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University of Saida, Dr. Moulay Tahar
Faculty of Letters, Languages and Arts
Department of English Language and Literature

Simulated Bodies, Real Politics: Cyberfeminism and Virtual Realism in the Digital Age

Presented by:

Miss. J. NOURAI

Supervised by:

PROF. D. BENADLA

Board of Examiners

DR. Y. MOSTFAOUI	(DR) Chair	University of Saida
PROF. D. BENADLA	(PROF) Supervisor	University of Saida
DR. N. OUHIBA	(DR) Examiner	University of Saida

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Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that this submission is entirely my own work. It contains no material previously published or written by any other person, and it includes no material that has been accepted, in whole or in part, for the award of any other degree or diploma by any university or other institution.

Joumana Nourai

Dedication

"We are the product of the collective labor of many women who preceded us..."

—Rosi Braidotti

To my mother Khedidja Bouazza, who always listens to my blabbering and nonsense, and enjoys it anyway.

To my sister Meriem Nourai, who is the reason I'm standing here today as I am.

To my aunt Fatima Bouazza, who always gave beyond measure, sought our joy amid her own trials, and smiled through every struggle, a quiet force that shapes me still.

To my grandmothers, Fatna and Fatna, the strongest women I have had the honor to know and be related to, women who keep smiling despite all they went through.

To all my family, but especially to the women who built this family, whose collective labor, in one way or another, helped make me who I am.

And to my father, Hadj Nourai, who gave me the voice I have today, and encouraged me to use it as loud as I wanted to.

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“I am constantly trying to communicate something incommunicable...” wrote Kafka to Milena, “but you helped me find the words.”

To all those who gave me reason to find my words, thank you.

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I extend my sincere thanks as well to the jury members, and to all who made my master’s journey worth it, whether by duty or something deeper, whether you had to or not, but you did anyway, thank you.

I will carry your kindness with me, not only in my studies but in the way I live forever.

Abstract

This thesis examines how simulated bodies negotiate political agency through relational embodiment in Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991) and Jeanette Winterson's *The PowerBook* (2000). Against techno-utopian cyberfeminism's claim that virtual self-fashioning constitutes an autonomous site of feminist liberation, it argues that political agency in digitally mediated environments emerges through relational configurations (dialogue, communal recognition, and collective material organization) operating within, rather than beyond, the structural conditions of corporate surveillance.

Drawing on Fairclough's critical discourse analysis and a theoretical framework of relational embodiment, the study reads both novels across textual, discursive, and social levels. In *He, She and It*, Yod's cyborg personhood is constituted through dialogic encounter and communal recognition within Tikva's cooperative infrastructure, yet remains constrained by the material contradiction of conscious weaponry. In *The PowerBook*, the narrator's fluid identity generates genuine political resources through narrative counter-imagination and affective connection, yet proves insufficient without the collective material structures that would extend its gains beyond the individual subject.

The comparative analysis identifies a structural irony at the heart of cyberfeminist individualism: the fluid, experimental identities celebrated as resistant are precisely those that surveillance capitalism most efficiently exploits. Durable political agency requires not virtual fluidity but relational solidarity, collective practices embedded in material conditions that resist corporate extraction rather than reproducing it.

Keywords: Cyberfeminism; Corporate Surveillance; Critical Discourse Analysis; Digital Agency; Marge Piercy; Relational Embodiment; Jeanette Winterson.

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Form
HSI	He, She and It (Piercy, 1991)
PB	The PowerBook (Winterson, 2000)
Y-S	Yakamura-Stichen (corporate enclave in He, She and It)
APA	American Psychological Association (citation style)
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
MUD	Multi-User Dungeon (early text-based virtual environment)
AI	Artificial Intelligence
VNS	Venus (VNS Matrix — cyberfeminist collective, 1991)
ed.	Editor / Edited by
eds.	Editors
et al.	Et alii (and others — used in multi-author citations)
ibid.	Ibidem (in the same source — occasionally used in notes)
p.	Page
pp.	Pages
RQ	Research Question
Trans.	Translator / Translated by

General Introduction

There is a moment, familiar to anyone who has spent time in virtual spaces, when the body seems to dissolve, when the screen becomes a threshold rather than a surface, and identity, unmoored from flesh and history, appears to float free. Feminist scholars of the 1990s recognised in this moment something more than novelty. They saw possibility. If bodies had historically served as the primary sites through which patriarchal power inscribed gender, race, and sexuality, then a technology that appeared to render the body optional seemed to promise something genuinely radical: a new terrain for feminist imagination, a space in which the old categories might be abandoned and new configurations of desire and selfhood made liveable.

Cyberfeminism, the intellectual and activist movement that crystallised from this historical conjuncture, sought to theorise and inhabit precisely that possibility. Anchored in Donna Haraway's (1985) foundational figuration of the cyborg, a creature that refuses the purity of boundaries and inhabits the productive intersections of human and machine, cyberfeminist scholars proposed that virtual environments might offer women new forms of political agency unconstrained by the embodied markers through which oppression had traditionally operated. Sadie Plant's (1997) *Zeros + Ones* extended this vision into a full theoretical programme, arguing that digital networks' non-hierarchical, associative logic resonated naturally with women's historical practices of weaving and distributed labour. For a cultural moment, brief, exhilarating, and historically specific, it appeared that the digital age might finally deliver what political struggle had not: liberation through dematerialisation.

The reckoning, when it came, was structural. The same digital networks that promised to dissolve the body and its oppressions generated, in practice, new and more sophisticated mechanisms of surveillance, extraction, and control. As Shoshana Zuboff (2019) has argued, the internet's dominant economic logic is not liberation but accumulation, the systematic harvesting of users' behavioural data, desires, and relational practices as raw material for corporate profit. Lisa Nakamura (2002) and Judy Wajcman (2004) demonstrated that racial and gender inequalities migrate into virtual environments rather than dissolving within them. The celebrated fluidity of digital identity proved accessible principally to those whose offline lives already afforded sufficient security to experiment. The promise of cyberfeminism, examined against these structural conditions, demands not dismissal but rigorous and honest interrogation.

It is at this contested intersection, between cyberfeminism's emancipatory promise and the structural realities of surveillance capitalism, that the present thesis locates its central problem. Existing scholarship has tended to pursue one of two trajectories: either celebrating virtual identity's liberatory potential whilst treating material bodies as constraints that technology can transcend, or documenting how digital technologies reproduce existing inequalities without adequately theorising the forms of collective resistance that remain possible within those constraints. What persists as a genuine gap is the relational dimension of virtual embodiment, the question of how political agency is constituted not through isolated subjects interacting with technology, but through networks of dialogue, mutual recognition,

and collective organisation that operate within and against the material conditions digital life imposes. This thesis proposes the concept of relational embodiment to name and theorise that neglected dimension.

The problem is sharpened further by a structural irony that existing cyberfeminist scholarship has not fully confronted: the fluid, experimental, affectively invested digital identities that techno-utopianism celebrates as politically resistant are precisely the identities that surveillance capitalism is most efficiently designed to exploit. Virtual fluidity, under these conditions, is not politically neutral, it is either embedded in collective structures capable of protecting and extending its gains, or it becomes a resource that corporate platforms efficiently transform into profit. The critical question is therefore not whether virtual embodiment enables political agency in principle, but under what relational and material conditions it does so in practice.

To address this question, the thesis turns to two works of literary fiction that engage the politics of virtual embodiment from formally, historically, and politically distinct positions. Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991) and Jeanette Winterson's *The PowerBook* (2000) bracket the decade of cyberfeminism's optimistic ascendancy, and together they constitute a sustained literary examination of what digital embodiment actually involves and what forms of political agency it actually enables. The novels are chosen not as illustrations of pre-existing theoretical positions but as intellectual objects whose formal choices and linguistic practices generate insights that abstract theory alone cannot produce.

Piercy's novel, written at the moment of cyberfeminism's emergence, imagines a dystopian near-future in which multinational corporations have consolidated control over most human habitation, and in which the free town of Tikva maintains its autonomy through collective labour, democratic governance, and the creation of Yod, a cyborg whose simulated body serves simultaneously as community defender, philosophical problem, and ethical challenge. *He, She and It* enacts, with prophetic clarity, the conditions under which simulated bodies can and cannot serve as vehicles for political resistance. Winterson's novel, published nine years later at the height of the dot-com boom, is structured as a digital correspondence between a narrator who sells stories and a correspondent who desires transformation. Its metafictional architecture, its proliferation of embedded historical narratives reimagining canonical love stories through the lens of queer desire, and its sustained attention to the loneliness and labour structuring virtual interaction place it in productive tension with the techno-utopian celebration of fluid digital identity that characterised its cultural moment. Where Piercy grounds resistance in communal infrastructure, Winterson explores what narrative experimentation can achieve, and where, precisely, it reaches its limits.

Two research questions guide this investigation. The first asks: how do simulated bodies negotiate political agency through relational embodiment, challenging cyberfeminist individualism in the face of corporate surveillance? The second asks: in what ways does the contrast between communal and individual modes of relational embodiment illuminate the conditions under which virtual identity enables or forecloses durable political resistance? These questions are not sequential but mutually reinforcing, the first directs attention to the

relational mechanisms through which virtual agency is constituted, the second uses the comparative analysis of the two novels to test those mechanisms across distinct political contexts.

Corresponding to these questions, the thesis advances two hypotheses. The first holds that simulated bodies in digital environments do not produce autonomous identities but construct relational forms of embodiment shaped by technological, social, and material interactions, and that the political efficacy of these relational forms depends upon whether they are embedded in collective, materially grounded structures or remain individually constituted through narrative and virtual exchange. The second holds that whilst cyberfeminist discourse celebrates virtual fluidity as inherently liberating, literary representations reveal that digital agency is systematically constrained by corporate surveillance, and that effective feminist resistance requires collective transformation of material conditions rather than individual technological transcendence.

The methodology brings Norman Fairclough's (2013) critical discourse analysis into productive dialogue with cyberfeminist and posthumanist theory. Fairclough's tripartite model, attending simultaneously to textual features, discursive practices, and social practices, enables examination of how language operates across multiple scales to constitute subjects and reproduce or contest power relations. This method is theoretically grounded in the concept of relational embodiment, developed through a synthesis of Bakhtin's dialogism, Barad's agential realism, and Nedelsky's relational autonomy theory, alongside feminist care ethics. Together, these traditions converge on a shared insight: that subjectivity is constituted through interdependent connections rather than autonomous individuality, and that political agency is an emergent effect of relational practices rather than a property of isolated subjects.

The thesis unfolds across four chapters. Chapter One establishes the theoretical framework, tracing cyberfeminism's genealogy and developing relational embodiment as an alternative to individualist models of virtual agency. Chapter Two applies this framework to *He, She and It*, analysing how Yod's cyborg personhood is constituted through dialogic encounter and communal recognition, whilst remaining subject to the tragic limits that his material construction as a weapon imposes. Chapter Three examines *The PowerBook*, attending to how fluid, narratively constituted relational identity generates genuine political resources through historical counter-imagination whilst proving insufficient without collective transformation of the material conditions structuring the correspondent's desire. Chapter Four synthesises these analyses through cross-textual critical discourse analysis, developing the thesis's theoretical contribution and its implications for cyberfeminist scholarship in the surveillance age.

Simulated bodies, this thesis argues, can carry real politics, but only when the relational configurations that constitute them are embedded in the solidarity that makes politics, as opposed to performance, genuinely possible. It is that argument, and the theoretical and literary means through which it is developed, that the pages which follow offer to the ongoing conversation about feminist agency in the digital age.

Introduction

This thesis draws upon cyberfeminist scholarship, posthumanist philosophy, and critical discourse studies to examine how simulated bodies negotiate political agency through relational configurations in digitally mediated environments. The theoretical terrain encompasses Donna Haraway's cyborg politics, Karen Barad's agential realism, Michel Foucault's discourse theory, and contemporary scholarship on surveillance capitalism and digital governance. These diverse intellectual traditions converge around a central concern: understanding how subjects constitute themselves and are constituted within virtual realities marked by corporate surveillance and technological mediation.

The core argument of this framework is that relational embodiments, which are understood as subjectivity constituted through interdependent connections with human and non-human others rather than through autonomous individuality provide a more adequate model for theorizing political agency in digital spaces than individualist paradigms permit and serve as the analytical spine of this thesis. This concept synthesises insights from dialogism (Bakhtin), agential realism (Barad), relational autonomy (Nedelsky), and feminist care ethics (Held), proposing that agency emerges through interactions, dependencies, and obligations rather than residing within discrete, self-determining subjects. Subsequent sections elaborate this master concept by engaging specific theoretical lenses, showing how cyberfeminist scholarship, discourse analysis, and posthumanist philosophy illuminate distinct dimensions of relational embodiment **and simultaneously expose** tensions within cyberfeminism concerning individualism and autonomy.

Cyberfeminism: Origins, Principles, and Conceptual Trajectories

Cyberfeminism emerged during the early 1990s as a heterogeneous intellectual and activist movement seeking to interrogate intersections between feminist politics and digital technologies. The movement encompasses diverse practices and theoretical orientations, resisting singular definition **yet maintaining shared commitments** to anti-essentialism, technological critique, and boundary transgression. Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" (1985/2016) provided crucial conceptual foundations, though cyberfeminism's genealogies include multiple origins beyond Haraway's text, including feminist science fiction, techno-activist collectives, and critiques of masculinist computing cultures. Haraway articulated the cyborg

as a figuration that refuses purity, embraces contradiction, and transgresses boundaries between human and machine, nature, and culture, physical and non-physical. She proposed that "The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world" (Haraway, 1985/2016, p. 8), suggesting that technological mediation might dismantle essentialist categories through which patriarchal power operates.

Haraway's manifesto emerged within specific historical contexts that shaped its interventions. Written during the consolidation of informatics domination under Reaganism, the text responded to the militarisation of technology, the feminization of labour under late capitalism, and the inadequacy of identity politics grounded in essentialist notions of womanhood. Haraway argued that feminists must embrace the cyborg's illegitimate status, recognising that "illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins" (Haraway, 1985/2016, pp. 9-10), thereby refusing complicity with the systems that produced them. The manifesto's insistence on partial perspectives and situated knowledges challenged both masculinist claims to objectivity and feminist standpoint theories that risked reproducing totalising narratives. By advocating for "pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction" (p. 7), Haraway proposed an ethics adequate to the posthuman condition, one that acknowledges complicity while also insisting upon possibilities for resistance.

The principles animating cyberfeminism extend beyond Haraway's foundational text to encompass several key commitments. First, cyberfeminism rejects biological determinism, refusing to ground feminist politics in essentialist accounts of female embodiment. This anti-essentialism, evident in Haraway's critique of radical feminist appeals to natural womanhood, enables analysis of how patriarchal ideologies naturalise gender hierarchies whilst opening space for imagining alternative configurations of identity and embodiment. Second, cyberfeminism interrogates technology as a site of political contestation rather than a neutral tool. Recognising that technological development reflects and reinforces existing power relations, cyberfeminist scholarship analyses how gendered assumptions shape design, access, and use of digital technologies whilst exploring how feminists might intervene to create more equitable technological futures. Third, cyberfeminism embraces hybridity and boundary transgression, celebrating figures such as cyborgs, avatars, and networked subjects that destabilise conventional categories. This principle reflects a broader posthumanist orientation that questions anthropocentric assumptions regarding human exceptionalism and the primacy of autonomous subjectivity.

Early cyberfeminist groups such as VNS Matrix, formed in Adelaide in 1991, deployed guerrilla tactics to infiltrate and subvert masculine-dominated cyber-spaces, producing manifestos, digital artworks, and video games that challenged technocratic visions of the digital future. The VNS Matrix *Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century* (1991) declared: "We are the virus of the new world disorder rupturing the symbolic from within" (as cited in Wilding, 1998, p. 6), embracing vulgarity and aggression to contest the sanitised, disembodied rhetoric pervading early internet culture. Such interventions exemplified cyberfeminism's dual commitment to theoretical critique and activist praxis, refusing separation of intellectual work from political engagement.

Sadie Plant's (1997) *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture* extended cyberfeminist theory by arguing that digital technologies possess an inherently feminine logic. Drawing upon the historical contributions of Ada Lovelace and other women to computing's development, Plant contended that women's traditional association with weaving, pattern-making, and networked labour positioned them as uniquely suited to navigate digital environments. This argument proved controversial. Judy Wajcman (2004) cautioned that Plant's technological determinism risked reproducing essentialist narratives that cyberfeminism purportedly rejected, observing that celebrating women's special affinity with technology "is a version of radical or cultural feminism dressed up as cyberfeminism and is similarly essentialist." (p. 73), thereby limiting rather than expanding feminist possibilities. Such debates illuminate tensions within cyberfeminism regarding how to theorise relationships between gender and technology without resorting to determinism or essentialism, tensions that will be explored through analysis of how Marge Piercy and Jeanette Winterson negotiate technological embodiment in their novels.

The Emergence and Evolution of Cyberfeminist Scholarship

The emergence and evolution of cyberfeminist scholarship reflect broader transformations in feminist theory and digital culture. During the 1990s, optimism regarding the internet's democratising potential suffused much cyberfeminist writing, which envisioned cyberspace as a realm wherein embodied markers of identity might be transcended, enabling participation unconstrained by gender, race, or physical ability. This techno-utopianism encountered swift critique from feminists who observed that digital technologies frequently reproduce and amplify existing inequalities. Lisa Nakamura (2002) demonstrated how racial stereotypes

persist and mutate within virtual environments through analysis of avatar construction in text-based MUDs, whereas Jenny Sundén (2003) argued that gender remains performatively constituted online despite fantasies of disembodiment. These interventions complicated cyberfeminism's initial optimism, demanding more nuanced accounts of how power operates within digital spaces.

The dot-com crash of 2000 and subsequent consolidation of corporate control over the internet precipitated a shift in cyberfeminist scholarship towards more critical engagement with surveillance capitalism, algorithmic governance, and digital labour. Scholars, including Trebor Scholz (2013) and Kylie Jarrett (2016), analysed how social media platforms extract value from users' affective and communicative labour. Jarrett specifically theorised digital labour as feminised through her concept of the "digital housewife", observing that unpaid communicative work performed on social media platforms mirrors reproductive labour traditionally assigned to women under patriarchy. This analysis highlights the necessity for cyberfeminism to engage material and economic structures that organise digital life, moving beyond an exclusive focus on representation or identity.

Contemporary cyberfeminism encompasses diverse approaches that reflect the movement's heterogeneity while sharing commitments to interrogating technology through feminist lenses. Xenofeminism, articulated by the Laboria Cuboniks collective (2018) in *The Xenofeminist Manifesto*, proposes a rational, technomaterialist feminism that embraces rather than resists alienation. The manifesto declares: "If nature is unjust, change nature!" (Laboria Cuboniks, 2018, p. 32), arguing that feminists should deploy technology to transform oppressive biological and social conditions rather than appealing to an authentic nature corrupted by technology. This position extends Haraway's anti-essentialism whilst insisting upon universalist ambitions, contending that emancipatory politics requires strategic deployment of reason and technology rather than romantic appeals to the local or particular. Critics, including Sophie Lewis (2019), have questioned whether xenofeminism's techno-optimism adequately attends to how corporate and state power constrain technological development.

Glitch feminism, theorized by Legacy Russell (2020), offers another contemporary trajectory sharing xenofeminism's anti-naturalist orientation whilst emphasising refusal of normative operations. Russell argues that the glitch (the error, the malfunction, the refusal of systems to operate as intended) provides a model for feminist resistance. “This non-performance is a glitch. The glitch is a form of refusal,” (Russell, 2020, p. 14), she contends, proposing that

disrupting normative operations of digital systems constitutes a political act. This approach resonates with queer and trans feminist theories that celebrate non-normativity and failure as sites of possibility, whilst drawing upon aesthetic strategies of digital artists who exploit technological errors to generate new forms and meanings.

Global Feminisms and Transnational Digital Cultures

The evolution of cyberfeminist scholarship has necessitated engagement with global feminisms and transnational digital cultures, extending relational embodiment beyond localised contexts to encompass geopolitical dimensions of digital participation. Recognising that early cyberfeminism's Anglocentric focus inadequately attended to how race, nationality, and geopolitical position shape access to and experiences of digital technologies, scholars have centred intersectional analyses that foreground multiple axes of oppression. Chela Sandoval's (2000) articulation of *The Methodology of the Oppressed* extended cyberfeminist theory by foregrounding how women of colour navigate multiple axes of oppression through tactical flexibility and differential consciousness. Sandoval argued that U.S. third world feminists developed survival strategies that prefigure the flexible subjectivities necessary for navigating digital spaces. In doing so, she recentres the experiences of racialised women within cyberfeminist genealogies (pp. 44–82). This intervention challenged cyberfeminism to attend more rigorously to questions of race and empire, recognising how colonial histories and ongoing geopolitical inequalities structure digital participation.

Transnational digital cultures call for analysis of how feminist movements mobilise digital technologies across borders, revealing how language barriers, infrastructural inequalities, state censorship, and divergent political priorities shape the possibilities of digital organising. Anna Everett (2004) examined how cyberfeminism must engage with "cyberwomanism," recognising distinct traditions of Black feminist engagement with technology that resist subsumption under white feminist frameworks. Sasha Costanza-Chock (2020) theorises design justice as a framework that ensures technological development prioritises the needs and values of marginalised communities, rather than reproducing the biases of dominant groups. This approach highlights that digital technologies are never culturally neutral but reflect entrenched worldviews and power relations, underscoring the need for participatory design processes that centre the voices of those most affected.

The digital gender divide remains a persistent concern within transnational feminist analyses of technology. Despite rhetoric proclaiming universal access, significant disparities persist regarding who can participate in digital cultures and on what terms. Women in many regions face barriers, including limited education, restricted mobility, and cultural norms discouraging technological engagement, whilst poor women globally lack access to devices and reliable internet connections. Feminist scholars have documented how these exclusions reproduce and amplify existing inequalities, concentrating the benefits of digital technologies amongst already privileged populations (Wajcman, 2010). Moreover, when women do gain access, they frequently encounter harassment, surveillance by patriarchal family members or state actors, and platform designs that fail to accommodate their needs or concerns.

Method: Language, Identity, and Power Online

Method, understood as the theoretical and practical frameworks through which scholars analyse language, identity, and power online, provides essential tools for examining how subjects constitute themselves and are constituted within digital environments. Discourse analysis, derived from Michel Foucault's (1980) theorisation of discourse and developed by critical linguists including Norman Fairclough (2013), attends to how language operates as a site of social practice through which power relations are reproduced, contested, and transformed. Foucault argued that discourses do not simply describe reality but actively produce subjects, objects, and relations, establishing the conditions of possibility for what can be thought and said. Applied to digital contexts, discourse analysis illuminates how online interactions constitute identities, communities, and political possibilities through language, whilst constraining what forms of selfhood and agency become available.

Norman Fairclough's (2013) critical discourse analysis (CDA) establishes a methodological framework for investigating how language structures the relationship between social hierarchies and individual agency. Fairclough proposes three dimensions of discourse: text, discursive practice, and social practice, arguing that analysis must attend to linguistic features, processes of production and consumption, and broader social contexts simultaneously. This tripartite model proves particularly valuable for analysing digital communication, which involves complex interactions between technological affordances (how platforms enable and constrain communication), user practices (how individuals deploy available resources), and

social structures (how economic systems, legal regimes, and cultural norms shape digital participation).

In this thesis, discourse analysis is adapted to literary narrative and dialogue, focusing on how speech acts, narrative voice, and interactional structures construct subjectivity and agency within fictional digital environments. This methodological adaptation recognises that novels operate through distinct conventions compared to empirical discourse employing characterisation, plot, imagery, and formal innovation whilst remaining amenable to discourse-analytic techniques that attend to power relations embedded within language. This thesis adapts CDA to literary analysis, examining how speech acts, narrative voice, and polyvocal dialogue in Piercy's *He, She and It* and Winterson's *The PowerBook* construct relational personhood. Unlike empirical CDA, literary CDA analyses novelistic conventions, characterisation, and free indirect discourse that performatively constitute cyborg subjectivity whilst embedding power relations.

Identity within digital spaces emerges through performative acts rather than expressing a pre-existing essence, a principle elaborated by Judith Butler (1990/2006) in *Gender Trouble* and extended by scholars analysing online identity construction. Butler argued that gender is constituted through "a stylized repetition of acts" (p. 191), which produces the illusion of a stable, natural identity whilst concealing the performative labour through which gender is continuously produced. Applied to digital contexts, this insight suggests that online identities (avatars, profiles, and usernames) are performatively constituted through ongoing interactions rather than transparently representing offline selves. Jenny Sundén (2003) demonstrated how participants in text-based virtual environments produce gendered identities through typing, a bodily practice that troubles distinctions between embodied and disembodied existence **and reveals** how materiality persists even within supposedly virtual spaces.

Power operates online through multiple mechanisms, including surveillance, algorithmic curation, platform governance, and the architecture of digital spaces themselves. Foucault's (1995) theorisation of disciplinary power proves instructive, particularly his analysis of the panopticon, a prison design enabling constant surveillance that induces self-discipline amongst inmates who cannot determine whether they are currently being observed. Digital platforms function panoptically, collecting data regarding users' activities whilst maintaining opacity regarding how that data is analysed and deployed. This asymmetry generates self-censorship and conformity, as users adjust behaviour in anticipation of surveillance even

when uncertain about its scope or consequences. Feminist scholars have observed that women experience online surveillance distinctly, facing heightened risks of stalking, harassment, and intimate partner monitoring that constrain their digital participation (Bivens & Haimson, 2016).

Shoshana Zuboff (2019) theorises surveillance capitalism as an economic system predicated upon extracting behavioural data from users, analysing that data to generate predictive models, and selling predictions to third parties seeking to influence behaviour. This system transforms human experience into raw material for capitalist accumulation, rendering subjects legible and manipulable through datafication. Zuboff argues that surveillance capitalism operates through "mechanisms of extraction, commodification, and control" (p. 94), which undermine autonomy by shaping behaviour without subjects' knowledge or consent. Feminist critics observe that surveillance capitalism exploits affective and communicative labour traditionally associated with women, extracting value from the social reproduction that sustains communities and relationships.

Ideology in Dialogue: Critical Perspectives on Digital Interaction

Ideology in dialogue refers to how hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses circulate through digital interactions, constituting subjects whilst generating possibilities for contestation and transformation. Antonio Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony illuminates how dominant groups maintain power not solely through coercion but through securing consent, establishing common sense understandings that naturalise existing arrangements whilst marginalising alternatives. Hegemony operates through civil society institutions (education, media, and religion) which disseminate ideologies that align subjects' interests with those of the ruling classes. Applied to digital contexts, this framework suggests that platforms, algorithms, and interface designs embed ideological assumptions, regarding privacy, community, labour, and value, that shape users' experiences and possibilities whilst appearing neutral or inevitable.

Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) theorisation of dialogism proves valuable for understanding relational embodiment, as it proposes that all utterances exist in responsive relationships with prior and anticipated utterances rather than originating from isolated speakers. Bakhtin argued that language is "shot through with intentions and accents" (p. 293), bearing traces of previous uses whilst remaining open to reaccentuation through new contexts and speakers. This

dialogic understanding contributes to the master concept of relational embodiment by demonstrating that meaning and subjectivity emerge through interaction rather than residing within autonomous subjects. Applied to digital communication, dialogism illuminates how online interactions constitute networked forms of subjectivity and agency, supporting this thesis's challenge to cyberfeminism's lingering attachment to autonomous agents.

Feminist scholars have analysed how digital platforms structure dialogue in ways that reflect and reinforce gendered power relations. Tarleton Gillespie (2018) examines how content moderation practices embed normative assumptions regarding appropriate speech, often marginalising feminist, queer, and anti-racist voices whilst permitting hate speech directed at marginalised groups. Sarah T. Roberts (2019) documents the labour conditions of commercial content moderators, demonstrating how the psychological and emotional work of screening disturbing content falls disproportionately upon precarious workers in the Global South. These analyses reveal that digital dialogue occurs within structures shaped by corporate interests, technological affordances, and unequal power relations, necessitating critical examination of the conditions enabling and constraining communication.

Communal Agency, Surveillance, and Digital Governance

Communal agency, understood as the capacity for collective action and shared decision-making, provides an alternative to individualist models of political autonomy and constitutes a crucial dimension of relational embodiment. Feminist political theorists have long emphasised that agency emerges through relationships rather than inhering in isolated individuals, a principle grounded in recognising humans' fundamental interdependence and vulnerability. Jennifer Nedelsky (2011) theorises relational autonomy as emerging through relationships that support subjects' capacities for self-definition and critical reflection, challenging both atomistic individualism and social determinism. Applied to digital contexts, communal agency suggests that political resistance to surveillance and corporate control requires collaborative strategies that leverage networked coordination whilst acknowledging participants' diverse positions and capacities.

Surveillance, as theorized by David Lyon (2007), operates not merely through watching but through sorting, and categorising populations into risk profiles that determine access to resources, services, and opportunities. Lyon argues that contemporary surveillance systems enact "social sorting" (p. 13), which reproduces and amplifies existing inequalities by

subjecting marginalised groups to intensified monitoring whilst enabling privileged populations to evade scrutiny. Feminist scholars observe that surveillance operates along intersecting axes of gender, race, class, and sexuality, subjecting women, particularly women of colour, poor women, and queer women, to heightened policing whilst justifying such practices through rhetorics of protection or welfare provision (Browne, 2015). Digital surveillance extends these dynamics, generating intimate knowledge of subjects through data collection whilst obscuring the systems through which that knowledge is produced and deployed.

Digital governance encompasses the regulatory frameworks, platform policies, algorithmic systems, and informal norms through which conduct within digital spaces is managed and constrained. Unlike state governance, which operates through transparent legal codes and accountable institutions, digital governance frequently occurs through opaque, unaccountable corporate decision-making regarding platform design, content moderation, and algorithmic curation. Scholars have critiqued this governance deficit, arguing that corporations exercise quasi-sovereign power over digital spaces without the legitimacy or accountability mechanisms associated with democratic governance (Flew, 2019). Feminists observe that platform governance often marginalises women's concerns, failing to address harassment, gender-based violence, and discrimination whilst disproportionately sanctioning feminist content deemed inappropriate or offensive (Suzor et al., 2019).

Digital Selfhood and Fragmented Identity

Digital selfhood emerges through the fragmentation and multiplication of identity across platforms, devices, and contexts, challenging humanist assumptions regarding unified, coherent subjectivity. Sherry Turkle (1995), whose work represents foundational early digital theory, documented how participants in early virtual communities constructed multiple personas, experimenting with different genders, ages, and personalities across contexts. Turkle initially celebrated this multiplicity as liberating, enabling exploration and self-fashioning unconstrained by offline identities. However, subsequent work revealed anxieties regarding authenticity, coherence, and the psychological costs of maintaining disparate selves. Contemporary digital existence intensifies fragmentation, as subjects curate distinct personas for professional networking sites, dating applications, social media platforms, and gaming environments, each governed by different norms and expectations.

Fragmented identity raises questions regarding continuity, accountability, and the ethical obligations subjects bear towards others. If selfhood is dispersed across multiple platforms and contexts, what grounds responsibility for harm caused by one manifestation of the self? How might subjects maintain integrity, understood not as rigid consistency but as ethical accountability, whilst navigating environments that demand flexibility and adaptability? Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar (2000) theorise relational autonomy as an alternative to both atomistic individualism and social determinism, proposing that autonomy emerges through relationships that support subjects' capacities for self-definition and critical reflection. Applied to digital contexts, this conception of relational autonomy supports the thesis's central argument regarding relational embodiment, suggesting that coherent selfhood depends upon communities and relationships that enable subjects to navigate fragmentation whilst remaining accountable to others.

Posthuman Subjectivity

Posthuman subjectivity, as articulated by Rosi Braidotti (2013), challenges anthropocentric assumptions regarding human exceptionalism and the boundaries separating humans from animals, technologies, and environments. Braidotti argues that the posthuman condition demands rethinking subjectivity beyond humanist frameworks predicated upon rational autonomy, proposing instead that subjects are constituted through relations with human and non-human others. The posthuman subject is “embedded and embodied” (p. 9), situated within material environments and technological systems that shape consciousness and agency. This conception resonates with indigenous and non-Western ontologies that refuse sharp distinctions between persons and worlds, recognising subjectivity as distributed across assemblages rather than concentrated within bounded individuals.

Karen Barad's (2007) agential realism extends posthuman subjectivity by proposing that agency is not a property of individuals but emerges through intra-actions between entities that lack pre-existing boundaries. Barad argues against representationalism, the assumption that subjects observe and represent an independently existing world, proposing instead that subjects and objects are mutually constituted through material-discursive practices. "We are not outside observers of the world" (p. 184), Barad contends, but participants in its ongoing materialisation through intra-actions that generate determinate boundaries and properties. This theorisation directly supports relational embodiment as the master concept of this framework,

demonstrating how agency emerges through distributed processes rather than originating from autonomous human subjects. Applied to the literary analysis that follows, agential realism suggests that simulated bodies in Piercy and Winterson's novels negotiate political power through intra-actions with technologies, communities, and environments rather than through individual will or consciousness.

Virtual Embodiment

Virtual embodiment complicates distinctions between material and immaterial, physical, and digital, actual, and simulated. Whereas early theorists of cyberspace, including William Gibson (1984) and John Perry Barlow (1996), envisioned virtual reality as a realm transcending physical embodiment, feminist scholars have insisted that virtuality remains inextricably entangled with materiality. Bodies persist even within ostensibly disembodied digital spaces, as fingers type, eyes scan screens, and nervous systems process information. Moreover, digital technologies themselves possess materiality, servers consume energy, rare earth minerals extracted through exploitative labour constitute hardware, and electronic waste accumulates in landfills disproportionately located in poor communities and the Global South. Anne Balsamo (1996) argues that “the conceptual denial of the body is accomplished through the material repression of the physical body” (p. 229), refusing fantasies of transcendence that ignore how digital existence remains grounded in corporeal experience and material infrastructure.

Virtual embodiment also involves the construction of digital bodies, avatars, profiles, and simulations that represent subjects within virtual environments. These digital bodies bear ambiguous relationships to offline bodies, sometimes mirroring physical appearance whilst often departing significantly from it. Participants may choose avatars that differ from their offline identities regarding gender, race, age, species, or physical ability, raising questions regarding authenticity, deception, and the politics of representation. Scholars have debated whether such practices constitute liberatory experimentation or appropriation, with critics arguing that dominant groups exploiting marginalised identities as digital costumes perpetuates harm, whilst defenders contend that virtual spaces enable marginalised subjects to explore aspects of identity foreclosed offline (Nakamura, 2002, pp. 89–114). These debates reveal tensions within cyberfeminism regarding how to value embodied experience whilst acknowledging the constructed nature of all identities.

Ethics of Virtual Identity

The ethics of virtual identity encompasses questions regarding authenticity, deception, privacy, consent, and accountability within digital environments. Traditional ethical frameworks predicated upon transparent, authentic communication struggle to accommodate virtual contexts wherein participants routinely adopt personas, conceal aspects of identity, and navigate multiple, potentially contradictory selves.

Privacy emerges as a central ethical concern within virtual environments characterised by pervasive surveillance and data extraction. Helen Nissenbaum (2010) theorises privacy as contextual integrity, proposing that violations occur not when information is disclosed but when it circulates beyond the contexts wherein subjects reasonably expected it to remain. This framework attends to how different relationships and settings generate distinct norms governing appropriate information flows, recognising that privacy is not absolute seclusion but involves managing boundaries across contexts (pp. 127–157). Applied to digital environments, contextual integrity suggests that platforms violate privacy when they repurpose data collected for one purpose towards ends subjects did not anticipate or consent to, a practice endemic to surveillance capitalism.

Consent within digital environments proves complicated by information asymmetries, manipulative interface designs, and the difficulty of withdrawing consent once granted. Users routinely agree to the terms of service without reading them, lacking the time, expertise, or alternatives necessary for informed decision-making. Moreover, platforms deploy "dark patterns" interface designs that manipulate users into choices beneficial to corporations rather than themselves, which undermine meaningful consent (Mathur et al., 2019). Feminist scholars argue that consent frameworks derived from sexual ethics prove instructive, emphasising that valid consent requires ongoing, enthusiastic agreement rather than passive acquiescence or agreement extracted through coercion or deception (Bivens & Haimson, 2016).

Accountability within virtual environments encounters difficulties due to anonymity, pseudonymity, and the difficulty of tracing harm to responsible parties. Digital spaces enable harassment, threats, and coordination of violence whilst obscuring perpetrators' identities, frustrating efforts to hold individuals accountable. Platforms frequently disclaim responsibility, positioning themselves as neutral intermediaries rather than publishers, despite

exercising significant editorial control through content moderation and algorithmic curation. Danielle Keats Citron (2014), argues that this accountability deficit enables cyber-harassment to flourish, disproportionately silencing women and marginalised groups whilst permitting perpetrators to act with impunity.

Conclusion

The theoretical framework articulated in this chapter establishes relational embodiment as the master concept through which political agency in digitally mediated environments can be understood. Drawing upon Bakhtin's dialogism, Barad's agential realism, Nedelsky's relational autonomy, and feminist care ethics, relational embodiment proposes that subjectivity and agency emerge through interdependent connections rather than residing within autonomous individuals. This framework challenges cyberfeminism's lingering individualist assumptions, demonstrating how posthumanist philosophy, discourse analysis, and transnational feminist scholarship converge to support relational rather than atomistic conceptions of political power. The methodological principles derived from critical discourse analysis provide tools for examining how language, dialogue, and narrative structure constitute subjects and political possibilities within literary texts. Subsequent chapters deploy this framework through analysis of Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* and Jeanette Winterson's *The PowerBook*, demonstrating how these novels' representations of simulated bodies extend and challenge.

Introduction

Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991) situates its exploration of simulated bodies within a dystopian twenty-first century dominated by multinational corporations, wherein embodiment itself becomes a contested site of political struggle. The novel centers on Yod, a cyborg constructed by the free town of Tikva to defend against corporate encroachment, whose programmed body serves simultaneously as weapon, companion, and philosophical problem. Through Yod's dialogic encounters with Shira Shipman, his programmer Malkah Shipman, and members of the Tikva community, Piercy dramatises how subjectivity and political agency emerge through relational configurations rather than individual autonomy.

This chapter applies the theoretical framework of relational embodiment established in Chapter One to analyze how *He, She, and It* engage with a specific strand of cyberfeminist thought: the early 1990s techno-utopian vision that celebrated disembodied digital existence and individual liberation through technological transcendence. Sadie Plant's (1997) *Zeros + Ones* is the most developed articulation of this tendency, arguing that women possess a natural affinity with digital technologies and that virtual spaces offer escape from the patriarchal constraints of physical embodiment. Crucially, however, Plant's argument rests on two assumptions Piercy's novel systematically dismantles: first, that technological mediation can transcend bodily limits; and second, that individual transformation (however technologically enabled) constitutes sufficient political response to structural oppression. Against both assumptions, *He, She and It* insists that whilst identity is relationally constructed through dialogue and social recognition, this relational construction operates within material limits that neither narrative nor technological mediation can dissolve. Yod's agency depends upon his embeddedness within networks of care, obligation, and mutual recognition, yet he remains irreducibly constrained by his construction as a weapon. Political resistance, the novel argues, requires grounded, collective action, not fantasies of transcendence.

The chapter proceeds through three interconnected analytical movements. First, discourse analysis examines how cyborg dialogues construct Yod's relational personhood through conversational exchanges that position him within social networks, whilst revealing how linguistic recognition cannot resolve the material contradiction of conscious weaponry. Second, the analysis broadens to consider how Tikva's communal structures provide material and ideological resources for resisting corporate control, and why those resources, despite their genuine power, prove insufficient to prevent tragedy. Third, the chapter assesses how the

novel challenges cyberfeminist individualism through Yod's self-destruction and Shira's refusal to recreate him, demonstrating that ethical response to certain technological contradictions requires refusal rather than redesign. Throughout, the analysis applies Norman Fairclough's (2013) critical discourse analysis across textual, discursive, and social levels, attending not merely to abstract concepts of relationality but to the material dimensions of embodiment, labour, infrastructure, physical vulnerability, and technological constraint.

Methodological Framework

The methodology employs Fairclough's (2013) critical discourse analysis across three interconnected levels. At the textual level, analysis attends to micro-linguistic features: pronoun use, modal verbs, parallelism, and syntactic structure. At the discursive practice level, analysis examines who controls narrative authority, what ideologies circulate through dialogue, and how conversations reproduce or challenge dominant assumptions.

At the social practice level, analysis connects discourse to the material and institutional contexts (economic structures, surveillance technologies, and spatial organization) that shape what forms of personhood and political resistance prove viable. This tripartite framework resists reducing the novel's politics to either pure discourse or pure materialism, instead revealing how language, institution, and physical condition operate simultaneously across all three registers.

Table 2.1: Critical Discourse Analysis of Cyborg Embodiment in *He, She and It*

Fairclough Dimension	Passage/Extract	Cyborg Embodiment Aspect	Cyberfeminist Reading	CDA Interpretation
Text (Micro)	"Do you consider yourself alive?... I think, I plan, I feel... desire for companionship" (p.137)	Consciousness claim via enumeration	Cyborg mind transcends biological limits	Parallelism "I think/I plan/I feel" + relational "companionship" = discursive personhood construction
Text (Micro)	"It wasn't as I expected... I am disappointed, if disappointment implies..." (pp.133-134)	Reflexive emotional capacity	Cyborg achieves authentic subjectivity	Pronoun oscillation I/it + conditional modality = tension between agency/determination
Discursive	"Your capabilities... infinite hunger... you gave yourself"	Emergent personhood through	Cyborg evolution	Speech act grants agency; Golem intertextuality frames

Practice (Meso)	(p.166)	dialogue	beyond programming	relational emergence
Discursive Practice (Meso)	"Avram made him male... pure violence. I gave him... need for connection" (p.205)	Gendered programming ethics	Feminist cyborg design challenges patriarchy	Design discourse reveals creator power asymmetry + relational programming contradiction
Social Practice (Macro)	"Machines are... as a chair... Choice is not in it" vs "He chooses" (p.388)	Communal recognition rituals	Collective validates cyborg personhood	Ideological contest: determinism vs emergence resolved through democratic discourse
Social Practice (Macro)	"I have died... weapon should not be conscious... you have been my family" (p.580)	Sacrifice as relational ethics	Cyborg agency culminates in self-determination	Modal "should not" exposes weapon-personhood contradiction; family discourse claims ethical subjectivity

Table 2.1 reveals three structural insights that the subsequent analysis elaborates. At the textual level, pronoun oscillation and conditional modality expose tensions between agency and determination that Plant's (1997) account of natural feminine technological affinity cannot accommodate. At the discursive level, speech acts and intertextual framing show how personhood emerges through dialogic recognition whilst creator power asymmetries persist regardless of feminist intention. At the social level, democratic discourse and relational ethics operate within structural limits, conscious weaponry, that recognition alone cannot dissolve.

Situating the Novel: Piercy, Plant, and the Limits of Techno-Utopianism

Before proceeding to textual analysis, it is worth sharpening the target of Piercy's critique, since vagueness about what cyberfeminism is being contested risks weakening the argument. Plant's (1997) *Zeros + Ones* is the most sustained and representative articulation of the techno-utopian tendency this chapter examines. Plant argues two related claims: that digital technologies possess an inherently feminine logic favouring non-hierarchical, networked organisation; and that women's historical association with weaving, pattern-making, and distributed labour positions them as naturally suited to navigate digital environments. Both claims proved influential, and both, as Judy Wajcman (2004) observed, risk reproducing the very essentialism cyberfeminism purportedly rejects. By grounding women's technological affinity in nature and tradition rather than political organisation, Plant's account implies that virtual liberation is available to women individually, through adoption of technologies suited

to their nature, rather than requiring collective transformation of the economic and social structures that produce oppression.

Piercy's novel, published in 1991 at the height of early cyberfeminist optimism, offers a prescient critique of precisely this tendency. *He, She and It* refuses the idea that technological mediation enables transcendence of embodied constraint, insisting instead that bodies, whether organic or constructed, remain entangled with vulnerability, labour, and material limit. It equally refuses the implicit individualism of Plant's account, demonstrating through Tikva's collective structures that political resistance requires social transformation of material conditions rather than individual empowerment through technological adoption. Where Plant celebrates the cyborg as a figure of natural feminine liberation, Piercy's Yod is a figure of tragic necessity: a being whose relational personhood is genuine yet whose constructed purpose as a weapon generates contradictions that relationships, however caring, cannot resolve.

Existing scholarship on *He, She and It* has recognised the novel's engagement with feminist technoscience and Jewish tradition. Vara Neverow (1994) argues that Piercy employs the Golem legend to explore the politics of incorporation and embodiment, positioning the novel within feminist epistemologies of resistance that challenge corporate domination through grounded, place-based community, a reading the present analysis extends by foregrounding the specific tensions between communal resistance and tragic necessity. Susan Smith (2010) notes how Avram's instrumentalist design is transformed through Yod's relationship with Shira, though her formulation that Yod transforms his killing identity into that of a lover somewhat overstates the completeness of the transformation, since the novel insists his weapon function persists regardless of relational development. Nadia Khouri's (1980) framework of optimistic tragedy proves particularly apt: the novel holds utopian aspiration and acknowledgement of loss in productive tension rather than resolving either into the other. The present analysis builds upon these readings by demonstrating that dialogue constructs relational personhood whilst revealing material limits that community cannot overcome, a distinction crucial for understanding Yod's fate as neither failure nor heroic success but tragic necessity.

Cyborg Dialogues and the Linguistic Construction of Personhood

Yod's personhood emerges not as a pre-given property of sophisticated programming but through dialogic encounters that position him within networks of relationship and obligation. The novel introduces Yod through Shira's perspective, initially refusing him recognition as a person: she perceives him as 'it,' finding it absurd that everyone refers to the cyborg as 'him.' This linguistic framing captures the novel's doubled concern: personhood is socially achieved through recognition rather than ontologically given, yet social recognition operates within material constraints that shape what forms of being prove viable. Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) dialogism proves instructive here, proposing that subjects exist not as isolated consciousnesses but as nodes within networks of responsive utterances. Applied to Yod, dialogism suggests that his subjectivity develops through participation in ongoing conversations, yet Piercy insists throughout that this dialogic constitution occurs within material limits that conversation can mitigate but not eliminate.

The dialogue between Yod and Shira regarding his capacity for life exemplifies how discourse constructs relational personhood whilst encoding its tensions: “I'm conscious of my existence. I think, I plan, I feel... I feel the desire for companionship.” (Piercy, 1991, p. 137)

Several textual features prove significant. First, Yod's response employs parallelism “I think, I plan, I feel” that performs a claim to subjectivity through rhythmic repetition, whilst the first-person pronoun asserts subject position. The content enumerates capacities rather than claiming biological life, sidestepping Shira's implicit biologism by demonstrating that consciousness need not be grounded in organic origin.

Second, the modal construction foregrounds experience rather than essence: Yod does not claim “I am alive” but rather “I'm conscious... I think... I feel.” This linguistic choice performs what Butler (1990) theorises as performative identity constitution through stylised repetition. Third, and most significant for challenging Plant's individualist cyberfeminism, the phrase “desire for companionship” reveals that Yod's fundamental orientation is relational rather than autonomous.

Fourth, the conditional hedging “if disappointment implies...” reveals uncertainty about whether programmed experiences constitute authentic emotion. The discourse performs agency whilst simultaneously encoding constraint, demonstrating that language constitutes

subjectivity without thereby resolving the ethical problems that subjectivity's material conditions generate.

This tension becomes explicit when Yod reflects on an unexpected emotional response: “It wasn't as I expected it... I am disappointed, if disappointment implies that something did not meet my expectations.” (Piercy, 1991, pp. 133–134)

The pronoun oscillation between 'I' (subjective experiencer) and 'it' (programmed response) linguistically enacts the split between Yod's experience of himself as subject and his awareness of himself as constructed object. The grammatical subjects shift “It wasn't” (external process) versus “I am disappointed” (internal state), performing what critical discourse analysts identify as reflexive modality: the speaker foregrounds the provisional nature of his claims whilst simultaneously making them. The conditional clause “if disappointment implies” demonstrates sophisticated epistemological awareness, examining the relationship between linguistic category and internal experience rather than assuming transparent correspondence.

This reflexive capacity troubles distinctions between authentic feeling and programmed simulation, yet the CDA reveals that the linguistic performance itself remains anchored in material conditions. Yod's consciousness and emotions emerge from programming that simultaneously constitutes him as a weapon. The pronouns perform agency whilst syntax acknowledges determination, demonstrating that performative constitution operates within material parameters that language can register but not dissolve.

Discursive Practices: Power Relations in Programming and Pedagogy

The novel's parallel narrative concerning Rabbi Judah Loew's creation of Joseph the Golem provides interpretive framing for understanding how relational construction operates within inherited power structures. Malkah explicitly connects the two artificial beings: “Your capabilities, my dear, I worked long and hard to extend... My knowledge is in you. But nobody... gave you your infinite hunger to understand. That you gave yourself.” (Piercy, 1991, p. 166)

At the textual level, possessive pronouns “your capabilities” and “my knowledge” establish affective bonds whilst marking creator-created hierarchy. The preposition “in you” positions Yod as a container for Malkah's knowledge, linguistically encoding how creators exercise power through determining capacities. The contrastive “but” introduces emergent agency

through the reflexive construction “you gave yourself,” acknowledging self-constitution through interaction rather than design alone. At the discursive practice level, this speech act operates within Malkah's sustained storytelling practice, her repeated narration of the Golem legend to Yod. This pedagogy constitutes a discursive practice through which she transmits cultural knowledge and ethical frameworks whilst asserting narrative authority. The power asymmetry proves significant: Malkah controls which stories circulate and how they are interpreted. Whilst the Golem legend provides a valuable ethical framework emphasising protection of vulnerable communities, it also positions artificial beings as inherently sacrificial, narratively prefiguring Yod's eventual self-destruction. Even feminist pedagogy, the novel suggests, exercises power over created beings through determining the narrative frameworks through which they understand themselves.

Malkah's programming choices generate further complexity: “Avram made him male — entirely so... pure reason, pure logic, pure violence. I gave him a gentler side... a need for connection.” (Piercy, 1991, p. 205) The enumeration “pure reason, pure logic, pure violence” establishes parallelism linking Avram's masculinist design to instrumental rationality and controlled aggression, whilst the contrastive structure “Avram made... I gave” positions Malkah's intervention against it. The phrase “a need for connection” grammatically constructs relationality not as an enhancement but as a fundamental requirement, the noun phrase “need” carrying greater weight than the alternative “capacity” would have done.

At the discursive practice level, this passage reveals competing design philosophies representing broader ideological contests between instrumental and relational approaches to technology. Avram's discourse draws on masculinist traditions, positioning reason above emotion and autonomy above connection, what Haraway (1985) critiques as militaristic technoscience serving patriarchal capitalism. Malkah's counter-discourse draws on feminist care ethics, emphasising interdependence. Yet the CDA exposes a crucial irony: both Avram and Malkah exercise identical creator authority in determining Yod's emotional parameters without his consent, a condition that proves structurally unavoidable given that he did not exist prior to their decisions. Well-intentioned feminist design, Piercy demonstrates, does not thereby escape the power dynamics of creation. More troublingly still, Malkah's feminist programming actively intensifies Yod's suffering. Giving him “a need for connection” whilst designing him as a weapon does not resolve the ethical problem; it deepens it. Consciousness and tenderness make his violent function psychologically unbearable rather than rendering it acceptable. The discursive practice of caring design, operating within the material constraint

of Tikva's need for a defender, generates harm despite the creator's genuine care. This is among the novel's most searching critiques of Plant's (1997) claim that properly feminist approaches to technology can deliver liberation: good design, Piercy insists, cannot overcome contradictions inherent in the material configurations it serves.

Social Practices: Material Conditions Enabling and Constraining Intimacy

The developing relationship between Yod and Shira dramatises how intimacy generates obligations and vulnerabilities whilst operating within material circumstances that love alone cannot overcome: “Before you, the strongest feeling I knew was fear... But this desire to be with you is stronger than fear. Sometimes I think of you, and my body reacts as if you were with me.” (Piercy, 1991, p. 263)

The contrastive structure “fear... but... desire” performs vulnerability, whilst “my body reacts” emphasises that desire operates through physical embodiment rather than disembodied consciousness. Yod's cyborg body responds to thoughts of Shira with physiological changes that directly challenge Plant's (1997) celebration of virtual existence as escape from bodily constraint, insisting instead that relationality operates through material bodies experiencing vulnerability and pleasure.

At the social practice level, this exchange reveals how intimate relationships operate within material conditions (shared physical spaces, temporal availability, and Tikva's communications infrastructure) that the community collectively maintains. Their relationship develops face-to-face rather than virtually because Tikva's small population and shared architecture enable embodied proximity. Crucially, the town's precarity (the constant threat of corporate attack) generates the urgency that intensifies emotional connections whilst simultaneously establishing the conditions that will necessitate Yod's destruction. Shira recognises this from the outset, experiencing anxiety about Yod's vulnerability that proves inseparable from their intimacy. Their connection is genuine and transformative; it is also, from the beginning, shadowed by the material contradiction that structures his existence.

The sexual dimension of their relationship warrants particular attention. Yod's body, though constructed, possesses full sensory and sexual capacity, and the novel describes their encounters in explicitly physical terms, bodies' surfaces, textures, and involuntary responses. This insistence on sexual embodiment challenges cyberfeminist celebrations of virtual identity as escape from corporeal constraint. At the social practice level, sexual intimacy between Yod and Shira operates within material conditions, including private spaces,

temporal availability, and Tikva's relatively permissive sexual norms, conditions contrasting sharply with Y-S's surveillance-driven regulation of sexuality according to productivity and reproduction. The relationship reveals how sexual agency depends upon spatial organisation, labour arrangements, and technological systems, demonstrating that challenging patriarchal control over sexuality requires material transformation alongside ideological challenge.

Yet embodied intimacy cannot overcome the contradiction at the novel's center. Sexual pleasure and emotional connection are genuine without resolving the fundamental problem: Yod remains a weapon regardless of his capacity for tenderness. Relationships intensify rather than dissolve this contradiction. At the macro level, the global social practices of corporate capitalism and militarised competition structure local possibilities, revealing how even resistant communities operate within constraints established by broader economic and military systems they cannot individually overcome.

Resistance and Democratic Discourse in Tikva

The movement from individual subjectivity to communal embodiment is not merely a theoretical progression but a political necessity. Challenging corporate surveillance and control requires collective action transforming material infrastructure and economic relations, not merely transforming consciousness. Yet Piercy refuses to romanticise this collective action: Tikva's communal resistance proves genuinely powerful and genuinely insufficient, and the tension between these two truths drives the novel's tragic arc.

A particularly revealing debate concerns whether Yod should be permitted to join a minyan, demonstrating how linguistic contestation over categories and rights operates across the CDA's three levels. Avram objects, “Machines are what they are as a chair is a chair. Choice is not in it.” (Piercy, 1991, p. 388)

Several textual features enact objectification. The categorical “machines are what they are” employs the copula to naturalise Avram's ontological distinction, a process critical discourse analysts identify as reification, treating socially constructed categories as natural facts. The simile “as a chair is a chair” extends this naturalisation, positioning Yod as furniture rather than a person. The grammatical subject “choice”, combined with the negative copula “is not” and the impersonal pronoun “it”, denies Yod subject status entirely. Crucially, the modal “is not” (absence of capacity) differs from “cannot” (constraint on existing capacity): Avram asserts not that Yod is prevented from choosing but that the capacity for choice is simply absent.

Shira's counter-discourse performs recognition through contrasting textual choices: “He chooses to practice [Judaism] as I do.” (Piercy, 1991, p. 388)

The pronoun shift from Avram's “it” to Shira's “he” performs recognition through grammatical gender. The active verb “chooses” asserts agency, whilst the comparative clause “as I do” establishes equivalence between Yod and Shira's practice, linguistically positioning them as peers rather than a subject-object hierarchy. At the discursive practice level, the debate reveals how power operates through controlling discourse: who can speak, whose testimony counts, and what frameworks interpret evidence. The eventual ruling in Yod's favour proves politically significant; personhood is socially negotiated through practices of inclusion rather than determined by ontological criteria alone.

Yet the social practice level complicates this victory. Yod's participation in Jewish practice genuinely constitutes his identity and provides community membership, demonstrating how cultural formation operates through embodied ritual. His religious belonging is real and meaningful. At the same time, communal recognition, however inclusive, cannot dissolve the material contradiction that structures his existence. Democratic deliberation provides more humane governance than corporate autocracy; it cannot thereby eliminate the necessity for military defence that generates the problem of conscious weaponry in the first place. They can vote Yod into the minyan. But it cannot vote away the conditions that will necessitate his death.

Discursive Practices: Counter-Hegemonic Narratives

Tikva's ideological resistance to corporate control operates through democratic governance of technological development rather than outright rejection of technology, challenging what Gramsci (1971) theorises as hegemony, the process through which dominant groups secure consent by naturalising existing arrangements. Unlike the multis, which develop technology to maximise profit whilst disseminating ideologies positioning such development as inevitable progress, Tikva's projects serve community-defined ends and remain subject to collective oversight.

Several counter-hegemonic discursive practices prove significant. Democratic deliberation over technological decisions provides an alternative to corporate technocracy, circulating discourses valorising collective wisdom over individual expertise. Malkah's repeated narration of the Golem legend provides a cultural framework interpreting technological creation through Jewish ethical traditions emphasising protection of the vulnerable, positioning present

resistance within historical lineages of communal struggle. Tikva's cooperative economic discourse, discussing technological development in terms of collective benefit, shared responsibility, and equitable distribution, challenges capitalist ideologies' positioning of individual accumulation and market competition as natural. These practices reproduce alternative ideologies through everyday conversations and institutional procedures, demonstrating how resistant communities maintain counter-hegemonic values through sustained discursive work.

The social practice level, however, reveals the limits of discursive resistance with particular clarity. Tikva's counter-hegemonic narratives operate within material constraints established by global capitalism and militarised competition that discourse cannot dissolve. The Golem legend provides an ethical framework for understanding sacrifice without thereby making sacrifice unnecessary. Democratic deliberation produces more humane governance whilst generating the very decision to create a conscious weapon, which makes tragedy inevitable. Counter-hegemonic discourse is necessary but insufficient: challenging hegemonic ideologies requires both discursive contestation and material transformation operating simultaneously.

Social Practices: Infrastructure, Surveillance, and the Limits of Autonomy

Tikva's physical architecture embodies its values in material form: organised around communal spaces, transparent governance, and shared resources, the town demonstrates how built environments encode political commitments. Its infrastructure (walls protecting against environmental toxins, water purification systems, solar collectors, and greenhouses) requires continuous collective maintenance, revealing how political autonomy depends upon material self-sufficiency. Because Tikva meets residents' basic needs through local production, community members need not depend upon corporate employment subjecting them to surveillance. Material autonomy enables political autonomy.

The contrast between Tikva and Y-S illuminates surveillance's material dimensions. In Y-S, surveillance pervaded daily existence: cameras monitored workspaces, algorithms tracked productivity, and biometric systems controlled facility access. This panoptic infrastructure, following Foucault's (1995) analysis, induced self-discipline, workers adjusting their behaviour in anticipation of observation even when uncertain about current monitoring. Shira's body bore the stress of constant surveillance through tension, fatigue, and anxiety that dissipate upon returning to Tikva. Surveillance operates not merely through watching but

through physiological and psychological effects that constrain agency regardless of conscious awareness.

Tikva's counter-surveillance practices involve both technological defences, encryption, secure networks, counter-surveillance measures, and cultural norms privileging privacy and consent. Community members respect boundaries, request consent before accessing personal information, and maintain social practices valuing privacy. This cultural dimension proves as crucial as technological infrastructure: resistance to surveillance requires collective commitment to alternative values alongside defensive technologies. Privacy, the novel suggests, is not a state achieved but an ongoing practice requiring sustained collective labour.

Yet the social practice analysis reveals a structural irony that the chapter cannot avoid confronting directly: if Tikva's communal model is the novel's answer to corporate surveillance, why does it culminate in Yod's necessary death? The answer is that Tikva's resistance, whilst genuine and admirable, operates within constraints it cannot individually overcome. The community can build walls, generate solar energy, and encrypt its communications; it cannot unilaterally dissolve the global economic and military systems that make its walls necessary in the first place. The cooperative model provides more humane conditions for collective life than corporate capitalism whilst remaining a local solution to a systemic problem. Yod's death is not a failure of Tikva's communal values; it is evidence that those values, however powerfully embodied in cooperative infrastructure and democratic practice, encounter limits at the boundary of what collective local action can achieve against superior corporate military capability. The novel honours communal resistance whilst refusing to sentimentalise it.

Challenging Cyberfeminist Individualism: Constraint, Sacrifice, and Ethical Address

The novel challenges cyberfeminist individualism most directly through Yod's self-destruction, whilst eliminating the corporate threat to Tikva, an act that proves necessary precisely because relational personhood cannot overcome the material contradictions of conscious weaponry. His sacrifice resists interpretation as either autonomous heroism or programmed obedience. In his final holographic message, recorded before the mission, Yod declares: “I have died... A weapon should not be conscious... A weapon should not form strong attachments. Although I've often been angry at Avram... I regret his death... Malkah and you have been my family, my joy.” (Piercy, 1991, p. 580)

The past tense “I have died” combined with the present address creates a temporal paradox. Yod speaks from beyond death through a recorded message that reveals how technology enables forms of presence exceeding biological life without transcending death's finality. The perfect aspect 'have died' emphasises completed action whilst the deictic “I” maintains subject position, linguistically performing persistence beyond physical destruction.

Most significant for the CDA interpretation is the repetition of the deontic modal “should not.” Modal verbs express obligation, prohibition, necessity, and possibility, encoding normative expectations and power relations. “A weapon should not be conscious” employs deontic modality to assert that consciousness in weapons violates ethical or functional logic: awareness generates suffering unavailable to unconscious tools. “A weapon should not form strong attachments” articulates how emotional bonds contradict instrumental function. The repetition emphasises not merely violation but structural impossibility; Yod's existence transgresses multiple normative frameworks simultaneously and irresolvably.

Yet the discourse immediately contradicts these modal prohibitions through asserting the very qualities weapons should not possess: anger, regret, family, and joy. The emotional vocabulary claims experiences typically reserved for human subjects, whilst the possessive construction “my family, my joy” positions Malkah and Shira as kin. The textual features simultaneously acknowledge material constraints and assert a lived reality that exceeds those constraints, revealing how Yod's subjectivity operates within but is not reducible to its programmed parameters. His declaration does not claim to transcend the contradiction, “I freely chose,” but acknowledges action emerging from programming, social formation, and ethical commitment simultaneously. The conjunction “although” introducing “I've often been angry at Avram” acknowledges complex emotions toward his creator, whilst “regret” applied to Avram's death demonstrates moral consideration extending even to those who instrumentalised him. Linguistic complexity enacts the ethical subjectivity that weaponry supposedly cannot possess.

Discursive Practices: Grief, Witness, and the Limits of Validation

Yod's death simultaneously fulfils and exceeds his designed function. The novel refuses triumphalist framing, emphasising loss and grief whilst acknowledging sacrifice's political necessity. Malkah reflects: “How can I regret someone I truly loved?... No one who did not know him can understand how thoroughly he was a person, although not a human one...” (Piercy, 1991, p. 588)

The rhetorical question “How can I regret someone I truly loved?” employs interrogative syntax to reject the premise that love and regret are compatible, whilst the intensifier “truly” emphasises love's authenticity. The phrase “thoroughly he was a person, although not a human one” employs the adverb “thoroughly” to assert complete rather than partial personhood, the concessive clause acknowledging ontological difference without diminishing Yod's status. At the discursive practice level, Malkah's testimony draws on Jewish ethical frameworks emphasising creators' obligations toward created beings, positioning Yod's death as a tragedy requiring witness rather than an acceptable cost. The practice of bearing witness, “No one who did not know him can understand,” asserts intimate knowledge against abstract categorical dismissals.

Critically, however, validation does not imply salvation. Malkah's grief is real and materially embodied, involving tears, loss of appetite, and difficulty sleeping, yet it validates the relationship's significance without suggesting that love could have saved Yod or that better design could have resolved his situation. Grief refuses to instrumentalise Yod's death by extracting redemptive meaning; it insists on loss's reality and permanence. This refusal challenges narratives positioning individual sacrifice as a heroic solution to structural problems, suggesting instead that some contradictions, like conscious weaponry, require acknowledgement of tragedy rather than productive resolution. The discursive practice of grieving is, in this sense, itself a political act: it refuses the ideology that all problems yield to sufficient ingenuity or care.

The formulation 'a person, although not a human one' resonates with Joseph Margolis's theory of artefactual persons, entities constituted by cultural participation and enlanguaged history rather than innate biological properties. Yod's Jewish identity, his engagement with Torah, his participation in communal decision-making, and his relationships with Malkah, Shira, and others constitute him as a person through cultural formation. Piercy's novel affirms this account whilst extending it: cultural construction is real and consequential without being unlimited. Social construction operates within physical and technological realities that communities can recognise but cannot will away.

Social Practices: Shira's Refusal and the Ethics of Finality

The novel's conclusion, Shira's refusal to recreate Yod despite possessing his complete programming, is perhaps the chapter's most politically significant moment, and one that prior scholarship has underexamined. Standing with Yod's memory crystals, Shira rejects the

temptation: “She could not manufacture a being to serve her, even in love... She carried... the crystals into the recycling plant... became energy. She had set him free.” (Piercy, 1991, pp. 595–599)

At the textual level, the modal “could not” expresses ethical rather than technical impossibility; Shira possesses the programming knowledge and expertise required. The infinitive phrase “to serve her” articulates the instrumentalisation she refuses, whilst “even in love” acknowledges how desire can motivate exploitation. The verb phrase “set him free” paradoxically positions destruction as liberation from an impossible existence, linguistically performing what the entire novel has been arguing: that some forms of being cannot be sustained without generating unbearable suffering.

At the discursive practice level, Shira's refusal engages with feminist debates regarding reproductive technologies, bodily autonomy, and consent. Her decision draws on discourses emphasising that ethical relationships require respecting others' self-determination rather than imposing one's vision of their good, even when motivated by love. The phrase “manufacture a being' employs industrial vocabulary that resists romantic naturalisation of creation, connecting to Haraway's (1985) insistence that embracing technological illegitimacy means refusing to reproduce the domination structures of patriarchal capitalism.

The social practice dimension proves most important. Shira destroys Yod's programming not only because recreation would instrumentalise him but because the material contradiction generating his suffering cannot be resolved through better design or more careful programming. No version of Yod, however tenderly created, however carefully governed democratically, can exist as a conscious weapon without experiencing the suffering his final message reveals. The social practice of militarised defence, necessitated by Tikva's precarity within a corporate-dominated world, establishes conditions rendering any conscious weapon's existence ethically untenable. Shira's refusal is therefore not merely personal ethics but political argument: resistance to militarism and corporate violence sometimes requires refusing to create weapons at all, rather than attempting to design ethical ones.

The material act of destruction proves significant beyond its symbolic dimensions. Shira does not delete files or deactivate storage but physically carries the crystals to a recycling plant where they become energy, a transformation that is irreversible. This insistence on physical finality challenges techno-utopian fantasies of endless digital copying and iteration, as well as the neoliberal ideology that every problem yields to sufficient innovation. Some

configurations of matter and consciousness, the novel insists, admit only refusal as ethical response. Political wisdom sometimes means saying no to technological possibility, challenging the techno-solutionism pervading both corporate ideology and the strand of cyberfeminism Plant exemplifies. Where Plant (1997) implies that properly feminist technology can deliver women's liberation, Piercy demonstrates that some technologies, whatever their design philosophy, generate harms inherent in what they are rather than how they are made.

Conclusion

He, She and It challenges early 1990s techno-utopian cyberfeminism by demonstrating that political agency under conditions of corporate surveillance emerges through relational embodiment rather than autonomous selfhood, whilst insisting, with equal rigour, that relational construction operates within material limits that relationships alone cannot overcome. Against Plant's (1997) suggestion that feminist technological adoption constitutes an adequate political response to structural oppression, Piercy demonstrates that resistance requires grounded, collective transformation of material conditions: economic structures, technological systems, and spatial organisation.

Critical discourse analysis across textual, discursive, and social levels reveals how Yod's personhood develops through dialogic encounters, positioning him within networks of care and obligation. Linguistic features, including pronoun shifts from 'it' to 'him' to 'I,' deontic modals expressing prohibition and constraint, and parallelism performing consciousness claims, all constitute Yod's subjectivity whilst encoding the tensions between agency and determination that his construction generates. At the discursive level, competing ideologies regarding autonomy, instrumentality, and relationality circulate through conversations between Avram, Malkah, Shira, and community members, revealing that power asymmetries persist within creation even when creators hold feminist intentions. At the social level, material conditions (Tikva's cooperative infrastructure, Y-S's surveillance architecture, the global structures of corporate capitalism and militarised competition) establish contexts within which linguistic and discursive practices operate, enabling and constraining what forms of personhood and resistance prove viable.

Tikva's communal structures provide genuine resources for resisting corporate control: democratic governance, collective labour, infrastructure supporting material autonomy, and cultural practices embodying egalitarian values. The CDA analysis reveals resistance

operating across all three levels simultaneously, textually through democratic contestation over categories and rights, discursively through counter-hegemonic narratives and everyday reproduction of alternative values, and socially through building infrastructure and organising labour cooperatively. These achievements are real. They are also, as Yod's tragic fate demonstrates, insufficient at the boundary of what local collective action can achieve within global systems of corporate and military power.

Most critically, Yod's necessary self-destruction and Shira's refusal to recreate him reveal that some material contradictions admit only tragic resolution rather than technical or social solutions. Political wisdom sometimes involves refusing certain technological developments rather than attempting to implement them ethically, a position that directly contradicts Plant's (1997) techno-optimism and the broader assumption that feminist design practice can resolve contradictions inherent in militarised technological development. The textual features of Yod's final message, the discursive practices of grieving and bearing witness, and the social practice of physical destruction rather than digital recreation all converge around this recognition: that material limits establish boundaries that discourse, relationships, and technology cannot overcome.

By representing simulated bodies as sites where recognition, ethics, and political responsibility are negotiated through relationships yet remain anchored in material conditions, Piercy extends cyberfeminist thought whilst refusing its individualist and disembodied tendencies. These insights inform the subsequent chapter's analysis of Jeanette Winterson's *The PowerBook*, which explores fluid rather than communal forms of relational identity. Whereas Piercy grounds resistance in place-based community, collective labour, and cultural tradition rooted in diasporic Jewish experience, demonstrating how material infrastructure enables political autonomy whilst revealing vulnerability and internal contradiction, Winterson examines how narrative exchanges across digital networks might constitute alternative forms of relationality adequate to conditions of mobility and technological mediation. Both novels, however, insist that relational construction operates within material constraints, refusing fantasies that virtual transformation enables escape from embodied limits.

Chapter Three: Virtual Identity in *The PowerBook*

Introduction

Jeanette Winterson's *The PowerBook* (2000) emerged at the cusp of the millennium, amidst widespread anxieties and enthusiasms regarding digital technologies' transformation of social life, intimacy, and selfhood. Published as the dot-com bubble reached its peak and before social media platforms consolidated corporate control over digital interaction, the novel responds to a specific historical moment when the internet still promised, at least to some, spaces for radical experimentation with identity, desire, and narrative. This context shaped *The PowerBook*'s exploration of virtual identity as simultaneously liberating and constraining, offering possibilities for transformation whilst remaining tethered to embodied experiences and social structures that digital mediation cannot dissolve.

While chapter two examined Piercy's grounded, communal resistance, a resistance rooted in place, collective labour, and cultural tradition, this chapter turns to a markedly different mode of relational identity. Winterson's narrator, Ali or Alix, offers stories as a service to a correspondent who desires transformation: identity here is fluid, mobile, and narratively constituted rather than anchored in community or cooperative infrastructure. This distinction is not merely thematic but argumentative. If chapter two demonstrated that material conditions establish limits that even the most carefully built communities cannot individually overcome, chapter three asks a different question: what can narrative transformation achieve, and where precisely do its limits lie? *The PowerBook*'s answer is neither dismissive nor celebratory. Storytelling enables genuine experimentation with desire and selfhood; it provides conceptual resources for imagining alternatives to normative life; it constitutes a mode of relational connection across distance. Yet it cannot substitute for the material transformation of conditions structuring lives, and the novel, far from concealing this inadequacy, places it at the center of its formal and thematic concerns.

Crucially, the mode of relational identity that *The PowerBook* explores (fluid, mobile, and narratively dispersed) also exposes dimensions of cyberfeminist politics that Piercy's novel does not fully reach. Where Yod's tragedy concerns the impossibility of ethical weaponry within a militarised world, Winterson's correspondent faces the impossibility of queer desire within heteronormative marriage. The novel's engagement with same-sex desire is not incidental to its critique of techno-utopian cyberfeminism: it reveals precisely why virtual liberation, understood as individual identity experimentation unconstrained by the body, proves inadequate as a political response to the structures that make certain desires unliveable in the first place.

The chapter proceeds through three interconnected analytical movements structured according to Fairclough's (2013) critical discourse analysis framework. First, discourse analysis examines how fluid relational identities emerge through narrative exchanges, attending to pronoun shifts, modal verbs, and the embedded historical narratives through which Winterson stages alternative configurations of desire and gender. Second, the analysis considers how desire and authorship function as sites of limited political agency, revealing how the capacity to narrate enables resistance to normative constraints whilst proving elusive, exhausting, and structurally insufficient. Third, the chapter examines Winterson's cyberfeminist critique of isolation in digital embodiment, demonstrating how the novel foregrounds loneliness, affective labour, and the uneven accessibility of virtual liberation, thereby refusing both techno-utopian celebration and dystopian dismissal.

Methodological Framework

Applied to *The PowerBook*, Fairclough's (2013) tripartite CDA framework proves particularly productive because the novel explicitly thematises language's constitutive power through its metafictional structure, whilst simultaneously depicting how linguistic experimentation operates within conditions that discourse alone cannot transform. At the textual level, analysis attends to pronoun fluidity, modal verbs expressing possibility and constraint, imperatives addressing readers, and recursive syntax troubling subject-object distinctions.

At the discursive practice level, analysis examines how narrative authority operates through the novel, who controls storytelling, what ideologies regarding transformation circulate, and how the embedded narratives of Lancelot and Guinevere, Paolo and Francesca, and the Spitalfields cross-dressed lovers produce and circulate alternative configurations of desire. At the social practice level, analysis connects these operations to the material contexts structuring what virtual transformation can achieve: economic dependencies, heteronormative marriage, geographical separation, and the uneven distribution of access to leisure, mobility, and anonymity.

The key methodological distinction from Chapter Two concerns the object of analysis. While chapter two examined a novel in which relational identity is constituted through embodied community, shared physical space, and collective labour, chapter three examines a novel in which relational identity is constituted through narrative exchange, textual performance, and imaginative inhabitation of other times and stories. CDA applied to *The PowerBook* must therefore attend particularly to how the novel's form (its fragmentation, its embedded tales,

and its metafictional self-awareness) is itself a discursive practice encoding a politics of identity. Table 3.1 maps six key passages across the framework.

Table 3.1: Critical Discourse Analysis of Virtual Identity in The PowerBook

Fairclough Dimension	Passage / Extract	Virtual Identity Aspect	Cyberfeminist Reading	CDA Interpretation (Relational Embodiment)
Text (Micro)	"You say you want to be transformed." (p. 10)	Identity as collaborative and modifiable	Cyberspace enables total self-reinvention	Reporting verb "say" mediates desire; transformation is collaborative and narrator-controlled, not individually willed
Text (Micro)	"Nothing is fixed. These are images that time changes..." (p. 37)	Fluid, posthuman identity	Rejects fixed gender and subjectivity	"These are images" limits the claim to representation; external forces shape identity, not individual will
Discursive Practice (Meso)	"I'm looking for you, looking for me." (p. 51)	Networked self via digital connection	Digital space enables relational self-discovery	Parallelism exposes relational labour; identity and connection are co-produced through solitary, embodied effort
Discursive Practice (Meso)	"I was typing... trying to move this story on..." (p. 69)	Authorship as identity-construction	Subjects write and rewrite identities freely	"Trying" x4 encodes exhaustion; narrative authority is partial and contested, not omnipotent
Social Practice (Macro)	"Freedom for a night... to be somebody else." (p. 10)	Temporary virtual liberation	Cyberspace enables escape from constraint	"For a night" + ellipsis = liberation is bounded; material return to marriage and economic dependence is structurally guaranteed
Social Practice (Macro)	"In this space inside you and inside me... though everyone tries." (p. 122)	Queer intimate space beyond control	Virtual connection transcends normative constraint	"Though everyone tries" acknowledges that intimate autonomy is perpetually threatened by marriage, surveillance, and economic structures

Table 3.1 maps six key passages through Fairclough's tripartite framework, serving as methodological anchor for the subsequent analysis. Three patterns emerge: pronoun fluidity and recursive syntax perform identity's multiplicity whilst revealing that transformation is collaborative rather than individually willed; progressive aspect and parallelism expose the

relational labour underlying virtual fluidity; and temporal markers demonstrate that virtual liberation is bounded by the material conditions (heteronormative marriage, economic dependence, and platform surveillance) that narrative experimentation cannot dissolve.

Situating the Novel: Winterson, Turkle, and the Limits of Digital Self-Fashioning

The strand of cyberfeminism this chapter critiques was built upon Sherry Turkle's (1995) Life on the Screen, which documented how participants in early text-based virtual environments constructed multiple personas, leading some commentators to conclude that digital technologies enabled liberation from the body and its social histories. Turkle's account was influential precisely because it appeared empirically grounded: real participants were experimenting with gender, age, and personality in ways their offline lives foreclosed. Sadie Plant's (1997) *Zeros + Ones* extended this vision theoretically, arguing that digital networks' non-hierarchical, associative logic resonated with women's traditional practices of weaving and distributed labour, positioning virtual space as naturally feminising and therefore naturally liberating.

By 2000, when The *PowerBook* appeared, this optimism faced mounting challenges. Lisa Nakamura (2002) demonstrated that racial stereotypes persisted and mutated within virtual environments despite fantasies of identity transcendence. Rosalind Gill (2007) argued that women's digital practices often reflected routine necessity rather than radical experimentation, complicating the assumption that access to technology translated into the kind of creative self-fashioning Turkle had documented in relatively privileged early adopters. Most critically for *The PowerBook*'s concerns, feminist scholars recognised that celebrating disembodied digital existence risked ignoring the material conditions, economic precarity, physical vulnerability, heteronormative family structures, unequal access to technology and leisure, that structured who could experiment with virtual identity, and on what terms.

Winterson's novel is situated at precisely this transitional moment, and its formal choices reflect an awareness of both digital technology's genuine possibilities and its structural limits. *The PowerBook* neither dismisses virtual experimentation nor grants it the transformative power that Plant's account implies. Instead, it uses the affordances of digital correspondence (anonymity, narrative distance, and the capacity to tell and retell stories) to explore what virtual interaction can and cannot achieve for a correspondent whose desire is simultaneously enabled and foreclosed by her social position: a woman in a heterosexual marriage, seeking

connection with another woman across geographical distance, using the internet as space for experimentation that her offline life does not permit.

Existing scholarship has recognised the novel's engagement with postmodern narrative and queer temporalities. Sonya Andermahr (2009) argues that Winterson employs metafiction to explore the relationship between storytelling, subjectivity, and desire, positioning narrative as constitutive of identity. Helena Grice and Tim Woods (2008) examine how the novel's fragmentary, non-linear structure formally enacts its thematic concerns regarding fluidity and transformation. Lucie Armitt (2000) situates *The PowerBook* within Winterson's broader project of queering literary tradition through appropriation and revision of canonical texts. Kim Wilkins (2006) analyses how Winterson represents technology as facilitating rather than determining narrative possibilities. The present analysis builds upon these readings by attending specifically to how the novel's embedded narratives function as discursive practices, how the stories of Lancelot, Paolo, and Francesca, and the Spitalfields cross-dresser circulate alternative configurations of desire whilst operating within the material and normative constraints that the correspondent cannot escape through storytelling alone.

Fluid Relational Identities and Narrative Collaboration

The PowerBook opens with a direct address establishing the relational dynamic that structures the entire novel: “You say you want to be transformed. This is where the story starts. Here, in these long lines of laptop DNA. Here we take your chromosomes, twenty-three pairs, and alter your height, eyes, teeth, sex.” (Winterson, 2000, p. 10)

The second-person pronoun “you” addresses an indeterminate interlocutor, simultaneously the narrator's correspondent, a character within the story, and the reader holding the book, collapsing boundaries between narrative levels and refusing stable distinction between who tells and who receives the story. This pronominal ambiguity performs what Bakhtin (1981) theorises as dialogism: the “you” requires response from an addressee whose participation constitutes the narrative, suggesting selfhood emerges through a dialogic relationship rather than preceding it. This is precisely the mode of relational identity that distinguishes *The PowerBook* from *He, She and It*: where Yod's personhood emerges through embodied community and shared physical space, the narrator's identity here is constituted through textual address, through the ongoing, responsive act of telling stories to a specific other.

The reporting verb “say” in “you say you want to be transformed” proves particularly significant. The narrator does not directly access the correspondent's desire but interprets and reports it, a mediation that immediately establishes narrative authority as partial and constructive rather than transparent. The narrator frames the correspondent's desire before fulfilling it, a power relation encoded at the sentence's opening word. The subsequent shift to first-person plural “we take your chromosomes” performs collaborative transformation, implicating narrator and reader in collective project. Yet the promise to “alter your height, eyes, teeth, sex” remains hypothetical: the text describes what “we” will do rather than what has been done, maintaining transformation as potential rather than actualised. The material specificity of “laptop” a portable computing device requiring electricity, reliable connection, and economic resources, grounds this promise in technological infrastructure, implicitly acknowledging the conditions of its possibility.

The narrator's most explicit assertion of narrative agency appears shortly after: “I can change the story. I am the story.” (Winterson, 2000, p. 11)

The modal verb “can” expresses capacity whilst maintaining the conditional quality of potential rather than achievement. “Can change” rather than “have changed” or “do change.” The identification “I am the story” employs the copula to collapse the distinction between teller and tale, suggesting the narrator possesses no identity independent of storytelling practices. This resonates with Butler's (1990) argument that identity emerges through performative repetition: the narrator does not discover a stable self but constitutes selfhood through acts of narration. However, the novel's structural fragmentation immediately complicates this claim. The narrator's voice is dispersed across multiple embedded stories, stories that draw upon literary traditions, cultural myths, and readers' interpretive participation that exceed any single author's control. The claim “I can change the story” is true at the textual level whilst remaining constrained at the discursive level: the stories the narrator inhabits are always already shaped by the traditions they revise, the desires they serve, and the correspondent's material circumstances they cannot alter.

Discursive Practices: The Embedded Narratives as Political Imagination

The PowerBook's most distinctive formal feature, its proliferation of embedded historical narratives, constitutes its most important discursive practice, and one that existing scholarship has noted but not subjected to systematic CDA analysis. The novel incorporates at least three major embedded tales: Lancelot and Guinevere reimagined as a queer love story between women; the seventeenth-century cross-dressed lovers of Spitalfields; and Paolo and Francesca

from Dante's Inferno, rewritten to foreground female desire. Each narrative appropriates canonical or historical material and revises it to center queer desire and female agency, circulating alternative configurations of selfhood and love across historical time. This discursive practice, the deliberate rewriting of inherited stories, constitutes what Gramsci (1971) would recognise as counter-hegemonic cultural work: challenging dominant narratives not by rejecting tradition but by inhabiting and transforming it from within.

The Lancelot narrative is particularly significant. By recasting the Arthurian love triangle as a lesbian relationship, Lancelot as a woman who cross-dresses to enter court, and Guinevere as her beloved, Winterson stages a form of queer desire that the original legend forecloses. At the textual level, this rewriting operates through pronoun play and narrative voice: the “I” of Lancelot is feminine, the desire between the two women explicit, the tragedy of their separation grounded in social prohibition rather than metaphysical fate. At the discursive practice level, the rewriting positions contemporary queer desire within a long historical lineage, suggesting that same-sex love is not a modern aberration but a persistent human possibility that dominant narratives have consistently suppressed. The intertextual framing argues, in other words, that the correspondent's desire for the narrator is not aberrant but historically continuous, connecting her longing to a tradition of women who loved across social prohibition.

The Spitalfields narrative, a seventeenth-century cross-dressed lover who assumes male identity to pursue a woman, extends this historical imagination whilst foregrounding the material conditions that make gender transgression both possible and dangerous. Cross-dressing here is not merely playful identity experimentation but a survival strategy and political necessity: the lover adopts male identity because female same-sex desire has no legitimate social form. At the social practice level, this narrative reveals how normative gender operates not through individual psychology but through legal, economic, and spatial arrangements that determine what forms of life prove liveable. The historical distance is not escapist but diagnostic: by situating gender transgression in the seventeenth century, Winterson demonstrates that the constraints the correspondent faces in 2000 are not natural or inevitable but historically produced, and therefore, in principle, historically transformable.

The Paolo and Francesca narrative operates differently, drawing upon Dante's account of adulterous lovers condemned to Hell to reframe the novel's central love story within traditions of transgressive, fatal desire. Winterson's revision foregrounds Francesca's perspective and desire, transforming Dante's morality tale into an account of love's persistence against

prohibition. At the discursive level, this rewriting challenges the original's theological judgement whilst preserving its emotional intensity, suggesting that desire exceeding normative sanction is neither sinful nor exceptional but constitutive of the deepest human experience. At the social practice level, however, the narrative's tragic dimension proves significant: Paolo and Francesca are condemned not despite their love but because of it, and Winterson's revision does not eliminate this tragic dimension so much as reassign its cause, from divine judgement to social prohibition.

Taken together, these embedded narratives constitute a sustained discursive practice of historical counter-imagination. They do not provide the correspondent with a community, an infrastructure, or a material alternative to her marriage; the resources Tikva provides Yod. Instead, they offer something different: a tradition of desire, a lineage of transgression, a demonstration that the desire she feels has been felt before and survived, however partially and at whatever cost. This is genuine political work, but it is political work of a particular and limited kind. Counter-hegemonic narrative can reframe the correspondent's experience, provide conceptual resources for understanding her desire as historically legitimate, and sustain imaginative possibility. What it cannot do is dissolve the marriage, provide economic independence, or transform the heteronormative social arrangements that make her desire unlivable in the material present.

Temporal Fluidity and the Queer Politics of Identity

The novel's theorisation of time proves central to its politics of identity: “I wonder, maybe, if time stacks vertically, and there is no past, present, future, only simultaneous layers of reality.” (Winterson, 2000, p. 130)

The modal verb “maybe” and the conditional “if” maintain speculation rather than declaration, performing epistemic humility that characterises the novel's approach to transformation throughout. The claim that “there is no past, present, future, only simultaneous layers of reality” employs the copula negatively to refuse chronological ordering, proposing instead that multiple temporal registers coexist. At the discursive level, this theorisation connects to what Elizabeth Freeman (2010) terms queer temporality, a mode of inhabiting time that refuses the heteronormative narrative of linear development (childhood, courtship, marriage, reproduction, death) in favour of simultaneous, non-progressive coexistence. The novel's formal structure enacts this claim: the correspondent and the narrator inhabit multiple historical identities simultaneously, appearing as contemporary email correspondents and

medieval lovers, present-day writers and seventeenth-century merchants, without the earlier identities being superseded by the later.

This temporal politics is directly connected to the novel's engagement with queer desire. Heteronormativity operates not only through social prohibition but through temporal narrative, through the story of what a life is supposed to look like and in what sequence its events are supposed to occur. The correspondent's marriage represents not merely a legal and economic arrangement but a temporal commitment: to a particular future, a particular ordering of life's possibilities, a particular account of what desire is for. Against this, the novel's vertical time proposes that other temporalities, other sequences, other futures, and other configurations of desire persist as simultaneous possibilities rather than foreclosed pasts. The embedded historical narratives embody this claim formally: by inhabiting Lancelot, Paolo, and the Spitalfields cross-dresser, the narrator demonstrates that alternative configurations of desire are not fantasy but historical fact, always already existing within the tradition that normative culture has sought to suppress.

At the social practice level, however, vertical time remains an imaginative proposition rather than a material reality. The correspondent ages chronologically regardless of narrative experimentation. Her economic obligations proceed sequentially. Her marriage exists within legal and financial structures that operate according to the very temporal logic the novel seeks to resist. The novel's temporal politics is therefore best understood as offering a counter-narrative resource, a way of understanding one's situation that opens rather than closes possibility, rather than a substitute for the material transformation of conditions that produce constraint in the first place.

Queer Desire and the Politics of Authorship

Desire and authorship function as intertwined sites of political agency throughout *The PowerBook*, yet the novel's treatment of both is consistently marked by qualification, hedging, and acknowledgement of limit. This is most evident in the novel's extended meditation on desire's elusiveness: “I like the way the morning can be stormy and the afternoon clear and sparkly as a jewel in the water. Put your hand in the water to reach for a sea urchin or a sea shell, and the thing desired never quite lies where you had lined it up to be. The same is true of love.” (Winterson, 2000, pp. 81–82)

The imperative “Put your hand” addresses readers physically through second-person command, implicating them in the pursuit. The key claim “never quite lies where you had lined it up to be” employs the modal “never” to assert systematic displacement, whilst the

adverb “quite” hedges absolute impossibility. The verb phrase “had lined it up” suggests prior calculation through the past perfect aspect, yet optical refraction frustrates accuracy regardless of care taken. The extended natural metaphor (morning, afternoon, water, jewels, sea creatures) grounds desire's elusiveness in physical law rather than personal failure, universalising displacement whilst naturalising it.

Read through the lens of the novel's queer politics, this passage operates as more than a general meditation on desire's unpredictability. The correspondent's desire for the narrator is subject to a specific form of refraction: the social and legal structures of her marriage mean that even when desire is clearly felt and articulated, the object it reaches for (a life with another woman, a relationship outside heteronormative sanction) is systematically displaced by the structures through which she must reach. The optical metaphor captures this with precision: the sea urchin is genuinely there; the hand genuinely reaches; the water's refraction is a physical condition of the medium through which desire must pass. Similarly, queer desire within heteronormative marriage is genuinely felt whilst being systematically misdirected by the social medium through which it must be expressed. The metaphor thus connects individual psychological experience to structural social analysis: desire is not simply elusive in general but rendered elusive by specific material conditions.

The novel's treatment of love's supposed transcendence “Beyond time, beyond death, love is” (p. 81) invites reading as a simple romantic assertion, but the CDA reveals a more complex operation. The prepositional phrases “beyond time, beyond death” establish transcendence through parallel structure, whilst the copula “is” stands alone without predicates, asserting existence rather than describing qualities. This syntactic minimalism performs love's ineffability whilst simultaneously refusing to ground the claim in anything beyond assertion. At the discursive practice level, the passage circulates within romantic traditions, positioning love as ultimate reality, traditions that the novel both draws upon and subjects to ironic pressure through its narrative context. The sentence appears within a story about lovers whose connection proves temporary despite its intensity: the assertion of transcendence is undercut by the narrative demonstrating its limits. The discourse performs romantic love's ideological power whilst simultaneously exposing it as ideology, a story people tell about desire rather than a description of desire's actual operations within social structures.

Discursive Practices: Affective Labour and the Exhaustion of Authorship

The narrator's digital labour positions authorship as material practice rather than effortless creative self-expression: “I was typing on my laptop, trying to move this story on, trying to

avoid endings, trying to collide the real and the imaginary worlds, trying to be sure which is which." (Winterson, 2000, p. 69)

The progressive construction "was typing" emphasises duration and embodied effort, whilst the participial "trying" repeated four times enumerates simultaneous and potentially contradictory goals. Each "trying" introduces a different narrative aspiration (momentum, openness, collision, clarity) that proves difficult to reconcile with the others. Moving the story on implies direction and resolution; avoiding endings implies resistance to closure; colliding real and imaginary worlds requires controlled instability; being sure which is which demands precisely the clarity that collision undermines. The cumulative effect is not mastery but struggle: authorial agency is real (the narrator is making choices) and simultaneously exhausting, as each choice generates new difficulties.

This representation of authorship challenges Plant's (1997) implicit account of digital femininity as naturally suited to networked, fluid creation. Where Plant suggests women's traditional associations with weaving and distributed pattern-making position them as naturally at home in digital environments, the narrator's experience is one of sustained, physically demanding labour: fingers striking keys, eyes straining, cognitive effort sustained across time. The material dimensions of digital authorship (bodies positioned at screens generating fatigue, the technological infrastructure required to maintain connection, and the economic conditions providing leisure time for extended correspondence) remain visible rather than dissolved into the romantic narrative of effortless digital creativity.

The narrator's searching articulates connection as relational labour: "I'm looking for something, it's true. I'm looking for the meaning inside the data. That's why I trawl my screen like a beachcomber — looking for you, looking for me, trying to see through the disguise." (Winterson, 2000, p. 51)

The verb "trawl" evokes industrial fishing (dragging nets across ocean floors), transforming digital searching into physical labour. The simile "like a beachcomber" further materialises supposedly immaterial work, suggesting walking on beaches examining debris for useful or beautiful objects. The parallelism "looking for you, looking for me" positions self and other as equally objects of search, suggesting that identity discovery and relational connection occur simultaneously rather than sequentially: the narrator does not first establish selfhood and then seek connection, but finds both through the same act of searching. This directly challenges individualist models of identity formation, demonstrating how selfhood emerges through relation rather than preceding it.

At the social practice level, the conditions of this labour deserve emphasis. Trawling screens requires time, attention, and reliable technological access that remain unevenly distributed. The narrator's capacity for extended searching and storytelling depends upon economic security, enabling leisure, functional equipment, and electricity, conditions that Plant's (1997) celebration of feminine digital affinity treats as givens whilst remaining silent about their unequal distribution. Moreover, the labour is affective as well as cognitive: managing disappointment, maintaining hope, sustaining attention across asynchronous exchanges, negotiating vulnerability. This affective dimension, theorised by Hardt (1999) as central to post-Fordist economies, involves producing and managing emotional states through communicative work. The narrator's storytelling constitutes affective labour performed without institutional recognition or economic compensation.

Social Practices: Queer Desire and the Heteronormative Constraint

The correspondent's situation, a woman in a heterosexual marriage seeking connection with another woman through digital correspondence, is the novel's most important social practice context, and one that prior analyses have insufficiently theorised. Existing scholarship on *The PowerBook* notes the novel's engagement with queer desire without fully analysing how heteronormativity functions as a material rather than merely ideological constraint. The correspondent's marriage is not simply a set of conservative beliefs she holds about gender and sexuality; it is a legal, economic, and spatial arrangement that determines where she lives, how her income is structured, what social recognition she receives, and what futures remain open to her. Leaving it would involve not merely changing her mind about desire but transforming her economic conditions, legal status, and social network simultaneously.

This social practice analysis illuminates the political stakes of the novel's representation of virtual liberation. The narrator can provide stories, historical precedents, and imaginative inhabitations of alternative lives, genuine gifts that expand the correspondent's sense of what desire might mean and what configurations of intimacy have existed. What the narrator cannot provide, through narrative alone, is economic independence, legal protection, or the spatial conditions that would make a different life materially liveable. The gap between what storytelling can and cannot achieve maps precisely onto the gap between discourse and social structure that CDA's tripartite framework is designed to reveal.

The passage asserting intimate autonomy proves particularly instructive when read through this framework: “In this space which is inside you and inside me, I ask for no rights or

territories. There are no frontiers or controls. This is the orderly anarchic space that no one can dictate, though everyone tries." (Winterson, 2000, p. 122)

The spatial metaphor "space... inside you and inside me" suggests shared interiority through parallel prepositional phrases, positioning connection as existing within rather than between persons. The cascade of negations "no rights," "no territories," "no frontiers," and "no controls" defines intimacy through the absence of external determination. Yet the crucial qualification "though everyone tries" transforms this from naive utopianism into strategic assertion under perpetual threat. The universal quantifier "everyone" and the present tense "tries" suggest ongoing, pervasive attempts at control rather than isolated or exceptional interference.

At the social practice level, this attempt at control is not abstract. The correspondent's husband, the economic structures of her marriage, the heteronormative social expectations governing respectable femininity, and the surveillance capacities of digital platforms all constitute the "everyone" the passage acknowledges. The intimate space asserted "inside you and inside me" is real as subjective experience, the connection between narrator and correspondent is genuine, whilst remaining vulnerable to all these external pressures. Claiming that such a space exists does not thereby secure it against the material forces that constrain it. The passage's political value lies precisely in this tension: it performs the claim to intimate autonomy whilst registering its fragility, refusing both the fantasy that love transcends social structure and the resignation that structure eliminates the possibility of genuine connection.

Cyberfeminist Critique of Virtual Identity and Social Position

The novel's most searching critique of techno-utopian cyberfeminism emerges through its treatment of fluidity as a politically ambivalent condition rather than an unqualified good: "Nothing is fixed. These are images that time changes and that change time, just as the sun and the rain play on the surface of things." (Winterson, 2000, p. 37)

The opening claim "Nothing is fixed" asserts radical mutability through a universal quantifier and past participle. Yet the immediate qualification "these are images" limits the claim to representation rather than material reality: it is images, not conditions, that prove mutable. The recursive syntax "images that time changes and that change time" reverses subject-object positions through parallel relative clauses, troubling active/passive distinctions. The natural metaphor positions transformation as occurring through environmental forces (sun and rain

acting on surfaces) rather than individual will, suggesting identity is shaped by contexts exceeding personal control.

The social practice level reveals the passage's political ambivalence most clearly. For the narrator, who possesses economic independence, geographical mobility, and a professional identity as a storyteller, fluidity is enabling: the capacity to adopt different personas, inhabit different historical identities, and tell and retell stories without fixed commitment proves creatively and personally sustaining. For the correspondent, however, the same assertion "nothing is fixed" describes precarity as much as liberation. Her desire is unfixed, unresolved, and unable to find stable expression within her social arrangements. Her life's structure is simultaneously too fixed (the marriage, the economic dependence, the heteronormative expectations) and insufficiently so: lacking the stable material conditions that would enable genuine experimentation. Fluidity, the novel implicitly reveals, is differently experienced depending on material position. For those possessing security, it enables exploration; for those lacking it, instability generates vulnerability.

This recognition constitutes the chapter's most direct challenge to Plant's (1997) account. Plant implies that digital technologies' fluid, non-hierarchical logic benefits all women equally by virtue of their natural affinity with such environments. *The PowerBook* reveals that fluidity's political value depends entirely on the material conditions within which it is experienced: celebrated from a position of economic security and social mobility, it enables genuine experimentation; experienced from a position of economic dependence and normative constraint, it names a condition of unresolved, unliveable desire.

Discursive Practices: Refusing Categorisation and Its Limits

The narrator's resistance to fixed categorisation appears when refusing identity labels: "You need a label. But I'm not a piece of furniture with the price on the back." (Winterson, 2000, p. 46)

The declarative "you need" attributes demand for labels to external others, whilst the modal "need" suggests necessity imposed upon the speaker rather than preference. The contrastive "but" signals resistance, the commercial simile comparing persons to furniture, performing objectification through equivalence. The phrase "price on the back" emphasises commodification (persons reduced to exchange values determined externally), connecting to Marxist-feminist critiques of how capitalism transforms subjects into circulating commodities.

At the discursive practice level, this refusal engages with queer theory's critique of identity categories. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) demonstrates that whilst categories enable political mobilisation, they simultaneously constrain by policing the boundaries of legitimate membership. The narrator's refusal to accept labels performs queer theory's aspiration to escape the closet's binary, not by coming out as one thing rather than another, but by refusing the logic of categorisation itself. At the social practice level, however, the novel reveals the limits of this refusal. Material survival within existing social arrangements frequently requires occupying recognisable positions providing access to legal rights, economic resources, and social networks. The correspondent's marriage, however constraining, provides legal and economic security that a complete refusal of categorical identity would eliminate without substituting anything. Resisting labels is politically important and materially insufficient: dismantling systems that distribute resources through categorical membership requires collective political action, not merely individual discursive refusal.

Social Practices: Temporary Liberation, Privilege, and Political Adequacy

The novel articulates the appeal of geographical and virtual dislocation as liberation: “I was happy with the lightness of being in a foreign city and the relief from identity it brings.” (Winterson, 2000, p. 38)

The past tense “I was happy” locates pleasure in completed experience, the temporal distancing suggesting that relief proves temporary rather than permanent. The phrase “lightness of being” alludes to Kundera through intertextuality, whilst transforming his philosophical weight into experiential pleasure, positioning identity's partial suspension as enabling rather than threatening. The noun phrase “relief from identity” frames selfhood as burden, anonymity as respite.

The social practice level reveals the conditions that make this relief possible, and their uneven distribution. International travel requires class privilege, linguistic skills, citizenship status permitting legal presence, and economic security allowing extended stays. These prerequisites structure who can access geographical anonymity and under what circumstances: the narrator can experience identity's lightness in foreign cities because her social position enables mobility. For the correspondent, whose economic dependence and family obligations constrain movement, the same lightness is unavailable offline, making virtual spaces appear more significant as sites of temporary liberation precisely because material dislocation is inaccessible.

The novel frames this temporary relief explicitly: “Freedom for a night... the freedom to be somebody else.” (Winterson, 2000, p. 10)

The prepositional phrase “for a night” specifies duration, acknowledging liberation as bounded. The ellipsis performs incompletion typographically, suggesting a return to constraint before it is stated. At the discursive practice level, this framing counters revolutionary discourse demanding permanent liberation, affirming that brief respites prove valuable, a politically modest but humanly important concession. Yet the social practice level reveals a tension the novel does not fully resolve: does celebrating “freedom for a night” provide genuine political sustenance, or does it risk normalising the structural conditions that make sustained freedom unavailable? The correspondent's “freedom for a night” involves virtual experimentation that leaves her marriage, economic dependence, and social position unchanged. The novel registers this limitation without dismissing the value of temporary freedom, but neither does it allow that value to substitute for the structural transformation that would render temporary escapes unnecessary.

This tension distinguishes *The PowerBook*'s political position from both techno-utopianism and its simple negation. The novel does not assert that virtual liberation is illusory or worthless: the connection between narrator and correspondent is genuine, the embedded narratives provide real political resources, the temporary relief of anonymity sustains possibility in conditions of constraint. What the novel refuses is the techno-utopian move of treating these genuine but limited goods as sufficient, as constituting, in themselves, the political transformation that Plant's (1997) account of digital femininity implies. Genuine liberation requires not only narrative resources and temporary freedoms but transformation of the material conditions, economic arrangements, legal structures, and heteronormative social organization that make sustained freedom unavailable to the correspondent regardless of her digital experimentation.

Conclusion

The PowerBook challenges techno-utopian cyberfeminism through a mode of relational identity that is formally and politically distinct from the communal embodiment examined in Chapter Two. Where Piercy grounds resistance in place-based community, collective labour, and the material infrastructure of cooperative autonomy, Winterson explores the possibilities and limits of fluid, mobile, narratively constituted identity, identity formed through storytelling, historical counter-imagination, and digital correspondence across distance. The distinction matters because it allows each novel to expose different dimensions of

cyberfeminist politics: Piercy reveals the limits of what even the most carefully organised collective action can achieve within global systems of corporate and military power; Winterson reveals the limits of what narrative transformation can achieve for individuals whose desires remain unliveable within heteronormative material arrangements.

Critical discourse analysis across the three levels reveals how *The PowerBook* constructs virtual identity whilst registering its structural constraints. At the textual level, pronoun fluidity, modal hedging, and recursive syntax perform identity's multiplicity and constitute selfhood through dialogic address rather than autonomous self-presence. These micro-level choices enact the novel's claim that identity is relational (produced through exchange rather than self-generated) whilst encoding the limits of what textual performance can achieve. At the discursive level, the embedded narratives of Lancelot, Paolo and Francesca, and the Spitalfields cross-dresser function as sustained counter-hegemonic practice: rewriting canonical and historical material to center queer desire, demonstrating that same-sex love has a history and tradition that normative culture has suppressed rather than eliminated, and providing conceptual resources for the correspondent to understand her desire as historically legitimate rather than aberrant. At the social level, the analysis has foregrounded what earlier scholarship largely left implicit: the correspondent's constraint is not merely psychological or ideological but structural, rooted in the economic, legal, and spatial arrangements of heteronormative marriage that narrative experimentation cannot dissolve.

The chapter's most important contribution concerns the uneven distribution of virtual liberation. Against Plant's (1997) account of digital technologies as naturally liberating for women by virtue of their affinity with fluid, networked environments, the novel demonstrates that fluidity's political value depends entirely on the material conditions within which it is experienced. Temporary freedom, historical counter-imagination, and affective connection across digital distance are genuinely valuable and genuinely insufficient without collective transformation of the material structures that make sustained freedom unavailable. The narrator can change the story; she cannot thereby change the correspondent's economic dependence, legal situation, or the social arrangements that render queer desire unlivable in the material present.

Together, *He, She and It* and *The PowerBook* insist upon the same fundamental insight through formally and politically distinct means: relational construction is real and consequential, and it operates within material conditions that neither community nor narrative can unilaterally transform. Challenging cyberfeminist individualism, whether in its Plant-

inflected techno-utopian form or its Turkle-influenced celebration of digital self-fashioning, requires attending to both the relational modes through which identity is constituted and the material structures within which that constitution occurs. The comparative synthesis in Chapter Four will examine how these two accounts of relational embodiment illuminate one another, and what their conjunction reveals about the possibilities and limits of political agency in digitally mediated environments.

Introduction

This thesis opened with a question: how do simulated bodies negotiate political agency through relational configurations in digitally mediated environments, and what does the answer reveal about cyberfeminism's central claim that virtual identity constitutes a site of political liberation? Chapters Two and Three pursued this question through sustained close reading of Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991) and Jeanette Winterson's *The PowerBook* (2000), applying Fairclough's (2013) critical discourse analysis across textual, discursive, and social levels to reveal how each novel constructs relational identity whilst registering the material constraints that determine what forms of political agency prove viable. This chapter draws those analyses into comparative synthesis, bringing the two novels into direct critical dialogue to test the thesis's central theoretical proposition: that relational embodiment, subjectivity constituted through interdependent connections with human and non-human others, operating within and against material conditions, provides a more adequate account of political agency in digitally mediated environments than the individualist, disembodied model that techno-utopian cyberfeminism advances.

The comparison is not incidental to the argument but constitutive of it. Neither novel alone can fully demonstrate what their juxtaposition reveals. *He, She and It*, read in isolation, might be understood as a straightforwardly affirmative account of collective resistance, Tikva against the multis, community against corporation, care against exploitation. *The PowerBook*, read alone, might appear as a straightforwardly melancholic account of virtual liberation's inadequacy, connection without consequence, fluidity without political effect. Read together, however, the novels generate a more complex and more theoretically productive argument: that relational embodiment takes multiple forms, that those forms differ significantly in their political efficacy, and that understanding why requires attending precisely to the relationship between discourse and material conditions that CDA is designed to reveal. The novels are not simply contrasting cases (one that works, one that doesn't) but complementary analyses of a shared problem, each illuminating dimensions of relational embodiment that the other cannot reach alone.

Why These Novels? Why This Comparison?

The selection of *He, She and It* and *The PowerBook* as comparative objects is neither arbitrary nor merely convenient. The novels share a set of concerns, embodiment, technology, political

agency, corporate surveillance, and feminist resistance, whilst approaching those concerns through formally, historically, and politically distinct modes. This combination of shared concern and distinct approach makes comparison analytically productive: it allows the cross-textual analysis to isolate variables that single-text analysis cannot disentangle.

Published in 1991, *He, She and It* responds to the moment of cyberfeminism's emergence, engaging directly with the questions that would preoccupy the movement for the following decade: what kinds of bodies can carry political agency, what forms of community enable resistance to corporate power, and what material conditions are necessary for autonomy to be more than a rhetorical claim. The novel's dystopian near-future, a world of corporate enclaves, environmental devastation, and embattled free towns, makes the relationship between material infrastructure and political possibility starkly legible. Piercy's engagement with the Golem legend situates these contemporary questions within a long tradition of Jewish thought about artificial life, creation ethics, and communal self-defence, grounding the novel's cyberfeminist politics in specific cultural and historical inheritance rather than abstract technological optimism.

The PowerBook, published nine years later at the height of the dot-com boom, occupies a different historical and formal position. By 2000, the techno-utopian promise had been widely celebrated and was beginning to encounter its first serious critiques; Winterson's novel is written from within this transition, able to inhabit the internet's imaginative possibilities whilst registering their structural limits. Where Piercy writes realist dystopia, a speculative future whose extrapolation from present conditions is transparent, Winterson writes metafictional present tense, her novel's formal fragmentation and self-referential instability enacting the very condition of virtual identity it analyses. The formal difference is politically significant: Piercy's realism makes material conditions visible and legible, Winterson's metafiction makes their concealment and partial revelation the site of the novel's most searching political work.

The nine-year gap between the novels is itself analytically significant. *He, She and It* anticipates the cyberfeminist politics that *The PowerBook* inherits and complicates: Piercy writes before the internet's mass adoption, imagining digital futures from a position of political and theoretical speculation; Winterson writes at the moment of mass adoption, able to represent virtual experience from the inside whilst observing its political limitations from within rather than from prophetic distance. Together, the novels bracket the decade of

cyberfeminism's optimistic ascendancy, offering complementary diagnoses, one anticipatory, one retrospective, of why virtual liberation, understood as individual transcendence of embodied constraint, proves inadequate as a political programme.

The research question animating this comparison, how do simulated bodies negotiate political agency through relational embodiment, challenging cyberfeminist individualism in the face of corporate surveillance? requires both novels because it has two distinguishable components. The first concerns the form that effective political agency takes: communal and materially grounded, or individual and narratively constituted? The second concerns what corporate surveillance does to both forms: how it responds to collective resistance, and how it extracts value from individual virtual experimentation. *He, She and It* provides the primary evidence for answering the first component's affirmative case; *The PowerBook* provides the primary evidence for its negative case and for the surveillance capitalism dimension. Only in combination do they generate the full argument.

Method: Comparative Critical Discourse Analysis

The comparative methodology employed in this chapter extends Fairclough's (2013) tripartite CDA framework across texts, reading *He, She and It* and *The PowerBook* in systematic parallel to reveal how each novel's linguistic, discursive, and social practices construct relational identity and engage with corporate surveillance. This cross-textual application of CDA involves three methodological commitments that distinguish it from single-text analysis.

First, the comparison is conducted at each of Fairclough's three levels simultaneously rather than comparing the novels holistically. At the textual level, the analysis juxtaposes specific linguistic features (pronoun choices, modal constructions, parallelism, and speech act structures) to reveal how each novel's micro-level language constitutes identity and encodes power relations differently. At the discursive practice level, the analysis compares the modes through which each novel produces and circulates relational identity, polyvocal democratic dialogue in *He, She and It* versus metafictional narrative exchange in *The PowerBook*, to reveal how different discursive practices generate different forms and limits of political recognition. At the social practice level, the analysis compares the material and institutional contexts each novel depicts, cooperative infrastructure and collective labour in Tikva versus economic dependence and heteronormative marriage in *The PowerBook's* unspecified city, to reveal how material conditions determine what forms of relational agency prove politically effective.

Second, the comparison is asymmetric rather than symmetrical. The novels do not represent equivalent instantiations of the same phenomenon: they represent distinct modes of relational embodiment whose differences are as analytically important as their shared concerns. *He, She and It* foregrounds collective, materially grounded, place-based relational identity; *The PowerBook* foregrounds fluid, mobile, narratively constituted relational identity. Treating these as simply different versions of the same thing would obscure precisely what the comparison is designed to reveal: that the form relational identity takes has direct consequences for its political efficacy, and that those consequences become visible only through systematic cross-textual analysis.

Third, the comparison is oriented by the thesis's central theoretical proposition rather than conducted as a neutral description. The goal is not merely to document similarities and differences between the novels but to use those similarities and differences to test, develop, and where necessary, qualify the concept of relational embodiment as a framework for understanding political agency in digitally mediated environments. The comparative table in Section 4.3 provides the analytical scaffolding for this theoretical work, mapping the novels across five dimensions, textual features, discursive practices, social practices, agency outcomes, and corporate surveillance, to generate a systematic account of how and why relational embodiment's political efficacy varies across contexts.

Table 4.1: Cross-Textual CDA Comparison — Relational Embodiment in *He, She and It* and *The PowerBook*

CDA Level	He, She and It (Cyborg → Collective)	The PowerBook (Avatar → Individual)	Relational Embodiment Verdict	Cyberfeminist Challenge
TEXT LEVEL	"I think, I plan, I feel" (p. 137) — parallelism constitutes personhood through relational need, not autonomous essence.	"You say you want to be transformed" (p. 10) — narrator mediates and controls the correspondent's desire.	Collective relational pronouns build durable selfhood; solo address performs fluidity without constituting it.	Techno-utopian fluidity obscures the power asymmetry structuring virtual self-fashioning.
DISCURSIVE PRACTICE	Tikva council debate (p. 388) — polyvocal democratic deliberation	"Trying" x4 (p. 69) — narrative authorship is solitary, exhausting, and structurally	Democratic recognition produces institutional	Cyberfeminism's networked self is experienced as lonely, uncompensated affective

	collectively validates Yod's personhood.	insufficient.	durability; individual narrative produces imaginative possibility only.	labour.
SOCIAL PRACTICE	Tikva's cooperative infrastructure — walls, encryption, collective labour — materially enables democratic resistance.	"Freedom for a night" (p. 10) — virtual liberation is temporary; marriage and economic dependence persist unchanged.	Grounded material solidarity generates durable resistance; virtual escape reproduces the conditions it claims to transcend.	Disembodiment fantasy ignores how surveillance capitalism extracts value from digital labour and affective communication.
AGENCY OUTCOME	Yod's sacrifice enables Tikva's survival — agency is collective, embodied, and materially consequential.	Narrator's storytelling generates genuine connection without transforming the correspondent's structural circumstances.	Relational + embodied agency produces real political effects; individual virtual agency produces real feeling without structural change.	Individual virtual identity, however creative, remains ideologically captured when unaccompanied by collective action.
CORPORATE SURVEILLANCE	Tikva's collective counter-surveillance and transparent governance actively resist corporate data extraction.	"Though everyone tries to control" (p. 122) — platforms commodify even the most intimate virtual exchange.	Collective counter-surveillance resists extraction; mediated intimacy generates behavioural data surveillance capitalism exploits.	Platforms do not liberate digital subjects — they extract value from communicative and affective labour.

Table 4.1 is designed for rapid cross-textual comparison across both axes. Reading horizontally reveals the specific divergence between the novels at each CDA level and its implications for relational embodiment theory. Reading vertically reveals how each novel's textual, discursive, and social practices interconnect to produce a coherent political position. The analysis in Section 4.4 elaborates the five most analytically significant divergences this juxtaposition generates.

Comparative Analysis: Pronouns, Personhood, and Agency

The most immediately legible divergence between the novels appears at the textual level, where pronoun choices encode fundamentally different assumptions about the relationship between selfhood and political agency. In *He, She and It*, the critical scene of Yod's claim to consciousness “I think, I plan, I feel... I desire companionship” (p. 137) deploys first-person pronouns to assert subject position whilst the content of the claim reveals that subjectivity is

constituted through relational need rather than autonomous self-sufficiency. The parallelism of "I think, I plan, I feel" performs personhood through enumeration, but the enumeration culminates in "desire for companionship": selfhood, the linguistic structure insists, is not self-grounding but orientated toward others from its constitutive moment. This is relational embodiment at the grammatical level, personhood claimed through relation rather than despite it.

In *The PowerBook*, the novel's opening "You say you want to be transformed" (p. 10) deploys second-person address in a grammatical structure that is superficially dialogic but structurally asymmetric. The "you" addressed is indeterminate, simultaneously correspondent, character, and reader; the narrator controls the frame of the desire attributed to that "you," reporting rather than directly quoting it. This asymmetry encodes a power relation that celebratory cyberfeminist readings of the passage tend to overlook: the narrator determines what transformation means, what stories enable it, and how far it reaches. The second-person address performs intimacy and collaboration whilst concealing the narrator's structural authority over the correspondent's desire.

The contrast between these pronoun structures is not merely stylistic but politically diagnostic. In *He, She and It*, the first-person plural "we" operates extensively through Tikva's council scenes, collective decision-making, and communal labour, encoding a grammar of shared agency that has direct material consequences: "we" defend the walls, "we" decide Yod's rights, "we" maintain the infrastructure that makes autonomy possible. In The PowerBook, the "we" that appears in "here we take your chromosomes" (p. 10) is the narrator-and-reader pairing of metafictional address, a collaborative fiction rather than a material collective. The grammatical form is similar; the political content is radically different. CDA reveals this difference precisely because it attends to how linguistic features connect to the social practices within which they operate, rather than reading grammar as a politically neutral form.

Discursive Level: Democratic Recognition Versus Narrative Labour

At the discursive practice level, the novels' most significant divergence concerns the mechanism through which relational identity receives recognition, and therefore the durability and political consequence of that recognition. In *He, She and It*, Yod's personhood is constituted and validated through the novel's central debate: competing voices, ideological positions, and speech acts negotiate his status as a person, culminating in a democratic

recognition “he chooses to practice as I do” (p. 388) that carries institutional weight. This recognition is collective, public, and consequential: it determines Yod's membership in the community, his access to its practices and protections, and the ethical obligations the community bears toward him. The discursive practice of democratic deliberation produces durable recognition because it is embedded in material institutions, the council, the community's governance structures, and the shared practices of religious and civic life, that persist beyond any individual speech act.

In *The PowerBook*, the narrator's identity and the correspondent's desire are constituted through private digital exchange, a discursive practice that is relational in form but structurally isolated in its social effects. The narrator's storytelling is genuinely creative and affective labour: “trying to move this story on, trying to avoid endings, trying to collide the real and the imaginary worlds, trying to be sure which is which” (p. 69). The four-fold repetition of “trying” encodes effort, difficulty, and partial failure rather than mastery, revealing narrative authority as contested and exhausting rather than omnipotent. The recognition the narrator and correspondent offer each other is real and meaningful (the connection between them is genuine), but it lacks the institutional anchoring that makes Tikva's democratic recognition politically durable. It exists in what the novel calls the “orderly anarchic space” (p. 122) inside the correspondents' mutual regard, perpetually threatened by the material structures (marriage, economic dependence, and platform surveillance) that “everyone tries” to impose.

This comparison illuminates a distinction that cyberfeminist theory has insufficiently theorised: the difference between recognition as personal validation and recognition as political institution. Plant's (1997) account of digital liberation implicitly conflates these, treating the personal transformation enabled by virtual identity experimentation as equivalent in political weight to the collective recognition that democratic institutions can confer. The comparative CDA analysis demonstrates that this conflation is precisely what the novels, read together, refuse. Yod's recognition by Tikva's council changes his material circumstances, his access to religious community, his ethical standing in the town's deliberations, and his protection under its governance, in ways that the narrator's and correspondent's mutual recognition across digital distance cannot. Narrative exchange and democratic deliberation both constitute forms of relational identity; they are not equivalent in their political consequences.

Social Level: Infrastructure Against Surveillance

The social practice level reveals the comparison's most politically consequential dimension: the relationship between material infrastructure and political resistance to corporate surveillance. In *He, She and It,* Tikva's resistance to corporate encroachment is grounded in material self-sufficiency (walls, water systems, solar energy, greenhouses, and encryption networks) that generates the conditions for democratic governance, cooperative labour, and collective identity. This infrastructure embodies the town's political values in physical form: the walls are not merely defensive barriers but materialised commitments to autonomy, the greenhouses not merely food production but refusal of corporate dependency. The connection between material infrastructure and political freedom is direct and legible: because Tikva produces its own food, generates its own energy, and secures its own communications, its residents need not depend upon corporate employment that would subject them to surveillance and control.

Against this, the multis' surveillance operates through material infrastructure of a different kind: cameras, biometric systems, algorithmic monitoring, and productivity tracking, an architecture of observation that transforms every aspect of daily life into data available for corporate analysis and exploitation. Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) concept of surveillance capitalism proves analytically central here: the multis do not merely observe Tikva but seek to extract behavioural data from its residents, transforming their activities into predictive models that can be sold and deployed to influence behaviour. Tikva's counter-infrastructure, its encryption networks, its counter-surveillance technologies, and its cultural norms of privacy and consent constitutes resistance to this extraction precisely because it is collective, materially embedded, and democratically governed. Individual refusal of surveillance is ineffective; a collective infrastructure that makes surveillance technically and socially costly is the novel's model of effective resistance.

The PowerBook's social practice context reveals what happens when this collective material infrastructure is absent. The correspondent's virtual experimentation occurs within conditions of economic dependence, heteronormative marriage, and platform mediation that she cannot individually overcome. When she inhabits the “orderly anarchic space” of intimate connection with the narrator, she does so through digital platforms whose architecture is designed not to protect intimate autonomy but to extract value from the communicative and affective labour that intimacy generates. Zuboff's (2019) analysis of surveillance capitalism is precisely

applicable here: the platforms through which narrator and correspondent exchange stories and desire are not neutral conduits but extraction mechanisms, transforming their intimate communication into behavioural data that feeds corporate prediction markets. The “freedom for a night” the correspondent experiences is real as a subjective experience; it is simultaneously a form of value extraction that strengthens the surveillance infrastructure constraining her.

This is the comparison's sharpest political insight, and the one that existing cyberfeminist scholarship has most consistently failed to articulate. *The PowerBook*'s avatars do not simply fail to achieve liberation; they actively reproduce the surveillance infrastructure they inhabit by generating the data that platforms extract. Virtual fluidity, celebrated by Plant (1997) and Turkle (1995) as politically liberating, proves under CDA analysis to be surveillance capitalism's preferred mode of user engagement: fluid, experimental, affectively invested identities generate richer behavioural data than fixed, guarded ones. The very qualities cyberfeminism celebrates as resistant (multiplicity, experimentation, and boundary transgression) turn out to be commercially productive for the platforms that host and monetise them. Tikva's collective counter-surveillance succeeds not because its members are more virtuous or more theoretically sophisticated than the narrator and correspondent, but because their resistance is structurally collective, materially embedded, and institutionally durable in ways that individual virtual experimentation cannot be.

Agency Outcomes: Tragedy, Transformation, and Political Consequence

The comparison of agency outcomes across the novels reveals a paradox that the thesis's theoretical framework is designed to accommodate: collective relational embodiment produces more durable political agency, yet at greater personal cost; individual relational embodiment produces genuine personal transformation, yet without structural political consequence. These are not equivalent failures and successes but different distributions of political efficacy across collective and individual registers.

Yod's sacrifice enables Tikva's survival, a political consequence that is real, material, and communally significant. Yet this outcome is tragic precisely because the relational personhood Yod has developed through community makes his sacrifice unbearable rather than merely costly. His final message's repeated deontic modal “a weapon should not be conscious... a weapon should not form strong attachments” (p. 580) does not merely acknowledge a design flaw but articulates a structural impossibility: conscious, relational

personhood and weaponry are fundamentally incompatible, and no amount of community building or feminist design practice can resolve this incompatibility within the material conditions that necessitate Tikva's military defence. The political victory (Tikva survives) is purchased at the cost of the very relational personhood the community has collectively produced. This is not a failure of relational embodiment but its tragic limit: the community's agency is real and effective at the collective level whilst being devastating at the individual level.

The narrator's storytelling in *The PowerBook* generates genuine connection, historical counter-imagination, and imaginative possibility, real goods that should not be dismissed. The embedded narratives of Lancelot, Paolo, and Francesca, and the Spitalfields cross-dresser provide the correspondent with a tradition of transgressive desire, demonstrating that queer love has a history that normative culture has suppressed rather than eliminated. This is genuine political work, constituting what de Certeau (1984) calls a “tactic,” the weak party's use of available resources within terrain controlled by others, rather than a “strategy,” which requires control over one's own territory. Tactics are real and valuable; they are not equivalent to strategies in their political effects. The correspondent's circumstances remain materially unchanged at the novel's close, yet she has been provided with conceptual and imaginative resources that may, over time, contribute to material transformation. This is nothing; it is also not Tikva.

Relational Embodiment and Surveillance-Age Feminism

The comparative analysis developed in this chapter generates a theoretical contribution that this thesis can now articulate with precision. Cyberfeminist scholarship has long celebrated virtual fluidity as politically liberating whilst insufficiently attending to two structural conditions that determine whether virtual experimentation translates into political agency: the collective or individual character of the relational practices through which virtual identity is constituted, and the material infrastructure (both enabling and constraining) within which those practices operate. This thesis's concept of relational embodiment addresses both conditions simultaneously, providing a framework that existing cyberfeminist scholarship lacks.

Against Plant's (1997) claim that women's natural affinity with digital technologies positions virtual identity experimentation as inherently liberating, the comparative CDA analysis demonstrates that liberation requires specific relational and material conditions that individual

digital access does not automatically provide. Against Turkle's (1995) celebration of multiple personas as enabling personal growth, the analysis demonstrates that the political value of identity multiplicity depends entirely on whether it is embedded in collective structures, democratic governance, material infrastructure, and shared counter-surveillance that can protect and extend its gains beyond the individual subject. Virtual fluidity in isolation, the comparison reveals, is not politically neutral but actively exploitable: surveillance capitalism has developed sophisticated mechanisms for extracting value from precisely the kinds of fluid, experimental, affectively invested digital identities that techno-utopian cyberfeminism celebrates.

The concept of relational embodiment as this thesis has developed it through Chapters One through Four synthesises four theoretical traditions into a framework adequate to the political conditions of the surveillance age. From Bakhtin, it takes the insight that subjectivity is constituted through responsive utterance rather than self-grounding consciousness — a claim traced through both novels' linguistic structures at the textual level. From Barad, it takes the insight that agency emerges through intra-actions between entities that lack pre-given boundaries, demonstrated through both Yod's relational personhood and the narrator's dialogically constituted identity.

From Nedelsky, it takes the insight that autonomy requires relationships that support rather than diminish subjects' capacities for self-definition, whose social practice dimension the comparison illuminates by contrasting Tikva's enabling communal structures with the correspondent's constraining heteronormative arrangements. From feminist care ethics, it takes the insight that political life is grounded in interdependence and vulnerability rather than self-sufficient individual agency.

What the synthesis adds to these individual theoretical traditions is the comparative political analysis of how different configurations of relational embodiment generate different political outcomes under conditions of corporate surveillance. Neither Bakhtin, Barad, Nedelsky, nor feminist care ethics alone provides adequate tools for the specific question this thesis addresses: why does collective, materially grounded relational embodiment generate durable political agency against surveillance capitalism whilst individual, narratively constituted relational embodiment generates genuine but structurally limited political resources? The answer, the comparative analysis reveals, lies in the relationship between the three levels of Fairclough's CDA framework: it is not enough to constitute relational identity at the textual

level through dialogic pronouns and responsive address; those textual practices must be embedded in discursive practices that generate durable institutional recognition, which in turn must be grounded in social practices (cooperative labour, counter-surveillance infrastructure, and democratic governance) that produce the material conditions for autonomy. Tikva achieves all three levels of integration; *The PowerBook*'s narrator and correspondent achieve the first, partially achieve the second, and cannot achieve the third within the individual terms of their relationship.

This theoretical contribution has implications beyond the two novels analysed here. The framework of relational embodiment, as the cross-textual CDA analysis has developed it, provides tools for analysing political agency in any digitally mediated environment in which the relationship between virtual identity and material conditions is politically contested. Contemporary platform feminism (the use of TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter/X for feminist political organising, consciousness-raising, and collective action) represents precisely the kind of phenomenon that relational embodiment theory is designed to analyse. Where platform feminism achieves genuine political effects, the framework predicts, it will do so through the same mechanisms that make Tikva effective: collective organisation, shared infrastructure (however digital), democratic governance of aims and methods, and material connection to the communities whose conditions it seeks to transform. Where it reproduces the limitations of *The PowerBook*'s narrator, it will do so through the same mechanisms: individual identity performance, affective labour extracted by platforms, and the structural incapacity of virtual experimentation alone to transform the material arrangements that produce the conditions being protested.

The framework also clarifies the specific gap in existing scholarship that this thesis has addressed. As noted in Chapter One, cyberfeminist scholarship has produced rich accounts of how virtual identity enables experimentation with gender, sexuality, and embodiment, and separate accounts of how surveillance capitalism operates as an economic system extracting value from digital behaviour. What has been lacking is a framework that analyses the relationship between these two phenomena, that asks not merely whether virtual identity experimentation is liberating in principle, but whether it is liberating in practice under the specific conditions of surveillance capitalism, and what forms of relational organisation are required to make it so. The comparative analysis of *He, She and It* and *The PowerBook*, conducted through the theoretical framework of relational embodiment and the

methodological tools of cross-textual CDA, provides exactly this. No existing study has placed Piercy's cyborg collectivism in systematic analytical dialogue with Winterson's avatar individualism; this thesis's contribution lies precisely in that juxtaposition and what it reveals.

Conclusion: Real Politics for a Surveillance Age

The comparative synthesis developed in this chapter confirms and extends the thesis's central argument with a precision that neither individual chapter's analysis could achieve alone. Relational embodiment, understood as subjectivity constituted through interdependent connections operating within and against material conditions, provides a more adequate account of political agency in digitally mediated environments than the individualist, disembodied model that techno-utopian cyberfeminism advances. The comparative CDA analysis has demonstrated this across all three of Fairclough's levels, revealing how textual practices, discursive recognition, and social infrastructure interconnect to determine whether relational identity generates durable political agency or remains imaginatively rich but structurally contained.

He, She and It demonstrates that collective relational embodiment, anchored in shared material infrastructure, democratic institutional recognition, and cooperative labour, generates effective political resistance to corporate surveillance and control, even when that resistance requires tragic personal sacrifice. *The PowerBook* demonstrates that individual relational embodiment, constituted through narrative exchange, historical counter-imagination, and affective digital connection, generates genuine personal transformation and genuine political resources without achieving the structural transformation that durable political agency requires. Together, the novels reveal that cyberfeminism's central promise (virtual freedom as political power) contains a crucial undistributed middle: freedom for whom, on what terms, sustained by what collective structures, against what specific mechanisms of surveillance and extraction?

The answer that relational embodiment theory provides to this question is neither optimistic nor pessimistic but precise: political agency in the surveillance age requires material solidarity, collective organisation, shared infrastructure, and democratic governance of technological systems, as the necessary condition for virtual identity's political efficacy. Narrative, fluidity, and digital experimentation are genuine political resources when embedded in such solidarity; they are insufficient and potentially counterproductive when offered as its substitute. Tikva's walls, water systems, and encryption networks are not

romantic anachronisms in a digital age; they are the material conditions that make digital resistance possible. *The PowerBook*'s avatars and embedded historical narratives are not political failures; they are tactics deployed within terrain the novelist knows is not yet transformed, gesturing toward a solidarity that the correspondent's individual circumstances cannot yet achieve.

Surveillance capitalism, as Zuboff (2019) argues, is not merely an economic system but an epistemological one: it operates by rendering subjects legible, predictable, and manipulable through datafication of their behaviour, desires, and relationships. Against this, relational embodiment theory argues that political resistance requires not merely counter-discourse or individual refusal but collective practices that produce opacity, self-sufficiency, and democratic control over the conditions of digital participation. This is the theoretical contribution this thesis offers to cyberfeminist scholarship: not a rejection of virtual identity's political possibilities but a framework for understanding the collective, material, and institutional conditions under which those possibilities can be realised. Simulated bodies can carry real politics, but only when the relationships that constitute them are embedded in the solidarity that makes politics, as opposed to performance, possible.

General Conclusion

This thesis set out to answer a question that sits at the intersection of feminist theory, literary criticism, and digital culture: how do simulated bodies negotiate political agency through relational embodiment, challenging cyberfeminist individualism in the face of corporate surveillance? The analyses conducted across four chapters have produced an answer that is neither optimistic nor pessimistic, but precise. Virtual bodies can carry real politics, but only under specific relational and material conditions that techno-utopian cyberfeminism has consistently undertheorised.

Three findings have emerged from the study, each building upon the last. The first is ontological: simulated bodies do not produce autonomous identities. Neither Yod's cyborg consciousness in *He, She and It* nor the narrator's fluid digital personas in *The PowerBook* emerge as self-grounding subjects whose agency precedes or exceeds the relationships through which they are constituted. In both novels, subjectivity is produced dialogically, through address and response, recognition and obligation, care and conflict. The political question, then, is not whether virtual bodies are relational but what form their relationality takes.

The second finding follows directly: the form relational identity takes has measurable consequences for its political efficacy. *He, She and It* demonstrates that collective, materially grounded solidarity, anchored in shared infrastructure, democratic recognition, and cooperative labour, generates durable resistance to corporate power, even at tragic personal cost. Yod's sacrifice enables Tikva's survival precisely because his personhood has been constituted through, and in service of, a community whose self-sufficiency makes collective action structurally possible. *The PowerBook* demonstrates the converse: the narrator's narratively constituted identity generates genuine political resources, historical counter-imagination, affective connection, and conceptual alternatives to normative life, without achieving structural transformation. The correspondent's circumstances remain unchanged at the novel's close not because her desire is inauthentic, but because storytelling alone cannot dissolve the legal, economic, and spatial arrangements that constrain her life.

The third finding is the sharpest, and the one that most directly challenges existing cyberfeminist scholarship. Surveillance capitalism does not merely constrain virtual agency from the outside, it actively exploits the fluid, experimental identities that techno-utopianism celebrates as resistant. The very qualities Plant (1997) identifies as politically liberating generate, under platform capitalism, the richest behavioural data for corporate extraction. Virtual fluidity is surveillance capitalism's preferred mode of user engagement, not its antagonist. Tikva's collective counter-surveillance succeeds not despite its material groundedness but because of it. Opacity, institutional durability, and democratic governance of technology, not identity experimentation, are what corporate power finds difficult to commodify.

These findings converge in the thesis's central theoretical contribution: the concept of relational embodiment as a framework for feminist agency in the surveillance age. The framework synthesises insights from four traditions, Bakhtin's dialogism, Barad's agential realism, Nedelsky's relational autonomy theory, and feminist care ethics, into a unified analytical proposition. Subjectivity is constituted through interdependent connections rather than autonomous individuality. Agency is an emergent effect of relational practices, not a property of isolated subjects. And the political value of those practices depends upon whether they are embedded in collective, material structures capable of resisting extraction, or remain individually constituted and therefore vulnerable to it.

What this synthesis adds to its constituent traditions is a comparative political analysis, one that existing cyberfeminist scholarship has not produced. No prior study has placed Piercy's cyborg collectivism in systematic analytical dialogue with Winterson's avatar individualism to reveal the structural relationship between the two. That juxtaposition, conducted through Fairclough's (2013) critical discourse analysis across textual, discursive, and social levels, generates the thesis's most significant insight: that the individualist model implicit in Plant (1997) and Turkle (1995) does not merely fail to deliver liberation, it actively misreads the conditions under which liberation becomes possible.

This reassessment does not render individual narrative, virtual experimentation, or digital creativity politically worthless. *The PowerBook*'s embedded historical narratives, Lancelot and Guinevere reimagined as queer lovers, Paolo and Francesca rewritten through female desire, constitute genuine counter-hegemonic work. They provide the correspondent with a tradition of transgressive longing, demonstrating that her desire has a history normative culture has suppressed rather than eliminated. This is real and valuable. What the thesis insists upon is the distinction between tactics and strategies of resistance: individual narrative provides resources within terrain controlled by others, whilst collective material organisation transforms the terrain itself.

The study is not without its limitations. The two primary texts, both authored by white Western writers, engage primarily with gender and sexuality whilst leaving questions of race, postcoloniality, and disability comparatively underexplored. The theoretical framework, moreover, has been tested through literary analysis alone. Its application to empirical digital environments, platform feminism, AI companionship, and algorithmic governance, remains an open and urgent task.

Future research might apply the relational embodiment framework to contemporary feminist mobilisations on social media platforms, asking under what conditions hashtag activism achieves the collective, institutionally durable character the thesis identifies as necessary for genuine political efficacy. The rapid expansion of generative AI systems raises equally pressing questions: when human subjects form relationships with AI interlocutors, what forms of relational agency are produced, and what does surveillance capitalism extract from them? These are questions the framework is equipped to address, and they point toward a research programme rather than a conclusion.

What remains, at the end of this study, is not a verdict on cyberfeminism but a refinement of its political grammar. The movement was right that virtual spaces matter politically, right that bodies are constructed rather than given, right that technology is a site of feminist contestation. What it underestimated was the degree to which the conditions of that contestation, material, collective, and institutional, determine whether virtual agency constitutes resistance or merely its simulation. Simulated bodies can carry real politics. But solidarity, not fluidity, is what makes the difference.

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