: the body” (153). Here and elsewhere the text frames abstraction as a *positive* force of dematerialization, seemingly in contrast to growing bodies of work in media studies and communications that insist on the materiality of computation. It is difficult to say exactly how Russell’s usage of dematerialization maps onto this body of work, but I am inclined to say that by “material” she means something like the condensation of normative practices into the infrastructures of life. Dematerialization, then, would be the loosening of hegemonic conditions and the re-introduction of contingency. It remains to be seen how abstraction will redevelop as a theoretical tool, though I agree with Scott Richmond that there does seem to be something vital in its recent deployments, *Glitch Feminism* among them.

In this review I have tried to tap into a politics running beneath the surface of *Glitch Feminism*. One could, justifiably, ask about what is keeping it submerged. Unfortunately, because *Glitch Feminism* relies heavily on metaphor to keep its pace, there are moments in which I felt the argumentative thread slipping away in the play of metaphor. Of course, paradox and intentional contradiction are at the heart of the work being done here. However, a distinction between the tasks of paradox’s strategic deployment and the theorization of that deployment is important. The chapter “Glitch Is Skin” is perhaps the exception that proves the rule: largely a meditation on the concept of permeability, the chapter *theorizes* permeability as an inherently paradoxical facet of “the glitch.” At the same time, it uses the metaphor of skin to thematically bind this conceptual labor to, among other works, Shawné Michaelain Holloway’s *picking skin: alignment*. As the text balances these two tasks, I found them to be most in accord in chapters that revolved around processual themes, such as “Glitch Throws Shade,” and “Glitch Mobilizes.” The more purely metaphorical chapters, such as “Glitch Is Anti-Body” or “Glitch Is Virus,” were less coherent in this respect, and less impactful as a result.

All told, this issue is somewhat offset by the fact that concepts are recursively worked over throughout *Glitch Feminism*, grazed from a different perspective on each pass. Happily, I have found that iteratively returning to the book yields a layered mesh of connective tissues. The aforementioned focus on abstraction, for instance, begins in *Glitch Feminism*’s introduction, but unfolds sporadically across nearly the entire length of the text, from chapters “Glitch Is Cosmic” to “Glitch Throws Shade” and “Glitch Survives.”

As I sat with *Glitch Feminism*, flipping through and rereading short sections over a period of months, it became clear that to conclude this review by positioning the book and the conceptual developments it offers as simply the next contribution in the cyberfeminist lineage would be a disservice. It does, of course, proclaim itself as such even before the text begins, in the jacket

description. In that meta-textual proclamation, *Glitch Feminism* makes a meta-textual point. Its very presence works to denaturalize the ground upon which that conversation has matured and makes painfully obvious the extent to which white, cis het voices have dominated this conversation. “Tear it all open,” Russell writes, “be the glitch” (153).

ENDNOTES

¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. Gareth Stedman Jones (London: Penguin, 2002), 258.

² Donna J. Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 68.

³ Laboria Cuboniks (Collective), *The Xenofeminist Manifesto: A Politics for Alienation* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2018), 92.

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