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REVIEWS

Review of Legacy Russell (2020). *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*

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> I was a young body: Black, female-identifying, femme, queer. There was no pressing pause, no reprieve; the world around me never let me forget these identifiers. Yet online I could be whatever I wanted. And so my twelve-year old self became sixteen, became twenty, became seventy. I aged. I died. Through this storytelling and shapeshifting, I was resurrected. (Russell 2020: 3)

Introduction

Legacy Russell (2020) *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* is a lyrical ode to being, becoming, and reimagining in the postdigital age. Russell is a queer, Black femme identifying artist and writer from New York who is dazzled by the kaleidoscopic promise of screens. The *Manifesto* is a gorilla-conduct-manual which 'throws shade' (Russell 2020: 50) on the conventions of heteronormative, white identity. Its aim is to create 'a homeland for those traversing the complex channels of gender's diaspora' (Russell 2020: 11). To this end, the book is divided into 12 chapters, each representing a specific form of glitch resistance, including error, refusal, skin, and virus. Starting in the early online years of the Web 1.0 and extending into the present, Russell describes the Internet's opportunities for nurturing pixilated personas in ways that were not possible away from the keyboard' (15). Throughout the *Manifesto*, Russell refers to 'AFK' ('Away From Keyboard') instead of 'IRL' ('In Real Life'), and her message is to disrupt convention in exchange for 'participatory action that challenges the status quo' (11).

The *Manifesto* will be of interest to postdigital scholars, and, in the spirit of the postdigitalism, Russell argues that it no longer makes sense to differentiate between the digital and analogue. The synthesis of the online/offline world, according to the author, intersect and shape each other and negate 'the fetishization of "real life"'

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(Russell 2020: 43). Thus, although the 'glitch is an error, a mistake, a failure to function' (7), it is a refuge from the hegemonic order.

The strategy that the *Manifesto* advocates, in philosophical terms, is thus an idealist retreat into imaginary spaces of the Internet which, for Russell, offers a sanctuary from the embodied world of white supremacy, sexism, and homophobia. This review will consider Russell *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (2020) as a form of theoretical idealism for going beyond conservative dogma. First, it will situate the text in relation to feminist new materialism and Afrofuturism. Second, it will analyse the allure of philosophical idealism for Russell, as an advocate of Black, queer femme consciousness. Third, the commentary will consider the relevance of the *Manifesto* to postdigitalism.

Theoretical Roots

In some respects, the *Manifesto* aligns with feminist new materialism. It echoes Rosi Braidotti's (2018) posthuman charting of new ways of thinking and doing outside of rational humanist 'man'. Russell discusses figuration and nomadic thinking, which is a theme in the work of Donna Haraway (2016) on cyborgs, human-animal relations, and new planetary ethics for 'staying with the trouble'. Like feminist science studies, the *Manifesto* seeks to dissolve the nature/culture and nature/technology divide through her work. A bit like Karen Barad (2007), Russell acknowledges the profoundly relational nature of being and knowing, mattering, and fusing a varying range of onto-epistemologies. *Glitch Feminism*, in being born out of this paradigmatic shift, is a fractious subject-object while Russell's message is poetic, reflective, and uncompromising. Much like Patricia Hill Collins (1990) (a central Black feminist theorist who is curiously omitted from the *Manifesto*), Russell views Black feminist thought as growing out of the intersectional dynamics of race and gender rather than white feminism.

Conversely, the book's vignettes are infused with the spirit of Afrofuturism, and its muses include the African American sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois who wrote the *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), which although considered a powerful theoretical masterpiece was never incorporated into the sociological canon (Lemert 1994). Du Bois viewed race and racial differences as historically contingent social constructions that ought to be vitally preserved as a basis of social pluralism. Defending the preservation of Black culture, Du Bois wrote in 1897:

> As such, it is our duty to conserve our physical powers, our intellectual endowments, our spiritual ideals; as a race we must strive by race organization, by race solidarity, by race unity to the realization of that broader humanity which freely recognizes differences in men, but sternly deprecates inequality in their opportunities of development. (Du Bois 1897: 183)

Another inspiration for the *Manifesto* (Russell 2020) is the author and activist James Baldwin. In 1961, Baldwin said of the African American experience: 'To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a state of rage almost,

almost all of the time.' (Baldwin 1961: 205) Almost 60 years later, Russell affirms Baldwin's rage and states: 'We will be not "single beings" but be every single being and every single avatar, expanding to a rageful full range that makes this gendered engine screech to a halt.' (Russell 2020: 152)

Russell (according to her own website[1]) is a curator, performer, and writer, who has been internationally educated and won opportunities to exhibit her work around the world. This cosmopolitanism informs her confidence in assuming a hyphenated mash-up of nomadic identity and pixilation. While doing so, she draws on the works of artists like the South African Tabita Rezaire who takes refuge in art's 'healing technology' (Rezaire in Russell 2020: 134). In her video work Afro Cyber Resistance (2014), Rezaire problematises the reality of an Internet driven by the west, and Russell agrees that it 'filters and excludes the contributions of Black people within its historical arc' and manifests as 'electronic colonialism' (Russell 2020: 134). For Russell, the *Manifesto* is thus part of a broader effort to reconcile with a (postdigital) world that is far from the paradise promised at the birth of the Internet.

These are powerful tropes and Russell darts over them swiftly while curating a rough and jagged assemblage of snapshots, theorists, artists, and references from popular culture and hipster circles in a manner distinctly reminiscent of 1990s postmodernist eclecticism. Just as Russell's 'glitched self is always on the move' (Russell 2020: 48) so is her theoretical line of enquiry. The structure and style of the text are exploratory, speculative, and provocative rather than conventionally academic. Arguably, for Russell, this is the *raison d'être* of glitch feminism. Glitches are a synaptic flickering and 'an activist prayer' (Russell 2020: 9). For Russell, a glitch can be conceived as a technological fault-line and refrain that Russell repeats and reformulates via a series of analogies. This involves a degree of fragmentation which Russell suggests stems from telling the 'diasporic journey of online to offline' and 'fertilization—splitting, merging, emerging' (48). She tells us:

> [I]n order to reimagine the body, one must reimagine space. Revolutionary change manifests through a reconsideration of the spatial, in negotiation of spatial limitations and identification of how to overturn, dissolve, break through these boundaries. Therefore, deterritorialization of the body requires a departure from the heaviness of space. (Russell 2020: 84)

But, as evocative as this reimagining might appear, idealism is a philosophical position that precedes Russell's *Manifesto*. In the next section, the appeal of idealism and its formation as a glitch will be considered.

[1] See https://www.legacyrussell.com/. Accessed 31 January 2023.

Idealism's Appeal

In contrast to materialism, idealism is a form of philosophical monism that holds matter to be the fundamental substance in nature. According to idealists, mind and consciousness transcend first-order realities to which matter is dependent and material interactions are secondary. A well-known exponent of idealism is Plato who believed that, in addition to the ordinary and everyday world that we can see, there is an eternal and perfect realm of 'Forms.' This argument is presented in the mode of Socratic dialogue in *The Republic* (which is thought to have occurred around 375 BCE) (see Brickhouse and Smith 1995). Plato suggested that whenever we grasp an idea, or see something with our mind's eye, it is our mind trying to conceive of something in idealist terms. But as attractive as idealism may appear to artists, dreamers, and radicals, there are several criticisms of its epistemology. Du Bois, one of Russell's influences, was staunchly anti-idealist since he believed that idealism is a form of individualist acquisitiveness that disregards the constructivist imagination necessary for collective praxis. Du Bois (1903: 44) writes: 'but to-day the danger is that these ideals, with their simple beauty and weird inspiration, will suddenly sink to a question of cash and a lust for gold.'

Although philosophical idealism developed out of the work of Immanuel Kant in the 1780s and 1790s and was closely linked with Romantism and the revolutionary politics of the European Enlightenment, its critics point out that it prepared the ground for the growth of dictatorships (Zitelmann 2020). Consequently, while acknowledging that Russell's idealism is an Afro-futurist femme fantasy, we should be mindful that idealism could become conflated with separatism. The separatism being advocated by Russell in the *Manifesto* requires riding on the wave of the glitch into an online safe-sea of identity-idealism. Russell explains:

> I am not an identity artist just because I am a Black artist with multiple selves. I am not grappling with notions of identity and representation in my art. I'm grappling with safety and futurity. We are beyond asking should we be in the room. We are in the room. We are also dying at a rapid pace and need a sustainable future. We need more people, we need better environments, we need places to hide. (Russell 2020: 17)

But the notion of finding a safe space and sanctuary, whereby we might examine and contest reality, is consecutively an emblem of the *vox populi*. For instance, it is the crux of the film the *Matrix* (Wachowski Brothers 1999). In the *Matrix*, the main character Neo choses the red pill of uncertainty to free himself from ignorance and the enslaving control of the machine generated Wonderland. Hence, the *Matrix's* association with the notion of red-pilling has been picked up by several Donald Trump supporters and alt-right groups. In 2017, political activist and commentator Candace Owens launched *RedPillBlack*, a now obsolete website and YouTube channel that promoted Black conservatism in the USA.[2]

[2] Candace Owens changed the name of the *RedPillBlack* YouTube channel to @RealCandaceO. See https://www.youtube.com/@RealCandaceO/videos. Accessed 9 February 2023.

The term is used as a metaphor for the process of rejection of previously believed leftist narratives, and in May 2020, Elon Musk tweeted 'Take the red pill', agreeing with a Twitter user that it meant taking a 'free-thinking attitude and waking up from a normal life of sloth and ignorance'. Ivanka Trump retweeted this, stating 'Taken!'. But Lilly Wachowski, a director of the *Matrix*, responded to this exchange with the words, 'Fuck both of you' (Ball 2020). While these issues are a deviation from a focus on Russells *Manifesto* (2020), my point is that the glitch is in certain respects an analogous concept to the *Matrix* (Wachowski Brothers 1999), and a mere short-circuit within the postdigital sphere, since it is premised on philosophical idealism. In the following section, I will consider the notion of the glitch in relation to postdigital theory.

Postdigital Glitch

As readers of *Postdigital Science and Education* will be aware, postdigitalism is a growing body of theory that casts a critical eye on platform capitalism beyond the hype of Big Tech (Jandrić et al. 2018). The early history of the term 'postdigital' is associated with Kim Cascone (2000: 12) who stated that the 'digital information age has surely passed' and that we live in an era in which digital media are no longer new (Cramer 2015). According to Jandrić (2022), Cascone (2000) sees 'the postdigital in a glitch; a computer error, a mistake in technological processes, which symbolises the human (or analog) in the technological (the digital)'; Jandrić (2022) also draws on Pepperell and Punt (2000: 2) who use the metaphor of the 'biological membrane' to illustrate the biological aspects of the glitch. For Jandrić (2022), this is important since 'the postdigital is a signal or a transition'.

Due to the work of a collective body of theorists, the postdigital paradigm has developed into profoundly interdisciplinary field which confronts questions of education and learning in the broadest sense (Fawns 2018) as well as taking on issues of identity, social justice, technology studies, media, and communications. To a degree, it is what Gary Hall (2016) calls a 'pirate philosophy' since it involves a radical mutation of concepts, disciplines, and practices which disrupt the traditional terrain of the humanities.

What brings me to postdigitalism is my own assortment of split-positionalities, as a decolonial-feminist, semiotician, and transnational scholar, teaching in the Arabian Gulf and working at the nexus of media, communications, and technology studies (Hurley 2023). However, rather than embracing postdigitalism as a mode of post-modern-gesturing, I consider it fruitful for aligning technology studies with cultural materialism while prompting tough self-reflexive questions about whiteness, feminism, ethnocentrism, and heteronormative discourses. Postdigitalism is a useful ethical-compass to navigate beyond the clear-cut politics of binary oppositions, where lines in the sand might be crudely drawn between heroes and folk-devils. See for instance, Ella Sohat's (1991) discussion of the western media's coverage of the Gulf War or more recent debates about the so-called Arab Spring (Hurley 2023). Postdigitalism reminds us that simplistic political binaries do not necessarily exist and probably never did since 'frontier effects' are not 'given' but constructed. Consequently,

nuanced political theoretical positionalities involve trying to understand what making an ethical political choice could be in the postdigital age (Jandrić 2018, 2022; Sinclair and Hayes 2019).

Critical theorists like Adorno and Horkheimer (1947), associated with the Frankfurt School, also argued that technology itself reflects the forms of control and social organisation of reality through which collective constraint is exercised. They suggest that resistance and individuality are repetitively eroded through the totalitarian machinery of mass culture, popular music, books, and entertainment. At the centre of their critique is the modernist crisis of the 'subject' and 'subjectivity' whereby social actors are considered as being consumed and overwhelmed by the all-powerful machinery of capitalism. Russell *Manifesto* (2020), like the Frankfurt school's critical theory, is a quest to rescue subjectivity from the shallows of heteronormative capitalism and whiteness. However, Russell's conception of the glitch rehearses a distinctly postmodern dialectic, suggesting that the self is mere illusion, ephemeral, and self-reflexive. She states:

> In these breaks and system failures, we find new beginnings. The digital skin—the screens through which we embrace range, politic via play, and toy with different modes of representation—remains a necessary precondition of the Internet avatar. Avatars can become rhetorical bodies, ones that challenge how and why we perform our abstract and varied selves toward the goal of becoming our truer selves, both on- and offline. (Russell 2020: 102)

Admittedly, within both the Frankfurt School and Russell *Manifesto* (2020), there is a degree of nostalgia concerning the 'subject' that is steeped in an ideology of Otherness. In the assumption that the subject can either retreat or escape into technology, the notion of an autonomous, self-produced, and self-identical cultural identity resurfaces. Although Russell is aware that the Internet is underpinned by extant offline/online cultural and social practices of its users, her idealist position seems to overlook how these socioeconomic divisions are in part being constituted simultaneously by profit-driven technology companies and polarised minority groups. Moreover, contemporary algorithmic chambers raise questions about democratic participation due to the potential lockouts of companies, consumers, and communities both within and outside their networks (Sujon 2021).

As a result of this postdigital theoretical analysis of the *Manifesto* (Russell 2020), I would argue that it is vital to also conceive of the physical dimensions of technological platforms which involve a stack of layers and series of socioeconomic relations (Sujon 2021). The stack models provide a visual representation of the layered nature of the Internet which differentiates each level of apparatus by functionality. The bottom layer, made up of physical artefacts, such as the actual tubes, cables, data servers and wires connecting computers to networks, enables the flow of data through networks. Platform infrastructures which host, organise, and circulate users' shared content via images, videos, and visual exchanges involve a layering of different systems, protocols, and networks that connect people in different ways and thus offer specific conditions of possibility (Sujon 2021).

These stacks of technological infrastructures facilitate new iterations of platform patriarchy and colonialism which continue to subjugate historically marginalised

groups, including people in the Global South attempting to survive the gig economy (Hurley 2022). But in view of the ever-deepening inequalities of platform capitalism, the intersecting online/AFK domains need to be interrogated. With these points in mind, the next section offers some final ruminations.

Conclusion

In this review, I have attempted to explore some of the philosophical tenants of Russell *Manifesto* (2020). While the concept of the glitch is a promising and exciting idea from a postdigital perspective, its underpinning onto-epistemology—of resistance via escapism into a parallel imaginary—ultimately stems from philosophical idealism. Conversely, Collins (2019), who is also committed to developing intersectionality's potential, argues that a critical social theory rests on:

> Attending to questions of how we know what we know (the truths of epistemology), what social actions are possible within the complex social inequalities that organize our daily lives (the politics of power), as well as our agency and actions in response to the social injustices that confront us (the commitment of ethics). (Collins 2019: 290)

Applying Collins (2019) framework of critical social analysis to Russell *Manifesto* (2020) indicates that the glitch is premised upon the Cartesian notion that we can free ourselves from our embodied reality. While admiring Russell's prose and appreciating the importance of providing a refuge for oppressed groups, a belief in the glitch ultimately returns us to Plato's Cave whereby we are entangled within the flickering representations of a simulated reality (Hurley 2022). Consequently, considering that the algorithmic turn of the Internet, atomisation of siloed individuals and disenfranchised subaltern, we need to recognise that Russell *Manifesto* (2020) disregards the ideal of the public sphere and community dialogue in favour of an idealist sanctuary of queer Black femme separatism and other non-conforming groups. While becoming more entrenched within the cultural wars, both online and AFK, a problem with this position is that it is a short-term idealist fix that evades addressing the root causes and materiality of social inequalities. This downplays the social, economic, and ontological divisions being constituted, regenerated, and capitalised upon by platform capitalism and its historic biases.

Although Russell *Manifesto* was published in 2020, at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, her anticipation of the glitch as a virus was undoubtedly prophetic and indicates that her finger was on the keyboard of the cultural *Zeitgeist*. But in the post-pandemic era, we continue to experience global recession, deepening socio-economic polarisation, and tech companies' insatiable but largely unregulated drive for profit. Russell is undoubtedly a strong voice for the queer Black femme movement as well as anyone else dissatisfied with the current hegemonic order. Not surprisingly, the book has received rave reviews, for instance, Curran-Troop and Prins' (2022) review in the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, which states that '*Glitch Feminism* puts forward an updated and nuanced analysis of the radical potential of the Internet'. A further example is the *Forbes* journalist Jesse Damiani (2020)

who claims that 'Russell glitches defaults and blurs the boundary between the digital and physical, triumphantly positing alternative frameworks for the future'.

But in terms of the *Manifesto's* broader relevance to postdigital feminist theory, I would suggest that postdigitalism is developing a body of scholarship which is collectively articulating that social, economic, political, technocratic, and gender suffering are much more than 'glitch'. In agreement with Russell, I believe that it is crucial that we articulate the systemic inequalities and differences between social groups in terms of intersectionality. However, as Du Bois (1897: 183) argues, we need politically reflective theory that 'sternly deprecates inequality in their opportunities of development'. This is vital considering that, even though a glitch might offer a portal to an idealist utopia, the separatist online world is proving to be a post-truth incubator for hatred, racism, homophobia, extremism, and misogyny.

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