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# Cyborg Bodies, Human Minds: Robert Venditti's *The Surrogates*, Yukito Kishiro's *Battle Angel Alita* and the Great Myth of Posthumanism

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

“Cyborg Bodies, Human Minds: Robert Venditti's *The Surrogates*, Yukito Kishiro's *Battle Angel Alita* and the Great Myth of Posthumanism.”

by

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A THESIS

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### Abstract

The topic of humans altered and *improved* through advanced cyborg technology—technology that amalgamates animal and machine—has long been of interest in science fiction, gaining popularity in most Western countries and Japan. This paper examines two graphic novel series, Robert Venditti’s *The Surrogates* and Yukito Kishiro’s *Battle Angel Alita*, in relation to cyborg humans and the theoretical concept of posthumanism, defined as a state that transcends the limitations of human existence with the help of cutting-edge technologies. The posthuman theory of Donna Haraway suggests that the cyborg has the potential to change humanity for the better, to challenge essentialist dichotomies and harmful identity politics. However, theorists like Katherine Hayles warn about the dangers inherent in technologies that allow humanity to “master” the body—and mortality—completely. This paper critically examines both perspectives and, ultimately, the viability of a utopic posthuman state.

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## Introduction: Chimeras

The cybernetic organism (or the "cyborg") is a futuristic chimera—a hybrid creature fashioned from a combination of organics and biotechnology or machinery. Today, the cyborg is common in both fiction and everyday life. In most fictional cases, the biotechnological components<sup>1</sup> of a cyborg serve to enhance the "natural" or biological aspects of an animal, usually a human being, in order to create a superhuman. The reality, however, is much more mundane. Contemporary biotechnology is often restorative rather than enhancing. It simply treats people suffering from a physical or mental illness, raising them to an average or healthy standard. A hearing aid, for instance, does not enhance a hearing-impaired person's hearing ability to superhuman levels. Rather, it gives that person the ability to hear as healthy people do naturally at birth. Nonetheless, both types of individuals, whether super-enhanced or merely brought to an average standard through cybernetic technology, can be considered cyborgs.

The topic of humans altered and, in particular, *improved* through advanced cyborg technology has long been of interest in science fiction literature, film, and television. In fact, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, written in 1818, could be regarded as the earliest example of cyborg literature (or at least an example of proto-cyborg literature). Shelley's short novel is concerned with the story of Victor Frankenstein who rebuilds a dead human consciousness and body with parts from cadavers. He reanimates his creature with the help of then-advanced technology, namely electricity. While human in many ways,

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<sup>1</sup>A variety of biotechnologies (or technologies—I will use these terms interchangeably)—biological and mechanical—can be used to create a cyborg, including genetic/DNA manipulation, drug therapy, nanotechnology, cybernetics and robotics.

Frankenstein's monster is also physically enhanced after his resurrection--he's eight feet tall and incredibly strong; his enhancements are beneficial, but they also isolate him from others without enhancements. This narrative is echoed in more contemporary cyborg stories, such as Octavia Butler's series, *Lilith's Brood*, and Paul Verhoeven's *Robocop*. Both of these narratives tell stories of technologically-enhanced humans who are expelled from unaltered society. Clearly, cyborgs and their stories have long been and continue to be compelling to consumers.

While futuristic cyborgs are part and parcel of the stories we tell, the cyborg is not just a creature of science fiction and mythology. Today more than ever before, the cyborg is a reality. In contemporary industrialized cultures such the integration of computer and biotechnologies<sup>2</sup> is both common and necessary in everyday life. Our jobs often require the human body to work in harmony with cell phones, computers, and automobiles. These technologies become part of us.<sup>3</sup> They are important not only to functionality and effectiveness in technology-reliant societies, but

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<sup>2</sup> *Biotechnology* is the science of modifying or harnessing organic materials and living organisms on a cellular and biomolecular level to create technologies and other products that work to improve human and animal existence. An example of a biotechnology would be developing or optimizing vaccines and medicines based on an individual's genetic makeup or modifying the genetic makeup of a fruit so that it can grow in adverse weather.

<sup>3</sup> In chapter four of *How We Became Posthuman*, N. Katherine Hayles challenges the idea that cyborgs are surgically created; humans have been cyborgs for some time. She writes, "[C]ane and man join in a single system, for the cane funnels to the man essential information about his environment. The same is true of a hearing aid for a deaf person, a voice synthesizer for someone with impaired speech, and a helmet with a voice-activated firing control for a fighter pilot" (84).



also to our sense of assimilation and belonging. In this way, many of us are cyborgs, synchronizing our organic parts with human-made technology to perform ordinary everyday tasks.

More advanced cyborg technologies<sup>4</sup> are still in the early planning stages and, for now, exist only in speculative fiction. Gene therapy, drug therapy, mechanical human-like replacement limbs, reproductive selection, and neural implants are mostly in the experimental stage (Bostrom and Sandberg 312). Only a small number of people have experienced a surgical and/or neurological pairing with robotic implants and limbs. In 1998, cybernetics professor and biomedical engineer, Kevin Warwick, famously installed a microchip into his forearm that connected him to the internet. The implant allowed him to control electronic objects, including a disembodied robotic arm (Nelson Para 9). Warwick also successfully completed an experiment in which two humans communicated using electronic input between nervous systems. Academics and non-academics alike have praised his risky experiments as revolutionary and invaluable to the advancement of treatment for the physically and mentally disabled.

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<sup>4</sup> Cybernetics would be included under the umbrella of “cyborg technologies.” While *Cybernetics* is difficult to define, I’ll apply Norbert Wiener’s definition (see his aptly named book, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*): cybernetics is the science of control and communication in the animal and the machine. Cybernetics is often interdisciplinary, including mathematics, engineering, biology, and physics. Under this definition, the virtually operated surrogate bodies in *The Surrogates* and the surgically modified bodies in *Battle Angel Alita* would both be considered cybernetic in nature.

Similarly, in 2001, Jesse Sullivan, an amputee, became a real bionic person when he was fitted with an artificial arm limb, directly linked to and operated by his nervous system and muscles. Unlike typical artificial limbs, Sullivan's arm reacts much like an organic arm: it can feel hot, cold, and different levels of pressure (Nelson Para 12). Although the bionic arm requires more development, it demonstrates the great potential of technology, particularly cybernetic technology, in improving the lives of amputees.

Unfortunately, not all cybernetics research betters our lives and society. Like all computers, certain biomedical devices, such as pacemakers, can be hacked and reprogrammed. In a Forbes article titled, "Yes, You Can Hack A Pacemaker (And Other Medical Devices Too)," Tarun Wadhwa warns about cyber-crime: "[i]mplanted devices have been around for decades, but only in the last few years have these devices become virtually accessible. While they allow for doctors to collect valuable data, many of these devices were distributed without any type of encryption or defensive mechanisms in place" leaving them vulnerable to hackers (para 4).

Virtual crime and questions about the ethical use of cyborg technology are just some of the many problems that come with a rapidly progressing cyborg technology movement. Of course, as I have already indicated, cyborg technologies have the potential to significantly improve our lives and cultures. They could increase our intelligence; treat or prevent crippled bodies and health; allow us to choose our appearance and body; tame unpredictable emotions, addictions, and behaviours like anger and depression; and perhaps even extend our lives-- indefinitely. Cyborg technology has the ability to drastically change our world, for better or for worse. Thus, as our technology advances and science fiction slowly becomes reality, scientists, ethicists, philosophers, cyborg anthropologists, literary theorists, and even the entertainment industry speculate on what could become of humanity in the distant and not-so-distant future.

They wonder how cultures comprised (partially or entirely) of machine-animal hybrids will behave.

In this paper, I offer my perspective as a literary theorist, feminist, ethicist, and avid science fiction consumer in order to explore the transformative potential of cyborg technology. In particular, I will define and critically examine the theoretical (i.e., existing only in thought experiments and speculative fiction) and often utopic idea of posthumanism, a state thought to be achievable with the help of advanced technology such as cybernetics. Because posthumanism is all conjecture at this point in time, and because the stories we share and popularize offer insight into culturally shared desires, fears, and ideologies and therefore insight into the possibility of a utopic posthumanism, I will use two widely distributed and highly praised graphic novel series as case studies: Robert Venditti's books *The Surrogates* and *The Surrogates: Flesh and Bone*, and Yukito Kishiro's original manga series, *Battle Angel Alita*. I chose these series for important reasons. First, both narratives come from first-world cultures (America and Japan, respectively) with the capability and will to advance cybernetic technologies. Venditti's novel series offers a Western perspective on a "posthuman" culture, while Kishiro's offers an Eastern one<sup>5</sup>. Venditti's novels feature a white male protagonist who has no cybernetic enhancements (and who desires to

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<sup>5</sup> Japan is one of the only Eastern countries that consumes and produces cybernetic and cyberpunk narratives (Kumiko Sato 335). Moreover, a significant portion of Western cybernetic narratives actually take place in Japan, either fully or in-part, or use Japanese phrases and cultural references (see William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* as examples). It would be best, then, to look at Japan's contribution to posthuman theories and stories.

remain free of them), while Kishiro's features a female cyborg of Asian descent (likely Japanese) who readily embraces her mechanical enhancements. Alita's cyborg status combined with her gender will aid in better understanding how both female embodiment and gender is treated in advanced cyborg societies. Second, both narratives are dystopian (and arguably even post-apocalyptic) which reflects most other contemporary cyborg/posthuman narratives. Essentially, these narratives are an accurate representation of the prevailing cyborg/posthuman narrative in contemporary first world cultures. Third, and finally, as comic books, these narratives offer two differing, but equally compelling visualizations of posthuman cyborg worlds. Although comic books are not as readily accepted into academic canon, they offer a unique way, visually and textually, to tell important stories. Unlike television and film which are sometimes visually limited (and therefore limited with regards to story-telling) by the availability and quality of special effects technology as well as by budgeting, comic books are visually unlimited except for in the talent and time availability of the artist. To put it simply, I believe that comic books are in general more visually unbounded and imaginative and accordingly, may be better able to visually represent a posthuman world.

## Chapter One: Genesis

Before beginning my case study, it is important to define and review the philosophical concept of posthumanism. In order to do that, however, I must first begin with the concept of *humanism* in that it shares an etymological and theoretical link to the word and idea of *posthumanism*. *Humanism*, though a relatively young word<sup>6</sup>, has existed much longer as a philosophical concept. At its core, humanism (and humanists<sup>7</sup>)<sup>8</sup> describes the moral uniqueness and importance of human beings. Robert Shafer writes that humanisms' "ultimate warrant lies in experience, and its value arises from its solid justification of man's persistent sense that his life is important, is significant, is purposive, is spiritual, and may lead, if direct aright, to enduring happiness" (198), perhaps even to utopia. It "stands broadly for the constant efforts of humanists to define the characteristic excellence of man, and to guide men towards its achievement" (Shafer 199). The characteristics that give mankind its excellence, that allow mankind to sit outside the "purposeless round" (Shafer 203) of existence, have varied across time and space.

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<sup>6</sup> The Oxford Dictionary's etymological history of the word *Humanism* tracks its earliest use to the year 1812.

<sup>7</sup> See Wesley J. Smith, Joseph Fletcher, René Descartes, and Plato as examples of famous philosophers/academics with humanist philosophies.

<sup>8</sup> The definition of *humanism* is ever-changing. Today, it is often used interchangeably with *humanitarianism*, but I want to clarify that these are two distinct concepts. *Humanitarianism* can be defined as the benevolent and ethical treatment of all human beings regardless of gender, race, or sexual orientation. When I talk about *humanism*, however, I am referring to the principles of human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism.

Religious humanists (like Thomas Aquinas) have and still do argue that it is our Biblical right, our soul, our connectedness and significance to the almighty God, that give humankind (particularly *white* mankind) its excellence. Humans are both unique and superior to other animals because they're made in God's image (thus, closer to God) and because God grants them dominion over non-human animals. In Genesis 1:26, God commands, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." Religious humanism has been criticized for its philosophical groundings since they are based in the supernatural and fantastic and so cannot be proven. Moreover, it has been derided for hierarchizing certain humans above others, such as mankind over womankind, and white humankind over black/aboriginal humankind. Indeed, in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, European Christian ideologies supported policies of violent imperialism which sought to "improve" and convert "Godless" pagans.<sup>9</sup>

More recently, many humanists have veered away from religious and spiritual justifications and favour secularist arguments instead. Secular humanists have argued that modern science, language, logic, reason and intelligence, personhood, and even shame and nudity make us distinct from other animals and give us our importance<sup>10</sup>. For instance, Oliver L. Reiser, who

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<sup>9</sup> See Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* for a detailed summary of European imperialism.

<sup>10</sup> These qualities are becoming more and more specific as they are challenged. See LiveScience's article, "What Distinguishes Humans from Animals?" for more instances of uniquely "human" qualities: <http://www.livescience.com/33376-humans-other-animals-distinguishing-mental-abilities.html>.

calls himself a “cosmic” humanist, posits that “the idea of imagination,” the creative intelligence responsible for human inventions, is the “key concept for interpreting man and nature” and explains the “divinity of man” (Reiser 4).

In another example, Jacques Derrida—not a humanist philosopher himself—explores and ultimately critiques the concept of nudity and shame as distinctly human qualities in his article, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow).” He writes, “It is generally thought, although none of the philosophers I am about to examine actually mention it, that the property unique to animals and what in the final analysis distinguishes them from man, is their being naked without knowing it” (373). He continues that animals “without knowledge of their nudity” are “without consciousness of good and evil” (373). Derrida argues that according certain humanist philosophers, the concept of nudity thus becomes a natural boundary of which to divide human and animals.

Although secular humanists maintain that their beliefs are in direct opposition to that of religious humanists, both groups share similarities. Even secular humanists, who argue against the existence of the supernatural (i.e., God), must believe in the human soul. Blog contributor, Brandon Norgaard offers interesting insight on this point:

Secular Humanists argue that there is value to human life and it is unjust when people suffer unnecessarily. The argument is that we should have concern for our fellow humans and work to prevent social injustice whenever possible.

This reasoning is rooted in the realization of the nonphysical aspect of humanity, which is called the soul. There is also an important realization that souls have free will, which is a supernatural concept because there are no natural processes through which all actions of souls, and by extension humans, can be reduced to.

This worldview [secular Humanism] does not actually provide a metaphysical foundation for its emphasis on humanity and social justice. These are just taken as a given as true within a purely physical universe. (Para 5-7)

Mainstream Western society generally accepts humanist notions as fact (and as common sense knowledge), but some ethicists, animal rights activists and environmentalists, and anti-humanists have problematized humanist philosophies<sup>11</sup>. In "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense" Friedrich Nietzsche criticizes human exceptionalism and points out that human life is as "purposeless and arbitrary" (Nietzsche 874) as the life of any other living creature (in his example, a midge). He explains that "the intellect is human, and only its own possessor and progenitor regards it with such pathos" as if "it housed the axis around which the entire world revolved" (Nietzsche 874). He challenges this belief, stating that "if we could communicate with a midge we could hear that it too floats through the air with the very same pathos [that humans hold], feeling that it too contains within itself the flying centre of the world" (Nietzsche 874). Nietzsche suggests that humanity's inflated sense of importance, our intellect, and our ability to dissimulate (i.e., to lie to ourselves about the purposelessness of our existence), evolved in nature only as "a means for the preservation of the individual" much like other animals developed "horns or the sharp fangs of a beast of prey" (Nietzsche 875) as a way to survive. The "arrogance inherent in human cognition and feeling casts a blinding fog over the eyes and senses of human beings, and because it contains within itself the most flattering evaluation of cognition it deceives them about the value of existence" (Nietzsche 875). Without this arrogant perception of

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<sup>11</sup> See Jacques Derrida, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), Peter Singer, Donna Haraway, Giorgio Agamben, and David Suzuki as examples.



human cognition, humans would "have every reason to flee existence ... quickly" (Nietzsche 875).

Anti-humanists are also critical of humanist ideology on the grounds that human qualities and experiences are, in fact, neither universally nor exclusively human.<sup>12</sup> For instance, some mentally young (e.g., new born babies) or disabled humans may not meet the human standard of intelligence or language. On the other hand, some animals possess qualities that have been explained as solely human in nature in the past. Dolphins, Apes, and even dogs have the ability to communicate through language (rather than through animal sounds, though the distinction between animal communication and human language is itself precarious). Gorillas and chimpanzees, while without a voice box and therefore unable to produce the range of sounds humans are able to make, have nonetheless successfully been taught to use American Sign Language. Astonishingly, they have even managed to teach American Sign Language to their kin with no human intervention. Not only is it evident that the idea of human excellence and importance is unproven, but also that the distinctions between human and animal, especially those that hierarchize humans above non-human animals, are specious.

Historically speaking and as I briefly argued previously, humanism, particularly human exceptionalism and essentialism, has been far more insidious. It has justified the othering and domination of animals and even certain members of the human species, such as people of colour, women, and the mentally and physically disabled. These minorities are mistreated based on the

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<sup>12</sup> For an example, see Peter Singer's book, *Practical Ethics*, which specifically argues that most species of animals possess "human" qualities, specifically personhood.

argument that they somehow lack the same personhood, intellect, and/or rationality of white mankind. In *Practical Ethics*, Bioethicist Peter Singer elaborates:

If we go back to the origins of Western Civilization, to Greek or Roman times, we find that membership of Homo Sapiens was not sufficient to guarantee that one's life would be protected. There was no respect for the lives of slaves or other 'barbarians'; and even among the Greeks and Romans themselves, infants had no automatic right to life. Greeks and Romans killed deformed or weak infants by exposing them to the elements on a hilltop. Plato and Aristotle thought that the state should enforce the killing of deformed infants. (Singer 88)

To summarize, Singer states that simply belonging to the group Homo Sapiens is not enough to earn respect as a human being. Certain classes of Homo Sapiens are actually excluded from the moral category of human person. To quote Giorgio Agamben<sup>13</sup>, many patriarchal leaders have produced the inhuman or “ape-man” in the human (Agamben 37)—appearing as the “barbarian,” the feral child, the foreigner, or the slave. These ape-men thus become a figure of “animal in human form” (37). The practice of finding the “animal in human form” (37) allows for the exploitation and abuse of “un-human” Homo Sapiens. In fact, the act of excluding supposedly less rational humans from the morally protected group of human persons has resulted in some of the world's biggest atrocities, such as the justification and practice of: slavery (including the sexual slavery of women and girls still alive and thriving today); the forced sterilization of the mentally and physically disabled; the death penalty for human beings who act like animals (i.e.- commit crimes that are deemed inhuman); and institutionalized racism and sexism that prevents entire groups of people from occupying positions of power and status.

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<sup>13</sup> This quote is in reference to Giorgio Agamben's definition of the *Ancient Anthropological Machine* found in his book, *The Open: Man and Animal*. In his book, Agamben argues that the ancient anthropological machine is directly responsible for Nazism.

Although it is can be argued that humanist philosophies can be used for good, posthumanists have mostly rejected them because time after time they have produced and upheld destructive patriarchal ideologies. Here, I return to the posthumanism of Agamben, who claims that while the core of humanist philosophies have relied on ever-changing hierarchies (what he calls *articulations*), in the end, all of these hierarchies have had a damaging impact on humanity and the world as a whole. He writes: “it is not so much a matter of asking which of the [hierarchies] is better or more effective –or, rather, less lethal and bloody—as it is of understanding how they work so that we might, eventually, be able to stop them” (Agamben 38). In a truly posthuman world, humanity will not “seek new—more effective or more authentic—articulations” (Agamben 92), but “stop them” completely (83). But Agamben seems to be, perhaps intentionally, unclear about what apparatus might replace the human need to create hierarchies. On Agamben’s posthuman earth, humanity will sit in a “between” state, where we do not consider our own humanity or animality, where we remain in a state of “indeterminacy,” without mastery. To put it simply, Agamben suggests that humanity should abandon humanist ideology, including all qualifying systems, and merely experience the “bare life” (Agamben 38). The central problem here is that humanity does not know how to go beyond qualifying systems. Indeed, even Agamben admits that humans are humans because we qualify and create hierarchies, and we examine ourselves, especially in comparison with others. And since this seems to be humanity's nature, it would be difficult to completely change that nature. Thus, according to Agamben's definition of posthumanism, a posthuman state seems unachievable, even mythological.

Donna Haraway, another posthumanist philosopher and the author of the widely read essay, "A Cyborg Manifesto," posits that the possibility of "liberation rests" on the embracement

of the cyborg (a metaphorical creature, for her), a hybrid of "machine and animal" (Haraway Para 2). The cyborg makes possible the "confusion of boundaries," specifically the boundary of gender (Para 4). Haraway explains that the cyborg also has no grounding in the Western tradition of dichotomies and binaries:

The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity. In a sense, the cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense - a 'final' irony since the cyborg is also the awful apocalyptic telos of the 'West's' escalating dominations of abstract individuation, an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency, a man in space. An origin story in the 'Western', humanist sense depends on the myth of original unity, fullness, bliss and terror, represented by the phallic mother from whom all humans must separate, the task of individual development and of history, the twin potent myths inscribed most powerfully for us in psychoanalysis and Marxism. Hilary Klein has argued that both Marxism and psychoanalysis, in their concepts of labour and of individuation and gender formation, depend on the plot of original unity out of which difference must be produced and enlisted in a drama of escalating domination of woman/nature. The cyborg skips the step of original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense. This is its illegitimate promise that might lead to subversion of its teleology as star wars. (Para 5)

At the core of her argument, Haraway proposes that the cyborg "has no truck" with nature, gender, or in fact any long-established dichotomies in that it does not reproduce (and thus is not sexed or gendered)—it is not born—and therefore it has no part to play in the Western "myth of unity" or the Western tradition of Othering (Para 5). Cyborgs sit outside of classification systems and hierarchies. To Haraway, cyborgs represent a way to reject essentialism and harmful identity politics, which have conventionally served as a means to index differences and then dominate certain classes of people (particularly women and subgroups of women, such as women of colour) based on these arbitrary differences. She suggests that we adopt political affinities—partial and shifting identities—as a method of resistance. In effect, a cyborg world "might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with

animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints" (Para 4). People would espouse multiplicities rather than essences or binaries.

Haraway's argument is troubling, however, on several levels. How could a cyborg be anything but theoretical? Can it positively change the lives of *real*, marginalized people? How could any human being, including a "posthuman" cyborg, disentangle itself from the patriarchal traditions that permeate every aspect of our culture, even today? Is a "post" *anything*, posthuman, postracial, postfeminist, postgender, etc., truly realizable? In order to achieve a posthuman state, humans would have to abandon shared histories. That means that the ideas, the dichotomies historically associated with, and the shared histories of spaces like "woman" and "black" would be, effectively, erased. Any one individual could adopt an affinity that has been part of those categories. The idea of affinities is problematic because it ignores the reality that many people rarely fit into the binaries that the patriarchy assigns to them in the first place. For instance, women and men may not identify with or display the behaviors traditionally ascribed to femininity and masculinity respectively. In many cases, women and men are androgynous, both owning and displaying qualities that conventionally have been perceived as feminine and masculine, while completely rejecting others; in this way, we are already metaphorical cyborgs, but that does not prevent the inequalities females experience because of their assigned gender, woman. In truth, many civil rights activists recognize that the categories they identify with and are identified by—race, for instance—are constructs, and they aggressively resist concepts of essentialism. Unfortunately, recognizing the fallacy and constructedness of race does not put a stop to the reality of racism.

It is obvious that, like Agamben's understanding of posthumanism, Haraway's understanding is in many ways utopian. She freely admits that it is so (Haraway Para 5) and

suggests that regardless, the cyborg could bring positive change to a world of injustices and inequality for minorities (even if she cannot expressly tell us *how*). Most posthumanists share Agamben's and Haraway's optimistic views of posthumanism. In a 2009 article, titled "Cognitive Enhancements: Methods, Ethics, Regulatory Challenges," bioethicists Nick Bostrom and Anders Sandberg agree that cyborg technology, principally cognitive and physical enhancements, could lead to a better humankind. They say that humans, with the help of progressive technology, could attain higher levels of moral excellence than humans—they could become transhumans<sup>14</sup> (Bostrom and Sandberg 11). They stress that through education and cultural reform, posthumans could represent the best of what we could ever hope to become as meager humans (Bostrom and Sandberg 11-12). Unfortunately, as was the case with Agamben's and Haraway's arguments, Bostrom and Sandberg fail to provide evidence that cyborg technology could encourage humans to go beyond the hierarchies that have ruled us for so long (even now as technology continues to advance) and progress humankind morally and ethically. Although Bostrom and Sandberg correctly argue that cognitive and physical enhancements may indeed do away with some of the problems that have plagued humanity, such as cancer, learning/physical disabilities, and even

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<sup>14</sup> *Transhumanism*, a branch of and similar to posthumanism, is an intellectual movement that works to improve humanity mentally, physically, and morally through the application of advanced technologies (cybernetics and robotics included). Transhumanist visionaries (like Bostrom and Sandberg) are incredibly passionate and optimistic about the ethics and fate of technology-enhanced humanity, trusting that these modifications through technology will ultimately allow us to transcend the limitations and evils of humanity. Transhumanism philosophy is necessarily grounded in humanist ideologies.

death, they fail to specify how said enhancements could possibly end patriarchy. In truth, they seem uninterested in discussing, even outright ignorant of, current patriarchal problems, such as sexual slavery, rape culture, classism and poverty, and racism. All of these afflictions still exist in contemporary and supposedly "progressive" cultures, though those occupying spaces of privilege may not experience or see them. Therefore, there is plain evidence that these problems will continue to exist in a highly technologically advanced society if we do not actively address them. Put another way, posthumanism achieved through cyborg technology may have the capability to better humankind and erase hierarchical dualisms and, as a consequence, many human cruelties, but we need specifics and non-abstractions on how such a feat might be realized; technology is not our salvation. More worrying still is the possibility that posthumanism could change humankind for the worse. And so, the question remains: will posthumanism help *real* people?

Advanced technologies might someday allow a few elite individuals the ability to change and modify their bodies and therefore their lived bodily realities, but the constant upkeep and upgrades required would be enormously expensive. We only have to look at the great technological and medical divide in our current world, even in first-world countries, to know that the cost of cybernetic enhancements would absolutely prevent certain groups of people, especially those living in poverty (e.g., women and people of colour), from participating in and experiencing the unlimited potentialities cyborg tech could permit. The result of this divide could be nightmarish, allowing some people to temporarily experience the "exotic" space (such as that of "black") and return to a privileged space (such as "white") when the experience becomes boring or complicated.

While I remain concerned about the accessibility of cybernetic technology, others worry that it could efface something vital to the survival of our species. In *Life, Liberty, and Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics*, author Leon Kass argues that "the final technical conquest of [our] own nature would almost certainly leave mankind utterly enfeebled" and that this "form of mastery would be identical with utter dehumanization" (Kass 48). He continues, citing dystopian literature as examples: "Read Huxley's *Brave New World*, read C.S. Lewis's *Abolition of Man*, read Nietzsche's account of the last man, and then read the newspapers. Homogenization, mediocrity, pacification, drug-induced contentment, debasement of taste, souls without loves and longings—these are the inevitable results of making the essence of human nature the last project of technical mastery" (Kass 48). Kass warns, rather brutally, that "Promethean man will become a contented cow" (Kass 48). It is evident from Kass's argument that he believes some essential quality of human existence, love and longing, for instance, would be lost as a result of the "final technical conquest" of human nature (48).

Kass is not alone in his belief. Famous ethicists, Francis Fukuyama, George Annas, Wesley Smith, Jeremy Rifkin, and Bill McKibben all share similar sentiments. In particular, Fukuyama worries that cyborg technologies are an affront to human dignity (what he vaguely calls factor 'X'). Denial of "the concept of human dignity," he argues, "of the idea that there is something unique about the human race that entitles every member of the species to a higher moral status than the rest of the natural world—leads us down a very perilous path" (Fukuyama 160).

N. Katherine Hayles has also been critical of posthumanism. Although she, like most feminists, yearns for the day when domination and oppression no longer exist, she believes that posthumanism risks becoming a nightmare rather than the utopian dream many posthumanists



believe it to be. She writes that the liberal humanist subject, constructed mostly of white men, has presumed "a universality that has worked to suppress and disenfranchise women's voices" (Hayles 4). Understandably, many people eager for cultural reform (such as Haraway) have keenly embraced the hybridity of the cyborg as a method of resistance (Hayles 4). For one, cutting-edge technologies could make it possible to transfer one's consciousness into a bodiless space (such as a computer) or even into another physical body of one's choosing (a body biologically grown or built with machinery). The ability to choose bodies and rhizomatically jump from identity to identity could erase or, at the very least, blur the markers of sex, ethnicity, and race (Hayles 5) and thus end the mistreatment of marginalized people based on those markers. Hayles is skeptical of technology with that capability, however. She aptly observes that posthuman disembodiment could be "rewritten, once again, into prevailing concepts of subjectivity" (Hayles 5). She paints a harrowing picture—unquestionably, that's her intention—of a posthuman future where the human body is treated as superfluous, like meat. Brains are pureed and downloaded onto a computer disk; bodies are callously thrown away (Hayles 1). In this possible future, posthumans regard their bodies as "fashion accessories rather than the ground of being" (Hayles 5); posthumans are seduced by fantasies of "unlimited power and disembodied immortality" and the "great complexity" (such as race, ethnicity, and sex) inevitably embedded in the material world is erased without a care (Hayles 5). Hayles believes that posthumanism could be a dream only if posthumans respect their bodies and "celebrate finitude as a condition of human being" (Hayles 5). Furthermore, she is firm that humans, including posthumans, must embrace complexity, not expunge it, if we wish to survive (Hayles 5).

In some ways, Hayles' dream of posthumanism is sentimental. For one, it is unclear how the human body and mortality is essential to the survival of the human race. Since we have never

experienced disembodiment or immortality, it is difficult to determine how human beings would react to either. On the other hand, Hayles' insistence that we accept the complexity rooted in the material world is convincing. The eradication of ethnicity, sex, and race may appear to solve problems of hierarchy and oppression, but it is hardly ethical. Indeed, this method of "peace" and human "unity" has been practiced before through forced assimilation and genocide. Today, minorities, such as Aboriginals and Jewish people, are still recovering from the effort of one group of people (namely white people) to obliterate another "inferior" group of people. I fail to understand how simply erasing people of colour with cyborg technology is solving any problems. As Hayles contends, once ethnicity, sex, and race is gone, posthumans may find new and more creative ways to hierarchize and disenfranchise certain groups of posthumanity.

Undoubtedly, the theorists of posthumanism are strongly divided. To some theorists, such as Agamben and Haraway, posthumanism represents a possible, perhaps utopian, future without disparity or despair. And yet to other theorists, like Hayles, a posthuman world may become a nightmarish dystopia. At this point in time, without the technology to test the theories, it is simply impossible to know what posthumans and a posthuman world will look like for sure. It is thus important to turn to literary texts, film, and other cultural stories to better predict, understand, and positively influence posthumanity. To quote Hayles once again, "literary texts are not ... merely passive conduits" (Hayles 21). Rather, they "actively shape what the technologies mean and what the scientific theories signify in cultural contexts" (21). As I mentioned, popular cultural narratives not only shape our technologies, they also reflect our collective fears, desires, and states of mind. Stories can reveal where we have been and where we might end up. In the next two chapters of this paper, then, I will examine two popular cyborg narratives, *The Surrogates* and *Battle Angel Alita*, in order to explore the theoretical idea of

posthumanism. *The Surrogates* focuses on advanced virtual reality that allows humans to mind-control another entirely mechanical body. Their surrogated bodies carry out their day-to-day duties (e.g., jobs) while their physical bodies remain safely tucked away at home. Although *Surrogates* grapples with many themes and issues arising from the wide-use of these mechanical bodies (many of which I will address in the following chapter), the main conflict is the treatment of race and gender. *Surrogates* offers insight into the potentialities and failures of advanced cyborg technologies in relation to race and gender. On the other hand, *Battle*, centering on the misadventures of a surgically created cyborg woman, Alita, is useful in exploring female embodiment and gender in societies with highly accessible and state-of-the-art cyborg technology. Indeed, as I will argue, Alita's female embodiment and gender play an intimate role in her failed "ascension" into a posthuman state. Ultimately, through the study of these texts, I hope to clarify whether posthumanity will be a dream or nightmare, utopian or dystopian, a possibility or a great myth.

## Chapter Two: Robert Venditti's *The Surrogates* and *The Surrogates: Flesh and Bone*

In the graphic novel, *The Surrogates* and its prequel *The Surrogates: Flesh and Bone*<sup>15</sup>, writer Robert Venditti, in collaboration with the artistic talent of Brett Weldele, presents a future earth in which humans have invented and combined advanced virtual reality and cybernetic esthetics. In action taking place between 2030 and 2054, Virtual Self Industries (VSI for short), a company based in the United States, combines virtual reality and cybernetic technologies to develop surrogate bodies (also known as surries). Surrogate bodies are cybernetic units that look indistinguishable from the human form except that they are physically perfect. Living humans purchase a surrogate of their choosing (much like we choose vehicles today) and link-up to them with the help of exceedingly sophisticated virtual reality technology, allowing humans to remain in the safety of their own homes while they perform their day-to-day tasks (such as working, shopping, etc.). Surrogates permit users to look however they prefer. They can choose surrogates

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<sup>15</sup> *The Surrogates: Flesh and Bone* is a prequel with the same protagonist, Harvey Greer, and taking place around 15 years prior to the events of *The Surrogates*. The plot of *The Surrogates: Flesh and Bone* concerns the murder of a Black man, Zachary Hayes, committed by three wealthy teenagers while illegally operating surrogates. The events following the murder include the formation of the Dreads (who become especially prominent in *The Surrogates*) and the end of VSI's youth line. *The Surrogates* focuses on telling the story of techno-terrorist, Steeplejack, who eventually disables all surrogates with an electronic pulse, forcing surrogate operators to use their own bodies for day to day tasks. Because the narratives tell both stories through the protagonist, Harvey Greer, and because they are largely chronological, I will consider the separate graphic novels as one continuous story.

that are athletic, thin, beautiful, and essentially flawless. Surrogates also benefit the disabled and elderly by providing a physically able body they can control through thoughts. Because of the many benefits associated with operating a surrogate body, most humans, at least in the United States, interact through surrogate units. Inevitably, the surrogate bodies create a multitude of new legal, moral, and personal questions, the answers to which leave many of the characters divided—often times internally. Harvey Greer’s beauty-obsessed wife, for example, happily embraces the surrogate body as an extension of herself to the point where she is unable and unwilling to live without it. On the other hand, Harvey and the pro-body terrorists, the Dreads, view the surrogated bodies as a hindering advancement which has allowed humanity to “trade flesh and bone” for a “filtered life” (Venditti 46, *Surrogates*). Undoubtedly, Venditti depicts a world where the surrogates are simultaneously desired and feared, utopic and dystopic.

The characters’ conflicting understandings of the surrogate question—whether the surrogates are a “good” or “bad ... advancement” (Venditti Para 1, “Robert Venditti Talks,”)—forces the reader to reflect on the ambiguous potential of the cybernetic prostheses and—by default—posthumanism, a (yet unachieved) state where humanity has moved beyond “human nature” usually with the help of advanced technology. Venditti does a thorough job of presenting his readers with a balanced portrayal of posthumanism. For one thing, surrogate bodies remove the “yuck” factor often coupled with posthuman cybernetics. Neil Gerlach, Sheryl N Hamilton, et al’s book, *Becoming Biosubjects: Bodies, Systems, Technologies*<sup>16</sup> describes the “yuck” factor in the context of “cloning” and other genetic manipulation as the assertion that certain technologies

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<sup>16</sup> *Becoming Biosubjects* focuses on the Canadian perspective, but the information is applicable to the Western perspective as a whole.

are wrong on the grounds that they appear to violate some sense of what is right for human beings (Gerlack, Hamilton, et al 7). They argue further that "[t]ransgenics, genetic engineering, and cloning all fundamentally alter the material composition of the human and animal body, contaminating it through 'unnatural' manipulation or cross-species interaction" (7). As of yet, "science has not been able to control the body's messiness effectively" (7). However, the surrogate body does not violate the material boundaries of the human body (there is no organ transplants or limb removal). Thus, it is not, to put it colloquially, inherently "yucky" or messy.<sup>17</sup>

Certainly, on the surface, as well, the novel series indicates that the surrogates may help humanity dismantle arbitrary hierarchies, creating a posthuman world where no one group is marginalized. Wilson, the author of "Stylistic Abstraction and Corporeal Mapping in *The Surrogates*" is a proponent of this positive and utopian understanding of surrogated posthumanism. He argues that *The Surrogates* (note, he does not argue about *The Surrogates: Flesh and Bone*) possesses "a [potentially] utopian" outlook on posthumanism in that the surrogate prosthesis allows humanity to both transcend the boundaries of the body and satisfy Hayles's dream version of the posthuman. The *Surrogates* advance humanity so that they may take on "multiple forms," like rhizomes "authorizing lines of flight from the constructedness of gender and race into a matrix of social and biological anonymity where one's true identity is ... subsidiary to one's machinic function" (Wilson Para 4), which satisfies the posthuman element

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<sup>17</sup> The surrogate body is not "yucky" because it doesn't surgically alter the physical body. It's still a cyborg enhancement, however, because it merges the mind of an animal (a human) and the machine of the surrogate body. The organic body of the surrogate user is important: the surrogate cannot operate without it.

of abandoning arbitrary boundaries. At the same time, Surrogate users keep their mortal bodies as a “ground of being” (Wilson Para 4) to remind them of their mortality. A closer look at Hayles’s *How We Became Posthuman* supports Wilson’s idea. The surrogates do celebrate the “finitude” of the “human condition” (Hayles 5), because the mortal body grounds the surrogate user, thus preventing “fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality” (Hayles 5) as Hayles fears. Lionel Canter, the inventor of the surrogates, is an obvious representation of mortality. His wasting body reminds Harvey that everyone is “wasting away” and that, despite the surrogates, no one will be “around that long” (Venditti 154 Surrogates). Ultimately, as Wilson argues, surrogates create a society of “chronic dissemblers” able to slip “in and out of whatever race, gender, or occupation they like,” like a “healthy actualization of Deleuzoguattarian flows” (Wilson Para 5), while still celebrating the “finitude ... of the human condition” (Wilson Para 4).

There is no doubt that Wilson is correct in his assertion that *Surrogates* introduces a plausible posthuman utopia, according to Hayles’s requirements at least, but is *Surrogates* advocating for the achievement of an ideal posthuman future? Venditti’s *Surrogates* offers a critical look at those who cling to unstable “truths” and humanist philosophies instead of accepting the surrogate body as an opportunity to realize Hayles’s and Wilson’s potential utopia. Harvey Greer is certainly an example of a character who essentializes the human body as the site of the soul, resulting in some harrowing consequences, including the alienation of his wife and the loss of his career. The Dreads (who are portrayed as religious fanatics and terrorists), led by “The Prophet,” also essentialize the human body as the site of the soul going to such extremes as rioting against, damaging the property of, and murdering those who do not adhere to their ideology. Without a doubt, there is some strong evidence that Venditti takes issue with

humanity's need to hold onto dichotomies and beliefs that are harmful to society as a whole. Perhaps, posthumanism is an alternative to humanism in that it has the potential to allow humanity to transcend harmful binaries. However, while Venditti's narrative does indeed reveal some undeniable concerns with maintaining rigid hierarchies, it does not altogether encourage posthumanism. A posthuman utopia is never actualized in Venditti's work—in many ways the surrogate bodies are presented as dystopic in nature, because even in 2054 with an unlimited amount of (surrogate) bodily variations, Venditti's humanity is simply unable to transcend arbitrary hierarchies like race and gender. Essentially, humankind clings to what Agamben calls "articulations" (Agamben 92). As I summarized in the previous chapter, Agamben argues that in a truly posthuman world, humanity will not "seek new—more effective or more authentic—articulations" (Agamben 92), but "stop them" completely (Agamben 83). The surrogates, however, only allow humanity to re-articulate an already dominant ideal. Racially and sexually conspicuous individuals can only participate socially and professionally by purchasing and operating white, male surrogates, risking a world where race and sex is effaced in favour of one "superior" race and sex. Thus, Venditti's *Surrogates* is also interested in the failings of an ideal posthumanism: that striving for a levelled playing field where all individuals can "pass" might reify essentialist preconceptions of hegemonic society. Venditti, then, is neither strictly against nor strictly for the achievement of an ideal posthuman future. Venditti's failure to outwardly support or altogether abandon posthumanism raises some questions about the possibility of a utopic posthumanism. It can be argued that posthumanism can only serve as a mythological state that might never be realized, but must be compelling us forward. The illusion of posthumanism (a state that is difficult to describe by even the most learned theorist) is a necessary illusion that



brings meaning to life in that it compels humanity to work toward social equality. However, the actual achievement of it may risk the exhaustion of desire and the exhaustion of all meaning.

Harvey Greer, the protagonist, demonstrates problems with abandoning the surrogate body altogether and clinging to empty dualisms. He states that he believes the “lifestyle” of the surrogate body harms humanity, because it erases all of the imperfections and challenges of life, providing “enhanced looks, data playback, [and] forecast manager” (Venditti 111, *The Surrogates*). Fundamentally, he believes that part of the human essence, the soul, is lost while operating surrogates, because human imperfections are effectively erased. There is nothing inherently wrong with his belief that surrogates can act as a filter for real life experiences. In fact, Harvey rightly reveals some of the limitations of surrogates when he states that (because of his surrogate body) he has not “felt [the rain] in years” and that he misses the “rejuvenating” feel of it (Venditti 80, *The Surrogates*). When he abandons his surrogate body and feels the rain on his skin, he experiences nostalgic memories of “when [he] was a kid” running through the “sprinklers” (Venditti 80, *The Surrogates*). The surrogate body’s “forecast manager”—its weather control—does limit what humankind can feel and Harvey’s description of the rain suggests that some of our unique experiences of everyday life are only achievable with the human body.

The problem with Harvey’s dualism—his belief that the site of the human soul lies in our imperfections—is that he rejects his surrogate altogether despite its obvious benefits. The surrogate is especially beneficial for him because it allows him to fight crime in “safety” and provides “more security” and comfort for the families of police officers (Venditti 111, *Surrogates*). It is only with the strength and durability of the surrogate bodies that the city of Georgia's police force is able to contain the Dreads during the surrogate riots (Venditti 114-115,

*Flesh and Bone*). Without the surrogates, many more human lives may have been lost and Harvey might not have "come home in one piece" after all (Venditti 107, *Flesh and Bone*). Additionally, Harvey is only able to keep up with and fight Steeplejack, a techno-terrorist, "fifteen stories above the ground" thanks to his surrogate body (Venditti 46, *The Surrogates*). Without it, he would have fallen off the building and died. Indeed, Margaret reveals some legitimate concerns about fighting crime in a city full of physically superior surrogates without a surrogate body when she warns, "[it's] just a scratch this time ... [but] what if you **really**<sup>18</sup> get hurt. Or **killed**? There's a reason the department has a surrogate pool in reserve" (Venditti 58, *Surrogates*). As Margaret points out, the surrogates offer humanity a way to experience life without the limitations of bodily frailty. Being "young" in surrogated society does not "count for much when the only part of" the police force at work is their "**brains**" (Venditti 135, *Flesh and Bone*). And, because Harvey chooses to completely stop using the surrogate body, he is simply unable to participate at work—he is overweight, "old," and out of shape—and must, therefore "retire" or risk death (Venditti 111, *Surrogates*).

Harvey appears willing to sacrifice his career as a detective in order to live in his own body, but the loss of his job is not comparable to the end of his marriage and the eventual loss of his wife, Margaret. While he continues to claim that "losing [his] surrie" is the "best thing that could've happened" to him (Venditti 111, *Surrogates*), his decision clearly hurts his marriage. Harvey is almost fanatical with his essentializing—it becomes his religion. He continuously tries to push his "opinion" (Venditti 60, *Surrogates*) on his wife who, in turn, repeatedly tells him that the surrogate body is important to her. She informs him on more than one occasion that her

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<sup>18</sup> Bolding emphasis is Venditti's.

surrogate body makes her “**feel** younger”<sup>19</sup> and better (Venditti 60, *Surrogates*), not limited like Harvey feels. While readers may find it difficult to see Margaret’s side in that Weldele frequently draws her with angry, aggravated, or similarly defensive expressions, creating aversion in readers, her arguments are absolutely convincing. Margaret is correct in saying that she has a “right to live [her] life however [she] choose[s]” and she extends that right to Harvey by respecting his choice not to operate a surrogate (even though she fears for his safety on the job). Harvey, on the other hand, is condescending and pushy about his standpoint on the surrogate so much so that he starts to distance himself from her. When Margaret first purchases and operates a surrogate, Harvey is beyond impressed with it, stating that he “like[s] it a lot” and that “everything feels so real” (Venditti 29, *Flesh and Bone*). Yet, he quickly changes his tune about Margaret’s surrogate once he decides that the human body is somehow superior and essential to the human experience. He does not react to any of Margaret’s touching or loving gestures. When she hugs him in one scene, he remains unresponsive and cold—he does not even make eye contact and he keeps his back to her (Venditti 98, *The Surrogates*). In the beginning of *The Surrogates*, he outright refuses to have “dinner” with her because she is not willing to do so with her “real” body (Venditti 22, *The Surrogates*). Essentially, Harvey tries to manipulate his wife into accepting and adopting his point-of-view by withholding from her, emotionally and physically. While Harvey may feel that his human body is important to his identity, Margaret tells him that her surrogate body is important to *her* identity—but he unwaveringly ignores her feelings and beliefs. Thus, his rigid enforcement of his dualistic ideology alienates his wife. In

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<sup>19</sup> Margaret, compelled to look and act young, reveals that age-ism is also alive and well in surrogated society,

effect, in some ways and almost ironically, Harvey's unyielding humanist beliefs make it difficult for him to participate in the world around him and he loses his identity: his career and his only family. Wilson writes that for Harvey the body is "everything," but it is also "fading out" (Para 9), and Harvey's failure to adapt to his changing environment is both damaging and limiting to him.

While Harvey is directly harmed by his own unmoving dualism, his belief also has complex implications for humans who are severely limited by their human bodies. In his *Defense of Posthuman Dignity*, Nick Bostrom writes, "nature's gifts are sometimes poisoned and should not always be accepted. Cancer, malaria, dementia, aging, starvation, unnecessary suffering, cognitive shortcomings are all among the presents that we wisely refuse" (Bostrom 204, *In Defense*). We should not rely on "what is natural as a guide to what is desirable or normatively right" (Bostrom 204, *In Defense*). The truth of Bostrom's argument is apparent throughout Venditti's narrative. Surrogates offer a variety of benefits to the most vulnerable citizens of society. The surrogate youth line, though never realized in Venditti's novels, could prevent "children from getting abducted from the mall, or caught in the crossfire of a school shooting" (Venditti 108, *The Surrogates*). Adolescents would not have to cope with "the painful issues of body image and peer pressure" and there would be no more "bullying" or "teen pregnancy" (Venditti 108, *The Surrogates*).

Surrogated reality has great potential for the disabled as well. Mr. Canter, the inventor of the surrogates, suffers from "motor neuron disease" and is confined to a wheelchair because of his illness (Venditti 113, *Surrogates*). He treats his surrogate as a prosthesis which allows him to live his life beyond the confines of his entirely paralyzed body. Disabilities, including immune

system diseases, do not prevent people from working, enjoying the outside world, or having a partner (or multiple partners). Everyone, able bodied or not, is made able bodied.

Surrogate bodies do not just help the physically disabled. They are also a blessing for people suffering from Gender dysmorphic disorder (GDD). GDD causes sufferers to believe that one's body does not fit one's mental gender perception of oneself or that one's body is defective in some way. GDD is common among transgender people who feel that their sex and sexual dimorphic characteristics do not match the gender they identify with. Looking at their physical bodies can become increasingly distressful and leads to a variety of emotional and mental problems. Surrogate bodies offer a chance for sufferers to occupy bodies that they mentally identify with without having to endure painful, expensive, and sometimes dangerous surgeries and hormone treatments. Jackowski, a minor character in *The Surrogates*, is normally a "6'6" **mountain**" of a man "looking like he can bench press a building" (Venditti 25, *The Surrogates*). However, Jackowski does not identify as a man and is "genuinely heartbroken" when Steeplejack fries his female-presenting surrogate (Venditti 25, *The Surrogates*). Pete, Harvey's partner, says that Jackowski bawls "because he can't be a woman anymore" (Venditti 25, *The Surrogates*). Although Venditti's characters, Pete and Harvey, treat Jackowski's reaction as overly dramatic and rather trivial, transgender people will confirm that GDD is no laughing matter. In fact, many people afflicted with GDD (and without the means to correct their external appearance) end their lives.

The female-bodied characters we meet in Venditti's novels agree that the surrogate body is a way to access certain privileges and rights that they would not normally have access to. In one of *The Surrogates* and *The Surrogates: Flesh and Bone*'s many fake news journals, this one titled "The Current," author Amber Forbes responds to Mr. Daniels assertion that what is older is

somehow purer and better. To summarize, Mr. Daniels argues that the supposed benefits of the surrogates are outweighed by what we (humans) lose in the process: "who we are" as human beings (Venditti 32, *Flesh and Bone*). Amber Forbes points out that men, particularly Mr. Daniels, romanticize "the concept of old" (Venditti 32, *Flesh and Bone*). She explains: "We live in a world where men past the age of sixty are distinguished, and women past the age of sixty are divorced" (Venditti 32, *Flesh and Bone*). Amber Forbes's point is grounded in reality: older women often face many inequalities that older men do not, including becoming "invisible" or even repulsive because men no longer consider them sexually attractive or viable. Poverty, abuse, and neglect are among some of the other ageist experiences older women experience at higher rates than older men. Margaret shares Amber's sentiments: "It must be nice to be you, Harvey—to not care that you've put on weight and gotten older. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I don't share your self-confidence" (Venditti 59, *The Surrogates*).

Having access to "young" and "attractive" bodies is a survival technique for older women in several ways. First, it allows women to remain visible and sexually valuable to a society that prizes beautiful women and ignores "ugly" ones. Second, it increases women's earning potential. Because of the child care and elder care women are expected to do throughout their lives (that men are not), they do not have the same earning potential that men do. They often have fewer working hours than men. Additionally, they often have jobs with less earning potential, since the responsibilities of child care and elder care prevent women from finding full time work. Part time jobs do not offer the same benefits, such as pensions, that full time jobs do. Thus, women are more likely to have a smaller pension or no pension at all by the time they are unable to physically (or mentally) work. Surrogate bodies allow older women to continue working even when they may have physical disabilities. Moreover, the surrogates permit women who must

stay home with children, the sick, or elderly to access better paying jobs. In fact, the majority of the police force in Venditti's universe is comprised of "PTA mommies" who are able to participate in the police force only because of their surrogate "stand-ins" (Venditti 132, *The Surrogates*).

Women, like Victoria Welch, on the other hand, choose to occupy male surrogates in order to gain access to positions of power—positions that are conventionally held by men. Welch is acting CEO of VSI, but she must occupy a male surrogate because "the board of directors feels more secure having a male CEO" and that "investors" also "like that sort of thing" (that is, male CEOs) (Venditti 139, *The Surrogates*). Surrogates allow women to hide their gender and therefore avoid undo stereotyping (and the glass ceiling) and access better paying, more influential jobs.

Finally, the surrogate bodies offer protection to women who still face an overwhelming amount of gender violence in their day to day lives:

The mental trauma often endured by victims in the aftermath of violent episodes, such as that suffered by women following a rape or sexual assault, is no longer a factor because an operator can terminate their involvement in such events by removing the virtual reality device that links their mind to their unit's experience. Violence has been stripped of both its physical potency and its tragic legacy. (Venditti 33, *The Surrogates*)

Women no longer have to worry about experiencing the trauma associated with stranger rape. This reality has tremendous ramifications for women working in dangerous fields, especially sex work. Sex worker, Deborah, for example, can maintain anonymity at work, avoiding stalkers and other violent offenders intending to do her harm. What's more, she does not have to perform sexual duties in her "own **skin**," which effectively eliminates any risk of sexually transmitted

diseases as well as bodily violence, two of the most dangerous aspects of sex work (Venditti 54, *Flesh and Bone*).<sup>20</sup>

In my interview with Venditti, he explains that “no one is about to tell someone without limbs that they can’t have a prosthetic—a surrogate,” but “characters like Greer” ask “where do we draw the line?” and while “the human body is [necessary] for Harvey,” to define the human soul, for instance, it is unnecessary or even limiting to others. Effectively, Harvey’s dualism cannot be ethically applied to people that feel limited by the human body they have been born into. Mr. Canter chooses a surrogate body to be able to walk; Jackowski chooses a surrogate body to be the woman he is in the inside; Margaret chooses a surrogate body to feel confident; and Victoria Welch chooses a surrogate body to access a male-dominated job. They are all limited by their physical bodies—in different ways—and so the surrogate bodies are actually necessary for them to enjoy life fully. Thus, Harvey’s condescending and privileged opinion, that one’s natural body is the best body, cannot be effectively applied to their individual situations and could actually harm them—or serve as a filter much like the surrogate serves as a filter for Harvey.

The Dreads, too, represent a criticism of unyielding humanist hierarchies. Like Harvey, the Dreads re-inscribe what Covino, not specifically speaking about *The Surrogates*, labels a “longstanding dualism ... of the body-mind relation” (Covino 91). Instead of “favour[ing][sic]

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<sup>20</sup> Of course, these benefits are not extended to women who choose *not* to operate surrogates. As a white, able-bodied man, Harvey is in a privileged position where he can choose whether or not to operate a surrogate without the consequences people with marginalized physical bodies would face.



the mind” over the body, the Dreads favour the body over the mind (Covino 91). It is the imperfections of the human body that are essentialized as the site of the soul. The Dreads represent Venditti's most apparent criticism of dualisms and binaries. They are portrayed as a modern-day terrorist group which utilizes waves of “anti-surrogate mass rioting,” arson attacks on surrogate production buildings such as the “Chemicals plant,” and murder to punish and persuade those who not believe in the significance of human bodily imperfections (Venditti 93, *The Surrogates*). While the government respects the Dreads “religious” beliefs and even allows them to live on their own “reservation” where they “govern themselves “ (Venditti 93, *Surrogates*), the Dreads do not respect surrogate users in the same way. The leader of the Dreads, Zaire Powell (also known as "The Prophet"), even encourages his followers to “march onward with the sword of **righteousness** drawn” (Venditti 117, *Surrogates*), suggesting that the Dreads believe in violence, perhaps even in "self-annihilation," to enforce their rigid beliefs (Venditti 120, *Flesh and Bone*). Essentially, Venditti demonstrates the dangers of rigid binaries and dualisms through the terrorist and extremist actions of the Dreads.

Without a doubt, the Dreads' extremist actions are unethical. However, it is important to note that, unlike Harvey, the dreads obsession with their bodily identity has groundings in their status as a marginalized group. It is obvious that the dreads consist of mostly black people (as well as the poor). Indeed, their very name implies that they are of black descent. They are known "to each other as 'Dreads' because of their trademark dreadlocked hairstyles" (Venditti 75, *Flesh and Bone*). Dreadlocks, while sometimes appropriated by white people and other people of colour, are a hairstyle recognized and often embraced as essentially Black. Wearing dreadlocks represents Black people's refusal to "tame" their course hair and wear unattainable white styles (such as straight hair) that white society claims are superior and more attractive. Black people

have so long been denied the right to celebrate their own identities (including their ethnic bodies), that it is understandable that they refuse to occupy surrogates—especially if they must occupy surrogates that are not ethnically obvious (i.e.-white). In his article, "The Importance of Black Identity to the Black Adolescent," William L. Jones explains how important identity is to black people:

Black teenagers, and all younger black Americans for that matter, are busily engaged these days in trying to establish their identity. Black Americans as a group are unique in this respect because every other ethnic group in America has always been able to preserve its heritage and culture. Additionally, they have all been able to point to some "old country" from which they came.

...

The Black American, however, was brought to this country originally as a slave. His families had been torn asunder and his origins had been deliberately obliterated. In fact, even before his arrival here, a fiendish plot was fomented to blot out any vestige of culture and tradition for the African, and he was continually drilled in the belief that he was of a subhuman species and consequently had no actual heritage worth preserving. (Jones 81).

It is clear from Jones's above quote that while white humankind (especially white *mankind*) has had years to understand and define his subjectivity, black humankind has not. It is no wonder, then, that the Dreads cling so readily to their lived bodily realities, while white humankind happily abandons it. They want the opportunity to define and preserve their culture—the opportunity white people have had since the beginning of history.

Undoubtedly, Venditti exposes some of inherent problems with Harvey and the Dreads' hierarchy which privileges the natural body over the surrogate, but he also reveals that surrogated posthumanism is not perfect. In particular, he uses the fictional article, "Paradise Found: Possibility and fulfillment in the age of the surrogate" by a very authoritative sounding Doctor William Laslo (PhD) (Venditti 31, *The Surrogates*) to introduce some of the problems

with surrogate posthumanism. In it, Doctor Laslo reveals that the surrogates do not allow humanity to abandon all articulations, but are utilized by ethnically and sexually prominent operators in a way that “remove[s] [their] race and gender ... from their social interactions” (Venditti 32, *The Surrogates*). By purchasing and operating gender appropriate surrogates for gendered occupations,” for example, women can access “jobs they might otherwise be excluded from” (Venditti 32, *The Surrogates*). Put another way, the surrogate body does not necessarily allow humankind to schizomatically jump from body to body or go beyond the boundaries of gender and race. Rather, they have “served to reinforce ... discriminatory policies” (Venditti 32, *The Surrogates*) and hierarchies by masking race and gender behind a white, male face. It is clear that humanity does not abandon all articulations, but utilizes the surrogate body to perfect an already prevalent articulation. That is, the surrogates allow a hierarchy dependent humanity, through “disembodiment” and then re-embodiment, to “[re-articulate] ... prevailing concepts of subjectivity,” not surpass those concepts (Hayles 5).

In *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, Ginsberg argues that although passing—which is effectively what the surrogates allow people to do— has been traditionally seen as a subversive act which challenges and exposes the “link” between identity and the body, passing actually ensures that the “social customs” of Western society are still maintained (not transcended): “gendered” or racial “identity” is still “inextricably linked” to “physical being” (Ginsberg 2). If I may extrapolate and apply Ginsberg's argument to the surrogate bodies, it is clear that the surrogate bodies act as a machine which allows some marginalized people to pass under an assumed gender or race in a society that is as rigid and as reliant on gender and racial preconceptions as ever. No diversity or variation or opportunity to jump from body to body without consequence is actually achieved in *Surrogates*, because women and people of colour

must choose bodies that allow them to participate in a culture which is still dominated by white men—Victor Welch is a strong example of this. When Harvey finds his/her body, it is revealed that Victor Welch is actually “Victoria” Welch (Venditti 139, *Surrogate*). As I mentioned in a prior paragraph, Victoria explains that she decided to use a male surrogate because “the board of directors feels more secure having a male CEO. Investors like that sort of thing” (Venditti 139, *The Surrogates*). Harvey responds, “It’s a man’s world” (Venditti 139, *The Surrogates*). Harvey and Victoria's conversation demonstrates that even in a modern world without the limitations of the physical body society is still concerned with gender and race.

In agreement with Ginsberg, Covino also posits that passing is potentially a re-inscription of that which it purports to subvert. Surrogates, or plastic surgery in Covino’s argument, actually risk creating a society of “mass duplicatons” (Covino 100). Since hierarchies still exist in the surrogate world, marginalized persons will choose bodies that prevent “mutability and social othering” (Covino 100). Ethnically obvious, conventionally unattractive, and older individuals must occupy surrogates that are youthful, “trim,” with “Caucasian features” (Covino 100) so that they can function socially and professionally. Women choose male bodies to enter male-dominated professions. Additionally, conventional feminine and masculine characteristics will be maintained. In the pursuit of perfected beauty, women will choose bodies with “large breasts” and tiny waists, while men will select bodies with “pectoral and penile enlargements” (Covino 100). Effectively, “hegemonic cultural versions of the beautiful activate attempts at mass duplications” and “[efface] race and cultural difference” in favour of one race and culture (Covino 100). Weldele, the artist behind *Surrogates*, displays this monolinguality perfectly by painting the entirety of *The Surrogates* monochromatically (figure 1).

The (faux) supplemental adverts that Venditti inserts into his text also expose a disquieting monolinguality: page 121, 122, and 124 of *The Surrogates* each display white models for the “Life...only better” surrogate campaign (see below). Venditti also released a series of faux adverts that are not seen in the individual comics, only the graphic novel. Those advertisements also display faceless white bodies. Furthermore, the white male and female models have traditionally ideal bodies: defined abdominal muscles, wide shoulders and muscled arms for the male models; long finger nails and hair, and full lips for the female models (figure 2).

Venditti’s advertisements suggest a disturbing inevitability: increasingly perfected qualities will limit bodily variation and the surrogate society will risk Hayles’s “posthuman nightmare” (5), constructed of one “unified, consistent identity” of “white European male[s]” (5). Fittingly, the surrogate logo is an obviously white, male body, puppeted by a black hand, evoking Hayles’s nightmare. One unified identity is dangerous to Hayles because humanity needs complexity and difference in order to function in a complex world and dangerous to Baudrillard because mass duplication would mean the dissolution of the real (the human aura). It would also mean the end of desire—since we only desire what is different—and, therefore, the “end to totality” (Baudrillard 97). Simply put, if there is no difference, humanity will be very bored. There will be no point to living anymore, because there is nothing new or interesting (or different) to see.

Venditti and Weldele’s surrogate world demonstrates the complexity of the posthuman myth. *The Surrogates* does not argue for the outright abandonment of the pursuit of a perfected posthuman state. Indeed, it demonstrates the inherent problems with Harvey and *The Dreads*’ desire to cling to human articulations. Harvey’s dualism puts him at risk and effectively ends his

career. His rigid beliefs also alienate his wife. The Dreads, too, represent a very apparent critique of rigid binaries and dualisms. They believe so strongly in their articulation that they are willing to act violently to all those who do not believe what they believe. At the same time, *Surrogates* does not outwardly praise posthumanism. In fact, it reveals a major fault with posthumanism: that the pursuit of posthumanism can lead to hierarchal humanity to erase all difference in favour of one dominate ideal.

Because Venditti neither praises nor abandons posthumanism nor achieves a utopic posthuman state, it is clear that *Surrogates*, perhaps inadvertently, reveals that the posthuman serves as a mythological “kingdom of heaven” that might never be realized, but that must always be compelling us forward. That is, the illusion of an achievable posthumanism (a “kingdom of heaven”) is necessary to bring meaning to life (because it compels humanity to work toward a goal of equality). Actually achieving posthumanism risks Baudrillard’s “end of totality” (97) – the end of desire and, thus, the end of seeking new experiences. Thus, *Surrogates* argues for a “between state” of desiring a perfected posthumanism without ever attaining it.

### Chapter Three: Yukito Kishiro's *Battle Angel Alita*

In this chapter, I will examine an English translation of Yukito Kishiro's dystopian manga (漫画, plural and singular) series, *Battle Angel Alita* in relation to cyborg technologies and posthumanism, with focus on female embodiment. As this paper is written in English and targets a mostly Westernized audience that may not necessarily be familiar with the Japanese culture of manga and animation, I will first briefly describe this type of literary medium and the culture it comes from.<sup>21</sup>

Manga, much like American graphic novels and comic books, share a narrative through the harmonization of images (drawings) and words on paper. Characteristically, manga are serialized with the exception of the occasional one-shot. Manga draw much of their inspiration and influence from American comics and cartoons (particularly Disney films), which Japan began to import from the U.S.A. following the end of the Second World War. Like Western comic books, manga have a reputation of being "low-class," "low-brow" literature, created for the casual enjoyment of children and the crass public, and certainly not for academics, though this attitude is slowly changing (Kinsella 5); some forward-thinking Japanese groups, Japanese students and youths, and left-wing intellectuals, etc. for example, consider manga socially progressive, telling stories that are wide-ranging, socially and morally challenging, and

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<sup>21</sup> It is important to note that while I have much book-knowledge of Japanese culture and history, including four years of training in the Japanese language, I am not Japanese and I have not lived in Japan for any extended period of time. I have only visited Japan as a tourist. It is my firm belief that Japanese people are the experts on Japanese culture. My understanding of Japanese culture is from an outsider's perspective and should be taken with a grain of salt.

intellectually intricate (Kinsella 5); for now, manga are for the most part categorized under and dismissed as pop culture, even kitsch culture. In other words, the current intellectual status of manga is as contentious as the status of today's American comic books.

Despite their unfixed cultural status in Japan, manga are popular amongst all age groups. Perhaps their popularity is due to the fact that their narratives are diverse. Manga come in many genres (romance, science fiction, horror, etc.) and incorporate many themes. Thus, manga attract a wide audience. It is not unusual to see entire sections of manga in Japanese bookstores and even adult-only manga bookstores, which typically house pornographic (へんたい, hentai) or erotic/non-erotic gore (エログロ, ero-guro) manga. Manga that become especially popular are often developed into animated television shows (called *anime* or *Japanime* in English) that appear on popular networks and appeal to many age groups (that is, not just to young children). From there, manga characters and symbols are produced as toys, adult and children's costume-play outfits, jewelry, and other paraphernalia available for a price (*Sailor Moon*, *Evangelion*, and *Pokemon* are some of the most recognizable examples for Western audiences). Western comic books occasionally receive comparable treatment in Western countries. However, in an effort to draw-in adult and non-comic reading audiences, most Western producers prefer to create live-action, big-budget movies based on comic books, instead of cartoons (see *Thor*, *Iron Man*, and *Man of Steel* as examples).

While manga share similarities to American comics, they are also dissimilar in many ways. For example, American comics are typically in colour, especially higher-end graphic novels. Manga, on the other hand, are generally printed in black and white. Black and white printing allows for smaller production teams as well as more frequent and less expensive releases. While manga are produced to be read in the traditional Japanese manner—that is, from



right to left, and from back to front—in translation some Japanese publishers have also offered Western-style manga which are written and read in the traditional Western style (i.e. - left to right, front to back).

Perhaps the most striking difference between manga and American comic books is manga's distinct, stylistic art. Manga characters are almost exclusively drawn with large, expressive eyes. Emotions are made obvious to the reader with standardized symbols and emotional iconography. Notable too, is the way in which women are drawn and depicted; female characters are overtly sexualized and unrealistic with firm, (sometimes comically) over-sized breasts, flawless skin, round, firm buttocks, thick, dark lashes, doe-eyes, impossibly styled and coloured hair, small waists, and willowy limbs. These are features that are unattainable to Japanese women (and to all women, really)—even with cosmetic intervention. Female characters are also portrayed as willing to engage in sexual behaviours, yet submissive and motherly, as well as easy to sexually and emotionally manipulate. The submissive, maternal female characters are most-often represented as desirable, reflecting the values of a culture that still expects women, especially wives, to act submissively, deferring to the "superior" judgment of men and husbands. Even manga that target children or include serious themes depict women in a sexualized manner. Sometimes manga artists will perform something known in English as *fan-service* in which a female character is "inadvertently" or casually placed in a compromised position or situation without significance to the plot in order to fulfill the sexual desires of male fans. For example, an artist may draw a needless up-skirt shot or perhaps s/he will draw a character in a revealing bikini. It is clear from my description of manga that their artists (not unlike American comic book artists) frequently objectify the bodies of women. The stylistic

choices found in manga demonstrate a patriarchal culture that eroticizes the female body and constructs and subjects it to the male gaze.

Science fiction (a.k.a. "sci-fi") manga, the genre I will focus on in this chapter, do often participate in the objectification and hyper-sexualization of female bodies (see Clamp's *Chobits* series, for example), but they also appear to challenge some of the patriarchal ideals of femininity found so often in other manga genres. The protagonists of American sci-fi literature are often male, but, surprisingly, sci-fi manga are just as or more likely to tell stories from the perspective of a female protagonist, even though sci-fi manga writers, artists, and consumers are predominately male. On the surface, this inversion of protagonists might suggest that sci-fi literature, principally manga, is ahead of its time and more sympathetic to the struggles of women. Indeed, feminists have long argued that the media needs to better represent the stories of women by including more female protagonists—with extra points if the female characters are complex, relatable, and in possession of interests outside of men. Sci-fi manga appear to meet this requirement. Moreover, cybernetic-sci-fi often offers a pro-feminist message in that it allows women to transcend the perceived and actual limitations of their female bodies—limitations that have been exploited and exaggerated in order to excuse the continued disenfranchisement and infantilization of women. Women have been gendered and then repressed based on their observable biological sex since the conception of society (to clarify, some intersex people may present as female and are therefore gendered women in spite of the sex of their internal reproductive organs). In many sci-fi worlds, however, cybernetic bodies are readily available to women, so that they are able to discard or change their biological bodies and adopt mechanical ones that are considerably stronger and faster than any natural human body. They are able to become heroes in their own stories by transcending the boundaries of their "weak" human

bodies. Because of these apparently pro-feminist themes, cyberfeminists might argue that sci-fi manga challenge patriarchal concepts of body, identity, and reality, and represent a posthuman dream, but does sci-fi manga in point of fact provide an example of a world made new through information technology? Or do these narratives simply re-inscribe gender and other patriarchal binaries and present them as new?

Yukito Kishiro's manga series, *Battle Angel Alita (Battle)*, is one of Japan's most popular sci-fi manga. It stars a powerful, yet principled female-cyborg protagonist known as Alita. The story is set in the 26th century, on a dilapidated and polluted earth. A mid-air city, Tiphareans, hovers in the atmosphere, housing and providing luxuries to the wealthy elite. In contrast, earth people (Tiphareans call them surface-dwellers) live in relative squalor. They not only struggle to provide for themselves, but they are also forced to work to provide the Tiphareans with necessary resources and services (food, clothes, sewage disposal, military defense) as well as luxuries like alcohol, which results in resentment among the surface-dwellers. Because supplies are limited and the conditions are harsh, earth is violent and most surface-dwelling humans must modify their bodies with nano-drugs or cyborg parts, or a combination of both, to survive. As a result, organic humans—humans lacking cyborg modifications—are uncommon. The story begins when Daisuke Ido, a former Typharean doctor banished to the rotting, garbage-filled city of Scrapyard, finds the head and partial torso of a young girl on a heap of junk. He takes her remains home, gives her a recycled cyber body, and revives her. When she awakens, she remembers nothing about her past. Ido names her Alita and adopts her as his own daughter. Alita quickly discovers that she possesses an extraordinary fighting ability, Panzer Kunst. Though she has no memory of learning Panzer Kunst (except for brief dream-like visions), she is able to use it to defeat any enemies she happens upon: body thieves, cannibals, and mad scientists.

In many ways, Kishiro's posthuman cyborg novel is progressive—at least in its depiction of Alita—but it certainly does not serve as an example of a perfect posthuman utopia; of course, it is a dystopian narrative. In this chapter, I argue that Alita almost represents a cyberfeminist hero. At times, she is able to transcend the boundaries of gender, class, and race and become a creature that is more than human. At other times, she adheres to traditional gender paradigms. In effect, Alita often simultaneously rises above and performs gender. In the end, however, she does not represent a cyberfeminist's dream version of blurred and eradicated dualities, despite the advanced technology, medical tools and experts at her disposal. She is simply unable to escape the gendered qualities assigned to her and enforced by the characters in the text, the readers of the text (who inevitably will construct her gender based on their own patriarchal understandings of gender), and by Kishiro himself. Alita's inability to truly become a cyberfeminist's dream is perhaps due to the fact that *Battle Angel Alita* is part of a popular culture dependent on economic success. To some extent, economic success is contingent on the pleasurable and digestibility of a story. Narratives that are completely challenging to long-held cultural beliefs and not a bit recognizable are less likely to succeed among a wide audience (Melzer 106).

While Alita is able to oscillate between transcendence and performance of traditional gender, the other female characters in Kishiro's text, and there are very few, are not afforded the complexity and sympathetic portrayal that Alita receives. Most surface-dwellers in *Battle* are gruesome-looking cyborgs; curiously, though, many of the women we meet in Kishiro's story have organic, unaltered bodies (see Koyomi, Jasmine, Shumira, and Sara). If they are mechanically modified (see Eelai, Zafal, and Lou), the modification is aesthetically pleasing and conventionally beautiful or unnoticeable (because they are internal, nano-modifications only). These secondary female characters are not allowed to be ugly, suggesting that they are there to

appeal to the male gaze. Furthermore, they are tired caricatures of femininity and womanness and they face the same inequalities and challenges that women do now. The male characters, conversely, far out-number the female ones and are given multifaceted back stories and personalities, whether they are good or bad. Essentially, Alita is the exceptional female character and not the rule.

A close-reading of *Battle Angel Alita* reveals a posthuman nightmare where posthumanity has simply extended and re-inscribed the hierarchies and cruelties of humanity; nothing has been challenged or made new. This reinforcement of patriarchal norms regardless of extremely advanced cyber-technology suggests that it is humanity's beliefs and practices that must progress and not our technology alone.

I will argue momentarily that Alita is in fact a sympathetic portrayal of womankind. However, I would be remiss not to expose some of the problematic aspects of Kishiro's universe. I will begin by discussing Alita's female embodiment which is significant though it does not appear so on the surface. Posthumanists boast that cyborg technology could free women of the vulnerability and risks that come with female embodiment, particularly reproduction. Female-bodied humans could exchange their reproductive female bodies for ones without reproductive capabilities. New posthumans would be grown in mechanical wombs or cloned in laboratories. Unquestionably, this posthuman future is appealing to cyberfeminists. Haraway writes that the cyborg who is not born and cannot reproduce "skips the step of original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense" and, thus, of "gender formation" (Haraway para 5). Liberal feminists also agree that reproductive technology is beneficial to womankind. Reproduction is one of the most dangerous parts of being a reproductive (and even a non-reproductive) female and removing this liability from women seems advantageous. The act of accepting a penis into

the body without protection is dangerous in itself, since the penis can carry many sexually transmitted diseases. Intercourse can be painful, uncomfortable, or even frightening for women, while it is almost always pleasurable for men. Female orgasm during penetrative intercourse is rare and, unfortunately, so is foreplay. It is doubtful that the initial sexual experience is even enjoyable for women. Once impregnated, women are especially at risk, both physically and financially since their weakened state often prevents them from working. Pregnancy can cause a myriad of health problems, including dropsy, gestational diabetes, and eclampsia (just to name a few); pregnancy can even be lethal. Thus, pregnant women must rely on their community or partner to support and protect them, which may not always happen. They need access to healthcare, both for themselves and for their fetus, and it can be expensive. Giving birth is painful, costly, dangerous, and leaves women extremely defenseless. They must trust that the people who care for them are professional, knowledgeable, and invested in their safety. And, after a painful birth, women are regularly required to sacrifice their careers, finances, time, and bodies (to breast feed) to care for and ensure the survival of their offspring. While fathers *are* becoming more involved with the care of their children, women are still overwhelmingly expected and more likely to be the main care-takers, whether they choose to or not. Regrettably, these reproductive concerns are often classified as “women's problems” even though it effects the lives of everyone, men included. In fact, reproductive health and choices remain one of the most important topics among Feminist activists even in first-world cultures, like the United States, Canada, and Japan. It could be argued, then, that once this vulnerability is removed and placed outside of the realm of female responsibility, women would be wholly freed from one of their greatest burdens, pregnancy—a sacrifice that considerably encumbers one sex (female) over the other and benefits both.

Radical feminists offer a counter and argue that reproductive technology could actually harm women more than it helps them. One such feminist, Janice G. Raymond, posits that "[o]pposition to these technologies is based on the more political feminist perspective that women as a class have a stake in reclaiming the female body – not as female nature – and not just by taking the body seriously – but by refusing to yield control of it to men, to the fetus, to the State, and most recently to those liberals who advocate that women control our bodies by giving up control" (3). To summarize, Raymond suggests that the benefits that might come with reproductive technologies are outweighed by the dangers in yielding reproductive control to men or the state. Kishiro's *Battle* addresses some of the risks associated with surrendering reproductive control.

In later volumes, Kishiro reveals *Battle's* climactic and long-anticipated secret: Tipharean citizens do not have freewill in any regard. They do not have the ability to make reproductive choices; rather, new Tiphareans are created through a sophisticated eugenics program in which citizens with "superior" health, physical appearance, intelligence, and other desirable traits are permitted to breed and live on Tiphares (Kishiro 9:17). Perfect children are then fitted with a brain-chip that guarantees they will "conform to a standard" (Kishiro 9:19) and obey the state. Conversely, qualities and citizens considered undesirable are bred-out and erased. Non-conforming Tiphareans are "purified," a euphemism for state-sanctioned execution (Kishiro 9:22). Desty Nova, a former Tipharean doctor who has learned the truth about Tiphares' eugenics program, suggests that Tiphareans have "no control over their lives" and are merely "guinea pigs" living in a laboratory (Kishiro 9:19). Kishiro portrays Tiphares and their eugenics program negatively, even horrifically, making a case that such a program removes liberty from the Tipharean people, causing madness and despair in those who discover that the state manages

their minds and bodies (such as Desty, Ido, and Bigott Eizenburg). Tiphares' industrialized reproduction is unethical because it violates Tipharean freewill, but it is also unethical in another regard: it has led to a homogenized population, without racial and physical diversity. Women and men are tall, thin, and white, and all with the mark of Tiphares on their forehead to indicate their status and belonging. Essentially, difference is effaced in favour of a "superior," white race.

It is also telling that Kishiro fails to address the role and status of Tipharean mothers throughout *Battle*. Kishiro readily represents Tipharean fatherhood through Desty Nova's relationship with his son, Kaos, suggesting that the concept of parenting still exists on Tiphares, yet he does not represent Tipharean motherhood at all. This absence of Tipharean motherhood reflects the problem with industrialized reproduction which regards women's bodies as living incubators. Women become non-beings there to serve the needs of the state and fetus only. Reproductive choice and freedom implies that women would be valued as persons rather than as walking wombs, but in Tiphares that is not the case. Tipharean Mothers are so insignificant, such non-entities, that they do not receive a mention in Kishiro's narrative.

Kishiro again argues against reproductive technologies, particularly cloning, through his depiction of Alita's forced replication in volume 8. Alita's body is not reproductive. That is, she is unable to produce children. In some ways, Alita's non-reproductive cyborg body is freeing as she does not have to worry about menstruating, the risks associated with sexual intercourse, or the illnesses and health concerns that come with having a reproductive body (e.g. - PCOS, endometriosis, ovarian cancer, etc.). These concerns would undoubtedly make her adventures more difficult—she would at the very least have to worry about practically and sanitarily coping with menstruation in the barren Badlands (for instance, where/how would she get tampons or pads?). Even while Alita is liberated from the responsibilities associated with owning a



reproductive female body, she is not wholly freed from reproductive risks. In fact, her bodily autonomy and reproductive rights are violated repeatedly. Bigott Eizenburg, the Tipharean chief for whom Alita works, violates Alita's trust and her right to decide whether or not to reproduce. He steals and clones Alita's abilities, body, and even the knowledge stored in her brain to create a "perfect combat android" replicate of Alita (A-1), known as Tuned AR Series 2 (Kishiro 8:58). Alita's forced cloning plays out much like a sexual assault. Eizenburg uses the language of a rapist, stating that "in order to make [Alita] behave" while he stole her genetic make-up and knowledge, he would "bring in some people" Alita would "warm up to" (Kishiro 8:59). He does not treat her as a person with feelings and desires. Instead, he treats her as a "sample" (Kishiro 8:59) or product to be used as he chooses. In response to Eizenburg's abuse of her bodily integrity, Alita responds as many women respond to rape: with rage, disbelief, and horror. She feels utterly debased and shouts at her male violator, "HOW DARE YOU" (Kishiro 8:58) and again, "How dare they." (8:60). She reiterates that the entire situation is a "nightmare" (Kishiro 8:63).

Alita is the only character in *Battle* who experiences forced cloning (or any type of cloning at all) and so her gender and female embodiment is significant. This side-narrative in which Alita, a female, is violated by a male person in a position of power reveals the danger inherent in entirely relinquishing female reproduction over to men and the patriarchy. Alita has no legal right to her own DNA, let alone her own reproductive capabilities.

Alita's self determination over her own body (and, arguably, her identity) is challenged in other respects as well. Alita is always in possession of a cyborg body (except for in the final chapter) which should allow her to move from body to body at will, but she never has control over how her bodies look or which body she owns. Indeed, only male characters decide on behalf

of Alita how she looks and what gender she presents as. From the very beginning of *Battle*, it is Ido who decides what Alita should be called and what she should look like without ever seeking Alita's insights. When Alita cannot remember her *real* name (later discovered to be Yoko), Ido tells (rather than asks) her that her "name is Alita," the name of his deceased cat (Kishiro 1:9). Ido's christening of Alita suggests that he regards her as he would a pet, as something he *owns*. When it comes to finding Alita a new body, Ido fails to ask for her opinion again, choosing the female parts of an ex-sex worker. Although Alita is quite agreeable to Ido's selections—she does not appear to mind her new name and she finds her new body beautiful—it is troubling that Ido does not bother to ask her about her own name and bodies.

Ido even controls Alita's gender presentation. In one example, he pairs Alita's brain with the Berserker body, a military body the Tiphareans developed during war times. The Berserker body has "variable skeletal muscles" which allow it to "change [its] shape" (Kishiro1:97). In essence, the Berserker body can be molded to present physically as either male or female. Alita never openly agrees to presenting as one particular gender (though she seems to identify as a ciswoman/female throughout *Battle*). Still, Ido decides for her, changing the male Berserker body into a female one, jokingly stating that Alita will never have to worry about "getting fat" (Kishiro 1:97).

This exposition is repeated during Desty Nova and Alita's shared dream. In their dream, Desty Nova and Ido have complete control over Alita's appearance and identity. Again, they choose her name for her and call her Gally, completely excluding her from the conversation. Even if she does not remember her name, that does not mean she should be barred from finding a name she likes on her own or from providing her own input at the very least. Moreover, they outfit her with the body of their choosing (again, they refuse to ask her). Desty Nova suggests

that they equip Alita with a tentacled lower half, while Ido "just want[s] to make her beautiful" like a "life-size[d] dress-up doll" (Kishiro 9:75).

Alita's physical boundaries are not honoured either. Kishiro frequently illustrates Alita in compromised positions in which male characters penetrate Alita's body to perform mechanical surgeries (Ido, Ido's assistant Gonzu, Alita's motorball assistant Umba, Kaos, and Desty Nova all "enter" her body, and often without her permission). While these surgeries are usually life-saving, they clearly make Alita uncomfortable. In one particularly unsettling scene, Kaos, a radio host who resides in the Badlands, begins performing an emergency surgery on Alita's robotic body. The panel focuses on Alita's breasts so that Kaos and the reader become voyeuristic of a vulnerable Alita (Kishiro 7:118). Thus, the surgery is undoubtedly sexual in nature. The sexual nature of the surgery is further confirmed when Kaos touches her organs and he becomes aroused. He imagines himself passionately embracing her and then he proceeds to actually kiss her before she regains full consciousness and can consent. He asks her, "[c]an't you feel my love?" (Kishiro 7:119). To Alita, Kaos' surgery (however necessary) is a huge violation of her bodily integrity and she understandably reacts violently towards him.

A major component of most feminist agendas has been personal autonomy and bodily integrity—the right for women to have ultimate control over their bodies, the right to have "sovereignty over one's own body and the right to make choices about invasive entries into the body" (Gerlach, Hamilton, et al 32). Topics of concern have been the right to choose when they reproduce, when they give sexual consent (and recant that consent), the right to dress and groom their own bodies as they see fit, etc. Generally speaking, women experience more (or more *severe*) violations of their bodily integrity (rape, sexual harassment, genital mutilation, stricter grooming expectations, etc.). Men overwhelmingly commit or perpetuate these bodily violations

of women. In *Battle*, Alita is not freed of these gendered bodily violations. Truthfully, she has virtually no self-determination or personal autonomy when her ability (made possible through advanced technology) to trade bodies on a whim should allow her to have ultimate self-determination. To make matters more complex, it is the men in Alita's life who control Alita's body (or bodies, as the case may be). Their wills are more important—in fact, Alita's wishes are not a concern at all. Alita is completely obedient, becoming a contemporary Pygmalion legend of sorts: the men shape her into their perfect daughter (in Ido and Desty Nova's case) or woman or warrior. In the process of shaping Alita, these men also violate the boundaries of Alita's body, "penetrating" her at will.

While Alita faces many of the gender concerns women face today, such as reproductive control and bodily integrity, she nearly becomes a cyberfeminist dream. She challenges numerous culturally held beliefs about women and has brief moments of human transcendence. Firstly, as an amalgam of machine and woman, Alita undermines the patriarchal order. Traditionally speaking, women have been associated with nature rather than technology and culture based on their reproductive bodies. According to the patriarchy, their purpose has been to perform nature's work: caring for the young, elderly, and sick, reproducing, and managing the home. Women have been relegated again and again to positions of powerlessness based on this patriarchal and humanist belief that they are inherently weaker and less rational than mankind, and also that they innately prefer to do jobs that are closer to nature. While women fulfilled these "natural" responsibilities, men were free to do important, "higher" work: inventing and building culture and acting as masters of nature (and therefore masters of animals and women). The cyborg female body subverts this male understanding of women. The combination of both machine and the female body allows female-bodied women to go beyond their perceived bodily

limitations and enter domains that men have occupied and controlled. Alita is particularly exceptional, since she is cleverer, stronger, faster, and overall more complicated than most male characters. When she competes in motorball, a vicious game that men play in the majority that frequently ends with the death of its players and requires competitors to be athletic and skilled in combat, she becomes the champion of the Scrapyard. Indeed, she defeats the unbeatable cyborg male champion, Jashugan, who had been playing motorball much longer than Alita. Patricia Melzer, writing on the *Alien* film series, suggests that "woman and machine undermine the white male subject position" (110) and that manifestations of woman and machine hybrids "incorporate displaced (patriarchal) cultural anxieties around subjectivity, control, and self-determinism" (110). Essentially, they represent the ultimate "other" which "simultaneously repulses and sparks desire of control" (110). Indeed, Alita becomes an "other" to many of her male adversaries (see Makaku, Desty Nova, Kaos), who desire, fear, and work to control her. Alita challenges the patriarchal hierarchy because she is not just equal to men, but superior to them.

Kishiro also departs from convention by telling a story through Alita: the perspective of a cyborg cisgender woman, a person who has the body of a female and experiences gender as a woman. She faces many of the issues women do now, as I previously argued: bodily integrity, sex and love, and even balancing career and family. Melzer argues that telling a story from the perspective of a woman already defies established "mechanisms of identification" because it forces male consumers to adopt the viewpoint of a female character when most novels, films, and manga tell the stories of male protagonists (Melzer 110). This identification allows male viewers to recognize women as complex people rather than an "other" significant to the story only as a means to satisfy the desires of male gaze. Women viewers, on the other hand, are treated to a character who they can emulate and identify with without having to cross gender

lines (Melzer 111). Alita serves as a subversion of patriarchal expectations, which can deter audiences who expect a reiteration of cultural stories, but Kishiro's unique approach to Alita, making her the protagonist who we must identify with, allows male and female consumers alike to become sympathetic to her and her cause.

As noted, critics fault manga for the hyper-sexual depiction of women, but Kishiro is mostly fair in his rendering of his female protagonist. Alita is certainly attractive with long black hair, large eyes, and a thin, smooth body, but her proportions are not hyperbolized. Her clothes are practical and safe for the work she chooses to do. When she is at home with Ido, she wears a baggy turtle neck sweater, sweatpants, and sneakers (Kishiro1:33). When she works as a bounty hunter, she wears an aerodynamic, leather suit with a long trench coat and shin armour (Kishiro 1:117). And, when she becomes a motorball player, she wears full body armour and a helmet (Kishiro 3:33). Alita's fighting style relies on agility and so her outfits permit her to move swiftly with little resistance. Warrior females are moderately common in the media, but they are frequently dressed in clothing that sexualizes their bodies and makes little sense for their dangerous environments, such as bikinis, stilettos, long painted nails, and low cut tops. These clothes do not protect a warrior's body from injury and can in actuality make injury more likely. But seldom do we see Alita in clothing that is not sensible. Kishiro's treatment of Alita's clothing may seem irrelevant, but it demonstrates to consumers that Alita's role in the story is that of a strong warrior, and not a sexual fantasy to be objectified. And that message is significant for consumers who only rarely get to witness female characters in positions of power without relying on their sexual appeal to get that power.

Kishiro's portrayal of Alita is demonstrably fair to women in that it shows Alita to be powerful, even more powerful than the men around her, complex, the hero of her own story, and

unreliant on her appearance and sexual allure. In some ways as well, Alita appears to be a cyberfeminist hero. Throughout *Battle*, Alita is consistently called and conflated with an angel. She describes herself as a "killing angel," "dark angel," and as an "angel of death" (Kishiro 6:77). Kishiro's very title, named for his protagonist, calls Alita a "Battle Angel," with each volume playing on that theme: *Volume 1 Rusty Angel*, *Volume 2 Tears of an Angel*, *Volume 3 Killing Angel*, etc. The conflation continues on the cover of *Volume 1 Rusty Angel* and *Volume 4 Angel of Redemption* on which Kishiro illustrates her with mechanical angel wings. And, on the final volume cover, *Angel's Ascension*, Alita appears to be "ascending" to a heavenly-like sky, a blue halo of light surrounding her. A variation of the cover image appears in the volume itself, when Alita sacrifices herself to save the people of Tiphares and the Scrapyard and rises into the tubes of Tiphares, fittingly called "Jacob's ladder"<sup>22</sup> (9:205) (Figure 3).

Alita's conflation with angels and other supernatural beings (like Mephistopheles (6:77)) is essential in explaining her role as a possible posthuman. Comparing women to angels is not new or necessarily progressive. According to Yamin Wang, author of "A Representative of the New Female Image—Analyzing Hester Prynne's Feminist Consciousness in *The Scarlet Letter*" men have eulogized women as angels in order to "flatter women's merits and achievements" as selfless beings willing to sacrifice their wants and needs to rescue "men's souls" (Wang 893) and defer to *their* wants and needs. This representation of women does not "destroy ... sexism," but rather "it becomes the best excuse for men's limiting women within the small circle of family life" (Wang 893-94). Wang continues, "[t]he reason and power still belong to men whereas what really belong to women are their beautiful bodies and frail minds" (894). Today, we still see

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<sup>22</sup> *Jacob's ladder* is the staircase to heaven.

sexist depictions of women as angels—consider *Charlie's Angels* or even the *Victoria's Secret* models, *Victoria's Angels*. But is Alita's comparison to an angelic being meant in this traditional sense?

In Christian mythology, angels effortlessly cross boundaries that humans cannot. They can occupy material bodies, exist as bodiless spirits, or live as a coalescence of both. They are beings who transgress multiple planes of existence, visiting earth and heaven, interacting with humans, other angelic beings, and even God. Although biblical angels—Gabriel, Michael, Raphael—are apparently male (the verity of which is hotly debated among theologians), popular culture understands them as genderless, sexless creatures, androgynous or infant-like. They enjoy endless life, superior intelligence, strength, and beauty—even Lucifer is more beautiful than any human. Angels can speak all human languages, and transcend all races and classes. While they are *not* human, they are human-like, in possession of human emotions and qualities, such as jealousy and love. Simply put, the angels' ambiguity is akin to the rhizomatic potentialities posthumanist theorists attribute to posthumanity or "Promethean man" (as Leon Kass calls posthumanity).

Alita has many of the traits of a biblical angel and therefore many of the traits of posthumanity. Firstly, she is androgynous, oscillating between the performativity of subjugated femininity and hyper-masculinity, yet resisting definite categorization in either space. Alita is intellectual, well-read (She reads Hans Henny Jahnn), musical, bubbly, and in possession of higher morality. Kishiro's characterization of Alita is clearly complex and his readers will have difficulty placing her in any one gender class based on clichéd and marked definitions of feminine and masculine. For instance, Alita often appears maternal (a Madonna) as she cares for the weak and young around her. We see examples of this maternal behaviour when Alita fights



her first enemy, Makaku. In order to lure Alita into the sewer so that he can fight her in his own environment, Makaku steals baby Koyomi from the Scrapyard and brings her down into the sewer, threatening to devour her. Alita risks her life and follows Makaku into the sewer, despite knowing that Makaku is using the baby as a trap. She states that it is her responsibility to protect Koyomi and that she wants to do so because Koyomi is "such a cute baby" (Kishiro 1:162).

This is not the first instance where Alita acts in a maternal manner. In volume seven, Alita meets a nearly grown Koyomi and develops a strong motherly bond with her, scolding her, protecting her, and even offering her dating advice. Although Alita does not know Koyomi well and has had little to do with parenting her, she scolds Koyomi for leaving the safety of the Scrapyard to wander the dangerous parts of the Badlands. And, unexpectedly, Alita even discusses Koyomi's love life. She coyly suggests that the real reason Koyomi left the Scrapyard was because she had a boyfriend she "fell out of love" with and Koyomi agrees (Kishiro 7:66). Later, Alita sacrifices her own health (and potentially her life) for Koyomi, when they both slip into a large body of water and begin drowning. Alita diverts her oxygen from her mechanical lungs to Koyomi in an effort to save her.

Kishiro also depicts Alita in a stereotypically feminine way when she enters a heterosexual relationship with Hugo. Kishiro completely changes her personality so that she "fits" into the traditional hierarchy of heterosexual gender roles. Because of her knowledge of Panzer Kunst and her cyborg body, Alita is incredibly strong, both emotionally and physically, even more so than the men around her. Nevertheless, Alita feels ashamed of her strength and tries to hide it when she is around her first love, Hugo. She questions whether or not Hugo could "fall in love" with her "even though [she's] a cyborg" (Kishiro 2:37). So, she consistently hides her power from him even when it puts her in danger, permitting Hugo to become a strong,

dominant male who must protect the weaker sex (Alita). When a werewolf (a type of human-animal cyborg hybrid) attacks Hugo and Alita, Alita pretends to be weak and "frightened" (Kishiro 2:22) and tricks Hugo into thinking he has saved them.

Troublingly, too, Alita becomes incompetent once she has fallen in love with Hugo. Normally, Alita is an excellent bounty hunter because of her above-average instincts, fighting skills, and reaction time. But Alita becomes so engrossed in her love for Hugo, that she begins to lose focus at her job. During a hunt for a bounty with Ido, she fails to hear her mark approach and appears frightened of him, shouting "No ... Stop!" when he grabs her (2:42). Her eyes are tightly shut in terror though she has fearlessly fought many, more impressive monsters before (including Makaku only one volume earlier). Her poor reaction allows the "homicidal maniac" time to escape (Kishiro 2:44). Ido, confused by Alita's sudden fear and lack of skill, asks her how she could let the "junkie" get away and Alita simply responds that she is "moonstruck" (Kishiro 2:44) as if to say that love leaves women brainless and ineffectual in the workplace.

For the first time, Kishiro shows Alita in a submissive, domestic role rather than in battle. After a night of drinking with black market dealer, Mr. Vector, Hugo is hungover. Alita visits to "look after him" (Kishiro 2:59), feeding him and doing piles of his dirty laundry. This scene is one of the only in all nine volumes in which Alita performs domestic duties (she gardens briefly in volume 6). It is not surprising, though it is disappointing, that such duties are performed within the confines of a traditional heterosexual relationship. And it does not make sense that Alita would, without prompting or training, understand how to complete household chores commonly perceived as women's work. However, once she becomes a girlfriend, she "naturally" adopts the characteristics of subjugated femininity.

Although Alita displays conventional feminine characteristics throughout *Battle*, she has moments where she rejects femininity and assumes masculine and even hyper-masculine characteristics. The few occasions Alita is forced to wear a dress—once with Kaos (a handmade wedding dress) and once in Desty Nova and Alita's shared dream (a play dress)—she appears awkward. The frilly dresses overwhelm her slight frame and make it difficult for her to perform her duties, especially fighting. Essentially, Alita looks as though she is performing femininity that does not suit her well, challenging patriarchal ideas about how women are supposed to look. Simply put, Alita does not fit comfortably into subjugated femininity and the wedding dress/play dress symbolize this un-comfortableness—a discomfort that readers will likely share. In reality, Alita looks more like herself, more in character, when she wears her aerodynamic, non-gender specific gear.

Furthermore, Alita is exceedingly violent, a symptom of virulent masculinity (and certainly not femininity). During a faceoff with Barjack's soldiers, for instance, Alita, Yolg, and Figure Four experience shelling while hiding out in an abandoned building, and, understandably, Yolg begins to act fearful. He refuses to "fight anymore" (Kishiro 6:142). His fear is justifiable in the sense that he has a lot to "lose" (as Figure Four puts it) as a non-cyborg with no training or experience in battle (Kishiro 6:145). Furthermore, he has a "wife and kid" waiting for him back home and he worries that he will never return to them (Kishiro 6:145). In contrast, Alita and Figure Four are both skilled fighters with combat experience. However, Alita does not express sympathy for Yolg. Rather, she interprets his behaviour as cowardly and weak and begins to beat him with the butt of her gun for his refusal to fight (Kishiro 6:143). Alita's aggression towards Yolg, an individual she should protect not abuse, is decidedly not something that would

conventionally be attributed to femininity and is in stark contrast to her gentle, defensive treatment of infants (such as Koyomi).

It becomes clearer and clearer that Alita craves violence to the point that it is almost arousing for her. In one instance, following Figure Four's interruption of Alita's abuse of Yolg, he confronts her about her antagonistic actions:

Figure Four: "You seem awfully **lively**<sup>23</sup> Alita ... do you enjoy killing **that** much?"

Alita: "**Yes! I love** being in battle! I love the moment when my body stops being a machine and becomes a **part** of me! My blood **boils** and my mind goes all **white**! It's an incredible **high**! There's no time to think—only action!"

... "It's not my fault. I was probably a gun or something in my previous life."  
(Kishiro 6:143-144)

In the above quote, Alita reveals that she enjoys—loves—the feeling that she gets from fighting and killing. In the final volume, Yoko, Alita's Mars' persona, shares this same callousness and destructiveness, this time acting violently towards her own wounded soldiers, even her own lover, Beltram (Kishiro 9:164). Without a doubt, Alita embraces some aspects (particularly violence) of hyper-masculinity.

The evidence that I have provided demonstrates that Alita cannot be placed easily into either assigned gender paradigm, that of feminine or masculine. Like an angel, her gender identity is ambiguous and androgynous (though she does seem to identify as a woman). As I argued in chapter one, most people, men, women, and transgender people, exhibit a mix of gender-specific qualities. However, Alita is unique in that she shares other similarities with angels as well. Alita transgresses not just abstract borders (like gender), but also physical boundaries that other characters in *Battle* cannot. While the majority of Surface-dwellers are

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<sup>23</sup> Word bolding is Kishiro's emphasis.

unable to leave the Scrapyard (Hugo tries his entire life and never succeeds in reaching Tiphares), Alita manages to repeatedly visit outside territories, such as the Badlands, Mars, and, perhaps most impressive, Tiphares. Her ability to reach Tiphares is particularly symbolic since Tiphares shares commonalities with heaven; Surface-dwellers, like Hugo, believe it is a utopia, while its proximity to the sky immediately aligns it with heaven. Additionally, as noted earlier, parts of Tiphares are named after biblical architecture (such as the gravitational tubes, called "Jacob's Ladder"). Finally, Alita also crosses social borders, befriending all kinds of people. She shares friendships with women, men, the young, the old, the weak, the strong, Surface-dwellers, Molemen, Tiphareans, Badland people, unmodified humans, and cyborgs.

As I have established, Kishiro has gifted Alita with qualities that are more than human, perhaps even angelic. In fact, it could be argued that Alita is Jesus-like. Alita chooses to sacrifice her own life in order to save the lives of beings lacking her higher moral understanding, just as Jesus did in Christian mythology. In one scene, Zapan, one of Alita's many enemies, manages to get his hands on an infected Berserker body, a militarized cyborg, and threatens the safety of everyone in the Scrapyard. The people in the Scrapyard, afraid and unable to fight, demand that Alita "sacrifice [her]self to him" in order to save their home and themselves (Kishiro 5:157). At first, Alita is taken aback by their demands, bewilderingly asking, "You're all asking me...to **die** for you?" (Kishiro 5:157), but she does as they ask and faces a vengeful Zapan. Although Alita manages to defeat Zapan, she nearly dies in the process, ending up in a purgatory-like coma until the Tipharean, Bigott reactivates her brain (Kishiro 6:12). This is an obvious reference to Jesus Christ who sacrifices himself to pay for the sins of humanity before God resurrects him.

What is notable about the above scene is Kishiro's intentional comparison of Alita to Jesus Christ. During Alita's battle with Zapan, Kishiro inserts a page with a biblical inscription

from Leviticus 16:22: "The goat shall carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place" (5:160).

Alita, like the goat in this passage (and therefore like Jesus), sacrifices herself on behalf of the sinners. Kishiro makes another comparison between Alita and Jesus on volume six's front inside cover. On the cover, Alita's abdomen and legs are missing, while her arms are spread out horizontally. The resulting image bears a striking resemblance to Jesus on the cross (Figure 4).

Alita's similarities to Jesus are important in determining her status as a posthuman. Jesus represents change and human potential, or, as Brent Waters suggests in his book, *From Human to Posthuman: Christian Theology and Technology in a Postmodern World*, the possibility of humankind to transcend its own nature and evolve (Waters 84). That is, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ communicates to humankind God's intentions in a "clear and compelling manner" (Waters 84) and gifts humankind with the potential to move from "mastery to transformation" (Waters ix). As a Jesus figure, Alita signifies the human potential of transcendence. This representation is made clear in Alita's second major sacrifice in the final volume in which she transmutes and uses her body, to borrow Lou's words, as "some kind of glue to hold" the Tipharean sky-city together (Kishiro 9:219). It is important to communicate here that the actual mechanisms of the sacrifice are vague, to say the least. However, Alita's selfless sacrifice (her bodily union with the docking bolt) saves not only Tiphares and all Tiphareans aboard (including Lou and Desty Nova), but also the entire Scrapyard which would be effectively crushed if Tiphares ever fell.

Alita's transmutation process is particularly compelling because she becomes something wholly changed, perhaps a creature that could be classified as post or trans-human (and I argue just that). Tiphares absorbs her physical body and she transforms into a giant, space flower (Kishiro 9:238). Living organisms like roots, flowers, and trees overtake the remaining

mechanical parts of Tiphares, until it is changed into a life-giving tree that supports the needs (fresh water and air) of the Scrapyard people and Tiphareans. The physical distinctions between Tiphares and Alita's body become indistinguishable, and they fundamentally become one hybrid creature.

Is Alita's bizarre transformation an example of posthumanism? As I argued earlier, posthumanism is an unclear concept (especially since we have not achieved this state), yet I believe that Kishiro's depiction of Alita's transmutation attempts to represent posthumanism. Agamben contends that posthumanism is "something ... which is neither animal nor man" but instead "settles between nature and humanity" (Agamben 83). At the same time, posthumanity "[shows] the central emptiness, the hiatus that—within man—separates man and animal" and risks themselves in "this emptiness: the suspension of the suspension" (Agamben 92). Agamben's description of posthumanity is difficult to decipher (purposefully so, maybe), but at the core of his argument Agamben states that posthumanity will remain in an inbetween state, never overvaluing humanity nor wholly precluding their kinship with animals. Alita's plant form appears to align with Agamben's understanding of posthumanism in that she has succeeded in idling the "anthropological machine" of humankind (at least, she has idled her own anthropological machine) (Agamben 37). Her new form is distinctly human, Desty Nova states that there are "traces of her genetic code still stored within ... the life-tree's system" (Kishiro 9:252), yet the amalgamation of Alita and Tiphares is beyond human: it is completely genderless, classless, and raceless; the flower lives without hierarchy, in a position of utter indeterminacy, never considering itself, its state, or the world around it. As such, the life tree depicts posthumanity.

Alita's transcendence is remarkable particularly because she is a woman who manages to escape the boundaries of gender altogether, abandoning all gender performance—even the

performance of androgyny—and become a godly, life giving tree, a posthuman. Nonetheless, Kishiro does not permit Alita to remain in transcendence for long. Simply put, he is uncomfortable with Alita's posthumanity and perhaps anticipates his consumers' discomfort with and confusion about her posthuman state. In order to re-establish the narrative within the confines of traditional, patriarchal story-telling, to appeal to the perceived wants and needs of his audience, he firstly re-embodies Alita. And, he does not only re-embody her, he also ensures that Alita regenerates completely. That is to say, she is reborn as an organic woman without any genetic or biotechnological modifications (Kishiro 9:252). Secondly, Kishiro re-inscribes long-established romance narratives in which a man (a prince, generally) rescues a woman in distress (a princess, generally). Figure Four, Alita's boyfriend before her transformation into the life tree cannot accept that Alita, as he knows her—a woman—is "dead" (Kishiro 9:247). He is certain that "she's got to be alive somewhere" (Kishiro 9:247), ignoring the truth that she is alive in her tree-flower form, just not in the way that he wants her to be alive. Like Kishiro, Figure Four cannot comprehend nor accept Alita's posthuman existence and he forces her to re-enter the hierarchy that he does understand and accept.

Kishiro, likely unintentionally, makes obvious this forced reestablishment of patriarchy in the final scenes of the final volume. In said scenes, Figure Four violently penetrates, and then rips apart, a womb-like organic structure in the heart of the life tree (9:252-53). And, Alita, naked, made of flesh and bones, pours out of the womb into Figure Four's arms. They embrace and the story ends. Figure Four perfectly reveals the problem with posthuman utopia achieved through technology (as in the case with Alita's transmutation and transcendence). If humankind cannot change their need to re-inscribe and re-enforce the anthropological machine that



Agamben describes, then they simply cannot transcend the hierarchies that have permeated human existence, and humans cannot evolve.

Although Alita enjoys complex characterization and nearly transforms into a cyberfeminist posthuman hero, other female characters are not afforded Kishiro's sympathetic portrayal. Firstly, Kishiro does not fairly represent women. There are a limited amount<sup>24</sup> of notable female-bodied characters with dialogue, names, or development of any kind. The male characters completely outnumber the female characters. Secondly, Kishiro's female characters are underdeveloped and lack the complexity of both Alita and the male characters. Zafal Takie, the only other female player in Motorball, is one of the only black characters and one of nine female-bodied persons within Kishiro's narrative. Unfortunately, Kishiro never allows her to speak. The most we know about her is that she uses her agility to win motorball games. We are never permitted to know her backstory or motivation.

When women do have a backstory or when Kishiro reveals their motivation within the plot, it is almost always in relation to a male character or in subservient roles to the male characters. Eelai, Jasmine, Lou, and Koyomi (and to some extent, Alita) all work as female assistants under the leadership of male employers. Eelai works for Desty Nova, Jasmine works for Kaos, Lou works for Bigott, and Koyomi works for Barjack. Eelai is motivated by appearances. That is, she works for Desty Nova so that she has access to nanobots that will regenerate her body; she never has to worry about death or wrinkles. Jasmine, on the other hand,

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<sup>24</sup> There are only nine female-bodied characters Kishiro develops in a meaningful way: Eelai, Messenger girl, Sara, Tuned AR clone Alita, Shumira, Koyomi, Zafal Takie, Jasmine, and Lou Collins. That is nine female-bodied characters out of nine volumes.

is clearly motivated by her unspoken love for Kaos, evidenced by her reaction when Kaos gives Alita his hand-made wedding dress instead of her (Kishiro 7:150). Lou works for Bigott in hopes of becoming an honourable member of Tiphares.<sup>25</sup> And Koyomi works for Barjack because she longs for adventure and for freedom from Tiphares' tyranny. Unfortunately, Kishiro discards Koyomi's complex motivations. He implies that her true motivation for serving Barjack is because she inherently needs a father figure and he becomes that father. Once Barjack abandons her (indeed, he tries to kill her), she is reunited with her father and immediately forgives him for beating her. These subservient roles reveal that even in technologically advanced societies, like Tiphares and the Scrapyard, where women can modify their bodies and minds in ways that make them drastically stronger and smarter than organic males, they are still relegated to positions in submission to male leaders. Only Alita is able to transcend societal limitations and become a leader and a warrior (and even she faces adversity).

Jashugan's mentally underdeveloped younger sister is Shumira. Her most meaningful contribution to the narrative is to exist as Jashugan's inspiration to succeed and stay healthy during motorball competitions. When Jashugan dies, she all but disappears from the narrative. It is arguable, too, that Eelai and Shumira serve as "eye candy" for *Battle's* consumers. While women like Lou Collins, Koyomi, and Alita are not given unrealistic proportions (Koyomi is even mistaken for a little boy, at times) and for the most part are not drawn in sexualized positions, Eelai and Shumira are frequently subject to the male gaze. They are shown in

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<sup>25</sup> To be fair to Kishiro, Lou is not a flat character obedient to every whim of Bigott. She is complex, appearing eager to please and morally simple at first, then unexpectedly becoming Alita's female saviour. She sacrifices her career (which she loves) and life to save Alita.

revealing clothing, sexual positions, or completely in the nude. Eelai, the most sexually aggressive female-bodied character, dresses in lingerie with high stockings, stilettos, and a sleeveless top. When she interacts with male characters, she is extremely flirtatious and sexually available. For instance, when she meets Ido for the first time at Desty Nova's laboratory, she nibbles on Ido's ear lobe (Kishiro 5:168). Shumira, though not as sexualized or sexually charged as Eelai, is one of the only characters to appear in the nude (Alita also appears in the nude). Her nude scene is obviously unnecessary; it is added as fan-service.

Finally, even in a technologically advanced cyborg society like Tiphares and the Scrapyard, women are still vulnerable to sexual exploitation, violence, and rape (and still at the hands of men, cyborg or otherwise). Lou Collins, for instance, worries that she will be raped while walking in a dark stairwell with a strange man (Kishiro 7:11). Although Lou is never raped, her fear indicates that sexual assault still exists (even in the "utopian" sky city, Tiphares) and that women still agonize about where they go and who they trust. Gender violence is also a concern for the women of Kishiro's world. In the first volume, a cyborg woman who we can infer is a sex worker from her surroundings (she works beside a building called the "love zone") is beheaded (Kishiro 1:10-11). This beheading suggests two points. Firstly, it suggests that sex work is still a popular occupation for women and that men still exploit women for sex. Secondly, it reveals that violence is still an overwhelming concern for sex workers, even with cyborg prostheses.

In another example of gender violence, a war photographer readers meet in volume eight discloses that he dismembers women, takes pictures of them, and sells "a few photos from [his] precious collection" to interested men in the Scrapyard (Kishiro 8:129). Supposedly, his disturbing crimes are motivated by "desire" and "love" for women (8:128), but it is clear that he

in fact hates them. Worse yet, there is a market for gender hate; the photographer earns a profit off the sale of his violent photographs.

The above examples indicate that while Alita is able to (almost) transcend the confines of her gender, most women, even cyborg women, are not. Advanced technology has not allowed the women of Tiphares and the Scrapyard to escape exploitation or gender violence. The same crimes and violence women face today are relevant in the future.

To conclude, it is clear that although cyberfeminists believe that cyborg technology could potentially allow women to transcend the boundaries of their gender—that cyborg technology could effectively erase the boundaries of gender altogether—that such an idealized future may not ever be realized. Alita, a cyborg cisgender woman, easily moves between performing subjugated femininity and virulent masculinity and her mechanical body allows her to do so. Undeniably, she even manages to briefly transcend the bounds of humanity and become a posthuman. Ultimately and however, the patriarchal beliefs of society that have always perpetuated the disenfranchisement of women are still intact even in a world where posthumanism is possible. The male characters in Kishiro's universe, Kishiro himself, and to an extent, the reader, continue to enforce patriarchal humanist ideologies that repeatedly undermine the potential of posthumanism. Alita is not permitted to remain posthuman, because Kishiro must appeal to the demands of his audience who still expect a traditional narrative and therefore a traditional ending. This realization reveals that although technology may one day grant humans the ability to transform, transmutate just as Alita momentarily succeeds at doing, it is our ideologies that must change before such a state is achieved and accepted.

## Chapter Four: Infinite Possibilities

In Venditti's series, ethnic people and women are forced to operate white, male surrogates to partake in their society, socially and professionally, without fear of discrimination. They have no true opportunity to forgo operating them (like Harvey Greer) without severe consequences (violence, workplace discrimination, etc.). As I argued, this compulsion to use white surrogates erases racial and gender complexity and demonstrates that, even with advanced technology, the potential of posthumanism might not be realized.

In Kishiro's manga series, *Battle Angel Alita*, the same is true. Although Alita is momentarily able to transcend the boundaries of her female embodiment and gender, transforming into a hybrid creature (plant, machine, and human), she is abruptly forced back into her patriarchal role. In the end, she enters a heteronormative relationship and even her mechanical parts are replaced with a completely organic body.

These series establish that posthuman cyborg narratives are not truly imagining rhizomatic potentialities—or really any other ideals and promises many posthumanist philosophers espouse (see Agamben, for example). In actuality, cyborg narratives tend to reproduce humanistic ideologies despite the infinite possibilities for which posthumanism supposedly allows. Ultimately, posthuman narratives re-essentialize certain human (rather than posthuman) experiences—especially those that maintain hegemonic and often times patriarchal culture.

Although the majority of cyborg stories do not achieve an ideal posthuman state and are typically dystopian (*The Surrogates* and *Battle Angel Alita* being my specific examples), cyborg narratives are still fantastical and appealing in many ways. Real life cybernetic technologies repair deficiencies and allow disabled bodies to function as most average bodies do naturally, yet

fictional cyborg narratives are overwhelmingly concerned with technologies that create super-humans capable of the extraordinary. Simply put, there is a significant gap between what cybernetic technology can do in reality and the fantastical technology described in cybernetic fictions. Kishiro's vision of cybernetic technology includes humans who are able to pop off their heads and place them on different mechanical bodies, just like you might see a child do with his/her doll. And in *The Surrogates*, Venditti imagines a robotic renaissance in which mechanical bodies are virtually indistinguishable from (yet significantly comelier than) organic humans. Obviously, these technologies are currently impossible. Human augmentation on the same level as Kishiro's fictional cybernetics has never been achieved (that we know of). A human brain cannot be transplanted into a life-supporting mechanical body. Even Venditti's surrogated vision—while less technologically ambitious than Kishiro's—is simply impossible at this time. Surrogates look *better* than real humans, but real-life roboticists who choose to imitate human characteristics in their development of robots struggle with having their androids move, speak, and look human, resulting in the uncanny valley phenomenon.

Gabriel Licina, a real-life human augments who's currently attempting to install humans with infrared vision, has been critical of fictionalized accounts of cybernetic super-humans and the public's understanding of the capabilities of cyborg technology: “[t]he myth ... is that with an augmentation, people will easily become superhuman. It's important that we stay grounded in scientific reality ... it's not as easy as just popping a pill or flicking a switch” (Swain Para 13). Licina cites his own experimentation as an example of the ideological disconnect between reality and imagination: subjects found they could improve their “infrared” vision, but lost some of their blue/green perception as a result (Swain Para 14). Licina's example demonstrates that the reality of cybernetics is much more mundane than the stories we tell about it. If the reality is that

technology is not capable of the feats portrayed in fictional accounts, why does there remain such a great fissure between reality and fiction?

It may be un-academic to ascribe the popularity of these super-human stories to the simple fact that they're fun, but this seems to be the case, at least in part. In "Cyborgs: the truth about human augmentation," author Frank Swain suggests that "[t]ranshumanism often suffers as a form of wish fulfilment" (Swain Para 15). "A lot of people will tell you they'd like to be able to fly," he explains, "but these very same people can rarely be bothered to go running" (Swain Para 15). The public views human modification as a way to achieve greatness (the impossible, even) without actually working at it. It's a "quick fix."

Certainly, this fantasy<sup>26</sup> of possessing exchangeable and highly desirable bodies has been heightened in recent years due to Western (and some Eastern) corporations' aggressive advertising and marketing campaigns which encourage consumers to buy whatever is newest (e.g., the iPhone and its yearly new releases); in our culture, new is better. However, I also postulate that our developing porn culture encourages the fantasy of exchangeable bodies. Pornography, as accessible as ever thanks in large part to the invention and wide-spread use of the World Wide Web, offers a variety of body types performing a variety of sex acts on demand. In porn, difference is valued above all else since frequent and desensitized porn users eventually become numb to "innate" sexual preferences. These users "search for whatever will jack up their flagging dopamine" (Marnia Robinson), escalating and re-conditioning their own sexual tastes to the point that they're consuming and getting-off to uncommon fetish porn. Is it any wonder,

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<sup>26</sup> *Fantasy* is an (likely) unachievable desire or fancy based on imagination rather than reality. It is usually escapist in nature.

then, that in this porn culture our ultimate fantasy is to have any and all (cyborg) bodies for our own pleasure, to gaze at and be gazed at, and then traded instantaneously for something better, different, and more exciting?

Cyborg narratives are linked directly with the misogyny inherent in porn culture, yet cyborg-Feminists are also attracted to these narratives as a fantasy<sup>27</sup>. I maintain that most (if not all) cyborg narratives fail to represent the genderless (and sexless) utopia some cyborg-feminists envision. While female-bodied cyborgs may not identify with the gender category “woman” and manage to escape some of the problems female-bodied women experience throughout their lives (such as the complications of reproduction), they still experience sexism and gender socialization. They are forced to imitate or perform femininity for their creators (see Alita’s performance in her and Desty Nova’s shared dream, for example), their society, and their audience. These cyborgs are frequently and grotesquely sexualized and objectified, representing patriarchal ideals of womanhood. They are hyper-feminine and “un-human.”

It’s unclear how the forced gender socialization of female-bodied cyborgs is different than or unique to the same forced gendering female-bodied humans receive now. Nevertheless, cyborg-feminists argue that fictional cyborgs challenge patriarchal understandings about and hierarchies of gender and sex. According to these cyborg-feminists, cyborgs subvert creation myths (particularly Western creation myths). In the Christian creation myth, God creates man first (Adam), while woman (Eve) is created as an afterthought to ease the loneliness of man and serve his needs. While it could be argued that God creates the *most* important creatures last—

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<sup>27</sup> As I summarized in the second chapter, Donna Haraway argues that cyborgs subvert myths of origin—cyborgs are without “genesis” (Haraway para 4).



God creates the earth first and his most valued creation, humans and specifically *woman*, last—Christians have nonetheless maintained that men should be hierarchized above and dominate women, especially considering women committed the first sin (i.e.- eating the forbidden fruit). Fictional cyborgs exist outside of this creation myth. Women or female-embodied cyborg creatures are not God’s creation. They are humankind’s invention, and so they do not carry the burden of *sin* attributed to Eve and thus all woman-born (and born-from-woman) humankind. And, in most cyborg narratives, female cyborgs are created first. Sometimes, cyborg narratives choose not to explore male cyborgs at all. Moreover, these cyborg women have bodies that are powerful, nearly indestructible, perfect and invulnerable to the wills of men wishing them harm. They’re hybrids of two patriarchal slaves, machine and woman, that, when unified, threaten to overpower their master.

Aspirations of developing extremely advanced cybernetics are also pleasurable because of the potential to erase some of humanity’s worst ailments, including death. People with disabilities might fantasize about possessing perfect and controllable bodies—something they do not have at birth. Modifications might allow us to cure cancer, repair injuries instantly, and avoid all kinds of pain and strife. In a posthuman world, Mother Nature is not our master—we are hers.

Surely, these fictional cyborg narratives represent our fantasies—feminist or otherwise, superficial or enlightened—about the promises of innovative technology. I return to Yukito Kishiro who famously states, “Science, in all its greatness, is still subject to human creativity. It starts the first moment a child tries to reach up and grab at the clouds. Soon, the child learns that his own hands cannot reach the sky, but his hands are not the limit of his potential. For the human brain observes, considers, understands, and adapts. Locked within the mind is infinite

possibility.”<sup>28</sup> These stories allow us to explore these infinite possibilities locked inside our minds and fantasize about one day achieving them. Fantasies encourage us to use our ingenuity to make the impossible possible.

I make this point about fantasies and ideologies to clarify that the cyborg and posthumanism aren't inherently apocalyptic and dystopian. Though there are many terrifying aspects of a posthuman future, there are many pleasurable aspects, too. It is true that advanced cybernetic technology may change us for the worse, but it's also true that it could change us for the better and one day allow us to feel and do things we could only imagine. Undoubtedly, technology can have transformative power.

At the same time, we must not naively believe that technology alone is our savior. We must not trust that technology will deliver us from the limitations of essentialist dichotomies and boundaries and transform us into superior creatures morally incapable of committing atrocities or injustices. As I already pointed out, our cyborg technology is still inadequate and may be so for many years to come. When and if this high-tech cybernetics is achievable, it's important to know that technology alone cannot transform us. It's our thinking and ideologies—our fantasies—which must advance in order for humankind to truly evolve. Our fantasies and wishes can be incredibly progressive and ethical—or shallow and perverse. We use our creativity—science and stories—to realize our fantasies and fulfill our deepest wishes. While technology may certainly assist us in reaching aposthuman or transhuman state, we must not forget that, in the end,

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<sup>28</sup> Kishiro, Yukito. *Aqua Knight: Volume 3*. San Francisco, CA: Viz Communications, 2001.

technology is shaped by our wishes and desires. Thus, it's important to examine these fantasies, interrogate and criticize them, and hopefully grow.

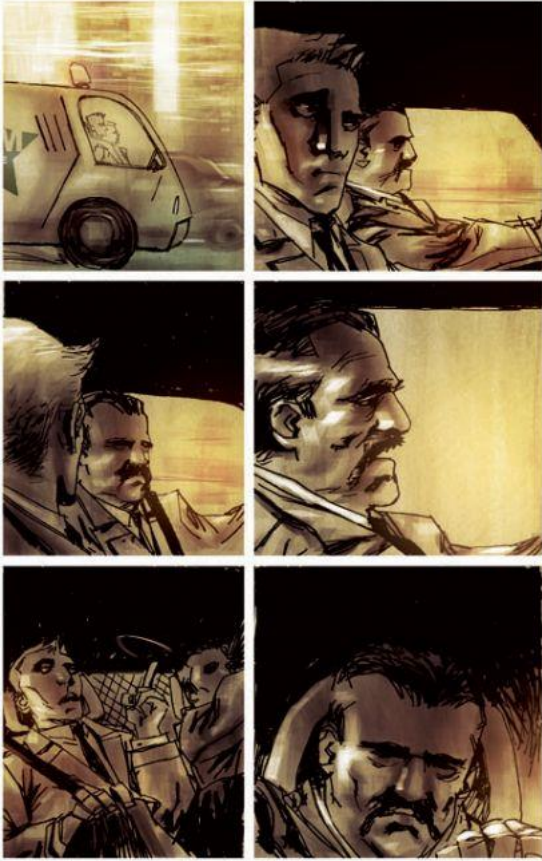


Figure 1. An example of Weldele's monochromatic colouring seen throughout *The Surrogates* series (Venditti 50, *Surrogates*).

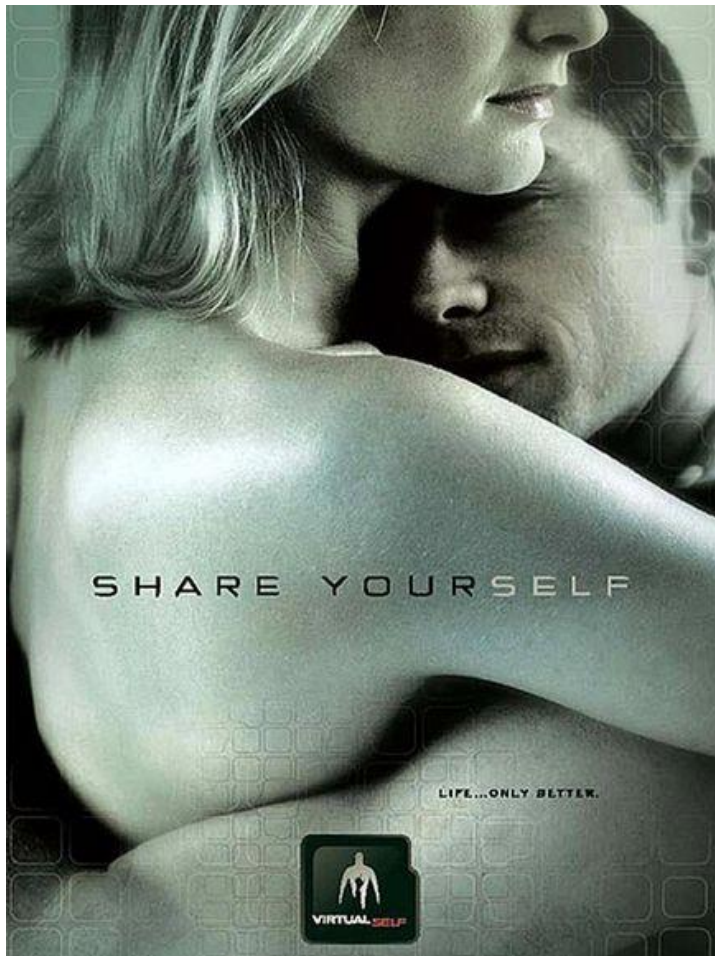


Figure 2. Venditti's faux VSI advertisement, featuring two white bodies (Venditti 181, *Surrogates*)



Figure 3. Alita ascending through the tubes of Tiphares as she sacrifices herself to save Tiphares and the Scrapyard (Kishiro 9:205).

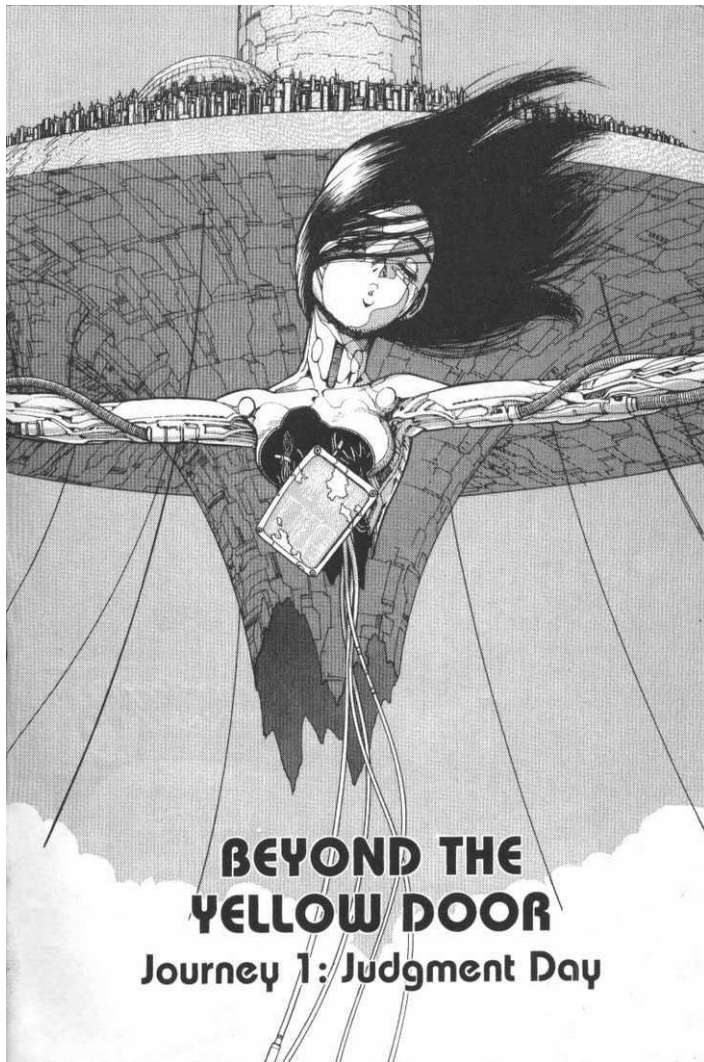


Figure 4. Alita on the "cross" in *Battle Angel Alita* (Kishiro 6:7).

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