

4 *Telegraphy's Corporeal Fictions*

In Lisa Gitelman & Geoffrey B. Pingree (eds.), *New Media, 1740-1915* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003)

Katherine Stubbs

The last decade of the twentieth century witnessed the feverish proliferation of scholarship focusing on the internet. Much of this critical excitement sprang from one of the intriguing features of early internet technology: In its first incarnation, online communication was entirely text based. In the eyes of many observers, text-based social interactions seemed to offer a freedom from the constraints of the body; cloaked in the anonymity of print, users could strategically misrepresent themselves to others online. For many, the internet stood as a potentially emancipatory arena, a space in which it was possible to experiment with selfhood; in the words of Sherry Turkle, sites such as internet chat rooms served as "laboratories for the construction of identity."¹ Despite evidence that online masquerades frequently failed, and despite the fact that this type of experimentation often left intact a variety of forms of prejudice, the internet's promise to release users from their corporeal restraints continued to be persuasive.² By the end of the decade, the notion that the internet enabled an escape from the limits of the body had become a widespread trope in American culture, present not only in scholarly treatises but in the rhetoric of commercial purveyors of the technology. Thus, in 1997, an MCI television ad could promote the internet by proclaiming that, "People . . . communicate mind to mind. There is no race. There are no genders. There is no age. There are no infirmities. There are only minds. . . . Utopia? No, the internet. Where minds, doors, and bodies open up."

What all of these representations have in common is a belief in the ability of the internet to reconfigure the real according to imagined constructs—to translate the actual into the "virtual." But if the liberating and politically progressive possibilities of this feature of the technology have been well explored, the concept of virtual reality, resting as it does on a problematic dematerialization of the real world, demands further attention. Insofar as we cast the virtual as an abstract realm distinct from material contingencies and conditions, we deny the very realities that enable the technology and in which the

technology crucially participates. Strikingly, this discursive strain—the virtual as radically divorced from the real—continues to circulate at a time when the internet has become not only a vast consumer medium but also “the central production and control apparatus of an increasingly supranational market system.”³ While the economic function of the internet has become highly visible, many theorists remain reluctant to assess the ways in which economic considerations have crucially shaped our fantasies, the cultural meanings we have assigned to the technology.

In order to gain perspective on what lies beneath contemporary dreams about media technology, we might find instructive the case of an earlier communication technology, the telegraph. Although at first glance it does not appear to share many features with the internet, the telegraph did in fact raise remarkably similar issues regarding the status of the body and personal identity in relation to technology. A telegraph operator was a member of a community; as many as ten or twelve operators might work on the same telegraph circuit, rapidly transmitting and receiving messages using Morse code. The wire was akin to a party line, as every message transmitted over the wire could be read by all the operators. On certain less-trafficked rural lines, in the intervals when no official telegraph messages were being sent, operators would routinely have personal conversations with each other over the wire. Given the nature of the technology, it was impossible to know for certain from which station a given message originated. The operators on the line were supposed to identify themselves at the beginning of each message, but there was no way to verify definitively the identity of a given sender.⁴ The result was a form of anonymity analogous to that enabled by the internet: On the telegraph circuit, it was theoretically possible to misrepresent oneself, to engage in a covert form of masquerade, trying on a new body and a new social identity.

The intriguing parallels between the telegraph and the internet may tempt us to collapse the differences between the two media. But in casting the telegraph as “the Victorian internet,” as the critic Tom Standage has done, we risk reducing the telegraph to the status of mere precursor to the later technology.⁵ Rather than positioning the telegraph as the lost origin of the internet, we might instead seek to explore the technology on its own terms, investigating how those actually involved in operating the technology conceived of its pleasures and dangers. A little-known genre of literature, the “telegraphic fiction” written by telegraph operators in the 1870s and 1880s, for example, makes the crucial distinctions between the telegraph and the internet, between that historical context and our own, clear. Yet telegraphic fiction also has much to teach us about the curious fantasies in circulation around the communication technologies of the twenty-first

century. By exploring these early fictions, many of which seek to investigate the status of the body and personal identity in relation to the telegraph, we begin to glimpse the degree to which representations of communication technologies frequently serve as attempted symbolic resolutions of larger contradictions within American culture.

By the late nineteenth century, when most of this telegraphic fiction was produced, the telegraph was no longer brand new; it had been introduced thirty years earlier. But when we follow Carolyn Marvin's injunction to shift our focus of interpretation from technologies themselves to the social drama in which the technologies are used to “negotiate power, authority, representation, and knowledge,” we discover that the telegraphic fictions of the late nineteenth century do in fact seem to constitute a historically new conception of the technology: In a sense, these cultural responses conceive of the technology in new, unprecedented ways.⁶ When we read this fiction today, we cannot help but be struck by the stories that focus on the technology as a tool of masquerade. From our contemporary vantage point, fictions such as Edward O. Chase's 1877 tale, “Wives for Two; or, Joe's Little Joke,” seem to be eerily prescient about the dangers of using communication technologies to tinker with identity. Set in a New England telegraph office, where every evening there is banter, or “buzzing,” between operators over the wire, the story seems nothing less than an avatar of on-line sexual cruising. Chase writes: “Two of the girls would start it, perhaps, with talk of dress and furbelows, shy hints at village beaux and gentle rivalry, then Joe, who was always on the alert for such chances, would snatch the circuit from one of the fair ones, and send a different and perhaps startling answer to the last question.”⁷ A practical joker, Joe frequently breaks in on discussions, impersonating one of the operators, to create embarrassment. The story's plot becomes tangled when both Joe and the male narrator fall in love over the wire with a female operator named Dolly Vaughan. Joe convinces another female operator, Mabel Warren, to impersonate Dolly, so that the narrator might unknowingly switch allegiance to the second woman. The narrator then visits his new love in person, spending the day with “Dolly” and becoming engaged to her. At the wedding, the narrator discovers “the cream of the joke”: When Joe unexpectedly marries the other female operator, the narrator realizes that Joe has wed the real Dolly and he himself has wed an impostor.

On the surface, “Wives for Two” appears to be a slight, if amusing, drama of mistaken identity, a carefully calculated romantic comedy of errors. With the final twist revealed, Chase's tale seems to deliver just what the title advertises—a little joke. Any satisfaction for contemporary readers derives in part from an appreciation of this narrative as a fictional foreshadowing of the forms of identity manipulation promised by later communication technologies. But I would suggest that this story is more than a humorous set piece;

its depiction of an on-line masquerade cannot be considered apart from its specific historical context. Indeed, there is a great deal at stake in the scenario traced by this narrative, although the stakes become evident only when we read the story as a pointed response to a particularly fraught moment in the history of telegraphy.

The history of telegraphy in America is, in large part, the history of an industry. From its introduction in the 1840s, the telegraph was a highly commercial technology; although many other countries sought governmental control over the wires, in the United States the technology belonged to a number of profit-oriented companies. By 1873, however, any competition between them was over, as Western Union, founded in 1856, finally secured a monopoly.⁸ With contracts and rights-of-way for most of the nation's wires, the company was conducting 80 percent of telegraph traffic in 1880. In fact, as Edwin Gabler observes, "the telegraph business was synonymous with Western Union" throughout the late nineteenth century.⁹

But while Western Union dominated the market, it was unable fully to control its workers; the company's labor relations were notoriously strained. Western Union had experienced a widespread operator strike in 1870, and it suffered another damaging walkout in 1883. These actions only reminded Western Union management that their industry relied to an uncomfortable degree on its human telegraph operators. Each telegraph transmission involved at least two operators; in order for a message to be transmitted, an operator had first to read and understand it, translate it into Morse code and transmit the dots and dashes over the wire (using the telegraph "key"), where another operator would listen to the coded sequence (coming in through the "sounder") and convert it into comprehensible English. Far from being a purely mechanical relay, transmission depended on the operator, who therefore occupied a highly important position. Writing in 1876, the president of Western Union admitted that telegraphy was distinguished from other means of communication in that it required a human medium: "Presumably no one knows the contents of a . . . letter, except the sender, whereas, anyone sending a telegram of necessity communicates it to another person, the operator. . . ."¹⁰ "The Telegrapher's Song," a poem that appeared about the same time, drove home this point, although in more celebratory language; in that piece, the operator "weave[s] a girdle round the globe/And guide[s] the lightning's wing"; "We touch our key, and, quick as thought,/The message onward flies—/For every point within the world/Right at our elbow lies."¹¹

Because the operator played a critical role in the system of telegraphic communication, labor gained a formidable influence over the industry's monopoly capital and

the nation itself. A clandestine organization of operators, the Telegraphers' Protective League, declared in 1868:

telegraphy's very peculiarities enhance [operators'] facilities for self protection [against the company], and while in its nature it must ever be controlled by a vast capital, its foundation rests in our hands. Each individual operator is a component part of the great system, without which the commercial interests of the country would be paralyzed, were our services withheld for a single week.¹²

Western Union's management was uncomfortably aware of the operator's leverage. Denouncing the operators' strike of 1870, a company spokesman declared, "Practically the intercourse of the continent by telegraph, on which innumerable interests had already learned to depend, was put in peril. . . ."¹³ And the company's in-house journal lamented, "the power of operators to annoy and destroy is vast and fearful."¹⁴

From its very beginnings, industry insiders had attempted to eliminate the operator from the system. Samuel Morse, inventor of the code used throughout the industry, originally attempted to institute a system that would automatically transmit messages; he assumed that such a mechanism was necessary to guarantee the accuracy of the telegraphic transmission.¹⁵ And throughout the late nineteenth century, industry commentators repeatedly called for mechanization of the technology.¹⁶ Yet despite the efforts of the large number of inventors who attempted to introduce automatic telegraph machines, these devices did not go into widespread use until the First World War; in the nineteenth century, most automatic machines proved to be far more delicate than the simple, sturdy Morse model, and very difficult to repair.

If, during the late nineteenth century, it was not feasible fully to automate the system, it seemed crucial to control the operator. For capital truly to control the technology, the laborer had to be reduced to a component of the machine. As a Western Union spokesman argued in the early 1870s, "The telegraph service demands a rigorous discipline to which its earlier administration was unused. The character of the business has wholly changed. It cannot now subserve public interests or its own healthful development without the precision and uniformity of mechanism."¹⁷ What was needed was a mediating agent who was not an agent at all; the ideal operator would be inexpensive and easily subjected to management's regime of "rigorous discipline." This desire to control more closely the unpredictable human operator helps explain how the telegraph industry came to prefer women as operators. Female operators were assumed to be less likely to agitate for better working conditions and higher wages, less likely to strike, and more

amenable to management's disciplinary strategies. Indeed, management tended to cast the female operator as an inert element of the communication apparatus. Thus it was not simply that female operators could be hired at lower wages; they were also valued for their putative docility, their perceived willingness to be servants of the technology and the company.¹⁸

By the 1860s, Western Union's preference for female operators was unmistakable. In 1869, the company began a joint venture with the Cooper Union Institute in New York, running an eight-month telegraphy course; the explicit goal of the school was to train female operators. The institute's first annual report phrased it bluntly: "The experience of the telegraph companies has gradually but surely convinced the managers that their interests would be greatly promoted by the substitution of women for men in the greater number of offices."¹⁹ A member of the Buffalo, New York, Western Union force, writing in the early 1880s, noted that it was "understood that the policy of the manager now is to fill all vacancies with ladies—at about one-half the price formerly paid, of course."²⁰

Yet if management widely predicted that "ultimately a large proportion of the telegraphists . . . would be females," as a superintendent declared in 1863, the process of feminization was very gradual and did not go uncontested.²¹ As that manager acknowledged, the main obstacle to feminization was "the antagonism naturally felt by male operators, who see in it a loss of employment to themselves. . . ."²² Indeed, male operators were acutely aware that the number of female operators was steadily increasing. One operator pessimistically predicted that by 1923, male operators would be completely eliminated: "The American Rapid and multiplex/Will be worked alone, by the gentle sex;/The men who now at the key do toil/Will have to die or till the soil."²³

Telegraph operator culture in the late nineteenth century can thus be seen in part as a response to this perceived crisis of feminization. Male operators reacted to this crisis in a variety of ways. Some addressed the issue directly, by writing editorials in industry papers or by making scornful pronouncements such as Jasper Ewing Brady's confession, "I wasn't overfond of women operators."²⁴ But a far more revealing response surfaced in the 1870s and 1880s, in the stories and poems known as telegraphic literature. This literature appeared primarily in industry newspapers and was produced and consumed by telegraph operators, although it was also available to the public in the form of published story collections.²⁵ One of the chief venues for telegraphic literature, the industry paper the *Operator*, published from 1874 to 1885, provided a forum for the laborers to express themselves. The paper conceived of itself as the only "thoroughly independent" trade journal in the industry; it advertised that it was "devoted to the interests of the Tele-

graphic Fraternity," and "not controlled by any corporation or company."²⁶ As the emphasis on "fraternity" suggests, contributors to the *Operator* were overwhelmingly male, and virtually all were operators themselves.²⁷ The journal's poems and stories, together with the tales written by the operator Walter P. Phillips, can be interpreted as a clear attempt to combat Western Union's efforts to feminize the telegraph industry.

Many of these writers adopted the basic tactic of romanticizing the male operator. In the very early years of the industry (before and during the Civil War), male operators who entered the field had often ascended through the ranks to managerial positions. But in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, as the industry became more rigidly organized, opportunities for advancement within Western Union diminished sharply.²⁸ As Gabler notes, "low incomes and crippled mobility" and "narrowed skill ranges and status" combined to make those years "the dark age of the craft" for operators.²⁹ Many telegraph operators in the late nineteenth century came to view their work in post-lapsarian terms, saturating it with a fierce nostalgia for what was considered the industry's golden age, the years before the 1870s. According to this view, telegraphy was once a true craft, practiced by mythic men known within the field as "boomers," who were famous both for their skillful work and for their irresponsible debauchery. Writing under the nom de plume John Oakum, Walter P. Phillips commemorated the boomers' charming eccentricities in a series of stories published in the industry papers.³⁰ But if the image of the boomer pleased some operators, it worried others. At a time of industry rationalization, some male operators felt the need to dispute publicly the stereotype of the footloose, fast-living boomer, by replacing this rogue figure with the image of the operator as an upstanding hero and moral exemplar—a chivalrous "knight of the key," in the common phrase used by male telegraphers.³¹ Although the "knight of the key" stereotype differed from the boomer image, both myths nonetheless presented the operator as a virile male, and envisaged the telegraph industry as a highly masculine, homosocial realm.

While glorifications of the fraternity of operators worked implicitly to exclude female operators, there were also numerous representations that addressed the threat of female operators more explicitly. The writers of several works of fiction went to great lengths to stress that the introduction of female operators would result in a decline in operator competence. In such tales, female operators are depicted as woefully lacking in the skills necessary to operate the machines; often the work of male operators also suffers because they are distracted by women working nearby.³²

But a far more intriguing and complex literary response to feminization surfaced in another set of tales, stories that can be read as veritable meditations on the relation between

the human body and communication technology. In these tales, the proximity of the female body to the telegraph machine alters the technology itself, effectively disabling it. J. M. MacLachlan's story "A Perilous Christmas Courtship; or, Dangerous Telegraphy" invokes just such a scenario. When the main character of MacLachlan's tale falls in love with a female operator who is willing to "do a flirt' on the wire," the result is a highly eroticized encounter.³³ The main character declares, "Such a burning stream of affection, solicitude, and sentiment flowed over that senseless iron thread, when not ruthlessly interrupted by common-place dispatches, that I often thought, when our words grew warmer than usual, that the wire might positively *melt*, and so cut the only link that bound us in love together!"³⁴

Despite the hyperbole of MacLachlan's vision, his tale serves as a variation on what was a widespread trope of telegraphic fiction: a depiction of the female operator as a threat to the technology. In some stories, such as William Lynd's "A Brave Telegraphist" and J. A. Clippinger's "Poor Dick," the presence of the female operator disables a crucial function of the technology: the confidential transmission of information. Other tales, including J. M. MacLachlan's "A Perilous Christmas Courtship," Exie's "Foiled by a Woman's Wit," and William Lynd's "A Brave Telegraphist," depict the female operator in dire peril, subject to a variety of brutal assaults. By repeatedly emphasizing the female operator's vulnerability to violent penetration, these stories suggest that the female operator is a weak link in the telegraph network, a theme that is crucial to male operators' arguments against feminization. (The only logical way to restore integrity to the telegraph network, the argument goes, was to remove the female operator from the industry; in numerous stories, this is accomplished through marriage.)³⁵

In a large number of these representations, the female operator's weakness—her vulnerability, her assailability—is a function of the degree to which she is exposed to the public. Throughout the nineteenth century, wage-earning women of any sort were considered morally suspect precisely because they promiscuously circulated in unregulated public spaces, outside the safety of their putative natural place in the private sphere of hearth and home.³⁶ At a time when even the most minimal contact with the public sphere seemed to threaten feminine modesty, female telegraph operators appeared to herald a new and unprecedented form of public exposure. Indeed, as the historian Sarah Eisenstein has noted, telegraphy was one of the most highly public occupations open to women during this period.³⁷ Male-authored representations of female operators thus often traded on nineteenth-century beliefs about public exposure and female sexuality. In Thomas C. Noble Jr.'s story "Old Robin York," in William Johnston's "A Centennial-

Telegraphic Romance," and in G. W. Russell's poem "Out of Adjustment," the female operator emerges as morally loose—flirtatious at best, sexually indiscriminate at worst. The young female operator Tilly M'wens ruefully sums up these sentiments in the story "A Quandary": "Telegraphing's too public."³⁸

Seen in the light of these representations of the female operator, and in the context of the contested gender relations that divided the telegraph labor force during the 1870s, the identity masquerade limned in Edward O. Chase's "Wives for Two; or, Joe's Little Joke" begins to look rather different. The facetiousness of Chase's sketch gives way to a serious subtext. Indeed, Chase's entire narrative is structured by its final twist, the punchline of the joke—the spectacle of the male narrator successfully hoodwinked by a "subtle exchange." This carnivalesque upheaval of expectations, a destabilization of the order to which the narrator was accustomed, is a source of humor, but also of anxiety. "Wives for Two" in effect emphasizes the ways in which the telegraph might be turned into a duplicitous device directed against the male operator. Throughout the tale, Chase relies on the reader's acquaintance with stereotypes about morally loose female operators—for if Joe is the mastermind, Mabel Warren, who serves as his willing accomplice, successfully executes his deception.

To recognize that "Wives for Two" is a cautionary tale, and not, as it would first seem, a simple validation of the transformative possibilities offered by the telegraph, is not to deny that there existed early celebrations of this aspect of communication technology. But it does mean that we must carefully consider how fantasies about the technology reflect historically specific conditions, especially the economic and social tensions of the moment. Ella Cheever Thayer's 1880 novel *Wired Love: A Romance of Dots and Dashes* offers a case in point. Perhaps the most extensive nineteenth-century meditation on the ways communication technology can be used to negotiate embodiment, *Wired Love* was published by W. J. Johnston (the editor of the *Operator*), and was heavily promoted in that journal as the "first and only telegraphic novel."³⁹ It depicts the adventures of Nattie Rogers, a young female operator who falls in love over the wire with an operator known only as "C" (later revealed to be a young man named Clem). Over the course of the novel, Nattie suffers several setbacks in her pursuit of Clem (as "Cupid, viewed in the character of a telegraphist . . . swithe[s] everybody off on to the wrong wire") before ultimately achieving her goal, when the "circuit" of her love for Clem is completed.⁴⁰ But despite its conventional structure, this romantic narrative is far from traditional. In fact, Thayer's novel portrays the telegraph circuit as a space that enables corporeal and social plasticity.

Throughout her novel, Thayer responds to those who would indict the female operator for her publicity. Rather than denying the publicity of the female operator's body, she

instead begins by strategically foregrounding it. During much of the novel, Thayer uses Miss Kling, the landlady of Nattie's boardinghouse, as a spokeswoman for conventional expectations of female modesty (she offers statements such as "I was brought up to understand that young ladies should never receive the visits of gentlemen except in the presence of older people!" [168]). The landlady also repeatedly articulates the standard condemnations of female publicity. "Public characters are not to be trusted," she argues (64). "You cannot deny that no young woman of a modest and retiring position would seek to place herself in a public position," she declares (65). Another character later echoes Miss Kling's complaints, crying, "How can she appear before the public so? [I]t seems so unwomanly!" (186). While the explicit target of these comments is a young woman named Cyn, an opera singer, Thayer makes clear that Nattie is equally vulnerable to charges of publicity. Indeed, throughout the text, whenever Nattie is in the telegraph office, Thayer stresses her visibility.⁴¹

As if the reader might miss the moral implications of Nattie's publicity, Thayer takes pains to accentuate her heroine's aggressive pursuit of Clem. Although Nattie sees Clem every day in the boardinghouse where they both live, she nonetheless becomes jealous of her friend Cyn's close relationship with Clem. Nattie is entranced with a new idea: the construction of a private telegraph wire from her bedroom to the bedroom where Clem lives with his roommate. That way, she will get Clem all to herself and "nobody could share" him (175). Thereafter, Nattie and Clem achieve an intimacy highly unconventional for unmarried young persons in the nineteenth century: Each morning, Nattie performs the duty of a wife to Clem, waking him up by calling him over the private line; each night, Nattie and Clem use the line for pillow talk, chatting "even into the small hours" (180).

Inevitably, Miss Kling suspects "a horrible scandal" to be taking place, and finally confronts Nattie with the "underhanded" "utter immorality" of "such proceedings" (245). In the same sentence that she condemns women who "show themselves to the public" she denounces Nattie's private line to Clem's bedroom (245). She declares, "That any young woman should be so immodest as to establish telegraphic communication between her bed-room and the bed-room of two young men is beyond my comprehension!" (246). In response to Miss Kling's accusation that she has "connected" herself to Clem, Nattie blushes and confesses that while the private line was "not exactly correct," "there was nothing reprehensible in my conduct" (246). The landlady then responds in the strongest terms. "I have heard of young females so much in love that they would run after and pursue young men, but never before of one so carried away and so lost to every sense of decorum, as to be obliged to have a wire run from her room to his, in order to communicate

with him at improper times!" (248). But Thayer immediately makes clear that Nattie will not be punished for her transgression; instead, she is rewarded, as Clem proposes marriage on the spot. Miss Kling comments acerbically to Nattie's lover, "Well, she has worked hard enough to get you—had to bring the telegraph to her assistance!" (252). As the novel's happy ending demonstrates, Thayer decisively condones Nattie's violation of the normal rules of courtship.

Thayer is able to offer this approbation because she constructs the telegraph circuit as a space different from the space of daily life; Nattie "lived, as it were, in two worlds" (25). Her "telegraphic world" (26) enables her to "wander away, through the medium of that slender telegraph wire, on a sort of electric wings, to distant cities and towns" (25). This telegraphic world is one "where she could amuse herself if she chose, by listening to and speculating upon the many messages of joy or of sorrow, of business and of pleasure, constantly going over the wire" (25). But Nattie is particularly thrilled by the "romantic" potential of the telegraphic circuit, because while she is on the circuit, previously unsanctioned forms of social connection can take place; Nattie's private telegraph wire is only one of many instances of this. When Nattie first becomes acquainted with "C" over the wire, she permits him liberties that would be unacceptable in real life. She quickly becomes accustomed to "the license that distance gave," so that when "C" addresses her impertinently as "my dear," Nattie excuses him by thinking, "did not the distance in any case annul the familiarity?" (41). And when "C" expresses his hope that "we may clasp hands bodily as we do now spiritually, on the wire" (44), she readily assents.

Indeed, Nattie's most intimate moments with "C" always occur through the medium of telegraphy. But what is most astonishing is that Thayer presents Nattie and Clem as entirely dependent upon the circuit for their interaction, even when they are face to face.⁴² At such moments, in order to express themselves freely, they pretend to be connected through a phantom circuit, and use objects to drum out a message in Morse code. In their first face-to-face meeting, "C" reveals himself to Nattie in code by using a pencil to tap out a message. Nattie responds in code, using a pair of scissors (148–151). Whenever a spare telegraph machine is available, they stand facing each other, tapping out messages. Clem acknowledges, "It is nicer talking on the wire, isn't it?" (173), and declares, "a wire is so necessary to our happiness!" (174). As Cyn notes, even if Clem and Nattie were stranded by themselves on a desert island, a telegraph wire would be needed for their communication. It is fitting, then, that *Wired Love* concludes with Nattie and Clem standing in the same room, hands clasped over the same telegraph key, telegraphing their love to each other (256).

The telegraph circuit is the sole arena where Nattie can express herself freely because to speak on the circuit is to create a new identity which is not identical to one's identity in the real world. Thus, after getting to know Clem, Nattie feels a sense of loss and nostalgia for "C": "She sometimes felt that a certain something that had been on the wire was lacking now; that Clem, while realizing all her old expectations of 'C,' was not exactly what 'C' had been to her" (170). Nattie notes that "the day that had brought Clem" in person to her, had "not restored as she then supposed, but taken away, her 'C'" (223). Nattie's acknowledgment of the disparity between "C" as she imagined him and the flesh-and-blood Clem is another way of noting that telegraphy disconnects the speaking self from the body. In the words of Quimby, another of Thayer's characters, telegraphy is a domain where persons become "invisibles" (53, 55, 82). Quimby illustrates his point "with a gesture of his arm that produced an impression as if that member had leaped out of its socket" (82). With this eloquent representation, Quimby locates his commentary at the level of the body; if the arm leaving its socket figures a corporeal alienation (a body divided against itself), it also suggests an attempt to escape the body. Or, in another of Quimby's formulations, telegraphy is "ghostly" (82) not only because it was conventionally assumed to be a link to the spiritual world, but also because it enables an escape from the body, a form of self-abstraction.

This insight functions as the central contribution of *Wired Love*. Traditional republican rules of public discourse maintained that the public subject's right to speak was predicated on his disembodiment and anonymity; he could assume the speaking position of the disinterested public citizen only because he inhabited a body perceived as so normative (white, male, upper-class) that it did not count as a body at all, a concept that Michael Warner has termed "the rhetorical strategy of personal abstraction."⁴³ As Warner argues, this ability to abstract oneself, to take rhetorical advantage of the nonidentity of speaking self and embodied self, has not historically been equally available to everyone. For those persons whose bodies deviated from the white male standard, corporeal difference was equivalent to hyper-embodiment; unable to abstract themselves, they had no grounds from which to speak in the public sphere. To attempt to speak would only call attention to their bodies, to their lack of authority; for women, this meant that appearing in too public a fashion was a form of dangerous promiscuity. Thus, in the male-authored fantasies of telegraphic literature, the female operator, exposed to multiple forms of public circulation, is not disembodied and anonymous, but is instead all too visible, precariously hyper-embodied.

If, as Warner has argued, in the eighteenth century the public sphere was constructed through print discourse, we see in Thayer's novel the possibility that a new form of public

sphere is created by the circuit of communication technology. In Thayer's novel, the telegraph enables self-abstraction, a nonidentity with the body. This disincorporation is not a denial of the female operator's publicity, but a reclamation of it from those versions that would equate the female body with the dominated body. In the space of the circuit, then, the female operator experiences a different relation with herself; she earns the right to speak.⁴⁴ Rendered invisible, temporarily freed from her body, she is also freed from conventional rules of female behavior and seems no longer subject to the traditional forms of discipline, prejudice, and violence that exploit corporeal difference.

The writings of two female operators, J. J. Schofield and L. A. Churchill, extend Thayer's notions regarding the benefits communication technology offered to nineteenth-century women. Along with Thayer, Schofield and Churchill joined the small handful of female writers of telegraphic fiction; Churchill was the only female contributor to the first edition of the fiction collection *Lightning Flashes* and was joined by Schofield in the second edition of the text (where, in the table of contents, the two writers were distinguished from their colleagues by the appellation "Miss"). In stories by Schofield and Churchill, the telegraph circuit appears to emancipate the female operator from visibility and corporeal entrapment, from aspects of her body that marginalize her. Specifically, the circuit becomes a way of circumventing cultural expectations regarding age, physical appearance, and female sexuality.

In Schofield's "Wooing by Wire," Mildred Sunnidale, a telegraph operator, believes herself handicapped in romantic encounters because of her physical appearance and her advanced age (unmarried at thirty, she qualifies as a "spinster," as she acknowledges). Mildred establishes a relationship over the wire with a male operator, Tom Gordon. Tom is not only kind—he forces abusive male operators to treat Mildred respectfully—but he is also enlightened; his experiences over the circuit have taught him that physical appearance is unimportant. As he tells a friend, "You can form quite as good an estimate of a girl's character and temper by working and talking with her over the line, as by being personally acquainted with her; better, perhaps, for you take her on her merits alone, and are not prejudiced by appearance."⁴⁵ Tom has thus learned, after his experiences on the telegraph circuit, that it is possible to see beyond the exterior appearance of "homely women," to stop "taking it for granted that their characters are as unattractive as their faces" (164). According to Schofield's representation, Mildred's relationship with Tom is possible largely because Tom cannot see Mildred's face, and because he fails to realize how old she is (she speculates, "Would he want [my photograph] if he knew I was thirty years old, and so dreadfully plain?" [167]). When Tom proposes to Mildred over the wire,

she tells him, "When you saw me, and discovered your mistake, you would repent your bargain. Why, I'm an old maid, with red hair!" (167). But Tom has already fallen in love with Mildred and thus still wants to marry her even after he has seen her. As he acknowledges at the conclusion of the story, he would never have discovered her good nature had he first met her in person; his love for her would not have had a chance to develop "except by working with her over the line" (168).

The terms of Schofield's story are echoed in L. A. Churchill's "A Slight Mistake." In Churchill's tale, a young operator named Paul Riverson has fallen in love with an operator named Flossie Bates. Flossie, "a woman of about fifty, with a decidedly stout figure and a profusion of gray hair," is thrilled with her new relationship, with the way the circuit frees her from conventional prejudice about age and appearance.⁴⁶ As long as the two communicate over the wire, the romance flourishes. But Churchill does not have Schofield's optimism; at the conclusion of the story, when Paul sees Flossie in person, he is outraged at his "mistake." He immediately rejects Flossie and becomes embittered, vowing never again to risk flirting over the wire.

"Wooing by Wire" and "A Slight Mistake" both explore the use of the circuit to make one's body metaphorically pliable, to attempt to establish a new social identity and new social relations based on that identity. Perhaps the most striking instance of such a masquerade appears in L. A. Churchill's "Playing with Fire." The story depicts a female operator named Rena Chelsey, who resolves to fool another female operator at the next telegraph station, a Miss Dwinell, by pretending to be a man, "Isaac." In that persona, she flirts with Miss Dwinell, complimenting her on her appearance (she has in fact glimpsed Miss Dwinell one day from afar). After a day of extensive flirtation, Rena declares to herself, "One would suppose from my talk that I was a regular lady-killer."⁴⁷ Over the following weeks, Rena and Miss Dwinell spend many hours together on the wire. It is soon apparent that Miss Dwinell has fallen in love with Rena, and Rena too is deeply stirred by Miss Dwinell's "charm"; she sends her numerous small gifts. When Miss Dwinell announces that she will visit Rena in person, Rena panics. In a telling passage, she both repents of the indecency of her ruse and wishes that she might become a man, so that she could consummate her relationship with Miss Dwinell. "If I had ever imagined that she was half as interesting as I have found her, I would have tried to make her acquaintance at once in a decent way. I shall be heartily sorry to lose her good opinion, for I am so deeply interested in her that I more than half wish this Isaac business was a reality" (70).

The strong homoerotic charge of the story appears defused when Miss Dwinell visits Rena in person and it is revealed that the operator Rena assumed to be Miss Dwinell is in

fact a young man. Herbert Stanley, replacing Miss Dwinell in her office, "in the spirit of mischief," decided to impersonate Miss Dwinell when "Isaac" first began flirting. But it immediately becomes evident that this development does not reduce but rather intensifies the queerness of the situation. For Herbert confesses that he has fallen in love with "Isaac." He tells Rena, "You have yet to learn how much I have come to care for my new friend. Often I have wished I *was* Miss Dwinell, if Isaac would care for me as he seemed to care for her" (71). After admitting his upset at Rena's gender ("There must be some mistake" [70]), he makes a half-hearted attempt to assert that "things are now just as they should be." He declares, "I think you cared for me in my old character. Can you learn to love me in my new?" But Rena, it turns out, is also disappointed, and refuses his offer. "Home love is not for me," she informs Herbert, and advises, "Let us each go our own way, bravely walking in the path marked out for us . . ." (71). In the last lines of the story, Churchill explains that neither Rena nor Herbert ever marry. Herbert feels that he has another unnamed "purpose to fulfill" (71), as does Rena. Churchill concludes the tale by reflecting not on the pathos of Rena's spinsterhood but on the dignity of her destiny: "A few years later Rena died. Her work was done. The brave heart ceased to beat, and the tired hands were folded, and no one said that hers had been a wasted life" (71). With this, Churchill suggests that there can be no tidy heterosexual solution; the circuit has permanently queered things for Rena and Herbert.

If the female-authored fictions of Churchill, Schofield, and Thayer revel in technology's offer of emancipatory subjectivity to those who were highly circumscribed in the nineteenth century, it is worth remembering that many male-authored fictions were preoccupied with the threatening side of this aspect of the technology, its potential to endanger the status of those who were dominant. Recognizing the range of responses to this aspect of the technology—that there existed representations of masquerade that were censorious, as well as celebratory—prevents us from positing a straightforward genealogy of communication technologies, whereby fantasies about the internet simply mirror earlier fantasies about the telegraph. It is wise for us to recognize that these early fantasies were responses to a specific historical moment; the tales of telegraphic fiction offered symbolic resolutions to very immediate and urgent tensions within nineteenth-century society. One way to read these tales is as efforts to reconcile traditional assumptions about gender roles—about men and women's proper and rightful place—with new workplace conditions, with rapidly changing economic and social realities.

Yet if in one sense fantasies about telegraphy speak narrowly to their own historical moment, they are also suggestive of ours. In telegraphic fiction, what is all too often

mystified in current discourse about the internet is rendered relatively accessible. In these nineteenth-century fictions, the material conditions underlying the operation of technology become visible. While the telegraph is often fantasized as a means of achieving temporary release from certain constraints, it just as often appears as an integral participant in the reproduction of unequal conditions and social relations. With the example of telegraphic literature before us, we might turn to our contemporary moment, to interrogate the cultural meanings we have assigned to the internet, and to inquire about what needs these meanings have been made to serve. It is only then—when we fully acknowledge the degree to which the computer internet is enabled by and itself enables structures of economic exchange—that we begin to recognize that our most persistent fictions about the internet, our fantasies about escape and our longings for fluidity of identity, might also be understood as powerful evidence of the forms of circumscription and impoverishment experienced by those living under the conditions of late capitalism.

Notes

1. Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1995), 184.
2. It is important to note that the invisibility of corporeal difference does not always lead to politically progressive results; insisting on the visibility of alterity in cyberspace can serve as a mechanism through which to interrogate the reproduction of normative assumptions in real life. Indeed, a denial of one's difference can be problematic in a variety of situations, including those involving community building. Julian Stallabrass has argued that "the extreme mutability and multiplication of identity possible in cyberspace collides with the desire to build communities based upon honest communication with people of diverse backgrounds and interests. Role-playing, and the potential for dishonesty which goes with it, militates against community." "Empowering Technology: The Exploration of Cyberspace," *New Left Review* 211 (May/June 1995): 16. See also Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, "Racialized Fantasies on the Internet," *Signs* 24, no. 4 (1999): 1089–1096, and Jodi Dean, "Virtual Fears," *Signs* 24, no. 4 (1999): 1069–1078.
3. Dan Schiller, *Digital Capitalism: Networking the Global Market System* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), xiv.
4. Although some commentators and operators believed that certain operators—particularly women—possessed a characteristic sending style, such attempts at distinguishing the true identity of a given sender were notoriously difficult.
5. Tom Standage, *The Victorian Internet: The Remarkable Story of the Telegraph and the Nineteenth Century's On-line Pioneers* (New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 1998).
6. Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 5.
7. Edward O. Chase, "Wives for Two; or, Joe's Little Joke," *Lightning Flashes and Electric Dashes: A Volume of Choice Telegraphic Literature, Humor, Fun, Wit & Wisdom* (New York, 1877), 41.
8. Vidkunn Úlriksson, *The Telegraphers: Their Craft and Their Unions* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs, 1953), 8. Western Union's only competition came from the Baltimore and Ohio Telegraph Company and the American Rapid Telegraph Company.
9. Edwin Gabler, *The American Telegrapher: A Social History, 1860–1900* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 44, 43.
10. "Inviolability of Private Dispatches," *Journal of the Telegraph*, 1 July 1876, 201.
11. J. A. Wyllie, "The Telegrapher's Song," *Lightning Flashes and Electric Dashes: A Volume of Choice Telegraphic Literature, Humor, Fun, Wit & Wisdom* (New York, 1877), 75.
12. Quoted in Gabler, *The American Telegrapher*, 148.
13. James D. Reid, *The Telegraph in America: Its Founders, Promoters, and Noted Men* (1878; New York, 1974), 547. In his position as a company official and editor of the company organ the *Journal of the Telegraph*, Reid served as a mouthpiece for company doctrine.
14. Quoted in Gabler, *The American Telegrapher*, 157.
15. Charles L. Buckingham, "The Telegraph of To-Day," *Scribner's Magazine* (July 1889), 4. Morse originally conceived of his code as visual; the received messages would be recorded permanently on paper (enabling an objective way of verifying the accuracy of message transmission). He was angered when he realized that operators invariably elected to listen to the pattern of clicks made by the machine, rather than reading the code off a ribbon.
16. Menahem Blondheim has studied the shift in public attitudes toward the telegraph and notes that while initially observers cast the technology in utopian terms, as the century wore on there was increasing anxiety about the degree to which the technology was vulnerable to manipulation by criminals—and by the telegraph companies themselves. Menahem Blondheim, "When Bad Things Happen to Good Technologies: Three Phases in the Diffusion and Perception of American Telegraphy," in *Technology, Pessimism, and Postmodernism*, ed. Yaron Ezrahi, Everett Mendelsohn, and Howard Segal (Dordrecht: Kluwer 1994).
17. Quoted in Gabler, *The American Telegrapher*, 67.
18. See Charles H. Garland, "Women as Telegraphists," *Economic Journal* 11 (June 1901): 254, 255, 260, 261.
19. Quoted in Gabler, *The American Telegrapher*, 132.
20. Quoted in *ibid.*
21. The feminization of telegraphy during this era was of course being paralleled by the feminization of clerical work. Gabler notes that male fears of industry feminization "were reasonable

enough, given the state of the craft in the postbellum years," although the total feminization of the field did not occur until the twentieth century. The official policy of the national union, the Brotherhood of Telegraphers, was to welcome women into the union and to demand equal pay for women; but, as historians invariably note, demands for equal pay for women were usually equivalent to demanding the removal of women from the field, for their chief appeal for employers was their cheap wages.

22. Quoted in Virginia Penny, *The Employments of Women: A Cyclopaedia of Woman's Work* (Boston, 1863), 101.

23. Anonymous, "A Modern Mother Shipton," *Operator*, 23 December 1882, 681.

24. Jasper Ewing Brady, *Tales of the Telegraph: The Story of a Telegrapher's Life and Adventures in Railroad Commercial and Military Work* (Chicago, 1900), 185. For an example of an editorial explicitly addressing the issue, see "Women as Telegraph Operators," *Operator*, 15 May 1882, 198. The article provides an overview of arguments against female operators by exploring the European debate on the subject. Despite the author's recognition of the adequacy of female operators in the United States, the rhetorical weight of the piece lies with the lengthy explications of arguments against female operators. Thomas Edison, himself a former telegraph operator, went on record denouncing female operators, alleging that they did not have "commercial instinct and judgment" "and can't acquire them." Quoted in Gabler, *The American Telegrapher*, 136.

25. For examples of collections, see Walter P. Phillips, *Sketches Old and New* (New York, 1897) and Phillips's volume written under the pseudonym John Oakum, *Oakum Pickings: A Collection of Stories, Sketches and Paragraphs* (New York, 1876). Phillips's 1897 volume was based on stories originally written in the 1870s. See also the 1877 anthology *Lightning Flashes and Electric Dashes*, collected from the pages of the *Operator* by the paper's editor, W. J. Johnston, which went through two editions.

26. These phrases of self-promotion appeared in an advertisement at the back of *Lightning Flashes* and in an advertisement in the *Journal of the Telegraph*, 1 May 1877, 139.

27. See for instance the biological profiles on the well-known telegraphic fiction writers Edward O. Chase (a former chief operator), D. C. Shaw (a chief operator in Portland, Maine), and Joseph Christie (for years an operator in the Philadelphia Western Union office) in *Lightning Flashes*. Although the fact that some writers use only first initials would seem to make their gender ambiguous, in a later edition of *Lightning Flashes*, a distinction is made between male and female contributors by appending "Miss" to the names of two contributors, L. A. Churchill and J. J. Schofield. I will discuss the contributions of these female authors, below.

28. Gabler, *The American Telegrapher*, 63.

29. *Ibid.*, 64, 71, 63.

30. See Phillips's depictions of "Old Jim Lawless," "Little Tip McClosky," "Cap De Costa," "Posie Van Dusen," "Old George Wentworth" and "Patsy Flanagan," in Oakum, *Oakum Pickings* and Wal-

ter P. Phillips, *Sketches Old and New*. Phillips gave his tales an elegiac cast; he set his stories "in the far-off realm of those good old times, when it was thought something smart to work telegraph lines." *Oakum Pickings*, 64. As a reviewer of Phillips's tales noted, in an advertisement appearing in the *Journal of the Telegraph*, they dramatized a breed of "characters now almost extinct," 1 October 1876, 299. Writing the next year for the *Journal of the Telegraph*, a writer mourned the boomers in humorous terms. He recalled those operators "whose personal exploits and achievements buried those of Munchausen in a grave of ignominious tameness; men who would have freely divided their last cent with any unfortunate, but who unluckily, for the unfortunate, seldom had a last cent to divide, but the *tout ensemble* of whose characteristics, had they been described by some one eloquent, would have been compressed, perhaps, into two words—Smart Alecks." *Journal of the Telegraph*, 1 May 1877, 129.

31. Perhaps the most extended version of the myth of male operator as moral exemplar is offered in Brady, *Tales of the Telegraph*.

32. For literary explorations of female operators' incompetence, see John Oakum (Walter P. Phillips), "An Autumn Episode" and "Narcissa" in *Oakum Pickings*. For examples of the disruptive effects of female operators on male operators, see Thomas C. Noble Jr., "Washington Butterfield's Experience with Female Help," *Operator*, 1 December 1883, and "Washington Butterfield's Experience with Female Help, Conclusion," *Operator*, 15 December 1883.

33. J. M. MacLachlan, "A Perilous Christmas Courtship; or, Dangerous Telegraphy," *Lightning Flashes*, 66.

34. MacLachlan, "A Perilous Christmas Courtship," 66.

35. See for example Anonymous, "A Quandary," *Operator*, 15 November 1883, 190; MacLachlan, "A Perilous Christmas Courtship," Chase, "Wives for Two," and William Lynd, "A Brave Telegraphist," *Operator*, 15 March 1884, 78.

36. See Thomas C. Noble Jr., "Old Robin York," *Operator*, 15 October 1883, 158; William Johnston, "A Centennial-Telegraphic Romance," *Lightning Flashes*, 107–108; and G. W. Russell's poem "Out of Adjustment," *Lightning Flashes*, 62–53; and especially "A Quandary," where the female operator's "too public" status is a source of anxiety to the man courtshiping her.

37. Sarah Eisenstein, *Give Us Bread but Give Us Roses: Working Women's Consciousness in the United States, 1890 to the First World War* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 83. Western Union was aware of the possibility that female operators' exposure to the public could be perceived as a problem. It was Western Union practice to segregate women in the large branch offices, or to surround them with eight-foot partitions to shield them from male eyes; Gabler, *The American Telegrapher*, 111. James D. Reid, spokesman for Western Union, insisted that far from introducing an element of sexuality into the telegraph office, a female operator "stopped vulgarity"; her influence "was in every way healthful," *The Telegraph in America*, 171. In their seclusion, their removal from the world, the operators could be presented as isolated from the meaning of the messages they transmitted. As one anonymous writer in the Western Union company organ put it, female op-

erators who are removed from the world "might for aught they feel in the matter, be accelerating communications from one star to another." "The Female Telegraphists at the London Office," *Journal of the Telegraph*, 16 August 1877, 242.

38. Anonymous, "A Quandary," 190.

39. The question of whether Thayer was herself an operator is difficult to resolve. The level of detail with which the novel describes not only Morse code but also a wide variety of conventions of telegraph operation (including numerous telegraphic abbreviations, where numbers and letters serve as industry code), suggest that Thayer did work as a telegraph operator. She certainly was a reader of telegraphic fiction; several of the anecdotes about telegraphy related in the novel were plagiarized from W. J. Johnston's "Some Curious Anecdotes of the Wire" (which appeared in the second, expanded edition of *Lightning Flashes*). Reviews of *Wired Love* fail to shed light on this question; for instance, the *Boston Journal's* observation that Thayer "is evidently familiar with the electric telegraph" indicates that the reviewer was not certain of her professional status. The review appears in an advertisement for the novel, published in the *Operator*, 15 October 1883, 165. It seems fair to conclude that if Thayer was not herself an operator, she was closely associated with the industry.

40. Ella Cheever Thayer, *Wired Love: A Romance of Dots and Dashes* (New York, 1880), 194, 198. All further page numbers will be included parenthetically in the text.

41. For example, an "urchin, flattening his nose against her window-glass" watches Nattie (62–63). When Nattie exclaims loudly, "a passing countryman stopped . . . to stare" (96). When she is sad she presents "no laughing face to the curious passers-by" (94). The clerk in the store opposite Nattie's office constantly monitors Nattie's behavior; he observes her "for some weeks" (48, 76, 77, 94). At one point, the clerk is joined by another man, and together the two curiously stare at Nattie (77).

42. This element of Nattie's relationship resembles the real-life experience of Thomas Edison, when he was courting his wife. In his diary he recalled, "I taught the lady of my heart the Morse code, and when she could both send and receive we got along much better than we could have with spoken words by tapping out our remarks to one another on our hands," quoted in Standage, *The Victorian Internet*, 142.

43. Michael Warner, "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 382.

44. We might thus see these fictions as confirming Carolyn Marvin's observation that the history of electric media "is less the evolution of technical efficiencies in communication than a series of arenas for negotiating issues crucial to the conduct of social life; among them, who is inside and outside, who may speak, who may not, and who has authority and may be believed"; Marvin, 4.

45. This story appeared only in the second, expanded edition of *Lightning Flashes*. J. J. Schofield, "Wooing by Wire," in *Lightning Flashes and Electric Dashes: A Volume of Choice Telegraphic Literature*,

Humor, Fun, Wit and Wisdom (New York, 1877), 164. All further page numbers will be included parenthetically in the text.

46. L. A. Churchill, "A Slight Mistake," in *Lightning Flashes and Electric Dashes: A Volume of Choice Telegraphic Literature, Humor, Fun, Wit and Wisdom* (New York, 1877), 74.

47. L. A. Churchill, "Playing with Fire," in *Lightning Flashes and Electric Dashes: A Volume of Choice Telegraphic Literature, Humor, Fun, Wit and Wisdom* (New York, 1877), 69. All further page numbers will be included parenthetically in the text.