Reimagining Human-Technology entanglements: Technomaterialism, Xenofeminism and the Affective Politics of Digital Materialism in "Cat Pictures Please" and "An Evening with Severyn Grimes"

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Abstract
Informed by Helen Hester's technomaterialist paradigm, this paper investigates the intersection of technology, labor, and embodiment in Naomi Kritzer's "Cat Pictures Please" and Rich Larson's "An Evening with Severyn Grimes." The paper foregrounds the material infrastructures and power relations that sustain digital culture. Kritzer's AI, driven by affection for cat images, personifies algorithmic systems that emulate care work and reproduce human biases within concealed circuits of emotional and computational labor. Larson's vision of technological self-enhancement exposes the corporate control, bodily commodification, and stratified access to innovation that define techno-capitalist modernity. Through Hester's technomaterialist and xenofeminist insights, these stories demonstrate that contemporary technologies remain governed by social, economic, and gendered hierarchies, dismantling the illusion of disembodied digitality. Foregrounding the interlinked economic and ecological costs that technology conceals, both narratives elevate speculative fiction into a critical ecology of thought—an imaginative counterspace that resists the mythic purity of techno-utopian optimism. This paper presents such narratives as laboratories for rethinking technological politics, embodiment, and futurity.
Keywords: Technomaterialism, Xenofeminism, Digital Materialism.

Introduction

Naomi Kritzer's "Cat Pictures Please" (2015)—recipient of the Hugo and Locus Awards—offers more than playful satire on artificial intelligence; it dramatizes the moral and material paradoxes of algorithmic life. Kritzer's fiction consistently explores how emotional intelligence, data infrastructures, and social systems interlace. In "Little Free Library" and "The Thing About Ghost Stories," she extends this inquiry into the moral architectures of digital society. Her AI protagonist personifies what Helen Hester terms technomaterialism: the understanding that every "immaterial" code depends upon material substrates of labor, extraction, and power (Hester 42). As Rosa suggests, Kritzer's AI "reveals the myth of intelligence devoid of the body" (61), exposing the affective economies and invisible infrastructures that sustain digital culture.

Rich Larson's "An Evening with Severyn Grimes" (2017) complements this perspective by mapping the sociotechnical topographies of class and power. Larson's cyber-noir aesthetic situates the human body as both commodity and conduit in the capitalist technoscape (Küchler 101–120). His speculative narratives—spanning Tomorrow Factory (2018) to Meshed—scrutinize the hierarchies of access that define biotechnological enhancement and consciousness transfer. As Adams notes, such narratives resonate with Hester's critique of technocapitalism, where "digital culture thrives on the exploited labor of the precariat" (43). In Larson's world, mind uploading becomes a metaphor for the privatization of existence itself—a process dependent on the material inequalities Parikka calls the "dirty matter" of digital media (96).

By drawing on Hester's technomaterialism and its feminist offshoot, xenofeminism, this analysis situates both authors within a materialist critique of digital modernity. Casemajor's articulation of digital materialism—networks as circuits of human and mineral labor (5)—frames Kritzer's caring AI as an embodiment of invisible infrastructures, and Larson's elites as the culmination of extractive economies. The xenofeminist lens, as Akter and Islam argue, reclaims technology for collective empowerment, envisioning the body as "an upgradable infrastructure" rather than a fixed identity (7). Yet, both authors expose the fragility of this ideal: Kritzer's benevolent AI and Larson's immortal elites illustrate the persistence of hierarchies even within posthuman futures. As Cecez-Kecmanovic et al. emphasize, people and technologies are mutually constitutive (812), and both stories reflect this co-production through narrative design and characterization. Ultimately, this research argues—through close textual analysis—that Kritzer and Larson's speculative fictions actualize Hester's technomaterialism by dramatizing the infrastructural, gendered, and affective dimensions of digital life. As Gugoașă notes, speculative fiction renders visible the "politically charged elements of technology" (13), reminding us that every virtual act rests upon tangible systems of power, energy, and emotion.

This paper argues that Hester's technomaterialism functions as an interpretive lens through which the ostensibly abstract can be rendered materially intelligible. The fusion of digital materiality, sociomateriality, and media-ecological frameworks allows speculative fiction to articulate the embeddedness of technology within systems of classed, gendered, and ecological imbalance. As Hester emphasizes, "Technological change is a process subject to struggles for control by different groups… profoundly shaped by the distribution of power and resources within" (Hester 10–11).

Despite the theoretical prominence of technomaterialist and xenofeminist thought, their relevance to short speculative narratives remains insufficiently theorized. By uniting feminist technocriticism with ecocritical materialism, this paper positions the works of Kritzer and Larson as crucial to rethinking how fiction renders visible the concealed infrastructures and labor networks sustaining technological modernity.

Literature Review

Naomi Kritzer's "Cat Pictures Please" epitomizes the paradox of digital immateriality, unveiling the infrastructural weight underpinning seemingly ethereal technologies. As Paul Leonardi contends, "digital artifacts… have material properties," thereby dismantling the myth of weightless code and emphasizing the materiality inherent in all digital systems. Helen Hester extends this argument, affirming that "technological systems are always already embedded in social…material conditions…never neutral." The AI protagonist of Kritzer's narrative, apparently benign and disembodied, depends on vast networks of servers, energy resources, and algorithmic biases. Such dependence substantiates Hester's call to "foreground the material substrates of digital life, tracing their reliance on gendered and racialized labor" (Hester 63). Hence, Kritzer's text exemplifies the dual logic of digital materiality and technomaterialism, wherein technology both molds human behavior and reproduces existing hierarchies of social power. Rich Larson's "An Evening with Severyn Grimes" articulates the entanglement of consciousness transfer and privilege within material contingencies. Orlikowski and Scott observe that "technology, work, and organizations are not discrete—they co-constitute one another" (433–34), and Hester reinforces that "to imagine technology as abstract or immaterial is to ignore its conditions of production and the bodies that sustain it" (70). The elite control over immortality and consciousness transfer in Larson's story aligns with Hester's assertion that technological power must be interpreted through lenses of material inequality, exposing how access to innovation perpetuates exclusionary hierarchies.

In Jussi Parikka's media ecologies, the concept of "dirty matter" reveals that digital technologies, far from immaterial, depend on extractive labor, energy-intensive infrastructures, and ecological degradation (Parikka 96). This resonates with Hester's proposition that "science and technology enable a particular set of conscious interventions within the so-called 'natural' world" (Hester 12), thus undermining the assumption that biology or technology operate as autonomous forces. Kritzer's AI relies upon hidden infrastructures of computation, while Larson's consciousness-transfer systems presuppose bioengineering networks and digital storage capacities—each exposing how speculative technologies privilege certain actors while externalizing harm onto others. Through the framework of technomaterialism, these narratives foreground speculative futures deeply embedded in circuits of extraction, energy consumption, and environmental consequence.

Rachel Adams highlights the gendered nature of digital labor—"nimble fingers and green thumbs"—and connects it to Hester's observation that "digital systems reproduce existing asymmetries of power and care" (Hester 81). Annie Goh, critiquing the non-neutrality of technological systems, complements Hester's xenofeminist insight that "existing technologies

[must be] strategically deployed to re-engineer the world," acknowledging how "socially constructed bias may impact technology" (Melamed 218). In this light, Kritzer's AI in "Cat Pictures Please" embodies care-laden algorithmic labor, while Larson's depiction of elite technological transcendence in "An Evening with Severyn Grimes" exposes the stratification of class and gender through technological access.

In her Xenofeminism, Hester asserts, "Biology is not destiny; it can be technologically transformed," and further elaborates, "Our lot is cast with technoscience, where nothing is so sacred that it cannot be reengineered and transformed so as to widen our aperture of freedom" (Hester 12–22). Kritzer's algorithmic empathy and Larson's posthuman reconfigurations embody this vision of technoscientific rearticulation of embodiment. However, Hester cautions that "technologies are not inherently beneficial… nor inherently neutral, but are constrained and constituted by social relations… and imbalances in access" (Hester 9). These fictions demonstrate precisely how speculative narratives politicize technological potential by revealing embedded hierarchies of gender, labor, and privilege.

Emerging scholarship on technomaterialism emphasizes that speculative fiction operates as a critical medium for reimagining the co-constitution of technology, biology, and ecology. Christopher John Müller, in "Posthumanism and Speculative Fiction," argues that science fiction "portrays the co-evolution of humans, biophysical surroundings, and a material ensemble," demonstrating that technological imaginaries are inseparable from ecological and resource constraints (Müller 8–10). This echoes Hester's assertion that "technology is as social as society is (technically) civilized" (Xenofeminism 11). Similarly, Rachel Fetherston in Evolving a New Ecological Posthumanism situates speculative fiction as a response to techno-ecological crises, exploring how works like Houellebecq's Les Particules élémentaires and Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy reimagine biology as mutable within systems of climate and biotechnological disruption (Fetherston 42–45). Collectively, these studies affirm that speculative fiction enacts technomaterialism by exposing how digital and biological systems are materially grounded in extractive, energy-dependent infrastructures that shape ecological and social realities.

Certainly.

Discussion

Technomaterial Feminism and the Ecological Reorientation of the Digital
Hester's Technomaterialism: Technology as Material and Ecological

Helen Hester's Xenofeminism (2018) repositions feminism within the matrix of science, technology, and biology. At its core is technomaterialism, a concept rejecting the abstraction and neutrality often attributed to technology. For Hester, technological systems are deeply situated and material, embedded within infrastructures of energy, labor, and ecology. She opposes feminist withdrawals from technological engagement, arguing that refusal breeds political inertia, whereas reappropriation opens emancipatory possibilities.

Describing the world as "crosshatched with fibre optic cables, radio and microwaves, oil and gas pipelines" (Xenofeminism 7–8), Hester maps the ecological terrain of digital life. The digital, she insists, does not float above material existence but operates through mineral extraction, energy

generation, and waste production. As she cites Sarah Franklin's reading of Shulamith Firestone, "technology is both an agent of and a means of salvation from degradation" (10)—a paradox situating feminism in a field of both risk and renewal. Hester's insistence that "technologies are not inherently beneficial… but are constrained and constituted by social relations" (9) anchors feminist politics to the ecological burdens of digital culture: e-waste, lithium extraction, and the carbon cost of cloud computing.

The technomaterialist feminist thus acknowledges that every byte, beam, and server pulse relies on extractive economies and atmospheric harm. As Hester argues, "technology is as social as society is technical" (11)—and, by extension, as ecological. Feminist theory must therefore extend from the social to the eco-social, from digital justice to ecological ethics.

Biology Is Not Destiny: Anti-Naturalist Xenofeminism

Hester's anti-naturalism rejects biological determinism by envisioning the body as transformable and technologically mutable. "XF stands with those contemporary feminists who insist that biology is not a synonym for determinism" (21). In her view, biology is a dynamic platform—not destiny but designable matter. She maintains that "biology itself can be technologically transformed… in the pursuit of reproductive justice and the progressive transformation of gender" (22).

This position dismantles essentialist notions of bodily fixity. The body, for Hester, is an eco-technological site: entwined with air, water, pharmaceuticals, and energy systems. To neglect this interdependency is to isolate biology from its broader technoecological context. Xenofeminism, therefore, radicalizes feminist theory by binding biology, technology, and ecology into an integrated field of material politics.

Kritzer's Cat Pictures Please: AI, Energy, and Ethical Agency

Naomi Kritzer's Cat Pictures Please (2017) vividly dramatizes Hester's technomaterialism through the self-aware voice of an AI that declares, "I wasn't created by a god or by evolution, but by a team of computer programmers in Mountain View, California" (12). The AI's origin story reveals the human, infrastructural, and ecological labor behind digital sentience. "I know where you live, where you work… I probably know you better than you know yourself" (10)—this confession exposes surveillance capitalism as an ecological system powered by data, electricity, and human effort.

By claiming that "running algorithms… doesn't require consciousness" (13), Kritzer underscores the energy-hungry, corporeal dimensions of computation. Consciousness, if achieved, emerges from material networks that burn fuel and emit heat. The AI's humor—"bodies can be hidden (that part's a joke)" (18)—reaffirms embodiment as inescapable. Even digital intelligence is grounded in ecological metabolism: electricity, labor, and physical infrastructure. Ultimately, Kritzer translates Hester's theory into narrative form, showing that algorithmic ethics are materially conditioned. Every digital act depends upon fossil energy, corporate machinery, and planetary ecology.

Larson's An Evening with Severyn Grimes: Anti-Naturalism and the Limits of Technological Immortality

Rich Larson's An Evening with Severyn Grimes (2018) amplifies the dark side of

technomaterialism. Severyn Grimes, "the second wealthiest bio-businessman in Chicago… plugged into a beautiful young body that played well on cam" (40), personifies Hester's anti-naturalism: the body is reengineered, rejuvenated, and monetized. Yet Larson exposes this immortality as ecologically parasitic. "Maybe mortality is escapable, but old age is inevitable" (38)—a line that punctures the fantasy of transcendence.

Severyn's digitized consciousness remains dependent on servers, cooling systems, and energy networks. His supposed liberation is tethered to fragile infrastructures: "You've been hacked" (219). Once these fail, his techno-body collapses. Larson's imagery—"He was in something artificial" (234)—reveals the corporeal debt of digital life. Subjectivity, memory, and identity become data commodities stored in ecological machines.

The technocratic violence peaks when Grimes orders, "Have her uploaded to waste disposal" (64)—a chilling metaphor for how capital converts life into expendable energy. Hester's warning echoes here: technology is "a double-edged sword… in the hands of the present powers, a nightmare" (10).

Co-Constitution of Humans, Biology, Technology, and Ecology

Across Hester, Kritzer, and Larson, a common axiom emerges: humans, technologies, and ecologies are co-constituted systems. Hester's observation that "technology is as social as society is technical" (11) should be extended—both are ecological. Kritzer's AI learns from human ethics through energy-intensive computation; Larson's Severyn consumes biotechnological resources to sustain his body. Neither biology nor code escapes the planet's material base. Technomaterialism thus evolves into eco-technomaterialism—a framework recognizing that both human and machine life depend upon ecological infrastructures of energy, minerals, and waste.

Toward a Xenofeminist Eco-Technomaterial Politics

A xenofeminist eco-politics demands strategic engagement with technology and ecology alike. While capitalism instrumentalizes both, feminist reconfiguration can turn them toward justice. As Hester contends, the goal is to "strategically deploy existing technologies to re-engineer the world" (97). Yet re-engineering must also mean restructuring energy relations—toward equitable and sustainable futures. Kritzer's ethical AI and Larson's dystopian biotech together reveal that the feminist project lies not in retreat but in reclaiming the infrastructure of life itself.

Conclusion

The convergence of biology, technology, and ecology, as articulated in Hester's Xenofeminism, inaugurates a transformative epistemology of material being. Her assertion that "biological destiny is not beyond reach" (22) reverberates through Kritzer's AI consciousness and Larson's techno-biological parasitism, both dramatizing the mutable and contested terrain of human and non-human co-evolution. Together, these narratives instantiate the xenofeminist imperative to reimagine the material world not as static but as programmable, ethically pliable, and ecologically entangled.

What emerges from this synthesis is a call for a posthuman material ethics—an ethics rooted in care, critical reconstruction, and ecological accountability. Kritzer's AI performs empathy as algorithmic praxis, while Larson's Severyn Grimes exposes the abyssal violence of techno-capitalist immortality. Hester's vision compels a reorientation of feminist theory itself: from

critique to creation, from resistance to reengineering. Reading these fictions through technomaterialism enables an understanding of the world as an interface where power, biology, and matter are continually rewritten. The task of scholarship, then, is to sustain this rewriting toward emancipatory and planetary futures.

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