Female Body in the Postmodern Science Fiction

Ying Liang
Beijing Foreign Studies University, China

Abstract—The female body is still the focus of different and multifarious schools of feminist criticism. How does this relate to the post modern sci fi? Through examining the interactions between female bodies and technologies in close readings of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Greg Bear's *Queen of Angels*, we see an interesting paradox in action. On one hand naturally female body is culturally constructed according to dominant codes of femininity and racial identity, there is no way to consider the body without cultural influences coming through, but on the other, we see that the roles of women aren't the traditional, socially conditioned, and arbitrary sex roles. And often times we see an active rewriting the texts of the female body and an inversion of sexual roles. Historically the female body was constructed as a hybrid case, thus making it compatible with current notions of cyborg identity. Even today, the ambiguous constitution of female body is strongly related to cyborg identity. To contribute to the feminist studies of science and technology, this paper offers an alternative narrative of sci fi identity and argues that the female body is always gendered and is subordinated within systems of power, yet it is not fully determined by those systems and instead, always interacting with and resisting against these systems.

Index Terms—female body, science fiction, technology, cyborg, *Neuromancer*, *Queen of Angels*

I. INTRODUCTION

Historically the properly feminine body was considered to be constitutionally weak and pathological. For instance, women in advertisements are often depicted in poses that would be considered undignified for a man. Basically only one body type is preferred--- the waif look or the waif-made-voluptuous-with-reconstructed-breasts look. Yet some new ads today, for example, the new genre of physical fitness ads emphasize women's physical strength and capabilities as well as their sexuality and femininity. Ads for athletic products feature models with beautiful hair and faces, tanned skin, strong trim, and shapely bodies.

It can be argued that these new ads aim to strike balances between female athleticism and sexuality, leaving the question of empowerment up to the viewer. Yet if we cast our eyes to traditional science fiction, the picture is both monotonous and disheartening: the female body is always negatively constructed. It is gendered passive, self-denying, obedient, and self-sacrificial.

Have things changed in post modern science fiction? For one thing, post modern theory claims that women are rendered "other" (a notion that challenges the denotative stability of human identity) in the post modern discourse. With this myth, "even the special erotic nature of the feminine body may disappear" (Landa, 1996, p. 28). But, on the other hand, if we look at the images of female robots in post modern movies, cartoons, comic books, TV shows, and video games, the action heroes are often designed as leather wearing, metal dressing, with big boobs, long hair, and small waists.

So a series of questions arise: if the female body is a recurrent presence throughout the productions of world culture over thousands of years, how is it being reconstructed by and within the sci fi discourse, since as we all know, science fiction is a literature of infinite possibilities. Has the female body become unruly, uncontainable since the female fighters are always depicted assertive, strong, and knowing what they are doing, and yet emotionless? Or as argued by cyborg feminist Anne Balsamo, "the body in high-tech is as gendered as ever" (Balsamo, 1999, book cover) and it is still under control and structured according to the subordination of women? Or even, to quote Balsamo again, the repression and disembodiment of the female body is so easily accomplished (Balsamo, 1999, p. 117) in the sci fi that the female body is rendered silent / silenced? Is the material female body an obsolete piece of meat to be cast off or does it still matter? And how does technology play a role in all this?

These sensitive issues have been brought up in today's society and their being addressed in the sci fi discourse has particular significance in that until recently, sci fi may seek to draw on the sciences for much of its inspiration, but it has also reflected the larger culture around it. The twentieth century cultural environment has been one where traditional assumptions about the roles of men and women were still unchanged. Thus reading the body into the fields of science and technology can surely help map out the post modern society.

Before we venture directly into the discussion about post modern sci fi, let us have a brief overview of various feminist studies first. Feminism is not a closed topic. It is difficult to summarize feminist literary criticism as a whole. Who counts as woman? What is woman's identity? These have been questions of debate for a long time.

According to classical essentialist assumptions, traditional or normal sexuality

(heterosexuality) is the natural result of gender differences which are the same as sexual differences: males are and should be masculine, women are and should be feminine---not just female. (Landa, 1996, p. 20)

Therefore women are essentially different from men, and in fact there is an essence of women, there is a "she", and there is a singularity. "Foucault would have us believe that 'she' was hardly present, marginal and uninteresting at best" (Balsamo, 1999, p. 22).

Over the years, American feminism had shifted away from sex issues towards gender problems, that is to say, had concentrated more on social than on pure biological factors (Rodriguez, 1996, p. 109). For instance, constructivism tells us that first of all, "masculinity" and "femininity" are the result of culture and ideology, not the result of biology. Men and women are castes, not merely sexes (Landa, 1996, p. 22). For constructivist feminists, like Simone de Beauvoir, "you are not born a woman: you become one", and the sexual symbolism which surrounds both genders is a construction.

The female body is still the focus of different and multifarious schools of feminist criticism. Cyborg feminists like Donna Haraway subverts the beliefs in the essential unity and realizes that "female" is a highly complex term and is constructed. The concept of women is elusive: "Woman disintegrates into women in our time" (Haraway, 1991, p. 160). Women's experience is denatured. Balsamo observes that "the female body is not an essentially unchanging, given-in-nature, biological entity, but rather is symbolically constructed within different cultural discourses situated within different historical conjunctions" (Balsamo, 1999, p.22).

How does this relate to the post modern sci fi? My argument is that in cyberspace the female body still matters and yet the natural body takes the "technologically produced simulacrum" (Balsamo, 1999, p.28), the cyborg body, as its second self.

What is cyborg? "A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (Haraway, 1991, p. 149). Cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, fusions, and dangerous possibilities. In the cyborg world, the pristine natural nature is often an illusion, because nature has been largely married to technology and in fact technology and nature becomes almost the same thing. Therefore "nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other" (Haraway, 1991, p. 151). Nature is constructed, rather than discovered; truth is made, not found. Thus, according to Haraway, the only bodies that stand a chance in postmodern culture are cyborg bodies (Balsamo, 1999, p. 32). So when we look into the female body in the sci fi, we need to abandon our romantic conceptions of the material natural body.

II. NEUROMANCER

When *Neuromancer* by William Gibson was first published in 1984 it created a sensation. The plot of *Neuromancer* is roughly as follows: Case, the male protagonist, a twenty-four-year-old classic illegal hacker worked as a "thief, [who] worked for other, wealthier thieves, employers who provided the exotic software required to penetrate the bright walls of corporate systems, opening windows into rich fields of data" (Gibson, 1984, p. 5). Case has been nerve-damaged, rendering him unable to jack into cyber space. He is recruited and healed by Corto, who wants him to steal a digital copy of Case's now-dead cowboy teacher, McCoy Pauley, and with Pauley's help, break into a corporate / family computer matrix. Corto, who was formerly a military officer named Armitage, is controlled by an Artificial Intelligence (AI) named Wintermute. Wintermute wants to merge with his other self, an AI represented as Neuromancer. Case, the female protagonist Molly, Peter Riviera, and Armitage / Corto eventually succeed in releasing Wintermute and Neuromancer from the hardwired constraints that keep them from melding and evolving into a higher form of intelligence.

Virtual reality is at the heart of Sci fi. The opening image of the book: "The sky was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel" (Gibson, 1984, p. 3) compares nature to technology and sets the tone of the narrative. Thus Gibson creates an environment deeply rooted in technology and cyberspace. If we want to read anything into the name, "Case" could suggest detective fiction or technology. The mixture of flesh and machinery is introduced in the book through Ratz's stainless steel teeth. In fact, the characters of the book---Wintermute, Neuromancer, McCoy Pauley, Case, Molly, the Finn, and eventually the matrix itself---are all entities who live to one degree or another in the machine, in cyberspace, or to use Gibson's formulation, in the matrix of human knowledge "from the banks of every computer in the human system" (Gibson, 1984, p. 51). They are cyborg images.

Case treats his body as almost an alien entity with which he is not in friendly terms --- he describes the body as "meat" (Gibson, 1984, p. 6). Trapped in the physical body, Case feels himself drawn down to the "meat" level by the projection of Linda Lee. His seduction from the world of the Net down into the flesh is highly ironic. He also calls the girl in his cubicle a "meat puppet" (Gibson, 1984, p. 147). Yet his body is a kind of case for his mind and for the cyberspace with which he is jacking into, though it is only when his mind transcends its boundary of flesh that he feels unfettered and free.

The female protagonist Molly, a cyborg is our focus. What kind of person is she? What is her job? She is a street Samurai. Samurai originated as the faithful defenders of feudal lords during the Kamakura period, but as Japan fell into disorder, many of them roamed the country as "hired swords". She is also a "working girl" (Gibson, 1984, p. 30), prostitute, though when Molly uses the term it at first, she suggests a willingness to work as a street samurai for anyone.

Molly plays a large role in the novel. Only by jacking into Molly's body is Case able to jack into the matrix. Molly acts not just like masculine ass kickers, since she fights and kills in the book. She is also presented as active, dominant,

highly competent, and --- most important ---better informed than Case. She even possesses characteristics that are more masculine than feminine and she is also an extrapolation of the "tough dame" of mean-streets crime fiction.

Her physical strength (or emotional also) is due in large part to her equipment of the implanted weaponry. She has been technologically modified --- her body contains electronic technologies: glasses and razor nails. Eyes are the windows of the soul. Molly's characteristic implant --- eyes--- are at the center of the novel. But what is more significant is that her eyes are inaccessible, masked, and inscrutable, though she can see others. This protects her from intrusions: in fact Case never truly knows her and Peter Riviera is also enraged about her invisibility.

Molly's fingernails are retractable, made of steel, which suggests her profession of "razor girls" (Gibson, 1984, p. 28). Although Molly is depicted as a powerful embodiment of female identity, no longer constrained by norms of passivity and proper femininity, her body implants fully literalize the characteristically *threatening* nature of her female body. Why is she so threatening?

To be both female and strong implicitly violates traditional codes of feminine identity. Therefore we need to control the female body that is threatening us. Gibson's hero, Case, must negotiate a cyberspace invasion where he is plugged in to Mollys' body. Hence Case, the hot computer cowboy, is both similar and different from a traditional cowboy. The stolen module will enable Case to experience the world inside Molly's body without leaving cyberspace. Riding on Molly, Case gets to find out "just how tight those jeans really are" (Gibson, 1984, p. 53). Yet he is different from traditional cowboy in that Case's mind has to use Molly's body (If I have to choose one between male body and male mind, I would definitely choose the male body. It's better designed than the male mind.) As mentioned earlier, only by using Molly's body is he able to jack in. In traditional SF, a strongly independent individual often overcomes huge obstacles to solve problems affecting masses of people. *Neuromancer* departs from this pattern.

Case is not the only character in the novel that controls / manipulates Molly. Riviera's implant allows him to project onto the retinas of any of his victims. In chapter 8 we see Riviera projects to Case subliminal image to symbolize his opinion of Molly. In chapter 11 Molly is also furious at Riviera's sadistic fantasy performance. In chapter 18, Riviera encases Molly's hands in a kind of "Chinese handcuffs": the more you struggle, the tighter you are trapped. Therefore Case and Maelcum penetrate Villa Straylight to complete the mission and rescue Molly. When Molly abruptly sees her mutilated face, it is of course Riviera taunting her again.

In chapter 11 Molly gives her theory about how Wintermute is manipulating her (Gibson, 1984, p. 147-148). In fact, Wintermute has chosen each of the participants---Case, Molly, etc to manipulate, because each one has special skills and, more important, is psychologically manipulable in a predictable way. For instance, Wintermute plays upon Case's ill-fated love affair with Linda Lee and his consequent suicidal impulses. And Molly, although better informed than Case, like everyone else except Armitage, is left in the dark about what much of the plan of action is or who is really running the show. This lack of knowledge could, on some levels, make her weak.

Therefore, although Molly is depicted as a strong and independent woman, the sexualization of the gender and the female body is a common theme in this novel. Molly is sexualized. She is strong, but still extremely sexy. She is seen as wearing tight, form-fitting clothing to show off her sexuality. What "sumauri" would actually wear skin tight leather pants?

In post modern "cyberpunk narratives, as in VR applications, cyberspace heroes are usually men" (Balsamo, 1999, p.130). Yet Case is not a manly man. He seems very weak and dependent on people to guide him through everything that is happening. Case seems to be largely desexualized, due mostly to his passivity throughout the book, also he seems preoccupied with things like jacking in and doing drugs. Notice that Case is "disoriented" (Gibson, 1984, p. 56) while riding Molly for the first time. When he is first time inside Mollys' body, he is rendered passive.

For a few frightened seconds he fought helplessly to control her body. Then he willed himself into passivity, became the passenger behind her eyes. The glasses didn't seem to cut down the sunlight at all. He wondered if the built –in amps compensated automatically. Blue alphnumerics winked the time, low in her left peripheral field. Showing off, he thought. Her body language was disorienting, her style foreign. (Gibson, 1984, p. 56)

So his passivity refers to his lack of control over Molly's body. Yet in a sense Case does experience, a bodily state more traditionally feminine. His passivity is easily sexualized. To tease him, Molly "slid a hand into her jacket, a fingertip circling a nipple under warm silk. The sensation made him catch his breath. She laughed." (Gibson, 1984, p. 56).

Yet, overall *Neuromancer* still goes along with the trend that "inside of cyberspace, or out, the relations between these cybernetically connected bodies often recreate traditions heterosexual gender identities" (Balsamo, 1999, p. 129). So I would say in *Neuromancer*, the individual male and female bodies are coded only differently, instead of significantly different, than they are in prevailing cultural norms. However, as for Case, a counterargument could be Gibson tries to use Cyberspace to offer white men an enticing retreat from the burdens of their cultural identities. And in fact Balsamo notices that "in the course of Gibson's *Neuromancer* trilogy, for example, not only is the hero's body eventually reconstructed from fragments of skin, so is his macho-male identity" (Balsamo, 1999, p.129). Therefore it seems like Gibson himself may realize Case's passivity and decide to correct it in later works.

The book's overall heterosexual gender pattern also speaks directly to the ending of the book. The ending is actually interesting: Case and Molly are back where they started: alone. It is significant that Gibson doesn't go in to detail about Case and Molly's relationship after the job is done. This seems to imply that Case and Molly are cyborg selves

incapable of "true love". I say this because it seems like as the action progresses Case is very concerned with Molly's well being although the reverse of that is not really shown.

I would argue that the book's ending implies that male authors or predominant audience for sci fi (or was in 1984?) want highly desirable but dangerous women like Molly get involved with their protagonists and then leave.

Sci fi has been written largely by men for a mostly male readership. "In fact, … much of the new SF written by men, for all the boundary erosions and breakdowns it dramatizes, remains stuck in a masculine frame" (Pfeil, 1990, p. 88). Yes, Molly plays a powerful role in the novel, a theme if not hidden throughout most of the story. Yet she does not play a male stereotype role. Instead she is portrayed as being sexually aggressive and a tease, both qualities of which many men find sexually attractive. And in fact her power is basically through sexual attraction. This reminds me in the movie *Robocop* that female cops are quite sexualized. There are stripper costumes that are like cop outfits, except with much less fabric. Again this gives males the fantasy of being dominated by a woman. A cop has more power than a regular citizen. So why not take this into the bedroom?

Such *femme fatale* assassins are a mainstay of post modern action fiction and films. These tough Dames don't represent women's liberation, but they are a big draw for the male readers and also popular with male writers. So, although women's empowerment is surely a running thread in the novel, the female characters are still gendered female and constructed according to social norms.

Nonetheless *Neuromancer* is historically significant. It is the first cyberpunk novel as well as one of the best of its kind. Gibson's employ of contemporary technology sets a new standard for sci fi prose. A lot of ideas for contemporary sci fi films came from this book. It is definitely a seminal book.

III. *QUEEN OF ANGELS*

It is interesting to compare Molly with Mary Choy in *Queen of Angels* (1990) by Greg Bear. This story is situated in: December 2047, the miraculous microscopic machines of nanotechnology build a clean, prosperous America; art and LitVId flourish; the robot space probe AXIS. Mary is assigned to apprehend the missing killer for mandatory therapy---before the poet is captured by the Selectors, a network of vigilante fanatics who use neural torture on those considered mentally impure.

Mary undergoes much more transformations than Molly does. Mary changes her skin to make it "dolphinslick" (Bear, 1990, p. 5); she changes her face color to the color of "jet-black"; "Her transform chemistry could let her coast for many hours without sleep" (Bear, 1990, p. 48); she has birth control ability in that "she would lift the voluntary gates Dr. Sumpler had grown within her and let Ernest's seed find its way all the way" (Bear, 1990, p. 131); she can hide her nipples and bring them out (Bear, 1990, p. 135); she can even smell as she likes---"She brought out the perfume…, her smell that of jasmine, seeping from her; this was Sumpler's masterpiece, people who could smell as they wished" (Bear, 1990, p. 132).

Often times we hear stories of women, even fabulous X-women having cosmetic surgery. What are their motives? Get a man, improve beauty, "improve self-esteem, social status, and sometimes even professional standing" (Balsamo, 1999, p.58) or a little of everything? But whatever the purpose is, the female body is thus reconstructed "as a signifier of ideal feminine beauty" (Balsamo, 1999, p.58). According to Balsamo, "the female body …serves as a site of inscription, a billboard for the dominant cultural meanings" (Balsamo, 1999, p.78), yet Mary's body is super inscribed with a multitude of cultural meanings, central to which would be instead, a flip of gender roles and reconstructing the female body as a power.

What it means to be human? The first thing we need to know is we are all different and there is no need to feel ashamed or guilty about being different. Yet a modern mistaken belief is that "the female body is flawed in its distinctions and perfect when differences are transformed into sameness" (Balsamo, 1999, p.71). Hence cosmetic surgery. But the beauty reproduced in this way is the "assembly-line beauty", because "'difference' is made over into sameness" (Balsamo, 1999, p.58).

Yet Mary chooses "an exotic design" (Bear, 1990, p. 8) and this design doesn't make her look thin, frail, girlish, frivolous, exhibitionistic, silly, or any other "to dos" based on the weak, pathological beauty standard. Instead, her design makes her distinct, exotic, unreal, though still sexual and beautiful. She is rendered "an alien" (Bear, 1990, p. 8). Her friend Theo says to her "You are a fapping *alien*" (Bear, 1990, p. 8). Ernest also says to her "You tell me she [Theo] is your friend, Mary, but I never saw such a friend. She reflects off you. Doesn't love you. Wants to be like you, but hates you for being different" (Bear, 1990, p. 86). Mary is also cut off from her mother and her family after the surgery.

Yes, Mary is transformed into a woman strong, "tall, night-colored" (Bear, 1990, p. 6-7), independent, intelligent, and equal with men in their potential for professional status. She is gendered active and powerful. But don't get me wrong. The female self isn't transformed wholly into undefined or neutral. In fact she is transformed extremely sexier. Femininity "is essentially a masquerade, a fact which is further emphasized by fashion and cosmetics" (Landa, 1996, p. 28). "Her transformed voice was deep yet sweetly feminine, powerful yet motherly. She could sing lullabies or growl a pd threat" (Bear, 1990, p. 6). She is "quiet" (Bear, 1990, p. 6-7), "elegant" (Bear, 1990, p. 23) and "composed" (Bear, 1990, p. 23). We also see Ernest is the man Mary plans "to lawbond" (Bear, 1990, p. 140).

Mary's transformation makes her has that control over her sexual body, or gives her even more power over men. I really appreciate the fact that Mary's motives [in transformation] do not lie in male appreciation, like today's women's sometimes do, yet Mary and Sandra discuss:

(Mary) "There's a real problem with female transforms in the shade". …

(Sandra) "We're the new breed". …

(Mary) "I'd prefer to have some male protection" (Bear, 1990, p. 404).

And couple of times we see Mary's intention to harness her beauty and power and produce effects, though we also see hesitations, doubts, ignorance, or rejections from the receivers' side. "She [Mary] narrowed her eyes and fixed on the greeter until he averted", because "The greeter might not lust for her" (Bear, 1990, p. 37); "The nice young man decided this orbital transform [Mary] was too much even for fantasy and ignored her" (Bear, 1990, p. 38); "She [Mary] smiled that lovely unnatural smile white teeth small and fine behind full lips and smooth finely downed black skin. Her expression made him [Richard] avert and gave his insiders another knot. + She cannot be real none of this is real" (Bear, 1990, p. 105); "On impulse she flashed him [Ochoa] a girlish grin and waved with her splayed fingers. Ochoa frowned and turned away" (Bear, 1990, p. 119). Their trepidations can be due to either Mary's repelling "exotic" design or their belief that "behind the skin and beauty" Mary "seemed [more] real" (Bear, 1990, p. 105).

And her strategy of harnessing female power sometimes works. When she talks with Richard, she pulls "a chair away from the dining room table and sits on it feminine and precise without doubt or obvious anxiety". "Wonderful to be like that" (Bear, 1990, p. 106). Richard thinks. The little chemistry sparks.

Molly and Mary are two characters that alter their appearances surgically, yet Mary has much more transformations and her transformations are a much more direct flaunt on traditional beauty standard or gender roles. To be specific, first, Mary is a career woman and many of her transformations relate to her career enhancement. All of Mary's modifications make Mary more content with her self or her work. In the text, Theo admits:

"You have an edge over me and I refuse to compete, Mary".

"What edge"?

"You're a transform. You are exotic and protected" (Bear, 1990, p. 7).

Wendell also asks "if Mary seems more complete now than before, and what sort of job (non entertainment related) puts so much pressure on appearance". Balsamo's observation can serve as an explanation:

A man's choice to have cosmetic surgery is explained by appeal to a rhetoric of

career enhancement: a better looking body is better able to be promoted. In this case, cosmetic surgery is redefined as a body management technique designed to reduce

the stress of having to cope with a changing work environment, one that is being threatened by the presence of women and younger people. (Balsamo, 1999, p. 67)

In fact, although Mary wishes to "lawbond" with Ernest, when Ernest says: "Mary, you know I adore you, I'd give up al lot to be with you lawbond". "Mary smiled, then shivered. 'I'd like nothing better, but I don't want either of us to give up anything. We haven't peaked yet, professionally. After we peak" (Bear, 1990, p. 85). And even when Ernest says to her: "We'll be married by then. You'll protect me." "Mary chewed and watched him closely, looked away looked back with a slow blink. 'All right,' she said. … "You'll marry me?" asked Ernest, Mary smiled. "Eat" (Bear, 1990, p. 137), instead of giving an affirmative answer, though Mary expresses her intention to have "some male protection" at the end of the book (Bear, 1990, p. 404).

Second, if there is always "an unshakable belief in a Westernized notion of 'natural' beauty" (Balsamo, 1999, p.78-79), Mary chooses a design no thing close to that standard. Her nose is made "flat" (Bear, 1990, p. 143) instead of "pert" and "upturned" (Balsamo, 1999, p.62), though her eyes are "wide and slanted quizzical" (Bear, 1990, p. 143), which is both Western and Oriental shaped. Yet in *Neuromancer*, many Japanese women undergo surgery to remove the epicanthic fold in the eyelid, in order to get "Western" eyes. Our focus next is her skin color.

Ernest says to Mary that "You are truly a dark woman. Not just nature's halfhearted night; you are dark where sun never dares inquire" (Bear, 1990, p. 132). What does he mean by "halfhearted"? He could talk about the dark women who undergo or may want to undergo surgery to change their black colors, if they are not satisfied with their skin color and want to do something about it. It is like the derogatory "banana man", which refers to Asians who are yellow outside, but white inside.

Yet Mary is brave enough to choose a color [jet-black] that is not logo centric beautiful, and she chooses that design and color for "purely aesthetic" (Bear, 1990, p. 272) reasons. Black is beauty to her. In Hispaniola, which is a black culture, her color is generally, though not always, approved. "Your design is very beautiful, Inspector Choy. … We especially approve you of your skin color" (Bear, 1990, p. 193); "Soulavier gave Mary the sweetest smile she had yet seen in Hispaniola. 'There is a resemblance, you know,' he told her in a confidential tone" (Bear, 1990, p. 377) and this resemblance makes Mary "as human as you or I" in Soulavier's eyes (Bear, 1990, p. 377).

But Greg Bear makes the issue not so simplistic in that though Mary chooses her skin color because she finds it attractive at first, when she is in Hispaniola, she feels vaguely ashamed to wear that skin there (Bear, 1990, p. 198).

She looked at her hands, more like the hands of a mannequin than the vitally black hands of Roselle. Mary's palms were black, smooth and silken, tough as leather yet supple and flexible, super-sensitive on command; excellent high

biotech skin. Neither Jean-Claude nor Roselle seemed to think it a mockery; but theirs was a professional politeness and what they really thought might never be revealed. (Bear, 1990, p. 198)

She is ashamed because she realizes that "The inhabitants of Hispaniola had eared their blackness across centuries of misery", whereas her "own losses---friends, family and larger parts of her past---were minor sacrifices" (Bear, 1990, p. 198) and yet she is stealing their distinctive skin color without experiencing anything that entitles her to enjoy that privilege. Here we find a blatant flip of western beauty standard in that blackness not only carries exoticness, distinction, or beauty, but also honor, pride, privilege, and power.

Third, in terms of sexuality, Mary has more control over her body and more power over men than Molly. Mary's sexual power particularly manifests itself in her ability to choose whether or not she wants to be an active sexual being and her option of stopping her reproductive system. It prevents her from getting distracted by men or motherhood and helps her to concentrate on being a police woman. It entitles her individual dignity.

Whereas if we compare this with Molly's feeling of sex, we see that Case and Molly forms a functional and sexual liaison. For instance, after Case jacks into Molly the first time, the cybernetic penetration is followed by a sexual encounter between them. We don't get much about their sex. On Case's side, "What did he know about her? That she was another professional; that she said her being, like his, was the thing she did to make a living" (Bear, 1990, p. 56). He can recall that "their mutual grunt of unity when he'd entered her, and that she liked her coffee black, afterward" (Bear, 1990, p. 56). On Molly's side, Molly once reveals that she and Case have something important in common and she likes about her relationship with Case. Not much more than that is given.

IV. FEMALE BODY AND TECHNOLOGY

Getting a transformation in Molly and Mary's worlds doesn't seem odd or sick, yet it is interesting if we compare the reasons that they get a surgery, because we can discern the difference. Molly doesn't give an obvious explanation, yet we can assume this is for self image and career both. Jamie observes Molly may also "in a way use it as protection and offense". She is right. These motives also prompt Mary, though Mary at least is also prompted by a desire "to match inner her with an outer appearance that had never satisfied" (Bear, 1990, p. 8). The depiction of her process of interior struggle and gaining self-awareness and self-recognition shows Bear has a sure sense of his characters.

Has Mary felt satisfied after the transformation? Has she ever regretted and if so, has she come out of it eventually? Greg Bear's characters in the book really grow and Mary's growth is particularly shown in her changing attitudes toward "the crease of her buttocks" (Bear, 1990, p. 3). At first Mary is so concerned about the crease "turning gray in the universal deep black" (Bear, 1990, p. 3). On the surface, this can be interpreted that Mary is not pleased with the operation because the doctor leaves her a scar after the surgery.

But on a deep level, the process of her growth out of the concern about that crease also parallels her growth out of the warring selves. It is beyond the scope of this paper to trace how she grows out of the internal trauma. From a racial point of view, her crease is "a blemish" (Bear, 1990, p. 208) and makes her not black enough. In fact, not all the people in Hispaniola approve her skin color. Legar says: "You are a most attractive woman, of the kind of beauty we call marabou, though you are not negro. Surely a person who chooses to be black is to be honored by those born to the condition" (Bear, 1990, p. 241)? To him and some others in Hispaniola, people who are not black yet choose such a design are disrespecting them. And this worries Mary and she has to explain. And in the novel she feels the tension of being looking black, yet not a black inward, and her concern actually belies Ernest's praise that she is not "halfhearted night" (Bear, 1990, p. 132). So the crease is associated with her uneasiness, her flaw---"She didn't want him [Ernest] to see the blanching of her buttock crease. [She wanted him to see] so much else more intimate if less flawed" (Bear, 1990, p. 132).

Yet she gradually grows. When asked whether she "in fact support by [her] choice of design the political movement whereby blacks around the world have found their pride", Mary "considered that for a moment. 'No, I sympathize'" (Bear, 1990, p. 272). And by the end of the novel, she not only risks her own welfare to rescue the tortured Ephraim, she also finds peace at heart. "During her time on Hispaniola Mary had passed through the spectrum of dark emotions: fear, anger, dismay. Now she was simply calm" (Bear, 1990, p. 293). If we contrast this with earlier on, when asked by Yardley "You're a transform. … Are you pleased with your new self?" Instead of giving an affirmative answer, Mary answers "I've been this way for some time, it's second nature now. *Or should be*" (Bear, 1990, p. 297).

Interestingly enough, toward the end of the book, we find "her pale cleft mark was darkening. Soon she would be uniform black. Healing by itself" (Bear, 1990, p. 293). And as we have mentioned earlier, Mary chooses transformation "to match inner her with an outer appearance that had never satisfied" (Bear, 1990, p. 8). And at the end, over the New Year's Eve, "Mary closed her eyes. *Why have I become who I am*. The dark as night face smiled back at her. Ghost of younger self content to fade into. *What I see outside is now what I see in. I am one not two as before. Reason enough. Who else asks*" (Bear, 1990, p. 403)?

Mary's awakening of self-awareness can also be seen from the point of view of Mary's compassion and maternal nature. Mary's compassion and maternal nature overcome her blind observance of the law. However, she sets aside her sense of legal duty when she promises Ephraim an outlet, a suicidal escape. Her sense of legal duty has thus been completely supplanted by her compassion. This is irresponsible policing. In giving this promise, Mary becomes self-aware of her inner voice or conscience, her "highest and best self" (Bear, 1990, p. 395).

Molly in *Neuromancer* doesn't show her warring state explicitly when it comes to her transformations, though this mother notion is also obvious in *Neuromancer*, since Straylight, Wintermute and artificial intelligence are developed by a woman. This may show Gibson's interest in the self's relationship to culture and technology, and issues like how subjectivity produces and is produced by culture. One focal point behind the question could be: How do you recognize a self?

What is the significance of this mother notion? The gendered distinctions among cyborg characters are significant in that female body is coded as a body-in-connection and male body as a body-in-isolation. But I believe the "mothers" not just manipulate the dimensions of cyberbetic space in order to communicate with other people, or go for the release it offers from the loneliness of their material bodies (Balsamo, 1999, p.144), but rather, the depiction of the major struggle / integration throughout the books between the former and transform selves or between the "mothers" and the "kids" makes the disparate duality nature in the postmodern sci fi world all the more remarkable.

In spite of the promise cosmetic surgery offers women for the technological reconstruction of their bodies, in actual application such technologies produce bodies that are very traditionally gendered. Yet I am reluctant to accept as a simple and obvious conclusion that cosmetic surgery is simply one more site where women are passively victimized. Whether as a form of oppression or a resource of empowerment, it is clear to me that cosmetic surgery is a practice whereby women consciously act to make their bodies mean something to themselves and to others. (Balsamo, 1999, p. 78)

This relates to how to define technology in the sci fi world. What is technology? What qualifies as technology? In the world of the near future, who will control women's bodies? Are they technologically constructed? If they are technologized, in what ways technologies construct gendered bodies? Technology that I have focused on in the paper does not refer simply to computers and other such machines, but is understood "in a Foucauldian sense---to mean not only machines and devices but also social, economic, and institutional forces" (Balsamo, 1999, p.159). As observed by Wajcman, "technology is more than a set of physical objects or artifacts. It also fundamentally embodies a culture or set of social relations made up of certain sorts of knowledge, beliefs, desires, and practices" (Wajcman, 1991, p. 149).

Technologies always have multiple effects. Determining the meaning of those effects is not a simple process. Balsamo argues that the transformations "appearing as a form of resistance" in that "these technological body transgressions rearticulate the power relations of a dominant social order" (Balsamo, 1999, p. 54). "This is to say that when female bodies participate in bodybuilding activities that are traditionally understood to be the domain of male bodies, … although these bodies transgress gender boundaries, they are not reconstructed according to an opposite gender identity" (Balsamo, 1999, p.55). Thus she calls our attention to "the *persistence* with which gender and race hierarchies structure technological practices, thereby limiting the disruptive possibilities of technological transgressions" (Balsamo, 1999, p.55). She actually believes that "certain biotechnologies are ideologically shaped by gender considerations and other beliefs about race, physical abilities, and economic and legal status" (Balsamo, 1999, book cover)

Yet Mary and Molly's transformations show us that technology is not just "a powerful narrative force that qualifies and just obliterates the role of individual and collective human agency possibilities" (Spencer, 1999, p. 403). In Sandy Stones' analysis of the virtual body, she concludes that cyberspace both disembodies and re-embodies in a gendered fashion: technology is both the mechanism by which post political multinational corporate power dominates the lives of humans and the means of those humans' empowerment and resistance (Spencer, 1999, p. 403).

V. CONCLUSIONS

Generally critics believe that in traditional sci fi, the female body is still gendered passive and culturally and socially constructed. They also believe this holds true for post modern sci fi. For instance, Balsamo, as we have mentioned earlier, believes that new technologies are invested with cultural significance in ways that augment dominant cultural narratives. "My aim here is to describe," she asserts at the beginning of the book *Technologies of the Gendered Body*, "how certain technologies are, to borrow Wajcman's phrase, ideologically shaped by the operation of gender interests and, consequently, how they serve to reinforce traditional gendered patterns of power and authority" (Balsamo, 1999, p. 10). And she concludes

although cyberspace seems to represent a territory free from the burdens of history, it
will, in effect, serve as another site for the technological and no less conventional
inscription of the gendered, race-marked body. So despite the fact that VR
technologies offer a new stage for the construction and performance of body-based
identities, it is likely that old identities will continue to be more comfortable, and thus
more frequently reproduced. (Balsamo, 1999, p. 131)

What she is suggesting is that in post modern sci fi, on one hand, "the symbolic reproduction of dominant ideals of femininity" (Balsamo, 1999, p. 13) is narrated, and on the other, even if we see "deviant constructions of the female body" (Balsamo, 1999, p. 13), "old identities will continue to be more comfortable" (Balsamo, 1999, p. 13). So when deviations occur, we just need to "direct our attention to how deviant constructions of the female body are staged and disciplined" (Balsamo, 1999, p. 13). My argument is that the point is we need to decide to what extent the construction of the female body is deviant. Is it like in some ways the sci fi world is an idealized society where gender and sexual

preference are no longer issues? Or, as Balsamo suggests as an example, "cyberspace playmates are beautiful, sexualized, albeit sometimes violently powerful" (Balsamo, 1999, p. 131)? In other words, the deviations are just actually cautiously constructed to be a little insane, but still good overall?

The first option is not feasible, since Haraway herself suggests that a world without gender is utopian and this is perhaps a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end (Haraway, 1991, p. 150). Through examining the interactions between female bodies and technologies in close readings of *Neuromancer* and *Queen of Angels*, we have seen that in these two works there is an interesting paradox in action. On one hand " 'naturally' female body is culturally constructed according to dominant codes of femininity and racial identity" (Balsamo, 1999, p.41), there is no way to consider the body without cultural influences coming through, but on the other, we see that the roles of women aren't the traditional, socially conditioned, and arbitrary sex roles. And often times we see an active rewriting the texts of the female body and an inversion of sexual roles. Molly and Mary are typical examples.

By comparison, Bear is keener toward the tendency to challenge conventional views of gender, socialization, and sex roles. Created out of dissatisfaction with the dominant male discourse of traditional sci fis, *Queen of Angels* conceives a different view of the world. Teresa Lauretis anticipated the critical response that cyberpunk science fiction enjoys from postmodern readers when she provisionally suggested (in 1980) that in "every historical period, certain art forms (or certain literary forms…), have become central to the episteme or historical vision of a given society…. If we compare it with traditional or postmodern fiction, we see that SF might, just might, be crucial from now on" (quoted in Balsamo, 1999, p.136). I am pretty positive about the promise of post modern sci fi as long as it takes rethinking, reflecting, and challenging conventional views of gender, socialization, and sex roles as its mission and carry it on.

Historically the female body was "constructed as a hybrid case, thus making it compatible with notions of cyborg identity by more recent cultural theorists" (Balsamo, 1999, p.19). Even today, "the ambiguous constitution of the female body---predicated on the blurred boundaries between the individual and the collective, the material and the discursive, the fictive and the real" (Balsamo, 1999, p.34) is strongly related to their cyborg identity. Molly and Mary are cyborgian creations, predicated on transgressed boundaries. Generally cyborg image can be read as a coupling between a human being and an electronic or mechanical apparatus. The coupling between human and machine is located within the body itself---the boundary between the material body and the artificial machine is surgically redrawn. Yet cyborg can also be read as the identity of organisms embedded in a cybernetic information system. Thus the boundary between the body and technology is indistinct, but no less functional.

Women, gender roles, female body, and cyborgs are "simultaneously symbolically and biologically produced and reproduced through social interactions. The "self" is one inter-actional product; the body is another" (Balsamo, 1999, p. 34). The female body is eminently changeable and subject to revision. "It is never outside history and concrete relations of power and domination. It is never silent / silenced. Just as women never speak, write, or act, outside of their bodies, cyborgs never leave the meat behind" (Balsamo, 1999, p. 40).

"In postmodern social theory, the female body has been constructed as uncontainable, unruly, and ultimately un-decidable. Just as this is woman's legacy, so too is it her promise" (Balsamo, 1999, p. 38). Although the phrase "the female body" has been amply used as a critical concept in feminist denunciations of man's traditional appropriation of woman, things began to change. To contribute to the feminist studies of science and technology, this paper offers an alternative narrative of sci fi identity and argues that the female body is always gendered and is "subordinated within institutionalized systems of power and knowledge and crisscrossed by incompatible discourses, yet it is not fully determined by those systems of meaning" (Balsamo, 1999, p. 39) and instead, always interacting with and resisting against these systems.

REFERENCES

[1]   Balsamo, Anne. (1999). Technologies of the Gendered Body. Durham and London: Duke UP.
[2]   Bear, Greg. (1990). Queen of Angels. New York, A Time Warner Company.
[3]   Gibson, William. (1984). Neuromancer. New York: Ace Books.
[4]   Haraway, Donna, J. (1991). Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature. New York: Routledge.
[5]   Landa, Jose Angel Garcia. (1996). "Gender, I-deology and Addictive Representation: the Film of Familiarity." Chantal Cornut-Gentille D' Arcy, and Jose Angel Garcia Landa, eds. *Gender, I-deology: Essays on Theory, Fiction, and Film.* Amsterdam: Rodopi. 13-54.
[6]   Pfeil, Fred. (1990). Another Tale to Tell: Politics and Narrative in Postmodern Culture. London: Verso.
[7]   Rodriguez, Francisco Collado. (1996). "Complexity / Controversy: Some Aspects of Contemporary Women's Studies in America." Chantal Cornut-Gentille D' Arcy, and Jose Angel Garcia Landa, eds. *Gender, I-deology: Essays on Theory, Fiction, and Film.* Amsterdam: Rodopi. 107-20.
[8]   Spencer, Nicholas. (1999). "Rethinking Ambivalence: Technopolitics and the Luddites in William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's Works." *Contemporary Literature* 40.3: 403-429.
[9]   Wajcman, Judy. (1991). Feminism Confronts Technology. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP.

Ying Liang was born in Tianjin, China. She received her PH.D. degree in comparative literature from Purdue University, Indiana, USA in 2008.

She is currently an Associate Professor in the Graduate School of Translation and Interpretation, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, China, teaching translation. She taught intensive reading & biblical literature at School of Foreign Languages, Nankai University, Tianjin, China from 2000-2002; taught English composition at Dept. of English, Purdue University, USA from 2002-2008. She has published two monographs: *A Comparative Study of Eighteenth to Twentieth Century Chinese and American Country-0f-women Utopian Fictions* (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2010); *William Faulkner and Shen Congwen's Three Worlds: A Thematic Comparative Study* (Berlin: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2010). Her research interests include translation, comparative literature, English composition, and American literature.

Dr. Liang is a member of Translators Association of China, International Association for Chinese Culture Studies, and International Association of Eco-translatology Research. Dr. Liang is also on the Steering Committee for National Accreditation Examinations for Translators and Interpreters, specifically responsible for writing the exams.