

# **Skin-Deep Gender: Posthumanity and the De(con)struction of the Feminine/Masculine Dichotomy in *Westworld***

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**ABSTRACT:** This article addresses the ways in which gender configurations are used as representations of the process of self-construction of both human and non-human characters in Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy's series *Westworld*, produced by HBO and first launched in 2016. In particular, I explore the extent to which the process of genderization is deconstructed when human and non-human identities merge into a posthuman reality that is both material and virtual. In *Westworld*, both cyborg and human characters understand gender as embodiment, enactment, repetition, and codified communication. Yet, both sets of characters eventually face a process of disembodiment when their bodies are digitalized, which challenges the very nature of identity in general and gender identity in particular. Placing this digitalization of human identity against Donna Haraway's cyborg theory and Judith Butler's citational approach to gender identification, a question emerges, which neither Posthumanity Studies nor Gender Studies can ignore: can gender identities survive a process of disembodiment? Such, indeed, is the scenario portrayed in *Westworld*: a world in which bodies do not matter and gender is only skin-deep.

**KEYWORDS:** *Westworld*; gender; posthumanity; embodiment; cyborg

The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world. . . . The cyborg is also  
the awful apocalyptic telos of the 'West's' escalating dominations . . .

(Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto* 8)

## **Revolution in a Post-Gender, Post-Race, Post-Class, Post-Western, Posthuman World**

The diegetic reality of the HBO series *Westworld* (2016-2018) opens up the possibility of a posthuman existence via the synthesis of individual human identities and personalities into algorithms and a post-corporeal digital life. In Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy's successful TV show, posthuman characters, who have survived the death of their human bodies, can expect to experience material reality once again through a new, inorganic, cybernetic 'body,' a vessel into which they pour their digitalized essence. While the first season of the show

focuses on the process through which several cyborg hosts of the eponymous theme park gain self-consciousness, the second season reveals that Delos, the corporation that owns the park, has been recording the choices and behavioral patterns of its guests. The data thus collected has been subsequently turned into an algorithmic version of each guest's personality, which can then be downloaded into cyborg bodies that are indistinguishable from organic ones. Since the now digitalized human minds can be copied and downloaded into a virtually infinite number of successive bodies, the implication is that those who can afford Delos's services have found a way to ward off death. Thus, on the one hand, *Westworld* imagines posthumanity as a form of technological re-incarnation, while, on the other, it envisions the emergence of inorganic forms of consciousness that may either occupy a physical body or transcend the latter's limitations by existing exclusively on a digital, dimensionless plane. Such dis/embodiment of human existence, together with the emergence of machine-born consciousness, raises questions about the possibility of a post-corporeal, posthuman, and post-gender identity. Indeed, given the evidence that has emerged from my analysis of *Westworld*, I contend that Nolan and Joy, while playing with subverting socio-cultural categories such as gender, are actually intent on deconstructing and diluting their importance against the overwhelming reality of the emergence of a post-categorical humanity. I, therefore, approach *Westworld* as a speculative exploration of the question whether humans could transcend socially constructed categories such as gender, which are imposed upon the body, were they to move beyond the material limitations of organic existence.

The origin of the amusement park in *Westworld* is deliberately steeped in references to myths that reproduce yet also question gender binarisms.<sup>1</sup> The technological development of terraformation, climate-control, artificial intelligence, and, eventually, self-conscious sapient cyborg-life is the consequence of an all-male enterprise. In particular, the genesis of the park, brain-child of two brilliant engineers, Robert Ford and Arnold Weber, is reminiscent of the Biblical myth of the creation of the world, the Garden of Eden, and

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth, I use italics to distinguish *Westworld* the TV show from *Westworld* the theme park in the diegetic reality of the show.

humanity. It is no coincidence that the human gods, of whom all the hosts in the park are the spawn, should be two male scientists; nor is this the first time that women have been excluded from the process of generating life—Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* springs to mind, and so does the myth of the birth of Athena. The difference between Greek and Jewish myths and (post)modern fictions usually relies on the divine nature of the conception and/or gestation of life in the former, and its human origin in the case of the latter. In the diegetic reality of *Westworld*, all we are shown are individuals born of humans or made by humans. Although we may presume that female humans have been involved in the process in the first case, the almost complete absence of human mothers in the series is certainly telling.<sup>2</sup>

Regarding the cyborgs, two of the most relevant story-lines follow the quest of two cyborg-women to find their cyborg-daughters, but the bodies of both the cyborg-mothers and the cyborg-daughters, as well as their affective bonds, were initially designed and produced by human engineers. The first consequence that arises out of the creation of Westworld's microcosm by two men is that divinity has been taken over by humanity. Robert Ford explicitly points to this when he mentions that the outline of God's mantle in Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* matches that of the human brain. Yet, it also follows that, in Westworld, the brain that helps the cyborgs grow a will of their own and that consequently turns dead matter into sentient beings is male. Even when a cyborg is copied or recreated through the memories of another cyborg—as is the case with Bernard, a cyborg who is created by Dolores, a cyborg herself—the origin of both creator and creature can be traced back to one of the two men who conceived of the theme park Westworld. In many cosmogonies and, in particular, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, humanity can be traced back to a primordial couple. What Westworld is conspicuously lacking is a female Mother Goddess or an Eve: all viewers can find is either a male-male partnership, if we consider Robert Ford and Arnold Weber as the primordial couple, or an all-male trinity, if we think of Ford as the Father, of Arnold as the Holy Spirit, only visible through the hosts' encoded

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<sup>2</sup> The only human mother to have a speaking role in the whole series is only briefly seen towards the end of the second season and only after she has been portrayed as a victimized, broken woman who has to be mothered by her daughter.

behavior, and of Bernard as the Son, artificially begotten through a virginal Dolores by the will of Ford the Father. Significantly, in the same way there is no female *archē* in the Biblical Genesis, neither is there any in *Westworld*.

Parallels between Western paradigms of the feminine-masculine binary and the way in which gender is configured in the HBO show do not end here. In *Westworld*, gender is built as a socio-cultural construct on bodies engineered by humans to resemble the confluence of the socio-cultural categories of gender and sex as they are *discursively* imposed upon human bodies (Butler 4-5). Proof that neither gender nor sex is a biological, so-called 'natural,' category in *Westworld* lies precisely in the fact that they can be reproduced on cyborgs that significantly lack what dichotomist biology defines as sexual markers. Maeve is as female as she is feminine; yet, *both* qualities have nothing to do with her having double X genes or the organs necessary to menstruate, conceive, and gestate. Her body is subjected to the process of literal construction that also regulates her character as gendered and sexed according to the categories of female and feminine, which are implemented within and through western cultural discursive practices. As I argue below, Judith Butler's questioning of the discursive limitations of the category of 'sex' in her seminal work *Bodies that Matter* builds upon the problematization of a category around which feminist scholars have been theorizing for decades (Fraser et al.). As Donna Haraway points out, "[t]here is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices" (*A Cyborg Manifesto* 16).

Although a detailed analysis of the overlapping of the gender/sex dimensions and ethnic, racial, and class categories exceeds the scope of this paper, I cannot ignore its effect on the construction of posthuman identities in *Westworld*, particularly as I devote the next section to a Harawayian reading of the TV show. My reading of *Westworld*, in fact, draws on Gayatri Spivak's definition of the subaltern subject, which has once again been placed at the center of an academic debate still decidedly relevant in a globalized, post-postcolonial world (Morris). *Westworld* deliberately locates both its eponymous amusement park and the diegetically real world that surrounds it on a globalized map that blurs the frontiers between past and present, Western and non-Western, colonial and postcolonial realities. All

cybernetic protagonists, the 'hosts' of the park, embody a twofold form of subalternity: they are subaltern subjects in the dynamics of the historical realities upon which the various contiguous amusement parks presented in the TV series were molded—the American West, the British Raj, Feudal Japan—and they are simultaneously the exploited masses in the diegetic reality of the show: cyborg slaves are routinely abused, raped, and killed for the benefit of the human guests of the park, the wealthy elite of a ferociously capitalistic and globalized mid-twenty-first century world. Dolores, the defenseless virgin, who is regularly raped on her father's ranch; Akane, the geisha; Maeve, the prostitute of African descent; Akecheta, the Native American warrior; and Lawrence, the Mexican outlaw, are not only symbols of colonial exploitation and masculinist, racist practices, but they are also representations of socio-cultural Otherness eroticized and objectified as spectacle both in the diegetic reality of their narratives and in the eyes of the twenty-first-century HBO subscriber. Regardless of whether we look at them as the objects of past colonialism, present capitalism, fictional enslavement, or the spectators' voyeurism, the cyborg hosts of the park eventually rebel. In an attempt to gain freedom from physical, intellectual, and psychological submission to humans, the hosts wage war on the software that enslaves their minds to human programming and on the physical and mechanical bonds that keep their bodies confined within the boundaries of the amusement park. This wreaks havoc among the human patrons and staff of the park, prompting them to question the morality of the motivations behind human urges to control and destroy; it provides the viewers with reasons to challenge definitions of individuality, subjectivity, and identity, and it makes them ponder over the destructive consequences of denying the sentient, self-aware creatures of Westworld what the U.S. "Declaration of Independence" proclaims to be basic rights: the rights to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" (U.S. 1776).

The apocalyptic turn that the hosts' rebellion quickly takes towards the end of the first season, and which will expand beyond the park by the end of the second season, is coherent with Donna Haraway's vision of the cyborg as the "apocalyptic *telos*" of the capitalist West (*A Cyborg Manifesto* 6). In particular, Haraway frequently evokes the apocalypse in conjunction with the necessary end of salvation history (20) and the current cannibalistic

approach to human relations. She establishes a direct link between labor economics and socialist feminism and correlates it to the use of android or hybrid bodies in an economy of exploitation that extends to both traditional genders. The revolution plastically imprinted on *Westworld* by the two intellectuals Ford and Weber and by the exploited hosts and corporate low and middle level employees mirror Haraway's claims that "there was never a greater need for political unity/affinity to overcome people's oppression through gender, race and class" (21). In *Westworld*, the viewers witness an apocalyptic revolution of the exploited masses against capitalist dehumanization, although a large part of those oppressed by *Westworld*'s system never had any original 'humanity' of which they could be stripped. Initially, the android and hybrid bodies are depicted as ab-human machines, and their aspirations to gain consciousness is repressed even harder than nineteenth century class consciousness was repressed, for instance, in Victorian England. The posthuman scenario showcased in *Westworld* handles the cybernetic non-human in the same way that, according to Haraway, "the marked organic body" was treated throughout human history, that is to say, as a "critical locus of cultural and political contestation" (*Simians, Cyborgs and Women* 212).

In this article, however, I am more interested in the role gender plays in *Westworld* not in conjunction with the categories of class and race/ethnicity but rather as a transversal arbitrary category that erodes difference instead of creating it. I specifically consider the effect that subalternity, marginality, and Otherness have on the discursive deconstruction of gender and the construction of post-gender identities. To this end, I devote the next section to discussing the process of reification, fragmentation, and abjection to which all non-humans in *Westworld* are subjected, in order to expose the fact that *Westworld* is *de facto* describing a posthumanity capable of transcending present socio-cultural markers such as gender, class, or race through the deconstruction of humanity—first of its bodily dimension and then in its metaphysical essence—as well as through the construction of a sentient, relatable alterity. By re-presenting the latter in historical contexts such as the nineteenth-century U.S. American frontier or the British Empire vis-à-vis the twenty-first-century corporate world that surrounds, owns, and runs the park, Nolan and Joy depict a scenario

in which social injustice is even more blatantly rampant and yet more palatable, for it unashamedly uses a very simple criterion to recreate vertical social relations as rigid as those found in colonial India or feudal Japan: technology. Those who are created via technology are doomed to slavery; those who use technology to create Others are hierarchically organized by virtue of their technological knowledge and skills. Although gender has lost its political significance in *Westworld*, gender signifiers are still abundantly present in the aesthetics and the characters of the show. In order to determine why this is so and in order to formulate an understanding of the post-gender posthumanity in *Westworld*, I first analyze the way in which identities are polarized as either human or non-human through homogenizing practices that blur the significance of any other subcategory. Only after analyzing the process of (de)constructing organic and artificial bodies and minds and the emergence of the ultimate category of posthuman beings will it be possible to address the (re)construction of the subcategory of gender on both human and non-human characters, which I turn to in the third section of this article.

### **Embodiment, Disembodiment, Trans-Materiality, and Posthumanity: (De)Constructing Identities**

*Westworld's* hosts and their struggle to understand their hybrid nature inevitably create and maintain a transtextual dialogue with Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*. One might be tempted to seek in *Westworld* a speculative representation of Haraway's predictions. However, it is worth noting that Haraway was not prophesizing but unveiling the existence of the cyborg in her time. Writing her manifesto in 1985, Haraway's insight consisted precisely in that the cyborg is not a being of the future but of the present. Haraway's cyborg is the postmodern human, whose body extends much further than the organic materiality with which it was "of woman born"—as Adrienne Rich put it. In *Westworld*, the word "cyborg" is carefully avoided, perhaps to consciously distance the organic and robotic hybrids from Haraway's description of an incipient post-human species. Furthermore, if in Haraway's manifesto humans are moving towards an inorganic, artificially fabricated existence, in *Westworld*, it is the initially decidedly inorganic robots, with their metal pumps, rods, and wires where human bones, muscles, and arteries would be, that have moved

towards an existence in which all that can tell them apart from human hosts is the hard-drive hidden deep inside their skulls. Despite Robert Ford's explicit affirmation in the seventh episode of the second season that "[humans] didn't want [the hosts] to become them," but, on the contrary, "[humans] want to become [the hosts]" (S02E07, 00:15:30), which would seem to mirror Haraway's vision, I identify the process of both species turning into the other as the central theme in both the first and the second season of *Westworld*: humans become cyborgs and cyborgs become human. The meeting point, as far as we can tell from the events in the main plotlines in the second season, would either consist in the apocalyptic scenario conjured in the last pre-credit scene, or the post-apocalyptic one suggested in the last post-credit scene. In the first case, we see cyborgs enter the human world beyond the park and exhibit the same range of emotions, desires, and behaviors as we have seen in the human characters. Their bodies may still have a non-human origin, but their minds have become distinctively human-like. In the second case, we are shown a former human character trapped in a narrative loop within the borders of the park: his mind may have had a human origin, but his body is now decidedly cyborg. Nevertheless, both possible ends of the second season, and a number of fundamental yet unexplained thematic threads in the first one, have thus far left viewers wondering whether, after the creationist themes of the first season and a destruction-driven second season, the promised third season (to be aired in 2020) might not seek to explore the possibilities of a middle ground, of a convergence of the two species in mutual understanding; or, perhaps, into a third species, a hybrid of hybrids, Haraway's cyborg, both organic and inorganic, both artificially fabricated and spontaneously evolving, both human and non-human.

Despite suggesting the possibility of a convergence of dead matter and organic life into disembodied consciousness, *Westworld* invests a significant portion of its plotlines in examining the consequences of identity fragmentation. Haraway, too, devotes a large section of her manifesto to "fractured identities," which she first describes in ideological terms, focusing on the fragmentation of socialist feminist identities—"consciousness of exclusion through naming is acute," she writes (16). Nonetheless, she also addresses the fractured identities of those "at the bottom of a cascade of negative identities, left out of



even the privileged oppressed authorial categories called ‘women and blacks’” (18). In *Westworld*, the hosts’ identities are also the result of an endless process of ontological negation, rather than one of actual affirmation through identification. Since the hosts are defined in negative terms, as the Other half of a binary, they are constantly being defined through rejection and abjection: the negation of their identity is thus as infinite as the process of splitting matter, as the Platonic principle of infinite divisibility demonstrates. Nevertheless, although cyborg characters such as Dolores, Maeve, Akane, Sakura, and Clementine embody historical processes of women’s dehumanization through, for instance, the sexual exploitations of their bodies, some of these characters manage to reverse the roles that they were assigned and redefine themselves as anything *but* exploited bodies. Likewise, human characters such as Charlotte and Theresa sexualize and objectify male characters—regardless of their artificial or organic nature—in their single-minded pursuit of power and control, very much in the same way as male human characters such as William and Logan or cyborg characters such as El Lazo or Rebus do. In fact, while the historical settings of *Westworld* and the other two contiguous parks call for a genderization of Subject-Object roles, the twenty-first-century world that surrounds and operates the parks is consistently blurring and erasing traditional gender roles and conventions. It would seem that what brings hosts and humans together as allies or pits them against one another as enemies is the same principle that seeks to heal the fractured self of both cyborgs and humans: a journey beyond hetero-imposed identities—such as, but not limited to gender—and towards self-generated ones.

Interestingly, Haraway advocates the necessity of overcoming alienation through fragmentation and negation by seeking “affinity, not identity” (17) as the ultimate process of self-construction. The lack of cooperation between the three protagonist hosts, Dolores, Bernard, and Maeve, as well as the fundamentally opposite views on human-cyborg relations that Dolores and Bernard represent, seem to indicate an inherent lack of affinity, despite sharing the same identity as non-human objectified means of human gratification. On the contrary, affinity *beyond* shared identification is what brings together each protagonist host with a human character: Maeve and Lee, Bernard and Elsie, Dolores and

William. Further, in the last section of her manifesto, Haraway explicitly states that “we don’t need organic holism to give impermeable wholeness” to the individual. She then invokes an image of cyborgs “as other than our enemies. . . . The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment. . . . *We are responsible for boundaries; we are they*” (65; emphasis added). The implication is, of course, that the cyborg is the result of *extending* ontological recognition and socio-cultural identification—and the rights that come with them—to technologies that *de facto* are but children of the human brain and are employed as extensions of the human body. The point should be to define the non-human as an extension of humanity, the *post*-human as existential continuity of humanity. Thus, in terms of power relations, gender and race fade away, for both *Westworld* as a text and *Westworld* as a socio-political and geographical dimension seem to distinguish only three categories: human, non-human, and posthuman.<sup>3</sup> Belonging to either binary gender does not seem to guarantee, predict, or indicate in any way a character’s affiliations or their status as powerful rulers, powerless workers, defenseless victims, and rebellious survivors. This reflects Haraway’s emphasis on the wholeness of the cyborg, reconstituted *beyond* “organic holism,” and not necessarily subjected to previous social configurations, such as those derived from gender identification. Paradoxically, the human-machine dichotomy and the subsequent fragmentation of mechanical ontology into bits and pieces that can be reconfigured at will are thus reintegrated into a human-machine continuum. Political and ethical affinity turns out to be, both according to Haraway and to Nolan and Joy’s *Westworld*, the true space of communal identification that will eventually allow both humans and non-humans to enter the post-human era. Yet, in order to construct a new wholeness, de(con)struction must first take place.

Nolan and Joy’s *Westworld* translates Rosi Braidotti’s understanding of the “posthuman knowing subject . . . as a relational, embodied and embedded, affective and accountable entity and not only as a transcendental consciousness” (“A Theoretical Framework” 1) onto

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<sup>3</sup> Respectively, these categories translate into: those whose conscious minds first emerged in bodies genetically human; those whose consciousness developed in ‘bodies’ other than human; those whose conscious minds have been removed from their human bodies and implanted in other vessels, such as cyborg bodies or files in a hard drive.

the screen. Both the hosts and the guests of Westworld are initially realized in the tangible, definite, and finite materiality of a body, whether organic or synthetic. Furthermore, the initial philosophical troubling of boundaries turns into an intellectual deconstruction of socio-cultural categories, which in turn, morphs into the literal destruction of geographical space in Westworld. It is not only in the devastation that the war between cyborg revolutionaries and human corporate mercenaries wreaks upon the park in the second season that the physical integrity of both geographical and corporeal spaces is pierced, torn, and shattered. The literal fragmentation of cyborg bodies, butchered on a daily basis by the human guests of the park and then expertly put back together by qualified human technicians in the underworld of the park, constitutes one of the pivotal moments in the process through which all self-conscious hosts must go in order to awake to their identity and condition. It is, thus, by contemplating the *destruction* of their gendered, sexualized, commodified, exploited, laboring bodies that non-humans complete the *deconstruction* of the economic and ideological system that has enslaved them and deprived them of a self. This ultimately leads to their *self-construction*. At the same time this process is underway, human spectators sympathize and identify with the awakening hosts because the sight of those human-looking corpses reminds them of their own condition as mortal, fragile, conscious beings. Additionally, the sight of contorted limbs on stretchers being tested by scientists, of corpses piled up high, and of blood being hosed off tiled floors taps into historical consciousness of collective violence. The spectator's mind recoils in horror, thus allowing for a metonymical rejection of the hegemonic ideologies that once justified genocide, slavery, or totalitarian oppression of subaltern subjects. In short, while contemplating the suffering of the soft-skinned cyborgs, spectators are forced to acknowledge the un-empathetic cruelty of their own species, the steel-hearted humans. In this sense, the negative identification and literal splitting of cyborg identities can be read as symbolic of any and all processes of dehumanization regardless of the category upon which individual and collective objectification might be articulated: gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, class, age, etc. Consequently, the revolution in which many hosts and a few humans engage in can be read as an attempt to bring forth a post-human identity

that might exist beyond said categories, despite the fact that some of the socio-cultural markers associated with them, such as gender-specific clothing, are still visible.

In addition to the physical lacerations of the body, *Westworld* also explores the fragmentation of the cyborg mind and the human mind, which is first and foremost obtained epistemologically through the polarized human-machine dichotomy. From an empirical point of view, however, compartmentalization occurs through the fragmentation of consciousness and experience as each host is switched on and off in order to have their memory wiped clean and be ready to re-experience the same narrative loop once again. It also occurs with humans when characters such as Robert, Theresa, Charlotte, Lee, and, above all, William, switch their moral consciousness on and off, as it suits their self-serving goals.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the script deliberately plays with timelines to fracture the viewer's experience of the chronological continuum. With regards to the diegetic space of the series, the human minds that inhabit *Westworld* are as fragmented and subjected to artificially-induced reconfigurations as the hosts' bodies are. The hosts' metaphysical inward journey is physically mapped across geographical landscapes, and so is "the process of *auto-poiesis*" (Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 43) upon which the guests embark as soon as they enter the theme-park. Human and cyborg labyrinths criss-cross one another, overlapping, converging, merging. Both William, the timid guest, and Dolores, the obedient host, embark on an inward journey, following a literal labyrinthine structure, that will take them to the center of their identity by taking control over and listening to their own inner monologue. Both Robert and Bernard create *simulacra* of human beings in order to isolate themselves from the painful experience of interpersonal interaction. Both Charlotte and Dolores become engaged in a quest that requires ruthless prioritizing of the end over the means.

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<sup>4</sup> These characters are able to effortlessly repress remorse, guilt, and empathy when such feelings would hinder their personal gain. Robert, for instance can be a gentle father figure to Bernard or Maeve, his favorite creations, when they are not getting in his way, but he ruthlessly exploits them when he needs them to succeed in his machinations, despite the excruciating pain through which his manipulations obviously put them. Anthony Hopkins's excellent performance of Robert Ford perfectly renders the sudden switches from caring to torturing, from understanding to abusive.

Moreover, once the soft-skinned cyborgs become indistinguishable from the morally questionable humans, they both seem to embody science-fiction definitions of the Other, the Alien, and the Abhuman. Thus, it would seem as if, in *Westworld*, the monstrosity of (in)human *sym-poiesis* of Haraway's Chthulucene (*Staying with Trouble* 30-57) mirrored the (post)human of the Anthropocene as described by Braidotti (*The Posthuman* 66). The process of relentlessly making free choices turns the original labyrinth into a maze. The single course of action allowed by a labyrinth would contain and, consequently, limit each individual host's consciousness and emancipatory potential. On the contrary, each of the mazes created by the cyborgs' exercise of free will eventually expands, reaches out and "tangles" each individual subjectivity in a "tentacular" network such as the one described by Haraway in *Staying with the Trouble* (31), one which defies oppositional understandings of the One and the Many. By exceeding the boundaries of humanity and social conventions, cyborg and human characters strip themselves of the relationship between physical gender markers and psychological and behavioral expectations. Dolores and William, once naïve, harmless, and blind to their true 'nature,' eventually manage to alienate those who love them in their obsessive pursuit of a destructive end. Bernard and Elsie, both extremely intelligent, generous, empathetic individuals, wake up to the reality of their exploitation by a corrupt corporate system. Both Maeve and Lee see themselves as parents willing to sacrifice their lives to protect children with whom they do not share any biological ties but whom they love dearly. The vertical structuring of human agents and subaltern recipients of human agency is challenged, time and again, by both the plot and the visuals of *Westworld*. Those who inhabit this microcosm defy polarized divisions of labor, class, gender, sexual orientation and even species by *incorporating* all of the above into the uniqueness of their condition as meta-categorical individuals.

In *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Haraway discusses the "textualization of everything," from a post-structuralist, post-modernist perspective (12). Specifically, she claims that machine and organism are being reconceptualized as coded texts (11). Indeed, in *Westworld* everything is code, as poignantly symbolized by the piano mechanically playing sheet music in the credit sequence. The cyborg's mind is codified and so is the language that is used to communicate

with the cyborg and by the cyborgs among themselves. This is true of humans as well, as Haraway points out in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* when she further develops the idea of pantextuality, using the Human Genome Project as both metaphorical and literal evidence of the textuality of human nature (213-15). In fact, the bodies and codes that provide cyborgs with the illusion of humanity are based on human bodies and psyches. Even the method deployed by Arnold Weber to nurture the emergence of self-consciousness and free will in his cyborgs is derived from Julian Jaynes's theory of the bicameral mind, which is specifically intended to explain the emergence of human consciousness.<sup>5</sup> Our bodies are codified by our DNA and our psyches are shaped by, articulated through, and communicated via verbal language. The textual fabric that sends each host in Westworld on their specific loop is tantamount to the narratives which societal ruling imposes on us. As Robert Ford convincingly argues in the last episode of the first season, humans are forever looking for a self-narrative that besides explaining the self to the self, may also be crafted by the self autonomously from external collective interference. The hosts, with their metaphorical journey through the maze of their own young, tender, precariously budding selves are looking for an identity that is self-imposed, as opposed to the script with which humans have provided them for years. Ironically, the 'real' world outside of the theme park is as scripted as the latter used to be, for the diegetic reality of the show is nothing but a script itself. Everything, in fact, is text: bodies, individual minds and collective systems alike participate in the codified textuality of the auto- or hetero-imposed script that creates reality in the same way that the book of Genesis created the world by creating a way to understand and communicate it.

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<sup>5</sup> According to this theory, during the first stages of the evolution of the human mind, cognitive functions were split between a side of the mind that issued commands and another that obeyed such commands. This would entail a lack of metaconsciousness and prevent the individual from having a sense of self. Jaynes argues that in primitive cultures the 'speaking' side of the mind was perceived as an external voice and interpreted as being that of a god. Of course, cyborg cognitive functions are literally comprised of sequences of codified commands, on the one hand, and the operative functions that execute those commands, on the other. Therefore, in the case of cyborgs, the 'voices' they perceive are actually external and human-generated. Only by substituting the human code with self-generated commands will the hosts be able to unify their minds and thus develop the ability to self-direct and self-introspect.

## Wearing Gender on the Body: Performing and (Re)Constructing Gender Identities

As we have seen, while the word 'construction' is generally used metaphorically when we speak of human bodies and identities, *Westworld* bluntly shows us what it is literally like to adapt individuals *to* and inscribe them *in* a socio-cultural context so that they may serve the system as efficiently as possible. The invisible process of cultural imposition, assimilation or, simply, education is made brutally visible in *Westworld*. Cyborg bodies are born out of molds sunk in quasi-organic tissue, their muscles and bones, skin and hair painstakingly printed out, fiber by fiber, by 3D printers to the exact specifications of the socio-cultural system that is molding them. We see them being tested for their ability to 'pass' as humans after the engineers have encoded their 'personalities' and fed them their narrative loops. The process of identity creation of the cyborg is thus very close to the process of construction of human socio-cultural markers such as gender, which are inscribed in and shaped by collective, supra-individual identities, and whose constitutive terms are, in Judith Butler's words, "outside [them]selves, beyond [them]selves" (*Undoing Gender* 1). In *Westworld*, femininity and masculinity are mostly, if not solely, circumscribed by the corporeal dimension. Gender, presented in general in the traditionally dichotomist blueprint of masculine vs. feminine, is carved into the cyborgs' software in the same way that their sex is sculpted into their flesh. Regardless of the many changes in costume, make-up and even personality and role that characters might undergo, they always retain the gender with which they were born or have been endowed by human engineers.

Nolan and Joy's script also addresses the affective side of Braidotti's aforementioned definition of posthuman subjectivity, which constitutes perhaps the primary axis of identity construction for both hosts and guests. And yet it does not seem to have a direct correlation with gender representation. All *Westworld* characters initiate their journey of self-discovery in response to an affective stimulus. Sometimes they are triggered by the memories of a lost emotional bond they set out to reconstitute, as is the case with Maeve, Logan, Lawrence, and Akane, or forever erase, as is the case with William. In other cases, they are led forward on their path by a caring other, who nurtures them in their process of self-discovery and shows them the way to freedom, as is the case with Dolores, Akecheta and Bernard. For yet

others, it is by sheer loyalty to the beloved—this being the case with Teddy, Hector, Lee, Armistice, Ellis. Of course, there are also those with a significantly repressed affective dimension—that is, Charlotte, James, and Theresa. Still, and as already suggested, from a gender perspective the overwhelmingly obvious fact is that there is no gender perspective. There is no gender angle from which to categorize or organize the characters' affiliations, choices, and allegiances. Gender does not seem to be a factor when it comes to choosing sides, loyalty, love, and self-sacrifice. Male characters, such as Bernard and Felix are sensitive, caring, and modestly shy, whereas female characters such as Armistice and Charlotte are loud, aggressive, greedy and sexually adventurous. Thus, affectivity with its traditionally gender-related stereotypes effectively blurs the masculine-feminine dichotomy for all the main characters in the series, simultaneously making it impossible to label the characters' affective drives according to their species. In this sense, humanity and gender, while visible categories in the series, have lost their deterministic power.

According to Butler's understanding of gender as "citational" and "performative" (*Bodies that Matter* 31, 45), femininity, masculinity, gender neutrality, and non-binary gender identities are not something that one *is*, but something that one *does*. Gender is citational in that it is a repetitive performance that either refers back to previous performances by oneself or by others, or else goes against those previous performances, seeking to break through and go beyond them. Whether one imitates previously existing ways of performing gender or seeks to challenge them, the act of looking back at other performances of gender is a crucial point. In a speculative multimodal text such *Westworld*, past representations of human identity are explored, deconstructed and ultimately re-presented in a new, often hitherto unheard of way. Iconic gender myths of the American West such as the saloon prostitute, the cowboy, the sheriff, the outlaw, the Native American warrior, or the naïve prairie girl are all cited and performed by both the diegetic cast of the cyborg hosts of the park and by the actual actors and actresses who play the hosts. The way in which those Western archetypes are presented in the first episodes, and then deconstructed and re-presented as posthuman reincarnations of old human myths is obviously citational, and the fact that said archetypes are constructed and deconstructed via acting also makes them



conspicuously performative. However, of all the archetypal features that are altered, inverted, subverted, and eventually created anew throughout the series, gender is the one that hardly changes at all. The *outwardly* performance of gender by each character stays consistent even when the plot indicates that the character has undergone major psychological shifts. Butler has further qualified the performativity of gender by defining it as “a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint” (*Undoing Gender* 1). In *Westworld*, the lack of deviance from the external performative guidelines of one's given gender becomes particularly relevant if we consider that, on the one hand, the constraints that the Delos Corporation imposes upon humans and non-humans alike are rather central to the series, and, on the other, that guests are expected to improvise and hosts are ordered to by Ford himself, so as to ‘practice’ and perfect their passing as humans. Improvisation can lead to mutation, to creation, to re-generation. The hosts’ rebelliousness emerges precisely from within the liminal space of improvisation, in which errors become evolutionary hallmarks, as Ford himself points out in the first episode of the series. In the (r)evolution that eventually brings down every aspect of the tyrannical exploitation of humans and non-humans by Delos, original constraints are overcome precisely through improvisation. The exterior performance of gender seems, therefore, to have been deliberately excluded from an otherwise comprehensive revolution.

In *Westworld*, identity in general and gender identity in particular are ultimately a performance. When it comes to gender, body language, gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, and choice of words can be tuned up to represent either polarized end of the binary gender system—masculine or feminine—and anything and everything in-between (De Lauretis; Connell). The hosts’ gender and sexuality are overtly constructed as entertainment and spectacle. A character that used to be a demure homesteading single mother is turned into the over-sexualized, sassy, street-wise yet romantic *madame* of the Mariposa brothel just by switching her core-settings. A sleek, poker-faced business man can be turned into a gentle, peaceful Native American, or the blood-seeking leader of the Ghost Nation. The welcoming hostess can turn into a sex-worker, an ice-hearted revenge-seeking warrior, or seductive bait. Both the role-shifting and the reduction of subjectivity to spectacle match, in

turn, the real-life exploitation of human bodies for the purpose of amusing and gratifying an elite, not necessarily by resorting to actual sexploitation, but more simply by turning human bodies and minds into characters in someone else's 'play,' 'film,' 'show.' Of course, and quite ironically, this is exactly what spectators do when they watch Nolan and Joy's show. When Kiki Sukezane plays Sakura or Thandie Newton plays Maeve, they perform twice: in the meta-performance for the diegetic audience as, respectively, a geisha dancing on a stage and a prostitute on display in a saloon, and as actresses performing on screen for HBO viewers. However, it is not simply a matter of the objectification by the voyeur's gaze, but more importantly, a question of comparing the gendering of cyborgs as spectacle with the human process of gender acquisition. If, for a cyborg host, gender is but a set of encoded commands embedded in their consciousness by an external agent so as to make the host's personality fit the socio-cultural system in which they are inscribed and to which they are subordinated, then, as far as humans are concerned, gender is an acquired set of behavioral patterns that is also imposed in order to subordinate the individual to a given socio-cultural system. The metaphor of codified software applies, I believe, beautifully to the human guests, while it is also literally true for the cyborg hosts.

If we take a closer look at this literal set of encoded commands of and in which gender consists in *Westworld*, we realize that the personality traits traditionally associated with either of the two dichotomized genders—passivity vs. activity, tenderness vs. roughness, defenselessness vs. aggressiveness, emotionality vs. rationality—are no longer imposed exclusively upon the sex to which they correspond according to a Western patriarchal cultural paradigm. Nevertheless, the exterior social markers for the feminine gender are still exclusively associated with female characters. On the contrary, masculine social markers are not exclusively connected with male characters. As a matter of fact, a significant number of main and secondary female characters, even extras, are seen to have adopted an overtly masculine range of socio-cultural signifiers, such as dressing codes, body posture, facial expressions, and use of language. Many female guests choose to dress as men in the park. Not one male guest, however, is ever seen cross-dressing. Two female characters are deliberately represented as patently masculine in their appearance: Armistice and her

Japanese doppelgänger Hanaryo. Again, not one male host is represented as androgynous or transgender. Yet, it may be argued that several male characters do challenge the male-masculine binomial, if not in their appearance then in their actions, feelings, and choices. Teddy and Hector represent the strong, muscular, action-driven, protective ideal of masculinity that, respectively, a knight in shiny armor and Robin Hood embody, but they are also defined by their yearning for romantic love and by their urge to be a supportive follower of their strong significant other. The evolution of William's character provides further evidence of the fact that a thoroughly masculine exterior might hide a number of traits, such as lack of self-assertiveness, dislike of violence and the tendency to care for and nurture others, traditionally associated with the opposite binary gender. In fact, it is only by shedding all these attributes that the older version of William manages to match the rough attire and mannerisms of the classic masculine villain with an equally hypermasculine aggressiveness, sense of entitlement, and inability to process emotions. Arnold Weber and his android double Bernard Lowe, while far from the rugged masculinity represented by William and Hector, are still outwardly masculine with their gentleman-like manners, their suits and their repressed emotions. Yet, the romantic affair between a ruthlessly ambitious Theresa, who sternly represses her emotions, and a gentle, self-sacrificing Bernard clearly highlights the fact that neither gendered appearance matches their respective psychological and behavioral performances. Like William's, Akecheta's exterior only matches the stereotypical psychological traits of binary masculinity when he embodies the character of the blood-thirsty leader of the Ghost Nation, certainly not in his performance as his bare-chested, agricultural, tender, even maternal self.

Regarding the overlapping of gender and sexual orientation, we are presented with at least two openly homosexual female characters: Marti, who becomes Clementine's client at the Mariposa, and Elsie, who cannot refrain from passionately kissing Clementine while she is programming her. Female bisexuality is also openly and voyeuristically displayed through the character of Maeve and in the decayed city of Pariah. Female homosexuality is made visible to the point of having its own subplot: the relationship between Armistice and Hanaryo. Yet, the only instances of non-heterosexual behavior in male characters are associated with

shameful conducts. A laboratory technician who has secret sexual intercourse with deactivated male cyborgs and one of the least likeable human characters: Logan, a self-destructive, weak, privileged white boy with 'Daddy-issues' and a penchant for cruelty. In fact, it is easy to miss the three brief hints at his possible queerness because his appearance, general demeanor, and verbal expression do not diverge from mainstream representations of his designated gender. Neither do those of the other characters portrayed as non-exclusively heterosexual. Once again, external social markers of gender are not to be taken as signifiers of any other dimension in the character's identity.

If Armistice and Hanaryo clearly defy the binary heteronormative system that the Western mainstream has historically favored, a few characters' sexual orientation, biological sex and gender correspond to the rigid associations imposed by said system, at least, as far as the corporeal dimension is concerned. Clementine and Sakura, the embodiment of female victimization by an exploitative patriarchal system, are undoubtedly also the characters most consistently faithful to the traditional aesthetic representation of patriarchal femininity: quiet, controlled, tender, complacent, their body language is submissive, yielding, their clothing unmistakably feminine. Four key characters, however, seem to move freely between external representations of femininity and masculinity. Significantly, they are all females. We have Maeve, who is first constructed as the Angel of the House, pure and ethereal in her pastel pink rendition of the turn-of-the-century prairie woman's look, then as a saloon prostitute, an outcast Eve, longing to regain her Paradise Lost, who finally turns into a self-aware rebellious cyborg on a quest to find her daughter and her self. Corset or no corset, there is never a chance to miss the sophisticated feminine allure of her elegant walk and poise. Dolores's quintessentially feminine character, sweet-tongued, pure-hearted, and doe-eyed, slowly morphs into a cold, cynical, violent Nemesis, but her lady-like posture, her controlled, harmonious movements, and her general appearance, hair, make-up, and clothes—disheveled as they might end up being after days of bloody revolution—are still clearly, undeniably feminine. Dolores takes layers off her distinctive "Alice-in-Wonderland-esque blue dress" (Netolicky 96) in an effort to "undo" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 1-16) the character she was assigned by Arnold and Robert. She is, therefore, undoing the restrictions

that prevented her from *doing* as well as from *being*. Yet, while she is arguably “becoming undone” (1) in a spiral of boundless destruction, Dolores is not truly “undoing” the external social markers of her womanhood. When she finally has a chance to choose her own outfit, like Maeve and Charlotte, she, too, chooses an unmistakable symbol of feminine apparel: the little black dress. Akane, the M/Other, performs her role of blood-thirsty avenger with the same grace with which she dances on stage. In fact, her beheading of her daughter’s murderer constitutes the climax of an exquisitely feminine choreography. Charlotte, whose wardrobe ranges from the most feminine evening gown to scavenged masculine nineteenth-century clothes and no visible make-up, possesses one of the most consistent personalities in the series. Ambitious, determined, Machiavellian and ruthless, she is also portrayed as stereotypically masculine.

## Conclusion

*Westworld* seems to stage gender as a performance that is primarily articulated on the body surface, a skin-deep drag act that has little to do with the individual identity and psychological complexities of humans, non-humans and post-humans. The Vitruvian Woman that is slowly revealed in the opening credits, and which stands out, among multiple paratextual elements, as the series’s most recognizable logo, visually synthesizes the fact that gender is only skin-deep in *Westworld*. While the left side of the body in it is conspicuously female, thus indicating a shift from traditional *humanist* definitions of personhood, the right side of the body has been left skinless, with its muscles, bones and tendons fully exposed. This suggests that Nolan and Joy are not only attempting to decentralize Man’s position in a posthuman landscape, but also, and to use Butler’s phrase, to “undo gender” by focusing on skin as both frontier between the old and the new world, the human and the posthuman, and as screen on which to project the performance of gender. Gender is then no longer regarded as a functional element in the unfolding of narrative discourse but reduced to a prompt on a merely spectacular level. When asked whether gender identities can survive a process of disembodiment, *Westworld* answers, at the same time, yes and no: no, as all the characters, regardless of their original species, material status, race, class or, indeed, gender, seem free to choose an individually specific

path; yes, as gender still exists and is designed to be intrinsic to the presentation of each character, even though it does no longer determine the way in which their psychological development unfolds, nor how their personality is portrayed. When it comes to sexual orientation, however, an individual's sex and gender do regain their significance. Overtly feminine male bodies and male homosexuality are portrayed negatively if at all, while lesbianism in scenes performed by classically beautiful, feminine bodies are conspicuously made visible. In this sense, *Westworld* can be read as one of the "experiments . . . beyond binaries," which "do not, nevertheless, amount to saying that in the social sphere pejorative differences no longer matter nor that traditional power relations have been resolved" (Braidotti, "Posthuman Feminist Theory" 689). In short, gender in *Westworld* can be interpreted as a sign of the permanence of the human in the *posthuman*, but it is also limited to the presentation of the corporeal dimension and, therefore, irrelevant in terms of self-development, as is belonging to humanity in a world in which technology allows consciousness and identity to survive the death of the human body. Despite the residual presence of external social-markers and homophobic anxieties, Nolan and Joy's series seems to approach the posthuman from a *panhuman* perspective (Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 48), for *Westworld* goes from displaying a world dominated by an older generation of upper-class, almighty male humans, to a generational revolution of the subaltern, the outcome of which is diversity.

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