In the midst of a depression and with prospects like that, who wouldn’t be excited? So in the days of corsets, leg-of-myton sleeves, bloomers, and long skirts, many women risked whatever they had to go find their own fortune.

(Mayer 1989, 3)

Gold! Gold! Gold! Psychology and psychobiology professor Melanie Mayer (1989) introduces us to the brave women who took part in the 1897-98 Klondike, Alaska, gold rush. They were women from all walks of life: Poor women, aspiring immigrants, professional women, wives, single women, miners, shopkeepers, cooks, widows, nurses, entertainers – the list goes on and on (Mayer 1989). Some women went to Klondike, Alaska, out of desperation. Others were swept up by gold enthusiasm. Adventuresome, as they all were, they went through substantial physical hardship to survive on the trail. This paper is motivated by their stories. My goal is to read young women’s resistance to male internet-domination in light of these early female pioneers. The narratives of early female pioneers, such as the Klondike women or Wild West Woman Annie Oakley, help situate young women’s approach to the internet. This comparison is even more appropriate, when seen in light of young women’s own appropriation of frontier and pioneer rhetoric. They indeed see themselves as the early female internet pioneers – comparable to their 19th century predecessors.
First a more general connection between the early gold rush and the “new” gold: The vast unsettled West of the mid- to late 1800s was the land of promise as well as the dark beyond, writes history scholar Sandra Myres (1982). The West beckoned and repelled (Myres 1982, 15). Likewise, the internet at first beckoned and repelled. In the early 1990s, the internet was, by many, best described as a new frontier. Enthusiastic and hopeful of a quick financial gain, dot.com firms emerged rapidly in Silicon Valley. The number of internet users in the United States skyrocketed. And academics speculated on possibilities for new gender-bending environments (Turkle 1995). American writers were quick to see the connection with the old West. For example, Howard Rheingold (1993) in *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* drew vivid associations to 19th century homesteading on the American West.

Today, this view of the internet continues. Western metaphors help us understand the internet. This is not surprising. The essence of metaphors is to understand one experience in terms of another (Lakoff, 1994). Metaphors help us make sense of the world we live in. In this regard, the frontier metaphor is particularly interesting. It’s presence in describing anything from space (the ultimate frontier) and fertility (technological frontiers) to the internet (electronic frontiers), demonstrates a Western love affair with “frontiers”. Myres (1982) says: “Perhaps no concept, no theme in American history had a greater impact on the popular imagination than the idea of the West, the frontier” (p. 12). Internet critic Laura Miller agrees. She situates the frontier metaphor in the rich figurative soup of American culture. The frontier was a primal moment in American history – and a moment that today continues to define and solidify North American national identity.
But frontier rhetoric conjures up numerous and often conflicting narratives. Feminist scholars have, not surprisingly, responded to the use of the frontier metaphor with criticism. Rhetorician Virginia Eubanks (2000), for example, warns us: Frontier rhetoric is two-faced. It professes key Western values such as self-determination and individual freedom, while it simultaneously conjures up practices that historically have been repressive to women and people of color. Understood in this manner, the frontier metaphor, when applied to the internet, not only articulates the dream of new opportunities and new environments but oppression as well. Eubanks’ concern is echoed in popular culture. Notions that online anonymity fosters bizarre frontier male behavior led, in 1996, Newsweek to conclude that women on the internet feel as welcome as a system crash. ¹ Cyberspace is no Eden for women, wrote the author. In these accounts, male dominance and female victimization unfolds – a familiar image. According to Myres (1982), the image of female victimization has its roots in portraits of Western women:

“Perhaps no image in American history and literature is more deeply embedded in the American mind than that of the frightened, tearful woman wrenched from home and hearth and dragged off into the terrible West where she is condemned to live a life of lonely terror among savage beasts and rabine Indians” (p. 1).

The image leaves little room for understanding the presence of young female internet pioneers – the goal of this paper. And I therefore agree with Miller’s assessment: The notion that men are computer cowboys, women and children – the victims of untamed electronic landscapes calls for closer examination.

An 1897 press report with the headline “NO PLACE FOR WOMEN” pointed to the Klondike as a hostile environment for women. According to gold pioneer James Christie, women were “utterly unfit to fight the battle out there” (Mayer 1989, 6). A blatant statement filled with ignorance and prejudice. Christie’s statement is as offensive today, as it was then. Conventional notions hold that the internet is a dangerous place. Because women are physically and rhetorically weaker than men, they are the likely victims of cyber-harassment and online rape. Laura Miller (1995) says: “The imperilled women and children of the Western narrative make their appearance today in newspaper and magazine articles that focus on the intimidation and sexual harassment of women on line and reports of pedophiles trolling for victims in computerized chat rooms” (p. 52). Rugged, individualistic, ambitious males inhabit the internet and they make it a dangerous place for women. But to exclusively cast women as victims, overlooks the number of women who are currently present online – women who continue a history of frontierning. Women’s histories as pioneers must be acknowledged. Most importantly, they inspire a fresh new perspective on young women’s involvement with technology.

Despite discouragement, women joined the early gold rush. Joining the gold rush meant leaving friends and families behind, confronting the unknown and undertaking severe physical hardship. According to Mayer (1989), almost none of the women, who ventured to Alaska, had been to the Northwest before. The trip was beautiful, ruthless and difficult. Some of the women never made it. Some died on the trails. One adventuresome woman, who did make it, was Nellie Cashman. Nellie was no rookie. During the 1870s and 1880s, she travelled the Western territories in search of gold and silver (Mayer 1989). She went to South
Africa in search of diamonds, and she opened a boarding house in a gold camp in Mexico (Mayer 1989). The peak of the Klondike rush was in 1897 and the now fifty-year old Nellie decided that she was ready for another adventure. Although Nellie wanted to find gold, it is much more likely that it was the adventure itself that she desired. And she was not alone. Women’s diaries at the time revealed their excitement with the land and the hopes for new and better prospects. About Oregon, one woman wrote: “The mountains are glorious and the forests elegant. I can’t describe it for it is beyond description” (Myres 1982, 34). Like men, women were, at the time, influenced by a certain degree of romanticism towards wilderness on the frontier (Myres, 1982).

Another well known, albeit different pioneer at the time, was Annie Oakley. Known as Little Sure Shot, Annie Oakley became famous for her accuracy with a gun. She excelled in shooting, hunting, riding horses and biking – all uncommon activities for women during the late 1800s. Whereas Annie Oakley supported women’s ability to hold employment and equal pay for equal work, she prized conventional femininity: Modesty, marriage and appearance (Riley 1994). A lady had to be a civilizing force (Riley 1994). Introduce women and children into the frontier and the frontier must be civilized, says Laura Miller not without some sarcasm (p. 52). In light of conventional female stereotypes of the time, Annie Oakley’s choice to stress conventional “ladyhood” was not surprising. In this manner, she became palatable to dominant male culture. Her unconventional activities (which invariably led to her own financial gain – an uncommon accomplishment for women at the time) – were not seen as a threat but were instead feminized by males. One male admirer, for example, saw Annie’s handling of a gun as as feminine as other women’s handling of the needle (Riley 1994).
this manner, Annie’s “lady-performance” was crucial in her ability to gain acceptability, visibility and upward mobility.

Historian Glenda Riley (1994), in her vivid account *The Life and Legacy of Annie Oakley*, sees Annie as a feminist. Annie pushed what conventionally was thought of as appropriate feminine activities. She wished for women to handle a gun as naturally as they handle babies. And she challenged yet another boundary when she, in 1898, wrote president Wilson that she was prepared to “place a Company of fifty lady sharpshooters as his disposal” (Riley 1994, 143). Her feminist contributions have, however, gone almost unacknowledged. Her lack of commitment to the issue of the day - women’s suffrage was a likely deciding factor in the women’s rights movement declining to acknowledge her many other efforts to expand women’s spheres. To them, Riley says, she was little more than an entertainment star. But to Riley, Annie Oakley personifies the longing of a nation to return to elements of its past: “The West endures because it is an useful and attractive part of Americans’ collective past, a part characterized by many successes and associated with virtues many people think of as peculiarly American” (Riley 1994, 235).

In what ways, then, does the story of fifty-year old Nellie Cashman and Annie Oakley add to a feminist understanding of young women’s rhetoric about the internet? For one, the keyboard replaces the gun. Electronic networking is gold. Although not explicitly discussed, the work of feminist philosopher and rhetorician Judith Butler (1990, 1997) and feminist rhetorician Celeste Condit (1997) is essential to my discussion of young women’s rhetoric. Inspired by Butler and Condit, my underlying thesis is: *rhetoric is the grounds onto
which gender is constructed and consequently gender is a doing – a sort of performance that never ends.

**Grrrl Rhetoric: New Frontier, New Pioneers.**

Carla Sinclair and Aliza Sherman are two self-proclaimed and prominent early internet pioneers. Although their contributions are discussed in an article forthcoming in *The Nordic Journal of Women’s Studies* (NORA), I here read them in light of pioneer mythology. In her book *Net Chick: A Smart Girl Guide to the Wired World*, Carla Sinclair (1996) welcomes her readers in the following manner:

Loosen your bra straps and take a deep breath – you’re about to embark on the most sumptuous, estrogenic journey ever taken through online culture. Thousands of smart, opulent and entertaining salons await you in cyberspace, and this book will escort you to the best of them. On your way, you’ll meet some of the sharpest, baddest, raciest Net Chicks who’ve helped shape the feminine energy now flooding the Internet (Sinclair 1996: 3).

Sinclair’s choice of “salons” to describe women’s online spaces is an interesting choice. According to feminist scholar Anne Scott Sørensen (1998), salons privileged the intellectual elite, but they were not limited to men. Prominent European women hosted salons to engage in dinner, music and conversations with invited guests. When applying a frontier perspective to salons, they gain additional significance. It is tempting, then, to infer *saloons* rather than the more European concept of salons. Saloons as well as salons connote spaces designed for public use, frequently entertainment, but in the case of the “saloon” also drinking. The Calamity Jane stereotype – the woman who drank, smoked, and shocked

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everyone with her speech and manners fits readily in with the notion of frontier saloons. It is therefore interesting that when Sinclair appropriates “salons”, she suggests a predominantly female space designed for women to network. With as sharp of a tongue as Calamity Jane, Sinclair eloquently connects a forum of the past to a contemporary space. Internet salons attract, she articulates, sharp, educated, and by implication, therefore, privileged women. With elitist undercurrents, Sinclair poses that internet salons are intimate spaces that help transcend geographical and cultural borders. They are, in the eyes of Sinclair, contemporary salons for networking among young women.

But who are the young women that Sinclair wishes to attract? Net Chicks, as Sinclair prefers to name them, are grrrly and strong young women. A Net Chick does not hide her grrrly traits but, in the words of Sinclair, “flaunts them as symbols of strength and power (p. 11). Like early pioneers, Net Chicks have a “sassy-ass attitude and a sense of adventure” (Sinclair 1996, 6). They roam the internet, not necessarily to gain riches and fame – they simply enjoy the adventure. In this manner, Sinclair appropriates “Chick” to mean something very different from its usual connotations of “immature, all-appearance-oriented female”. Sinclair’s Net Chick defies conventional notions of feminine and masculine behaviors. She is an individual who dares to be feminine, sees it as her strength, while she rhetorically composes herself in a conventional masculine mode in a domain dominated by males.

Net Chicks pave the way for others. They wish to challenge the notion that the internet is a male-domain. And in this manner they again compare themselves to the early pioneering women. Spence in Sinclair says:
It appears that our lot is to be the pioneer women of this medium. Hardily like our female predecessors, we should stand strong and firm, remembering that we are actively plowing the way for the grrrls who will follow us (Spence in Sinclair 1996, xii).

The analogy between geographical pioneers and internet pioneers facilitates an immediate connection with strength, audacity and adventure. It places them on the frontier: Grrrls go where no one (at least no girls) have gone before. And in paving the way for others, grrrls hope others will join them.

Aliza Sherman is another fellow internet pioneer. In her book *Cybergrrrl! A Woman’s Guide to the World Wide Web*, she introduces her readers in the following manner:

Cybergrrrl says... If you think the Internet and the World Wide Web is too hard, is too expensive, is too dangerous, offers you nothing professionally, offers you nothing personally... then think again (p. 1).

With the use of an online alter ego, cybergrrrl, Sherman reconciles differences between herself and her readers. She starts by describing her own story. “I’m not a techie”, she says (Sherman 1998, 8). It was not until she acquired a job as a secretary that she learned about computers. And she initially feared the computer: “Something about that cold, plastic machine and glaring screen seemed really scary to me. But once I learned how to turn the thing on, open a program, type a letter, save it, and print it, I was hooked” (Sherman 1998, 4). Sherman’s story is a familiar one. Her first computer was bought from money that she had from selling her car. A neighbor helped her pick out the right computer (one that she could afford). And then with stunning and sudden success, she launched her website in January of 1995: *The World according to Cybergrrrl*. Her story testifies to the notion that women do not need to be nerds to find a place of their own on the internet:
I am living proof that you don’t have to be a techie or computer whiz to benefit from the Internet. Going online isn’t really about computers; it’s about communication as well as making connections to both information and people. And making connections can help you in many aspects of your life – personally and professionally. Cybergrrl says . . . Get online! (Sherman 1998, 8).

Cybergrrl articulates a no-nonsense approach to the internet: Just do it! But she simultaneously addresses issues of harassment and intimidation. Stories from women whose careers have been enhanced or facilitated by the internet are strong testaments to the power of the tool: Stephanie Brail’s online harassment experience inspired her to start a business to support women online. And Joan Korenman’s interpersonal relationships are enhanced through online connections with people from various parts of the world. Each of them overcame initial barriers to succeed.

A comparison of the two authors show that Sherman speaks more directly to women whose fears of technology may keep them from entering the web. In her plot, the main character, Sherman herself, roams the margins. Subordinated by a dominant male culture, lack of knowledge and few financial resources, she is barely able to buy the absolute essentials. The plot changes, however, into a success story. Sherman resurfaces as “cybergrrrl” – a heroine of the internet. This type of subaltern story is, as expressed by historian Kerwin Lee Klein (1997), almost always romantic: “The subaltern has been been tragically oppressed but heroically surmounts these barriers and emerges triumphant, autonomous, and independent” (Klein 1997, 272). In Sherman’s story, the creation of The World According to Cybergrrrl and cybergrrrl are triumphant. And so are the other heroines in the book: Stephanie Brail and Joan Korenman – to name a few.
In contrast, Sinclair presents another plot. In her story, the heroine – Net Chick is a cyberbabe. Appropriating words such as BITCH to “Babes In Their Cyber Hangout”, Sinclair positions Net Chicks as feminine kick-ass individuals who belong in cyberspace. These grrrls are not ridden by fear, but guided by a feistiness characteristic of third wave feminism and, I argue, inspired by early pioneer women on the American West. The story is, at no point, not even remotely tragic (except perhaps for the individuals who choose not to follow them). Net Chicks are rhetorically portrayed as a dominant force. They are triumphant, homesteading the electronic frontier, as they see fit. And they challenge others to dare join them. To position Net Chicks as autonomous, strong, independent young women allows Sinclair to present a narrative of young women’s presence on the internet that far exceeds the more familiar picture painted by Sherman. It is a narrative that challenges the conventional idea that women are afraid of technology. Like 19th century pioneer Annie Oakley, they see femininity as an asset – although in the case of Net Chicks, modesty is not allowed.

Sinclair and Sherman’s use of pioneer rhetoric should not be studied uncritically, however. Several questions are raised: In what ways did early female pioneers contribute to injustices during Western expansionism? And do Net Chicks or cybergrrrls reinstate these injustices in online environments? Of grave concern to any contemporary feminist analysis are issues involving diversity of experiences. While popular media portrayed, and continues to portray, the West as a white place, the West was in most respects more heterogeneous than the rest of the United States. Little known, but nevertheless important, women and men of color played key roles in the West. Mary Fields, for example, an ex-slave and a pistol-packing, hard-drinking black woman escaped to Montana where she took up residency and
worked. Mexican-Americans, African-Americans, and Chinese-Americans built the first transcontinental railroad. Bill Pickett, a black cowboy, invented bulldogging - a technique used in today’s rodeos. There is no doubt, however, that women of color were met with prejudice. With little knowledge of Hispanics, for example, Caucasian women ventured west with a loaded baggage of stereotypes. Myres (1982) expresses a conventional belief about Mexicans at the time, when she says: “They were still strange, ignorant, and not quite honest barbarians, but, like Indians, they were our barbarians, interesting examples of a dying culture” (p. 78). Some of the stereotypes were later cast aside, yet others were left unchallenged.

Likewise, an analysis of the internet must acknowledge diversity present on the Net. But presence of diversity does not necessarily make the internet a welcoming environment for women of color. In their book, *A Race for Cyberspace*, writers Lisa Nakamura, Gilbert Rodman and Beth Kolko (2000) develop a postcolonial critical view of the internet. According to them, the internet is dominated by white ethnocentric ideas – lacking programming, design and interactions by and for people of color. Race is supposedly invisible, thus, whiteness becomes the norm. The use of frontier rhetoric provokes other critical questions: Do grrrls succeed in assigning new meaning to the concept of an electronic frontier? To a large extent, their feminist contribution depends on the extent to which they succeed in appropriating these terms. Feminist writer Julia Penelope (1990) points to this dilemma when she says:

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3 See the online biography of Mary Fields on http://www.lkwdpl.org/wihohio/fiel-mar.htm
4 See the online biography of Bill Pickett on http://www.billpickettrodeo.com/
5 See for instance http://www.sistahspace.com/
Reclaiming specific words, for example, isn’t simple, and numerous problems present themselves as we contemplate the choices we have. How should we decide which words we can reclaim without also reinforcing the patriarchal ideas they denote? There is a sifting process involves talking among ourselves and arguing about the relative effects each has on our thinking and our behaviors (p. 215).

Penelope gives priority to words that allow women to move outside of the world as men have named it. And she is not alone. Rhetorical critic Barbara Warnick (1999, 2002) is a vocal sceptic of grrrl frontier rhetoric. In her view, notions of grrrls as explorers and first-comers marginalize their less resourceful sisters. Grrrl rhetoric is patriarchal discourse. It is hierarchical and elitist. Women are excluded, while they are simultaneously invited online (Warnick 1999). Warnick is also critical of the grrrl heroine created by Sherman and Sinclair. An ideal type of woman, says Warnick: One who is career oriented, opportunistic, and a risk-taker. She says:

Rhetorical analysis of invitational rhetoric addressed to women to get them to come online showed that such talk and writing masculinized the feminine. That is, it constructed an “ideal” type of woman – one who was career oriented, opportunistic, and prepared to take risks and try new things. This discourse spoke of taking control of powerful tools and praised individuals who could take care of themselves on the new cyberspace frontier (Warnick 2002, 86).

Although I agree that frontier rhetoric opens up a pandora’s box of critical questions and that the process of reclaiming words is a complex one, I take issue with Warnick’s claim that Net Chicks or cybergrrrls “masculinize the feminine”. To argue that grrrl rhetoric “masculinizes the feminine” is to overlook that there is nothing inherently masculine about projecting women as risk-takers and pioneers. As briefly demonstrated in my historical account, women have long been pioneers. And what’s more: The pioneer image is a feminist image – early pioneer women resisted conventional restrictive feminine roles. They challenged the notion of the frontier as a province restricted to males. Similarly, young
women challenge and transcend stereotypical gendered speech. With Butler and Condit as my inspiration, I also must take issue with Warnick’s claim for yet another reason: There is nothing masculine about grrrl rhetoric, because there is nothing inherently masculine. To not project women as career oriented, opportunistic, and risk takers is not only to limit them but is also to uncritically accept that a category of so-called “feminine” behaviors exist.

Young women’s rhetoric is, preferably, I argue, understood in light of early women’s frontier rhetoric. A narrative of Annie Oakley, for example, as a woman of the American West who could shoot as well as, or much better than, any man, when applied to online environments, moves us from a narrative of victimization to a narrative of resistance. Frontier rhetoric is also about resistance. The making of new narratives is vital. Sherman’s and Sinclair’s frontier heroine is the girl who growls and bites her way through cyberspace. Annie Oakley was the woman whose abilities with a gun outshined most of her competitors. Both narratives speak to women’s frontier experiences. They propose new plots, new characters and a set of new possibilities. Privileging women on the frontier, places their contributions at the center. Although this is not entirely unproblematic either, it provides the rhetorical critic with a different, and much more fruitful, vantage point.
References


