Reviews

Legacy Russell. *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*. Verso Books, 2020. 192 pp. $14.95, paperback.

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As its title suggests, *Glitch Feminism* is as much a manifesto declaring the need for liberation from oppressive social norms as it is a theoretical exploration of the way those norms are maintained in our digital era. In this short text, Legacy Russell critically analyzes the "toxic virality" (6) of the gender binary and how "the notion of *glitch-as-error*" (8) might help us to break "free of an understanding of gender as something stationary" (9). Following the "Introduction," each of the twelve chapters begins with the word "Glitch" covering how glitch refuses, is cosmic, throws shade, ghosts, is error, encrypts, is anti-body, is skin, is virus, mobilizes, is remix, and survives. Through these themes, Russell combines feminist, critical race, queer, and post-humanist theories with contemporary art analysis and a call to action. *Glitch Feminism* is a celebration of the failures of hegemonic social systems and a re-imagining of error as refusal to be assimilated into a machine that was not built for female-identifying, queer, or Black people. As such, for Becca Harrison, <u>keynote speaker of Realizing Resistance II: Uncharted Galaxies,</u> Russell's framework provides an alternative means of reading *Star Wars*, a media franchise that has for decades refused LGBTQ+ representation.

Russell begins by recognizing how white supremacist, patriarchal, heteronormative, capitalist systems operate as a politics of exclusion. Through discursive and physical violence, these overlapping systems of oppression marginalize difference and cast out female, queer, Black subjects as mistakes. Because "All technology reflects the society that produces it, including its power structures and prejudices… institutions of the digital… are also, without question, deeply flawed" (23). Nevertheless, the Internet (for example) can also be a site of resistance, and to be labeled a glitch can be the means of revealing the fragility and fallacy of these systems. In other words, making use of the same tools by which one is rendered a problem can facilitate "mutiny in the form of strategic occupation" (25). Harrison similarly argues that despite *Star Wars* media producers' persistent attempts to tightly control the franchise and to maintain a heteronormative status quo, attending to the glitches can be a mode of queer resistance. In drawing attention to the franchise's own narrative insistence that the power of dominant empires is never absolute, its paradoxical embrace of and occasional attempts to eradicate technological glitches, and fan-use of glitches as art, Harrison follows Russell in suggesting that glitches can be "a generative force" for establishing new ways to read *Star Wars* texts.

One of the foundational aspects of both Russell and Harrison's analyses is the embodied nature of glitch. Despite their engagement with screen cultures and the futurity of both Russell's

Internet-as-utopia vision and the *Star Wars* universe, Harrison and Russell are not out to negate or ignore the human body. Contrary to what it might seem, Chapter 7 of *Glitch Feminism*, "Glitch is Anti-Body," is not an endorsement of the somatophobia underpinning certain threads of transhumanism. Instead, Russell wants to resist "the social, cultural framework of the body" (91), the body that is only intelligible according to binary gender, that is conceived of as "pure" and hermetically sealed, one that is identifiable as human, or decidedly less-than. In fact, Russell's manifesto is emphatically about being-in-the-world. Rather than drawing a distinction between online and IRL (in real life), for instance, Russell employs the phrase "Away From the Keyboard"(AFK) to summon the materiality of both states and to indicate "a more continuous progression of the self, one that does not end when a user steps away from the computer" (30-31). Harrison too is keen to note that observing glitches in *Star Wars* media is not a passive, disengaged experience; glitches are sensory experiences. Glitches flicker, stutter and pop; they incite emotions and cognitive dissonance; to witness a glitch is often to feel quite queer. Therefore, however removed one might feel from the reality that unfolds online or on screen, both Russell and Harrison work to establish how glitches *matter*.

In her keynote, Harrison outlines three examples of glitches in *Star Wars* that reveal the cultural system within which it is produced for what it is, cisheteronormative patriarchy, and that point towards how the franchise can be queered. These examples also help to illuminate other important aspects of Russell's work. Harrison begins by discussing matte lines which occur when two or more images are combined into a single image. She explains that they are inevitable in the production process and that they quite naturally reveal the limits of technology. This should not be bad in and of itself, but for producers keen to maintain the illusion of total control, matte lines are treated as a kind of "contamination" of a particular type of fantasy. Two things become important in analyzing matte lines: one, Harrison argues that the language of contamination is reminiscent of white supremacy, thus further revealing what kind of ideological system *Star Wars* is embedded in. Two, matte lines as error, as contamination, or as virus also reveal how limited that system is and how illusory fantasies of purity are. For glitch feminists, matte lines can be celebrated because they disrupt production systems that seek to reinforce cisheterornormative patriarchal white supremacist versions of the *Star Wars* franchise. And, as Russell explains, these kind of glitches show "us how we might ourselves break broken systems via the creative re-application of these systems' own material toward the purpose of a strategic disruption and refusal" (115).

Holograms and glitchy CGI are another example Harrison gives. The holograms that appear in *Star Wars* are always discolored, glitchy, and interrupted. This depiction recalls broadcast glitches of the 1950s, thus disrupting the supposed futurity of the franchise. Harrison points out that contrary to the drive to purify media of glitches like matte lines, *Star Wars* producers' purposeful adoption of a throwback aesthetic for holograms is meant to lend authenticity to the "lived-in" feel of the universe on screen. This contradictory stance further undermines the production logic that demands purity, homogeneity, even straightness. Computer generated imagery such as animated aliens have also proven to be glitchy in *Star Wars*. Characters like Jar Jar Binks or Maz Kanata stand out in live-action scenes, their lack of materiality and seemingly distinct experiences of gravity disrupt the fantasy of a diverse, multispecies universe. As racialized characters, their artificiality draws attention to the overwhelming whiteness of the

human cast through visual contrast. The fact that these characters are so unconvincingly rendered also draws attention to the whiteness of their producers. This example resonates with Russell's discussion of image-recognition algorithmic tools which "have done little more than gamify racial bias. These technologies underscore the dominant arch of whiteness within… image-making." In short, these kinds of technologies, be they algorithms or animations, "highlight the structural inequality inherent to the creation of these tools themselves, with such algorithms created for and by whiteness" (25-26).

Harrison's final example of *Star Wars* glitch is the use of recall and retcon. In repeatedly recalling the specific line, "I've got a bad feeling about this," for example, *Star Wars* creators run the risk of pulling viewers out of the diegesis of a specific film because of the ways multiple films contain this same moment of disturbance. The atemporality of this kind of recall distorts narrative logic and muddles the distinctions between texts. Retcons, or retroactive continuity, similarly glitch the coherence of *Star Wars* narratives. Although creators have revised or reimagined the nature of the Force, who gets to use it, and Rey's parentage in an attempt to fix plot holes, their retcons also draw attention to narrative breakdowns and "expose the system's propensity for error." Thus, despite creators' attempts to present a singular, linear story, recalls and retcons prove Russell's assertion that "Glitch is a gerund, an action ongoing" (55). Glitch survives.

Harrison concludes by asserting that because glitches reveal the shortcomings of technology and the corporate machine (a cisheteronormative, white supremacist, patriarchal group), they can be a site of queer resistance. Failures are refusals. Disruptions call attention to the limits of different technologies which are made and controlled by a certain demographic and thus, glitches demonstrate what exists beyond their power. Harrison is careful to clarify that the *Star Wars* saga isn't queer, but "glitches are momentary glimpses of queerness that disrupt and haunt the straightness of *Star Wars* with their historic and insistent presence."

For Russell, this kind of revelatory power is just the beginning of glitch feminism. Glitches also enable the realization that if our world is breakable and disruptable, then it is ultimately re-makeable. "Glitch carries a technology of remix within its code" (134). Even if remixing also recalls that there is an "original," glitch feminists can recognize that materials "can be reclaimed, rearranged, repurposed, and rebirthed toward an emancipatory enterprise, creating new 'records' through radical action" (133). As the *Star Wars* universe continues to proliferate and expand, the will of creators to repurpose its contents towards more liberatory ends remains to be seen. But at least we know, the franchise is full of glitches.