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## **The Art of the Exploit: Gender Hacking and Political Agency**

**HELEN HESTER**

First published in French and Spanish in 2008, and released in English in 2013, Paul B.

Preciado's *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* is an idiosyncratic and hybridized work — a 'book-length meditation on an epochal shift in the logic of gendered being', in which reflections upon the pharmaceutically-mediated nature of contemporary gender and sexual embodiment are positioned alongside semi-autobiographical accounts of the author's illicit experimentation with Testogel (a synthetic androgen administered through the skin).<sup>1</sup> Since the end of the twentieth century, Preciado argues, the West has been dominated by 'the processes of a biomolecular (pharmaco) and semiotic-technical (pornographic) government of sexual subjectivity'.<sup>2</sup> The medical technologies which alter our moods, our fertility, the contours of our bodies and what we might do with them, combine (not always harmoniously) with the circulation and capillary diffusion of pornographic images to construct the contemporary gendered self.

But although Preciado presents both pornographically and pharmaceutically mediated subjectivities as the product of post-industrial capitalism after 1970, he does not try to claim that either drugs or sexually explicit images inevitably and invariably play into the hands of power. In fact, the heart of his project in *Testo Junkie* can be found in attempts to disrupt the pharmacopornographic regime through experimentation with these tools. In the text, BP (the author's autofictional avatar) takes a DIY approach to many of the key elements s/he identifies as being central to biocapitalism; an early episode entitled 'videopenetration,' for example, sees hir filming a pornographic self-portrait with the help of three dildos and a homemade moustache (*TJ*, 16), and the reader is regaled with accounts of hir self-administration of a range of intoxicants, from coffee and cigarettes to alcohol, cocaine and ecstasy.

The most obvious example of what Preciado calls the ‘principle of the auto-guinea pig’ (*TJ*, 348), however, is BP’s self-devised protocol for the administration of testosterone: ‘I am my own guinea pig for an experiment on the effects of intentionally increasing the level of testosterone in the body of a cis-female. Instantly, the testosterone turns me into something radically different from a cis-female’ (139-40). Preciado frames this relationship with Testogel via language more generally associated with hacker communities. The narrator directly compares those who seek to intervene within technoliving embodiment to computer hackers who ‘use the web and copyleft programs as tools of free and horizontal distribution of information’ (395), and s/he celebrates those ‘who consider sex hormones free and open biocodes, whose use shouldn’t be regulated by the state or commandeered by pharmaceutical companies’ (55). The person who supplies BP with testosterone is described as a ‘master gender hacker’ (55), while other transfeminist icons are labelled as ‘hackers of gender, genuine traffickers of semiotico-technological flux, producers and *tinkers* of copyleft biocodes’ (395; emphasis in original).

This approach to corporeal politics is likely informed by wider discourses around hacking the body. As Alessandro Delfanti notes, since the *fin de millénaire*, an ‘array of do-it-yourself biology groups, biotech start-ups and community labs have emerged in Europe, America, and Asia’, whose activities rely on accessible data and cheap (sometimes homemade) equipment.<sup>3</sup> Their work ‘draws on elements from hacker cultures and adopts molecular biology as its main scientific framework’ (237). Examples range from the relatively formalized (such as Shenzhen Open Innovation Lab in China, which offers a synthetic biology programme covering cell synthesis, biomanufacturing and genome editing) to the rather more DIY, including individual “hobbyists” in Australia, the US and elsewhere who have genetically modified their own gut bacteria or implanted LED lights beneath their skins.<sup>4</sup> From at least the mid-noughties, Delfanti argues, ‘scholars analysing the rise of

phenomena such as DIY biology have ( . . . ) focused on the relation between distributed biology and hacking, thus adopting the term “biohacking” as an umbrella term referring to different forms of distributed intervention in the life sciences’ (238). Gender hacking can be viewed as a specific form of biohacking — one which emphasizes the mutability of gender and sexual embodiments, and the social systems that surround and constitute them. But what is hacking, and how does it operate as (or within) theories of social change? Concentrating on *Testo Junkie*, this article will consider the figure of the hacker and the process of hacking as they circulate in Preciado’s writing, with a view to understanding the implications of their usage for contemporary conceptions of political agency.

### *Hacking Off*

Hacking is a term primarily associated with gaining access to computer systems by exploiting their vulnerabilities (sometimes at the behest of the militarized state). More generally, however, it has come to be understood as a process of improvization, involving the creative application of specialized knowledge or technical expertise to specific problems — as in, for example, the idea of “life hacks” as handy tips or tricks for making one’s day-to-day activities easier to perform. It is this looser, more expansive sense of hacking (inspired by, but not identical to, the computational kind) that concerns me in this article, particularly as it relates to gender or biohacking. Of course, it is not always helpful to further dilute an already contested and polysemic term — to broaden out something already in dispute — but it can nevertheless be revealing to observe the implications of this kind of conceptual slippage.

We are dealing with hacking principally as model or metaphor here, then — an approach to engaging with systems we inherit, which are not of our design. To wilfully appropriate Marx’s comments on history, we make our own technical systems, but we do not

make them as we please; we do not make them under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. Hacking can be understood as means of intervening within this landscape or under these conditions. What do practices of hacking, in the typical sense of gaining unauthorised access to computer systems, share with these wider processes? What resources can they lend to other forms of so-called hacking, and what do they have in common?

Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker note that contemporary struggles in informatic spaces ‘do not centre around changing existent technologies but instead involve discovering holes in existent technologies and projecting potential change through those holes. Hackers call these holes “exploits.”’<sup>5</sup> An exploit is a software tool designed to take advantage of flaws or vulnerabilities in a computer system, but in Galloway’s and Thacker’s broader characterization it can also be understood as ‘a resonant flaw designed to resist, threaten, and ultimately desert the dominant political diagram’ (21). Hacking, as the art of the exploit, can be understood as the strategic misuse of existing elements within a given system — the turning of these elements toward different ends. Processes of repurposing (by which I mean, processes of using old means for new ends) can lend themselves to being understood as acts of hacking; they offer potential avenues for subversion via the turning of extant materials towards alternative uses.

We can detect something of this understanding within Preciado’s work. By his account, gender hacking can be described as follows:

A cellular micropolitics that looks beyond the politics of representation for leakage points in the state’s control of fluxes (hormones, sperm, blood, organs, etc.), codes and institutions (images, names, protocols, legal inscriptions, architecture, social services, etc.), and the privatization and marketing of these technologies of production and modification of gender and sex by pharmacopornographic corporation. (*TJ*, 389)

Contrary to any idea of hacking as cyber warfare, this pits the resistant subject decisively *against* state regimes. Like hacking in its more conventional sense, however, it involves the identification and leveraging of ‘holes’. The self-experimentation at the heart of *Testo Junkie* is itself a process of turning old means to new ends; BP is taking testosterone outside of the narrowly defined territories of its institutionally sanctioned usage. S/he is not taking it with the permission of the medical authorities in order to transition; s/he is illegally self-administering it, appropriating and repurposing specific molecules in an act of auto-experimentation without preconceived goals or ideal outcomes.

As Elizabeth Stephens remarks:

[Preciado’s] focus is on experimentation rather than identity, a decision about which [he] is [himself] highly ambivalent, and one [he] is aware is not politically neutral nor without potentially negative consequences for people who do not live in [his] (reasonably privileged and independent) circumstances, and whose relationships with the pharmaceutical industry [he] critiques are compellingly different.<sup>6</sup>

This seizure of the territory of the auto-guinea pig is presented as an act of resistance by Preciado and makes up much of the substance of the political project sketched out in *Testo Junkie*. The narrator expresses this view quite forcefully:

The first principle of a trans-feminism movement capable of facing *porno-punk* modernity: the fact that your body, the body of the multitude and the pharmacopornographic networks that constitute them are political laboratories, both effects of the process of subjection and control and potential spaces for political agency and critical resistance to normalization. (*TJ*, 348; emphasis in original)

Elsewhere in his work, Preciado asserts that ‘We will soon, without a doubt, be able to print our sexual organs with a 3D bio-printer’, resulting in a ‘contrasexual aesthetics defined not

by laws of sexual reproduction or political regulations but by the principles of complexity, singularity, intensity and affect' (AA, 219).<sup>7</sup> This is a future in which people will be better able to hack the pharmacopornographic regime via the strategic repurposing of available technologies.

To some extent, Preciado's emphasis on repurposing also characterizes biohacking more generally, given that it is 'often conducted outside traditional research environments' and 'is based around finding innovative and creative home-made workarounds to the limitations of existing technology, for pleasure, often assisted by knowledge sharing'.<sup>8</sup> Gender- and biohacking can arguably be framed as a form of shrewd cyborgian witchcraft – one which, in keeping with a tradition of radical amateurism, facilitates practices of bodily knowledge and technological know-how that might otherwise be concealed, forbidden, or occulted. For Hil Malatino, illegality 'is central to the ethos of biohacking. As a form of hacking, it entails the illicit acquisition of material. This acquisition is democratizing because it bypasses systems of bureaucratic gatekeeping and institutional regulation and thus expands accessibility' ('BG', 181). A hacking perspective brings with it a particular set of affordances; as an approach to interacting with inherited systems, it generates opportunities for subversion and searches out possibilities for exercising (restricted and relative) agency in the face of substantial constraints.

Despite these possibilities, however, critics have expressed justifiable reservations about the emancipatory potential of biohacking. While many hacktivist movements around the globe 'work to disrupt the functions of state and capitalist technological apparatuses',<sup>9</sup> and while Preciado's project both within and beyond *Testo Junkie* calls to (and for) 'cooperatives of politicized users, cooperatives that would allow us to win sovereignty to confront pathologizing institutions as well as the pharmaceutical industry and its ambitions for genocidal profit' (AA, 236-7), other varieties of biohacking do not address themselves to

such a mindfully politicized imagined consumer. Rather, as Malatino aptly notes, they target ‘a small handful of entitled, enfranchised subjects’ (‘BG’, 189), who seek to engage in processes of biological modification as part of a quest for ‘do-it-yourself superhumanity’ (181). To this extent, ‘there is a form of biohacking that is fully invested in Western technoprogressivist fantasies of transcending the limitations of the human body, in overcoming (through medical, technological and nutritional means) disease, frailty, weakness and — ultimately — human finitude itself’ (179). All this occurs at the level of the entrepreneurial individual, with little attention to the uneven distribution of the means of self-production.

There is also a risk that biohacking processes will themselves be co-opted by capitalism and/or the state — part of the ongoing autophagic dynamic of repurposing, in which that which has been appropriated comes to then be appropriated in turn. The technologies and alternative sociotechnical practices developed via biohacking are liable to eventually be incorporated by and adapted to the needs of industry and centralized institutions (including universities), in such a manner that their more radical edges are quickly sanded off. After all, as McKenzie Wark notes, the ‘ruling class seeks always to control innovation and turn it to its own ends, depriving the hacker of control of her or his creation’, and ‘Patents and copyrights all end up in the hands, not of their creators, but of a vectoralist class that owns the means of realizing the value of these abstractions’.<sup>10</sup> These criticisms link to issues that will concern me throughout the remainder of this article — specifically, the disadvantageous qualities of hacking as a paradigm for agential intervention when it comes to thinking about would-be counter-hegemonic political projects, and the pressing need to complement a hacking paradigm with a wider ecosystem of activist perspectives. Such issues become more apparent when we consider the tensions of scale evident within Preciado’s work.

*Small Time: The Parasite in the Machine*

For our purposes, the most pressing issue with regard to the supposedly emancipatory potential of biohacking is one which relates also to the hacking of networked computing technologies — namely, that it tends to emphasize resistance over systems building.

Galloway and Thacker argue that ‘*one of the greatest lessons of computer viruses and their cousins (Internet worms, Trojan horses) is that, like biological viruses, they exploit the normal functioning of their host systems to produce more copies of themselves*’ (TE, 83; emphasis in original). As an opportunistic violation or strategic misuse of an existing system, hacking necessarily presupposes and is parasitical upon the very system it disrupts. It is telling, then, that these authors explicitly link hacking with transgression (as in, the act of violating a rule or convention) — the character and political valances of which have been subject to considerable debate within modern European philosophy.<sup>11</sup>

As Georges Bataille famously remarks, ‘*The transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it*’.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the act of transgression reinforces the taboo that it violates, and in fact depends upon this taboo for its very existence *as* transgression; the thrill of violation is thus particularly acute when the standard violated is one to which the transgressor themselves wholeheartedly subscribes (E, 38). Indeed, for Lisa Downing and Robert Gillett, transgression ‘is at least as much about affirming the status quo as about challenging it’ — a view with clear implications for understanding a hacking model of activist intervention.<sup>13</sup> If we consider hacking as a correlate of transgression, we are prompted to acknowledge the fundamental dependency of the exploit upon that which is being exploited. Exploits, like violations of norms, depend on existing systems for their ability to propagate, and as such operate (necessarily and specifically) as a form of resistance.

The version of gender hacking that *Testo Junkie* enacts arguably plays into these dynamics, ultimately proving ambiguous in terms of its challenge to the biocapitalist systems that it aspires to disrupt and upon which it depends.

As we've seen, by strategically "misusing" pharmaceuticals, BP's voluntary intoxication protocol points to the political possibilities associated with seizing and repurposing technologies. It deploys testosterone in ways that run counter to its medically sanctioned uses, and as such involves the application of specialist knowledge in an improvisational response to inherited systems. In appearing to espouse such strategies, Preciado might be seen as enacting a kind of 'rebellious compliance', a politics defined not by outright rejection but by strategic co-option and partial acceptance.<sup>14</sup> As Joshua Rivas puts it, 'political agency emerges when one knowingly assents to pharmacopornographic pleasures', and BP's embrace of pornography, his utilization of pharmaceuticals, and so on, are all part of an attempt to manipulate the meanings of these pleasures, rather than to refuse them outright (155).<sup>15</sup> (Such a project can be related to a wider queer tradition of appropriation in Preciado's work, as most obviously exemplified by the repurposing of the word "queer" itself – an appropriation via which 'an insult used by heterosexuals to mark homosexuals as "abject" [...] becomes the rebellious and productive self-designation of a group of "abject bodies" who for the first time seize the word and reclaim their own identity'.)<sup>16</sup>

As one might expect of a process framed as a form of hacking, system and exploit are entangled in BP's approach to pharmaceuticals, and for some readers, appropriation shades into over-identification. Benjamin Noys, for example, suggests that Preciado pursues a strategy of 'immersion with these new forms of power. The "drug" experience, this molecular intoxication, is not a device of transcendence or escape per se, but rather insertion with and within the "chains" of signifiers and "materialities" of the present'.<sup>17</sup> Preciado's politics of

appropriation is a form of resistance through compliance that arguably results in opposition becoming all but indistinguishable from capitulation; the parasitical exploit piggybacks on elements of the normal functioning of its host system. The key point here is that an approach that favours hacking as a model of emancipatory change-making is liable to prioritize working through and within the system to which it is a reaction, rather than creating alternatives to that system. It concentrates on select interventions, targeted disruptions and specific resistances in place of throughgoing structural transformation.

The influence of this hacking perspective can be felt in the framing of political agency throughout *Testo Junkie*. Preciado, for all his avowed cosmopolitanism, concentrates primarily upon small-scale interventions and repurposings, arguing that self-experimentation is ‘a requirement for the possibility of any future micropolitical action’ (362). While figures in a wider gender hacking network lurk at the margins of the book — ‘hundreds of transgender, mutating bodies all over the planet’ (21) — Preciado favours the microcommunity, and typically declines to engage directly with potential ‘rhizomatic connections among (...) resistances and insubordinations’.<sup>18</sup> As the voice of the text observes, ‘romantic autoexperimentation carries the risk of individualism and depoliticization’ (351); as with other tendencies within the biohacking movement, we find that pursuing individual self-fashioning by any means available is as about as revolutionary as things get. The injustices that Preciado outlines in his account of the ‘technology of heterosocial domination’ (*CM*, 24) are, to quote Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, ‘abstract in appearance, complex in structure, and non-localised’.<sup>19</sup> As such, they demand ‘systemic and abstract responses’ (*IF*, 40) — responses that *Testo Junkie* regrettably demonstrates scant interest in advancing.

Preciado never claims that his pharmaceutical and theoretical protocols should be read as a practical handbook for collective politics, and as such it would be somewhat unfair to

censure him for failing to engage in feasible counter-hegemonic strategizing. The main focus of *Testo Junkie* is (quite self-consciously) micropolitical experimentation, and it deserves to be considered in these terms. However, there *are* moments where the voice of the text expresses a desire for larger-scale social change, and it is at these points that the limits of the project demand critical consideration. When these thoughts arrive, the book tends to veer rather dramatically from the micropolitical towards the other extreme, jumping from accounts of BP toying with the hormonal metabolism of his own discrete body to ambitions toward species-wide ‘endocrinal reprogramming’ (143), and leaping from an individualized micropolitics of embodiment to a wider-reaching political vision no less radical than the remaking of the human.

Preciado writes, for example, that ‘*molecular revolution*’ is a matter of ‘intervening intentionally in this process of production [of sexual difference] in order to end up with viable forms of incorporated gender, to produce a new sexual and affective platform that is neither male nor female in the pharmacopornographic sense of the term, which would make possible the transformation of the species’ (*TJ*, 143; emphasis in original). Here we encounter an obvious issue of scale: from tinkering with individual bodies to re-engineering humanity, with little in between. What remains largely ignored is the *mesopolitical* – the sphere which, as I have put it elsewhere, ‘operates between atomized, hyper-local interventions at the level of, for example, individual embodiment (micropolitics), on the one hand, and big-picture, speculative projects premised on the wholesale overthrowal of power at the level of the state or beyond (macropolitics), on the other’.<sup>20</sup> That is to say, comparatively little imaginative space is given to the ways in which diverse embodied appropriations might interconnect, in which the project might be scaled up, or in which a collective politics might be practically cultivated.

This is not to suggest that the mesopolitical is entirely disregarded in Preciado's work, however. His *Countersexual Manifesto*, for example, displays a marked interest in technologies of sociopolitical scale, such as the contract, the manual and the constitution. These forms are designed precisely to facilitate the establishment and transmission of particular projects or practices – in Preciado's case, counter-normative practices intended to destabilize a 'naturalized heterocentric regime' (*CM*, 40). He includes a sample countersexual contract, instructions for countersexual somatic activities (accompanied by helpful diagrams), and a highly programmatic set of principles for a countersexual society. While this suggests an interest in and engagement with the devices required for a scaling up of political ambitions, however, I'm not convinced that it represents anything like a concerted attempt to practically cultivate a collective project.

This is because there is a degree of playfulness and hyperbole in this section of the manifesto that invites us to read it as tongue-in-cheek. The principles of countersexual society include such articles as the 'systematic parody and simulation of the effects associated with the orgasm in order thus to subvert and transform an ideologically constructed natural reaction' (*CM*, 34), for example. Others mandate the establishment of 'high-tech countersexual research squads' to explore new forms of 'feeling and affection' (*CM*, 33). The declarative tone of a political constitution is set against the rather more ludic content of specific assertions here, encouraging us both to view this framing as ironic and to recognize that bodily autonomy and sexual or gender freedom cannot, by definition, be imposed by fiat. As such, the character of Preciado's engagement with these legalistic or instructional forms would seem to counteract the aspirations toward meaningful mesopolitical transmission that their use might otherwise imply.

In *Testo Junkie*, too, there is a brief flirtation with the mesopolitical – one which, while apparently more serious in intent than that of the *Countersexual Manifesto*, is

nevertheless somewhat underdeveloped. In the book, drag king workshops are shown to initiate a consciousness raising process, as participants reflect upon the structural underpinnings of their individual experiences of gender:

Little by little, a denser and denser fabric of voices is created; it surrounds us and allows us to cover ourselves with shared words, creating a collective second skin.

Under that protective membrane, through a political magnifying glass, we can see that femininity and masculinity are the gears of a larger system in which every person participates structurally. Knowledge liberates. It produces a certain political joy that I have never experienced before. (*TJ*, 366)

There is at least some concern here with how the individual connects to the systemic and with how such spaces of ‘political joy’ might scale up into a wider transformative force in society. The voice of the text expresses hope that such workshops might proliferate ‘as spaces for the creation of urban brigades that, in their turn, will set off more workshops, decode the dominant gender grammar, invent new languages’ (*TJ*, 377). And indeed, the idea of consciousness raising to which such practices relate has impressive form as a mesopolitical technology, having proven itself to be a remarkably flexible, transmissible and accessible tool of feminist change-making during the course of the second wave.<sup>21</sup>

The space given over to the development of this idea is scant, however, and there remains a striking disconnect between the introduction of ‘a dozen [...] cis females’ exploring gender identity in an experimental performance workshop (*TJ*, 365), and the suggestion shortly afterwards that this might generate ‘*global* counterhegemonic networks for reprogramming gender’ (*TJ*, 377; emphasis in original). Indeed, the text itself seems a little sheepish about advancing such claims, almost pleading with the reader to accept that ‘it is necessary to take the risk of giving [such practices] their chance’ (*TJ*, 377). There remains a disjuncture in *Testo Junkie*, then, between macropolitical ambitions and micropolitical

means. In dealing primarily with small-scale, individualized tactics, it risks remaining satisfied with isolated, temporary and defensive (if appealingly romantic) gestures of experimentation, rather than looking toward how one might enact further reaching forms of change – or indeed achieve ‘*planetary somatic communism*’ (CM, 13; emphasis in original).

Of course, one reason *why* the mesopolitical is liable to be neglected in this context is because it is so difficult to theorize outside of its concrete materializations; it is situational, perpetually negotiated, and difficult to distil down to generalizable principles. But tricky as it is to theorize, one neglects it at one’s peril; without sufficient attention to the mesopolitical, the difficult work of alliance building and of increasing the reach of political ideas too often goes unappreciated. It is this — rather *unromantic* — scale of operations that is left largely unconsidered in *Testo Junkie*, and perhaps within a hacking approach to sociopolitical transformation more generally.

### *(Re)Engineering Gender*

Preciado is invested in the bringing into being of a society in which gender dissident subjects can carve out a space of relative autonomy within disciplinary systems that remain difficult to navigate, both materially and politically. To some extent, his project can be seen as one of biomedical self-defence, which promotes individual agency over gender and reproductive embodiment when agency is somehow limited, conditional, or at risk of being curtailed. Such an agenda is important and valuable in and of itself (as a survival strategy, a tool for circumnavigating gatekeepers and so on). It is crucial, however, to position this approach in relation to and conjunction with other kinds of activist intervention and political imaginaries in order to ensure maximal emancipatory gains. If resistance and self-defence are taken to be the only horizons of action, we risk replicating some of the problematic complexities of the

exploit, and of hacking as a correlate to transgression. After all, as Srnicek and Williams note, resistance ‘is a defensive and reactive gesture, rather than an active movement. We do not resist a new world into being; we resist in the name of an old world’ (*IF*, 47). When interpreted as an end in itself, resistance can be seen to depend upon (and potentially to perpetuate) that which it resists.

An alternative viewpoint might celebrate resistance through repurposing, whilst also recognizing that appropriation itself may be an indicator of disempowerment — a disruption from within a system that continues to be stacked against us; a moment of cunning, potentially capable of achieving specific ends, but by no means an automatic and unqualified good. The disruptive practices of DIY gender hacking need to be complemented by broader attempts to ensure extensive and enduring change — to reconfigure not only specific bodies and subjectivities, but also the far-reaching institutional formations of the technomaterial world. What might such an approach involve, and can Preciado’s work help us to imagine it?

Elements of the project advanced in *Testo Junkie* resonate with ideas expressed in *Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation* — a work of neorationalist technofeminism authored by the international working group Laboria Cuboniks (of which I am a member). The so-called xenofeminist manifesto declares that ‘nothing is transcendent or protected from the will to know, to tinker and to hack’, and looks to the ‘embryonic promises held before us by pharmaceutical 3D printing (“Reactionware”), grassroots telemedical abortion clinics, gender hacktivist and DIY-HRT forums, and so on’.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, some commentators have positioned xenofeminism itself as ‘a framework to hack the human’.<sup>23</sup> Where this project differs from *Testo Junkie*, however, is in its explicit emphasis on the need to ‘foster connections between fractured insurgencies, to consider how emancipatory tactics can be scaled up for universal implementation’ (4). Xenofeminism describes itself as ‘an affirmative creature on the

offensive, fiercely insisting on the possibility of large-scale social change for all of our alien kin' (4).

As part of its attention to scale, the manifesto explicitly problematizes an overreliance on the idea of hacking as a philosophical framework for theorizing political agency, and queries 'whether the idiom of "gender hacking" is extensible into a long-range strategy, a strategy for wetware akin to what hacker culture has already done for software — constructing an entire universe of free and open source platforms that is the closest thing to a practicable communism many of us have ever seen' (9). Clearly, this is just as romantic as *Testo Junkie* in its own way; crucially for our purposes, though, xenofeminism sees hacking itself as a political technology with a specific set of affordances, and insists that it be viewed as only one potential tool among several.<sup>24</sup> The ultimate aim of a xenofeminist politics of technology is to transform political systems and disciplinary structures themselves, so that autonomy does not always have to be covertly seized.

In the words of the manifesto, 'xenofeminism avows the responsibility in constructing new institutions' (9). We must be engineers as well as hackers, it argues, conceiving of 'a total structure as well as the molecular parts from which it is constructed' (9). In short — and in keeping with the argument advanced in this article — Laboria Cuboniks claims that it's not enough to think about routing around barriers or staging disruptions within a given system; we must also strive toward the creation of new systems. This would demand the gradual construction of better forms of (necessarily contingent and provisional) technomaterial hegemony, in which we do not always have to start from the need to appropriate things or to identify exploits — to find opportunities to turn systems against their original purposes — because they were in fact *designed* with a more accommodating set of affordances in mind. These would include the universal provision of abortion, HRT and gender affirming or

gender disruptive healthcare on an informed consent basis – free, safe and accessible on demand.

Before we conclude, it is worth further considering the role of engineering and hacking as philosophies or approaches to understanding agency and action, with a view to exploring how counter-hegemonic system building and decentralized insurrection can be negotiated. As the xenofeminist manifesto suggests, we need both an engineering and a hacking perspective — to overrun existing and emerging systems, and to build better systems — and we would do well to problematize any framing which implies that this is an *either/or* situation. Indeed, it's not even a matter of *both/and*, in which solutions are drawn variously from hacking and engineering-type approaches to sociopolitical problem solving. To talk about it in this way risks setting up a false binary. Whilst hacking may typically represent a specific disruption within a system that otherwise goes largely unchallenged, it is also capable of going beyond this, and I would suggest that this has some bearing in terms of how we might think about Preciado's work.

Let us return to the idea of the exploit as a transgressive incursion. Bataille is right, I think, to point to the ways in which transgression suspends a taboo without suppressing it, and to the fact that there can be no proscription against the violation of a law that does not presuppose or depend upon the existence of that law itself. As we've seen, a violation can only exist as a result of that which is violated. And so it is that hacking, as a strategic navigation of the vulnerabilities or opportunities inherent within a given technical system, can be seen to be dependent upon that self-same system. However, it is also clear that, just as transgression is structurally dependent upon the law, so too is the law structurally dependent upon transgression — and that this insight might alter our understanding of what hacking, as a practice of transgression, can do. A specific act of transgression is only possible in relation to a rule that can be violated; there is no such thing as an unbreakable taboo. Prohibition

requires possibility (if an act was impossible, no prohibition would be required; a law that cannot potentially be broken would be meaningless, as well as pointless).

The taboo itself might therefore be thought of as indicative of the possibility of oppositional action — as a signal of the possibility of change. Contra Bataille, one might argue that transgression goes further than simply upholding the rules upon which it depends. It can, in fact, play an indirect and circuitous role in shifting them. Transgression is dynamic — both changeable and able to affect change. A process of repeated limit-breaching may be capable of altering the character of a taboo; the more frequently it is violated, the less vertiginous a specific act of boundary crossing may become, and the more the transgressive quality of this act is at risk of being diminished. The taboo no longer holds in the same way it once did; the ‘hack turns repetition into difference’ (Wark, *HM*, par. 130). This process may be a matter of individual action and phenomenological experience, or it may play out on a collective level, as when social norms gradually shift over time in response to old interdictions being increasingly tested and compromised. At any rate, it would seem that a specific transgression bears within itself the possibility of its own erasure, meaning that transgression not only buttresses existing norms but can in fact play an indirect role in changing them. Transgression, for all its complications, speaks to the fact that things could be otherwise.<sup>25</sup>

In a similar way, an act of hacking may be capable of facilitating alterations within the technical system it disrupts. As Galloway and Thacker put it, the ‘exploit creates a shift in the ontology of the network, in which the “failure” of the network is in fact a change in its topology (for example, from centralized to distributed)’ (*TE*, 97). Such comments imply that the network itself can be taken down through transformation in response to interaction with external forces. Here, though the underlying form of taboo/transgression or system/hack remains in place, the specific content at stake proves to be somewhat modifiable. The

structural relationship between system and disruption may be inexorable, but its specific expression can be made subject to change. One can detect hints of this idea in Sadie Plant's discussion of cybernetics in *Zeros and Ones*:

Economies, societies, individual organisms, cells: At these and every other scale of organization, the stability of any system depends on its ability to regulate the speeds at which it runs, ensuring that nothing stops too soon, goes too slow, runs too fast, goes too far. And there is always something hunting, trying to break the speed limits necessary to its organized form, tipping over a horizon at which point, even though another, long-term stability may emerge on the other side, it can no longer be said that the system survives. Nothing can guarantee a system's immunity to these runaway effects.<sup>26</sup>

Survival depends on mutation; persistence can be ensured only through change, and change is possible only as a result of persistence. A specific system may collapse — either due to excessive stability or excessive disturbance — but *systematicity itself* survives, and with it the structural tension that we have been exploring here. The possibility of the hack is an inevitable by-product of the very fact of organization. You can't have one without the other, and — as such — every system contains the seeds of its own disruption.

### *Conclusion: Bridging the Hole*

We encounter something of this structural dynamic (in which the hack exerts a shaping influence upon the system with which it interacts) within the kind of practices explored in *Testo Junkie*. BP's self-administration of hormones not only side-steps existing medical protocols and establishments, but — in demonstrating the very possibility of such a side-stepping — challenges the system itself to respond or to course-correct. Indeed, outside of the

text, the possibility of gender hacking has had a demonstrable influence on clinical guidelines. The Royal College of Psychiatrists in the UK, for example, noted in 2013 that ‘Hormones and hormone-blockers are readily available via the internet. The medical practitioner or specialist must consider the risks of harm to the patient by not prescribing hormones in these circumstances.’<sup>27</sup> The guidance, therefore, is that non-specialist medical practitioners ‘prescribe “bridging” endocrine treatments as part of a holding and harm reduction strategy while the patient awaits specialized endocrinology or other gender identity treatment’ (25).

The General Medical Council (GMC) continues to support this approach, noting in current ethical guidance to doctors that ‘It may be that the risk of harm to your patient of self-medicating with hormones bought from an unregulated source is greater than the risk of initiating hormone therapy before the patient is assessed by a specialist’.<sup>28</sup> There are admittedly several conditions attached to this support; that ‘the patient is already self-prescribing or seems highly likely to self-prescribe from an unregulated source (over the internet or otherwise on the black market)’, for example, or that ‘the bridging prescription is intended to mitigate a risk of self-harm or suicide’. Many thus feel that the GMC’s guidance remains ‘limiting, and doesn’t supply the patient with the full scope of care that they are entitled to on the NHS’.<sup>29</sup> It’s also crucial to note that, despite this advice from professional bodies, reports suggest that in practice many GPs refuse to prescribe bridging hormones to those who want and need them (Gender GP, ‘BH’). Nevertheless, we can see that having alternative means of accessing information, peer support and pharmaceuticals has fostered changes in the way the medical establishment *in theory* conceives of treatment and attempts to retain disciplinary control.

The feasibility and frequency of the hack — as the cultivation and dissemination of know-how in order to creatively overcome the systemic limits of actually existing

sociotechnical structures — has fostered an adjustment in the system. The exploit is the hole through which potential change is projected. So, the exploit can play a role in systemic change, and hackers are themselves engineers. But the flipside of this is also true; engineers are also hackers. Every possible transformation emerges from existing conditions and is constrained by the materials at hand. Nobody makes technical systems under freely self-selected circumstances; to various degrees, we are all constrained by restrictions we inherit, and hacking is the only choice we have. There is only ever (re)engineering — no clean slate or fresh, untainted system, just intervention within an existing framework, transmitted from the past and not of our own design.

Where *Testo Junkie* offers us a meaningful vision for a potential technomaterialist feminist project is in its positioning of the body as a biological platform for hacking as re-engineering, via experimentation with political subjectivities. As Preciado puts it, ‘As a body – and this is the only important thing about being a subject-body, a techno-living system – I’m the platform that makes possible the materialization of political imagination’ (*TJ*, 139). The tools for manipulating this platform, BP’s narrative suggests, are easier to access than one might imagine. It behoves to us to think about how the interventions facilitated by these tools might be scaled up; to take Preciado’s insights and try to understand how we can use them to build capacity for new actions, thoughts and desires; and to articulate a politics that exceeds the individual to express a more concerted interest in transforming biotechnical hegemony.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Hil Malatino, ‘Biohacking Gender: cyborgs, coloniality, and the pharmacopornographic era’, *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 22:2 (June 2017), 179–90, 186.

(Henceforth ‘BG’.)

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<sup>2</sup> Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, translated by Bruce Benderson (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013), 33–4.

(Henceforth *TJ*.)

<sup>3</sup> Alessandro Delfanti, ‘Distributed Biotechnology’, in *The Routledge Handbook of the Political Economy of Science*, edited by David Tyfield, Rebecca Lave, Samuel Randalls and Charles Thorpe. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 237-48, 237. (Henceforth ‘DB’.)

<sup>4</sup> Shenzhen Open Innovation Lab, ‘Bio Academy’ (2016): <https://www.szoil.org/core-business/edu/bio-academy/>, consulted 14 June 2022, 23.18 p.m. Izabella Kaminska.

‘Bioterror: The Dangers of Garage Scientists Manipulating DNA’ (2021):

<https://www.ft.com/content/9ac7f1c0-1468-4dc7-88dd-1370ead42371>, consulted 14 June

2022, 23.20 p.m. Anna Neifer, ‘Biohackers Are Implanting LED Lights Under Their Skin’

(2015): <https://www.vice.com/en/article/d7yzyj/biohackers-are-implanting-led-lights-under-their-skin>, consulted 14 June 2022, 23.23 p.m.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks*

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 81. Emphasis in original. (Henceforth *TE*.)

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Stephens, ‘The Pharmacopornographic Subject: Beatrice [*sic*] Preciado’s *Testo Junkie: Sexe, Drogue et Biopolitique*’, *Polari Journal* 2 (October 2010):

<https://polarijournal.com/resources/Stephens-Testo-Junkie.pdf>, consulted 28 December 2021, 11.56 a.m.

<sup>7</sup> Paul B. Preciado, *An Apartment on Uranus*, translated by Charlotte Mandell (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2019), 217. (Henceforth *AA*.)

<sup>8</sup> ‘Focus On: Biohacking’, *The Biologist* 64:6 (November 2017), 26-9, 26:

<https://www.rsb.org.uk/biologist-features/focus-on-biohacking>, consulted 28 December 2021, 12.00 p.m.

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<sup>9</sup> Casey R. Lynch, 'Contesting Digital Futures: Urban Politics, Alternative Economies, and the Movement for Technological Sovereignty in Barcelona', *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography* 52:3 (May 2020), 660-80, 661.

<sup>10</sup> McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), par. 012 and par.021. (Henceforth *HM*.)

<sup>11</sup> For reasons of brevity, I am here concentrating particularly on Georges Bataille (the pre-eminent European philosopher of transgression). However, elements of what follows could equally be developed in conversation with, for example, Pierre Klossowski, Alain Badiou's work on St Paul, or second wave feminist debates about the pornographic.

<sup>12</sup> Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, translated by Mary Dalwood (London: Marion Boyars, 1987), 63. Emphasis in original. (Henceforth *E*.)

<sup>13</sup> Lisa Downing and Robert Gillett, 'Georges Bataille and Avant-Garde of Queer Theory?: Transgression, Perversion, and Death Drive', *Nottingham French Studies* 50:3 (September 2011): 86-100, 93.

<sup>14</sup> Joshua Rivas, 'Intoxication and Toxicity in a 'Pharmacopornographic Era': Beatriz Preciado's *Testo Junkie*', in *Literature and Intoxication: Writing, Politics and the Experience of Excess*, edited by Eugene Brennan and Russell Williams (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), 147-59, 155.

<sup>15</sup> In Preciado's strategic approach to the pornographic, dominant regimes of representation are not simply objected to (as heterosexist, misogynist, cissexist, and so on) but instead actively countered via a proliferation of alternatives. This has interesting implications in terms of the dynamics of taboo and transgression we have been discussing here. For more on this, see my comments about redemptive approaches to pornography during the so-called feminist sex wars in Helen Hester, *Beyond Explicit: Pornography and the Displacement of Sex* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014), 25-7.

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<sup>16</sup> Paul B. Preciado, *Countersexual Manifesto*, translated by Kevin Gerry Dunn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 26-7. (Henceforth *CM*.)

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin Noys, 'Intoxication and Acceleration: The Politics of Immanence', in *Literature and Intoxication: Writing, Politics and the Experience of Excess*, edited by Eugene Brennan and Russell Williams (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), 185-201, 196.

<sup>18</sup> Antonella Corsani, 'Beyond the Myth of Woman: The Becoming-Transfeminist of (Post-)Marxism', translated by Timothy S. Murphy, *SubStance* 36:1 (2007): 106-38, 116.

<sup>19</sup> Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2015), 40. (Henceforth *IF*.)

<sup>20</sup> Helen Hester, *Xenofeminism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 114. (Henceforth *X*.)

<sup>21</sup> See Gabriela Loureiro, *Embodiment, Emotions and Collective Struggle: Hashtag Feminism as Digital Consciousness-Raising in Brazil* (2021):

<https://repository.uwl.ac.uk/id/eprint/8512/>, consulted 16 June 2022, 12.05 p.m.

<sup>22</sup> Laboria Cuboniks, 'Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation' (2015), 1-10, 9:

[https://laboriacuboniks.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/20150612-xf\\_layout\\_web.pdf](https://laboriacuboniks.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/20150612-xf_layout_web.pdf), consulted 29 December 2021, 10.38 a.m. (Henceforth 'XM'.)

<sup>23</sup> Peter Heft, 'Xenofeminism: A Framework to Hack the Human', *New Proposals: Journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Inquiry* 12:1 (2021): 121-39, 121.

<sup>24</sup> As Jules Joanne Gleeson notes in her very astute article on xenofeminism, 'Xenofeminism is Romantic'. Interestingly, Gleeson's piece argues that there is too little interest in the mesopolitical sphere (described here in terms of 'communities') within the xenofeminist manifesto – a fact she attributes to the influence of Preciado. While I would agree that the manifesto does not go far enough in terms of elaborating on this issue (in part because it is only ten pages long), it does in fact emphasize the importance of 'a mobile and intricate network of transits' and calls for 'an emancipatory and egalitarian community buttressed by

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new forms of unselfish solidarity' (XM, 9-10). This theme is also one upon which I have sought to elaborate in later work, particularly 2018's *Xenofeminism*. Jules Joanne Gleeson, 'Breakthroughs and Bait: On Xenofeminism and Alientation' , *Mute* (2019): <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/breakthroughs-bait-xenofeminism-alienation>, consulted 16 June 2022, 11.44 p.m.

<sup>25</sup> To be clear, this is not to suggest that there is anything fundamentally emancipatory about transgression. As I have argued elsewhere, transgression can in one sense be seen as simply the structural process of going beyond any particular boundary, and as such is a highly flexible and context-dependent concept. See Helen Hester, *Beyond Explicit* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 27.

<sup>26</sup> Sadie Plant, *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture* (London: Fourth Estate, 1997), 162.

<sup>27</sup> Royal College of Psychiatrists, 'Good Practice Guidelines for the Assessment and Treatment of Adults with Gender Dysphoria', *College Report CR181* (October 2013), 21: <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/docs/default-source/improving-care/better-mh-policy/college-reports/cr181-good-practice-guidelines-for-the-assessment-and-treatment-of-adults-with-gender-dysphoria.pdf>, consulted 28 December 2021, 11.17 a.m.

<sup>28</sup> General Medical Council, 'Trans healthcare: Mental health and bridging prescriptions' (n.d.): <https://www.gmc-uk.org/ethical-guidance/ethical-hub/trans-healthcare#mental-health-and-bridging-prescriptions>, consulted 04 January 2022, 12.28 p.m.

<sup>29</sup> Gender GP, 'Bridging Hormones' (August 2020): <https://www.gendergp.com/bridging-hormones/>, consulted 28 December 2021, 11.25 a.m. (Henceforth 'BH'.)