

# What Is Gender Nihilism ?

A READER

*What Is Gender Nihilism?*  
*A Reader*

December 2016, version 1.2.

Set in Chaparral and Avenir using the  
T<sub>E</sub>X typesetting system.

Covers printed on a Challenge 15KA letterpress.

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# Contents

Bibliographical Information	i
Introduction: The Crisis of Gender and Nihilism	iii
<b>I. Inspirations</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>1883</b> Manifesto of Nihilist Women	1
<b>1970</b> The Woman-Identified-Woman	3
<b>1976</b> <i>History of Sexuality, Volume 1</i> (excerpt)	13
<b>1978</b> Introduction to <i>Herculine Barbin</i> (excerpt)	15
<b>1980</b> Compulsory Heterosexuality... (excerpt)	21
<b>1981</b> One is Not Born A Woman	33
<b>1988</b> Performative Acts... (excerpt)	49
<b>1987</b> The <i>Empire</i> Strikes Back	53
<b>1994</b> My Words to Victor Frankenstein...	87
<b>1997</b> The Point is Not to Interpret Whiteness...	115

<b>2002</b>	<b>Romancing the Transgender Native (excerpt)</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>2008</b>	<b>The Coloniality of Gender (excerpt)</b>	<b>137</b>
<b>2011</b>	<b>Communization and the Abolition of Gender</b>	<b>145</b>
<b>2011</b>	<b>Statement by Olga Ekonomidou (excerpt)</b>	<b>169</b>

## **II. Examples** **173**

<b>2008</b>	<b><i>Testo Junkie</i> (excerpt)</b>	<b>175</b>
<b>2010</b>	<b>Preliminary Notes on Modes of Reproduction</b>	<b>177</b>
<b>2009</b>	<b>My Preferred Gender Pronoun is Negation</b>	<b>197</b>
<b>2010</b>	<b>Manifesto for the Trans-Feminist Insurrection</b>	<b>201</b>
<b>2010</b>	<b>Towards an Insurrectionary Transfeminism</b>	<b>203</b>
<b>2012</b>	<b>Identity in Crisis</b>	<b>209</b>
<b>2012</b>	<b>Musings on Nothingness (excerpt)</b>	<b>227</b>
<b>2011</b>	<b>Introduction to <i>Queens Against Society</i></b>	<b>239</b>
<b>2011</b>	<b>Dysphoria Means Total Destroy</b>	<b>255</b>
<b>2012</b>	<b>An Insurrectional Practice Against Gender</b>	<b>261</b>
<b>2014</b>	<b>Against the Gendered Nightmare (excerpt)</b>	<b>267</b>
<b>2014</b>	<b>Wildfire: Toward Anonymous War on Civilization</b>	<b>299</b>

<b>0019</b>	<b>Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto</b>	<b>307</b>
<b>0019</b>	<b>Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation</b>	<b>319</b>
<b>0019</b>	<b>Gender Nihilism (Aidan Rowe)</b>	<b>341</b>
<b>0019</b>	<b>Against Gender, Against Society</b>	<b>349</b>



# Bibliographical Information

In the spirit of making a reader, we have excerpted from some of the longer (mainly academic) selections, and truncated footnotes and bibliographical references in the same. In the spirit of encouraging further reading and queer research, we are providing the full references for the texts missing bibliographical information in our reader. All other selections are either provided in their entirety, or excerpts that do not exclude any bibliographical data.

Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." In *Blood, Bread, and Poetry*. Norton, 1994.

Monique Wittig, "One is Not Born a Woman." In *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. Beacon, 1992.

Sandy Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto." In Stryker and Whittle, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Routledge, 2006.

Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage." In Stryker and Whittle, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Routledge, 2006.

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Evan B. Towle and Lynn M. Morgan, "Romancing the Transgender Native:

Rethinking the Use of the 'Third Gender' Concept." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8.4 (2002) 469-497.

María Lugones, "The Coloniality of Gender." *Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise* Vol. 2 Dossier 2 (2008).



# Introduction

## The Crisis of Gender and Nihilism

In 2015, a call for contributions for an anthology on the topic of gender nihilism circulated online, accompanied by a list of readings divided into inspirations and examples. That list is the principal source of the present collection's table of contents. The second source is our own archive of related texts, which we selected from to complement the initial list and probably inflect it in the directions most curious for us.

The intention behind compiling these pieces is in one way to create a companion to the coming collection, but also to make possible an existence for some of these ideas in the face-to-face encounters of tabling, study groups, and collective spaces.<sup>1</sup> We're also excited to think about the book adrift in the world, in coffee shops and libraries,

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<sup>1</sup> We also intend this collection as an deliberately weird response-echo to the Communist Research Cluster's *Revolutionary Feminism (Communist Interventions, Volume III)* reader. One way to discern the bifurcation in our approaches is by noting that the CRC curiously places Valerie Solanas in their section on "biological reproduction." We're pretty sure that everything Valerie said on the subject was an acidly ironic calque of the speculative talk of many proto-feminists in the mid-sixties; we prefer the mutant Solanas channeled by Paul B. Preciado, translating her parodic

riding on buses and snuck into schools, and traveling far from where our language is spoken to be read in ways we can't imagine. We've titled our collection *What is Gender Nihilism?* to suggest that such encounters are desirable and possible, channeling the inventive will in the initial call. It is, among other things, a will to knowledge...

Taking a broad view, one might observe that each component of the phrase *gender nihilism* names a distinct crisis. The bulk of the readings gathered here could be read as a genealogy of the crisis of the idea of gender, proposed in the last century variously as a cultural complement to natural/biological sex, a euphemism that verbally distances certain behaviors and character traits from an overt reference to sexuality, and, most recently, an unstable and ever-growing proliferation of identity categories with various degrees of uptake depending where you are and whether you are online. In any case, the thought provoked by this crisis to consider here is that there is *no* version of gender worth saving; that all projects based on distinguishing sex and gender, explicating gender as this or that kind of construction, and vindicating gender as identity or expression are equally doomed to the same crisis, because none of them have sufficient escape velocity with respect to gender's orig-

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(though quite serious) misandry into a more general antigender sentiment. Many of the writers in the "examples" section repeat this transition and probably pass more fully from the antigender to the antisocial perspective, recognizing, as Avital Ronell wrote in her essay on SCUM, that "the effect of gender is always screened from a projection booth of social determinations."

inary binary, euphemistic, and metaphysical dispensation, which is, in a word, oppressive.

The term *nihilism* seems to have been accessed to name this crisis and perhaps some of our responses to it. In this reader, the gender nihilism “anti-manifesto” notes an “impasse” and a “predicament” that occasion the position it argues for as “stance and method”, while the Laboria Cuboniks collective describes a “world in vertigo” in their xenofeminist manifesto. Aidan Rowe writes of “nihilism as a point to pass through and as a position to act from”, both politically valuable, but leaves the explanation for another time. As for those of us involved in making this reader, we have thought and written about something we called queer nihilism—less as a position to maintain, define, or identify with, and more as a method; retroactively, as an exit event in a process of timespace displacement. It’s worth recalling that, meanwhile, in a shorter time span and a set of spaces more narrowly limited to radical milieus, nihilism itself not only designated but itself entered into a kind of crisis. In the last ten or so years we’ve seen the term nihilism used both to diagnose an implosion of values and a consequent helplessness or meaninglessness as well as to distinguish an active, destructive position against society; but arguably, more than either of those in a clear way, we’ve seen confused and sloppy uses of the term, appending it with hyphens to this and that theory, position or identity. When we see it appended to gender in this, the moment of its crisis, we cannot but recall that trajectory. But we prefer to see in gender nihilism a strange and thought-provoking

coupling. What if it names, not two parallel crises, but the same crisis?

There is, of course, a more specific reason why these words have been paired together. The old conversation on the abolition of gender, initiated by some second-wave feminists, has taken some odd turns as of late. For some it's mutated into a more or less explicit anti-trans discourse that, to whatever degree it is coherent, would seem to be oriented towards some sort of androgyny as a goal for all: a reaffirmation of bio-sex coupled with a minimization of differences implied by it. (It shares its sexual ontology with those who would reaffirm bio-sex so as to reinstate traditional sex roles, in effect maximizing the differences implied in it.) In the spaces and exchanges where this discourse is associated with gender abolition (more precisely having made itself known as "gender critical feminism"), it makes sense to propose gender nihilism as a response or at least specification. In this sense a minimum definition of gender nihilism would be that it involves envisioning both the abolition of gender and the survival of what would then cease to be gendered expressions and behaviors under some other regime of meaning or meaninglessness. Gender could survive in a negative mode or under erasure, as something expressive of nothing at all, nothing with large-scale or systematic social power, in any case. (At the same time, this summary shows that everything still remains to be discussed. For example, within the discourse of gender nihilism, or the practices it informs or emerges from, what is the place of sex or sexuality? Would some or all

of us not, having done with gender, return to sex, not as bio-sex with its determinations, but as unknowable and weird fleshy materiality?<sup>2</sup>)

We say that what has unfolded in interpersonal and internetworked exchanges resonates, or at least can resonate far beyond those exchanges. The appearance of the term nihilism is a first clue. We have gathered these readings and added our selection and intention to them to see how much farther we can push this discourse, and what practices have already or will soon appear alongside it as further clues and openings. Without discussion, without critique, and without what is not critique, there would be no point in this. This is where we are coming from: we don't really need to identify more forms of nihilism, and we don't really want any more gender positions or descriptors. The desirable possibility here is that the two, gender and nihilism, are paired in order to deconstruct or decompose each other. The even more desirable possibility is to stick around to see what comes after.

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<sup>2</sup> And is this close to what thinkers such as Alenka Zupančič mean when they say that sexual difference is "not ontologizable"? Is it what Rosi Braidotti has in mind in her article on the "demise of gender" when she writes that sexuality deterritorializes and undoes gender? Is it what Foucault had in mind when he rejected the modern *scientia sexualis* (of which gender is undeniably a part) in favor of an *ars erotica*?



# Part I.

## Inspirations

Gender → Crisis





# Manifesto of Nihilist Women

**L**et men have their fun blabbering on and on about the Revolution—They're free to do it! The nihilist women are tired of all this procrastination and are determined to act. Thinking about annihilating the bourgeoisie, they are ready to sacrifice everything to hasten the realization of this undertaking. In the inextinguishable hatred that is devouring us, they will call up whatever strength is necessary to overcome all obstacles.

But since this grandiose project cannot be carried out in one day, they will take their time, preferring for now to use poison and once in a while, to achieve their goal more easily, with a few bad seeds.

The nihilist women will make up for their lack of scientific knowledge and laboratory practice by mixing in the food of their exploiters small doses of deadly substances that are available to the poor and easy to handle for the most ignorant and inexperienced women.

From hundreds of ingredients with incontestable results, we can cite: lead acetate, which you can get in a few days if you leave lead shot sitting around or leave a piece of lead in vinegar; pieces of rotten meat; hemlock, which is so often mistaken for parsley and which grows

## *Manifesto of Nihilist Women*

everywhere on the side of the road and on the backsides of ditches.

At least we will give back to our despicable oppressors some of the evil that they give us every day. We will not smile and support the tyranny knowing that our enemies' lives are at our mercy... They want to be the masters! Let them suffer the consequences.

In the three years that the league has been around, hundreds of bourgeois families have already paid the fatal price, gnawed away by a mysterious illness that medicine cannot explain or heal.

To work, then, all you women who are fed up with suffering and who are looking for a remedy to your misery. Imitate the nihilist women!

# The Woman-Identified-Woman

x Radicalesbians

**W**hat is a lesbian? A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion. She is the woman who, often beginning at an extremely early age, acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be a more complete and freer human being than her society—perhaps then, but certainly later—cares to allow her. These needs and actions, over a period of years, bring her into painful conflict with people, situations, the accepted ways of thinking, feeling and behaving, until she is in a state of continual war with everything around her, and usually with her self. She may not be fully conscious of the political implications of what for her began as personal necessity, but on some level she has not been able to accept the limitations and oppression laid on her by the most basic role of her society—the female role. The turmoil she experiences tends to induce guilt proportional to the degree to which she feels she is not meeting social expectations, and/or eventually drives her to question and analyze what the rest of her society more or less accepts. She is forced to evolve her own life pattern, often living much of her life alone, learning

usually much earlier than her “straight” (heterosexual) sisters about the essential aloneness of life (which the myth of marriage obscures) and about the reality of illusions. To the extent that she cannot expel the heavy socialization that goes with being female, she can never truly find peace with herself. For she is caught somewhere between accepting society’s view of her in which case she cannot accept herself—and coming to understand what this sexist society has done to her and why it is functional and necessary for it to do so. Those of us who work that through find ourselves on the other side of a tortuous journey through a night that may have been decades long. The perspective gained from that journey, the liberation of self, the inner peace, the real love of self and of all women, is something to be shared with all women—because we are all women.

It should first be understood that lesbianism, like male homosexuality, is a category of behavior possible only in a sexist society characterized by rigid sex roles and dominated by male supremacy. Those sex roles dehumanize women by defining us as a supportive/serving caste *in relation to* the master caste of men, and emotionally cripple men by demanding that they be alienated from their own bodies and emotions in order to perform their economic/political/military functions effectively. Homosexuality is a by-product of a particular way of setting up roles (or approved patterns of behavior) on the basis of sex; as such it is an inauthentic (not consonant with “reality”) category. In a society in which men do not oppress women, and sexual expression is allowed

to follow feelings, the categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality would disappear.

But lesbianism is also different from male homosexuality, and serves a different function in the society. "Dyke" is a different kind of put-down from "faggot", although both imply you are not playing your socially assigned sex role... are not therefore a "real woman" or a "real man." The grudging admiration felt for the tomboy, and the queasiness felt around a sissy boy point to the same thing: the contempt in which women—or those who play a female role—are held. And the investment in keeping women in that contemptuous role is very great. Lesbian is a word, the label, the condition that holds women in line. When a woman hears this word tossed her way, she knows she is stepping out of line. She knows that she has crossed the terrible boundary of her sex role. She recoils, she protests, she reshapes her actions to gain approval. Lesbian is a label invented by the Man to throw at any woman who dares to be his equal, who dares to challenge his prerogatives (including that of all women as part of the exchange medium among men), who dares to assert the primacy of her own needs. To have the label applied to people active in women's liberation is just the most recent instance of a long history; older women will recall that not so long ago, any woman who was successful, independent, not orienting her whole life about a man, would hear this word. For in this sexist society, for a woman to be independent means she *can't be* a woman—she must be a dyke. That in itself should tell us where women are at. It says as clearly as can be

said: women and person are contradictory terms. For a lesbian is not considered a "real woman." And yet, in popular thinking, there is really only one essential difference between a lesbian and other women: that of sexual orientation—which is to say, when you strip off all the packaging, you must finally realize that the essence of being a "woman" is to get fucked by men.

"Lesbian" is one of the sexual categories by which men have divided up humanity. While all women are dehumanized as sex objects, as the objects of men they are given certain compensations: identification with his power, his ego, his status, his protection (from other males), feeling like a "real woman," finding social acceptance by adhering to her role, etc. Should a woman confront herself by confronting another woman, there are fewer rationalizations, fewer buffers by which to avoid the stark horror of her dehumanized condition. Herein we find the overriding fear of many women toward being used as a sexual object by a woman, which not only will bring her no male-connected compensations, but also will reveal the void which is woman's real situation. This dehumanization is expressed when a straight woman learns that a sister is a lesbian; she begins to relate to her lesbian sister as her potential sex object, laying a surrogate male role on the lesbian. This reveals her heterosexual conditioning to make herself into an object when sex is potentially involved in a relationship, and it denies the lesbian her full humanity. For women, especially those in the movement, to perceive their lesbian sisters through this male grid of role definitions is to accept this male

cultural conditioning and to oppress their sisters much as they themselves have been oppressed by men. Are we going to continue the male classification system of defining all females in sexual relation to some other category of people? Affixing the label lesbian not only to a woman who aspires to be a person, but also to any situation of real love, real solidarity, real primacy among women, is a primary form of divisiveness among women: it is the condition which keeps women within the confines of the feminine role, and it is the debunking/scare term that keeps women from forming any primary attachments, groups, or associations among ourselves.

Women in the movement have in most cases gone to great lengths to avoid discussion and confrontation with the issue of lesbianism. It puts people up-tight. They are hostile, evasive, or try to incorporate it into some "broader issue." They would rather not talk about it. If they have to, they try to dismiss it as a "lavender herring." But it is no side issue. It is absolutely essential to the success and fulfillment of the women's liberation movement that this issue be dealt with. As long as the label "dyke" can be used to frighten women into a less militant stand, keep her separate from her sisters, keep her from giving primacy to anything other than men and family—then to that extent she is controlled by the male culture. Until women see in each other the possibility of a primal commitment which includes sexual love, they will be denying themselves the love and value they readily accord to men, thus affirming their second-class status. As long as male acceptability is primary—both to

individual women and to the movement as a whole—the term lesbian will be used effectively against women. Insofar as women want only more privileges within the system, they do not want to antagonize male power. They instead seek acceptability for women's liberation, and the most crucial aspect of the acceptability is to deny lesbianism—i.e., to deny any fundamental challenge to the basis of the female. It should also be said that some younger, more radical women have honestly begun to discuss lesbianism, but so far it has been primarily as a sexual “alternative” to men. This, however, is still giving primacy to men, both because the idea of relating more completely to women occurs as a negative reaction to men, and because the lesbian relationship is being characterized simply by sex, which is divisive and sexist. On one level, which is both personal and political, women may withdraw emotional and sexual energies from men, and work out various alternatives for those energies in their own lives. On a different political/psychological level, it must be understood that what is crucial is that women begin disengaging from male-defined response patterns. In the privacy of our own psyches, we must cut those cords to the core. For irrespective of where our love and sexual energies flow, if we are male-identified in our heads, we cannot realize our autonomy as human beings.

But why is it that women have related to and through men? By virtue of having been brought up in a male society, we have internalized the male culture's definition of ourselves. That definition consigns us to sexual and fam-



ily functions, and excludes us from defining and shaping the terms of our lives. In exchange for our psychic servicing and for performing society's non-profit-making functions, the man confers on us just one thing: the slave status which makes us legitimate in the eyes of the society in which we live. This is called "femininity" or "being a real woman" in our cultural lingo. We are authentic, legitimate, real to the extent that we are the property of some man whose name we bear. To be a woman who belongs to no man is to be invisible, pathetic, inauthentic, unreal. He confirms his image of us—of what we have to be in order to be acceptable by him—but not our real selves; he confirms our womanhood—as he defines it, in relation to him but cannot confirm our personhood, our own selves as absolutes. As long as we are dependent on the male culture for this definition. For this approval, we cannot be free.

The consequence of internalizing this role is an enormous reservoir of self-hate. This is not to say the self-hate is recognized or accepted as such; indeed most women would deny it. It may be experienced as discomfort with her role, as feeling empty, as numbness, as restlessness, as a paralyzing anxiety at the center. Alternatively, it may be expressed in shrill defensiveness of the glory and destiny of her role. But it does exist, often beneath the edge of her consciousness, poisoning her existence, keeping her alienated from herself, her own needs, and rendering her a stranger to other women. They try to escape by identifying with the oppressor, living through him, gaining status and identity from his

## *The Woman-Identified-Woman*

ego, his power, his accomplishments. And by not identifying with other "empty vessels" like themselves. Women resist relating on all levels to other women who will reflect their own oppression, their own secondary status, their own self-hate. For to confront another woman is finally to confront one's self—the self we have gone to such lengths to avoid. And in that mirror we know we cannot really respect and love that which we have been made to be.

As the source of self-hate and the lack of real self are rooted in our male-given identity, we must create a new sense of self. As long as we cling to the idea of "being a woman," we will sense some conflict with that incipient self, that sense of I, that sense of a whole person. It is very difficult to realize and accept that being "feminine" and being a whole person are irreconcilable. Only women can give to each other a new sense of self. That identity we have to develop with reference to ourselves, and not in relation to men. This consciousness is the revolutionary force from which all else will follow, for ours is an organic revolution. For this we must be available and supportive to one another, live our commitment and our love, give the emotional support necessary to sustain this movement. Our energies must flow toward our sisters, not backward toward our oppressors. As long as woman's liberation tries to free women without facing the basic heterosexual structure that binds us in one-to-one relationship with our oppressors, tremendous energies will continue to flow into trying to straighten up each particular relationship with a man, into finding

how to get better sex, how to turn his head around—into trying to make the “new man” out of him, in the delusion that this will allow us to be the “new woman.” This obviously splits our energies and commitments, leaving us unable to be committed to the construction of the new patterns which will liberate us.

It is the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other, which is at the heart of women's liberation, and the basis for the cultural revolution. Together we must find, reinforce, and validate our authentic selves. As we do this, we confirm in each other that struggling, incipient sense of pride and strength, the divisive barriers begin to melt, we feel this growing solidarity with our sisters. We see ourselves as prime, find our centers inside of ourselves. We find receding the sense of alienation, of being cut off, of being behind a locked window, of being unable to get out what we know is inside. We feel a realness, feel at last we are coinciding with ourselves. With that real self, with that consciousness, we begin a revolution to end the imposition of all coercive identifications, and to achieve maximum autonomy in human expression.



# ***History of Sexuality, Volume 1***

x Michel Foucault

**W**e must not refer a history of sexuality to the agency of sex; but rather show how “sex” is historically subordinate to sexuality. We must not place sex on the side of reality, and sexuality on that of confused ideas and illusions; sexuality is a very real historical formation; it is what gave rise to the notion of sex, as a speculative element necessary to its operation. We must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power; on the contrary, one tracks along the course laid out by the general apparatus of sexuality. It is the agency of sex that we must break away from, if we aim—through a tactical reversal of the various mechanisms of sexuality—to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance. The rallying point for the counterattack against the apparatus of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures.

[...]

We need to consider the possibility that one day, perhaps, in a different economy of bodies and pleasures, people will no longer quite understand how the ruses of

sexuality, and the power that sustains its organization, were able to subject us to that austere monarchy of sex, so that we became dedicated to the endless task of forcing its secret, of exacting the truest of confessions from a shadow.

The irony of this apparatus is in having us believe that our "liberation" is in the balance.

# Introduction to *Herculine Barbin*

x Michel Foucault

**D**o we *truly* need a *true sex*? With a persistence that borders on stubbornness, modern Western societies have answered in the affirmative. They have obstinately brought into play this question of a “true sex” in an order of things where one might have imagined that all that counted was the reality of the body and the intensity of its pleasures.

For a long time, however, such a demand was not made, as is proven by the history of the status which medicine and law have granted to hermaphrodites. Indeed it was a very long time before the postulate that a hermaphrodite must have a sex—a single, a true sex—was formulated. For centuries, it was quite simply agreed that hermaphrodites had two. Were they terror-inspiring monsters, calling for legal tortures? In fact, things were much more complicated. It is true that there is evidence of a number of executions, both in ancient times and in the Middle Ages. But there is also an abundance of court decisions of a completely different type.

In the Middle Ages, the rules of both canon and civil law were very clear on this point: the designation "hermaphrodite" was given to those in whom the two sexes were juxtaposed, in proportions that might be variable. In these cases, it was the role of the father or the godfather (thus of those who "named" the child) to determine at the time of baptism which sex was going to be retained. If necessary, one was advised to choose the sex that seemed to have the better of the other, being "the most vigorous" or "the warmest." But later, on the threshold of adulthood, when the time came for them to marry, hermaphrodites were free to decide for themselves if they wished to go on being of the sex which had been assigned to them, or if they preferred the other. The only imperative was that they should not change it again but keep the sex they had then declared until the end of their lives, under pain of being labeled sodomites. Changes of option, not the anatomical mixture of the sexes, were what gave rise to most of the condemnations of hermaphrodites in the records that survive in France for the period of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Biological theories of sexuality, juridical conceptions of the individual, forms of administrative control in modern nations, led little by little to rejecting the idea of a mixture of the two sexes in a single body, and consequently to limiting the free choice of indeterminate individuals. Henceforth, everybody was to have one and only one sex. Everybody was to have his or her primary, profound, determined and determining sexual identity; as for the elements of the other sex that might appear, they



could only be accidental, superficial, or even quite simply illusory. From the medical point of view, this meant that when confronted with a hermaphrodite, the doctor was no longer concerned with recognizing the presence of the two sexes, juxtaposed or intermingled, or with knowing which of the two prevailed over the other, but rather with deciphering the true sex that was hidden beneath ambiguous appearances. He had, as it were, to strip the body of its anatomical deceptions and discover the one true sex behind organs that might have put on the forms of the opposite sex. For someone who knew how to observe and to conduct an examination, these mixtures of sex were no more than disguises of nature: hermaphrodites were always "pseudo-hermaphrodites." Such, at least, was the thesis that tended to gain credence in the eighteenth century, through a certain number of important and passionately argued cases.

From the legal point of view, this obviously implied the disappearance of free choice. It was no longer up to the individual to decide which sex he wished to belong to, juridically or socially. Rather, it was up to the expert to say which sex nature had chosen for him and to which society must consequently ask him to adhere. The law, if it was necessary to appeal to it (as when, for example, someone was suspected of not living under his true sex or of having improperly married), had to establish or reestablish the legitimacy of a sexual constitution that had not been sufficiently well recognized. But if nature, through its fantasies or accidents, might "deceive" the observer and hide the true sex for a time, individuals

might also very well be suspected of dissembling their inmost knowledge of their true sex and of profiting from certain anatomical oddities in order to make use of their bodies as if they belonged to the other sex. In short, the phantasmagorias of nature might be of service to licentious behavior, hence the *moral* interest that inhered in the *medical* diagnosis of the true sex.

I am well aware that medicine in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries corrected many things in this reductive oversimplification. Today, nobody would say that all hermaphrodites are "pseudo," even if one considerably limits an area into which many different kinds of anatomical anomalies were formerly admitted without discrimination. It is also agreed, though with much difficulty, that it is possible for an individual to adopt a sex that is not biologically his own.

Nevertheless, the idea that one must indeed finally have a true sex is far from being completely dispelled. Whatever the opinion of biologists on this point, the idea that there exist complex, obscure, and essential relationships between sex and truth is to be found—at least in a diffused state—not only in psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and psychology, but also in current opinion. We are certainly more tolerant in regard to practices that break the law. But we continue to think that some of these are insulting to "the truth": we may be prepared to admit that a "passive" man, a "virile" woman, people of the same sex who love one another, do not seriously impair the established order; but we are ready enough to believe that there is something like an "error" involved in

what they do. An "error" as understood in the most traditionally philosophical sense: a manner of acting that is not adequate to reality. Sexual irregularity is seen as belonging more or less to the realm of chimeras. That is why we rid ourselves easily enough of the idea that these are crimes, but less easily of the suspicion that they are fictions which, whether involuntary or self-indulgent, are useless, and which it would be better to dispel. Wake up, young people, from your illusory pleasures; strip off your disguises and recall that every one of you has a sex, a true sex.

And then, we also admit that it is in the area of sex that we must search for the most secret and profound truths about the individual, that it is there that we can best discover what he is and what determines him. And if it was believed for centuries that it was necessary to hide sexual matters because they were shameful, we now know that it is sex itself which hides the most secret parts of the individual: the structure of his fantasies, the roots of his ego, the forms of his relationship to reality. At the bottom of sex, there is truth.

It is at the junction of these two ideas—that we must not deceive ourselves concerning our sex, and that our sex harbors what is most true in ourselves—that psychoanalysis has rooted its cultural vigor. It promises us at the same time our sex, our true sex, and that whole truth about ourselves which secretly keeps vigil in it.

[...]



# Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence

x Adrienne Rich

## I

[...] It is not enough for feminist thought that specifically lesbian texts exist. Any theory or cultural/political creation that treats lesbian existence as a marginal or less "natural" phenomenon, as mere "sexual preference," or as the mirror image of either heterosexual or male homosexual relations is profoundly weakened thereby, whatever its other contributions. Feminist theory can no longer afford merely to voice a toleration of "lesbianism" as an "alternative life-style," or make token allusion to lesbians. A feminist critique of compulsory heterosexual orientation for women is long overdue.

[...]

## III

I have chosen to use the terms *lesbian existence* and *lesbian continuum* because the word *lesbianism* has a clinical and limiting ring. *Lesbian existence* suggests both the fact

of the historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence. I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range—through each woman's life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support; if we can also hear in it such associations as *marriage resistance* and the "haggard" behavior identified by Mary Daly (obsolete meanings "intractable," "willful," "wanton," and "unchaste" "a woman reluctant to yield to wooing")<sup>1</sup>—we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology that have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of "lesbianism."

Lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women. But it is more than these, although we may first begin to perceive it as a form of nay-saying to patriarchy, an act of resistance. It has of course included role playing, self-hatred, breakdown, alcoholism, suicide, and intrawoman violence; we romanticize at our peril what it means to love and act against the grain, and under heavy penalties; and lesbian existence has been lived

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<sup>1</sup> Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*.

(unlike, say, Jewish or Catholic existence) without access to any knowledge of a tradition, a continuity, a social underpinning. The destruction of records and memorabilia and letters documenting the realities of lesbian existence must be taken very seriously as a means of keeping heterosexuality compulsory for women, since what has been kept from our knowledge is joy, sensuality, courage, and community, as well as guilt, self-betrayal, and pain.<sup>2</sup>

Lesbians have historically been deprived of a political existence through "inclusion" as female versions of male homosexuality. To equate lesbian existence with male homosexuality because each is stigmatized is to deny and erase female reality once again. To separate those women stigmatized as "homosexual" or "gay" from the complex continuum of female resistance to enslavement, and attach them to a male pattern, is to falsify our history. Part of the history of lesbian existence is, obviously, to be found where lesbians, lacking a coherent female community, have shared a kind of social life and common cause with homosexual men. But this has

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<sup>2</sup> "In a hostile world in which women are not supposed to survive except in relation with and in service to men, entire communities of women were simply erased. History tends to bury what it seeks to reject" (Blanche W. Cook, "Women Alone Stir My Imagination: Lesbianism and the Cultural Tradition"). The Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York City is one attempt to preserve contemporary documents on lesbian existence—a project of enormous value and meaning, still pitted against the continuing censorship and obliteration of relationships, networks, communities, in other archives and elsewhere in the culture.

to be seen against the differences in women's lack of economic and cultural privilege relative to men; qualitative differences in female and male relationships, for example, the prevalence of anonymous sex and the justification of pederasty among male homosexuals, the pronounced ageism in male homosexual standards of sexual attractiveness, and so forth. In defining and describing lesbian existence I would hope to move toward a dissociation of lesbian from male homosexual values and allegiances. I perceive the lesbian experience as being, like motherhood, a profoundly *female* experience, with particular oppressions, meanings, and potentialities we cannot comprehend as long as we simply bracket it with other sexually stigmatized existences, just as the term *parenting* serves to conceal the particular and significant reality of being a parent who is actually a mother, the term *gay* serves the purpose of blurring the very outlines we need to discern, which are of crucial value for feminism and for the freedom of women as a group.

As the term lesbian has been held to limiting, clinical associations in its patriarchal definition, female friendship and comradeship have been set apart from the erotic, thus limiting the erotic itself. But as we deepen and broaden the range of what we define as lesbian existence as we delineate a lesbian continuum, we begin to discover the erotic in female terms as that which is unconfined to any single part of the body or solely to the body itself, as an energy not only diffuse but, as Audre Lorde has described it, omnipresent in "the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic," and in the



sharing of work; as the empowering joy which "makes us less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial". In another context, writing of women and work, I quoted the autobiographical passage in which the poet H.D. described how her friend Bryher supported her in persisting with the visionary experience that was to shape her mature work:

I knew that this experience, this writing-on-the-wall before me, could not be shared with anyone except the girl who stood so bravely there beside me. This girl had said without hesitation "Go on." It was she really who had the detachment and integrity of the Pythoness of Delphi. But it was I, battered and dissociated... who was seeing the pictures, and who was reading the writing or granted the inner vision. Or perhaps, in some sense, we were "seeing" it together, for without her, admittedly, I could not have gone on.<sup>3</sup>

If we consider the possibility that all women—from the infant suckling her mother's breast, to the grown woman experiencing orgasmic sensations while suckling her own child, perhaps recalling her mother's milk-smell

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<sup>3</sup> Adrienne Rich, "The conditions for Work: The common World of Women," in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*; H.D., *Tribute to Freud*.

in her own; to two women, like Virginia Woolf's Chloe and Olivia, who share a laboratory;<sup>4</sup> to the woman dying at ninety, touched and handled by women—exist on a lesbian continuum, we can see ourselves as moving in and out of this continuum, whether we identify ourselves as lesbian or not. It allows us to connect aspects of woman-identification as diverse as the impudent, intimate girl-friendships of eight or nine-year-olds and the banding together of those women of the twelfth and fifteenth centuries known as Beguines who "shared houses, rented to one another, bequeathed houses to their room-mates... in cheap subdivided houses in the artisans' area of town," who "practiced Christian virtue on their own, dressing and living simply and not associating with men," who earned their livings as spinners, bakers, nurses, or ran schools for young girls, and who managed—until the Church forced them to disperse—to live independent both of marriage and of conventual restrictions.<sup>5</sup> It allows us to connect these women with the more celebrated "Lesbians" of the women's school around Sappho of the seventh century B.C.; with the secret sororities and economic networks reported among African women; and with the Chinese marriage resistance sisterhoods—communities of women who refused marriage, or who if married often refused to consummate their marriages and soon left their husbands—the only women in China who were not footbound and who,

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<sup>4</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*.

<sup>5</sup> Gracia Clark, "The Beguines: A Mediaeval Women's Community".

Agnes Smedley tells us, welcomed the births of daughters and organized successful women's strikes in the silk mills.<sup>6</sup> It allows us to connect and compare disparate individual instances of marriage resistance: for example, the type of autonomy claimed by Emily Dickinson, a nineteenth-century white woman genius, with the strategies available to Zora Neale Hurston, a twentieth-century black woman genius. Dickinson never married, had tenuous intellectual friendships with men, lived self-convented in her genteel father's house, and wrote a lifetime of passionate letters to her sister-in-law Sue Gilbert and a smaller group of such letters to her friend Kate Scott Anthon. Hurston married twice but soon left each husband, scrambled her way from Florida to Harlem to Columbia University to Haiti and finally back to Florida, moved in and out of white patronage and poverty, professional success and failure; her survival relationships were all with women, beginning with her mother. Both of these women in their vastly different circumstances were marriage resisters, committed to their own work and selfhood, and were later characterized as "apolitical"; both were drawn to men of intellectual quality; for both

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<sup>6</sup> See *Women of Tropical Africa*. Some of these sororities are described as "a kind of defensive syndicate against the male element"—their aims being "to offer concerted resistance to an oppressive patriarchy, independence in relation to one's husband and with regard to motherhood, mutual aid, satisfaction of personal revenge." See also Audre Lorde, "Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving"; Marjorie Topley, "Marriage Resistance in Rural Kwangtung"; Agnes Smedley, *Portraits of Chinese Women in Revolution*.

of them women provided the ongoing fascination and sustenance of life.

If we think of heterosexuality as the "natural" emotional and sensual inclination for women, lives such as these are seen as deviant, as pathological, or as emotionally and sensually deprived. Or, in more recent and permissive jargon, they are banalized as "life-styles." And the work of such women—whether merely the daily work of individual or collective survival and resistance, or the work of the writer, the activist, the reformer, the anthropologist, or the artist—the work of self-creation—is undervalued, or seen as the bitter fruit of "penis envy," or the sublimation of repressed eroticism, or the meaningless rant of a "manhater." But when we turn the lens of vision and consider the degree to which, and the methods whereby, heterosexual "preference" has actually been imposed on women, not only can we understand differently the meaning of individual lives and work, but we can begin to recognize a central fact of women's history that women have always resisted male tyranny. A feminism of action, often, though not always, without a theory, has constantly reemerged in every culture and in every period. We can then begin to study women's struggle against powerlessness, women's radical rebellion, not just in male defined "concrete revolutionary situations"<sup>7</sup> but in all the situations male ideologies have not perceived as revolutionary: for example, the refusal of some women to produce children, aided at great risk

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<sup>7</sup> See Rosalind Petchesky.

by other women; the refusal to produce a higher standard of living and leisure for men (Leghorn and Parker show how both are part of women's unacknowledged, unpaid, and ununionized economic contribution); that female antiphallic sexuality which, as Andrea Dworkin notes, has been "legendary," which, defined as "frigidity" and "puritanism," has actually been a form of subversion of male power—"an ineffectual rebellion, but rebellion nonetheless."<sup>8</sup> We can no longer have patience with Dinnerstein's view that women have simply collaborated with men in the "sexual arrangements" of history; we begin to observe behavior, both in history and in individual biography, that has hitherto been invisible or misnamed; behavior that often constitutes, given the limits of the counterforce exerted in a given time and place, radical rebellion. And we can connect these rebellions and the necessity for them with the physical passion of woman for woman that is central to lesbian existence: the erotic sensuality that has been, precisely, the most violently erased fact of female experience.

[...]

#### IV

Woman-identification is a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power, violently curtailed and wasted under the institution of heterosexuality. The denial of reality and visibility to women's passion for

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<sup>8</sup> Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*.

women, women's choice of women as allies, life companions, and community; the forcing of such relationships into dissimulation and their disintegration under intense pressure, have meant an incalculable loss to the power of all women *to change the social relations of the sexes to liberate ourselves and each other*. The lie of compulsory female heterosexuality today admits not just feminist scholarship, but every profession, every reference work, every curriculum, every organizing attempt, every relationship or conversation over which it hovers. It creates, specifically, a profound falseness, hypocrisy, and hysteria in the heterosexual dialogue, for every heterosexual relationship is lived in the queasy strobelight of that lie. However we choose to identify ourselves, however we find ourselves labeled, it flickers across and distorts our lives.

[...]

We can say that there is a *nascent* feminist political content in the act of choosing a woman lover or life partner in the face of institutionalized heterosexuality. But for lesbian existence to realize this political content in an ultimately liberating form, the erotic choice must deepen and expand into conscious woman identification—into lesbian/feminism.

The work that lies ahead, of unearthing and describing what I call here lesbian existence, is potentially liberating for all women. It is work that must assuredly move beyond the limits of white and middleclass Western women's studies to examine women's lives, work, and groupings within every racial, ethnic, and political

structure. There are differences, moreover, between lesbian existence and the lesbian continuum—differences we can discern even in the movement of our own lives. The lesbian continuum, I suggest, needs delineation in light of the double-life of women, not only women self-described as heterosexual but also of self-described lesbians. We need a far more exhaustive account of the forms the double-life has assumed. Historians need to ask at every point how heterosexuality as institution has been organized and maintained through the female wage scale, the enforcement of middle-class women's "leisure," the glamorization of so-called sexual liberation the withholding of education from women, the imagery of "high art" and popular culture, the mystification of the "personal" sphere, and much else. We need an economics that comprehends the institution of heterosexuality, with its doubled workload for women and its sexual divisions of labor, as the most idealized of economic relations.

The question inevitably will arise: Are we then to condemn all heterosexual relationships, including those that are least oppressive? I believe this question, though often heartfelt, is the wrong question here. We have been stalled in a maze of false dichotomies that prevents our apprehending the institution as a whole: "good" versus "bad" marriages; "marriage for love" versus arranged marriage; "liberated" sex versus prostitution; heterosexual intercourse versus rape; *Liebeschmerz* versus humiliation and dependency. Within the institution exist, of course, qualitative differences of experience; but the absence of choice remains the great unacknowledged reality, and

in the absence of choice, women will remain dependent on the chance or luck of particular relationships and will have no collective power to determine the meaning and place of sexuality in their lives. As we address the institution itself, moreover, we begin to perceive a history of female resistance that has never fully understood itself because it has been so fragmented, miscalled, erased. It will require a courageous grasp of the politics and economics, as well as the cultural propaganda, of heterosexuality to carry us beyond individual cases or diversified group situations into the complex kind of overview needed to undo the power men everywhere wield over women, power that has become a model for every other form of exploitation and illegitimate control.



# One is Not Born A Woman

x Monique Wittig

**A** materialist feminist<sup>1</sup> approach to women's oppression destroys the idea that women are a "natural group": "a racial group of a special kind, a group perceived as *natural*, a group of men considered as materially specific in their bodies."<sup>2</sup> What the analysis accomplishes on the level of ideas, practice makes actual at the level of facts: by its very existence, lesbian society destroys the artificial (social) fact constituting women as a "natural group." A lesbian society<sup>3</sup> pragmatically reveals that the division from men of which women have been the object is a political one and shows that we have been ideologically rebuilt into a "natural group." In the case of women, ideology goes far since our bodies as well as our minds are the product of this manipulation. We have been compelled in our bodies and in our minds to corre-

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<sup>1</sup> Christine Delphy, "For a Materialist Feminism".

<sup>2</sup> Colette Guillaumin, "Race and Nature: The System of Marks, the Idea of a Natural Group and Social Relationships".

<sup>3</sup> I use the word society with an extended anthropological meaning; strictly speaking, it does not refer to societies, in that lesbian societies do not exist completely autonomously from heterosexual social systems.

spond, feature by feature, with the *idea* of nature that has been established for us. Distorted to such an extent that our deformed body is what they call "natural," what is supposed to exist as such before oppression. Distorted to such an extent that in the end oppression seems to be a consequence of this "nature" within ourselves (a nature which is only an *idea*). What a materialist analysis does by reasoning, a lesbian society accomplishes practically: not only is there no natural group "women" (we lesbians are living proof of it), but as individuals as well we question "woman," which for us, as for Simone de Beauvoir, is only a myth. She said: "One is not born, but becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society: it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine."<sup>4</sup>

However, most of the feminists and lesbian-feminists in America and elsewhere still believe that the basis of women's oppression is *biological as well as* historical. Some of them even claim to find their sources in Simone de Beauvoir.<sup>5</sup> The belief in mother right and in a "prehistory" when women created civilization (because of a biological predisposition) while the coarse and brutal men hunted (because of a biological predisposition) is symmetrical with the biologizing interpretation of history produced up to now by the class of men. It is still

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<sup>4</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

<sup>5</sup> Redstockings, *Feminist Revolution*.

the same method of finding in women and men a biological explanation of their division, outside of social facts. For me this could never constitute a lesbian approach to women's oppression, since it assumes that the basis of society or the beginning of society lies in heterosexuality. Matriarchy is no less heterosexual than patriarchy: it is only the sex of the oppressor that changes. Furthermore, not only is this conception still imprisoned in the categories of sex (woman and man), but it holds onto the idea that the capacity to give birth (biology) is what defines a woman. Although practical facts and ways of living contradict this theory in lesbian society, there are lesbians who affirm that "women and men are different species or races (the words are used interchangeably): men are biologically inferior to women; male violence is a biological inevitability..."<sup>6</sup> By doing this, by admitting that there is a "natural" division between women and men, we naturalize history, we assume that "men" and "women" have always existed and will always exist. Not only do we naturalize history, but also consequently we naturalize the social phenomena which express our oppression, making change impossible. For example, instead of seeing giving birth as a forced production, we see it as a "natural," "biological" process, forgetting that in our societies births are planned (demography), forgetting that we ourselves are programmed to produce children, while this is the only social activity "short

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<sup>6</sup> Andrea Dworkin, "Biological Superiority: The World's Most Dangerous and Deadly Idea".

of war"<sup>7</sup> that presents such a great danger of death. Thus, as long as we will be "unable to abandon by will or impulse a lifelong and centuries-old commitment to childbearing as the female creative act,"<sup>8</sup> gaining control of the production of children will mean much more than the mere control of the material means of this production: women will have to abstract themselves from the definition "woman" which is imposed upon them.

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A materialist feminist approach shows that what we take for the cause or origin of oppression is in fact only the *mark*<sup>9</sup> imposed by the oppressor: the "myth of woman,"<sup>10</sup> plus its material effects and manifestations in the appropriated consciousness and bodies of women. Thus, this mark does not predate oppression: Colette Guillaumin has shown that before the socioeconomic reality of black slavery, the concept of race did not exist, at least not in its modern meaning, since it was applied to the lineage of families. However, now, race, exactly like sex, is taken as an "immediate given," a "sensible given," "physical features," belonging to a natural order. But what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction, an "imaginary formation,"<sup>11</sup> which reinterprets physical fea-

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<sup>7</sup> Ti-Grace Atkinson, *Amazon Odyssey*.

<sup>8</sup> Dworkin, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> Guillaumin, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> de Beauvoir, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> Guillaumin, *op. cit.*

tures (in themselves as neutral as any others but marked by the social system) through the network of relationships in which they are perceived. (They are seen as *black*, therefore they *are* black; they are seen as *women*, therefore, they *are* women. But before being *seen* that way, they first had to be *made* that way.) Lesbians should always remember and acknowledge how "unnatural," compelling, totally oppressive, and destructive being "woman" was for us in the old days before the women's liberation movement. It was a political constraint, and those who resisted it were accused of not being "real" women. But then we were proud of it, since in the accusation there was already something like a shadow of victory: the avowal by the oppressor that "woman" is not something that goes without saying, since to be one, one has to be a "real" one. We were at the same time accused of wanting to be men. Today this double accusation has been taken up again with enthusiasm in the context of the women's liberation movement by some feminists and also, alas, by some lesbians whose political goal seems somehow to be becoming more and more "feminine." To refuse to be a woman, however, does not mean that one has to become a man. Besides, if we take as an example the perfect "butch," the classic example which provokes the most horror, whom Proust would have called a woman/man, how is her alienation different from that of someone who wants to become a woman? Tweedledum and Tweedledee. At least for a woman, wanting to become a man proves that she has escaped her initial programming. But even if she would

like to, with all her strength, she cannot become a man. For becoming a man would demand from a woman not only a man's external appearance but his consciousness as well, that is, the consciousness of one who disposes by right of at least two "natural" slaves during his life span. This is impossible, and one feature of lesbian oppression consists precisely of making women out of reach for us, since women belong to men. Thus a lesbian *has to be* something else, a not-woman, a notman, a product of society, not a product of nature, for there is no nature in society.

The refusal to become (or to remain) heterosexual always meant to refuse to become a man or a woman, consciously or not. For a lesbian this goes further than the refusal of the *role* "woman." It is the refusal of the economic, ideological, and political power of a man. This, we lesbians, and nonlesbians as well, knew before the beginning of the lesbian and feminist movement. However, as Andrea Dworkin emphasizes, many lesbians recently "have increasingly tried to transform the very ideology that has enslaved us into a dynamic, religious, psychologically compelling celebration of female biological potential."<sup>12</sup> Thus, some avenues of the feminist and lesbian movement lead us back to the myth of woman which was created by men especially for us, and with it we sink back into a natural group. Having stood up

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<sup>12</sup> Dworkin, *op. cit.*

to fight for a sexless society,<sup>13</sup> we now find ourselves entrapped in the familiar deadlock of "woman is wonderful." Simone de Beauvoir underlined particularly the false consciousness which consists of selecting among the features of the myth (that women are different from men) those which look good and using them as a definition for women. What the concept "woman is wonderful" accomplishes is that it retains for defining women the best features (best according to whom?) which oppression has granted us, and it does not radically question the categories "man" and "woman," which are political categories and not natural givens. It puts us in a position of fighting within the class "women" not as the other classes do, for the disappearance of our class, but for the defense of "woman" and its reenforcement. It leads us to develop with complacency "new" theories about our specificity: thus, we call our passivity "nonviolence," when the main and emergent point for us is to fight our passivity (our fear, rather, a justified one). The ambiguity of the term "feminist" sums up the whole situation. What does "feminist" mean? Feminist is formed with the word "femme," "woman," and means: someone who fights for women. For many of us it means someone who fights for women as a class and for the disappearance of this class. For many others it means someone who fights for woman and her defense for the myth, then, and its reenforcement. But why was the word "feminist" chosen

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<sup>13</sup> Atkinson: "If feminism has any logic at all, it must be working for a sexless society."

if it retains the least ambiguity? We chose to call ourselves "feminists" ten years ago, not in order to support or reenforce the myth of woman, nor to identify ourselves with the oppressor's definition of us, but rather to affirm that our movement had a history and to emphasize the political link with the old feminist movement.

It is, then, this movement that we can put in question for the meaning that it gave to feminism. It so happens that feminism in the last century could never resolve its contradictions on the subject of nature/culture, woman/society. Women started to fight for themselves as a group and rightly considered that they shared common features as a result of oppression. But for them these features were natural and biological rather than social. They went so far as to adopt the Darwinist theory of evolution. They did not believe like Darwin, however, "that women were less evolved than men, but they did believe that male and female natures had diverged in the course of evolutionary development and that society at large reflected this polarization."<sup>14</sup> "The failure of early feminism was that it only attacked the Darwinist charge of female inferiority, while accepting the foundations of this charge—namely, the view of woman as 'unique.'"<sup>15</sup> And finally it was women scholars—and not feminists who scientifically destroyed this theory. But the early feminists had failed to regard history as a dynamic process which develops from conflicts of interests.

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<sup>14</sup> Rosalind Rosenberg, "In Search of Woman's Nature".

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



Furthermore, they still believed as men do that the cause (origin) of their oppression lay within themselves. And therefore after some astonishing victories the feminists of this first front found themselves at an impasse out of a lack of reasons to fight. They upheld the illogical principle of "equality in difference," an idea now being born again. They fell back into the trap which threatens us once again: the myth of woman.

Thus it is our historical task, and only ours, to define what we call oppression in materialist terms, to make it evident that women are a class, which is to say that the category "woman" as well as the category "man" are political and economic categories not eternal ones. Our fight aims to suppress men as a class, not through a genocidal, but a political struggle. Once the class "men" disappears, "women" as a class will disappear as well, for there are no slaves without masters. Our first task, it seems, is to always thoroughly dissociate "women" (the class within which we fight) and "woman," the myth. For "woman" does not exist for us: it is only an imaginary formation, while "women" is the product of a social relationship. We felt this strongly when everywhere we refused to be called a "*woman's* liberation movement." Furthermore, we have to destroy the myth inside and outside ourselves. "Woman" is not each one of us, but the political and ideological formation which negates "women" (the product of a relation of exploitation). "Woman" is there to confuse us, to hide the reality "women." In order to be aware of being a class and to become a class we first have to kill the myth of "woman" including its most seductive

aspects (I think about Virginia Woolf when she said the first task of a woman writer is to kill "the angel in the house"). But to become a class we do not have to suppress our individual selves, and since no individual can be reduced to her/his oppression we are also confronted with the historical necessity of constituting ourselves as the individual subjects of our history as well. I believe this is the reason why all these attempts at "new" definitions of woman are blossoming now. What is at stake (and of course not only for women) is an individual definition as well as a class definition. For once one has acknowledged oppression, one needs to know and experience the fact that one can constitute oneself as a subject (as opposed to an object of oppression), that one can become *someone* in spite of oppression, that one has one's own identity. There is no possible fight for someone deprived of an identity, no internal motivation for fighting, since, although I can fight only with others, first I fight for myself.

The question of the individual subject is historically a difficult one for everybody. Marxism, the last avatar of materialism, the science which has politically formed us, does not want to hear anything about a "subject." Marxism has rejected the transcendental subject, the subject as constitutive of knowledge, the "pure" consciousness. All that thinks per se, before all experience, has ended up in the garbage can of history, because it claimed to exist outside matter, prior to matter, and needed God, spirit, or soul to exist in such a way. This is what is called "idealism." As for individuals, they are only the product of

social relations, therefore their consciousness can only be "alienated." (Marx, in *The German Ideology*, says precisely that individuals of the dominating class are also alienated, although they are the direct producers of the ideas that alienate the classes oppressed by them. But since they draw visible advantages from their own alienation they can bear it without too much suffering.) There exists such a thing as class consciousness, but a consciousness which does not refer to a particular subject, except as participating in general conditions of exploitation at the same time as the other subjects of their class, all sharing the same consciousness. As for the practical class problems—outside of the class problems as traditionally defined—that one could encounter (for example, sexual problems), they were considered "bourgeois" problems that would disappear with the final victory of the class struggle. "Individualistic," "subjectivist," "petit bourgeois," these were the labels given to any person who had shown problems which could not be reduced to the "class struggle" itself.

Thus Marxism has denied the members of oppressed classes the attribute of being a subject. In doing this, Marxism, because of the ideological and political power this "revolutionary science" immediately exercised upon the workers' movement and all other political groups, has prevented all categories of oppressed peoples from constituting themselves historically as subjects (subjects of their struggle, for example). This means that the "masses" did not fight for themselves but for *the* party or its organizations. And when an economic transforma-

tion took place (end of private property, constitution of the socialist state), no revolutionary change took place within the new society, because the people themselves did not change.

For women, Marxism had two results. It prevented them from being aware that they are a class and therefore from constituting themselves as a class for a very long time, by leaving the relation "women/men" outside of the social order, by turning it into a natural relation, doubtless for Marxists the only one, along with the relation of mothers to children, to be seen this way, and by hiding the class conflict between men and women behind a natural division of labor (*The German Ideology*). This concerns the theoretical (ideological) level. On the practical level, Lenin, *the party*, all the communist parties up to now, including all the most radical political groups, have always reacted to any attempt on the part of women to reflect and form groups based on their own class problem with an accusation of divisiveness. By uniting, we women are dividing the strength of the people. This means that for the Marxists women *belong* either to the bourgeois class or to the proletariat class, in other words, to the men of these classes. In addition, Marxist theory does not allow women any more than other classes of oppressed people to constitute themselves as historical subjects, because Marxism does not take into account the fact that a class also consists of individuals one by one. Class consciousness is not enough. We must try to understand philosophically (politically) these concepts of "subject" and "class consciousness" and how they

work in relation to our history. When we discover that women are the objects of oppression and appropriation, at the very moment that we become able to perceive this, we become subjects in the sense of cognitive subjects, through an operation of abstraction. Consciousness of oppression is not only a reaction to (fight against) oppression. It is also the whole conceptual reevaluation of the social world, its whole reorganization with new concepts, from the point of view of oppression. It is what I would call the science of oppression created by the oppressed. This operation of understanding reality has to be undertaken by every one of us: call it a subjective, cognitive practice. The movement back and forth between the levels of reality (the conceptual reality and the material reality of oppression, which are both social realities) is accomplished through language.

\* \* \*

It is we who historically must undertake the task of defining the individual subject in materialist terms. This certainly seems to be an impossibility since materialism and subjectivity have always been mutually exclusive. Nevertheless; and rather than despairing of ever understanding, we must recognize the *need* to reach subjectivity in the abandonment by many of us to the myth "woman" (the myth of woman being only a snare that holds us up). This real necessity for everyone to exist as an individual, as well as a member of a class, is perhaps the first condition for the accomplishment of a revolu-

tion, without which there can be no real fight or transformation. But the opposite is also true; without class and class consciousness there are no real subjects, only alienated individuals. For women to answer the question of the individual subject in materialist terms is first to show, as the lesbians and feminists did, that supposedly "subjective," "individual," "private" problems are in fact social problems, class problems; that sexuality is not for women an individual and subjective expression, but a social institution of violence. But once we have shown that all so-called personal problems are in fact class problems, we will still be left with the question of the subject of each singular woman—not the myth, but each one of us. At this point, let us say that a new personal and subjective definition for all humankind can only be found beyond the categories of sex (woman and man) and that the advent of individual subjects demands first destroying the categories of sex, ending the use of them, and rejecting all sciences which still use these categories as their fundamentals (practically all social sciences).

\* \* \*

To destroy "woman" does not mean that we aim, short of physical destruction, to destroy lesbianism simultaneously with the categories of sex, because lesbianism provides for the moment the only social form in which we can live freely. Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is *not*

a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. For what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man, a relation that we have previously called servitude,<sup>16</sup> a relation which implies personal and physical obligation as well as economic obligation ("forced residence,"<sup>17</sup> domestic corvée, conjugal duties, unlimited production of children, etc.), a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become or to stay heterosexual. We are escapees from our class in the same way as the American runaway slaves were when escaping slavery and becoming free. For us this is an absolute necessity; our survival demands that we contribute all our strength to the destruction of the class of women within which men appropriate women. This can be accomplished only by the destruction of heterosexuality as a social system which is based on the oppression of women by men and which produces the doctrine of the difference between the sexes to justify this oppression.

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<sup>16</sup> In an article published in 1970, whose original title was "For a Women's Liberation Movement".

<sup>17</sup> Christiane Rochefort, *Les stances a Sophie*.





# Performative Acts and Gender Constitution

• Judith Butler

[...] The option I am defending is not to redescribe the world from the point of view of women. I don't know what that point of view is, but whatever it is, it is not singular, and not mine to espouse. It would only be half-right to claim that I am interested in how the phenomenon of a men's or women's point of view gets constituted, for while I do think that those points of views are, indeed, socially constituted, and that a reflexive genealogy of those points of view is important to do, it is not primarily the gender episteme that I am interested in exposing, deconstructing, or reconstructing. Indeed, it is the presupposition of the category of woman itself that requires a critical genealogy of the complex institutional and discursive means by which it is constituted. Although some feminist literary critics suggest that the presupposition of sexual difference is necessary for all discourse, that position reifies sexual difference as the founding moment of culture and precludes an analysis not only of how sexual difference is constituted to be-

gin with but how it is continuously constituted, both by the masculine tradition that preempts the universal point of view, and by those feminist positions that construct the univocal category of 'women' in the name of expressing or, indeed, liberating a subjected class. As Foucault claimed about those humanist efforts to liberate the criminalized subject, the subject that is freed is even more deeply shackled than originally thought.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, though, I envision the critical genealogy of gender to rely on a phenomenological set of presuppositions, most important among them the expanded conception of an "act" which is both socially shared and historically constituted, and which is performative in the sense I previously described. But a critical genealogy needs to be supplemented by a politics of performative gender acts, one which both redescribes existing gender identities and offers a prescriptive view about the kind of gender reality there ought to be. The redescription needs to expose the reifications that tacitly serve as substantial gender cores or identities, and to elucidate both the act and the strategy of disavowal which at once constitute and conceal gender as we live it. The prescription is invariably more difficult, if only because we need to think a world in which acts, gestures, the visual body, the clothed body, the various physical attributes usually associated with gender, *express nothing*. In a sense, the prescription is not utopian, but consists in an imperative

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Anne Warren, *Gendercide: The Implications of Sex Selection*; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.

to acknowledge the existing complexity of gender which our vocabulary invariably disguises and to bring that complexity into a dramatic cultural interplay without punitive consequences.



# **The *Empire* Strikes Back**

## A Posttranssexual Manifesto

Sandy Stone

### **1. Frogs into princesses**

**T**he verdant hills of Casablanca look down on homes and shops jammed chockablock against narrow, twisted streets filled with the odors of spices and dung. Casablanca is a very old city, passed over by Lawrence Durrell perhaps only by a geographical accident as the winepress of love. In the more modern quarter, located on a broad, sunny boulevard, is a building otherwise unremarkable except for a small brass nameplate that identifies it as the clinic of Dr. Georges Burou.

It is predominantly devoted to obstetrics and gynecology, but for many years has maintained another reputation quite unknown to the stream of Moroccan women who pass through its rooms. Dr. Burou is being visited by journalist James Morris. Morris fidgets in an anteroom reading *Elle* and *Paris-Match* with something less than full attention, because he is on an errand of immense personal import. At last the receptionist calls for him, and he is shown to the inner sanctum. He relates:

I was led along corridors and up staircases into the inner premises of the clinic. The atmosphere thickened as we proceeded. The rooms became more heavily curtained, more velvety, more voluptuous. Portrait busts appeared, I think, and there was a hint of heavy perfume. Presently I saw, advancing upon me through the dim alcoves of this retreat, which distinctly suggested to me the allure of a harem, a figure no less recognizably odalesque. It was Madame Burou. She was dressed in a long white robe, tasseled I think around the waist, which subtly managed to combine the luxuriance of a caftan with the hygiene of a nurse's uniform, and she was blonde herself, and carefully mysterious... Powers beyond my control had brought me to Room 5 at the clinic in Casablanca, and I could not have run away then even if I had wanted to... I went to say good-bye to myself in the mirror. We would never meet again, and I wanted to give that other self a long last look in the eye, and a wink for luck. As I did so a street vendor outside played a delicate arpeggio upon his flute, a very gentle merry sound which he repeated, over and over again, in sweet diminuendo down the street. Flights of angels, I said to myself, and so staggered... to my bed, and oblivion.

Exit James Morris, enter Jan Morris, through the intervention of late 20th century medical practices in this wonderfully "oriental", almost religious narrative of transformation. The passage is from *Conundrum*, the story of Morris' "sex change" and the consequences for her life. Besides the wink for luck, there is another obligatory ceremony known to male-to-female transsexuals which is called "wringing the turkey's neck", although it is not recorded whether Morris performed it as well. I will return to this rite of passage later in more detail.

## 2. Making history

Imagine now a swift segue from the moiling alleyways of Casablanca to the rolling green hills of Palo Alto. The Stanford Gender Dysphoria Program occupies a small room near the campus in a quiet residential section of this affluent community. The Program, which is a counterpart to Georges Burou's clinic in Morocco, has been for many years the academic focus of Western studies of gender dysphoria syndrome, also known as transsexualism. Here are determined etiology, diagnostic criteria, and treatment. The Program was begun in 1968, and its staff of surgeons and psychologists first set out to collect as much history on the subject of transsexualism as was available. Let me pause to provide a very brief capsule of their results. A transsexual is a person who identifies his or her gender identity with that of the "opposite" gender. Sex and gender are quite separate issues, but transsexuals commonly blur the distinction by confusing the

performative character of gender with the physical “fact” of sex, referring to their perceptions of their situation as being in the “wrong body”. Although the term transsexual is of recent origin, the phenomenon is not. The earliest mention of something which we can recognize *ex post facto* as transsexualism, in light of current diagnostic criteria, was of the Assyrian king Sardanapalus, who was reported to have dressed in women’s clothing and spun with his wives. Later instances of something very like transsexualism were reported by Philo of Judaea, during the Roman Empire. In the 18th century the Chevalier d’Eon, who lived for 39 years in the female role, was a rival of Madame Pompadour for the attention of Louis XV. The first colonial governor of New York, Lord Cornbury, came from England fully attired as a woman and remained so during his time in office.

Transsexualism was not accorded the status of an “official disorder” until 1980, when it was first listed in the American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. As Marie Mehl points out, this is something of a Pyrrhic victory.

Prior to 1980, much work had already been done in an attempt to define criteria for differential diagnosis. An example from the 1970s is this one, from work carried out by Leslie Lothstein and reported in Walters and Ross’ *Transsexualism and Sex Reassignment*:

Lothstein, in his study of ten ageing transsexuals [average age fifty-two], found that psychological testing helped to determine



the extent of the patients' pathology [sic]... [he] concluded that [transsexuals as a class] were depressed, isolated, withdrawn, schizoid individuals with profound dependency conflicts. Furthermore, they were immature, narcissistic, egocentric and potentially explosive, while their attempts to obtain [professional assistance] were demanding, manipulative, controlling, coercive, and paranoid.

Here's another:

In a study of 56 transsexuals the results on the schizophrenia and depression scales were outside the upper limit of the normal range. The authors see these profiles as reflecting the confused and bizarre life styles of the subjects.

These were clinical studies, which represented a very limited class of subjects. However, the studies were considered sufficiently representative for them to be reprinted without comment in collections such as that of Walters and Ross. Further on in each paper, though, we find that each investigator invalidates his results in a brief disclaimer which is reminiscent of the fine print in a cigarette ad: In the first, by adding "It must be admitted that Lothstein's subjects could hardly be called a typical sample as nine of the ten studied had serious physical

health problems" (this was a study conducted in a health clinic, not a gender clinic), and in the second, with the afterthought that "82 per cent of [the subjects] were prostitutes and atypical of transsexuals in other parts of the world." Such results might have been considered marginal, hedged about as they were with markers of questionable method or excessively limited samples. Yet they came to represent transsexuals in medicolegal/psychological literature, disclaimers and all, almost to the present day.

During the same period, feminist theoreticians were developing their own analyses. The issue quickly became, and remains, volatile and divisive. Let me quote an example.

Rape... is a masculinist violation of bodily integrity. All transsexuals rape women's bodies by reducing the female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves... Rape, although it is usually done by force, can also be accomplished by deception.

This quote is from Janice Raymond's 1979 book *The Transsexual Empire: The Making Of The She-Male*, which occasioned the title of this paper. I read Raymond to be claiming that transsexuals are constructs of an evil phallogocratic empire and were designed to invade women's spaces and appropriate women's power. Though *Empire* represented a specific moment in feminist analysis and

prefigured the appropriation of liberal political language by a radical right, here in 1991, on the twelfth anniversary of its publication, it is still the definitive statement on transsexualism by a genetic female academic. To clarify my stakes in this discourse let me quote another passage from *Empire*:

Masculine behavior is notably obtrusive. It is significant that transsexually constructed lesbian-feminists have inserted themselves into the positions of importance and/or performance in the feminist community. Sandy Stone, the transsexual engineer with Olivia Records, an 'all-women' recording company, illustrates this well. Stone is not only crucial to the Olivia enterprise but plays a very dominant role there. The... visibility he achieved in the aftermath of the Olivia controversy... only serves to enhance his previously dominant role and to divide women, as men frequently do, when they make their presence necessary and vital to women. As one woman wrote: "I feel raped when Olivia passes off Sandy... as a real woman. After all his male privilege, is he going to cash in on lesbian feminist culture too?"

This paper, *The Empire Strikes Back*, is about morality tales and origin myths, about telling the "truth" of gender. Its informing principle is that "technical arts are

always imagined to be subordinated by the ruling artistic idea, itself rooted authoritatively in nature's own life." It is about the image and the real mutually defining each other through the inscriptions and reading practices of late capitalism. It is about postmodernism, postfeminism, and (dare I say it) posttranssexualism. Throughout, the paper owes a large debt to the work of Donna Haraway.

### **3. "All of reality in late capitalist culture lusts to become an image for its own security"**

Let's turn to accounts by the transsexuals themselves. During this period virtually all of the published accounts were written by male-to-females. I want to briefly consider four autobiographical accounts of male-to-female transsexuals, to see what we can learn about what they think they are doing. (I will consider female-to-male transsexuals in another paper.)

The earliest partially autobiographical account in existence is that of Lili Elbe in Niels Hoyer's book *Man Into Woman* (1933). The first fully autobiographical book was the paperback *I Changed My Sex!* (not exactly a quiet, contemplative title), written by the striptease artist Hedy Jo Star in the mid-1950s. Christine Jorgensen, who underwent surgery in the early 1950s and is arguably the best known of the recent transsexuals, did not publish her autobiography until 1967; instead, Star's book rode the wave of publicity surrounding Jorgensen's surgery. In

1974 *Conundrum* was published, written by the popular English journalist Jan Morris. In 1977 there was *Canary*, by musician and performer Canary Conn. In addition, many transsexuals keep something they call by the argot term "O.T.F.": The Obligatory Transsexual File. This usually contains newspaper articles and bits of forbidden diary entries about "inappropriate" gender behavior. Transsexuals also collect autobiographical literature. According to the Stanford gender dysphoria program, the medical clinics do not, because they consider autobiographical accounts thoroughly unreliable. Because of this, and since a fair percentage of the literature is invisible to many library systems, these personal collections are the only source for some of this information. I am fortunate to have a few of them at my disposal.

What sort of subject is constituted in these texts? Hoyer (representing Jacobson representing Elbe, who is representing Wegener who is representing Sparre), writes:

A single glance of this man had deprived her of all her strength. She felt as if her whole personality had been crushed by him. With a single glance he had extinguished it. Something in her rebelled. She felt like a school-girl who had received short shrift from an idolized teacher. She was conscious of a peculiar weakness in all her members... it was the first time her woman's heart had trembled before her lord and master, before the

man who had constituted himself her protector, and she understood why she then submitted so utterly to him and his will.

We can put to this fragment all of the usual questions: Not by whom but for whom was Lili Elbe constructed? Under whose gaze did her text fall? And consequently what stories appear and disappear in this kind of seduction? It may come as no surprise that all of the accounts I will relate here are similar in their description of "woman" as male fetish, as replicating a socially enforced role, or as constituted by performative gender. Lili Elbe faints at the sight of blood. Jan Morris, a world-class journalist who has been around the block a few times, still describes her sense of herself in relation to makeup and dress, of being on display, and is pleased when men open doors for her:

I feel small, and neat. I am not small in fact, and not terribly neat either, but femininity conspires to make me feel so. My blouse and skirt are light, bright, crisp. My shoes make my feet look more delicate than they are, besides giving me... a suggestion of vulnerability that I rather like. My red and white bangles give me a racy feel, my bag matches my shoes and makes me feel well organized... When I walk out into the street I feel consciously ready for the world's appraisal, in a way that I never felt as a man.

Hedy Jo Star, who was a professional stripper, says in *I Changed My Sex!*: "I wanted the sensual feel of lingerie against my skin, I wanted to brighten my face with cosmetics. I wanted a strong man to protect me." Here in 1991 I have also encountered a few men who are brave enough to echo this sentiment for themselves, but in 1955 it was a proprietary feminine position.

Besides the obvious complicity of these accounts in a Western white male definition of performative gender, the authors also reinforce a binary, oppositional mode of gender identification. They go from being unambiguous men, albeit unhappy men, to unambiguous women. There is no territory between. Further, each constructs a specific narrative moment when their personal sexual identification changes from male to female. This moment is the moment of neocolporrathy—that is, of gender reassignment or "sex change surgery". Jan Morris, on the night preceding surgery, wrote: "I went to say good-bye to myself in the mirror. We would never meet again, and I wanted to give that other self a last wink for luck..."

Canary Conn writes: "I'm not a *muchacho*... I'm a *muchacha* now... a girl [sic]."

Hedy Jo Star writes: "In the instant that I awoke from the anaesthetic, I realized that I had finally become a woman."

Even Lili Elbe, whose text is second-hand, used the same terms: "Suddenly it occurred to him that he, Andreas Sparre, was probably undressing for the last time." Immediately on awakening from first-stage surgery (castration in Hoyer's account), Sparre writes a note. "He

gazed at the card and failed to recognize the writing. It was a woman's script." Inger carries the note to the doctor: "What do you think of this, Doctor. No man could have written it?" "No," said the astonished doctor; "no, you are quite right..."—an exchange which requires the reader to forget that orthography is an acquired skill. The same thing happens with Elbe's voice: "the strange thing was that your voice had completely changed... You have a splendid soprano voice! Simply astounding." Perhaps as astounding now as then but for different reasons, since in light of present knowledge of the effects (and more to the point, the non-effects) of castration and hormones none of this could have happened. Neither has any effect on voice timbre. Hence, incidentally, the jaundiced eyes with which the clinics regard historical accounts.

If Hoyer mixes reality with fantasy and caricatures his subjects besides ("Simply astounding!"), what lessons are there in *Man Into Woman*? Partly what emerges from the book is how Hoyer deploys the strategy of building barriers within a single subject, strategies that are still in gainful employment today. Lili displaces the irruptive masculine self, still dangerously present within her, onto the God-figure of her surgeon/therapist Werner Kreuzt, whom she calls The Professor, or The Miracle Man. The Professor is He Who molds and Lili that which is molded:

what the Professor is now doing with Lili is nothing less than an emotional moulding, which is preceding the physical moulding into a woman. Hitherto Lili has been like



clay which others had prepared and to which the Professor has given form and life... by a single glance the Professor awoke her heart to life, a life with all the instincts of woman.

The female is immanent, the female is bone-deep, the female is instinct. With Lili's eager complicity, The Professor drives a massive wedge between the masculine and the feminine within her. In this passage, reminiscent of the "oriental" quality of Morris' narrative, the male must be annihilated or at least denied, but the female is that which exists to be *continually* annihilated:

It seemed to her as if she no longer had any responsibility for herself, for her fate. For Werner Kreutz had relieved her of it all. Nor had she any longer a will of her own... there could be no past for her. Everything in the past belonged to a person who... was dead. Now there was only a perfectly humble woman, who was ready to obey, who was happy to submit herself to the will of another... her master, her creator, her Professor. Between [Andreas] and her stood Werner Kreutz. She felt secure and salvaged.

Hoyer has the same problems with purity and denial of mixture that recur in many transsexual autobiographical narratives. The characters in his narrative exist in an historical period of enormous sexual repression. How

is one to maintain the divide between the "male" self, whose proper object of desire is Woman, and the "female" self, whose proper object of desire is Man?

"As a man you have always seemed to me unquestionably healthy. I have, indeed, seen with my own eyes that you attract women, and that is the clearest proof that you are a genuine fellow." He paused, and then placed his hand on Andreas' shoulder. "You won't take it amiss if I ask you a frank question? ... Have you at any time been interested in your own kind? You know what I mean."

Andreas shook his head calmly. "My word on it, Niels; never in my life. And I can add that those kind of creatures have never shown any interest in me."

"Good, Andreas! That's just what I thought."

Hoyer must separate the subjectivity of "Andreas", who has never felt anything for men, and "Lili", who, in the course of the narrative, wants to marry one. This salvaging procedure makes the world safe for "Lili" by erecting and maintaining an impenetrable barrier between her and "Andreas", reinforced again and again in such ways as two different handwriting styles and two different voices. The force of an imperative—a natural state toward which all things tend—to deny the potentialities of mixture, acts to preserve "pure" gender identity : at

the dawn of the Nazi-led love affair with purity, no "creatures" will tempt Andreas into transgressing boundaries with his "own kind".

"I will honestly and plainly confess to you, Niels, that I have always been attracted to women. And to-day as much as ever. A most banal confession!"

-banal only so long as the person inside Andreas' body who voices it is Andreas, rather than Lili. There is a lot of work being done in this passage, a microcosm of the work it takes to maintain the same polar personae in society in the large. Further, each of these writers constructs his or her account as a narrative of redemption. There is a strong element of drama, of the sense of struggle against huge odds, of overcoming perilous obstacles, and of mounting awe and mystery at the breathtaking approach and final apotheosis of the Forbidden Transformation. Oboy.

The first operation... has been successful beyond all expectations. Andreas has ceased to exist, they said. His germ glands—oh, mystic words—have been removed.

*Oh, mystic words.* The *mysterium tremendum* of deep identity hovers about a physical locus; the entire complex of male engenderment, the mysterious power of the Man-God, inhabits the "germ glands" in the way that the soul was thought to inhabit the pineal. Maleness is in the

you-know-whats. For that matter, so is the ontology of the subject; and therefore Hoyer can demonstrate in the coarsest way that femaleness is lack:

The operation which has been performed here [that is, castration] enables me to enter the clinic for women [exclusively for women].

On the other hand, either Niels or Lili can be constituted by an act of *insinuation*, what the New Testament calls *endeuein*, or the putting on of the god, inserting the physical body within a shell of cultural signification:

Andreas Sparre... was probably undressing for the last time... For a lifetime these coverings of coat and waistcoat and trousers had enclosed him.

It is now Lili who is writing to you. I am sitting up in my bed in a silk nightdress with lace trimming, curled, powdered, with bangle, necklace, and rings...

All these authors replicate the stereotypical male account of the constitution of woman: Dress, makeup, and delicate fainting at the sight of blood. Each of these adventurers passes directly from one pole of sexual experience to the other. If there is any intervening space in the continuum of sexuality, it is invisible. And nobody ever mentions wringing the turkey's neck.

No wonder feminist theorists have been suspicious. Hell, I'm suspicious.

How do these accounts converse with the medical/psychological texts? In a time in which more interactions occur through texts, computer conferences, and electronic media than by personal contact—the close of the mechanical age and the inception of the virtual, in which multiplicity and prosthetic social communication are common—and consequently when individual subjectivity can be constituted through inscription more often than through personal association, there are still moments of embodied “natural truth” that cannot be avoided. In the time period of most of these books the most critical of these moments was the intake interview at the gender dysphoria clinic, when the doctors, who were all males, decided whether the person was eligible for gender reassignment surgery. The origin of the gender dysphoria clinics is a microcosmic look at the construction of criteria for gender. The foundational idea for the gender dysphoria clinics was first, to study an interesting and potentially fundable human aberration; second, to provide help, as they understood the term, for a “correctable problem”.

Some of the early nonacademic gender dysphoria clinics performed *surgery on demand*, which is to say regardless of any judgment on the part of the clinic staff regarding what came to be called appropriateness to the gender of choice. When the first academic gender dysphoria clinics were started on an experimental basis in the 1960s, the medical staff would not perform surgery on de-

mand, because of the professional risks involved in performing experimental surgery on "sociopaths". At this time there were no official diagnostic criteria; "transsexuals" were, *ipso facto*, whoever signed up for assistance. Professionally this was a dicey situation. It was necessary to construct the category "transsexual" along customary and traditional lines, to construct plausible criteria for acceptance into a clinic. Professionally speaking, a test or a differential diagnosis was needed for transsexualism that did not depend on anything as simple and subjective as feeling that one was in the wrong body. The test needed to be objective, clinically appropriate, and repeatable. But even after considerable research, no simple and unambiguous test for gender dysphoria syndrome could be developed.

The Stanford clinic was in the business of helping people, among its other agendas, as its members understood the term. Therefore the final decisions of eligibility for gender reassignment were made by the staff on the basis of an individual sense of the "appropriateness of the individual to their gender of choice". The clinic took on the additional role of "grooming clinic" or "charm school" because, according to the judgment of the staff, the men who presented as wanting to be women didn't always "behave like" women. Stanford recognized that gender roles could be learned (to an extent). Their involvement with the grooming clinics was an effort to produce not simply anatomically legible females, but *women... i.e., gendered females*. As Norman Fisk remarked, "I now admit very candidly that... in the early phases we were avowedly

seeking candidates who would have the best chance for success." In practice this meant that the candidates for surgery were evaluated on the basis of their *performance* in the gender of choice. The criteria constituted a fully acculturated, consensual definition of gender, and *at the site of their enactment we can locate an actual instance of the apparatus of production of gender.*

This raises several sticky questions, the chief two being: Who is telling the story for whom, and how do the storytellers differentiate between the story they tell and the story they hear?

One answer is that they differentiate with great difficulty. The criteria which the researchers developed and then applied were defined recursively through a series of interactions with the candidates. The scenario worked this way: Initially, the only textbook on the subject of transsexualism was Harry Benjamin's definitive work *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (1966). (Note that Benjamin's book actually postdates *I Changed My Sex!* by about ten years.) When the first clinics were constituted, Benjamin's book was the researchers' standard reference. And when the first transsexuals were evaluated for their suitability for surgery, their behavior matched up gratifyingly with Benjamin's criteria. The researchers produced papers which reported on this, and which were used as bases for funding.

It took a surprisingly long time—several years—for the researchers to realize that the reason the candidates' behavioral profiles matched Benjamin's so well was that the candidates, too, had read Benjamin's book, which

was passed from hand to hand within the transsexual community, and they were only too happy to provide the behavior that led to acceptance for surgery. This sort of careful repositioning created interesting problems. Among them was the determination of the permissible range of expressions of physical sexuality. This was a large gray area in the candidates' self-presentations, because Benjamin's subjects did not talk about any erotic sense of their own bodies. Consequently nobody else who came to the clinics did either. By textual authority, physical men who lived as women and who identified themselves as transsexuals, as opposed to male transvestites for whom erotic penile sensation was permissible, could not experience penile pleasure. Into the 1980s there was not a single preoperative male-to-female transsexual for whom data was available who experienced genital sexual pleasure while living in the "gender of choice". The prohibition continued postoperatively in interestingly transmuted form, and remained so absolute that no postoperative transsexual would admit to experiencing sexual pleasure through masturbation either. Full membership in the assigned gender was conferred by orgasm, real or faked, accomplished through heterosexual penetration. "Wringing the turkey's neck", the ritual of penile masturbation just before surgery, was the most secret of secret traditions. To acknowledge so natural a desire would be to risk "crash landing"; that is, "role inappropriateness" leading to disqualification.

It was necessary to retrench. The two groups, on one hand the researchers and on the other the transsexuals,



were pursuing separate ends. The researchers wanted to know what this thing they called gender dysphoria syndrome was. They wanted a taxonomy of symptoms, criteria for differential diagnosis, procedures for evaluation, reliable courses of treatment, and thorough followup. The transsexuals wanted surgery. They had very clear agendas regarding their relation to the researchers, and considered the doctors' evaluation criteria merely another obstacle in their path—something to be overcome. In this they unambiguously expressed Benjamin's original criterion in its simplest form: The sense of being in the "wrong" body. This seems a recipe for an uneasy adversarial relationship, and it was. It continues to be, although with the passage of time there has been considerable dialogue between the two camps. Partly this has been made possible by the realization among the medical and psychological community that the expected criteria for differential diagnosis did not emerge. Consider this excerpt from a paper by Marie Mehl, written in 1986:

There is no mental nor psychological test which successfully differentiates the transsexual from the so-called normal population. There is no more psychopathology in the transsexual population than in the population at large, although societal response to the transsexual does pose some insurmountable problems. The psychodynamic histories of transsexuals do not yield any consistent

differentiation characteristics from the rest of the population.

These two accounts, Mehl's statement and that of Lothstein, in which he found transsexuals to be depressed, schizoid, manipulative, controlling, and paranoid, coexist within a span of less than ten years. With the achievement of a diagnostic category in 1980—one which, after years of research, did not involve much more than the original sense of "being in the wrong body"—and consequent acceptance by the body police, i.e., the medical establishment, clinically "good" histories now exist of transsexuals in areas as widely dispersed as Australia, Sweden, Czechoslovakia, Vietnam, Singapore, China, Malaysia, India, Uganda, Sudan, Tahiti, Chile, Borneo, Madagascar, and the Aleutians. (This is not a complete list.) It is a considerable stretch to fit them all into some plausible theory. Were there undiscovered or untried diagnostic techniques that would have differentiated transsexuals from the normal population? Were the criteria wrong, limited, or shortsighted? Did the realization that criteria weren't emerging just naturally appear as a result of "scientific progress", or were there other forces at work?

Such a banquet of data creates its own problems. Concomitant with the dubious achievement of a diagnostic category is the inevitable blurring of boundaries as a vast heteroglossic account of difference, heretofore invisible to the "legitimate" professions, suddenly achieves canonization and simultaneously becomes homogenized to

satisfy the constraints of the category. Suddenly the old morality tale of the truth of gender, told by a kindly white patriarch in New York in 1966, becomes pancultural in the 1980s. Emergent polyvocalities of lived experience, never represented in the discourse but present at least in potential, disappear; the *berdache* and the stripper, the tweedy housewife and the *mujerado*, the *mah'u* and the rock star, are still the same story after all, if we only try hard enough.

#### 4. Whose story is this, anyway?

I wish to point out the broad similarities which this peculiar juxtaposition suggests to aspects of colonial discourse with which we may be familiar: The initial fascination with the exotic, extending to professional investigators; denial of subjectivity and lack of access to the dominant discourse; followed by a species of rehabilitation.

Raising these issues has complicated life in the clinic.

"Making" history, whether autobiographic, academic, or clinical, is partly a struggle to ground an account in some natural inevitability. Bodies are screens on which we see projected the momentary settlements that emerge from ongoing struggles over beliefs and practices within the academic and medical communities. These struggles play themselves out in arenas far removed from the body. Each is an attempt to gain a high ground which is profoundly moral in character, to make an authori-

tative and final explanation for the way things are and consequently for the way they must continue to be. In other words, each of these accounts is culture speaking with the voice of an individual. The people who have no voice in this theorizing are the transsexuals themselves. As with males theorizing about women from the beginning of time, theorists of gender have seen transsexuals as possessing something less than agency. As with genetic women, transsexuals are infantilized, considered too illogical or irresponsible to achieve true subjectivity, or clinically erased by diagnostic criteria; or else, as constructed by some radical feminist theorists, as robots of an insidious and menacing patriarchy, an alien army designed and constructed to infiltrate, pervert and destroy "true" women. In this construction as well, the transsexuals have been resolutely complicit by failing to develop an effective counterdiscourse.

Here on the gender borders at the close of the twentieth century, with the faltering of phallogocratic hegemony and the bumptious appearance of heteroglossic origin accounts, we find the epistemologies of white male medical practice, the rage of radical feminist theories and the chaos of lived gendered experience meeting on the battlefield of the transsexual body: a hotly contested site of cultural inscription, a meaning machine for the production of ideal type. Representation at its most magical, the transsexual body is perfected memory, inscribed with the "true" story of Adam and Eve as the ontological account of irreducible difference, an essential biography which is part of nature. A story which culture tells itself,

the transsexual body is a tactile politics of reproduction constituted through textual violence. The clinic is a technology of inscription.

Given this circumstance in which a minority discourse comes to ground in the physical, a counterdiscourse is critical. But it is difficult to generate a counterdiscourse if one is programmed to disappear. The highest purpose of the transsexual is to erase him/herself, to fade into the "normal" population as soon as possible. Part of this process is known as *constructing a plausible history*—learning to lie effectively about one's past. What is gained is acceptability in society. What is lost is the ability to authentically represent the complexities and ambiguities of lived experience, and thereby is lost that aspect of "nature" which Donna Haraway theorizes as Coyote—the Native American spirit animal who represents the power of continual transformation which is the heart of engaged life. Instead, authentic experience is replaced by a particular kind of story, one that supports the old constructed positions. This is expensive, and profoundly disempowering. Whether desiring to do so or not, transsexuals do not grow up in the same ways as "GGs", or genetic "naturals". Transsexuals do not possess the same history as genetic "naturals", and do not share common oppression prior to gender reassignment. I am not suggesting a shared discourse. I am suggesting that in the transsexual's erased history we can find a story disruptive to the accepted discourses of gender, which originates from within the gender minority itself and which can make common cause with other opposi-

tional discourses. But the transsexual currently occupies a position which is nowhere, which is outside the binary oppositions of gendered discourse. For a transsexual, *as a transsexual*, to generate a true, effective and representational counterdiscourse is to speak from outside the boundaries of gender, beyond the constructed oppositional nodes which have been predefined as the only positions from which discourse is possible. How, then, can the transsexual speak? If the transsexual were to speak, what would s/he say?

## **5. A posttranssexual manifesto**

To attempt to occupy a place as speaking subject within the traditional gender frame is to become complicit in the discourse which one wishes to deconstruct. Rather, we can seize upon the textual violence inscribed in the transsexual body and turn it into a reconstructive force. Let me suggest a more familiar example. Judith Butler points out that the lesbian categories of "butch" and "femme" are not simple assimilations of lesbianism back into the terms of heterosexuality. Rather, Butler introduces the concept of *cultural intelligibility*, and suggests that the contextualized and resignified "masculinity" of the butch, seen against a culturally intelligible "female" body, invokes a dissonance that both generates a sexual tension and constitutes the object of desire. She points out that this way of thinking about gendered objects of desire admits of much greater complexity than the example suggests. The lesbian butch or femme both recall the

heterosexual scene but simultaneously displace it. The idea that butch and femme are “replicas” or “copies” of heterosexual exchange underestimates the erotic power of their internal dissonance. In the case of the transsexual, the varieties of performative gender, seen against a culturally intelligible gendered body *which is itself a medically constituted textual violence*, generate new and unpredictable dissonances which implicate entire spectra of desire. In the transsexual as text we may find the potential to map the refigured body onto conventional gender discourse and thereby disrupt it, to take advantage of the dissonances created by such a juxtaposition to fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries. I suggest we start by taking Raymond’s accusation that “transsexuals divide women” beyond itself, and turn it into a productive force to multiplicatively divide the old binary discourses of gender—as well as Raymond’s own monistic discourse. To foreground the practices of inscription and reading which are part of this deliberate invocation of dissonance, I suggest constituting transsexuals not as a class or problematic “third gender”, but rather as a *genre*—a set of embodied texts whose potential for *productive* disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored.

In order to effect this, the genre of visible transsexuals must grow by recruiting members from the class of invisible ones, from those who have disappeared into their “plausible histories”. The most critical thing a transsexual can do, the thing that *constitutes* success, is to

"pass." Passing means to live successfully in the gender of choice, to be accepted as a "natural" member of that gender. Passing means the denial of mixture. One and the same with passing is effacement of the prior gender role, or the construction of a plausible history. Considering that most transsexuals choose reassignment in their third or fourth decade, this means erasing a considerable portion of their personal experience. It is my contention that this process, in which both the transsexual and the medicolegal/psychological establishment are complicit, forecloses the possibility of a life grounded in the *inter-textual* possibilities of the transsexual body.

To negotiate the troubling and productive multiple permeabilities of boundary and subject position that intertextuality implies, we must begin to rearticulate the foundational language by which both sexuality and transsexuality are described. For example, neither the investigators nor the transsexuals have taken the step of problematizing "wrong body" as an adequate descriptive category. In fact "wrong body" has come, virtually by default, to *define* the syndrome. It is quite understandable, I think, that a phrase whose lexicality suggests the phallogentric, binary character of gender differentiation should be examined with deepest suspicion. So long as we, whether academics, clinicians, or transsexuals, ontologize both sexuality and transsexuality in this way, we have foreclosed the possibility of analyzing desire and motivational complexity in a manner which adequately describes the multiple contradictions of individual lived experience. We need a deeper analytical language for



transsexual theory, one which allows for the sorts of ambiguities and polyvocalities which have already so productively informed and enriched feminist theory.

Judith Shapiro points out that "To those... who might be inclined to diagnose the transsexual's focus on the genitals as obsessive or fetishistic, the response is that they are, in fact, simply conforming to *their culture's* criteria for gender assignment" (emphasis mine). This statement points to deeper workings, to hidden discourses and experiential pluralities within the transsexual monolith. They are not yet clinically or academically visible, and with good reason. For example, in pursuit of differential diagnosis a question sometimes asked of a prospective transsexual is "Suppose that you could be a man (or woman) in every way except for your genitals; would you be content?" There are several possible answers, but only one is clinically correct. Small wonder, then, that so much of these discourses revolves around the phrase "wrong body". Under the binary phallocratic founding myth by which Western bodies and subjects are authorized, only one body per gendered subject is "right". All other bodies are wrong.

As clinicians and transsexuals continue to face off across the diagnostic battlefield which this scenario suggests, the transsexuals for whom gender identity is something different from *and perhaps irrelevant* to physical genitalia are occulted by those for whom the power of the medical/psychological establishments, and their ability to act as gatekeepers for cultural norms, is the final authority for what counts as a culturally intelligible body.

This is a treacherous area, and were the silenced groups to achieve voice we might well find, as feminist theorists have claimed, that the identities of individual, embodied subjects were far less implicated in physical norms, and far more diversely spread across a rich and complex structuration of identity and desire, than it is now possible to express. And yet in even the best of the current debates, the standard mode is one of relentless totalization. Consider the most perspicuous example in this paper, Raymond's stunning "All transsexuals rape women's bodies" (what if she had said, e.g., "all blacks rape women's bodies"): For all its egregious and inexcusable bigotry, the language of her book is only marginally less totalizing than Gary Kates' "transsexuals... take on an exaggerated and stereotypical female role", or Ann Bolin's "transsexuals try to forget their male history". Both Kates' and Bolin's studies are in most respects excellent work, and were published in the same collection as an earlier version of this essay; but still there are no subjects in these discourses, only homogenized, totalized objects—fractally replicating earlier histories of minority discourses in the large. So when I speak the forgotten word, it will perhaps wake memories of other debates. The word is *some*.

Transsexuals who pass seem able to ignore the fact that by creating totalized, monistic identities, forgoing physical and subjective intertextuality, they have foreclosed the possibility of authentic relationships. Under the principle of passing, denying the destabilizing power of being "read", relationships begin as lies—and passing,

of course, is not an activity restricted to transsexuals. This is familiar to the person of color whose skin is light enough to pass as white, or to the closet gay or lesbian... or to anyone who has chosen invisibility as an imperfect solution to personal dissonance. Essentially I am rearticulating one of the arguments for solidarity which has been developed by gays, lesbians and people of color. The comparison extends further. To deconstruct the necessity for passing implies that transsexuals must take responsibility for *all* of their history, to begin to rearticulate their lives not as a series of erasures in the service of a species of feminism conceived from within a traditional frame, but as a political action begun by reappropriating difference and reclaiming the power of the refigured and reinscribed body. The disruptions of the old patterns of desire that the multiple dissonances of the transsexual body imply produce not an irreducible alterity but a myriad of alterities, whose unanticipated juxtapositions hold what Donna Haraway has called the promises of monsters—physicalities of constantly shifting figure and ground that exceed the frame of any possible representation.

The essence of transsexualism is the act of passing. A transsexual who passes is obeying the Derridean imperative: "Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres." I could not ask a transsexual for anything more inconceivable than to forgo passing, to be consciously "read", to read oneself aloud—and by this troubling and productive reading, to begin to *write oneself* into the discourses by which one has been written—in effect, then, to be-

come a (look out—dare I say it again?) posttranssexual. Still, transsexuals know that silence can be an extremely high price to pay for acceptance. I want to speak directly to the brothers and sisters who may read/“read” this and say: I ask all of us to use the strength which brought us through the effort of restructuring identity, and which has also helped us to live in silence and denial, for a re-visioning of our lives. I know you feel that most of the work is behind you and that the price of invisibility is not great. But, although *individual* change is the foundation of all things, it is not the end of all things. Perhaps it's time to begin laying the groundwork for the next transformation.

## Afterword

In the brief time, or so it seems, since this essay was first written, the situation both on the street with regard to articulating a specifically transgendered positionality and within the academy vis-a-vis theory has deeply changed, and continues to evolve. Whether the original Empire paper had the privilege of being a fortunately timed bellwether or whether it successfully evoked the build-it-and-they-will-come principle is unknown, but the results are no less gratifying for lack of that knowledge. Transgender (or for that matter, posttransgender) theory would appear to be successfully engaging the nascent discourses of Queer Theory in a number of graceful and mutually productive respects, and this is reason for guarded celebration. Needless to say, however, be-

ginnings are most delicate and critical periods in which, while the foundation stones are still exposed, it is necessary to pay exquisite attention to detail. For this author, it is a most promising and interesting time in which to be alive and writing.



# **My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix**

Performing Transgender Rage

✧ Susan Stryker

## **Introductory Notes**

**T**he following work is a textual adaptation of a performance piece originally presented at “Rage Across the Disciplines,” an arts, humanities, and social sciences conference held June 10-12, 1993, at California State University, San Marcos. The interdisciplinary nature of the conference, its theme, and the organizers’ call for both performances and academic papers inspired me to be creative in my mode of presenting a topic then much on my mind. As a member of Transgender Nation—a militantly queer, direct action transsexual advocacy group—I was at the time involved in organizing a disruption and protest at the American Psychiatric Association’s 1993 annual meeting in San Francisco. A good deal of the discussion at our planning meetings concerned how to harness the intense emotions emanat-

ing from transsexual experience—especially rage—and mobilize them into effective political actions. I was intrigued by the prospect of critically examining this rage in a more academic setting through an idiosyncratic application of the concept of gender performativity. My idea was to perform selfconsciously a queer gender rather than simply talk about it, thus embodying and enacting the concept simultaneously under discussion. I wanted the formal structure of the work to express a transgender aesthetic by replicating our abrupt, often jarring transitions between genders—challenging generic classification with the forms of my words just as my transsexuality challenges the conventions of legitimate gender and my performance in the conference room challenged the boundaries of acceptable academic discourse. During the performance, I stood at the podium wearing genderfuck drag—combat boots, threadbare Levi 501s over a black lace body suit, a shredded Transgender Nation T-shirt with the neck and sleeves cut out, a pink triangle, quartz crystal pendant, grunge metal jewelry, and a six-inch long marlin hook dangling around my neck on a length of heavy stainless steel chain. I decorated the set by draping my black leather biker jacket over my chair at the panelists' table. The jacket had handcuffs on the left shoulder, rainbow freedom rings on the right side lacings, and Queer Nation-style stickers reading SEX CHANGE, DYKE, and FUCK YOUR TRANSPHOBIA plastered on the back.



## Monologue

The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born. In these circumstances, I find a deep affinity between myself as a transsexual woman and the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster's as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist.

I am not the first to link Frankenstein's monster and the transsexual body. Mary Daly makes the connection explicit by discussing transsexuality in "Boundary Violation and the Frankenstein Phenomenon," in which she characterizes transsexuals as the agents of a "necrophilic invasion" of female space. Janice Raymond, who acknowledges Daly as a formative influence, is less direct when she says that "the problem of transsexuality would best be served by morally mandating it out of existence," but in this statement she nevertheless echoes Victor Frankenstein's feelings toward the monster: "Begone, vile insect, or rather, stay, that I may trample you to dust. You reproach me with your creation". It is a commonplace of literary criticism to note that Frankenstein's monster is his own dark, romantic double, the alien Other he constructs and upon which he projects all

he cannot accept in himself; indeed, Frankenstein calls the monster "my own vampire, my own spirit set loose from the grave". Might I suggest that Daly, Raymond and others of their ilk similarly construct the transsexual as their own particular golem?

The attribution of monstrosity remains a palpable characteristic of most lesbian and gay representations of transsexuality, displaying in unnerving detail the anxious, fearful underside of the current cultural fascination with transgenderism. Because transsexuality more than any other transgender practice or identity represents the prospect of destabilizing the foundational presupposition of fixed genders upon which a politics of personal identity depends, people who have invested their aspirations for social justice in identitarian movements say things about us out of sheer panic that, if said of other minorities, would see print only in the most hate-riddled, white supremacist, Christian fascist rags. To quote extensively from one letter to the editor of a popular San Francisco gay/lesbian periodical:

I consider transsexualism to be a fraud, and the participants in it... perverted. The transsexual [claims] he/she needs to change his/her body in order to be his/her "true self." Because this "true self" requires another physical form in which to manifest itself, it must therefore war with nature. One cannot change one's gender. What occurs is a cleverly manipulated exterior: what has

been done is mutation. What exists beneath the deformed surface is the same person who was there prior to the deformity. People who break or deform their bodies [act] out the sick farce of a deluded, patriarchal approach to nature, alienated from true being.

Referring by name to one particular person, self-identified as a transsexual lesbian, whom she had heard speak in a public forum at the San Francisco Women's Building, the letter-writer went on to say:

When an estrogenated man with breasts loves a woman, that is not lesbianism, that is mutilated perversion. [This individual] is not a threat to the lesbian community, he is an outrage to us. He is not a lesbian, he is a mutant man, a self-made freak, a deformity, an insult. He deserves a slap in the face. After that, he deserves to have his body and mind made well again.

When such beings as these tell me I war with nature, I find no more reason to mourn my opposition to them—or to the order they claim to represent—than Frankenstein's monster felt in its enmity to the human race. I do not fall from the grace of their company—I roar gleefully away from it like a Harley-straddling, dildo-packing leatherdyke from hell.

The stigmatization fostered by this sort of pejorative labelling is not without consequence. Such words have the power to destroy transsexual lives. On January 5, 1993, a 22-year-old pre-operative transsexual woman from Seattle, Filisa Vistima, wrote in her journal, "I wish I was anatomically 'normal' so I could go swimming.... But no, I'm a mutant, Frankenstein's monster." Two months later Filisa Vistima committed suicide. What drove her to such despair was the exclusion she experienced in Seattle's queer community, some members of which opposed Filisa's participation because of her transsexuality—even though she identified as and lived as a bisexual woman. The Lesbian Resource Center where she served as a volunteer conducted a survey of its constituency to determine whether it should stop offering services to male-to-female transsexuals. Filisa did the data entry for tabulating the survey results; she didn't have to imagine how people felt about her kind. The Seattle Bisexual Women's Network announced that if it admitted transsexuals the SBWN would no longer be a women's organization. "I'm sure," one member said in reference to the inclusion of bisexual transsexual women, "46 the boys can take care of themselves."

Filisa Vistima was not a boy, and she found it impossible to take care of herself. Even in death she found no support from the community in which she claimed membership. "Why didn't Filisa commit herself for psychiatric care?" asked a columnist in the Seattle

Gay News. "Why didn't Filisa demand her civil rights?" In this case, not only did the angry villagers hound their monster to the edge of town, they reproached her for being vulnerable to the torches. Did Filisa Vistima commit suicide, or did the queer community of Seattle kill her?

I want to lay claim to the dark power of my monstrous identity without using it as a weapon against others or being wounded by it myself. I will say this as bluntly as I know how: I am a transsexual, and therefore I am a monster. Just as the words "dyke," "fag," "queer," "slut," and "whore" have been reclaimed, respectively, by lesbians and gay men, by anti-assimilationist sexual minorities, by women who pursue erotic pleasure, and by sex industry workers, words like "creature," "monster," and "unnatural" need to be reclaimed by the transgendered. By embracing and accepting them, even piling one on top of another, we may dispel their ability to harm us. A creature, after all, in the dominant tradition of Western European culture, is nothing other than a created being, a made thing. The affront you humans take at being called a "creature" results from the threat the term poses to your status as "lords of creation," beings elevated above mere material existence. As in the case of being called "it," being called a "creature" suggests the lack or loss of a superior personhood. I find no shame, however, in acknowledging my egalitarian relationship with non-human material Being; everything emerges

from the same matrix of possibilities. "Monster" is derived from the Latin noun *monstrum*, "divine portent," itself formed on the root of the verb *monere*, "to warn." It came to refer to living things of anomalous shape or structure, or to fabulous creatures like the sphinx who were composed of strikingly incongruous parts, because the ancients considered the appearance of such beings to be a sign of some impending supernatural event. Monsters, like angels, functioned as messengers and heralds of the extraordinary. They served to announce impending revelation, saying, in effect, "Pay attention; something of profound importance is happening."

Hearken unto me, fellow creatures. I who have dwelt in a form unmatched with my desire, I whose flesh has become an assemblage of incongruous anatomical parts, I who achieve the similitude of a natural body only through an unnatural process, I offer you this warning: the Nature you bedevil me with is a lie. Do not trust it to protect you from what I represent, for it is a fabrication that cloaks the groundlessness of the privilege you seek to maintain for yourself at my expense. You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic Womb has birthed us both. I call upon you to investigate your nature as I have been compelled to confront mine. I challenge you to risk abjection and flourish as well as have I. Heed my words, and you may well discover the seams and sutures in yourself.

## Criticism

In answer to the question he poses in the title of his recent essay, "What is a Monster? (According to Frankenstein)," Peter Brooks suggests that, whatever else a monster might be, it "may also be that which eludes gender definition". Brooks reads Mary Shelley's story of an overreaching scientist and his troublesome creation as an early dissent from the nineteenth-century realist literary tradition, which had not yet attained dominance as a narrative form. He understands Frankenstein to unfold textually through a narrative strategy generated by tension between a visually oriented epistemology, on the one hand, and another approach to knowing the truth of bodies that privileges verbal linguisticity, on the other. Knowing by seeing and knowing by speaking/hearing are gendered, respectively, as masculine and feminine in the critical framework within which Brooks operates. Considered in this context, Shelley's text is informed by—and critiques from a woman's point of view—the contemporary reordering of knowledge brought about by the increasingly compelling truth claims of Enlightenment science. The monster problematizes gender partly through its failure as a viable subject in the visual field; though referred to as "he," it thus offers a feminine, and potentially feminist, resistance to definition by a phallitized scopophilia. The monster accomplishes this resistance by mastering language in order to claim a position as a speaking subject and enact verbally the very subjectivity denied it in the specular realm.

Transsexual monstrosity, however, along with its affect, transgender rage, can never claim quite so secure a means of resistance because of the inability of language to represent the transgendered subject's movement over time between stably gendered positions in a linguistic structure. Our situation effectively reverses the one encountered by Frankenstein's monster. Unlike the monster, we often successfully cite the culture's visual norms of gendered embodiment. This citation becomes a subversive resistance when, through a provisional use of language, we verbally declare the unnaturalness of our claim to the subject positions we nevertheless occupy.

The prospect of a monster with a life and will of its own is a principal source of horror for Frankenstein. The scientist has taken up his project with a specific goal in mind—nothing less than the intent to subject nature completely to his power. He finds a means to accomplish his desires through modern science, whose devotees, it seems to him, “have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they can command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake, and even mock the invisible world with its shadows.... More, far more, will I achieve,” thought Frankenstein. “I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation”. The fruit of his efforts is not, however, what Frankenstein anticipated. The rapture he expected to experience at the awakening of his creature turned immediately to dread. “I saw the dull yellow eyes of the creature open. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin



wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped". The monster escapes, too, and parts company with its maker for a number of years. In the interim, it learns something of its situation in the world, and rather than bless its creator, the monster curses him. The very success of Mary Shelley's scientist in his self-appointed task thus paradoxically proves its futility: rather than demonstrate Frankenstein's power over materiality, the newly enlivened body of the creature attests to its maker's failure to attain the mastery he sought. Frankenstein cannot control the mind and feelings of the monster he makes. It exceeds and refutes his purposes.

My own experience as a transsexual parallels the monster's in this regard. The consciousness shaped by the transsexual body is no more the creation of the science that refigures its flesh than the monster's mind is the creation of Frankenstein. The agenda that produced hormonal and surgical sex reassignment techniques is no less pretentious, and no more noble, than Frankenstein's. Heroic doctors still endeavor to triumph over nature. The scientific discourse that produced sex reassignment techniques is inseparable from the pursuit of immortality through the perfection of the body, the fantasy of total mastery through the transcendence of an absolute limit, and the hubristic desire to create life itself. Its genealogy emerges from a metaphysical quest older than modern science, and its cultural politics are aligned

with a deeply conservative attempt to stabilize gendered identity in service of the naturalized heterosexual order.

None of this, however, precludes medically constructed transsexual bodies from being viable sites of subjectivity. Nor does it guarantee the compliance of subjects thus embodied with the agenda that resulted in a transsexual means of embodiment. As we rise up from the operating tables of our rebirth, we transsexuals are something more, and something other, than the creatures our makers intended us to be. Though medical techniques for sex reassignment are capable of crafting bodies that satisfy the visual and morphological criteria that generate naturalness as their effect, engaging with those very techniques produces a subjective experience that belies the naturalistic effect biomedical technology can achieve. Transsexual embodiment, like the embodiment of the monster, places its subject in an unassimilable, antagonistic, queer relationship to a Nature in which it must nevertheless exist.

Frankenstein's monster articulates its unnatural situation within the natural world with far more sophistication in Shelley's novel than might be expected by those familiar only with the version played by Boris Karloff in James Whale's classic films from the 1930s. Film critic Vito Russo suggests that Whale's interpretation of the monster was influenced by the fact that the director was a closeted gay man at the time he made his Frankenstein films. The pathos he imparted to his monster derived from the experience of his own hidden sexual identity. Monstrous and unnatural in the eyes of the world, but

seeking only the love of his own kind and the acceptance of human society, Whale's creature externalizes and renders visible the nightmarish loneliness and alienation that the closet can breed. But this is not the monster who speaks to me so potently of my own situation as an openly transsexual being. I emulate instead Mary Shelley's literary monster, who is quick-witted, agile, strong, and eloquent.

In the novel, the creature flees Frankenstein's laboratory and hides in the solitude of the Alps, where, by stealthy observation of the people it happens to meet, it gradually acquires a knowledge of language, literature, and the conventions of European society. At first it knows little of its own condition. "I had never yet seen a being resembling me, or who claimed any intercourse with me," the monster notes. "What did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them." Then, in the pocket of the jacket it took as it fled the laboratory, the monster finds Victor Frankenstein's journal, and learns the particulars of its creation. "I sickened as I read," the monster says. "Increase of knowledge only discovered to me what a wretched outcast I was."

Upon learning its history and experiencing the rejection of all to whom it reached out for companionship, the creature's life takes a dark turn. "My feelings were those of rage and revenge," the monster declares. "I, like the arch-fiend, bore a hell within me". It would have been happy to destroy all of Nature, but it settles, finally, on a

more expedient plan to murder systematically all those whom Victor Frankenstein loves. Once Frankenstein realizes that his own abandoned creation is responsible for the deaths of those most dear to him, he retreats in remorse to a mountain village above his native Geneva to ponder his complicity in the crimes the monster has committed. While hiking on the glaciers in the shadow of Mont Blanc, above the village of Chamounix, Frankenstein spies a familiar figure approaching him across the ice. Of course, it is the monster, who demands an audience with its maker. Frankenstein agrees, and the two retire together to a mountaineer's cabin. There, in a monologue that occupies nearly a quarter of the novel, the monster tells Frankenstein the tale of its creation from its own point of view, explaining to him how it became so enraged.

These are my words to Victor Frankenstein, above the village of Chamounix. Like the monster, I could speak of my earliest memories, and how I became aware of my difference from everyone around me. I can describe how I acquired a monstrous identity by taking on the label "transsexual" to name parts of myself that I could not otherwise explain. I, too, have discovered the journals of the men who made my body, and who have made the bodies of creatures like me since the 1930s. I know in intimate detail the history of this recent medical intervention into the enactment of transgendered subjectivity; science seeks to contain and colonize the radical threat posed by a particular transgender strategy of resistance to the coerciveness of gender: physical alteration of the genitals.

I live daily with the consequences of medicine's definition of my identity as an emotional disorder. Through the filter of this official pathologization, the sounds that come out of my mouth can be summarily dismissed as the confused ranting of a diseased mind.

Like the monster, the longer I live in these conditions, the more rage I harbor. Rage colors me as it presses in through the pores of my skin, soaking in until it becomes the blood that courses through my beating heart. It is a rage bred by the necessity of existing in external circumstances that work against my survival. But there is yet another rage within.

### **Journal (February 18, 1993)**

Kim sat between my spread legs, her back to me, her tailbone on the edge of the table. Her left hand gripped my thigh so hard the bruises are still there a week later. Sweating and bellowing, she pushed one last time and the baby finally came. Through my lover's back, against the skin of my own belly, I felt a child move out of another woman's body and into the world. Strangers' hands snatched it away to suction the sticky green meconium from its airways. "It's a girl," somebody said. Paul, I think. Why, just then, did a jumble of dark, unsolicited feelings emerge wordlessly from some quiet back corner of my mind? This moment of miracles was not the time to deal with them. I pushed them back, knowing they were too strong to avoid for long.

After three days we were all exhausted, slightly disappointed that complications had forced us to go to Kaiser instead of having the birth at home. I wonder what the hospital staff thought of our little tribe swarming all over the delivery room: Stephanie, the midwife; Paul, the baby's father; Kim's sister Gwen; my son Wilson and me; and the two other women who make up our family, Anne and Heather. And of course Kim and the baby. She named her Denali, after the mountain in Alaska. I don't think the medical folks had a clue as to how we all considered ourselves to be related to each other. When the labor first began we all took turns shifting between various supporting roles, but as the ordeal progressed we settled into a more stable pattern. I found myself acting as birth coach. Hour after hour, through dozens of sets of contractions, I focused everything on Kim, helping her stay in control of her emotions as she gave herself over to this inexorable process, holding on to her eyes with mine to keep the pain from throwing her out of her body, breathing every breath with her, being a companion. I participated, step by increasingly intimate step, in the ritual transformation of consciousness surrounding her daughter's birth. Birth rituals work to prepare the self for a profound opening, an opening as psychic as it is corporeal. Kim's body brought this ritual process to a dramatic resolution for her, culminating in a visceral, cathartic experience. But my body left me hanging. I had gone on a journey to the point at which my companion had to go on alone, and I needed to finish my trip for myself. To conclude the birth ritual I had participated

in, I needed to move something in me as profound as a whole human life.

I floated home from the hospital, filled with a vital energy that wouldn't discharge. I pattered about until I was alone: my ex had come over for Wilson; Kim and Denali were still at the hospital with Paul; Stephanie had gone, and everyone else was out for a much-needed walk. Finally, in the solitude of my home, I burst apart like a wet paper bag and spilled the emotional contents of my life through the hands I cupped like a sieve over my face. For days, as I had accompanied my partner on her journey, I had been progressively opening myself and preparing to let go of whatever was deepest within. Now everything in me flowed out, moving up from inside and out through my throat, my mouth because these things could never pass between the lips of my cunt. I knew the darkness I had glimpsed earlier would reemerge, but I had vast oceans of feeling to experience before that came up again.

Simple joy in the presence of new life came bubbling out first, wave after wave of it. I was so incredibly happy. I was so in love with Kim, had so much admiration for her strength and courage. I felt pride and excitement about the queer family we were building with Wilson, Anne, Heather, Denali, and whatever babies would follow. We've all tasted an exhilarating possibility in communal living and these nurturing, bonded kinships for which we have no adequate names. We joke about pioneering on a reverse frontier: venturing into the heart of civilization itself to reclaim biological reproduction from

heterosexism and free it for our own uses. We're fierce; in a world of "traditional family values," we need to be.

Sometimes, though, I still mourn the passing of old, more familiar ways. It wasn't too long ago that my ex and I were married, woman and man. That love had been genuine, and the grief over its loss real. I had always wanted intimacy with women more than intimacy with men, and that wanting had always felt queer to me. She needed it to appear straight. The shape of my flesh was a barrier that estranged me from my desire. Like a body without a mouth, I was starving in the midst of plenty. I would not let myself starve, even if what it took to open myself for a deep connectedness cut off the deepest connections I actually had. So I abandoned one life and built this new one. The fact that she and I have begun getting along again, after so much strife between us, makes the bitterness of our separation somewhat sweet. On the day of the birth, this past loss was present even in its partial recovery; held up beside the newfound fullness in my life, it evoked a poignant, hopeful sadness that inundated me.

Frustration and anger soon welled up in abundance. In spite of all I'd accomplished, my identity still felt so tenuous. Every circumstance of life seemed to conspire against me in one vast, composite act of invalidation and erasure. In the body I was born with, I had been invisible as the person I considered myself to be; I had been invisible as a queer while the form of my body made my desires look straight. Now, as a dyke I am invisible among women; as a transsexual, I am invisible among



dykes. As the partner of a new mother, I am often invisible as a transsexual, a woman, and a lesbian. I've lost track of the friends and acquaintances these past nine months who've asked me if I was the father. It shows so dramatically how much they simply don't get what I'm doing with my body. The high price of whatever visible, intelligible, self-representation I have achieved makes the continuing experience of invisibility maddeningly difficult to bear.

The collective assumptions of the naturalized order soon overwhelmed me. Nature exerts such a hegemonic oppression. Suddenly I felt lost and scared, lonely and confused. How did that little Mormon boy from Oklahoma I used to be grow up to be a transsexual leatherdyke in San Francisco with a Berkeley Ph.D.? Keeping my bearings on such a long and strange trip seemed a ludicrous proposition. Home was so far gone behind me it was gone forever, and there was no place to rest. Battered by heavy emotions, a little dazed, I felt the inner walls that protect me dissolve to leave me vulnerable to all that could harm me. I cried, and abandoned myself to abject despair over what gender had done to me.

*Everything's fucked up beyond all recognition. This hurts too much to go on. I came as close today as I'll ever come to giving birth—literally. My body can't do that; I can't even bleed without a wound, and yet I claim to be a woman. How? Why have I always felt that way? I'm such a goddamned freak. I can never be a woman like other women, but I could never be a man. Maybe there really is no place for me in all creation. I'm so tired of this ceaseless movement. I do war with nature.*

*I am alienated from Being. I'm a self-mutilated deformity, a pervert, a mutant, trapped in monstrous flesh. God, I never wanted to be trapped again. I've destroyed myself. I'm falling into darkness I am falling apart.*

*I enter the realm of my dreams. I am underwater, swimming upwards It is dark. I see a shimmering light above me. I break through the plane of the water's surface with my lungs bursting. I suck for air and find only more water. My lungs are full of water. Inside and out I am surrounded by it. Why am I not dead if there is no difference between me and what I am in? There is another surface above me and I swim frantically towards it. I see a shimmering light. I break the plane of the water's surface over and over and over again. This water annihilates me. I cannot be, and yet—an excruciating impossibility—I am. I will do anything not to be here.*

*I will swim forever.*

*I will die for eternity.*

*I will learn to breathe water.*

*I will become the water.*

*If I cannot change my situation I will change myself.*

*In this act of magical transformation*

*I recognize myself again.*

*I am groundless and boundless movement.*

*I am a furious flow.*

*I am one with the darkness and the wet.*

*And I am enraged.*

*Here at last is the chaos I held at bay.*

*Here at last is my strength.*

I am not the water—  
I am the wave,  
and rage  
is the force that moves me.

Rage  
gives me back my body  
as its own fluid medium.

Rage  
punches a hole in water  
around which I coalesce  
to allow the flow to come through me.

Rage  
constitutes me in my primal form.  
It throws my head back  
pulls my lips back over my teeth  
opens my throat  
and rears me up to howl: and no sound dilutes  
the pure quality of my rage.

No sound  
exists  
in this place without language  
my rage is a silent raving.

Rage  
throws me back at last  
into this mundane reality  
in this transfigured flesh  
that aligns me with the power of my Being.

In birthing my rage,  
my rage has rebirthed me.

## Theory

A formal disjunction seems particularly appropriate at this moment because the affect I seek to examine critically, what I've termed "transgender rage," emerges from the interstices of discursive practices and at the collapse of generic categories. The rage itself is generated by the subject's situation in a field governed by the unstable but indissoluble relationship between language and materiality, a situation in which language organizes and brings into signification matter that simultaneously eludes definitive representation and demands its own perpetual rearticulation in symbolic terms. Within this dynamic field the subject must constantly police the boundary constructed by its own founding in order to maintain the fictions of "inside" and "outside" against a regime of signification/materialization whose intrinsic instability produces the rupture of subjective boundaries as one of its regular features. The affect of rage as I seek to define it is located at the margin of subjectivity and the limit of signification. It originates in recognition of the fact that the "outsideness" of a materiality that perpetually violates the foreclosure of subjective space within a symbolic order is also necessarily "inside" the subject as grounds for the materialization of its body and the formation of its bodily ego.

This primary rage becomes specifically transgender rage when the inability to foreclose the subject occurs through a failure to satisfy norms of gendered embodiment. Transgender rage is the subjective experience of

being compelled to transgress what Judith Butler has referred to as the highly gendered regulatory schemata that determine the viability of bodies, of being compelled to enter a "domain of abjected bodies, a field of deformation" that in its unlivability encompasses and constitutes the realm of legitimate subjectivity. Transgender rage is a queer fury, an emotional response to conditions in which it becomes imperative to take up, for the sake of one's own continued survival as a subject, a set of practices that precipitates one's exclusion from a naturalized order of existence that seeks to maintain itself as the only possible basis for being a subject. However, by mobilizing gendered identities and rendering them provisional, open to strategic development and occupation, this rage enables the establishment of subjects in new modes, regulated by different codes of intelligibility. Transgender rage furnishes a means for disidentification with compulsorily assigned subject positions. It makes the transition from one gendered subject position to another possible by using the impossibility of complete subjective foreclosure to organize an outside force as an inside drive, and vice versa. Through the operation of rage, the stigma itself becomes the source of transformative power.

I want to stop and theorize at this particular moment in the text because in the lived moment of being thrown back from a state of abjection in the aftermath of my lover's daughter's birth, I immediately began telling myself a story to explain my experience. I started theorizing, using all the conceptual tools my education had put at my disposal. Other true stories of those events

could undoubtedly be told, but upon my return I knew for a fact what lit the fuse to my rage in the hospital delivery room. It was the non-consensuality of the baby's gendering. You see, I told myself, wiping snot off my face with a shirt sleeve, bodies are rendered meaningful only through some culturally and historically specific mode of grasping their physicality that transforms the flesh into a useful artifact. Gendering is the initial step in this transformation, inseparable from the process of forming an identity by means of which we're fitted to a system of exchange in a heterosexual economy. Authority seizes upon specific material qualities of the flesh, particularly the genitals, as outward indication of future reproductive potential, constructs this flesh as a sign, and reads it to enculturate the body. Gender attribution is compulsory; it codes and deploys our bodies in ways that materially affect us, yet we choose neither our marks nor the meanings they carry. This was the act accomplished between the beginning and the end of that short sentence in the delivery room: "It's a girl." This was the act that recalled all the anguish of my own struggles with gender. But this was also the act that enjoined my complicity in the non-consensual gendering of another. A gendering violence is the founding condition of human subjectivity; having a gender is the tribal tattoo that makes one's personhood cognizable. I stood for a moment between the pains of two violations, the mark of gender and the unlivability of its absence. Could I say which one was worse? Or could I only say which one I felt could best be survived?

How can finding one's self prostrate and powerless in the presence of the Law of the Father not produce an unutterable rage? What difference does it make if the father in this instance was a pierced, tattooed, purple-haired punk fag anarchist who helped his dyke friend get pregnant? Phallogocentric language, not its particular speaker, is the scalpel that defines our flesh. I defy that Law in my refusal to abide by its original decree of my gender. Though I cannot escape its power, I can move through its medium. Perhaps if I move furiously enough, I can deform it in my passing to leave a trace of my rage. I can embrace it with a vengeance to rename myself, declare my transsexuality, and gain access to the means of my legible reinscription. Though I may not hold the stylus myself, I can move beneath it for my own deep self-sustaining pleasures.

To encounter the transsexual body, to apprehend a transgendered consciousness articulating itself, is to risk a revelation of the constructedness of the natural order. Confronting the implications of this constructedness can summon up all the violation, loss, and separation inflicted by the gendering process that sustains the illusion of naturalness. My transsexual body literalizes this abstract violence.

As the bearers of this disquieting news, we transsexuals often suffer for the pain of others, but we do not willingly abide the rage of others directed against us. And we do have something else to say, if you will but listen to the monsters: the possibility of meaningful agency and action exists, even within fields of domina-

tion that bring about the universal cultural rape of all flesh. Be forewarned, however, that taking up this task will remake you in the process.

By speaking as a monster in my personal voice, by using the dark, watery images of Romanticism and lapsing occasionally into its brooding cadences and grandiose postures, I employ the same literary techniques Mary Shelley used to elicit sympathy for her scientist's creation. Like that creature, I assert my worth as a monster in spite of the conditions my monstrosity requires me to face, and redefine a life worth living. I have asked the Miltonic questions Shelley poses in the epigraph of her novel: "Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay to mould me man? Did I solicit thee from darkness to promote me?" With one voice, her monster and I answer "no" without debasing ourselves, for we have done the hard work of constituting ourselves on our own terms, against the natural order. Though we forego the privilege of naturalness, we are not deterred, for we ally ourselves instead with the chaos and blackness from which Nature itself spills forth.<sup>1</sup>

If this is your path, as it is mine, let me offer whatever solace you may find in this monstrous benediction: May you discover the enlivening power of darkness within

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<sup>1</sup> Although I mean "chaos" here in its general sense, it is interesting to speculate about the potential application of scientific chaos theory to model the emergence of stable structures of gendered identities out of the unstable matrix of material attributes, and on the production of proliferating gender identities from a relatively simple set of gendering procedures.



***My Words to Victor Frankenstein...***

yourself. May it nourish your rage. May your rage inform your actions, and your actions transform you as you struggle to transform your world.



# The Point is Not to Interpret Whiteness but to Abolish It

x Noel Ignatiev

**N**ow that White Studies has become an academic industry, with its own dissertation mill, conference, publications, and no doubt soon its junior faculty, it is time for the abolitionists to declare where they stand in relation to it. Abolitionism is first of all a political project: the abolitionists study whiteness in order to abolish it.

Various commentators have stated that their aim is to identify and preserve a positive white identity. Abolitionists deny the existence of a positive white identity. We at Race Traitor, the journal with which I am associated, have asked some of those who think whiteness contains positive elements to indicate what they are. We are still waiting for an answer. Until we get one, we will take our stand with David Roediger, who has insisted that whiteness is not merely oppressive and false, it is nothing but oppressive and false. As James Baldwin said, "So long as you think you are white, there is no hope for you."

Whiteness is not a culture. There is Irish culture and Italian culture and American culture: the latter, as Albert Murray pointed out, a mixture of the Yankee, the Indian, and the Negro (with a pinch of ethnic salt); there is youth culture and drug culture and queer culture; but there is no such thing as white culture. Whiteness has nothing to do with culture and everything to do with social position. It is nothing but a reflection of privilege, and exists for no reason other than to defend it. Without the privileges attached to it, the white race would not exist, and the white skin would have no more social significance than big feet.

Before the advocates of positive whiteness remind us of the oppression of the white poor, let me say that we have never denied it. The United States, like every capitalist society, is composed of masters and slaves. The problem is that many of the slaves think they are part of the master class because they partake of the privileges of the white skin. We cannot say it too often: whiteness does not exempt people from exploitation, it reconciles them to it. It is for those who have nothing else.

However exploited the poor whites of this country, they are not direct victims of racial oppression, and "white trash" is not a term of racial degradation analogous to the various epithets commonly applied to black people; in fact, the poor whites are the objects of race privilege, which ties them to their masters more firmly than did the arrows of Vulcan bind Prometheus to the rock. Not long ago there was an incident in Boston in which a well-dressed black man hailed a taxi and directed

the driver to take him to Roxbury, a black district. The white cab driver refused, and when the man insisted she take him or call someone who would, as the law provided, she called her boyfriend, also a cabdriver, on the car radio, who showed up, dragged the black man out of the cab and called him a "nigger." The black man turned out to be a city councilman. The case was unusual only in that it made the papers. Either America is a very democratic country, where cab drivers beat up city councilmen with impunity, or the privileges of whiteness reach far down into the ranks of the laboring class.

We are anti-white, but we are not in general against the people who are called white. Those for whom the distinction is too subtle are advised to read the speeches of Malcolm X. No one ever spoke more harshly and critically to black people, and no one ever loved them more. It is no part of love to flatter and withhold from people what they need to know. President Samora Machel of Mozambique pointed out that his people had to die as tribes in order to be born as a nation. Similar things were said at the time Afro-Americans in mass rejected the term "Negro" in favor of "black." We seek to draw upon that tradition, as well as we do not deny it—an even older tradition, which declares that a person must die so that he or she can be born again. We hold that so-called whites must cease to exist as whites in order to realize themselves as something else; to put it another way: white people must commit suicide as whites in order to come alive as workers, or youth, or women, or whatever other identity can induce them to change from the miserable,

petulant, subordinated creatures they now are into freely associated, fully developed human subjects.

The white race is neither a biological nor a cultural formation; it is a strategy for securing to some an advantage in a competitive society. It has held down more whites than blacks. Abolitionism is also a strategy: its aim is not racial harmony but class war. By attacking whiteness, the abolitionists seek to undermine the main pillar of capitalist rule in this country.

If abolitionism is distinct from White Studies, it is also distinct from what is called "anti-racism." There now exist a number of publications, organizing programs and research centers that focus their energies on identifying and opposing individuals and groups they call "racist." Sometimes they share information and collaborate with official state agencies. We stand apart from that tendency. In our view, any "anti-racist" work that does not entail opposition to the state reinforces the authority of the state, which is the most important agency in maintaining racial oppression.

Just as the capitalist system is not a capitalist plot, so racial oppression is not the work of "racists." It is maintained by the principal institutions of society, including the schools (which define "excellence"), the labor market (which defines "employment"), the legal system (which defines "crime"), the welfare system (which defines "poverty"), the medical industry (which defines "health"), and the family (which defines "kinship"). Many of these institutions are administered by people who would be offended if accused of complicity with racial

oppression. It is reinforced by reform programs that address problems traditionally of concern to the "left"—for example, federal housing loan guarantees. The simple fact is that the public schools and the welfare departments are doing more harm to black children than all the "racist" groups combined.

The abolitionists seek to abolish the white race. How can this be done? We must admit that we do not know exactly, but a look at history will be instructive.

When William Lloyd Garrison and the original abolitionists began their work, slavery was the law of the land, and behind the law stood the entire machinery of government, including the courts, the army, and even the post office, which banned antislavery literature from Southern mail. The slave states controlled the Senate and Presidency, and Congress refused even to accept petitions relating to slavery. Most northerners considered slavery unjust, but their opposition to it was purely nominal. However much they disapproved of it, the majority "went along," as majorities normally do, rather than risk the ordinary comforts of their lives, meager as they were.

The weak point of the slave system was that it required the collaboration of the entire country, for without the support of the "loyal citizens" of Massachusetts, the slaveholders of South Carolina could not keep their laborers in bondage (just as today without the support of the law-abiding, race discrimination could not be enforced). The abolitionists set to work to break up the national consensus. Wendell Phillips declared that if he could establish Massachusetts as a sanctuary for the fugi-

tive, he could bring down slavery. They sought to nullify the fugitive slave law, which enlisted the northern population directly in enforcing slavery. They encouraged and took part in attempts to rescue fugitives—not, it must be pointed out, from the slaveholders, but from the Law. In all of this activity, the black population took the lead. The concentrated expression of the abolitionist strategy was the slogan, “No Union with Slaveholders,” which was not, as has often been charged, an attempt to maintain their moral purity but an effort to break up the Union in order to establish a liberated zone adjacent to the slave states. It was a strategy that would later come to be known as dual power, and neither Garrison’s pacifism nor his failure to develop a general critique of the capitalist system should blind us to its revolutionary character.

John Brown’s attack on Harpers Ferry was not an aberration but the logical application of the abolitionist strategy. The slaveholders retaliated for it by demanding new guarantees of loyalty from the federal government, including a stronger fugitive slave law, reopening of the slave trade, and especially the expansion of slavery into the territories.

As Phillips said, Brown “startled the South into madness,” precipitating a situation where people were forced to choose between abolition and the domination of the country as a whole by the slaveholders. It was not the abolitionists but the slaveholders who, by the arrogance of their demands, compelled the north to resist. From Harpers’ Ferry, each step led inexorably to the next:



Southern bullying, Lincoln's election, secession, war, blacks as laborers, soldiers, citizens, voters. The war that began with not one person in a hundred foreseeing the end of slavery was transformed within two years into an anti-slavery war, and a great army marched through the land singing, "As He died to make men holy, let us fight to make men free."

The course of events can never be predicted in other than the broadest outline, but in the essentials, history followed the path charted by the abolitionists. As they foresaw, it was necessary to break up the Union in order to reconstitute it without slavery. When South Carolina announced its secession, Wendell Phillips was forced into hiding to escape the Boston mob that blamed him; two years later he was invited to address Congress on how to win the war. He recommended two measures, both of which were soon implemented: (1) declare the war an anti-slavery war; (2) enlist black soldiers. Has ever a revolutionary been more thoroughly vindicated by history?

The hostility of white laborers toward abolitionism, and their failure to develop a labor abolitionism, was not, as some have claimed, an expression of working-class resentment of bourgeois philanthropists but the reflection of their refusal to view themselves as part of a class with the slaves—just as a century later white labor opposition to school integration showed that the laborers viewed themselves more as whites than as proletarians.

The white race is a club. Certain people are enrolled in it at birth, without their consent, and brought up accord-

ing to its rules. For the most part they go through life accepting the privileges of membership, without reflecting on the costs. Others, usually new arrivals in the country, pass through a probationary period before "earning" membership; they are necessarily more conscious of their racial standing.

The white club does not require that all members be strong advocates of white supremacy, merely that they defer to the prejudices of others. It is based on one huge assumption: that all those who look white are, whatever their reservations, fundamentally loyal to it.

For an example of how the club works, take the cops. The natural attitude of the police toward the exploited is hostility. All over the world cops beat up poor people; that is their job, and it has nothing to do with color. What is unusual and has to be accounted for is not why they beat up black people but why they don't normally beat up propertyless whites. It works this way: the cops look at a person and then decide on the basis of color whether that person is loyal to the system they are sworn to serve and protect. They don't stop to think if the black person whose head they are whipping is an enemy; they assume it. It does not matter if the victim goes to work every day, pays his taxes and crosses only on the green. Occasionally they bust an outstanding and prominent black person, and the poor whites cheer the event, because it confirms them in their conviction that they are superior to any black person who walks the earth.

On the other hand, the cops don't know for sure if the white person to whom they give a break is loyal to

them; they assume it. The non-beating of poor whites is time off for good behavior and an assurance of future cooperation. Their color exempts them to some degree from the criminal class, which is how the entire working class was defined before the invention of race and is still treated in those parts of the world where race, or some functional equivalent, does not exist as a social category. It is a cheap way of buying some people's loyalty to a social system that exploits them.

What if the police couldn't tell a loyal person just by color? What if there were enough people around who looked white but were really enemies of official society so that the cops couldn't tell whom to beat and whom to let off? What would they do then? They would begin to "enforce the law impartially," as the liberals say, beating only those who "deserve" it. But, as Anatole France noted, the law, in its majestic equality, forbids both rich and poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread. The standard that normally governs police behavior is wealth and its external manifestations dress, speech, etc. At the present time, the class bias of the law is partially repressed by racial considerations; the removal of those considerations would give it free rein. Whites who are poor would find themselves on the receiving end of police justice as black people now do.

The effect on their consciousness and behavior is predictable. That is not to say that everyone now regarded as "white" would suddenly become a progressive, any more than everyone now "black" is. But with color no longer serving as a handy guide for the distribution of penalties

and rewards, European-Americans of the downtrodden class would at last be compelled to face with sober senses their real condition of life and their relations with humankind. It would be the end of race.

When it comes to abolishing the white race, the task is not to win over more whites to oppose "racism"; there are "antiracists" enough already to do the job. The task is to gather together a minority determined to make it impossible for anyone to be white. It is a strategy of creative provocation, like Wendell Phillips advocated and John Brown carried out.

What would the determined minority have to do? They would have to break the laws of whiteness so flagrantly as to destroy the myth of white unanimity. What would it mean to break the rules of whiteness? It would mean responding to every manifestation of white supremacy as if it were directed against them. On the individual level, it would mean, for instance, responding to an anti-black remark by asking, What makes you think I'm white? On the collective level, it would mean confronting the institutions that reproduce race.

The abolitionists oppose all forms of segregation in the schools, including tracking by "merit," they oppose all mechanisms that favor whites in the job market, including labor unions when necessary, and they oppose the police and courts, which define black people as a criminal class. They not merely oppose these things, but seek to disrupt their functioning. They reject in advance no means of attaining their goal; even when combating "racist" groups, they act in ways that are offensive to offi-

cial institutions. The willingness to go beyond socially acceptable "anti-racism" is the dividing line between "good whites" and traitors to the white race.

A traitor to the white race is someone who is nominally classified as white but who defies white rules so strenuously as to jeopardize his or her ability to draw upon the privileges of whiteness. The abolitionists recognize that no "white" can individually escape from the privileges of whiteness. The white club does not like to surrender a single member, so that even those who step out of it in one situation can hardly avoid stepping back in later, if for no other reason than the assumptions of others—unless, like John Brown, they have the good fortune to be hanged before that can happen. But they also understand that when there comes into being a critical mass of people who look white but do not act white—people who might be called "reverse oreos"—the white race will undergo fission, and former whites, born again, will be able to take part, together with others, in building a new human community.



# Romancing the Transgender Native

Rethinking the Use of the  
“Third Gender” Concept

x Evan B. Towle and Lynn Marie Morgan

**T**his essay offers a critical examination of how “third gender” concepts are used in popular American writing by and about transgendered people. Over the past decade there has been an increase in the popular use of cross-cultural examples to provide legitimacy to transgender movements in the United States. Descriptions of the “transgender native” are often drawn from ethnographic portrayals of gender variation written by anthropologists for American audiences. Introductory anthropology textbooks commonly cite the *hijra* of India, the *berdache* of native North America, the *xanith* of the Arabian peninsula, the female husbands of western Africa, and the Sambia (a pseudonym) boys of Papua New Guinea who engage in “semen transactions.” Such examples are often glossed together under the “third gender” rubric.

“Third gender” roles and practices were once regarded by most Western readers as *exotica*, with little relevance to our “modern” societies. These days, however, anthropological accounts of “third gender” variation are used frequently by popular writers such as Kate Bornstein and Leslie Feinberg, and by contributors to periodicals such as *Transgender Tapestry* and *Transsexual News Telegraph*, to buttress the argument that Western binary gender systems are neither universal nor innate. Paradoxically, this rise in popularity comes just when some anthropologists are finding serious fault with the “third gender” concept. This essay explores its appeal as well as recent critiques of it. We illustrate the critiques with excerpts taken from several popular academic and nonacademic works whose authors write about transgender theories and experiences, and we point out some of the analytic paradoxes, contradictions, and dangers inherent in invoking the transgender native.

We come to this discussion from anthropological experience as well as from personal transsexual experience. As the self-conscious subjects of our own inquiry into how anthropologists and trans-identified individuals alike use transgender native models, we are ultimately invested in ensuring careful, responsible representation of individuals outside our culture. We are simultaneously committed to supporting transgender/transsexual scholarship, representation, and activism. If a common complaint among trans individuals is that their lives and identities are violated and misrepresented for the goals of scholarship, then it behooves us to make sure that we



do not commit the same offense against others for the goal of political advancement.

[...]

Disagreements among anthropologists about using “third gender” concepts show that the issue need not be who holds “better” or “more accurate” or “more significant” knowledge. Anthropological knowledge is based on the conviction that examining a situation from slightly outside it can expose meanings that the participants might miss. (As Bornstein quotes an anonymous source, “I’m not sure who discovered water, but I’m pretty sure it wasn’t a fish.”)<sup>1</sup> And “member” knowledge is based on the conviction that members have a right to represent themselves, both to inspire others and to resist hostile and repressive political forces. But the politics of membership are complex. Do transgender natives, speaking for themselves, merit a place in the literature? What if they elect to be silent or invisible? Ideally, knowledge circulates freely and continually among scholars, laypeople, policy makers, activists, and theorists, any or all of whom might belong to or ally themselves with member communities. A contradiction emerges, however, when members appropriate scholarly accounts for their own ends and then deny others a voice, or vice versa. The argument about dominant knowledge might better address how knowledge is produced, deployed, and consumed within a given set of power relations.

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Bornstein, *My Gender Workbook: How to Become a Real Man, a Real Woman, the Real You, or Something Else Entirely*.

Despite our commitment to the value of ethnographic comparison, we are skeptical of the utility of the generic transgender native in the popular literature. Understanding of other cultures is not enhanced by broad, decontextualized transcultural surveys or by accounts that encourage readers to take cultural features out of context. We do not believe that the goal of dismantling gender oppression and the binary gender system should seek legitimacy in narrow or sanctified appropriations of non-Western cultural histories or practices, although this method is used both in anthropology and in the popular literature. Rather, analysis should center on the meanings, ideologies, disputes, and practices that situate gender dynamics in specific historical and cultural contexts.

### **A Brief History of "Third Gender" Concepts in Anthropology**

One longtime goal of anthropologists has been to document the diversity and meanings of human cultural practices. Historically, anthropology has been the Western discipline with the greatest access and sensitivity to non-Western cultural practices and with the greatest authority in writing about them. Well before Michel Foucault restored historicity to the study of sexuality, anthropologists had provided ethnographic accounts of gender practices in various cultures.<sup>2</sup> One of the most

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<sup>2</sup> For a review of the literature see Weston, "Lesbian/Gay Studies."

important analytic contributions was the sex/gender distinction, which made it possible to argue that biological features did not “naturally” correspond to sexual practice, sexual orientation, gender identity, or sexual desire. The sex/gender distinction itself has been confounded and criticized over the years, with critics arguing that anatomical sex as well as sexuality and gender can be socially constructed.<sup>3</sup> Subsequent theories have resulted in an increasingly complex understanding of the intersections among biology, identity, performance, power, and practice.

Anthropologists make an important contribution to contemporary discussions of gender by pointing out that the two-gender system is neither innate nor universal. For many transgender activists and their allies, the cross-cultural perspective provides a welcome alternative to the heavily psychologized, medicalized, and moralistic analyses previously invoked in the West to explain gender variation. Using cross-cultural comparison—a tried-and-true strategy for deconstructing and challenging many supposed cultural truths—anthropologists have argued against the biological basis of race, just as they have against the biological basis of gender: “What began as a critique of universals and a search for factors of cross-cultural comparison has become instead a critical inquiry into the assumptions of Western scientific models of sexuality and folk ideologies of the classi-

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<sup>3</sup> See Anne Fausto-Sterling.

fication of individuals."<sup>4</sup> Anthropologists demonstrate the cultural logic of seemingly aberrant practices, showing, for example, how female-to-female marriage may function to perpetuate patrilineal social organization or how performing fellatio can be interpreted to promote the virility of young men.<sup>5</sup> Such examples provide ethnographic evidence to people working to challenge binary gender-based social arrangements in the West.

In recent years, the term transgender has sometimes replaced third gender to designate "gender roles and practices which are not definable in terms of local understandings of gender normativity," but the substitution has not necessarily rectified the attendant epistemological problems.<sup>6</sup> David Valentine argues that the concept of "transgenderism," and the corresponding social movements, arose recently and rapidly in the United States out of specific, identifiable developments in the cultural politics of sexuality. The birth of transgenderism responded to the sentiment among gay and lesbian rights advocates that one's sexual orientation does not reflect on one's gender; that is, "you can be a man and desire a man... without any implications for your gender identity as a man," and the same is true if you are a woman. This envisioning of gays and lesbians, who are to be seen

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<sup>4</sup> Herdt, "Introduction: Third Sexes and Third Genders."

<sup>5</sup> Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*; Herdt, *Guardians of the Flutes*.

<sup>6</sup> David Valentine, "'I Know What I Am': The Category 'Transgender' in the Construction of Contemporary U.S. American Conceptions of Gender and Sexuality".

as identical to heterosexuals in all ways but private sexual practices, removed many individuals—drag queens, butch lesbians, cross-dressers, and others—from the categories “gay” and “lesbian.” These individuals, who are different from heterosexual and gender-normative people in other, possibly more conspicuous ways, are left to assume the category “transgender(ed)”.

The word *transgender* is a trendy signifier. But Valentine argues that it should not be applied incautiously to nonnormative gender practices elsewhere...

Anthropologists are not immune from the temptation to use the word transgender as a shorthand gloss. Despite the care they often take to “mark out a cultural specificity to the gender and sexual practices of their informants and to avoid ‘gay’ in the USAmerican or European sense,” Valentine points out that they sometimes sweep a variety of nonnormative gender identities under the heading of “transgender”....

Valentine is interested—and deeply implicated, by his own admission—in the ways that anthropologists are complicit in creating the very categories they seek to understand and deconstruct. The appearance of selected books by anthropologists on transgender reading lists is a way for “transgender-identified people [to] draw on such anthropological texts to talk about themselves and others as transgender.”<sup>7</sup> Yet certain anthropological texts are inevitably passed over, while others find an avid readership. Valentine suspects that the key to

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

the popularity of these texts is the extent to which the ethnography in them seems to condone or reinforce, if it does not actively contest, “the categories of [U.S.-based] identity politics”. For example, ethnographic accounts of Native American two-spirit (formerly *berdache*) peoples such as Roscoe’s Zuni Man-Woman and Sabine Lang’s *Men As Women, Women As Men* may resonate with a U.S. readership because they are consistent with social movements that promote gay and transgender rights, autonomy, and self-determination for first-nation peoples, as well as New Age spirituality. The phenomenon of appropriation shows how widely anthropologists are recruited (sometimes willingly and deliberately, sometimes unknowingly) to participate in projects of identity formation. By the same token, when anthropologists use the “transgender” concept to discuss “non-normative genders and sexualities cross-culturally,” they “are complicit with those activists who imagine ‘transgender’ as a universal category of gender difference”.

[...]

In spite of the obvious imaginative and political potential created by the awareness of gender diversity across cultures, several flaws emerge in the utilization of “third gender” concepts. In the remainder of this essay we enumerate and illustrate these flaws, which we organize as follows:

1. The primordial location. “Third gender” societies are accorded a primordial, foundational location in

our thinking, as though they underlay or predated Western gender formulations.

2. Reductionism and exclusionism. The “third gender” concept lumps all nonnormative gender variations into one category, limiting our understandings of the range and diversity of gender ideologies and practices.
3. Typological errors. By identifying “third gender” types, the concept ignores the diversity of experience within categories and glosses over the often contentious processes through which social formations, relations, and hierarchies are created, lived, negotiated, and changed.
4. Inconsistent use of the culture concept. Does culture facilitate or delimit social change?
5. The West versus the rest. “Third gender” concepts may isolate the West, for analytic purposes, from other societies, thereby reinforcing our ethnocentric assumptions; inhibiting us from forging alliances across national or cultural borders; and inducing us to focus on diversity between cultures while ignoring diversity, or the complexities of social change, within them.

[...]

The reader will find the figure of the transgender native woven throughout the discussion. This figure is a

literary trope often used in transgender testimonial writing to invoke longing for the other. It serves in several texts as a generic, seductive figure who lives an idealized existence in a utopian place and time. The transgender native is portrayed not as a normal, fallible human being living within the gender constraints of his or her own society but as an appealing, exalted, transcendent being (often a hero or healer). He or she can be imagined (e.g., as a transgender ancestor), discovered (e.g., on a trip to a foreign land), enacted (e.g., as one's own persona), or simply cited to justify one's own argument. The transgender native surfaces in several of the following examples as an object of desire.

## Conclusion

[...] Transgender and transsexual activists need not invoke mythical gender warriors to support the idea that individuals should be free to express and embody themselves as they see fit or to justify their existence. (If warriors are sought, they are here.) Nor do they need to look elsewhere for acceptance. (Acceptance comes through understanding and mutual respect.) The potential that trans bodies and trans lives have to shed light on normative gender relations is immense. Who else has the opportunity to live these questions: What is the difference between women and men? Through what acts are gender identities communicated? What does failing to communicate a gender identity mean for social interactions? [...]



# The Coloniality of Gender

x María Lugones

[...]

## The Colonial/Modern Gender System

**U**nderstanding the place of gender in pre-colonial societies is pivotal to understanding the nature and scope of changes in the social structure that the processes constituting colonial/modern Eurocentered capitalism imposed. Those changes were introduced through slow, discontinuous, and heterogenous processes that violently inferiorized colonized women. The gender system introduced was one thoroughly informed through the coloniality of power. Understanding the place of gender in pre-colonial societies is also pivotal in understanding the extent and importance of the gender system in disintegrating communal relations, egalitarian relations, ritual thinking, collective decision making, collective authority, and economies. And thus in understanding the extent to which the imposition of this gender system was as constitutive of the coloniality of power as the coloniality of power was constitutive of it. The logic of the

relation between them is of mutual constitution. But it should be clear by now that the colonial, modern, gender system cannot exist without the coloniality of power, since the classification of the population in terms of race is a necessary condition of its possibility.

To think the scope of the gender system of Euro-centered global capitalism it is necessary to understand the extent to which the *very process of narrowing* of the concept of gender to the control of sex, its resources, and products constitutes gender domination. To understand this narrowing and to understand the intermeshing of racialization and gendering, it is important to think whether the social arrangements prior to colonization regarding the "sexes" gave differential meaning to them across all areas of existence. That enables us to see whether control over labor, subjectivity/intersubjectivity, collective authority, sex—Quijano's "areas of existence"—were themselves gendered. Given the coloniality of power, I think we can also say that having a "dark" and a "light side" is characteristic of the co-construction of the coloniality of power and the colonial/modern gender system. Considering critically both biological dimorphism and the position that gender socially constructs biological sex is pivotal to understand the scope, depth, and characteristics of the colonial/modern gender system. The sense is that the reduction of gender to the private, to control over sex and its resources and products is a matter of ideology, of the cognitive production of modernity that understood race as gendered and gender as raced in particularly differential ways for

Europeans/"whites" and colonized/"non-white" peoples. Race is no more mythical and fictional than gender, both powerful fictions.

In the development of twentieth century feminisms, the connection between gender, class, heterosexuality as racialized was not made explicit. That feminism centered its struggle and its ways of knowing and theorizing against a characterization of women as fragile, weak in both body and mind, secluded in the private, and sexually passive. But it did not bring to consciousness that those characteristics only constructed white bourgeois womanhood. Indeed, beginning from that characterization, white bourgeois feminists theorized white womanhood as if all women were white.

It is part of their history that only white bourgeois women have consistently counted as women so described in the West. Females excluded from that description were not just their subordinates. They were also understood to be animals in a sense that went further than the identification of white women with nature, infants, and small animals. They were understood as animals in the deep sense of "without gender," sexually marked as female, but without the characteristics of femininity. Women racialized as inferior were turned from animals into various modified versions of "women" as it fit the processes of Eurocentered global capitalism. Thus heterosexual rape of Indian women, African slave women, coexisted with concubinage, as well as with the imposition of the heterosexual understanding of gender relations among the colonized—when and as it suited Eu-

rocentered, global capitalism, and heterosexual domination of white women. But it is clear from the work of Oyewumi and Allen that there was no extension of the status of white women to colonized women even when they were turned into similes of bourgeois white women. Colonized females got the inferior status of gendering as women, without any of the privileges accompanying that status for white bourgeois women. Though, the history presented by Oyewumi and Allen should make clear to white bourgeois women that their status is much inferior to that of Native American women and Yoruba women before colonization. Oyewumi and Allen also make clear that the egalitarian understanding of the relation between anafemales, anamales, and "third" gender people has not left the imagination nor the practices of Native Americans and Yoruba. But these are matters of resistance to domination.

Erasing any history, including oral history, of the relation of white to non-white women, white feminism wrote white women large. Even though historically and contemporarily white bourgeois women knew perfectly well how to orient themselves in an organization of life that pitted them for very different treatment than non-white or working class women. White feminist struggle became one against the positions, roles, stereotypes, traits, desires imposed on white bourgeois women's subordination. No one else's gender oppression was countenanced. They understood women as inhabiting white bodies but did not bring that racial qualification to articulation or clear awareness. That is, they did not un-

derstand themselves in intersectional terms, at the intersection of race, gender, and other forceful marks of subjection or domination. Because they did not perceive these deep differences they did not see a need for creating coalitions. They presumed a sisterhood, a bond given with the subjection of gender.

Historically, the characterization of white European women as fragile and sexually passive opposed them to non-white, colonized women, including women slaves, who were characterized along a gamut of sexual aggression and perversion, and as strong enough to do any sort of labor.

This gender system congeals as Europe advances the colonial project(s). It begins to take shape during the Spanish and Portuguese colonial adventures and becomes full blown in late modernity. The gender system has a "light" and a "dark" side. The light side constructs gender and gender relations hegemonic ally. It only orders the lives of white bourgeois men and women, and it constitutes the modern/colonial meaning of "men" and "women." Sexual purity and passivity are crucial characteristics of the white bourgeois females who reproduce the class, and the colonial, and racial standing of bourgeois, white men. But equally important is the banning of white bourgeois women from the sphere of collective authority, from the production of knowledge, from most of control over the means of production. Weakness of mind and body are important in the reduction and seclusion of white bourgeois women from most domains of life, most areas of human existence. The gender system is

heterosexualist, as heterosexuality permeates racialized patriarchal control over production, including knowledge production, and over collective authority. Heterosexuality is both compulsory and perverse among white bourgeois men and women since the arrangement does significant violence to the powers and rights of white bourgeois women and it serves to reproduce control over production and White bourgeois women are inducted into this reduction through bounded sexual access.

The “dark” side of the gender system was and is thoroughly violent. We have begun to see the deep reductions of anamales, anafemales, and “third” genders from their ubiquitous participation in ritual, decision making, economics; their reduction to animality, to forced sex with white colonizers, to such deep labor exploitation that often people died working. Quijano tells us

The vast Indian genocide of the first decades of colonization was not caused, in the main, by the violence of the conquest, nor by the diseases that the conquerors carried. Rather it was due to the fact that the Indians were used as throwaway labor, forced to work till death.

I want to mark the connection between the work that I am referencing here as I introduce the modern colonial gender system’s “dark” side, and Quijano’s coloniality of power. Unlike white feminists who have not focused on colonialism, these theorists very much see the differential construction of gender along racial lines. To

some extent these theorists understand “gender” in a wider sense than Quijano, thus they think not only of control over sex, its resources and products, but also of labor as both racialized and gendered. That is, they see an articulation between labor, sex, and the coloniality of power. Oyewumi and Allen help us realize the full extent of the reach of the colonial/modern gender system into the construction of collective authority, all aspects of the relation between capital and labor, and the construction of knowledge.

There is important work done and to be done in detailing the dark and light sides of what I am calling the “modern colonial gender system.” In introducing this arrangements in very large strokes, I mean to begin a conversation and a project of collaborative, participatory, research and popular education to begin to see in its details the long sense of the processes of the colonial/gender system enmeshed in the coloniality of power into the present, to uncover collaboration, and to call each other to reject it in its various guises as we recommit to communal integrity in a liberatory direction. We need to understand the organization of the social so as to make visible our collaboration with systematic racialized gender violence, so as to come to an inevitable recognition of it in our maps of reality.





# Communization and the Abolition of Gender

Maya Gonzalez

Present day civilization makes it plain that it will only permit sexual relationships on the basis of a solitary, indissoluble bond between one man and one woman, and that it does not like sexuality as a source of pleasure in its own right and is only prepared to tolerate it because there is so far no substitute for it as a means of propagating the human race.

Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*

**C**ommunization is not a revolutionary position. It is not a form of society we build after the revolution. It is not a tactic, a strategic perspective, an organization, or a plan. Communization describes a set of measures that we must take in the course of the class struggle *if there is to be a revolution at all*. Communization abolishes the capitalist mode of production, including wage-labor, exchange, the value form, the state, the division of labor and private property. That the revolution must take this form is a necessary feature of class struggle today. Our cycle of struggles can have no other horizon, since the

unfolding contradictions of capitalism annihilated the conditions which other forms of revolution required. It is no longer possible to imagine a situation in which social divisions are dissolved *after* the revolution.

Since the revolution as communization must abolish all divisions within social life, it must also abolish gender relations—not because gender is inconvenient or objectionable, but because it is part of the totality of relations that daily reproduce the capitalist mode of production. Gender, too, is constitutive of capital's central contradiction, and so gender must be torn asunder in the process of the revolution. We cannot wait until after the revolution for the gender question to be solved. Its relevance to our existence will not be transformed slowly—whether through planned obsolescence or playful deconstruction, whether as the equality of gender identities or their proliferation into a multitude of differences. On the contrary, in order to be revolution at all, communization must destroy gender *in its very course*, inaugurating relations between individuals defined in their singularity.

The fact that revolution takes the form of communization is not the result of lessons learned from past defeats, nor even from the miserable failure of past movements to solve the gender question. Whether or not we can discern, after the fact, a winning strategy for the movements of the past says nothing about the present. For capital no longer organizes a unity among proletarians on the basis of their common condition as wage-laborers. The capital-labor relation no longer allows work-

ers to affirm their identity as workers and to build on that basis workers' organizations capable of assuming power within the state. Movements that elevated workers to the status of a revolutionary subject were still 'communist', but communist in a mode that cannot be ours today. The revolution as communization has no revolutionary subject, no affirmable *identity*—not the Worker, the Multitude, or the Precariat. The real basis of any such revolutionary identity has melted away.

Of course, workers still exist as a class. Wage-labor has become a universal condition of life as never before. However, the proletariat is diffuse and fractured. Its relation to capital is precarious. The structural oversupply of labor is enormous. A surplus population of over one-billion people—eager to find a place in the global commodity chains from which they have been excluded—makes it impossible to form mass organizations capable of controlling the supply of labor, except among the most privileged strata of workers<sup>1</sup>. Capital now exacerbates, fragments and more than ever relies on the divisions between workers. Once the proud bearers of a universally relevant revolutionary essence, the Working Class, in its autonomy as a class within capitalism, can no longer build its power as a class against capital. Today, *the revolution must emerge from the disunity of the proletariat, as the only process capable of overcoming that disunity*. If revolutionary action does not immediately

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<sup>1</sup> See 'Misery and Debt', *Endnotes* 2.

abolish all divisions between proletarians, then it is not revolutionary; it is not communization.

In the present moment, the very inability of workers to unite on the basis of a workers' identity thus forms the fundamental limit of struggle. But that limit is at once the dynamic potential of this cycle of struggles, bearing within itself the abolition of gender relations and all other fixed distinctions. It is no historical accident that the end of the former cycle of struggles coincided with a revolt against the primacy of the Worker—a revolt in which feminism played a major role. To re-imagine a workers' movement that would not demote women, blacks, and homosexuals to a subordinate position is to think a workers' movement that lacks precisely the unifying/excluding trait that once allowed it to move at all. With the benefit of hindsight, it is increasingly clear that if the working class (as a class of all those without direct access to means of production) was destined to become the majority of society, the workers' movement was unlikely to organize a clear majority from it. The revolution as communization does not solve this problem, but it takes it onto a new terrain. As surveyors of this new landscape, we must assess the present state of the practical movement toward the end of gender relations. We must also expand discussion of this essential communizing measure.

Until recently, the theory of communization has been the product of a small number of groups organized around the publication of a handful of yearly journals. If few of those groups have taken up the task of theorizing

gender, it is because most have been wholly uninterested in examining the real basis of the divisions that mark the existence of the working class. On the contrary, they have busied themselves with trying to discover a revolutionary secret decoder-ring, with which they might be able to decipher the merits and shortcomings of past struggles. Thus, most partisans of communization have thought the revolution as an immediate overcoming of all separations, but they arrived at this conclusion through an analysis of *what communization would have to be in order to succeed where past movements failed*, rather than from a focus on the historical specificity of the present<sup>2</sup>. For this reason, the tendency organized around Théorie Communiste (TC) is unique, and we largely follow them in our exposition. For TC, the revolution as communization only emerges as a practical possibility when these struggles begin to 'swerve' (*faire l'écart*) as the very act of struggling increasingly forces the proletariat *to call into question and act against its own reproduction as a class*. 'Gaps' (*écarts*) thereby open up in the struggle, and the multiplication of these gaps is itself the practical possibility of communism in our time. Workers burn down or blow up their factories, demanding severance pay instead of fighting to maintain their jobs. Students occupy universities, but against rather than in the name of the demands for which they are supposedly fighting. Women break with movements in which they already form a majority, since those movements cannot but fail

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<sup>2</sup> For a key debate on this point, see *Endnotes 1*.

to represent them. And everywhere, the unemployed, the youth, and the undocumented join and overwhelm the struggles of a privileged minority of workers, making the limited nature of the latter's demands at once obvious and impossible to sustain.

In the face of these proliferating gaps in the struggle,

a fraction of the proletariat, in going beyond the demands-based character of its struggle, will take communizing measures and will thus initiate the unification of the proletariat which will be the same process as the unification of humanity, i.e. its creation as the ensemble of social relations that individuals establish between themselves in their singularity.<sup>3</sup>

For TC, the divisions within the proletariat are therefore not only that which must be overcome in the course of the revolution, *but also the very source of that overcoming*. Perhaps that is why TC, alone among theorists of communization, have devoted themselves to an examination of the gender distinction, as it is perhaps the most fundamental divisions within the proletariat. TC's work on gender is relatively new, especially for a group which has spent the last thirty years refining and restating a few key ideas over and over again. Their main text on gender, written in 2008, was finally published in 2010 (with two additional appendices) in issue 23 of their journal

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<sup>3</sup> *Théorie Communiste*, 'The Present Moment', unpublished.

as *Distinction de Genres, Programmatisme et Communisation*. TC are known for their esoteric formulations. However, with some effort, most of their ideas can be reconstructed in a clear fashion. Since their work on gender is provisional, we refrain from lengthy quotations. TC claim that communization involves the abolition of gender as much as the abolition of capitalist social relations. For the divisions which maintain capitalism maintain the gender division and the gender division preserves all other divisions. Still, as much as TC take steps towards developing a rigorously historical materialist theory of the production of gender, they end up doing little more than suture gender to an already existing theory of the capitalist mode of production (to no small extent, this is because they rely largely on the work on one important French feminist, Christine Delphy<sup>4</sup>). For our context here, TC have a particularly fascinating theory of communization insofar as it is also a periodization of the history of class struggle—which itself corresponds to a periodization of the history of the capital-labor relation. This provides TC with a uniquely historical vantage on the present prospects for communism. Crucially, TC focus on the reproduction of the capital-labor relation, rather than on the production of value. This change of focus allows them to bring within their purview the set of relations that actually construct capitalist social life—beyond the walls of the factory or office. And the gender

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<sup>4</sup> Christine Delphy and Diana Leonard, *Familiar Exploitation*.

relation has always extended beyond the sphere of value production alone.

## I. The Construction of the Category 'Woman'

Woman is a social construction. The very category of woman is organized within and through a set of social relations, from which the splitting of humanity into two, woman and man—and not only female and male—is inseparable. In this way, sexual difference is given a particular social relevance that it would not otherwise possess<sup>5</sup>. Sexual difference is given this fixed significance within class societies, when the category of woman comes to be defined by the function that most (but not all) human females perform, for a period of their lives, in the sexual reproduction of the species. Class society thus gives a social purpose to bodies: because some women 'have' babies, all bodies that could conceivably 'produce' babies are subject to social regulation. Women become the slaves of the biological contingencies of their birth. Over

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<sup>5</sup> Not all human beings fit into the categories of male and female. The point is not to use the language of biology to ground a theory of naturalized sexuality, as distinct from a socialized gender. Nature, which is without distinction, becomes integrated into a social structure—which takes natural averages and turns them into behavioral norms. Not all 'women' bear children; maybe some 'men' do. That does not make them any less beholden to society's strictures, including at the level of their very bodies, which are sometimes altered at birth to ensure conformity with sexual norms.



the long history of class society, women were born into a world organized only for men—the primary ‘actors’ in society, and in particular the only people capable of owning property. Women thereby became the property of society as a whole.

Because women are by definition not men, they are excluded from ‘public’ social life. For TC, this circumscription of the women’s realm means that not only are their bodies appropriated by men, but also the totality of their activity. Their activity, as much as their very being, is by definition ‘private’. In this way, women’s activity takes on the character of domestic labor. This labor is defined not as work done in the home, but as women’s work. If a woman sells cloth in the market, she is a weaver, but if she makes cloth in the home, she is only a *wife*. A woman’s activity is thus considered merely as her activity, without any of the concrete determinations it would be given if it were performed by some other, more dignified social entity. The gender distinction man/woman thereby takes on additional significance as public/private and social/domestic.

Is the unpaid labor of women for men, including perhaps their ‘production’ of children, therefore a class relation, or even a mode of production (as Delphy calls it, the domestic mode of production)? TC defines class society as a relationship between surplus producers and surplus extractors. The social division between these groups is constitutive of the relations of production, which organize the productive forces for the purpose of producing and extracting surplus. Crucially, these relations must

have as their product the reproduction of the class relation itself. However, for TC—and we follow them on this point—each mode of production is already a totality, and in fact the social relevance of women's role in sexual reproduction changes with the mode of production. That does not mean that relations between men and women are derivative of the relations between the classes. It means rather that the relations between men and women form an essential element of the class relation and cannot be thought as a separate 'system', which then relates to the class-based system.

Of course, this discussion remains abstract. The question now becomes, how do we unite our story about women with our story about the succession of modes of production? For TC, *women are the primary productive force* within all class societies, since the growth of the population forms an essential support of the reproduction of the class relation. The augmentation of the population as the primary productive force remains, throughout the history of class society, the burden of its women. In this way, the *heterosexual matrix* is founded on a specific set of material social relations.

However, we should remind ourselves that the special burden of childbirth predates the advent of class society. Historically, each woman had to give birth, on average, to six children—just in order to ensure that two of those six survived to reproduce the coming generations. The chance that a woman would die in childbirth, in the

course of her life, was nearly one in ten<sup>6</sup>. Perhaps the insight of TC is that the advent of class society—which saw a massive increase in the size of the human population—hardened the social relevance of these facts. But even before the advent of class society, there was never any ‘natural’ regime of human sexual reproduction. Age at marriage, length of breastfeeding, number of children born, social acceptability of infanticide—all have varied across human social formations<sup>7</sup>. Their variation marks a unique adaptability of the human species.

But we are concerned less with the long history of the human species than with the history of the capitalist mode of production. Wage-labor is fundamentally different from both ancient slavery and feudal vassalage. In slavery, surplus producers have no ‘relation’ to the means of production. For the slaves are themselves part of the means of production. The reproduction or upkeep of slaves is the direct responsibility of the slave owner himself. For both men and women slaves, the distinction between public and private thus dissolves, since slaves exist entirely within the private realm. Nor is there any question, for the slaves, of property inheritance or re-

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<sup>6</sup> These statistics make it clear to what extent violence against women, sometimes carried out by women themselves, has always been necessary to keep them firmly tied to their role in the sexual reproduction of the species. See Paola Tabet, ‘Natural Fertility, Forced Reproduction’, in Diana Leonard and Lisa Adkins, *Sex in Question*.

<sup>7</sup> For an introduction to demography, see Massimo Livi-Bacci, *A Concise History of World Population*.

lations with the state, such as taxation. Interestingly, there is some evidence that patriarchy was, perhaps for that very reason, rather weak among slave families in the American South<sup>8</sup>. In vassalage, by contrast, the surplus producers have direct access to the means of production. Surplus is extracted by force. The peasant man stands in relation to this outside force as the public representative of the peasant household. Property passes through his line. Women and children peasants are confined to the private realm of the village, which is itself a site of both production and reproduction. The peasant family does not need to leave its private sphere in order to produce what it needs, but rather only to give up a part of its product to the lords. For this reason, peasant families remain relatively independent of markets.

In capitalism, the lives of the surplus producers are constitutively split between the public production of a surplus and the private reproduction of the producers themselves. The workers, unlike the slaves, are their 'own property': they continue to exist only if they take care of their own upkeep. If wages are too low, or if their services are no longer needed, workers are 'free' to survive by other means (as long as those means are legal). The reproduction of the workers is thus emphatically not the responsibility of the capitalist. However, unlike the vassals, the workers can take care of their own upkeep only if they return to the labor market, again and again,

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<sup>8</sup> Ellen Meiksins Wood, 'Capitalism and Human Emancipation'. I/167 (Jan-Feb 1988): 3-20.

to find work. Here is the essence of the capital-labor relation. What the workers earn for socially performed production in the public realm, they must spend in order to reproduce themselves domestically in their own private sphere. The binaries of public/private and social/domestic are embodied in the wage-relation itself. Indeed, these binaries will only collapse with the end of capitalism.

For if the capitalists were directly responsible for workers' survival—and thus if their reproduction were removed from the private sphere—*then the workers would no longer be compelled to sell their labor-power*. The existence of a separate, domestic sphere of reproduction (where little production takes place unmediated by commodities purchased on the market) is constitutive of capitalist social relations as such. Social activity separates out from domestic activity as the market becomes the mediating mechanism of concrete social labor performed outside of the home. Production for exchange, which was formerly performed inside the home, increasingly leaves the home to be performed elsewhere. At this point the public/private distinction takes on a spatial dimension. The home becomes the sphere of private activity—that is, women's domestic labor and men's 'free time'—while the factory takes charge of the public, socially productive character of men's work.

Of course, women have also always been wage laborers, alongside men, for as long as capitalism has existed. For TC, the gendered nature of women's domestic work determines that their work, even when performed

outside of the home, remains merely women's work. It remains, that is to say, wage labor of a particular sort, namely *unproductive or else low value-added labor*. Women tend to work in part-time, low-wage jobs, particularly in services (though of course today, there are at least some women in all sectors of the economy, including among the highest paid professionals). Women often perform domestic services in other people's homes, or else in their offices and airplanes. When women work in factories, they are segregated into labor-intensive jobs requiring delicate hand-work, particularly in textiles, apparel and electronics assembly. Likewise, work done in the home remains women's work, even if men perform it—which, largely, they do not.

In this sense, once gender becomes embodied in the wage-relation as a binary public/private relation, TC cease to theorize its ground in the role that women play in sexual reproduction. The fact that women's work is of a particular character outside the home is merely true by analogy to the character of the work they perform in the home. It bears no relation to the material ground of women's role in sexual reproduction, and in that sense, it is more or less ideological. By the same token, TC increasingly define the work that women do in the home by its character as the daily reproductive labor performed necessarily outside of the sphere of production—and not by relation to the role that women play in childbirth, as the 'principal force of production'. If, within the capitalist mode of production, women are and have always been both wage-laborers and domestic laborers, why do they

remain almost entirely female? As TC begin to discuss capitalism, they phase out their focus on sexual reproduction, which disappears under a materially unfounded conception of domestic labor (though their references to biology return later, as we will see).

This oversight is a serious mistake. The sexual segregation of work in the capitalist mode of production is directly related to the temporality of a woman's life: as the bearer of children, the main source of their nourishment at young ages (breastfeeding), and their primary caretakers through puberty. Over the long history of capitalism, women's participation in the labor market has followed a distinct 'M-shaped' curve<sup>9</sup>. Participation rises rapidly as women enter adulthood, then drops as women enter their late 20s and early 30s. Participation slowly rises again as women enter their late 40s before dropping off at retirement ages. The reasons for this pattern are well known. Young women look for full-time work, but with the expectation that they will either stop working or work part-time when they have children. When women enter childbearing years, their participation in the labor force declines. Women who continue to work while their children are young are among the poorer proletarians and are super-exploited: unmarried mothers, widows and divorcées, or women whose husbands' incomes are low or unreliable. As children get older, more and more women return to the labor market (or move to full-time

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<sup>9</sup> The term comes from Japan, see Makoto Itoh, *The Japanese Economy Reconsidered*.

work), but at a distinct disadvantage in terms of skills and length of employment, at least as compared to the men with whom they compete for jobs<sup>10</sup>.

For all these reasons, capitalist economies have always had a special 'place' for women workers, as workers either not expected to remain on the job for very long or else as older, late entrants or re-entrants into the labor force. Beyond that, women form an important component of what Marx calls the 'latent' reserve army of labor, expected to enter and leaving the workforce according to the cyclical needs of the capitalist enterprises. The existence of a distinctive place for women in the labor force then reinforces a society-wide commitment to an ideology about women's natural place, both in the home and at work. Even when both men and women work, men typically (at least until recently) earn higher wages and work longer hours outside the home. There thus remains a strong pressure on women, insofar as they are materially dependent on their husbands, to accept their subordination: to not 'push too hard'<sup>11</sup> on questions of the sexual division of labor within the home. Historically, this pressure was compounded by the fact that women were, until after World War II, de facto if not de jure excluded from many forms of property ownership, making them reliant on men as mediators of their relation to capital. Therefore, women did not possess

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<sup>10</sup> Johanna Brenner and Maria Ramas, 'Rethinking Women's Oppression'.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*



the juridical freedoms that male proletarians won for themselves—and not for their women. Women were not truly ‘free’ labor in relation to the market and the state, as were their male counterparts.

## **II. The Destruction of the Category ‘Woman’**

Though TC fail to explain the ground of the construction of women in capitalism, they do have a provocative theory of how women’s situation within capitalism changes according to the unfolding contradictions of that mode of production. ‘Capitalism has a problem with women’ because, in the present period, the capital-labor relation cannot accommodate the continued growth of the labor force. As we have already noted, capital increasingly faces a large and growing surplus population, structurally excessive to its demands for labor. The appearance of this surplus population has coincided with a transformation in the way that capitalist states, the workers’ movement, and also feminists have viewed women as the ‘principal productive force’. In an earlier moment birth-rates declined precipitously in Europe and the former European settler-colonies. The response was ‘pro-natalism’. Civilization supposedly faced imminent degeneration, since women were no longer fulfilling their duty to the nation; they had to be encouraged back into it. By the 1920s, even feminists became increasingly pro-natalist, turning maternalism into an explanation for women’s ‘equal but different’ dignity as compared to men. By the

1970s, however—as the population of poor countries exploded while the capitalist economy entered into a protracted crisis—maternalism was largely dead. The world was overpopulated with respect to the demand for labor. Women were no longer needed in their role as women. The ‘special dignity’ of their subordinate role was no longer dignified at all.

However, that is only half the story. The other half is to be found in the history of the demographic transition itself, which TC fail to consider. In the course of its early development, capitalism increased workers’ consumption and thereby improved their health, reducing infant mortality. Falling infant mortality in turn reduced the number of children that each woman had to have in order to reproduce the species. At first, this transformation appeared as an increase in the number of surviving children per woman and a rapid growth of the population. Thus, the spread of capitalist social relations was everywhere associated with an increase in women’s reproductive burden. However with time, and now in almost every region of the world, there has been a subsequent reduction, both in the number of children each woman has and in the number of children who subsequently survive infancy and early childhood. Simultaneously, as both men and women live longer, less of women’s lifetimes are spent either having or caring for young children. The importance of these facts cannot be overestimated. They explain why, in our period, the straight-jacket of the heterosexual matrix has had its buckles slightly loosened, for men as well as women (and even, to a small extent,

for those who fit neither the categories of gender distinction, nor those of sexual difference)<sup>12</sup>.

As with everything else in capitalism, the 'freedom' that women have won (or are winning) from their reproductive fate has not been replaced with free-time, but with other forms of work. Women's supposed entrance into the labor force was always actually an increase in the time and duration of women's already existing participation in wage-work. But now, since women are everywhere spending less time in childbirth and child-rearing, there has been a reduction in the M-shaped nature of their participation in labor-markets. Women's situation is thus increasingly split between, on the one hand, the diminishing but still heavy burden of childbearing and domestic work, and on the other hand, the increasingly primary role in their lives of wage-work—within which they remain, however, disadvantaged. As all women know, this situation expresses itself as a forced choice between the promise a working life supposedly equal to men and the pressure, as well as the desire, to have children. That some women choose not to have children at all—and thus to solve this dilemma for themselves, however inadequately—is the only possible explanation of the fall in the birth rate below what is predicted by demographic transition theory. Fertility is now as low as 1.2 children per woman in Italy and Japan; almost everywhere else

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<sup>12</sup> For a more developed theory of women's relation to property, see 'Notes on the New Housing Question', *Endnotes* 2. The ground of this loosening, as well as its timing, has remained inexplicable within the bounds of queer theory.

in the West it has fallen below 2. In the world as a whole, fertility has fallen from 6 children per woman in 1950 to around 2.5 today.

In this situation, it becomes increasingly clear that women have a problem with markets, since markets are incompatible with women. This incompatibility comes down to two facts about the capitalist mode of production. First, capital cannot, if it is to remain capital, take direct responsibility for the reproduction of the working class. It is because workers are responsible for their own upkeep that they are forced to return, again and again, to the labor market. At the same time, labor markets, if they are to remain markets, must be 'sex-blind'<sup>13</sup>. Markets have to evaluate the competition between workers without regard to any non-market characteristics of the workers themselves. These non-market characteristics include the fact that half of all of humanity is sexed female. For some employers, sexual difference cannot but appear as an additional cost. Women workers are able to bear children and thus cannot be relied on not to have children. For other employers, sexual difference appears as a benefit for precisely the same reason: women provide flexible, cheap labor. Women are thus relegated by capitalist relations—precisely because markets are sex-blind—to women's wage-work.

This incompatibility of women and markets has plagued the women's movement. Feminism historically accepted the gendered nature of social life, since it was

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<sup>13</sup> Brenner and Ramas, 'Rethinking Women's Oppression'.

only through gender that women could affirm their identity as women in order to organize on that basis. This affirmation became a problem for the movement historically, since it is impossible to fully reconcile gender—the very existence of women and men—with the simultaneous existence of the working class and capital<sup>14</sup>. As a result, the women's movement has swung back and forth between two positions. On the one hand, women fought for equality on the basis of their fundamental sameness with respect to men. But whatever the similarity of their aptitudes, women and men are not and never will be the same for capital. On the other hand, women have fought for equality on the basis of their 'difference but equal dignity' to men. But that difference, here made explicit as motherhood, is precisely the reason for women's subordinate role.

The workers' movement promised to reconcile women and workers beyond, or at least behind the back of, the market. After all, the founding texts of German Social Democracy, in addition to Marx's *Capital*, were Engels' *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, and Bebel's *Woman and Socialism*. Through struggle, the workers' movement promised to bring women out of the

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<sup>14</sup> In this sense, we are of course interested only in the history of women's situation within the workers' movement. Bourgeois suffragettes argued for property-based voting qualifications—thus excluding women as class enemies. By the middle of the twentieth century, these same bourgeois became defenders of women's maternal role—at the same time as they founded organizations to control the bodies of women among the 'dangerous classes'.

home and into the workforce, where they would finally become the true equals of men. In order to achieve this real equality, the workers movement would socialize women's reproductive work 'after the revolution'. Both housework and childcare would be performed collectively by men and women together. As it became clear to the most extreme elements of the Radical Feminist movement in the 1970s, these measures would never suffice to actually ensure 'real equality' between men and women workers. The only possibility of achieving an equality of workers, at the intersecting limit of both gender and labor, would be *if babies were born in test-tubes, finally having nothing to do with women at all*<sup>15</sup>.

In fact, the workers' movement betrayed its women as soon as it had the chance. Whenever they came close to power, male workers were fully willing to demonstrate their capacity to manage the economy by showing that they, too, knew how to keep women in their place. In the British Communist Party, freeing husbands from domestic work was the main task of women's 'party work'<sup>16</sup>. How could it have been otherwise? Within a world defined by work—or more precisely, by productive labor (a

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<sup>15</sup> Radical feminism followed a curious trajectory in the second half of the 20th century, taking first childbearing, then domestic work, and finally sexual violence (or the male orgasm) as the ground of women's oppression. The problem was that in each case, these feminists sought an ahistorical ground for what had become an historical phenomenon.

<sup>16</sup> On the history of women's situation within the workers' movement, see Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy*.

category of capitalism)—women would always be less than men. The attempt to 'raise' women to the equals of men was always a matter of adjusting a 'universally' relevant movement of workers to fit the 'particular' needs of its women. The attempt to do so, within the bounds of capitalism, amounted to a minimal socialization of child-care, as well as the institution of a minimal set of laws protecting women from their disadvantages in markets (that is to say, maternity leave, etc.). Workers' movements could have gone further along this road. They could have made women more of a priority than they did. But the fact is that they did not. And now, it's over.

The death of the workers' movement has been considered in other texts<sup>17</sup>. Its death marks also the passage from one historical form of revolution to another. Today, the presence of women within the class struggle can only function as a rift (*l'ecart*), a deviation in the class conflict that destabilizes its terms. That struggle cannot be their struggle, even if, in any given case, they form the majority of the participants. For as long as proletarians continue to act as a class, the women among them cannot but lose. In the course of struggle, women will, therefore, come into conflict with men. They will be criticized for derailing the movement, for diverting it from its primary goals. But the 'goal' of the struggle lies elsewhere. It is only from within this (and other) conflicts that the proletariat will come to see its class belonging as an external constraint, an impasse which

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<sup>17</sup> *Théorie Communiste*, 'Much Ado about Nothing', *Endnotes* 1.

it will have to overcome in order to be anything at all beyond its relation to capital. That overcoming is only the revolution as communization, which destroys gender and all the other divisions that come between us.



# **Statement by Olga Ekonomidou of the CCF**

x Olga Ekonomidou  
member of the anarchist revolutionary  
organization Conspiracy of Cells of Fire

[...] Only then are the roles broken, disappeared through an active stance. I myself chose an active stance in a world of passivity. I chose to actively participate in a revolutionary organization. I did not follow anyone, nor was I carried away by something. I made a choice. I was present at discussions, decisions, actions, and now at pay time. I took responsibility for my acts, even though I could have taken advantage of my identity as a woman and thus receive a more favorable treatment. But how dignified would that be?

Throughout history, a woman who is engaged in revolutionary undertakings in fact manages to repeal two roles at once. On the one hand, she consciously abolishes her identity as a legal person, questioning laws and order, and on the other hand she abolishes her identity as a woman, surpassing the concept of gender roles (mom, wife, chick) that society has attributed to her.

[...]

*Statement by Olga Ekonomidou (excerpt)*

In this moment I am writing these few lines from inside isolation; 30 days of solitary confinement is the price I pay for my refusal to sell out my dignity and obey the humiliation of a full body search, which would last 5 minutes. I remain unrepentant in my decision. I won't give away even a second of compromise to prison guards. I will not exchange my refusals and choices with the 'warmth' of a standard cell and the 'liberty' of yard time among the general prison population. I'm not looking to become another normal statistic of an inmate who cringes before the prison service, who serves 'quietly' her sentence, who trips into hallucinations induced by wacko-pills, who forces herself as an 'older rank' on new-coming prisoners. I remain friend, comrade and human with all women and men who keep the fire burning inside them. With those women and men who choose the dangerous paths of wolves instead of sheep pastures. When it comes to all of us, anarchists of praxis, imprisonment is never enough 'punishment.' For this, disciplinary penalties, transfers and solitary confinements are due to come down. Isolation is a prison within the prison. You remain 24 hours a day locked up in a cage with a bunk bed, an in-cell toilet and the vigilant eye of a closed-circuit camera. Inside here, your only girlfriends are your thoughts and memories. Inside here, the days and hours are eliminated, lost, dying, pushing slowly each other...

But these 30 days of solitary confinement I was not left alone. I had some odd and charming visitors by my side that passed secretly and 'smuggled' their way into

*Statement by Olga Ekonomidou (excerpt)*

my cell, breaking the isolation. 30 days of solitary confinement and I go on, but the she-wolf inside me doesn't sleep, doesn't give consent, doesn't forgive...



**Part II.**

# **Examples**

**Gender ← Nihilism**



# **Testo Junkie**

✦ Paul Preciado

**I**n her 1967 *SCUM Manifesto*, Valerie Solanas had seen things with a certain precision.<sup>1</sup> More than forty years have gone by, and one element seems to have changed: all the grotesque characteristics that Solanas attributes to men in capitalist society at mid-twentieth century seem to have spread to women today. Men and women are the bioproducts of a bifurcated sexual system with a paradoxical tendency for reproduction and self-destruction. "To be male is to be deficient, emotionally limited... egocentric, trapped inside himself, incapable of empathizing or identifying with others, of love, friendship, affection, of tenderness." Men and women are isolated units, creatures condemned to constant self-surveillance and self-control by a rigid class-sex-gender-race system. The time they devote to this brutal political arrangement of their subjectivity is comparable to the whole extent of their lives. Once all their vitality has been put to work to reduce their own somatic multiplicity, they become physically weakened beings, incapable of finding any satisfaction in life and dead politically before they have

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<sup>1</sup> Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto* (New York: Verso, 2004).

*Testo Junkie (excerpt)*

taken their last breath. I do not want the female gender that has been assigned to me at birth. Neither do I want the male gender that transsexual medicine can furnish and that the state will award me if I behave in the right way. I don't want any of it.



# Preliminary Notes on Modes of Reproduction

x gender mutiny

You had me at necrophilia...

Q———

## Creationism

we believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one substance with the Father.  
Through Him all things were made.

The Nicene Creed

**N**o logic is more complete than that of monism,  
though none is more often protested. As long as all  
Creation is derived from God and His written Word, no  
assault can breach the walls of its castle. In Truth the

logic of monism contains everything, and it can have no enemy. The cries of atheists and non-believers cannot reach the ears of its inhabitant, because heresy is logically not possible.

God's reproduction adds nothing to His perfect self. God can only reproduce Himself—man in His image, Son in His image—copies, not offspring. God's Creation is made by Him only, it cannot surpass Him nor exist beyond Him.

When God masturbates, He reproduces. Wherever His jism is spilled, life bursts forth.

In a flash, it's as if you were born, flung into dark. Restless space, utterly foreign to the Last Times. No idea where you are naturally, you are shipwrecked, you have only the word shipwreck as lantern and explanation, for the rest you are in the dark. All is lost. This lostness—a state you knew nothing about. You are adult and biped, but the species is unknown. You know nothing about being. We don't remember this world at all.

In monism, there is only one gender, that of man. Man who was made in God's image and, like God, reproduces by spilling his seed onto the fallow earth. The earth—what we would call woman—does not constitute a distinct gender to herself, rather, she is without singularity or soul, an empty material form like the earth itself.

To speak of woman in the ideology of monism is an impossibility—that is, unless one speaks of a nothingness, an absence, a ghost. Not being a man, woman cannot exist in God's Creation because that which is not One, that is not God, is not. The void is woman's ontological origin. She emerges from nothingness because her existence is not only impossible but quite impermissible in monist logic.

If a woman did exist (which, of course, she could not), she would have to be a nothingness. And so it was only by continuously asserting her very nonexistence that she was able to exist. She could not, in monist Truth, be, and so she was a ghost when she lived in the garden, and it was a void that suffered the pain of childbirth, and a specter that passed through the halls of the king to leave behind traces of desire on his body.

## **Procreationism**

When girls and boys reach puberty, their bodies start to change and become more mature. From this time, if a male and a female have sexual intercourse (often called 'making love', or 'sleeping with someone'), it is possible that the girl could get pregnant, i.e. a baby could start to grow.

### *How Babies Are Made*

From the moment we begin to speak of woman as such, we are not speaking of God and His world, but rather the world of opposition. Once woman existed as even a thought, in fact in any form exceeding nonexistence,

monism's ontological center could not hold. It must be said that in this crisis lay an intimate potential for the utter annihilation of the existent—would woman, as yet nonexistent herself, a being of the void, who came from nothing and returned all to nothingness, could she negate the existent that was her own negation? But so fierce was woman's affirmation of her own existence that her force would not cause monism to stagger and collapse under the weight of the impossibility of something truly outside itself, but rather would balance and harmonize Man.

All that separates modernity from what existed before it is the radical shift from a monolithic existent to a dichotomous one.

We don't stop killing ourselves. We die one another here and there my beloved and it's an obsession, it's an exorcism, it's a feign what we are feigning. I have no idea is it a sin a maneuver a vaccination the taming of a python the fixing-up a cage, it's an inclination, we don't stop rubbing up against our towers touching our lips to them... eroticism to the nth degree lips on the sacred scroll, the innocent handle of the book, the saint, the simpleton, we know all about it, we always thought it, we'd also always feared for our towers, such striking clarity, and naked, but what terror when the real planes really crashed into them, a black terror that bit

into our hearts, so this in reality can happen, in reality there was a tomb on one of our bodies, this was a fact and no waking, we'd awakened assassinated...

The Promethean feat was accomplished. The act of creation stolen from God and spread before mere mortals for their defilement. They engage in carnal desire and, when small, wet, stunted humans emerge from their loins, they marvel at their godlike power to create life.

The image of the one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth no longer prevails. His Creation has forsaken Him, and now they genuflect before false idols.

God still lingers here. With His masturbatory acts of Creation derided, He puts auto-eroticism aside and panders to the heresy of His flock. He constructs His procreative Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—father, mother, and Child. This divine mimicry of the people's profane procreative acts is too queer. He has not admitted the existence of woman, of dualism, of the Other; and in the binary regime, heterosexuality is sacrosanct.

While before the Creator had been the object of adoration, procreationism displaces the focus to that which is created. The act of sex is banal enough that only the conservative thinkers, attached still to the old ways of praising God, could envision it as a divine act. The parent is imbued with no shroud of mystery or the unknown. But the Child—who can remember his childhood?--the

Child is an image that could stand for the sacred mystery of reproduction.

The image is singular but its source is binary. Now the myth that subjectivities come from God is pushed aside by the idea that one exists simply because one's parents fucked at some point and didn't use birth control. Religious faith in an event one didn't experience now shattered, only a scientific and historically rigorous explanation will suffice. One still does not remember one's conception or birth, but the scientific method confirms that other babies are made this way, and so "I was too."

The procreative myth (not a religious myth, but a scientific fact-myth) structures and gives meaning to the binary opposition of the sexes. The categories of male and female have meaning and power because their stability and duality is generative. Like God's potency to make life spring from Himself, the male and the female, in their opposition and union, have the power to create life. No longer "God made me, therefore I am," but now "my mother and father made me, therefore I am."

The family constitutes the procreative apparatus, distinguished from the creative apparatus by a binary opposition inherent in the inclusion of woman into the realm of existence—while from God the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost were begotten, not made, and remained of one substance with the Father, it is only through the union of opposite sexes that babies are made, and made as a unified substance of their parents. A monist world could self-reproduce in perfect singularity and sameness, but once woman had posited herself in her difference,

the force of her Otherness in relation to Man was harnessed as a procreative drive. And so it would be with the reproduction of the future, of the political order, and of capitalism.

The apple that Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge may have initiated the fall from monist grace to dualist profanity in religious mythology; in history it was the apple that fell on Newton's head which ushered in dualistic thought. Newton's theory identifies the forces which hold and harmonize the dualistic world in the void against threat of collapse (much as the high walls of God's castle held the monist world together). Namely, for each force there is a reaction of equal force and opposite in direction. A simple example in the system of Newtonian physics explains how two heavenly bodies of sufficient velocity can orbit each other in harmony through the dynamic of their relative forces of gravity without collapsing into each other and spreading their dust into the void. So does dualist thought function to balance and harmonize the world of procreationism in its reproductive, political, economic and philosophical spheres.

Modernity, Newtonian physics, dialectics, liberalism, binary reproduction, capitalism: each is an aspect of the self-same logic of dualism. The triumph of the logic of two over the logic of one defines the world that we have inherited (though even now this world is evolving into the world of plurality).

From the image of the Child comes the image of the Future, our hopes and dreams, our investment in a better

world for future generations. Towards the image of the Future the political project is always aimed. The Child carries the Future, and just as the Family produces the Child, the political apparatus produces its burden.

The political order of modernity is liberalism. Monarchy ruled the monist world, and the binary world requires something more balanced. With a single gesture the sovereignty of the state is balanced against the rights of the people and the state opposes itself against itself in a balancing act of political parties and governmental branches. The liberal system of government, quite simply, is the state-form wrapped in the logic of dichotomy. Each and every political ideology that exerts itself in the effort to combat another political tendency or to assert the power of the people in resistance or opposition to that of the government participates in the discourse of liberal politics.

The world of opposition is the world of dialectics. Just as the opposition of the sexes produces the Child and together these constitute the Family, so does capitalism reproduce itself through the opposition of the classes.

In dialectics, the existent contains its own contradiction—the proletariat. The proletariat is the negative force that could destroy capitalism; rather than excluding its enemy, as woman was excluded by monism, capital locks its negative force in struggle with itself and thereby exploits its labor for production, manages its reproduction as the source of more labor, and reproduces capitalism through class struggle.



In the dialectical form, the proletariat's negation of capitalism entails the destruction of the proletariat-as-such. The negative force is no longer a nothingness locked outside the realm of the existent; it is instead integrated as a necessary factor in production and reproduction. The proletariat is validated, reproduced, and fed by the same order that exploits it. In the end, the desire of the proletariat for liberation and autonomy from the control of the bourgeoisie, like woman's desire to assert her existential being in the realm of man, would overpower its desire to abolish the present state of things and would usher in a new mode of reproduction.

Each and every stage of class struggle gave birth to another stage of capitalism, and every new manifestation was more perfect than the last. The latest high point in class struggle—May 1968—with its radical demands to sever the workers' movement from the management of union bureaucrats and liberate labor from bosses' control was the most significant of these, and it birthed the postmodern era along with a mode of reproduction surpassing that of dialectical opposition.

The Tower of Babel had fallen long ago; now it was the Twin Towers' turn.

## **Re-creationism**

Discover the new you...  
It's your world...  
A phone that gets you...  
It's so you...

You can hear it on the street and in the workplace, in the college classroom and the executive boardroom, at the latest radical convergence and at the beach, at dance parties and in underground venues: the logic of duality is *so* last millennium.

We are living in a postmodern world, and you are a postmodern girl. Which is to say, you are not really a *girl* as such.

Postmodernism posits a social order that takes place as social disorder; it is the form of the destabilization of formerly stable forms. Destabilization could be said to begin by attacking binary structure but it immediately, incessantly and necessarily goes on to destabilize whatever structure; postmodernity is thus characterized by its destabilizing force and not by whatever modernist strictures linger about. The traces of modernity are merely modern, which is to say, *old-fashioned*; the paradoxical need to go beyond the modern is what characterizes the frenzy of postmodern activity. The form of structure today is a post-structural modality akin to the Situationist dream of fluid architecture—a modal and mobile form of structure whose engine is a strong distaste for anything static.

Primary in postmodernity's de-/re-structuring is a shift in sexual differentiation—the very structure which constituted the means by which life was understood to be created. The destabilization of binary oppositional sexes constitutes a crisis in the family and in the reproduction of life, but this crisis is not one that must spell the end of reproduction. A whole assemblage of techniques

of biotechnology, cyberproduction, and social work are being deployed to enable, among other things, "queer" reproductive possibilities as well as overcome the limits of the human womb which too easily ceases to function, especially under the stress of postmodern life.

This analysis falls short, however, of recognizing the way that the central questions of reproduction have been displaced from the act of baby-making to the construction of the self, just as the centering of baby-making in procreationist thought usurped the former importance of the question of cosmic creation.

The primary mode of reproduction in a post-dialectic world is the reproduction of the individual. We call this mode of reproduction 're-creationism.'

The postmodern singularity is not created by God or its parents, but constructed through a pluralistic process that is increasingly "artificial," "social," and, paradoxically, self-realized. This process is the process of identification.

The pluralistic reproductive process could not suffer limits. Each time it reproduces itself exists on an ontological scale. There is no need to speak of the modes of reproduction constituted by three, four, or fifty-four towers because, once there are three, the towers reproduce not themselves and not the relation between themselves, but more and more towers, not twin but unique and individuated, marching across the landscape at an ever-increasing rate. The World Trade Center has fallen but today there stand more skyscrapers than ever before.

Since their death, all their suffering... our store of poisons entrusted to the Towers, counting of course on the jumbo apparatus of the American passions, in some the whole anxious and malificent game—of our lives, our primitive beliefs, our frissions, the deadly Greek and Bible-inspired phantasms, all that ghastly archivery we'd intuitively conserved in our Towers—hence unconsciously used as the colossal envelopes of all ideas of catastrophe, coffins costumed as the temples of our death wishes.

The social value of diversity is imbued by both evolutionary science and postmodern philosophizing about *becoming*.

The postmodern work is the self-made and self-managed worker. Stable, long-term employment—unionized, salaried career opportunities, with their attendant job security, benefits and pensions—is disappearing while part-time, short-term, piecemeal, casual, waged, and self-employed work takes its place. The proletarian must take on a certain *flexibility*; he must continually 'upgrade himself' through continual education and training. Meanwhile, labor becomes more efficient and the market becomes less prone to rewarding non-work. Recreationism is thus both an economic imperative acting upon labor and an imperative—a drive—in the interests of the economy.

Meanwhile, re-creationism provides the only market expansion opportunities that late-capitalism has available to itself. No longer able to reach new geographic, demographic markets through traditional expansion, capitalism today must create new markets out of nothing or else expand into extra-dimensionality. New markets now require new subcultural forms and identity forms. The tendency of market expansion in late capitalism is toward there being a market for each individual and ever-new markets as individuals recreate their identities, bodies and desires. Static forms can only impede this expansion; thus, a certain self-hatred must be made to drive old forms into undesirability, and a taste for the new, hip and abnormal must be cultured.

Identities must be produced—produced *as commodities* and *for commodities*. Identification, that is, the process of re-creationism, is what produces these identities. Inherent in this production is a certain form of anti-identification that opposes itself to stable, essential, static and, ultimately, *old-fashioned* identity-forms in order to compel the production and marketing of new ones.

Each new identity is a new tower to which consumers can flock to escape the *passé* nature of the old ones. Eventually—that is, soon and very soon—there will have to be a tower for each person (“*You know, there could be as many genders as there are people...*”), in fact many more, and the scale of such production far surpasses the limits of the old workplaces. The Fordist production line can make multiple, identical products, but today each new

identity must have the air of the unique and the 'creative' labor of identity production is thus displaced from the old workplaces. By social imperative and desire, the individual is put to work, unpaid, to create new identities 'for himself.' (Reproductive work—baby-making, class struggle, Facebook—is always unpaid.)

The postmodern Spectacle is a collection of images that must increasingly be produced uniquely by and for each individual (the ghost of reproduction must not linger on the screen), but it must also enable a certain form of 'social interaction.' An apparatus of Spectacle-production that is socially-networked affords its producer/consumer a profile and newsfeed unique to him but also the ability to 'connect' with his 'real' friends. Reality, in the end, is the product.

Political struggle is no longer epitomized by a war of one party or class against another, nor the people against the state, rather it becomes the battlefield of social war fought between many identities or forms-of-life against one another. These terms are not interchangeable, however. Just as the war between parties within the government served to mask class struggle, today the war over identities masks the war of forms-of-life.

In the war of towers, identity is the basis for political struggle as well as the product of political struggle. Struggles fought over destabilization, restructuring and creation of identities are no more a threat to what exists than struggles over childbirth are; on the contrary, these reproduce everyday existence.

The war between forms-of-life is not a war between identities, though it may often manifest as if it were. In today's war of all against all, the negative party is the queer, the abnormal. Queer constitutes the negative force that is centrally involved in the proliferation of identity through its struggle to assert itself positively outside of the realm of the normal. (Each positive queer act yields yet another position within normality.) Yet only for the queer is the overcoming of its limits in struggle capable of demolishing all the towers. In this way, queer negativity threatens to destroy the mechanism of reproduction that it inhabits and asserts—the mechanism of *difference*, of *abnormality*, of *queerness*—and so to abolish itself.

Let us be clear: the queer revolt will always be the *avant-garde* of capitalism: not only because the queer has been subsumed under the norm for the purposes of queering normality, but also because queer revolt, as the *avant-garde* of queer itself, pushes the margins of queerness into new territories which become the raw material of tomorrow's trends. The negative queer potentiality does not distinguish itself from the queer revolt by its violence and destruction alone (an assault on existing identities is inherent in the production of new ones) but by its gestures of abortion and its rendering of impotence, which is to say, its utter lack (of position, of possibility, of reproductivity, of existence &c.). Pure negativity does not and cannot exist nor come into existence.

The fact that we are writing (and rewriting) these notes at all is evidence enough that the *purely negative*

tendency has not destroyed everything. Our work is simply a critique of everything as it is, and of everything as it is becoming.

## **Nihilism**

*Anéantir le néant.*

Annihilate the void.

Up to now, every critique of the social order has more or less successfully described what needs to be destroyed, while every prescription for revolution has only resulted in a reconfiguration of misery. The existent is readily described by the discourse it contains, but the pure negativity is truly unspeakable. There is no reason to believe that the discursive elaboration of the purely negative project is at all possible; indeed, the negative project is itself necessarily impossible. Everything that can be said about it is deeply contradictory, because it is itself the bottomless deepening of contradictions.

The common essence of monist, binary, and pluralist ontology is the elevation of the subject to a (singular or multiple) substance—the failure to grasp the nothingness that defines subjectivity. The question of “why am I?” silently answers itself. Without a subject to pose the question, the question could not be posed. No reproductive apparatus is necessary to create or explain subjectivity. The origin and definition of subjectivity is the abyss; all else consists of substance that is constructed around the void and mistaken as the self. When we say that the



self consists of a nothingness, this is the same as the assertion that *there is no self*.

The *avant-garde* of capitalism has been misconstrued as its enemy. Although the queer could be called the negative party of the re-creationist order, this is inseparable from the recognition that the queer is central to the reproduction of the future. In opposition to the world of binary gender, procreationism, the family, politics, modernism, structuralism, dialectics, &c., the "queer revolt" posits pluralist gender, re-creationism, the identity group, identification, postmodernism, post-structuralism, multiplicitous struggle, &c. The latter constitute the reproductive apparatuses of the pluralist existent.

In a crucial point of emergence long ago, woman established herself as existent rather than plunge the monist world of Man into the void from which she came. In another, the proletariat struggled to secure its autonomous liberation from the bourgeoisie, failing to destroy the bourgeoisie and itself entirely. On the stage set by the present order, the queer force is making itself busy with the proliferation of identities and failing to effect the total negation of identity.

In the re-creationist order, life is experienced as void and death as the only escape. Such is not far from the truth. For those singularities which are born or incorporated into the reproductive order of identification—today, all are included, the woman, the queer, &c.—the void is no longer experienced as dwelling outside the castle, but as dwelling *within*.

Like the negative project of the proletariat, the negative queer project entails the total negation of the existent, of the existent's reproductive apparatuses, and of itself. What's more, the latter's self-abolition must take place not only as death, but also as the murder of a certain kind of death. This is because even suicide, or self-abolition, has been subsumed under the process of re-creationism. Death is necessary in self-creation because in the act of becoming, one must kill the old version of himself. In order to destroy the reproductive process of re-creation, the queer must destroy the latter's false version of suicide. The queer death-drive is an urge for *pure* suicide, which is also *pure murder*.

It is no coincidence that those who theorise on themes of pluralist gender identity, postmodernism, and intersectionality, also discourage suicide and instead offer the killing of *a part of oneself in order to reinvent oneself anew*.

Man's fall from grace and the collapse of the Twin Towers pale in comparison to the purely negative project, so awful are its manifestations. These are necessarily unspeakable, but if we could imagine the entire world rendered as an aborted fetus, the plunging of the universe into an abyss that opened in the space-time continuum, or the people of the world digging corpses out of their graves and fucking them endlessly, we would catch a glimpse of the death it seeks to unleash. To those who love this world, human strike will appear as no thing of beauty, but to those who hate it there is nothing as beautiful.

Pure suicide is not the suicide of the individual motivated by hopelessness, though it is antithetical to hope. It is not the suicide that comes from a moment of despair, but from an entire *world* of despair. It is not decided in the turn of an instant, but takes place out-of-time. For in its self-destruction, the purely negative singularity destroys the world, renders impotent its apparatuses of reproduction, and brings the Future to an end.

If the Tower our mother our body our sex burned down tonight—the hypothesis cannot be rejected, the whole castle has already burned down except for the Tower, the Tower's turn will come, since what else remains to burn? What's more to explain than that such a Tower, such a perfect gem of human grandeur not be condemned and executed in these days of perverse criminality? For sure it's a target, plans are afoot... She is there, round, delicious, appetizing, eternal, pregnant with genius and with books, and she is not there. One gulp of the plane. We are already killed. Read all about it in tomorrow's paper—if the Tower has burned, we are already dead and tomorrow we shall die of it

If the Tower has not yet burned, it will burn in a day or two.



# My Preferred Gender Pronoun is Negation

▸ Pittsburgh, September 2009

**T**hursday night, following a radical queer motivational speech about rioting, a black bloc emerged as the fourth round of the day's street fighting. This particularly vicious bloc (later named the Bash Back! black bloc) moved through Oakland smashing countless windows, overturning dumpsters and setting them on fire.

A friend remarks: what is so queer about that? People just wore black and burned things in the street. We counter: the practice of wearing black and destroying everything may very well be the queerest gesture of all.

In fact, it cuts to the heart of the matter: to queer is to negate. At this intersection of our deviant bodies we experimented in becoming-mob, prolematizing our very bodily boundaries. Fairy wands, tiaras, hammers, and masks were annexed into our limbs as dangerous prosthetics. Rocks, dumpsters, and black sequined dresses were profaned and put into use—thrown through windows, set on fire, and draped over our shoulders as a more fabulous take on riot attire. Our thresholds-of-self

dissolved further into a floor of shattered glass and smoldering garbage across the field of play.

Without hesitation, queers shed the constraints of identity in becoming autonomous, mobile, and multiple with varying difference. We interchanged desires, gratifications, ecstasies, and tender emotions without reference to the tables of surplus value of power structures. Muscled arms built barricades and broke shit to the imagined anthems of riot grrrl (or was it La Roux?).

If the thesis is correct that gender is always performative, then our performed selves resonated with the queerest gender of all: that of total destroy. Henceforth our preferred gender pronouns are the sound of shattering glass, the weight of hammers in our hands and the sickly-sweet aroma of shit on fire. Address us accordingly.

The march continued its rampage down Forbes, encountering some two-bit would-be queerbasher calling us faggots. Before he could realize his mistake, we enacted a particularly cold-blooded sadism on the fool. He was shown his error in a shower of kicks, punches, and a copious dousing of pepper spray. Before he even hit the floor, the immunitary logic of biopower was turned inside-out. His power to shape our bodies and to expose them to death was collapsed into itself. Yes, our bodies have been shaped, but into monstrous vessels of potential and revolt. He was instead made our object and was exposed to our violence.

An amalgamation of our crude delinquency and nasty desires unapologetically saturated the streets (and bath-

rooms and hotels and alleys) of Pittsburgh this past week. With ribald irresponsibility we wrecked, fucked, fought, and came all over politics' symbolic terrain, synchronized only in our lust for disorder. Using our bucking bodies against restraint itself, we had no message—choosing instead to leave behind ruins of boundaries and a tangible path of demolition. Our unleashing of violent aspirations upon homophobic frat boys and lifeless-daily-addictions spilled over as we pursued further stimulation onto each other. We got wet and came hard in a pile of dirty money, corrupting every inch of sterility with the funk of our perspiring bodies—aching with impure satisfaction. Our scheming, pleasure-seeking bodies came into conflict with lesser realities and emerged victorious. We left stains of the queerest kind all over the broken bits of capital graced by our presence.

Two questions were raised this summer. In Chicago: "to barricade or not to barricade?" And in New York: "does she give a fuck about the insurrection?" Thursday answered both definitively in the affirmative. To the question of barricades we answer that we only correctly concern ourselves with how to make them taller, stronger, more terrible. To the latter, we offer a form-of-life that could be read as a reuniting of barricades and unshaven legs. But what's more, a synthesis of strap-on-cocks, hammers, outlandish wigs, bricks, fire, pepper-spray, licking, fisting, and always ultraviolence.





# **Manifesto for the Trans-Feminist Insurrection**

.. The WhoreDykeBlackTransFeminist Network

We call for trans-feminist insurrection:

**W**e come from radical feminism, we are the dykes, the whores, the trans, the immigrants, the blacks, the hetero dissidents... we are the rage of the feminist revolution and we want to bare our teeth; out of the offices of gender and politically correct, and that our desire guides us continuing to be politically incorrect, bothering, rethinking and changing the signification of our mutations. Being just women isn't enough anymore. We have outgrown "Women" as the political subject of feminism, and it is in itself exclusive, it leaves out the dykes, trans, the whores, the one who wear veils, the ones who earn little and don't go to the university, the ones who yell, the immigrants without legal resident papers, the fags.

Let's dynamite the sex and gender binominal as a political practice. Let's follow the path that we began, "one is not born a woman but becomes one", let's continue unmasking the power structure, the division and

hierarchy. If we can't learn that the man/woman difference is a cultural product, just as the hierarchal structure that oppresses us, we reinforce the structure that tyrannizes us: the "man/woman" borders. Everyone produces gender, we produce freedom. Arguments with countless genders...

We call for reinvention based on desire, the fight with our bodies before any totalitarian regime. Our bodies are ours!, as well as their limits, mutations, colors and transactions. We don't need protection over the decisions our bodies, we transmute our genders, we are what we want to be, transvestites, dykes, super-fems, butches, whores, transgenders, we wear veils and speak Wolof; we are network: furious pack.

We call for insurrection, for the occupation of the streets, to the blogs, to disobedience, to not ask for permission, to generate alliances and structures of our own: let's not defend ourselves, make them fear us!

We are a reality, we operate in different cities and contexts, we are connected, we have common objectives and we won't be silenced now. Feminism will be trans-feminist or not at all...

We luv you.

*The WhoreDykeBlackTransFeminist Network.*

# Towards an Insurrectionary Transfeminism

x some deceptive trannies

**A note on gender:** *This essay deals with the discursive and material histories of people I refer to as "trans women," which I broadly define as anyone not assigned-female at birth who experiences their bodies as female, lives their gender in a way that could be taken as female, and/or identifies as woman/trans-female-spectrum/transfeminism. I rather begrudgingly use this term with a degree of hesitance as it certainly erases the complexities of my gender experience, but I aim to broadly relate to those who have been coercively assigned a gender category other than Woman but who still inherit much of the legacy of such a category.*

**T**rans people remain strangers and outcasts within much of the contemporary discourses of insurrectionary feminism. Essays about "male-bodied" perpetrators of sexual assault and "socialized men and women" seem to leave much to be analyzed about the ways in which trans people have historically related the function-

ing of gender systems and the development of capitalism as a system. It is in this context that we discursively intervene with that which we might term insurrectionary trans-feminism, an analysis which distinctively analyzes the ways in which trans bodies relate to the legacy of capitalism and the possibilities of living communism and spreading anarchy. This is distinctly **not** a plea for inclusion, nor is it an articulation of identity politics, but rather an articulation of why we might be invested in insurrection and communization with those who share our desires and perhaps a preliminary set of ideas on how our positionalities might be used in such processes. In order to imagine the possibilities of subversion, however, we must first recognize the historical relations of capitalism to the formulation of the trans subject.

The relation between capitalism and the trans subject is a contentious one. While many theorists such as Leslie Feinberg have sought to piece together a universal, ahistorical narrative of trans people throughout history across the world, we see such a task as ultimately failing to take into account the precise economic and social conditions which gave rise to each specific instance of gender variance. Gender nonconformity is not a stable or coherent phenomenon which appears in history due to the same conditions, rather it contextually can have a multiplicity of meanings. While it could certainly be useful to analyze the ways in which capitalism has instituted binary-based gender systems as a means to organize reproductive labor in colonial contexts with different gender systems, for the purposes of this essay we

will begin with the notion of the transsexual in context of the early 20th century United States, where the first narratives of transsexuality began to appear. These narratives are intimately tied to the rise of capitalist ventures in experimental medical procedures which gave rise to the first forms of gender reassignment surgery. By the 1950s, transsexuality had gained public attention in the United States with the gender reassignment surgery of Christine Jorgensen. Jorgensen's narrative, as some narratives just twenty years before her, became a model for the transsexual identity narrative, in which the subject feels that she is in the "wrong body" and that surgery has made her feel whole and relieved the immense feeling of body dysphoria now that she is a real woman. It is in this narrative that we find the experiences of gender dysphoria taking shape to define a concrete subject position of "trans."

At the same time, as capital has created the ability for trans individuals to modify their bodies in the ways that they see fit, it has also, with biomedical and psychological apparatuses, proliferated the means by which to discipline the trans body. Two of the most notable apparatuses to this effect are the Standards of Care, which enforced rigorous standards of femininity and passability as a necessary first step towards access to medical technologies of transition, as well as the "charm schools" which accompanied many GID clinics which sought to properly resocialize trans women as "proper ladies" with manners, grace, and all of the feminine wiles of "natural women." The trans subject's desires are easily molded

into that which can be profitable to capitalism, whether it is countless sessions of laser hair removal sessions, gender reassignment surgeries, or hormone therapy. That is, trans subjectivity is bound to the conditions of capitalism and disciplinary techniques which have given rise to it. We deploy these words carefully, however, as we also recognize the ways in which “radicals” and “feminists” have deployed the very same as a means of constructing trans women as capitalist-created penetrators of vanity and artificial artifacts of femininity. Yet the constructedness of the trans subject and the trans body is no more tied to the history of capitalism and domination than the constructedness of woman as an identity and a body, or the constructedness of racialized identities and bodies.

We do not mean to imply that trans identity is based upon a particular form of body modification or access to medical technology, but rather that these early narratives of trans experience and the disciplinary techniques shaping such identities are foundational in the ways in which trans identity has grown, whether in the broadening terms of constituting a political “trans community” on the basis of sharing a feeling of dysphoria or the emergence of genderqueer as a politicized subjectivity which has become the delight of postmodernism. Transfeminism, then, has emerged as theory dedicated to an articulation of the trans speaking subject. Yet capitalism has an ever expanding amount of room to incorporate an infinite amount of gendered subjectivities which can be rendered value-creating to capital. In this way, trans theory faces limits similar to feminist theory, which has

produced a feminized form of capital which is no less brutal in its form. The task, then, is to create an insurrectionary theory which is based on rendering trans bodies without function in the process of value creation, which necessitates their very identity as trans, as woman, as human. As trans people, we feel corporeality forcibly pushed onto us in an attempt to render us intelligible, to use the state of our bodies to comprehend our gender and sell us “more natural-looking” bodies. We feel our bodies outweigh our chosen identities when we interact with others and do not pass. As trans women, as we experience the legacy of trans subjectivity within capitalism, we also feel the weight of the corporeality of women in capitalism crush our existences. We experience the implicit violence in gendered division of labor every time we are raped and beaten and condescended to and treated as a hot she-male sex toy. Yet it is in this experience that we might see the possibilities of human strike for the trans woman.

Trans women experience corporeality in a unique way. While capital hopes to continue to use the female body as proletarian machine to reproduce labor-power, trans women’s bodies cannot produce more workers and are constantly already viewed as denaturalized. Perhaps in valorizing this inoperability in reproduction, and willfully extending it to all forms of reproductive labor, we see the potentiality of human strike. Ways of extending this remain to be seen, but in this affront to capitalist-produced nature and matrices of heteronormativity which are crucial to the functioning of capitalism,

we see the kinship between the human strike of trans women and the materialization of a non-reproductive, purely negative queer force. It seems that the trans woman too has no future, and thus through the building of this negative force might have a stake in wrecking everything and abolishing herself in the process. In any case, we do not have the answers that will render society inoperable, that will end the social reproduction of this world. Yet as trans women, we know that every strike against capital is a strike against the mechanisms of gender oppression, and that every strike against the gendered violence in our lives is a strike against the machinations of capital.

gender strike is human strike,  
*some deceptive trannies.*



# Identity in Crisis

## Swerve/Negation

x bædan

i

In an effort to isolate a strategic horizon and to avoid certain dead ends, we will consider the proposals of radical queer theorist Micha Cardenas in her recent book *Trans Desire*. Throughout the book, Micha offers her experience with a radical porn collective as an example of what she believes to be a subversive praxis of biopolitical resistance through porn production. She begins:

This paper will work with a process ontology, a concept of material reality that is constantly in the movement of becoming, in the churning flux of the chiasmic unity, a reality unbound in its material richness, where scales of observation can be wildly traversed in time and space, where everything is multiplicity and it is only the limited view of our current perceptions that creates the oc-

casional appearance of wholeness and stillness.

Her “churning flux of chiasmic unity” is nothing new to us. There is already a name for this “reality unbound in its material richness”: capitalism. The image of recreationism we elaborated in the third point of our second contention could very succinctly be described as throwing of bodies into this churning flux as bodies “constantly in the movement of becoming.” We read “becoming” as a continuous series of technologies of the self, a constant stream of status updates, an endless fine-tuning and re-writing of one’s identity to be more perfectly compatible with the needs of the market. Cardenas begins with the sinister postmodern operation of valorizing the meaninglessness of life under capital. If this is our framework, we are doomed from the start.

Under the heading “Creating a Queer Porn Commons” Cardenas goes on to describe her work with *Sharing is Sexy* (SIS):

I will examine the *Sharing is Sexy* collective as an example of porn production as radical political gesture... I would like to discuss a collaborative project which I am participating in, *Sharing is Sexy* (SIS), as a material example [of a] collective project that aims at creating queer porn that is licensed under a Creative Commons, By Attribution, Non Commercial, Share Alike license. The

process of creating and distributing porn is used to create radical queer community and to facilitate new conceptualizations of gender and sexuality.

SIS uses non-commercial license to facilitate a porn making praxis, to be able to invite someone to experiment with the expression of their sexual desires and to know that no one is making money off of it (or very little money at best, in the case of bandwidth). SIS does not want porn corporations to use their content and resell it with massive infrastructures, which SIS would consider commercial use.

There is a failure of understanding here in the belief that the absence of an immediate exchange of money qualifies something as non-commercial or anti-capitalist. The simple fact that one is not paid for one's labor is not enough to disqualify it from being labor. A great deal of labor, perhaps even the majority, is unwaged. An wide array of unpaid work has been subsumed so as to still produce a great deal of value. One isn't paid to update their Facebook profile. No licensing in existence can truly exempt something from the market. Where she says "distribution to create radical queer community" we can read "investment in the creation of new radical queer markets." These techniques of self-production can be as queer or as radical as possible, this will only cement their position as the *avant-garde* of capital.

She goes on:

I am interested in an experimental, materialist, affective approach to epistemology or meaning. I am approaching SIS as a concrete exploration of the possibilities of porn production, as a form of biopolitical resistance, and as an attempt to apply open source methodologies to cultural production with my own body and emotions.

It is unclear what is meant here by 'biopolitical resistance.' Porn is clearly a biopolitical terrain: a zone of the deployment of power that works to construct human subjectivity and sexuality. Where Micha goes astray is in only conceiving of power a top-down operation, as purely normative. The sexual practices portrayed in her porn, however radical they may be, are just as constructed and constructing as the dominant practices found in any other porn. If we are to read this as "biopolitical resistance" then we are naming as resistance what is simply the status quo functioning of pornography: to produce and discipline the sexual desires of its viewers. Changing the imagery does not change these productive forms of control. Beyond this, the application of open-source methodologies to cultural production is simply descriptive of cultural production as it already functions. Social media is the perfect example of the way in which our bodies and our emotions are put in the service of production through "open source methodologies."

She continues:

With respect to oppression of subaltern identities, non-oppressive porn that does not 'contain' oppression is not enough. SIS strives to make anti-oppression porn that challenges the institutions of oppression along lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Similarly with capitalism, I still harbor hope of making anti-capitalist porn that challenges the existence of capitalism.

Micha's ambitions become increasingly dubious as we go on. No such cultural production, however "anti-oppressive" its content, can escape the fundamentally oppressive structure of the institution. It is still reliant on mediated production, distribution, and consumption of sexuality. It is disseminated through material channels of dead labor based on real exploitation. A strong argument can be made that any gesture to integrate or assimilate marginalized groups into structurally flawed forms only acts to legitimate the form itself. We remain alienated regardless of the flavor of the now vindicated alienation. Secondly, to even evaluate the form in a vacuum, one must question what it means to be anti-oppressive in nature, especially when "anti-oppression" has become just another label to increase the value of any commodity: people still pay thousands to attend anti-oppression classes and academics use the trendiest brand of identity politics to sell books and fill rosters. The consumption

of anti-oppressive porn is in no way intrinsically anti-capitalist. In fact, it is merely pioneering the way for pornographers to market a new brand of sexual commodities to the most discerning ethical consumers. One needn't search too hard on Google to realize that this is already the situation.

In the section "Building Queer Network Subjectivities, Community as Resistance to Biopower," she goes on:

We are facilitating a process of building new genders and sexualities by making porn more accessible because the viewer can know that the images were not made under exploitative conditions, the images are free and they are licensed to be shared. Creating a dynamic of sharing is important to us in order to facilitate dialogue and processes of feedback or exchange and allowing new shapings of desire to come out of those feedback processes...

The activity of SIS can be seen on numerous levels as an act of biopolitical resistance: it challenges commodification of expressions of queer desire, allows the collective members to explore their own desires, and facilitates community offline and online through dialogue and the sharing of content, building a queer porn commons. SIS not only provides the conditions of pos-

sibility for the creation of new subjectivities that challenge gender and sexual norms for its participants but it also acts as biopolitical information vectors, spreading embodied resistant desires. Radical queer media, distributed on the net or passed hand to hand in zines, but also with live events like burlesque shows, can act as lines of flight, potentials of inoperativity, spreading from the individual act of creative world building with one's body or one's community to other people and other places. These radical transmissions virtualize techniques of biopolitical resistance in the minds of the viewers, individuation in new assemblages and deterritorializing queer resistance to biopower...

With pornography, this function of the imagined subject in the fantasy can operate like the mirror stage, where the subject imagines themselves one way and gradually becomes that.... A challenge for Radical porn, which often presents a viewer with a new conception of what is possible, would be to understand how to enable a viewer to identify with the person portrayed in the work....

This porn is more authentic, and therefore more erotic because it is easy to relate

to because these are real people, normal people, people like you.

There is nothing about the production of new genders and sexualities that resists capitalism; to the contrary, this production is fertile terrain for new economic growth, as we have already established. But this delusion may bear with it a certain kind of truth—or, to be more precise, a misconception of a truth. It makes sense here to speak of transsexuality, because this particularly self-conscious process of producing new genders operates as a microcosm of the whole social production of new subjectivities of which we are speaking. Transsexuality bears a totally negative aspect that relentlessly destroys capitalist subjectivities, yet this negativity is bound within a productive process that continually produces new capitalist subjectivities.

## ii

It is revealing that the emphasis of *Sharing is Sexy* is in the act of sharing itself. It is crucial for us to continually bring our analysis back to this point as sharing marks the real limitation of this strategy, but also of an entire set of ideas that believe that sharing is the revolution, is communization, or is the end of the commodity relationship. There is a criticism of this line of thought within theories of communization that articulates a bright line between sharing and communization as the totally negative ma-



terial undoing of capitalist society and its corresponding forms. From the text "Reflections around *Call*":

In call the term communization is systematically understood as 'making common.' in the previous quotation for instance the 'acts of communization' are described as 'making common such-and-such space, such-and-such machine, such-and-such knowledge.' That which is to put in common is use, as when it is said that to communize a space is to liberate its use.... In the same logic, if communization is 'making common,' then communism is systematically assimilated with sharing. The theme of sharing is omnipresent in *Call*...

The point is not that sharing and communism have nothing to do with another, but we have trouble understanding how they can be synonymous. Sharing already exists in capitalism: social institutions as important as the family function on the basis of sharing, and even in countries where capitalism is the oldest and where familial relation reduces itself to its simplest expression (the parent-child relation), capital, even economically, would not survive without this form of social sharing.

We will follow this criticism. Sharing may very well be sexy, but despite Micha Cardenas' (or Food Not Bombs'

or the lending library's) insistence to the contrary, it has nothing to do with the undoing class society. Sharing is desirable, and even beneficial, but capitalism will allow for almost an unlimited vision of sharing so long as the structural reproduction of the commodity relation is not challenged.

Let us take this criticism further, by locating the Self alongside the state, the commodity, the family, and gender as a fundamental form of capital and consequentially a terrain in which to do battle, and a limit to be destroyed. From here on, we cannot allow ourselves to be limited to a vision of unlimited sharing between coherent Selves. Such maintenance of the atomized forms, regardless of what is held between, is just a reshaping of misery. Rather, it is necessary to immediately engage in the sabotage of the Self, the strike against subjectivity. What separates me from you, what forms me and constitutes my entirety must be put into question and undone. Beyond the obvious need to destroy my gender, my race, my class position there is the more vital need to struggle against my image, my technologies of the self, my singular debility.

### iii

In thinking about what it means to struggle against identities and predicates, we can look to the idea of *the swerve* articulated by the group *Theorie Communiste*. The swerve, a reference to the way flowing water hits a rock and is necessarily split into two streams, is perhaps

the best way to describe how in the course of a struggle, any subject must reach and experience its own subjectivity as a limit, as an objective constraint, and to struggle against it. Through struggle, one must reach the point at which it becomes impossible to both continue to struggle and to maintain one's self.

For the proletariat, to act as a class is currently, on the one hand, to have no other horizon than capital and the categories of its reproduction, and on the other, for the same reason, it is to be in contradiction with, and to put into question, its own reproduction as a class. This conflict, this swerve in the action of the proletariat, is the content of class struggle and what is at stake in it. From daily struggles to revolution, there can only be a rupture. But this rupture is prefigured in the daily course of the class struggle each time that class belonging appears, within these struggles, as an external constraint which is objectified in capital, in the very course of the proletariat's activity as a class...

The proletariat's action as a class is characterised by a swerve within itself through practices that externalise their own existence as class practices as a constraint which is objectified in the reproduction of capital. It is no longer possible to do anything

more as a worker, while remaining a worker. This confrontation of the proletariat with its own constitution as a class is now the content of the class struggle and what is at stake in it is the putting into question by the proletariat of its own existence as a class and of all classes.

Currently, the revolution is predicated on the supersession of a constitutive contradiction of the class struggle: for the proletariat, being a class is the obstacle that its struggle as a class must get beyond, abolish. Class unity can no longer be formed on the basis of wage labor and the struggle over immediate demands as a prerequisite for its revolutionary activity. The unity of the proletariat can now only be the activity in which it abolishes itself by abolishing everything that divides it.

While we certainly reject any deterministic or scientific approach to explaining how a revolution 'must' happen, the theories of anti-state 'communizers' are interesting specifically because they reject the core tenets of Marxism: workers' identity, the role of the Party, class unity, valorization of the means of production, the dictatorship of the proletariat, formalism, even the workers' movement itself.

Any practice that aims to elaborate the swerve within the set of struggles that will emerge through the course

of the current crisis must begin with a study and understanding of the subject positions being put into question by the crisis itself. The desire is for struggles to reach the point that there is a swerve against the positions that the participants are desperately attempting to cling to. Those occupying buildings, refusing to leave their foreclosed homes, sabotaging their places of work, defying their predicates, disobeying the regime of whiteness, violently rejecting middle class complacency, must all inevitably come up against the brutal truth that each social role marks a real limits to their activity, and that the possibility of supersession of these limits is found within their activity itself.

In the same way, those who champion the collapse of the old subjects while proposing the formation of new ones must be confronted at all costs. To struggle for a new fluid identity must be seen as the bearing the limitation of all struggle for identity, as being merely the management of the decomposition of capital so as to restructure and preserve it. For us there can be no affirmative or positive subject, only an undoing of the material foundations of subjectivity.

#### iv

Some proposals:

- The widespread practice of identity theft (which effects not only the expropriation of resources from financial institutions but also the unraveling of

those institutions' ability to accurately identify individuals by linking with any degree of certainty an individual and his official identity—name, SSN, account number);

- The rise of the Anonymous phenomenon that began with petty 4chan hooliganism and went on to “troll society” (launching attacks from the cover of internet anonymity through practices of trolling, slander, leaking of huge quantities of confidential information including personal accounts data, massive online piracy networks for software, music, films, porn, books, etc.—not to mention IRL piracy in Somalia or anywhere—DDOS assaults on various institutions and organizations, especially agents in information control and management, attacks and creation of counter-repressive technology networks in solidarity with North African rebels experiencing severe government repression of internet communication);
- Total refusal of debt (giving the collectors the run-around);
- Flash mob expropriations and attacks;
- Pushing the inherent contradictions of identity politics towards their most extremist conclusions in order to undermine any logical basis that its circulation still retains (and outright attacking its priests);

- Wearing masks and destroying things;
- Squatting, looting, workplace theft and all forms of expropriation that make it possible for us to live in refusal of the apparatuses that produce us as workers or any other subject.

What these practices have in common is twofold: the sabotage of the systems of identification (by which we mean the technological networks by which an individual can be identified by financial, governmental, and social institutions as being his unique self—i.e. his social security number; as possessing certain attributes; and/or as belonging to a group, class, society, etc.), and some level of secrecy or anonymity on the part of the saboteurs. These latter practices (Anonymous, wearing literal or figurative masks, mobbing, secret societies, and so on) demonstrate that individuals necessarily take on, or emerge as, new forms of negative-being while assaulting systems of identification. Negative-being bears no relation to the forms of liberal, reductionist, being-in-common-at-the-lowest-common-denominator type of group mentality that is promoted by slogans about sharing, consensus, direct-democracy, equality, nor to the hip performance-art-style production of new subjectivities, but rather enacts in-itself the negation of the subject (the refusal of obedience, of attribution, and of identification) and thus of the very foundation of liberal society.

If we can return to Micha for just a moment:

This leads to my critique of sabotage as an important political strategy. Sabotage assumes a single world, assumes that the worker spends most of his days in the factory making machines or in the cubicle writing software, and therefore his best chance of resistance is in sabotage. Our strategy with SIS values subversion over sabotage, focusing on reuse of the garbage of capitalism for our own purposes of world building. In our heterotopic world and multi-faceted identities, it makes sense for us to bring home the cameras we use at work for photographing products and use them to produce queer anti-capitalist porn.

Micha is correct in her recognition that the old workers struggles are doomed. Where she is dead wrong is in her conclusions drawn from this. This society is reconstituted in every moment of every day. All the normative gestures carried out by society's members reproduce the social relationship of capital, and the not-so-normative gestures have their niche markets too. All of us—and especially the hip and radical among us—are positioned as workers in a social factory with no outside that is busily churning out new subjectivities and methods of tracking, identifying, categorizing, and managing them, and whose machinery is ripe for sabotage. Subversion can only offer us a surface level restructuring, a re-arrangement of elements that has never been in any



way related to the possibility of destroying capitalism. No, we need to recognize that sabotage remains our invariant task. We are speaking here of a sabotage of the technology and social networks that assign, monitor, classify, and designate subjectivity.

To return to the figure of pornography: The dead labor of thousands of boys not unlike myself, extracted from them in the form of the capture of their image and the spectacle of their sexuality is put into service. I am structured, formed, constituted by the unending reproduction of these specters. I, like an innumerable population of bodies, am captured by these images and animated by them. If it would have ever been possible to separate my own desire from the desires of the apparatuses that shape me, it isn't any longer. Through a miserable range of techniques of the self, I am re-created like Adam in the image of the God commodity, the dead labor taken from bodies for the cost of a wage. Through the successful application of these techniques, my self also becomes a marketable commodity. My sex, my hips, my tattoos, my particular skill set is alienated from me as an image, taken, multiplied, deployed through an almost endless network of apparatuses (tablets, computers, iPhones, network cables, servers, wifi, memories, bodies, fantasies) so that my dead labor may infinitely haunt bodies in the way all of ours are haunted.

There is no subversive practice that can undo this haunting of the living by the dead. For the ceaseless reproduction and exploitation of my image, and all images that are put into the service of the commodity relation-

ship to be halted in even the slightest way would require the total sabotage and destruction of every apparatus that acts toward this reproduction. We cannot orient ourselves towards the subversion of the cyborg network that enchants us as commodities. We have to take it all down.

# Musings on Nothingness and Some of Its Varieties

Humor

x bædan

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3.1 Sexual intercourse is whatever takes place between a phallus and an orifice.

- **remark 1:** Understood energetically, a phallus is whatever has an explosive (or repulsive) energy, and an orifice is whatever has an implosive (or attractive) energy. Understood materially, a phallus is whatever protrudes and the orifice is whatever consumes.
- **remark 2a:** Thus the five primary human orifices are the mouth, the anus, the cunt, and the eyes. The six secondary human orifices are the ears, the nostrils, the naval (the orifice which begins to atrophy upon birth), and the urethra. The tertiary human orifices are the one thousand one hundred pores of the skin.

- **aside:** One of the three hyperbolic sexual fantasies is that of having every orifice fucked at once. The atrophied form of this fantasy is the double or triple penetration, while its sub-cosmic form is the simultaneous penetration of all of the one thousand one hundred and eleven orifices.
- **remark 2b:** The six primary human phalluses are the head, the four limbs, and the cock or clitoris. The twenty-seven secondary human phalluses are the nose, the ears, the tongue, the chin, the nipples, the ten fingers and the ten toes. The tertiary human phalluses are all the three thousand three hundred hairs of the body.
  - **aside:** The second hyperbolic sexual fantasy is that of having every one of one's phalluses sucked at once. Atrophied forms of this fantasy appear in fetishes such as toe-sucking, while its sub-cosmic form is the simultaneous felatio of all of the three thousand three hundred thirty-three phalluses.
- **remark 3a:** The atrophied phallus is convex, and the atrophied orifice is concave. The strength of the phallus is thus conceived of in relation to the extent of its protrusion, and for the orifice its depth.
- **remark 3b:** The pure phallus, however, protrudes infinitely, and the pure orifice is infinitely deep.

These are thus neither concave nor convex, but hyperbolic.

- **aside:** The human cock, which protrudes finitely and has its own orifice in the urethra as well as its many pores, is therefore not a pure phallus. The human cunt, whose depth is finite and which has its own phallus in the clitoris as well as its many hairs, is therefore not a pure orifice.
- **aside:** The sun is nearly a pure phallus, and the earth is nearly a pure orifice. Neither, however, is pure or hyperbolic.
- **aside:** The supernova is closer still to a pure phallus, and the black hole to a pure orifice. Neither, however, is pure or hyperbolic.
- **aside:** The Big Bang would have to have been a pure phallus, and the Big Crunch would have to be a pure orifice.

3.12 All intercourse takes place between a phallus and an orifice.

- **aside:** Indeed, all intercourse takes place between the pure phallus and the pure orifice, since these are the beginning and end of the universe, respectively.

3.13 Therefore all intercourse is sexual intercourse.

3.14 All human intercourse is queer.

- **remark 1:** Queer refers to whatever is not heterosexual.
- **remark 2:** The veracity of this proposition can be demonstrated by means of a simple proof: Heterosexual intercourse is whatever intercourse takes place between a pure phallus and a pure orifice. Since there exists no human being who is a pure phallus or pure orifice, every body having one thousand one hundred eleven orifices and three times as many phalluses, it thus follows that human intercourse cannot be heterosexual.
- **remark 3a:** Not only is all human intercourse queer, but no form of human intercourse is more queer than any other.
- **remark 3b:** Some forms of human intercourse are, however, straighter than other forms of intercourse. For example, the penetration of a cunt by a cock is straighter than the penetration of an ear by a tongue, which is in turn straighter than the penetration of an anus by a fist, which is in turn straighter than the penetration of a naval by a nose, and so on.
  - **aside:** The preceding remarks may seem contradictory, but it is only because straightness can only be understood as a measurement, a question of how closely a particular fuck measures up to the grand old fuck between the

pure phallus and the pure orifice. Queerness cannot be understood as a measurement, but only as the humor in the face of the fact that no measuring stick can ever be right, that the rightness of any measurement can only be measured by how far off the mark it is relative to another stick.

- **remark 4a:** It is illogical to claim that a given person is heterosexual, since only a couple can be heterosexual.
- **remark 4b:** But it is likewise illogical to claim that a given couple is heterosexual, when what is meant instead is that the couple is remarkably more successful than most couples at presenting itself as approaching the heterosexuality of the intercourse between the pure orifice and the pure phallus.
- **remark 4c:** A given human couple presents itself as tending toward heterosexuality to the extent that its members are extremely polarized from each other in terms of the various gendered attributes which include physique, personality, dress, and mannerisms.
  - **aside:** Here is the ideally feminine woman with the hypermasculine man. He is at least a head taller than she. He has put his arm around her, and it is the size of her thigh, it as if it is his cock that holds her around

the waist, as if his member were the size of her thigh. They show themselves off as if to provoke in every passerby the staggering thought of such a large member penetrating such a small body, as if they were playing at being daddy and girl (which is still one of the most popular fantasies, though it may cloak itself as schoolteacher and student, father and babysitter, and so on) and she is made up so well that on the one hand it is strikingly obvious how made up she is, but on the other hand this face is understood by anyone who is watching to be nothing but the perfect expression of her true nature, which is to say her superficiality, and this again has the effect of staggering the onlooker, who can hardly imagine how a girl so lacking in depth could take it from such a beast of a man. What a champ; it must be truly painful.

- **remark 4d:** For the heterosexual fantasy draws its fascination almost purely from the obsession with the penetrative act being performed at the most extreme levels of stretching, as if the heterosexual imagination's ideal fantasy would be the image of some monstrous cock, possessed perhaps by a titan or by Zeus himself, penetrating inexorably into the tightest of holes.
  - **aside:** Thus the third hyperbolic sexual fantasy concerns itself with the degree to which



a tight orifice is stretched by a large **phallus**. It has as its atrophied form the fetish for a large cock or fist penetrating a tight hole. On the sub-cosmic level, its forms are birth and death. On the cosmic level, this and the other two hyperbolic sexual fantasies converge as the passage of the infinitely-large body of God through the infinitely-small hole of a moment in time.

- **remark 4e:** In the heterosexual imagination, the polarized couple is understood to possess a strong (re)productive power, while the imperfectly gendered couple possesses a weak (re)productive power, perhaps to the point of sterility.
- **aside:** A given human couple may present itself as tending toward homosexuality to the extent that its members are extremely similar to each other in appearance. To the extent that this similarity is performed in the manner that heterosexuals perform difference, it is a farce. But while to the heterosexual imagination the importance of intercourse is understood as (re)productive and strengthened by polar difference, intercourse understood queerly is a narcissistic endeavor that proceeds in spite of the tremendous variations between different individuals.

- **remark 5:** Understood queerly, all intercourse is queer, while intercourse in the heterosexual imagination is measured as more or less straight.
- **aside:** In the queer understanding of society, it can be seen that the strong (re)productive force that the polarized couple exerts does not pass from their loins to their offspring (as they themselves believe) but rather from their image onto everyone who perceives one pole of that couple as his or her ideal and strives to realize it him or herself. However futile, this effort (which is queer both in that it rests on the fact that people are not real men or women and in that people have to go through at least one sex change in the course of this effort) is itself a powerful (re)productive process.
- **aside:** Thus does the queer understanding of society grasp that no one is a man or a woman except to the extent that they strive to realize the ideal man or woman and trample desperately upon the backs of whoever they find beneath them in an enormous game of king of the hill where the hill is a pile of human bodies.

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4.1 All logic is phallic logic.

- **remark 1a:** This can be demonstrated by the fact that all logic consists in propositional energy: the putting-forward of various elements, definitions, claims, and proofs.
- **remark 1b:** This is further demonstrated by the fact that logic is universally repulsive in nature.
- **remark 2:** The counter-argument might arise that the existence of negational logical processes would negate the claim that all logic is propositional or positive. It is true that there is negational logic. However, this logic is only negates certain specific claims. Indeed, all negational logic can be seen to negate a certain claim only and ever for the purpose of justifying the opposite of said claim. Moreover, even negational logic must put forward a series of positive claims in order to reach the denial of the opposite claim. Hence, all logic is negative only ever deceitfully and in passing and is always positive and propositional in its true process and aim.
- **aside:** There might be said to exist a kind of logic that is negational of all logical propositions without putting forward any propositions of its own. These qualities, however, would disqualify this hypothetical kind of logic from being logic at all.

4.11 Given that all logic is phallic, there is also an orificial counterpart to logic, namely madness.

- **aside:** When speaking of orifices and orificial tendencies, it is technically incorrect to posit that they exist, since they do not and cannot. This is a difficulty not yet resolved, and the expression ought to be taken for what it is, while keeping this caveat in mind.

4.12 The intercourse between logic and madness is thus heterosexual intercourse between a pure phallus and a pure orifice.

4.13 The intercourse between logic and madness is governed by logic. Madness yet has a tendency to defy every form of this governance.

- **aside:** When logic tightens its grip, madness tends to act like a liquid. When logic forms a bowl to hold it, madness evaporates. When logic encapsulates the gas, madness burns away. When logic uses this fire for itself, madness perishes. When madness perishes, logic perishes with it.
- **aside:** This relation can be seen in the organism, whether single-celled or complex. To have substance, the organism must incorporate and breaks down solids to build itself, but to not stiffen and freeze it must drink water and become water. But to not dissolve away it must envelop the water in a membrane. But to not be pierced and thus lose its insides it must be able to sense dangers and move around them. To move and sense it must have energy. To have energy it must absorb this

from the sun. Since the sun is not always present it must store energy in a certain form and burn it later. This storage of energy makes it a potential target for other organisms seeking energy. And so on.

- **aside:** For the most part, the game of survival and death is governed by the logic of survival, and would proceed with or without consciousness. However, consciousness is more than a mere coincidence, happenstance, gift from God, or defiance of God's will. It is also the greatest trick by which to guarantee a precise and brutal play of the game of survival.



# **Introduction to *Queens Against Society***

x Ehn Nothing

**I**t seems obvious that the study of history is a necessary element of continued war against the present world. There are tools lying in every failed insurrection, every temporarily-established zone of free play, every campaign of sabotage that ended in a jail cell or shootout. To ignore these lessons is to forfeit valuable weaponry and strategic insight. History is a weapon.

Additionally, creating a narrative of revolt against the constraints of civilization gives us a lineage to draw motivation from, to keep us warm when we feel broken under the weight of this miserable world. By understanding ourselves as part of an ongoing war that has been raging for 12,000 years, we dynamite a history that would keep us as either spectators or pawns in a theater created by bosses, politicians, and police. History is a compass.

As we search the past for weapons and inspiration, we must also be careful. Every “revolutionary” murderer has been made into martyr by historians trying to “reclaim” the past. The end result of that path is establish-

ment of political cults, with their own party purity and sacred texts. As individuals who would like to see the entire tradition of managed revolution go up in flames, it is not for us to establish the dead as heroic martyrs, but rather to understand them as individuals like us, exemplary in the context of pacified contentment, but flawed nonetheless. To "honor our dead," then, cannot take the form it takes for the religious purists (whether they be Catholic or Leninist in nature), but can only exist as sustained attack against society and the proliferation of spaces and relationships from which that attack can be realized.

Currently, this strategy is elaborated upon in the vandalism, sabotage, and arson taken up by individuals or informally-organized groups of individuals in solidarity with prisoners of war, deceased comrades, or others lost to or harmed by the operations of power. Underlying these attacks is an ecology of revolt that extends far beyond any specific smashed window, glued lock, or torched police car. Our relationships of support, our solidarity with imprisoned comrades, our criminal intimacies, our squats, our syntheses of survival and attack are the materials from which our insurrectional practice springs forth.

It is with this in mind that I wish to critically engage with STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries) and its activities in the post-Stonewall gay liberation movement. As a broke, gender-variant person who desires an insurrectional break with the existent, the activities of Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson hold valuable



lessons on revolt, survival, street-level self-organization, the failure of leftism and feminism, and the interruption of the gender order. I do not wish to make martyrs out of Sylvia or Marsha, nor do I wish to uncritically valorize their activities; the failures and limits of STAR are of more interest to me than mythologized stories of Sylvia Rivera throwing shoes or bricks or Molotov cocktails at police during the Stonewall riots. I hope to engage STAR as a historical weapon and as a precedent of contemporary queer insurrectional projects.

I am not the first to engage with STAR or attempt to rescue its activities from the dustbin of history. Beginning with Martin Duberman's *Stonewall* in 1993, there has been a renewed interest in STAR, including academic essays, anthology contributions, documentary films, and archiving. While this may seem like a lot of attention for a group that existed for just a few years in the early 1970s, the lack of critical engagement or archiving of gay street culture and the self-organized networks that existed within it makes material hard to come by. So while much of the wider current that made ruptures like the Stonewall and Compton's Cafeteria riot<sup>1</sup> possible

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<sup>1</sup> The Compton's Cafeteria riot was an uprising against police repression of queer people that occurred in 1966 in San Francisco. After a queen fought back against police who attempted to arrest her, queers and street people destroyed furniture, smashed out the windows of the business, smashed out the windows of a police car, and burned down a sidewalk newsstand. The next night a picket occurred, during which the replacement windows of the cafe were again smashed. For more on this, see Susan Stryker's film *Screaming Queens*.

has been lost to history or remains uninvestigated and unarchived, STAR exists as a relatively well-documented example of street queens' resistance.

This renewed interest in STAR is not without its problems. Much of the critical writing and archiving is coming from professional academics or activists: positions whose prejudices affect the interpretations of STAR's history. In addition, the main audience for this work is the self-described "radical queer" milieu, which is often also coming from positions within academia, the non-profit industrial complex, or gay activism. While I am reluctant to level accusations of appropriation against middle-class, white leftist queers, this transference of history from "radical queer" academia/activism to "radical queer" academia/activism traps that history in a framework completely divorced from the reality Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson existed in. So we see an attempt to pull STAR into a framework of feminism, communism, or "radical queer"; and a reduction of lived experiences to facts one can repost on the internet to maintain one's image in the "radical queer" subculture. What we are left with is individuals scrambling to mobilize STAR to reinforce their ideologies, political positions, or self-constructed images, no matter how divorced those things may be from the lives of street queens or the methodology of resistance embodied by STAR.

It could be said that, in my writing, I too am guilty of appropriation. Admittedly, I am not a sex worker, in quite the same position of economic precarity, or oppressed by white supremacy in the way Sylvia and Mar-

sha were. However, my approach to STAR is not in service of protecting or reinforcing any ideology. Unlike the academics and activists who wish to position STAR in a context of charitable social work (Benjamin Shepard), or “transgender” liberation (Leslie Feinberg and others), my goal is to draw out currents within STAR’s praxis and relate them to a project of insurrection, allowing Marsha and Sylvia to speak for themselves and refusing to situate STAR within frameworks, such as anarchism, that I identify with. I feel that Marsha and Sylvia’s words, while I may ethically diverge from them significantly at times, speak their own truths.

In the following essay, I draw out particular attitudes, positions, and issues embodied in STAR and the culture of gay liberation that they fought in: conflict with the white gay left, street-level survival, self-defense, anti-police and anti-prison politics, direct action, and anti-assimilationist queerness.

### **Assimilationist Amnesia, Identity Insomnia**

In order to understand STAR’s practices and ideas, it is important to understand the context they existed in, both within the wider society and within the gay subculture. With the increase in historical studies of Stonewall, the fact that gender-variant people, queers of color, and gay street kids were at the front lines has become more evident. However, the continued resistance to this narrative by assimilationist gays and the view of Stonewall as a disconnected, exceptional moment of

gay revolt, has allowed only traces of the wider context of white supremacy, class oppression, transphobia, and hegemonic reformism to be brought to light. The resistance that STAR faced as a multi-racial group of revolutionary street queens illuminates the wider dynamics of the gay liberation movement, and allows us to understand the foundation upon which the current white supremacist, cissexist, middle-class gay assimilationist movement is built upon.

### **Race, Class, Revolution**

Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson were not respectable queers, nor were they poster-children for the modern image of “gay” or “transgender.” They were poor, gender-variant women of color, street-based sex workers, with confrontational, revolutionary politics and, in contrast to the often abstract and traditionally political activists of Gay Activists Alliance, focused on the immediate concerns of the most oppressed gay populations: “street gay people, the street homeless people, and anybody that needed help at that time” (Sylvia Rivera quoted in Feinberg). Within the predominantly white, non-gender-variant, middle-class, reformist gay liberation movement, Sylvia and Marsha were often marginalized, both for their racial, gender, and class statuses, and for their no-compromise attitudes toward gay revolutionary struggle.

After the initial rupture of Stonewall—which, as Sylvia describes, “was street gay people from the Vil-

lage out front—homeless people who lived in the park in Sheridan Square outside the bar—and then drag queens behind them and everybody behind us” (Feinberg interview)—the gay liberation movement had to deal with uppity street queens who rejected abstract politics in favor of street-level concerns. Those with nothing to lose are often those who push hardest when the time comes; this was true at the Stonewall riots, and continued into the gay liberation movement, much to the dismay of those whose idea of “gay liberation” was either inclusion in straight society or managed revolution. These forces of gay normativity and revolutionary management marginalized, erased, and silenced those whose bodies, histories, or ethical orientations refused dominant models. Gay Liberation Front and Gay Activists Alliance meetings became battlefields. As Martin Duberman describes in *Stonewall*: “If someone was not shunning [Sylvia’s] darker skin or sniggering at her passionate, fractured English, they were deploring her rude anarchism as inimical to order or denouncing her sashaying ways as offensive to womanhood.” The particular position Sylvia and Marsha occupied was, by nature of their very identities, resistant to the goals of the increasingly-assimilationist gay movement. Revolutionary street queens of color were an impediment to the goal of assimilation into the white straight capitalist world, leaving the general membership of GAA “frightened by street people” (Arthur Bell quoted in Gan).

This marginalization continues today in the revisionist history favored by the modern equivalents of

GAA assimilationists. The presence of gender-variant people, people of color, poor people, and street people at Stonewall and in the gay liberation movement that followed has been erased or minimized by assimilationists who wish to present a respectable movement of reformist white gays seeking inclusion in capitalism and state institutions.

### **“Transgender Liberation”**

This selective history has also been reconfigured and replicated by the burgeoning transgender movement. The activists and politicians of this movement, seeking the same inclusion of transgender individuals into white capitalist society that the GAA assimilations sought in the 1970s, have created a generalized “transgender” subject in the narrative of Stonewall and the gay liberation movement. As Jessi Gan points out, “the claim that ‘transgender people were at Stonewall too’ enacted its own omissions of difference and hierarchy within the term ‘transgender’” and, as they celebrated Sylvia Rivera’s visibility as transgender, concealed her status as a broke woman of color.

This erasure of the complexities of Sylvia and Marsha’s lives is one example in an ongoing white supremacist, colonialist project taken up by transgender activists, who wish to subsume all variations from Western binary gender under the umbrella of “transgender,” regardless of the origins of the term or the self-understanding of gender-variant individuals. This

flattening of complex experiences also allows for transgender individuals who are white, middle or upper class, assimilationist, or institutionally educated to appropriate the experiences and struggles of radical gender-variant people of color as part of a grand narrative of “transgender,” thereby separating themselves from any responsibility to engage and attack systems of oppression outside of the vague “transphobia.” The “transgender” or “genderqueer” movements, true to their origins within academia and activism, remain dominated by—to utilize Sylvia’s characterization of the gay liberation movement at the 1973 Liberation Day rally—“a white, middle-class, white club.”

### **Feminist and Assimilationist Betrayal**

In a similar move, some feminists have celebrated STAR as an early example of trans women’s participation in feminist organizing, but usually without acknowledgment of both the history of feminism’s violence against male-assigned-at-birth gender-variant people, or how this violence played out against STAR and Sylvia in particular. While both Sylvia and Marsha noted respectful treatment by lesbians situationally, the growing tide of radical feminism and lesbian separatism played out violently against STAR, specifically at the 1973 Christopher Street Liberation Day rally in Washington Square Park. Blocked from speaking and physically attacked by lesbian feminists for parodying womanhood, Sylvia stormed onto the stage, grabbed the mic, and confronted the

audience for its whiteness, class privilege, and lack of concern for prisoners. As Sylvia describes it: "I had to battle my way up on stage, and literally get beaten up and punched around by people I thought were my comrades, to get to that microphone. I got to the microphone and I said my piece." The betrayal, led by lesbian-feminist Jean O'Leary, caused Sylvia to drop out of the movement for decades and attempt suicide.

While the incident proved to be the dramatic end to STAR, it occurred within a context of betrayal by the gay liberation movement and growing hatred for male-assigned gender-variant people within feminist theory and activism. With the dropping of transvestites from the New York antidiscrimination bill—which Sylvia was arrested climbing the walls of City Hall in a dress and high heels to crash a meeting on (Wilchins) and which she attacked a Greenwich Village councilwoman with a clipboard in the service of (Highleyman)—the gay liberation movement turned toward assimilation and reform and began to distance itself from revolutionaries, street people, queers of color, and gender-variant individuals. STAR's politics—"picking up the gun, starting a revolution if necessary"—could find no harmony with a movement of white middle-class gays seeking inclusion in white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

## **Street Survival**

It is no surprise that STAR would come into conflict with a gay movement turning its focus onto integration into



capitalist society. From the beginning, STAR's concerns were not for sloganeering, posturing, masturbatory intellectualism, or "movement building." Survival, as both an attempt to provide for basic needs of living and as a tension toward self-defense and offensive struggle against a society that threatened them, was central to all of STAR's activities, and is key in understanding their positions in the conflict within the gay liberation movement.

Before exploring STAR's projects and revolt, I would like to complicate the narrative—favored today by those who would like to ignore the necessity of struggle in their immediate lives—of Stonewall as the origin of queer struggle against society. Stonewall, like the Compton's Cafeteria riot before it, was only possible because of pre-existing conflictual zones—metropolitan neighborhoods "where social tolerance for sexual difference was high and police interference with neighborhood life was lax or nonexistent" and in which queers shared money from hustling, food, housing, self-defense, and tricks of the trade (Freidman). STAR, therefore, should be seen as one particularly visible manifestation of a wider network of self-organization amongst street queens and poor queer people. Their true origins, then, are not necessarily "political" in nature, but rooted in an informal type of solidarity and mutual aid, often linked to criminality and hatred for the police.

STAR as an organization came out of the occupation of NYU's Weinstein Hall in 1970. The university had refused to allow gay dances, organized by a gay student group, to occur on campus, so gay liberationists occu-

pied the hall and held a sit-in. The arrival of the Tactical Police Force caused the gay liberationists to abandon the occupation. STAR, initially called Street Transvestites for Gay Power, was born of the frustration with the gay liberation movement for its refusal to defend itself and be committed to struggle against the police.

The immediate concerns of life—food, housing, money, safety—were central to all of STAR's projects. Sylvia and Marsha—who, in a common practice amongst street queens and queer sex workers, had secretly turned hotel rooms into temporary communal living spaces, sometimes for 50 or more people (Feinberg)—began work on self-organizing spaces and projects to provide for their needs and those of other street kids. Prior to the formation of STAR House, Sylvia and Marsha had a trailer truck in a parking lot in Greenwich Village, housing two dozen street kids. This was short lived, as Sylvia and Marsha came home one day with food for the kids, only to discover that their home was driving away, with 20 kids still sleeping in it. (Duberman). They then formed STAR House: "We fed people and clothed people. We kept the building going. We went out and hustled the streets. We paid the rent. We didn't want the kids out in the streets hustling. They would go out and rip off food. There was always food in the house and everyone had fun" (Feinberg). This living situation proved to be temporary, and they were evicted for not paying rent. Before leaving, however, they destroyed any work they had done on the building and removed the refrigerator (Duberman). With the members of STAR in precari-

ous living situations, STAR had difficulty actualizing its planned projects, which included dance fundraisers, another STAR home, a telephone line, a recreation center, a bail fund for arrested queens, and a lawyer for queer people in jail.

Equally important to establishing living situations and securing food was the need for self-defense against bashers and police. The generalized sharing of skills amongst queer street kids and sex workers focused heavily on discerning what situations were safe and which weren't, and protecting each other from police. Police and imprisonment were violent and intense, especially for broke street queens. Marsha recalled one transvestite being "grabbed right out of her lover's arms" while on the street (see Marsha interview). In jail, gender-variant prisoners faced rape and abuse by police and inmates, and legal manipulation that caused some queens to have to wait years to get a court date. It is no surprise then, that STAR originated in the frustration with gay liberationists' failure to confront police at NYU; that STAR's first public appearance was at a Young Lords demonstration against police repression (Feinberg) ; that Sylvia's impassioned 1973 speech indicted the gay liberation and women's movements for forgetting its prisoners of war; or that, upon reentering gay struggle in the 90s, Sylvia focused on police violence against Amadou Diallo and Abner Louima, in addition to the murders of Matthew Shepard and Amanda Milan. Sylvia's attitudes on the police are clear: "We always felt that the police were the real

enemy. We expected nothing better than to be treated like we were animals—and we were.”

## Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to address others with whom I share common enemies and common projects. STAR is just one historical note in a legacy of queer insurgency. With the rise of queer theory and transgender history as respectable subjects of study, other accounts of queer and gender-variant revolt are being rescued from oblivion. Much of the time, those doing this historical rescue work have little more in mind than furthering academic careers or reforming systems of exploitation and control. For queer insurgents, then, recovering our history from obscurity and recuperation is a necessary element of struggle. If we do not critically engage this history, we not only lose analytical tools that could aid the spread and sharpening of our revolt, but also abandon the dead to vultures who reduce everything to image and commodity. Everywhere we falter in our analysis or fail to recognize the tools and weapons lying in history, queer academics, “radical queer” scenesters, assimilationist filth, and all other types of gay managers and cops will turn those struggles toward their ends.

The struggle for queer liberation, fed on the sweat and blood of individuals like Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, continues. Many in the gay world today would have us abandon struggle as an antiquated reaction to domination. If they speak of Stonewall, it is to cordon

it off as an antique to be admired. This gay pacifism is not merely the result of gays and lesbians seeing their revolution come to be via gay marriage and hate crime legislation; it is an attempt by newly-integrated bosses and police to prevent revolt in their ranks. Our war, then, is against the gay defenders of society as much as it is against the straight ones.

But it is not only gay capitalists and professional politicians who seek to stifle revolt. Time and again, we have seen the partisans of "radical queer" one moment celebrate queer riots of the past, and the next mobilize identity politics to condemn queer riots today. We have seen these careerists use images of past queer insurrection to sell their books and further their art careers, all with a barely contained hatred for all forms of struggle outside of their control.

For those of us who, through our ethical inclination toward insurrection, have come into conflict with these perennial enemies, the distinction is clear. Glitter is not a basis for affinity. We prefer to forge our friendships in a shared practice of revolt, because we can only truly know each other when we cease to be servile, that is, when we are destructive together.



# Dysphoria Means Total Destroy

x Ignorant Research Institute

**T**he last three weeks, every stranger I have come across has misgendered me, whether I'm femming it up or not. In the mirrored elevator doors at work my face looks tired, angular in all the wrong ways. With some unease, I recognize my dad in my reflection. Both my spiro and estro pills ran out today, and I'm flipping out. They're probably going to arrive Monday, but they might have gotten lost in untracked airmail and what the fuck am I going to do if I've got to spend another Benjamin and wait three weeks more? I want to scream. I'm filled with steam. I'm warding off the desire to hit myself, and so I start daydreaming in my gray cubicle. I see a hijacked airliner turn and head directly towards my desk. I'm staring it down, making ridiculous arm gestures, calling it in like some sort of kamikaze air controller. There's a loud flash, I disappear, and everything burns.

Being so qualitative, dysphoria is difficult to pin down exactly. A decent definition would be something like "intense unease in regards to (one's) gender," where

gender is understood to include the entirety of sex, gender, and anatomy (since none exist outside of the discourses within which they are produced and they are all intimately interrelated). There is a tension, typically formulated as a contradiction between sex and gender, or between what one is, what one desires, and what one is not. Yet, a move away from positivity might help sidestep implicitly essentialist language while potentially opening up some new lines of thought.

Despair and hopelessness marks the quality of dysphoria, burning the border between the world and impossibility deep into me, making its omnipresence unbearably visible. Many other types of despair carry with it the seed of a hope that something possible (however unlikely) could fix the situation one despairs within: the cancer might go away, this ugly breakup could always turn around and spontaneously become a deep and lasting love, I might win the lottery so I can stop being in crushing debt, Obama might bring meaning to my life. Dysphoria carries with it no such thing. While there are despairs that do not carry this hope, the intensity, duration, and scope of gender dysphoria suggests that it is worth analyzing.

This conflict between actual and impossible does not exist in a vacuum, but exists precisely because of the naming-constructing-creating that is this world. The world creates its own impossibilities by its incessant productive categorization, as nothing fits its own definition. Everything is perpetually scratching at the walls, blindly, without any purpose. The intolerability that sur-



rounds everything is also a graininess in everything. The border reveals itself as not one but two, a pair of overlapping shadows. The impossible existing and the longed-for nonexistent intersect here. While this graininess exists everywhere, dysphoria marks where this graininess comes into conflict with gender, and by extension the world and our constitution as subjects. Beyond not fitting the category we were assigned (I am not-this), it is our continually failing to be (I am not-that). This is where the rhetoric of the liberal transfeminist fails. I wasn't born this way, and I can't ever be either. Not-this would imply that dysphoria has a similarity with despair, sharing the commonality of something else one could hope for. The not-that both stands in for and precludes that hope.

It is important to recognize that I am not talking about individuals, beliefs, choices, or actions here, but of a conflict that takes place between graininess and the world within gender and manifesting itself through gender. There is no revolutionary identity here, only an irreconcilable conflict against and through identity. This despair and this hatred is the result. Subsequently, identity-based attacks upon gender will not be able to collapse gender. My taking hormones or getting surgery or whatever is simply my performing the conflict by the lines of power that run through me. It does not follow that these things constitute an attack upon gender itself, although it may stimulate it to evolve in order to maintain its existence. Through and against are distinguished by where (and thus how) the conflict takes place.

## *Dysphoria Means Total Destroy*

These overlapping circles—the impossible existing and the nonexistent—produce one another endlessly, composing the topography of the world. I've gone over why the existing is impossible, but the status of nonexistent might be less obvious. The nonexistent is not something that can be acquired, but exists as the shadows and holes produced by the structuring of the world. It is not a way out. Yet, in the very foundation of this world lies its weakness, by the very fact of its own creating. Not-this, not-that: negation at its heart. Nothing, the very same as the graininess that gives rise to the conflict. Nothing because it lacks categories, because it is the emptiness that overflows every name given to it. It cannot be put to work, it is always breaking down. It cannot be rendered tame, but it will explode in revolt. It exists in the spaces between the things, and in the heart of every thing. It can never be contained. This Nothing attempts to destroy everything in its path.

Looking at the negative responses dysphoria presents, I think a course of action against gender emerges. Where dysphoria drives us towards destruction and away from interacting with gender on its own terms, we see something (or rather, Nothing) that dissolves, attacks, demolishes. This might often appear as destruction of the self or directed against the self such as suicide, drug (ab)use, self-harm, but also can appear as any other outwards action where I, unstable and miserable, unravel everything around me. These all are fundamentally an undoing, action which threatens the very existence of structure. Misgendering is an instance of this structure

imposing itself, spurring this conflict into even greater violence within me. The violence visited upon trans bodies is also an undoing of the conflict, although it works in attempt to stamp out this Nothing. Every action we could take that interacts with gender directly will at best be ineffective, every effort to impose gender upon us is met by increased resistance, and all that is left is destroy. Only Nothing can destroy gender.

To elaborate and clarify: this world is typified by the operations of productive power, creating two overlapping shadows. At once, there is the existing, a direct result of power's creation. As a simultaneous corollary, the nonexistent appears as produced holes, gaps, shadows, a mirage of what could be but contradicting themselves fundamentally. Both the existent and the nonexistent are impossible, empty. Their existence is both enabled and plagued by a graininess that cannot be contained by either but which production finds itself needing. Gender exists as an aspect of the power that creates the world, and while the obvious manifestations of gender can be separated from other aspects of power, its root is this power.

Dysphoria is situated in the space where the existent and the nonexistent overlap—that is, in the world—and is typified by antagonism and fundamental negation. On the one hand, it is a negation of the existent (not-this) and desirous of the nonexistent (not-that) in the modes of which it is capable. Where dysphoria can be softened by interacting with gender and attempting to bring the existent closer to the nonexistent, this will not affect

## *Dysphoria Means Total Destroy*

power or the reproduction of the world. Where dysphoria becomes feral and lusts for dissolution, it becomes the exit from this world to a place that does not yet exist. To destroy gender, we must be willing to destroy the world it exists within. After all, there's no hope anyway... why not?

# **An Insurrectional Practice Against Gender**

Considerations on Resonance, Memory, and  
Attack

x Lupa

I wish I could tell you that I became numb to the pain after all these years, but the news of the murder of another trans woman punches me in the gut every time it reaches me. Upon discovering details of Deoni Jones's murder, I'm left gasping for air and for the words or actions to express my total hatred for the society that produces the rhythms of gender-maintaining violence and mourning that have come to characterize the only rhythm that is audible to those of us seeking a way out of gender's terrible song. There's something inside of me that almost wishes to become deaf to this rhythm, but I know that it would not be enough to quiet gender's reverberations in my body and in my daily life, which I have unceasingly tried to silence through hormones, alcohol, drugs, and writing idiotic essays. I fear this essay is nothing but another of those futile attempts. So many

of us have tried these means and more to manage the crushing pain of gender in isolation, but there is nothing we could do short of collectively interrupting this rhythm and destroying gender in its entirety that will ease our heavy hearts. It is with this in mind that I will elaborate a proposal for those weary of gender violence and death for the creation of a new rhythm of vengeance against the gendered order.

There are certain practices that exist in the ways in which self-proclaimed “radical trans” people and “anarcha-feminists” of certain activist subcultures have set into motion in response to the question of gender. These include consent zines/workshops, “trans 101”s, and call-outs of “fucked up” behavior internal to their subculture, in addition to dance parties and orgies. There is certainly nothing inherently *wrong* with any of these things, but if we take seriously the notion that we must destroy gender and all social relations of this society, there is clearly something lacking in the practice which only challenges gender at a level of language use and subcultural dynamics. If we abandon the leftist-activist model and accept the charge that “revolutionary movements do not spread by contamination, but by resonance” and writing that has further elaborated this thesis of an insurrectional music, we come to an understanding that there are at the very least a number of problems with thinking that these isolated methods alone could build a force to destroy gender. Such a practice falls short at both directly addressing the material manifestations of gender violence as well as creating practices that will

resonate with the unthinkable pain we carry deep in our bodies. We must build a rhythm of struggle which resonates in our bodies and builds the links between attack, memory, and the gender terror we experience in daily life.

It is simple enough to begin a discussion of insurrectional strategy with the notion of the attack. Yet many confuse this process with merely smashing a random bank and writing a communique telling the cops to fuck off. Of course, I'm not interested in condemning such a practice, I'm merely more interested in examining the ways in which various notions and methods of attack are positioned in relation to our memory and all of the emotions that have built up over time due to all of the gender violence we've endured. While it's easy enough to mock candlelight vigils or the Trans Day of Remembrance, these moments function to create a continuity and rhythm of memory in relation to trans violence that many radical approaches to gender fail to do. When we hear the name Deoni Jones today and see pictures of groups huddled by candlelight, we cannot help but think of Dee Dee Pearson, Shelley Hilliard, Lashai Mclean, Sandy Woulard, Chanel Larkin, Duanna Johnson, Gwen Araujo, and Marsha P. Johnson. We cannot help but have our minds fill with the history of those murdered at the hands of a society that must maintain the gendered order at all costs. It's so easy to get lost in the pain that comes along with this, to look over your shoulder as you walk home every night in hopes that the noise you've heard isn't someone ready to pounce on you. You might

soon forget, and then be reminded next month when it happens again to another trans woman in another city or perhaps your hometown.

This is the rhythm of our memory and our collective fear and misery, which repeats with every murder, vigil, and Trans Day of Remembrance. An insurrectional practice which attacks the foundations of gender must also utilize the rhythms of memory and emotion, but toward the end of breaking the ideology of victimization and passivity that the former practices maintain. Insurrectional comrades elsewhere in the world write: "Power has implemented on its behalf a machine of forgetting, each time more perfect and macabre, in order to maintain actual conditions in its favor. Amnesia only generates an acceptance of imposed reality while observing past struggles or comrades like photographs, severing every connection with reality, achieved by showing how unfeasible every intent to disobey the masters is." This has manifested in attacks in solidarity with insurrectional comrades who have fallen or who are facing repression. These attacks are an attempt to tap into the visceral stores of hatred for this world and for its attacks upon those who share the desire to see an end to it, connecting the rhythms of collective memory, a desire for vengeance, and the terrain of struggle upon which they are situated.

We might be able to remove this practice of attack from a situation in which anarchists are only self-referential to the history of their own struggle and also apply it to our place within the cycles of deadly gender violence and mourning. Indeed, this has already been



experimented with amongst anarchists in the United States. This model was experimented with in Bash Back!'s "Avenge Duanna" campaign, in which queer anarchists from a variety of cities carried out actions in response to Duanna Johnson's murder in Memphis, TN in 2008. This brought to life a practice which connected the visceral emotions of vengeance, connection to collective memory, and attack which built power and the refusal of victimization. Its failure was perhaps failing to continue to materialize this force with every death, although in recent months there has been a resurgence in vengeance attacks. If we are to build a rhythm of bashing back, we must be steadfast in refusing to let the death of a trans woman go unnoticed. We must impose our own powerful rhythm, identifying the nodes of gender policing and violence in our local terrain of struggle and exacting our vengeance upon them, displacing the rhythms of fear, victimization, and empty gestures that continue to characterize current anarchist, feminist, or trans-activist responses to gender violence. Through connecting the terrain of our daily life to cycles of the struggle against gender violence, we make material our resistance and leave a material mark of our refusal of victimhood. If this practice is to resonate we must steadily build this rhythm and refuse to allow anyone to ignore the multiplication of trans death all around us, by means of media sabotage, graffiti, or a variety of other methods. We have the opportunity to experiment with many methods of action with the potential to diffuse techniques of sabotaging gender production. Let us boldly experiment in

*An Insurrectional Practice Against Gender*

this regard. Only then might the painful song of gender be replaced with the rhythm of its collapse.

# Against the Gendered Nightmare

Fragments on Domestication

x bædan

## III

In the years since Fredy published *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!*, the topic of domestication has been taken up by a whole range of anti-civilization anarchists and projects. In most of the writings emerging from this milieu, domestication is nearly tautological with civilization. (Civilization is understood as the web of power between the institutions, ideologies, and physical apparatuses which perform domestication and control; while Domestication is understood as the process by which living beings are trapped within the network that is Civilization.) This tautology is instructive, as it points to the autonomous existence of a monster which has the sole purpose of perpetuating itself by bringing all life inside. Fredy would call such a monster a world-destroyer. While different tendencies of anti-civilization thought tend to understand domestication from different angles,

it remains central to the thought and practice of those who believe civilization must be destroyed.

Contemporary anti-civilization writers (many anonymous or pseudonymous) have elaborated the critique of domestication into daily life, indicting countless small operations which serve to domesticate life.

Domestication is the process that civilization uses to indoctrinate and control life according to its logic. These time-tested mechanisms of subordination include: taming, breeding, genetically modifying, schooling, caging, intimidating, coercing, extorting, promising, governing, enslaving, terrorizing, murdering... the list goes on to include almost every civilized social interaction. Their movement and effects can be examined and felt throughout society, enforced through various institutions, rituals, and customs.

Others have devoted their explorations to the conditions and events which lead to the establishment of agriculture and symbolic thought ten thousand years ago, trying to force the far past to give up its secrets. From this perspective, that originary moment of domestication inaugurated millennia of war, slavery, ecological destruction, and the annihilation of free creatures.

All of these elaborations are useful in that they explain what domestication means in various instances

and phenomena, but it is still rare to find a concise and functioning definition of what it means all together. If we need to do so, we could say rather simply that *domestication is capture*. Further, it is the capture of living beings by a dead thing, and the integration of those beings into all the roles and institutions which comprise the dead thing. Furthermore it is all the practices which force those beings to spiritually accede to their capture. And lastly it is the discourse and ideology which justifies that capture. This capture is unending, and the dead thing can only continue its immortal reign if it continues to bring new living beings and commodities within itself.

## ***First Mythos: Enkidu and Shamhat***

*Fredy begins his account of the first civilization emerging in Sumeria. He describes the rise of the first king, the Lugal, and from it all subsequent worm monsters. Sumeria is interesting to our inquiry because it is the birth of civilization, but also of the written word. From this ancient civilization, the oldest written story, that of the Sumerian king Gilgamesh, was etched into tablets of lapis lazuli. As its hero, Gilgamesh is responsible for instituting the ultimate domination of the Sumerian Leviathan over the wild world. He does this because he*

...leaves no son to his father  
Day and night  
endlessly  
Gilgamesh

*Against the Gendered Nightmare (excerpt)*

The shepherd of Uruk  
The shepherd of the people  
Leaves no daughter to her mother  
No Warrior's daughter  
    no young man's spouse  
No bride to her groom

*In his endless mobilization of human beings, Gilgamesh built a human machinery which waged war against the wild earth. In response to Gilgamesh and his imposition of order, the Gods created an equal who could oppose him. His name was*

Enkidu  
    Primeval  
    in the wild  
Born of silence  
    knit by Ninurta  
    war  
His body covered with hair  
On his head as on a woman's  
    thick as Nissaba  
    grain  
Knowing neither people nor place  
Dressed as Sakkan commands  
    as the god of animals commands  
    as animals do  
He fed on the grass with gazelles  
He drank at springs with animals  
Satisfied his thirst with the herd

*But the hunters and shepherds were angry and terrified of Enkidu, who sabotaged their traps and released their animals. They went to Gilgamesh and asked for his help. He*

*Against the Gendered Nightmare (excerpt)*

*devised a plan involving Shamhat, one of the sacred prostitutes of the temple. He said:*

“Go  
Take Shamhat with you  
When the beast comes to the spring  
Let her strip off her clothing  
    reveal her charms  
He will see her and approach  
And the beasts will reject him”

And so Shamhat and the hunter set out in search  
    of Enkidu. The hunter  
said:

“Shamhat  
Open your arms  
Open your legs  
    let him take your charms  
Don't be afraid  
    Take his breath away  
He will see you and approach  
Open your clothes  
    Let him lie upon you  
Do a woman's work for the man  
Caress and embrace him  
As he embraces you  
And the beasts will reject him”

Shamhat opened her clothes  
Opened her legs  
He saw her charms  
She was not afraid  
And he lay down on her  
She did a woman's work for the man

*Against the Gendered Nightmare (excerpt)*

Six days  
seven nights  
Enkidu coupled with Shamhat  
breathless  
When he had satisfied his desire  
He faced the wilderness  
The gazelles shunned him and moved away

Exhausted  
Enkidu's legs would not move  
As the beasts moved away  
He could not run as he had before  
But he had reason and broad understanding  
He turned and sat at Shamhat's feet  
Looked at her face  
as she looked at his  
He listened to her speak  
"You are handsome  
Enkidu  
like a god  
Why wander the wild  
with the beasts?  
Come  
let me lead you to Uruk-the-Sheepfold  
To the temple  
home of Anu and Ishtar"

*Enkidu agreed, but for the possibility of challenging the mighty Gilgamesh, but Shamhat convinced him otherwise. Gilgamesh had already dreamt of Enkidu's coming, and the king would take the wild one as a dearest friend, would treat him as a wife. He would domesticate Enkidu.*

Shamhat disrobed and dressed him



in one of her robes...  
The shepherds set bread and beer before him

Suckled on the milk  
of the wild  
Enkidu looked  
squinted  
stared  
He knew nothing  
of food

Shamhat spoke to Enkidu:  
"Eat the bread  
staff of life  
Drink the beer  
destiny of the land"

Enkidu ate of the bread until sated  
He drank of the beer until sated  
seven mugs  
He became a manifestation  
dressed in robes  
A warrior  
who took up his weapons  
to fight lions  
the shepherds rested at night  
Enkidu fought off wolves  
and lions  
The elder shepherds slept  
Enkidu stayed  
awake.

*The story of Enkidu and Shamhat is a story of domestication from within the mythology of the first civilization. It shows of the taming of Enkidu through the imposition of sex*

roles, the wearing of clothes, the drinking of alcohol, and his separation from the wild beasts. Shamhat is a sacred prostitute of the Sumerian temples, a spiritual practitioner of the oldest profession. She serves the goddess Ishtar through the rite of hieros gamos, the sacred marriage between the king and the goddess of the city. Ishtar is the goddess of nature, yes, but of nature within the city. Heiros gamos, the sacred prostitution, is a ritualistic submission of nature to the power of the king; the bringing of the wild within the walls of the city. In this way, the nature goddess was also the goddess of arts of civilization. These arts included the practices of government and religion, war and peace, crafts, profession, eating, drinking, clothing, bodily adornments, art, music, sex and prostitution. These are the arts of living applicable to every aspect of civilized life. The goddess rules nature within the city, so her ars vivendi are the rules of civilization, of domestication. And so it was through these rules that Shamhat, a priestess of Ishtar, made Enkidu into a man. After he is torn from his world, Enkidu becomes a virile and bloodthirsty destroyer of the wild. The imposition of gender unleashes a continuum of separation which endlessly separates the city from the forest, humanity from the rest of wild life, and splits humans into genders.

Contemporary readings will of course illustrate a degree of misogyny around Shamhat, implying that women tamed the wild men. But this is incorrect and only reveals how deeply seated gendered domination is to civilization. Enkidu is domesticated by all the ars vivendi which define life in the first civilization; by women's work and men's

work. *Enkidu is made a man through these domesticating laws; he is civilized by gender itself.*

## IV

It could be said that perhaps no tendency has taken the question of gender further than primitivism. We say this, because the primitivists view the question through the lens offered by a critique of domestication. While there are obviously heinous examples of masculinist and misogynist theories and individuals within anti-civilization thought, the most lucid and careful writers have always located the rise of patriarchy at the very beginning of civilization. For many (Fredy Perlman and John Zerzan to name just two), Patriarchy emerges alongside domestication and the two are practically synonymous. We can even see small fragments of this perspective in Camatte's later writing, *Echoes of the Past*, for example. It is also acknowledged in the 2009 editorial statement of *BLOODLUST: a feminist journal against civilization*. The editors articulate that their desire to publish the journal was a result of what felt like a superficial treatment of the critique of gender, and yet they still celebrate that the anti-civilization tendency is one of the few that consistently indicts Patriarchy as a central enemy. While sadly the journal only released one issue, the task of fleshing out the anti-civilization critique of Patriarchy seems like a step toward understanding domestication's centrality to gender itself.

The primitivist perspective on gender is problematic for reasons we'll elaborate later, but for a moment we'll suspend our criticism so as to fairly lay out the argument. Whatever its flaws, this perspective on the rise of patriarchy is useful because it situates the emergence of gendered domination with civilization itself. In doing so, it refuses any ideology which fails to do so. By constantly demonstrating that such misery is older than most other institutions and systems of domination, it equips us with the necessary pessimism to respond to those who assure us that gendered violence will disappear after their specific reform or revolution.

Camatte (and consequently those who are influenced by his writing) is indebted, with regard to his fleeting thoughts on gender, to a French writer named Françoise d'Eaubonne. D'Eaubonne is credited as the person who coined the term *eco-feminism* in her 1974 book, *Feminism or Death*. More interestingly, she was also one of the co-founders of the organization *Front Homosexuel d'Action Revolutionnaire* (FHAR), the same militant gay liberation group which Guy Hocquenghem joined and which shaped his later perspectives. It makes sense then, that two anti-civilization theories of gender would emerge from the same action and discussions; d'Eaubonne's *eco-feminism*, and Hocquenghem's *homosexual desire*. It is a tragic detriment to our inquiry that almost nothing of d'Eaubonne's writing is translated into English. Most Anglophone primitivists and eco-feminists have only been exposed to her ideas through secondary sources (Camatte among them). We'll cite an excerpt from *Feminism*

or *Death* as it is unlikely that most readers would have access to the text:

Practically everybody knows that today the two most immediate threats to survival are overpopulation and the destruction of our resources; fewer recognize the complete responsibility of the male System, in so far as it is male (and not capitalist or socialist) in these two dangers; but even fewer still have discovered that each of the two threats is the logical outcome of one of the two parallel discoveries which gave men their power over fifty centuries ago: their ability to plant the seed in the earth as in women, and their participation in the act of reproduction.

Up until then the male believed [women were] impregnated by the gods. From the moment he discovered at once his two capacities as farmer and procreator, he instituted what Lederer calls 'the great reversal' to his own advantage. Having taken possession of the land, thus of productivity (later of industry) and of woman's body (thus of reproduction), it was natural that the over-exploitation of both of these would end in this threatening and parallel menace: overpopulation, surplus births, and destruction of the environment, surplus production.

The only change capable of saving the world today is that of the 'great reversal' of male power which is represented, after agricultural overproductivity, by this mortal industrial expansion. Not 'matriarchy,' to be sure, nor 'power-to-the-women,' but destruction of power by women. And finally, the end of the tunnel: a world to be reborn (and no longer 'protected' as is still believed by the first wave of timid ecologists)...

Therefore, with a society at last in the feminine gender, meaning non-power (and not power-to-the-women), it would be proved that no other human group could have brought about the ecological revolution; because none other was so directly concerned at all levels. And the two sources of wealth which up until now have benefited only the male would once again become the expression of life and no longer the elaboration of death; and human beings would finally be treated first as persons, and not above all else as male or female.

And the planet in the feminine gender would become green again for all.

While simplistic and essentialist, this line of argument stands out for its singular elaboration of the intrinsic connection between agricultural production and human reproduction. We'll look at others who've expanded

on this theory, but we would be hard pressed to find anything in the primitivist canon that deviates too far from this straightforward position. All of it will center the role of man as the husband to his wife and the practitioner of agriculture and animal husbandry. The argument is useful because it is an articulation of the way domestication captures both those humans assigned female and also a vast diversity of non-human life.

One can clearly see the echoes of this in a primer written by the *Green Anarchy* collective:

Toward the beginning in the shift to civilization, an early product of domestication is patriarchy: the formalization of male domination and the development of institutions which reinforce it. By creating false gender distinctions and divisions between men and women, civilization, again, creates an "other" that can be objectified, controlled, dominated, utilized, and commodified. This runs parallel to the domestication of plants for agriculture and animals for herding, in general dynamics, and also in specifics like the control of reproduction. As in other realms of social stratification, roles are assigned to women in order to establish a very rigid and predictable order, beneficial to hierarchy. Women come to be seen as property, no different than the crops in the field or the sheep in the pasture. Ownership and

absolute control, whether of land, plants, animals, slaves, children, or women, is part of the established dynamic of civilization. Patriarchy demands the subjugation of the feminine and the usurpation of nature, propelling us toward total annihilation. It defines power, control and dominion over wildness, freedom, and life. Patriarchal conditioning dictates all of our interactions; with ourselves, our sexuality, our relationships to each other, and our relationship to nature. It severely limits the spectrum of possible experience. The interconnected relationship between the logic of civilization and patriarchy is undeniable; for thousands of years they have shaped the human experience on every level, from the institutional to the personal, while they have devoured life. To be against civilization, one must be against patriarchy; and to question patriarchy, it seems, one must also put civilization into question.

Fredy Perlman expands on this premise in a few ways. Firstly, he consistently centers rape and the weaponization of the phallus as methods intrinsic to domestication. He connects the phallic towers at the center of early Leviathans to the weapons used by their armies. For him these institutions and apparatuses function to naturalize an unnatural form of domination and power,



to subject women to men and to pretend that this arrangement is the natural order of things. At times he describes Leviathanic men as 'women haters.' Secondly, he believes His-story to be the process by which the men who control Leviathan narrate their own conquests and achievements. For him His-story is specific to civilized culture and only emerges as a violent annihilation both of a pre-existing matriarchy, but also through the deification of an image of militaristic, Leviathanic men as opposed to former nature goddesses. For him, the earth itself is feminine; a mother who gives birth to all life. By contrast, Leviathan gives birth to nothing but death, and as such, despises the mother Earth. In the following fragments we'll criticize much of this theory, but it is worth acknowledging that it is rare to find another theory of His-story (especially one written by a man) which locates patriarchy as absolutely inseparable from civilization.

John Zerzan expands upon the theory from a different angle. He primarily concerns himself with studying the work of over a dozen anthropologists (all of them women) who analyze the role of women in social arrangements before domestication. Many of these anthropologists were part of the shift in Anthropology referred to as the shift from "man the hunter" to "woman the gatherer." Based on their research, he argues that the vast majority of sustenance in most non-civilized societies was provided by gatherers, who tended to be women. He argues that as a consequence, women had significantly more social power and autonomy, because they were not

reliant on patriarchal agricultural arrangements for survival. He also follows other anthropologists in claiming that hierarchies around gender were rare among American indigenous tribes, specifically noting the absence of fetishes for virginity and chastity, expectations of monogamy for women, or male control over reproduction. He argues that the sexual division of labor, imposed by domestication, was the first form of the division of labor which constitutes contemporary civilization. He also criticizes the shift from communal tribal relationships of sharing to the privatized and gendered existence of the family-form, arguing that the family is neither inevitable nor universal in human communities. Zerzan argues that the shift toward domestication is marked by the emergence of specialized labor roles, the limiting of women's labor to reproductive efforts, and the strengthening of kinship bonds above all else. For him, the presence of a gendered division of labor by the time of the earliest recorded symbolic art indicates that it is this division which gave rise to all others. He refuses to believe that these phenomena are coincidence, instead pointing toward a causal relationship between the rise of gendered existence and that of domestication. Both are shifts away from non-separated, non-hierarchical life. He says: "nothing in nature explains the sexual division of labor, nor such institutions as marriage, conjugality or paternal filiation. All are imposed on women by constraint, all are therefore facts of civilization which must be explained, not used as explanations." His explanation for these shifts involves both the ways that agricultural

life immiserated the women it captured, but also that the introduction of patriarchy was a key strategy of colonial civilizers and missionaries around the world. He argues that any attempts to destroy civilization must also be an attempted return to “the wholeness of original genderless existence.”

Much of the primitivist perspective on gender doesn't sit well from a queer perspective, significantly the emphasis on gender essentialism and the lack of substantive critique of compulsory heterosexuality, to say nothing of the role of Anthropology. And yet still there is something which resonates in the theory. Perhaps the appeal of the primitivist answer is that it implicates literally everything about this world in the horror of gender: the food we eat, the cities we live in, the language we speak, our families, our fetishes—all of it interwoven into the fabric of gendered existence. The implication, then, is that any break from gender would require a break from literally all the assurances and comforts which maintain our capture in it. Even more powerful, is a fiery insistence that our gendered existence is not inevitable nor laid out in the stars. Primitivism could be understood as an attempt to give words and evidence to a visceral experience of not-belonging in this world, to the feeling in our bones and muscles which cries out against the gendering of our lives and possibilities. Primitivism asserts an outside and makes claims to certainty regarding the nature of that outside. We'll dispense with them on the point of certainty; but the outside itself calls to us.

## V

One of the most lucid points that Fredy Perlman makes in *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!* is his critique of Anthropology. He often speaks of anthropologists and archeologists as "grave robbers," whose intention is to enforce their own story about human existence while erasing all other stories. He pays particular attention to the efforts of anthropologists to describe the role of work in primitive societies. Many anthropologists, sympathetic to primitive societies, will claim that the people in those societies worked significantly less than domesticated people. They call them Hunters or Gatherers. They will speak of the four hours a day that are devoted to work. Fredy critiques this position by claiming that it is the operation of the managers of work camps to naturalize work into all other human and animal existence. Yes, primitive people worked less, but because they did not work at all.

Modern anthropologists who carry Gulgag in their brains reduce such human communities to the motions that look most like work, and give the name Gatherers to people who pick and sometimes store their favorite foods. A bank clerk would call such communities Savings Banks! The [workers] on a coffee plantation in Guatemala are Gatherers, and the anthropologist is a Savings Bank.

Their free ancestors had more important things to do.

The !Kung people miraculously survived as a community of free human beings into our own exterminating age. R. E. Leakey observed them in their lush African forest homeland. They cultivated nothing except themselves. They made themselves what they wished to be. They were not determined by anything beyond their own being—not by alarm clocks, not by debts, not by orders from superiors. They feasted and celebrated and played, full-time, except when they slept. They shared everything with their communities: food, experiences, visions, songs. Great personal satisfaction, deep inner joy, came from the sharing.

(In today's world, wolves still experience the joys that come from sharing. Maybe that's why governments pay bounties to the killers of wolves.)

The assertion is simple, but profound: those who live in a world of work can only understand the activity of others as work. Work is a historically determined institution, and yet our civilized metaphysics operates to naturalize this institution; to obscure the violence of our domestication into it. The implications of this operation is all the more sinister, as we live in a world where more and more non-waged activities are subsumed into the world

of work. In a sense, domestication functions as a linear enforcement of the world of work, colonizing our past as it does our future.

S. Diamond observed other free human beings who survived into our age, also in Africa. He could see that they did no work, but he couldn't quite bring himself to say it in English. Instead, he said they made no distinction between work and play. Does Diamond mean that the activity of the free people can be seen as work one moment, as play another, depending on how the anthropologist feels? Does he mean that they didn't know if their activity was work or play? Does he mean we, you and I, Diamond's armored contemporaries, cannot distinguish their work from their play?

If the !Kung visited our offices and factories, they might think we're playing. Why else would we be there?

I think Diamond meant to say something more profound. A time-and-motion engineer watching a bear near a berry patch would not know when to punch his clock. Does the bear start working when he walks to the berry patch, when he picks the berry, when he opens his jaws? If the engineer has half a brain he might say the bear makes no distinction between work and play. If the en-

gineer has an imagination he might say that the bear experiences joy from the moment the berries turn deep red, and that none of the bear's motions are work.

If we are to attempt to imagine that none of the bear's (or our distance ancestors, for that matter) activity is work, then we are forced to abandon to scientific disciplines which aim to make claims to certainty about what vanquished peoples' activities were like. This is an important break from a primitivist orthodoxy which prioritizes the use of anthropological methods. It is understandable why one would want to make such claims as to the precise nature of an *outside* or a *before* civilization. We would assert, however, that such claims aren't simply wrong (by virtue of their entrenchment in the scientific worldview) but that they are unnecessary to our critique. We do not need to be able to claim with certainty that our ancestors "worked less" in order to refuse the world of work that captures us. That we can point to the world of work as a historically determined institution of domination which emerged with domestication and continues to immiserate our lives is reason enough that world should burn.

This is a different orientation to the *outside*. There is surely comfort and peace of mind in believing the scientific answers about what is outside. There is also a dignity and certainty which comes from believing that utopia once existed on the face of the earth. But what is left to us if we abandon these certainties? What remains

is a mystery and a chaos which evades any rationalist attempt to capture and put it to use. This unknown is precisely that which drives those who speak with certainty crazy. It is the dark and magical world of mystery which all the violence of the scientific operation aims to annihilate. Our proposal is simple: instead of deceiving ourselves about the unknown with this or that Positive Evidence, the unknown itself is something to celebrate. Rather than a primitivist return to an outside that is supposedly mapped into our biology; we'll pursue an escape into an outside which is at the same time a mystery and an uncertainty. Should we fight less to escape if we don't know what the outside looks like? One needs only look at the world which presents itself as all too certain to know the answer.

## VI

In considering this provocation in the context of our inquiry into gender and domestication, a glaring contradiction emerges: why is Fredy's willful embrace of the unknown (with regard to work) not likewise applied to gender? It takes very little effort to extend the critique of anthropological certainty into the gendered world. We could easily parallel it in saying: *Anthropologists, sympathetic to primitive societies, will view the relationships between Men and Women as more fair and desirable in these societies than in civilized societies. They are wrong in that there is no relationship between Men and Women. They live*



*in a world of gender, and so they can only perceive the varied and ineffable existences of others as conforming to those categories. An anthropologist with half a brain will say that these gender relationships are less rigid and dominating than the ones we experience; an anthropologist with an imagination would say that these are not gender relationships in the way we understand them at all.*

This critique can very easily be applied to almost all primitivist writings on gender. Perlman and d'Eaubonne are obviously implicated in this type of essentialism regarding the roles that women and men played in primitive cultures. The archetype of woman as the nurturing and pro-creative center of the universe is clearly as historically constructed by the division of labor, and yet it is all the more sinister because it operates as if natural. While Zerzan's theory of gender is more overt in mobilizing anthropology, it opens space against essentialism by identifying gender as a socially constructed institution sutured on top of a natural sexual difference. This still warrants critique, however. One of the most worthwhile understandings offered by queer theory is the provocation that the sex/gender dichotomy referred to by feminists over the last several decades is not two systems, but actually one. Sex as a binary is no more natural than gender. It is the historical and retrospective arrangement into two categories of a vast range of organs, hormones, gestures, dispositions, body shapes, sexual capacities, etc. The efforts on the part of transgender liberationists are relevant to this shift, as they demonstrate that there is no determinacy or cohesion

between any particular arrangement of the above characteristics, but rather that the arrangement of them into categories is always a coercive attack on an individual. The recent struggles of intersex people goes further to clearly undermine the certainty which naturalizes binary sex. The quiet scientific and medical mutilation and reshaping of untold infants to fit into binary sex demonstrates that it is no more natural than binary gender. This institutional capture into one or another sex is just the newest form of what is an ancient regime of diet, medicine, labor, bondage, religion and taboo which functions to shape and exaggerate two sexes out of the vast infinity of possibilities contained by the human body. Sex and Gender are the same his-torical operation of categorization and separation, they are simply different articulations.

It is not uncommon for primitivist thinkers and anthropologists to have a critique of heteronormativity, pointing to evidence of widespread homosexual practices in tribal societies before their colonization. Others will also point to the existence of 'third genders' in certain tribes. These stories are relevant in that they undermine the naturalized view of heteronormativity (and with it reproductive futurism), but as long as they function scientifically, they still maintain the stability of gender (even third genders). They point to a more favorable gender arrangement, but lack the imagination to understand that people may have had relationships to one's body and sexuality outside of the gendered cages which have been built around us. Furthermore, the ten-

dency to universalize these conclusions is a tendency of Leviathan; homogeneity is intrinsic to the domestication process.

If we follow the analogous critique of work, we must come to a place where we can say that we do not know for certain what gendered existence was like before civilization. And yet this revelation in no way alters our certainty that gender *as we know it* begins with civilization. If we invoke an orientation to an outside of civilized gender, then we are actually invoking another mystery, an ineffable which evades definition and capture. What would it mean to participate in life or death struggle against gender without knowing what existed before it? This would mean pursuing an outside which presents itself to us as shadows and chaos. It would mean fighting for the wild, without recourse to the natural. As we've intoned before: *though we forego the privilege of naturalness, we are not deterred, for we ally ourselves instead with the chaos and blackness from which Nature itself spills forth.* What we've elsewhere called queer desire is a tendency toward this primordial chaos. The task is to live it.

## VII

Having unveiled this contradiction within primitivism, we are left wondering how this blindspot has remained for so long.

One of the beautiful aspects of the primitivist critique is that it provides a lens through which to ex-

plore every relation and institution that is naturalized in Leviathanic thought. Within the primitivist canon, one can readily find incisive attacks against the family, race, psychiatry, agriculture, the division of labor, specialization, militarism and countless other dimensions of civilized existence. Primitivists are perhaps at their most imaginative and insightful when they explore a world outside the more deeply embedded abstractions of Leviathanic culture: symbolic thought, numbers, art, language, even nature. Several texts even offer dreamlike attempts to imagine how free people have conceived of *different shapes to time itself*.

How then, has this critical onslaught missed a relation so obvious and entrenched into our being? Those who claim that Civilization inaugurated gender disparity, still maintain the naturalness of those genders. Even those (like Zerzan) who call gender into question, still hold to a natural dualism which is perverted by domestication. That this dualism is considered natural by those who would otherwise refuse any other dualism (human/animal, mind/body, etc.) as a civilized constraint is not proof of its naturalism. Rather it is proof of how deeply entrenched it is in the process of domestication—so deep that we can scarcely imagine a world before it. Zerzan, to his credit, says the divide (which varies in its form, but not its essence) is the most deeply seated dualism; giving rise to the subject/object and mind/body splits in turn. He calls it a “categorization... that may be the single cultural form of greatest significance.” It introduces and legitimizes all other dominations. This line

of argument is echoed by Witch Hazel in *BLOODLUST*, who writes that the construction and devaluation of the feminine archetype is a parallel to the mind/body split and enables the turn toward domestication and Civilized conquest. This central underpinning of Civilization already divines, without knowing it, the enmity between Civilization and queer desire articulated by Guy Hocquenghem and others; the way that queer desire reveals what is common between the family and the automobile and every other civilized apparatus. This lens allows us to see that in gender, more than anywhere else, the enemy has projected itself throughout time in order to preclude our dreams of an outside. As Fredy narrates this dynamic of projection:

The strait that separates us from the other shore has been widening for three hundred generations, and whatever was cannibalized from the other shore is no longer a vestige of their activity but an excretion of ours: it's shit. Reduced to blank slates by school, we cannot know what it was to grow up heirs to thousands of generations of vision, insight, experience. We cannot know what it was to learn to hear the plants grow, and to feel the growth...

It becomes very important for the last Leviathan to deny the existence of an outside. The beast's voices have to project Leviathanic traits into pre-Leviathanic past,

into nature, even into the unknown universe.

The post-Hobbesian artificial beast becomes conscious of itself as Leviathan and not as Temple or Heavenly Empire or Vicariate of Christ, and it simultaneously begins to suspect its own frailty, its impermanence. The beast knows itself to be a machine, and it knows that machines break down, decompose, and may even destroy themselves. A frantic search for perpetual motion machines yields no assurance to counter the suspicions, and the beast has no choice but to project itself into realms or beings which are not machines.

A telling story is that of the interaction between colonizing French Jesuits and the indigenous Montagnais-Naskapi in 17<sup>th</sup> century Canada, as recounted by Eleanor Leacock, a feminist anthropologist cited by both Zerzan and Silvia Federici. She describes how it became necessary for the Jesuits to 'civilize' the Montagnais-Naskapi in order to ensure they'd be disciplined trading partners. This endeavor started with the introduction of hierarchical gender roles.

As often happened when Europeans came in contact with native American populations, the French were impressed by Montagnais-Naskapi generosity, their sense of cooperation and indifference to status, but they

were scandalized by their 'lack of morals;' they saw that the Naskapi had no conception of private property, of authority, of male superiority, and they even refused to punish their children. The Jesuits decided to change all that, setting out to teach the Indians the basic elements of civilization, convinced that this was necessary to turn them into reliable trade partners. In this spirit they first taught them that 'man is the master,' that 'in France women do not rule their husbands,' and that courting at night, divorce at either partner's desire, and sexual freedom for both spouses, before or after marriage, had to be forbidden.

The Jesuits succeeded in convincing the newly appointed chiefs of the tribe to implement male authority over the women. Several Naskapi women fled such novel and offensive constraint, causing men (at the encouragement of the Jesuits) to chase after them and threaten to beat and/or imprison them for their disobedience. One Jesuit missionary's journal proudly includes an account of the incident:

Such acts of justice cause no surprise in France, because it is usual there to proceed in that manner. But among these people... where everyone considers himself from birth as free as the wild animals that

roam in their great forests... it is a marvel, or rather a miracle, to see a peremptory command obeyed, or any act of severity or justice performed.

Another interesting story is recounted in a brief segment from the journal *Species Traitor* about homosexuality outside of civilization. The segment has the humility to acknowledge that while we can indict universalized homophobia as being unique to modern society, we can know very little about the vast and divergent sexual practices of the majority of cultures that have walked the earth. The segment goes on to cite an example of two anthropologists living among the Huaorani people in the Amazon region of what is now Ecuador. The two anthropologists witnessed two Huaorani men in an intimate embrace. When the Huaorani men saw that they were being watched, one quietly whispered to the other *kowudi*, after which they looked embarrassed at the anthropologists and walked away. *Kowudi* means *outsiders*.

Both of these stories succinctly illustrate the truly partisan role played by those who operate under some notion of objectivity or neutrality. The journals of countless missionaries, explorers and anthropologists show that their accounts are tainted by their civilized attitudes toward gender and sexuality, but also that one of their primary operations is to force those attitudes upon the people they study. In *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture*, Arthur Evans points to several of these, including a rather humorous example of the Greek histo-



rian Diodorus Siculus' disgust at the behavior of Celtic men in the first century BC:

Although they have good-looking women, they pay very little attention to them, but are really crazy about having sex with men. They are accustomed to sleep on the ground on animal skins and roll around with male bed-mates on both sides. Heedless of their own dignity, they abandon without a qualm the bloom of their bodies to others. And the most incredible thing is that they don't think this is shameful.

All of this points to the great flaw of anthropology in regard to the question of gender. As the existence and universality of gendered categories is taken for granted, their accounts (and often their actions) will always function to enact a violence upon a wild range of human experience, severing it from its whole context and recounting that experience as an amputated and gendered one. This isn't to say that we shouldn't read these stories. Instead it instructs us on *how* to read them. If we can glean any useful direction from them, it is by reading these scientists as we would read any other enemy; critically, and with attention to the secrets hidden between the lines. And even when we can distill this or that, we still only have one story, from one culture, in one moment. To universalize these stories as representations and truths about all of humanity, as is often done by

primitivist anthropology, is to falsify our understanding and erase an infinity of other possibilities and stories of people beyond civilization's snares. It is a reverence for this infinity which sets our inquiry apart from a scientific one. Science, after all, is also one myth among many. It is different only in that it refuses all stories but its own.

Some interpret these stories to mean that Patriarchy is one of the first pillars of civilization to emerge from domestication. Others glean that the gender division is the first duality, which makes domestication possible. Both versions draw circles around a third possibility:

*Gender is domestication.*

# Wildfire

## Toward Anonymous War on Civilization

**T**he search for tools with which to make war on society is a central element of struggle. History, theory, analysis, propaganda: all vital to the spread and sharpening of revolt. However, as with all weapons, each of these can be turned against us; each of these we can turn against ourselves. Academia recuperates radical historical research and theorizing, stripping it of its teeth and its relation to practices of attack. As anarchists become more concerned with the aesthetics of revolt (and their own careers as the avant-garde of capitalist cultural production) than with counter-information and generalization of subversive ideas, propaganda becomes indistinguishable from advertising. Artists draw from images of insurgency, captured moments which suffocate and die in the sterility of the gallery. Academia, advertising, the fashion industry, and the art world all operate vampirically, draining revolt of its purpose, its beauty, its joy. Those who engage with the word must be conscious of this, attempting to navigate away from and against recuperation, even as we use the enemy's language.

With this as our context, why design and distribute a publication about Direct Action and the Wimmin's Fire Brigade? Certainly, when researching and drawing attention to any identifiable tendency or group, we run the risk of creating another historical spectacle to wonder at, or another "radical" commodity to consume, all as we continue to stay our hand in our daily lives. This risk is multiplied if the subject is far enough in the past, or closely enough related to an already recuperated cultural milieu, that its charge can be defused by nostalgia. One need only look at the Weather Underground, with its spectacular actions and relation to hippie youth culture, to see how revolutionary action can be effectively turned into an artifact. Direct Action and the Wimmin's Fire Brigade certainly fit these parameters: their attacks were spectacular, and most members of the group were tied to the punk scene, a subculture that has been wholly subsumed by commodity culture. Despite this, it would be a victory for the careerist parasites to allow a group which in many ways acts as a forebearer to contemporary anti-civilizational struggle to be reduced to an historical or cultural museum piece.

Rather than simply present these texts as they are, I hope to engage with them critically, with fervor, and always with an eye towards refining the daily practices of attack and subversion.

## **War on Patriarchy, War on Civilization**

Direct Action and the Wimmin's Fire Brigade are not the first, nor the most significant, example of feminist militancy or "women's war." The history of gender is a history of revolt against the impositions of the gender binary, of compulsory heterosexuality, of the gendered order. This goes beyond the simple understanding that, amidst uprisings and riots, there are women, queers, and gender rebels participating. From Harriet Tubman's clandestine guerrilla warfare against slave society, to street queens and hustlers attacking police at Stonewall, to the bombings by the Weather Underground women's brigade, to the diffuse armed struggle of the Italian feminists of the 70s, women and gender rebels have always employed whatever means possible to attack the causes of their misery.

All this is to say, the Wimmin's Fire Brigade's fire-bombing of three Red Hot Video porn outlets has its context: a continual war against women and gender rebels, and a counter-war against the structures that maintain the gendered order. Still, the Wimmin's Fire Brigade is somewhat of an anomaly within feminism. With the exception of the George Jackson Brigade, a botched attack on homophobic politician John Briggs by a splinter group of the Weather Underground, and the participation of some gays and lesbians in anti-imperialist struggle, the women's and gay liberation movements in North America, unlike its brother and sister movements, did not adopt armed struggle as a strategy. While the

reasons for this rejection are complicated; the essentialist critique of violence as a weapon of patriarchy and heterosexism played a major part in stifling struggle. The respectable gays and bourgeois feminists, having a stake in the continuing function of society, employed any means—including cooperation with state investigation of underground groups, in the case of Jane Alpert—to destroy the capacities of those in revolt. The specter of pacifism hung over the feminist movement in particular as it descended further into the mire of essentialism in the 80s. The Wimmin's Fire Brigade, in just one night, broke free of these suffocating restrictions, showing the possibility of women's informal violence against our oppressors.

What sets the attacks by Direct Action and the Wimmin's Fire Brigade apart from many of the guerrilla groups of the time is their explicit critique of both the state and techno-industrial society as connected to the creation and maintenance of patriarchy. Unlike groups like the Weather Underground, Direct Action opposed the state in all of its forms; no Marxism-Leninism and hierarchical structures, but a hatred for all state structures, communist as well as capitalist. And perhaps because of this total rejection (and their connection to indigenous struggle), the group attacked, with both words and bombs, technological and industrial infrastructure. It was not only capitalism, but civilization itself, that Direct Action sought to destroy. In this, they have more in common with the crossdressing Luddites, faggot heretics,

and clandestine witches than with the aspiring Stalins of the New Left.

Patriarchy cannot be destroyed through the slow integration of women into the structures of capital and the state. It cannot be destroyed through wages for housework, female cops, female-centered spirituality, women-owned businesses, or separatist exodus. These half-measures will only strengthen control by facilitating its diffusion through all of social life and its colonization of our very being. The more we expand domination to include new subjects, the stronger we make our chains.

Technology is not a neutral set of tools to be employed by a liberated society in "new," "egalitarian" ways. It is an apparatus which captures, classifies, and distorts our lives, assimilating us to its worldview: the worldview of a machine. When we use technology, we accept the world which created it, with all of its implicit and explicit power relations, and in turn reproduce that society through our activity. We are trapped in a process in which we create new tools for our control and exploitation, never questioning this apparatus which has made us our own captors. There is no possibility of a liberated society without the complete destruction and abandonment of technology and its worldview.

Direct Action and the Wimmin's Fire Brigade, through attacks on techno-industrial infrastructure and production centers of gender, tore at the very roots of society. Though their actions leave open many spaces for criticism, the intentions and goals of their actions avoided the narrow vision and desire for (technologi-

cal, patriarchal, and state) authority which characterize most groups who have taken up arms.

## **A Critique**

The debate in anarchist circles about the named or formal organization has been raging for as long as anarchists have chosen to attack. Lately, with the resurgence of named anarchist armed struggle groups, this discussion has come to the forefront once again. Direct Action and the Wimmin's Fire Brigade offer us lessons on the limits of spectacular action and named organizations.

Both Direct Action and the Wimmin's Fire Brigade saw themselves as a sort of "armed wing" of aboveground legal protest movements. The members of the group, prior to going underground, were part of the various movements (anti-development/indigenous resistance to the Cheekeye-Dunsmuir line, anti-war and anti-nuclear resistance to Litton, and feminist organizing against Red Hot Video) of which they later acted as the guerrilla wing. This sort of division replicates the forms of most New Left guerrilla groups, and of nationalist groups like the IRA. It fosters a division between social warfare and clandestine attack, a separation that prevents those focused on social struggle from taking up arms and those focused on "building the underground" from actually relating to the struggles they claim to be acting for. It also creates in the guerrilla group a stifling isolation and a myopia of vision, turning all acts into self-referential or increasingly-narrow rituals. Direct Action realized these



limits after their two bombings and came partially above-ground. The actions of the Wimmin's Fire Brigade, which more closely related to the mass struggle against Red Hot Video, was not only the most successful action, but was most free of the limits of the guerrilla group. The action was not done to publicize the group, but seen as a one-shot act of destruction against an institution that social struggle alone could not destroy.

Do anarchists need to attach names to their actions? If we see ourselves as part of a general social war against control and exploitation, attaching names to our acts of subversion and attack could contradict our aims. Attacks that could have existed in and contributed to general social violence against cops and managers can become trapped within legible identities. This aids police investigation, and can also sever our projects from all other acts of antagonism to the social order. We do not need an "armed wing" to the social war, as social war knows its weapons well and employs them when necessary, not out of a gun and bomb fetish (or a fetish for "the social war"). We do not need spectacular actions that prop up named organizations as the vanguard of struggle. We need the spreading of chaos through the entirety of society, the subversion of our roles and identities, a total overturning of this world.

As anarchists internationally experiment with new forms of armed struggle, these questions become important. Even as we propose the strategy of anonymity, we would do well to avoid ideological condemnation of those who choose the path of the diffuse anarchist guer-

rilla. Whether we act anonymously or with a name, what matters is that the attacks multiply.

The tools of our war are everywhere, and we are not the first to experiment with the unknown. Despite (and because of) their limits, Direct Action and the Wimmin's Fire Brigade offer us new tools for our own struggles. What remains is to absorb these tools and continue on our path: toward the destruction of patriarchy, technology, and colonialism.

Toward the destruction of civilization itself.

# **Gender Nihilism**

## **An Anti-Manifesto**

### **Introduction**

**W**e are at an impasse. The current politics of trans liberation have staked their claims on a redemptive understanding of identity. Whether through a doctor or psychologist's diagnosis, or through a personal self affirmation in the form of a social utterance, we have come to believe that there is some internal truth to gender that we must divine.

An endless set of positive political projects have marked the road we currently travel; an infinite set of pronouns, pride flags, and labels. The current movement within trans politics has sought to try to broaden gender categories, in the hope that we can alleviate their harm. This is naive.

Judith Butler refers to gender as "the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes." If the current liberal politics of our trans comrades and siblings are rooted in trying to

expand the social dimensions created by this apparatus, our work is a demand to see it burned to the ground.

We are radicals who have had enough with attempts to salvage gender. We do not believe we can make it work for us. We look at the transmisogyny we have faced in our own lives, the gendered violence that our comrades, both trans and cis have faced, and we realize that the apparatus itself makes such violence inevitable. We have had enough.

We are not looking to create a better system, for we are not interested in positive politics at all. All we demand in the present is a relentless attack on gender and the modes of social meaning and intelligibility it creates.

At the core of this Gender Nihilism lies several principles that will be explored in detail here: Antihumanism as foundation and cornerstone, gender abolition as a demand, and radical negativity as method.

## **Antihumanism**

Antihumanism is a cornerstone which holds gender nihilist analysis together. It is the point from which we begin to understand our present situation; it is crucial. By antihumanism, we mean a rejection of essentialism. There is no essential human. There is no human nature. There is no transcendent self. To be a subject is not to share in common a metaphysical state of being (ontology) with other subjects.

The self, the subject is a product of power. The "I" in "I am a man" or "I am a woman" is not an "I" which transcends those statements. Those statements do not reveal a truth about the "I," rather they constitute the "I." Man and Woman do not exist as labels for certain metaphysical or essential categories of being, they are rather discursive, social, and linguistic symbols which are historically contingent. They evolve and change over time; their implications have always been determined by power.

Who we are, the very core of our being, might perhaps not be found in the categorical realm of being at all. The self is a convergence of power and discourses. Every word you use to define yourself, every category of identity within which you find yourself placed, is the result of a historical development of power. Gender, race, sexuality, and every other normative category is not referencing a truth about the body of the subject or about the soul of the subject. These categories construct the subject and the self. There is no static self, no consistent "I", no history transcending subject. We can only refer to a self with the language given to us, and that language has radically fluctuated throughout history, and continues to fluctuate in our day to day life.

We are nothing but the convergence of many different discourses and languages which are utterly beyond our control, yet we experience the sensation of agency. We navigate these discourses, occasionally subverting, always surviving. The ability to navigate does not indicate a metaphysical self which acts upon a sense of agency,

it only indicates that there is symbolic and discursive looseness surrounding our constitution.

We thus understand gender through these terms. We see gender as a specific set of discourses embodied in medicine, psychiatry, the social sciences, religion, and our daily interactions with others. We do not see gender as a feature of our "true selves," but as a whole order of meaning and intelligibility which we find ourselves operating in. We do not look at gender as a thing which a stable self can be said to possess. On the contrary we say that gender is done and participated in, and that this doing is a creative act by which the self is constructed and given social significance and meaning.

Our radicalism cannot stop here, we further state that historical evidence can be provided to show that gender operates in such a manner. The work of many decolonial feminists has been influential in demonstrating the ways that western gender categories were violently forced onto indigenous societies, and how this required a complete linguistic and discursive shift. Colonialism produced new gender categories, and with them new violent means of reinforcing a certain set of gendered norms. The visual and cultural aspects of masculinity and femininity have changed over the centuries. There is no static gender.

There is a practical component to all of this. The question of humanism vs antihumanism is the question upon which the debate between liberal feminism and nihilist gender abolitionism will be based.

The liberal feminist says "I am a woman" and by that means that they are spiritually, ontologically, metaphysically, genetically, or any other modes of "essentially" a woman.

The gender nihilist says "I am a woman" and means that they are located within a certain position in a matrix of power which constitutes them as such.

The liberal feminist is not aware of the ways power creates gender, and thus clings to gender as a means of legitimizing themselves in the eyes of power. They rely on trying to use various systems of knowledge (genetic sciences, metaphysical claims about the soul, Kantian ontology) in order to prove to power they can operate within it.

The gender nihilist, the gender abolitionist, looks at the system of gender itself and sees the violence at its core. We say no to a positive embrace of gender. We want to see it gone. We know appealing to the current formulations of power is always a liberal trap. We refuse to legitimize ourselves.

It is imperative that this be understood. Antihumanism does not deny the lived experience of many of our trans siblings who have had an experience of gender since a young age. Rather we acknowledge that such an experience of gender was always already determined through the terms of power. We look to our own childhood experiences. We see that even in the transgressive statement of "We are women" wherein we deny the category power has imposed onto our bodies, we speak the language of gender. We reference an idea of "woman"

which does not exist within us as a stable truth, but references the discourses by which we are constituted.

Thus we affirm that there is no true self that can be divined prior to discourse, prior to encounters with others, prior to the mediation of the symbolic. We are products of power, so what are we to do? So we end our exploration of antihumanism with a return to the words of Butler:

“My agency does not consist in denying this condition of my constitution. If I have any agency, it is opened up by the fact that I am constituted by a social world I never chose. That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility.”

## **Gender Abolition**

If we accept that gender is not to be found within ourselves as a transcendent truth, but rather exists outside us in the realm of discourse, what are we to strive for? To say gender is discursive is to say that gender occurs not as a metaphysical truth within the subject, but occurs as a means of mediating social interaction. Gender is a frame, a subset of language, and set of symbols and signs, communicated between us, constructing us and being reconstructed by us constantly.

Thus the apparatus of gender operates cyclically; as we are constituted through it, so too do our daily actions, rituals, norms, and performances reconstitute it. It is this realization which allows for a movement against the



cycle itself to manifest. Such a movement must understand the deeply penetrative and pervasive nature of the apparatus. Normalization has an insidious way of naturalizing, accounting for, and subsuming resistance.

At this point it becomes tempting to embrace a certain liberal politics of expansion. Countless theorists and activists have laid stake to the claim that our experience of transgender embodiment might be able to pose a threat to the process of normalization that is gender. We have heard the suggestion that non-binary identity, trans identity, and queer identity might be able to create a subversion of gender. This cannot be the case.

In staking our claim on identity labels of non-binary, we find ourselves always again caught back in the realm of gender. To take on identity in a rejection of the gender binary is still to accept the binary as a point of reference. In the resistance to it, one only reconstructs the normative status of the binary. Norms have already accounted for dissent; they lay the frameworks and languages through which dissent can be expressed. It is not merely that our verbal dissent occurs in the language of gender, but that the actions we take to subvert gender in dress and affect are themselves only subversive through their reference to the norm.

If an identity politics of non-binary identity cannot liberate us, it is also true that a queer or trans identity politics offers us no hope. Both fall into the same trap of referencing the norm by trying to “do” gender differently. The very basis of such politics is grounded in the logic of identity, which is itself a product of modern and

contemporary discourses of power. As we have already shown quite thoroughly, there can be no stable identity which we can reference. Thus any appeal to a revolutionary or emancipatory identity is only an appeal to certain discourses. In this case, that discourse is gender.

This is not to say that those who identify as trans, queer, or non-binary are at fault for gender. This is the mistake of the traditional radical feminist approach. We repudiate such claims, as they merely attack those most hurt by gender. Even if deviation from the norm is always accounted for and neutralized, it sure as hell is still punished. The queer, the trans, the non-binary body is still the site of massive violence. Our siblings and comrades still are murdered all around us, still live in poverty, still live in the shadows. We do not denounce them, for that would be to denounce ourselves. Instead we call for an honest discussion about the limits of our politics and a demand for a new way forward.

With this attitude at the forefront, it is not merely certain formulations of identity politics which we seek to combat, but the need for identity altogether. Our claim is that the ever expanding list of personal preferred pronouns, the growing and ever more nuanced labels for various expressions of sexuality and gender, and the attempt to construct new identity categories more broadly is not worth the effort.

If we have shown that identity is not a truth but a social and discursive construction, we can then realize that the creation of these new identities is not the sudden discovery of previously unknown lived experience, but

rather the creation of new terms upon which we can be constituted. All we do when we expand gender categories is to create new more nuanced channels through which power can operate. We do not liberate ourselves, we ensnare ourselves in countless and even more nuanced and powerful norms. Each one a new chain.

To use this terminology is not hyperbolic; the violence of gender cannot be overestimated. Each trans woman murdered, each intersex infant coercively operated on, each queer kid thrown onto the streets is a victim of gender. The deviance from the norm is always punished. Even though gender has accounted for deviation, it still punishes it. Expansions of norms is an expansion of deviance; it is an expansion of ways we can fall outside a discursive ideal. Infinite gender identities create infinite new spaces of deviation which will be violently punished. Gender must punish deviance, thus gender must go.

And thus we arrive at the need for the abolition of gender. If all of our attempts at positive projects of expansion have fallen short and only snared us in a new set of traps, then there must be another approach. That the expansion of gender has failed, does not imply that contraction would serve our purposes. Such an impulse is purely reactionary and must be done away with.

The reactionary radical feminist sees gender abolition as such a contraction. For them, we must abolish gender so that sex (the physical characteristics of the body) can be a stable material basis upon which we can be grouped. We reject this whole heartedly. Sex itself

is grounded in discursive groupings, given an authority through medicine, and violently imposed onto the bodies of intersex individuals. We decry this violence.

No, a return to a simpler and smaller understanding of gender (even if supposedly material conception) will not do. It is the very normative grouping of bodies in the first place which we push back against. Neither contraction nor expansion will save us. Our only path is that of destruction.

## **Radical Negativity**

At the heart of our gender abolition is a negativity. We seek not to abolish gender so that a true self can be returned to; there is no such self. It is not as though the abolition of gender will free us to exist as true or genuine selves, freed from certain norms. Such a conclusion would be at odds with the entirety of our antihumanist claims. And thus we must take a leap into the void.

A moment of lucid clarity is required here. If what we are is a product of discourses of power, and we seek to abolish and destroy those discourses, we are taking the greatest risk possible. We are diving into an unknown. The very terms, symbols, ideas, and realities by which we have been shaped and created will burn in flames, and we cannot know or predict what we will be when we come out the other side.

This is why we must embrace an attitude of radical negativity. All the previous attempts at positive and expansionist gender politics have failed us. We must cease

to presume a knowledge of what liberation or emancipation might look like, for those ideas are themselves grounded upon an idea of the self which cannot stand up to scrutiny; it is an idea which for the longest time has been used to limit our horizons. Only pure rejection, the move away from any sort of knowable or intelligible future can allow us the possibility for a future at all.

While this risk is a powerful one, it is necessary. Yet in plunging into the unknown, we enter the waters of unintelligibility. These waters are not without their dangers; and there is a real possibility for a radical loss of self. The very terms by which we recognize each other may be dissolved. But there is no other way out of this dilemma. We are daily being attacked by a process of normalization that codes us as deviant. If we do not lose ourselves in the movement of negativity, we will be destroyed by the status quo. We have only one option, risks be damned.

This powerfully captures the predicament that we are in at this moment. While the risk of embracing negativity is high, we know the alternative will destroy us. If we lose ourselves in the process, we have merely suffered the same fate we would have otherwise. Thus it is with reckless abandon that we refuse to postulate about what a future might hold, and what we might be within that future. A rejection of meaning, a rejection of known possibility, a rejection of being itself. Nihilism. That is our stance and method.

Relentless critique of positive gender politics is thus a starting point, but one which must occur cautiously. For if we are to criticize their own normative underpin-

nings in favor of an alternative, we only fall prey once again to the neutralizing power of normalization. Thus we answer the demand for a clearly stated alternative and for a program of actions to be taken with a resolute "no." The days of manifestos and platforms are over. The negation of all things, ourselves included, is the only means through which we will ever be able to gain anything.

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# Xenofeminism

## A Politics for Alienation

x Laboria Cuboniks

### Zero

0x00

**O**urs is a world in vertigo. It is a world that swarms with technological mediation, interlacing our daily lives with abstraction, virtuality, and complexity. XF constructs a feminism adapted to these realities: a feminism of unprecedented cunning, scale, and vision; a future in which the realization of gender justice and feminist emancipation contribute to a universalist politics assembled from the needs of every human, cutting across race, ability, economic standing, and geographical position. No more futureless repetition on the treadmill of capital, no more submission to the drudgery of labour, productive and reproductive alike, no more reification of the given masked as critique. Our future requires depetrification. XF is not a bid for revolution, but a wager on the long game of history, demanding imagination, dexterity and persistence.

**0x01**

XF seizes alienation as an impetus to generate new worlds. We are all alienated—but have we ever been otherwise? It is through, and not despite, our alienated condition that we can free ourselves from the muck of immediacy. Freedom is not a given—and it's certainly not given by anything 'natural'. The construction of freedom involves not less but more alienation; alienation is the labour of freedom's construction. Nothing should be accepted as fixed, permanent, or 'given'—neither material conditions nor social forms. XF mutates, navigates and probes every horizon. Anyone who's been deemed 'unnatural' in the face of reigning biological norms, anyone who's experienced injustices wrought in the name of natural order, will realize that the glorification of 'nature' has nothing to offer us—the queer and trans among us, the differently-abled, as well as those who have suffered discrimination due to pregnancy or duties connected to child-rearing. XF is vehemently anti-naturalist. Essentialist naturalism reeks of theology—the sooner it is exorcised, the better.

**0x02**

Why is there so little explicit, organized effort to repurpose technologies for progressive gender political ends? XF seeks to strategically deploy existing technologies to re-engineer the world. Serious risks are built into these tools; they are prone to imbalance, abuse, and exploita-



tion of the weak. Rather than pretending to risk nothing, XF advocates the necessary assembly of techno-political interfaces responsive to these risks. Technology isn't inherently progressive. Its uses are fused with culture in a positive feedback loop that makes linear sequencing, prediction, and absolute caution impossible. Technoscientific innovation must be linked to a collective theoretical and political thinking in which women, queers, and the gender non-conforming play an unparalleled role.

### **0x03**

The real emancipatory potential of technology remains unrealized. Fed by the market, its rapid growth is offset by bloat, and elegant innovation is surrendered to the buyer, whose stagnant world it decorates. Beyond the noisy clutter of commodified craft, the ultimate task lies in engineering technologies to combat unequal access to reproductive and pharmacological tools, environmental cataclysm, economic instability, as well as dangerous forms of unpaid/underpaid labour. Gender inequality still characterizes the fields in which our technologies are conceived, built, and legislated for, while female workers in electronics (to name just one industry) perform some of the worst paid, monotonous and debilitating labour. Such injustice demands structural, machinic and ideological correction.

**0x04**

Xenofeminism is a rationalism. To claim that reason or rationality is 'by nature' a patriarchal enterprise is to concede defeat. It is true that the canonical 'history of thought' is dominated by men, and it is male hands we see throttling existing institutions of science and technology. But this is precisely why feminism must be a rationalism—because of this miserable imbalance, and not despite it. There is no 'feminine' rationality, nor is there a 'masculine' one. Science is not an expression but a suspension of gender. If today it is dominated by masculine egos, then it is at odds with itself—and this contradiction can be leveraged. Reason, like information, wants to be free, and patriarchy cannot give it freedom. Rationalism must itself be a feminism. XF marks the point where these claims intersect in a two-way dependency. It names reason as an engine of feminist emancipation, and declares the right of everyone to speak as no one in particular.

## **Interrupt**

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The excess of modesty in feminist agendas of recent decades is not proportionate to the monstrous complexity of our reality, a reality crosshatched with fibre-optic cables, radio and microwaves, oil and gas pipelines, aerial and shipping routes, and the unrelenting, simultaneous execution of millions of communication protocols with

every passing millisecond. Systematic thinking and structural analysis have largely fallen by the wayside in favour of admirable, but insufficient struggles, bound to fixed localities and fragmented insurrections. Whilst capitalism is understood as a complex and ever-expanding totality, many would-be emancipatory anti-capitalist projects remain profoundly fearful of transitioning to the universal, resisting big-picture speculative politics by condemning them as necessarily oppressive vectors. Such a false guarantee treats universals as absolute, generating a debilitating disjuncture between the thing we seek to depose and the strategies we advance to depose it.

## 0x06

Global complexity opens us to urgent cognitive and ethical demands. These are Promethean responsibilities that cannot pass unaddressed. Much of twenty-first century feminism—from the remnants of postmodern identity politics to large swathes of contemporary ecofeminism—struggles to adequately address these challenges in a manner capable of producing substantial and enduring change. Xenofeminism endeavours to face up to these obligations as collective agents capable of transitioning between multiple levels of political, material and conceptual organization.

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We are adamantly synthetic, unsatisfied by analysis alone. XF urges constructive oscillation between description and prescription to mobilize the recursive potential of contemporary technologies upon gender, sexuality and disparities of power. Given that there are a range of gendered challenges specifically relating to life in a digital age—from sexual harassment via social media, to doxxing, privacy, and the protection of online images—the situation requires a feminism at ease with computation. Today, it is imperative that we develop an ideological infrastructure that both supports and facilitates feminist interventions within connective, networked elements of the contemporary world. Xenofeminism is about more than digital self-defence and freedom from patriarchal networks. We want to cultivate the exercise of positive freedom—freedom-to rather than simply freedom-from—and urge feminists to equip themselves with the skills to redeploy existing technologies and invent novel cognitive and material tools in the service of common ends.

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The radical opportunities afforded by developing (and alienating) forms of technological mediation should no longer be put to use in the exclusive interests of capital, which, by design, only benefits the few. There are incessantly proliferating tools to be annexed, and although no

one can claim their comprehensive accessibility, digital tools have never been more widely available or more sensitive to appropriation than they are today. This is not an elision of the fact that a large amount of the world's poor is adversely affected by the expanding technological industry (from factory workers labouring under abominable conditions to the Ghanaian villages that have become a repository for the e-waste of the global powers) but an explicit acknowledgement of these conditions as a target for elimination. Just as the invention of the stock market was also the invention of the crash, Xenofeminism knows that technological innovation must equally anticipate its systemic condition responsively.

## Trap

### 0x09

XF rejects illusion and melancholy as political inhibitors. Illusion, as the blind presumption that the weak can prevail over the strong with no strategic coordination, leads to unfulfilled promises and unmarshalled drives. This is a politics that, in wanting so much, ends up building so little. Without the labour of large-scale, collective social organisation, declaring one's desire for global change is nothing more than wishful thinking. On the other hand, melancholy—so endemic to the left—teaches us that emancipation is an extinct species to be wept over and that blips of negation are the best we can hope for. At its worst, such an attitude generates nothing but po-

litical lassitude, and at its best, installs an atmosphere of pervasive despair which too often degenerates into factionalism and petty moralizing. The malady of melancholia only compounds political inertia, and—under the guise of being realistic—relinquishes all hope of calibrating the world otherwise. It is against such maladies that XF inoculates.

0x0A

We take politics that exclusively valorize the local in the guise of subverting currents of global abstraction, to be insufficient. To secede from or disavow capitalist machinery will not make it disappear. Likewise, suggestions to pull the lever on the emergency brake of embedded velocities, the call to slow down and scale back, is a possibility available only to the few—a violent particularity of exclusivity—ultimately entailing catastrophe for the many. Refusing to think beyond the microcommunity, to foster connections between fractured insurgencies, to consider how emancipatory tactics can be scaled up for universal implementation, is to remain satisfied with temporary and defensive gestures. XF is an affirmative creature on the offensive, fiercely insisting on the possibility of large-scale social change for all of our alien kin.

**0x0B**

A sense of the world's volatility and artificiality seems to have faded from contemporary queer and feminist politics, in favour of a plural but static constellation of gender identities, in whose bleak light equations of the good and the natural are stubbornly restored. While having (perhaps) admirably expanded thresholds of 'tolerance', too often we are told to seek solace in unfreedom, staking claims on being 'born' this way, as if offering an excuse with nature's blessing. All the while, the heteronormative centre chugs on. XF challenges this centrifugal referent, knowing full well that sex and gender are exemplary of the fulcrum between norm and fact, between freedom and compulsion. To tilt the fulcrum in the direction of nature is a defensive concession at best, and a retreat from what makes trans and queer politics more than just a lobby: that it is an arduous assertion of freedom against an order that seemed immutable. Like every myth of the given, a stable foundation is fabricated for a real world of chaos, violence, and doubt. The 'given' is sequestered into the private realm as a certainty, whilst retreating on fronts of public consequences. When the possibility of transition became real and known, the tomb under Nature's shrine cracked, and new histories—bristling with futures—escaped the old order of 'sex'. The disciplinary grid of gender is in no small part an attempt to mend that shattered foundation, and tame the lives that escaped it. The time has now come to tear down this

shrine entirely, and not bow down before it in a piteous apology for what little autonomy has been won.

### 0x0C

If 'cyberspace' once offered the promise of escaping the strictures of essentialist identity categories, the climate of contemporary social media has swung forcefully in the other direction, and has become a theatre where these prostrations to identity are performed. With these curatorial practices come puritanical rituals of moral maintenance, and these stages are too often overrun with the disavowed pleasures of accusation, shaming, and denunciation. Valuable platforms for connection, organization, and skill-sharing become clogged with obstacles to productive debate positioned as if they are debate. These puritanical politics of shame—which fetishize oppression as if it were a blessing, and cloud the waters in moralistic frenzies—leave us cold. We want neither clean hands nor beautiful souls, neither virtue nor terror. We want superior forms of corruption.

### 0x0D

What this shows is that the task of engineering platforms for social emancipation and organization cannot ignore the cultural and semiotic mutations these platforms afford. What requires reengineering are the memetic parasites arousing and coordinating behaviours in ways occluded by their hosts' self-image; failing this, memes



like 'anonymity', 'ethics', 'social justice' and 'privilege-checking' host social dynamisms at odds with the often-commendable intentions with which they're taken up. The task of collective self-mastery requires a hyperstitional manipulation of desire's puppet-strings, and deployment of semiotic operators over a terrain of highly networked cultural systems. The will will always be corrupted by the memes in which it traffics, but nothing prevents us from instrumentalizing this fact, and calibrating it in view of the ends it desires.

## Parity

### 0x0E

Xenofeminism is gender-abolitionist. 'Gender abolitionism' is not code for the eradication of what are currently considered 'gendered' traits from the human population. Under patriarchy, such a project could only spell disaster—the notion of what is 'gendered' sticks disproportionately to the feminine. But even if this balance were redressed, we have no interest in seeing the sexuate diversity of the world reduced. Let a hundred sexes bloom! 'Gender abolitionism' is shorthand for the ambition to construct a society where traits currently assembled under the rubric of gender, no longer furnish a grid for the asymmetric operation of power. 'Race abolitionism' expands into a similar formula—that the struggle must continue until currently racialized characteristics are no more a basis of discrimination than than the color of

one's eyes. Ultimately, every emancipatory abolitionism must incline towards the horizon of class abolitionism, since it is in capitalism where we encounter oppression in its transparent, denaturalized form: you're not exploited or oppressed because you are a wage labourer or poor; you are a labourer or poor because you are exploited.

## **0x0F**

Xenofeminism understands that the viability of emancipatory abolitionist projects—the abolition of class, gender, and race—hinges on a profound reworking of the universal. The universal must be grasped as generic, which is to say, intersectional. Intersectionality is not the morcellation of collectives into a static fuzz of cross-referenced identities, but a political orientation that slices through every particular, refusing the crass pigeonholing of bodies. This is not a universal that can be imposed from above, but built from the bottom up—or, better, laterally, opening new lines of transit across an uneven landscape. This non-absolute, generic universality must guard against the facile tendency of conflation with bloated, unmarked particulars—namely Eurocentric universalism—whereby the male is mistaken for the sexless, the white for raceless, the cis for the real, and so on. Absent such a universal, the abolition of class will remain a bourgeois fantasy, the abolition of race will remain a tacit white-supremacism, and the abolition of gender will remain a thinly veiled misogyny, even—especially—when prosecuted by avowed feminists them-

selves. (The absurd and reckless spectacle of so many self-proclaimed 'gender abolitionists' campaign against trans women is proof enough of this).

## 0x10

From the postmoderns, we have learnt to burn the facades of the false universal and dispel such confusions; from the moderns, we have learnt to sift new universals from the ashes of the false. Xenofeminism seeks to construct a coalitional politics, a politics without the infection of purity. Wielding the universal requires thoughtful qualification and precise self-reflection so as to become a ready-to-hand tool for multiple political bodies and something that can be appropriated against the numerous oppressions that transect with gender and sexuality. The universal is no blueprint, and rather than dictate its uses in advance, we propose XF as a platform. The very process of construction is therefore understood to be a negentropic, iterative, and continual refashioning. Xenofeminism seeks to be a mutable architecture that, like open source software, remains available for perpetual modification and enhancement following the navigational impulse of militant ethical reasoning. Open, however, does not mean undirected. The most durable systems in the world owe their stability to the way they train order to emerge as an 'invisible hand' from apparent spontaneity; or exploit the inertia of investment and sedimentation. We should not hesitate to learn from our adversaries or the successes and failures of history.

With this in mind, XF seeks ways to seed an order that is equitable and just, injecting it into the geometry of freedoms these platforms afford.

## **Adjust**

### **0x11**

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, extending to gender and the human. To say that nothing is sacred, that nothing is transcendent or protected from the will to know, to tinker and to hack, is to say that nothing is supernatural. 'Nature'—understood here, as the unbounded arena of science—is all there is. And so, in tearing down melancholy and illusion; the unambitious and the non-scaleable; the libiditized puritanism of certain online cultures, and Nature as an un-remakeable given, we find that our normative anti-naturalism has pushed us towards an unflinching ontological naturalism. There is nothing, we claim, that cannot be studied scientifically and manipulated technologically.

### **0x12**

This does not mean that the distinction between the ontological and the normative, between fact and value, is simply cut and dried. The vectors of normative anti-naturalism and ontological naturalism span many ambivalent battlefields. The project of untangling what

ought to be from what is, of dissociating freedom from fact, will from knowledge, is, indeed, an infinite task. There are many lacunae where desire confronts us with the brutality of fact, where beauty is indissociable from truth. Poetry, sex, technology and pain are incandescent with this tension we have traced. But give up on the task of revision, release the reins and slacken that tension, and these filaments instantly dim.

## Carry

0x13

The potential of early, text-based internet culture for countering repressive gender regimes, generating solidarity among marginalised groups, and creating new spaces for experimentation that ignited cyberfeminism in the nineties has clearly waned in the twenty-first century. The dominance of the visual in today's online interfaces has reinstated familiar modes of identity policing, power relations and gender norms in self-representation. But this does not mean that cyberfeminist sensibilities belong to the past. Sorting the subversive possibilities from the oppressive ones latent in today's web requires a feminism sensitive to the insidious return of old power structures, yet savvy enough to know how to exploit the potential. Digital technologies are not separable from the material realities that underwrite them; they are connected so that each can be used to alter the other towards different ends. Rather than arguing for the pri-

macy of the virtual over the material, or the material over the virtual, xenofeminism grasps points of power and powerlessness in both, to unfold this knowledge as effective interventions in our jointly composed reality.

#### **0x14**

Intervention in more obviously material hegemonies is just as crucial as intervention in digital and cultural ones. Changes to the built environment harbour some of the most significant possibilities in the reconfiguration of the horizons of women and queers. As the embodiment of ideological constellations, the production of space and the decisions we make for its organization are ultimately articulations about 'us' and reciprocally, how a 'we' can be articulated. With the potential to foreclose, restrict, or open up future social conditions, xenofeminists must become attuned to the language of architecture as a vocabulary for collective choreo-graphy—the coordinated writing of space.

#### **0x15**

From the street to the home, domestic space too must not escape our tentacles. So profoundly ingrained, domestic space has been deemed impossible to disembed, where the home as norm has been conflated with home as fact, as an un-remakeable given. Stultifying 'domestic realism' has no home on our horizon. Let us set sights on augmented homes of shared laboratories, of commu-

nal media and technical facilities. The home is ripe for spatial transformation as an integral component in any process of feminist futurity. But this cannot stop at the garden gates. We see too well that reinventions of family structure and domestic life are currently only possible at the cost of either withdrawing from the economic sphere—the way of the commune—or bearing its burdens manyfold—the way of the single parent. If we want to break the inertia that has kept the moribund figure of the nuclear family unit in place, which has stubbornly worked to isolate women from the public sphere, and men from the lives of their children, while penalizing those who stray from it, we must overhaul the material infrastructure and break the economic cycles that lock it in place. The task before us is twofold, and our vision necessarily stereoscopic: we must engineer an economy that liberates reproductive labour and family life, while building models of familiarity free from the deadening grind of wage labour.

#### 0x16

From the home to the body, the articulation of a proactive politics for biotechnical intervention and hormones presses. Hormones hack into gender systems possessing political scope extending beyond the aesthetic calibration of individual bodies. Thought structurally, the distribution of hormones—who or what this distribution prioritizes or pathologizes—is of paramount import. The rise of the internet and the hydra of black mar-

ket pharmacies it let loose—together with a publicly accessible archive of endocrinological knowhow—was instrumental in wresting control of the hormonal economy away from ‘gatekeeping’ institutions seeking to mitigate threats to established distributions of the sexual. To trade in the rule of bureaucrats for the market is, however, not a victory in itself. These tides need to rise higher. We ask whether the idiom of ‘gender hacking’ is extensible into a long-range strategy, a strategy for wetware akin to what hacker culture has already done for software—constructing an entire universe of free and open source platforms that is the closest thing to a practicable communism many of us have ever seen. Without the foolhardy endangerment of lives, can we stitch together the embryonic promises held before us by pharmaceutical 3D printing (‘Reactionware’), grassroots telemedical abortion clinics, gender hacktivist and DIY-HRT forums, and so on, to assemble a platform for free and open source medicine?

## 0x17

From the global to the local, from the cloud to our bodies, xenofeminism avows the responsibility in constructing new institutions of technomaterialist hegemonic proportions. Like engineers who must conceive of a total structure as well as the molecular parts from which it is constructed, XF emphasises the importance of the mesopolitical sphere against the limited effectiveness of local gestures, creation of autonomous zones, and sheer



horizontalism, just as it stands against transcendent, or top-down impositions of values and norms. The mesopolitical arena of xenofeminism's universalist ambitions comprehends itself as a mobile and intricate network of transits between these polarities. As pragmatists, we invite contamination as a mutational driver between such frontiers.

## **Overflow**

### **0x18**

XF asserts that adapting our behaviour for an era of Promethean complexity is a labour requiring patience, but a ferocious patience at odds with 'waiting'. Calibrating a political hegemony or insurgent memeplex not only implies the creation of material infra-structures to make the values it articulates explicit, but places demands on us as subjects. How are we to become hosts of this new world? How do we build a better semiotic parasite—one that arouses the desires we want to desire, that orchestrates not an autophagic orgy of indignity or rage, but an emancipatory and egalitarian community buttressed by new forms of unselfish solidarity and collective self-mastery?

### **0x19**

Is xenofeminism a programme? Not if this means anything so crude as a recipe, or a single-purpose tool by which a determinate problem is solved. We prefer to

think like the schemer or lisper, who seeks to construct a new language in which the problem at hand is immersed, so that solutions for it, and for any number of related problems, might unfurl with ease. Xenofeminism is a platform, an incipient ambition to construct a new language for sexual politics—a language that seizes its own methods as materials to be reworked, and incrementally bootstraps itself into existence. We understand that the problems we face are systemic and interlocking, and that any chance of global success depends on infecting myriad skills and contexts with the logic of XF. Ours is a transformation of seeping, directed subsumption rather than rapid overthrow; it is a transformation of deliberate construction, seeking to submerge the white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy in a sea of procedures that soften its shell and dismantle its defenses, so as to build a new world from the scraps.

#### 0x1A

Xenofeminism indexes the desire to construct an alien future with a triumphant X on a mobile map. This X does not mark a destination. It is the insertion of a topological-keyframe for the formation of a new logic. In affirming a future untethered to the repetition of the present, we militate for ampliative capacities, for spaces of freedom with a richer geometry than the aisle, the assembly line, and the feed. We need new affordances of perception and action unblinkered by naturalised identities. In the name of feminism, 'Nature' shall no longer

be a refuge of injustice, or a basis for any political justification whatsoever!

If nature is unjust, change nature!



# Gender Nihilism

x Aidan Rowe

NOTHING can/will define me! Free to be  
EVERYTHING!!!

Miley Cyrus

I wish to speak of something without knowing quite what it is. A disposition; a sensibility; a micropolitical strategy; a navigational heuristic; a performative absence; a forgetting, perhaps; a queer site of refusal and resistance; a creative potential; an experiment, a mode of living within, despite and against the regime of gender, which I'm going to call "gender nihilism".

Gender nihilism designates a kind of radical agnosticism at the level of (gender) identity; a refusal of the injunction to know what one is, to objectify oneself as knowledge, and to make oneself known; a persistent "no comment" to the police who surround and suffuse us, and marshal against us a vast array of tactics—promises, threats, insults, lies, seductions, manipulations, forms of violence—to extract a confession. It names a possibility latent within any particular gender position: that of disidentification, of non-identification.

Silence too is performative.<sup>1</sup> If gender is in some sense the effect of the repetition of gendered expressions, what is the effect of the repetition of a silence when the question of one's gender is posed? It is not an escape. Norms continue to inscribe gendered meanings on the body, to produce modes of embodiment, and to act upon expression. One remains both a relay for and a product of gender as a form of power.<sup>2</sup> It is more like

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<sup>1</sup> One stock example of performativity is the "I do" of a wedding ceremony. Consider how the same ceremony also incorporates a performative silence to sanction the legality of the marriage: the moment after "speak now or forever hold your peace".

<sup>2</sup> A question arises here: if we assert that gender cannot be escaped, are we not legislating against the identities of those who claim for themselves a position outside of the gender binary, or outside of gender as such—those who call themselves agender, non-binary, or third gender, for example? This, I think, is a problem that arises in all forms of gender identification, which I call the problem of 'lived ontology'. That is: any particular assertion of gender identity involves claims about what kinds of genders can exist and which cannot, whose implications extend beyond the self to the whole social body. For example, a trans person's insistence that their anatomy does not dictate their gender troubles the gender of a cis person who understands their gender as grounded in biological fact, while in turn forms of lived gender fluidity trouble some trans people's understanding of their lived gender as grounded in fixed interior truth. The various forms of gender identity in the world are mutually incoherent, and in some cases mutually canceling. This should not be seen as a problem, rather we should seek to understand the ways that a variety of mutually incompatible forms of gender dissidence each open up their own spaces of freedom and effect their own disruptions of the gender regime. I intend to return to this topic in a more systematic way in the future, but provisionally we can say that all

a strike or an act of sabotage, a refusal to function as a site of production for a particular kind of knowledge and an effort to disrupt one's normal functioning as a force of production.

There is nothing natural about having a gender. The shift from sovereignty—whose mode of action is necropolitical and whose instrument is law—to discipline—in which the fashioning and control of life (rather than consignment to death) becomes the primary concern of power, and the norm its instrument—as the dominant form of power required the expansion of modes of inquiry and knowledge production. Simply: that which is to be disciplined must be rendered intelligible to disciplinary powers; the norm must be defined and delimited and deviance understood in order to be corrected and eliminated. Gender, sex, sexuality are conceptual instruments of this form of power. The belief that one must have a gender, that is, that one must know oneself in gendered terms and be capable of transmitting that knowledge, that gender self-knowledge is a necessary condition for a livable life, and that the absence of such knowledge is a form of crisis, is a historical phenomenon and an effect of power. Gender nihilism is the lived refutation of that belief, the demonstration that life can be

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genders are in some sense impossible, and that the extension of recognition despite or even because of that impossibility is one of the ways in which we can collaborate and support one-another to performatively open up possibilities that are barred by gender norms.

lived without such knowledge, and that such a life can flourish.

If the disciplinary society aimed at the elimination of troublesome difference through institutional power, the new capitalism, the society of control, produces a fresh twist on the politics of intelligibility. Control is interested not in the elimination of difference but in its assimilation, the recuperation and reincorporation of renegades into the market, the state, the family and so on by adding additional axioms which conditionally and selectively allow access to the norm. Homosexuality no longer requires a cure, rather the marriage norm is expanded to include gays who conform to certain norms of acceptable difference, while the rest are further abjected. Disciplinary power is tactile and direct, control is remote and abstract. It effects biopolitical control through the modulation of differential access to markets, food, shelter, recognition, rights, protections.

If the assertion of abjected identities, and the hybridisation and invention of new identities directly confronted disciplinary power, such gestures are increasingly incorporated by new forms of control. The assertion of identity becomes the means by which a population delimits itself and renders itself intelligible to power and begins a trajectory of assimilation which assigns it a place within marketing strategies, state institutions, culture and social life.<sup>3</sup> It thereby structures oppositional

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, this process is not inevitable. Identity categories can be queered and re-queered to resist assimilation. And identity-



politics according to a logic of recognition, drawing renegade flows back toward the state and the reproduction of the present.

Gender nihilism is disinterested in recognition. Recognition is always "recognition as..." and therefore remains always conditional: "I recognise you as..." is always conditional on a prior identification, always implies a "because you are...", and always retains the possibility that recognition will be withdrawn if you become something else. The power of recognition is also simultaneously the power of misrecognition and non-recognition, and the goal of recognition, whether demanded or asked for, exposes one permanently to these forms of violence. However forcefully we assert "I am...", we remain vulnerable to "You are not...", "You are instead..."<sup>4</sup>

Gender nihilism has no positive content. In itself it does not prescribe or recommend any particular way of being in the world. It makes no claims about what it is. If identification is drawing a circle in the sand saying "here are the things I am, there are the things I am not", gender nihilism simply lets the circle be washed away by the waves. ~~The gender nihilist is therefore indifferent to~~

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based movements can exceed containment and threaten power. My aim here is not to proscribe identification, but to question its necessity and sketch an alternative.

<sup>4</sup> This condition is perhaps never fully escapable. As social beings we are always minimally vulnerable. We never fully control how we are affected by the names we are called. In this sense perhaps gender nihilism designates a horizon rather than an actuality. In any case, it is certainly not a delusion of invulnerability.

~~the names they are called and the genders they signify.~~<sup>5</sup> Gender nihilism opens the entire space of gendered possibility as a terrain for exploration, but does not replace fidelity to an identity with fidelity to an ethics of exploration. One can stay where one is just as surely as one can set off at a sprint. In this sense it is less a nomadism than a homelessness.<sup>6</sup> It opens up gender as a space of play, or of combat, without mandating either. Its mode of address is “you can...” — “you should...” and “you must...” only emerge when other components are bolted on. It is futural in the sense that it refuses the conception of historicity that grounds identity (“I am what I always have been”) which is always in any case a founding myth, a constantly reworked fiction that establishes continuity with the past. Gender nihilism is at ease with rupture. It allows us to treat our histories as a resource, an archive of past styles, ways of living, memories, experiences, beliefs to be reworked and refashioned in any way desired, but is not innately a postmodernist, or futurist, or accelerationist disposition towards novelty or innovation.

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<sup>5</sup> The struck-out sentence is one I no longer endorses since it prescribes indifference as an ideal way of living queerness—precisely the kind of prescriptivism this text seeks to escape. I have struck it out because, while I feel it can safely be removed from the text without loss of coherence, I don't believe in simply deleting problematic/contentious mistakes so it appears as if I never said them.

<sup>6</sup> My point is not that a nomad ethics is not desirable (I think it is, and there is clearly an affinity or compatibility between the two), simply that this question is external to the proposition of gender nihilism.

Gender nihilism is political but it is not a politics. It is queer by definition, but proposes no ideal queer nor any queer horizon towards which to direct itself. It is a negation that doesn't presuppose some future dialectical turn. Clearly it is in various ways a marginal and precarious position and thus its structural position pushes towards certain forms of alliance, and indeed may in itself open unique political possibilities. In this sense gender nihilism may be a valuable conceptual component in a political assemblage, but one ambivalent to the particular political projects it connects with.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed I write this in part because I am convinced of the political value of nihilism both as a point to pass through and as a position to act from, but that's another essay.



# **Against Gender, Against Society**

(This is What a Feminist Looks Like)

x Nila

Exclusion is not remedied by inclusion but by attacking those forces that exclude, which are numerous and are rarely entirely within our control.

*How to Destroy the World*

## **Gender Is a War That Spans All Society**

**T**here is a war waged against our bodies, our minds and the potential of our relationships: the social war. What is gender and what is it to be gendered? Genders are socially constructed categories that corresponds to nebulous parameters surrounding behaviors, sexualities, aesthetics, socio-cultural roles, bodies, etc. Genders concretize differently in different places, times and individuals; some will experience gender as very constricting and others will never hit the boundaries their genders impose on them. Gender is inextricably connected to

sexuality, both of which perpetually shape and define each other. The two most commonly imposed genders are man/male and woman/female, and to stray away from them, move amongst them or act against them summons the enforcement agents of society. Gender benefits those who want to control, socialize and manage us and offers us nothing in return. Every time a person is scrutinized and gendered, society has attacked them, confined them, waged war on them.

Social war is the conflict that spans all society, social war is the struggle against society; that is to say all existing social relations. The self-destructive tendency within society, so-called "anti-social behavior", the desire to command and to obey, acts of rebellion and acts of reinforcement, the riot and the return to work, these are the attacks and counter-attacks in this war. Social war is the battles between those who wish to destroy society and those maintaining it. Chaos against control. Nothingness and potential against everything and the existent. Everything that holds society together insulates us from each other; each blow to domination and control is a step closer to each other, a step away from our imposed identities, our alienation and toward infinite possibility. Because society is everywhere, the only way to escape is to win the social war; to destroy society. Gender is one of the fronts on which the social war is fought.

## The Topography of Gender Covers Racial Terrains

Prior to the industrial revolution and the two world wars, in many western cultures white women had to struggle to work (outside of the home) and move into the "public" sphere which was previously reserved for white men and people of color.<sup>1</sup> Women of color within these same cultures, on the other hand, have always worked both within and outside of the home. They were "workers" in a traditional sense, as well as women; though never held to the standard of white womanhood and in the eyes of whiteness seen as "secondary man" of sorts.

Women of color are read and marked as capable of working outside the home. Women of color do not hit the limits of their genders when moving between "private/domestic" and "public/work" spheres but were limited by their non-white womanhood within each of these realms. White women had a different womanhood that demanded they remain within the "private/domestic" sphere, white womanhood had very little room for women to enter the world of work, however white womanhood ensured that white women would never face the challenges women of color faced simply for being gendered as such. Again, gender, while always limiting, limits differently on different racial terrains within the social war.

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<sup>1</sup> This isn't to say women do not continue to struggle, only that a shift of the gender composition has taken place in contemporary western work places.

## **An Imported Gender Pandemic**

As Europeans moved outside of Europe to further colonial projects, they brought their ideas and conceptions of gender. The nuclear family<sup>2</sup> and the specific genders and sexualities that it requires were foreign to many non-western cultures that form families in any number of other ways. The nuclear family is a unit that fit most easily in the social narrative of dominant western cultures; it plays easily into patriarchal power dynamics. The nuclear family places much of the work that colonizers had to actively engage in on the patriarch of each family; socialization, policing behaviors and roles, and of course the enforcement and reproduction of genders capable of existing more peacefully within western hierarchies.

The expansion of the church and the spread of christianity played a large part in spread of the nuclear family and western conceptions of gender and sexuality. Christianity was accepted by some populations that integrated it into their cultures to varying degrees while others were violently made to "accept" it. This isn't to say that gender didn't exist in some form or other outside of colonialism and western cultures or that other forces are not at play in defining and limiting what gender is, only that

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<sup>2</sup> A term commonly used to define a family group consisting of a father, a mother, (typically married) and their children all in one household dwelling. This is in contrast to a single-parent family, to the larger extended family, and to a family with more than two parents. The family cooperates economically and reproduces. The term nuclear is used in its general meaning referring to a central entity or "nucleus" around which others collect.



the current “universal” and “natural” ideas of what gender is now stem in part from colonialism and a need to centralize and control non-western forms of life.

Additionally the cis/trans\* binary also furthers centralization and colonialism, assimilating and categorizing all identities outside of itself. Like all forms of representation, the cis/trans\* binary as an all-encompassing set of categories is both flattening and inadequate. There are genders that are not cis, but do not place themselves under the trans\* umbrella. Despite this, anyone who isn't cis is assumed to be trans\* and vice versa. An LGBTQ avant-garde of sorts moves to assimilate all unusual genders and even the lack of gender into transness. This leaves no room for anyone to fall outside of these categories. This often plays out in a colonial manner, rendering non-western genders legible to and manageable by western LGBTQ narratives of gender and sexuality.

## **None of Us Belongs to Any Gender**

None of us belongs to any gender outside the context of social war; that is to say gender is a social imposition upon us, a means of keeping us under control (by limiting what is acceptable for anyone gendered in any way). Despite the popular notion that gender is one of two stable biological categories resulting from certain sexed bodies, the very existence of trans\* people of all stripes (especially non-binary people) and of intersex bodies that frustrate efforts to attribute gender to certain anatomical characteristics calls this narrative into

question and forces us to acknowledge the idea that gender is something that happens to us and not something that we are inherently or “naturally”.

## **We Must Oppose the Myths of Identity**

Each of us is a vast and unquantifiable nothing, an infinitely potent singularity. Imposing a gender on us, an identity even, can only stifle us at best and destroy us at worst. Attempting to define us will always fail, no category can fully contain us, any identity will necessarily restrain. We must oppose identity. However, we'd be foolish to deny the material consequences of the myths of identity; after all, they are amongst the foundations of oppression. Anyone who is told they are a woman will be treated “like a woman” despite the fact that women share nothing other than the myth of womanhood and the societal violence that accompanies this myth.

Each time we are gendered, society is attempting to limit us to certain behaviors and roles, to certain actions and aesthetics. Women are caring and weak, men are strong and insensitive. Gender robs us of our potential to do and be *whatever* and then offers us a limited range of roles, actions, aesthetics and behaviors packaged as a specific social category. We have the potential to be anything, and gender is the myth that tells us we are specifically *something* and *only* that something. All the traits various genders “offer” are traits we can embody on our own without the help of gender.

Behaving in ways that are seen as outside the domain of our genders will inevitably bring down repression—whether that means an awkward laugh from a sibling, or a severe beating and prison sentence will depend on the context. However, as long as gender remains intact we will be limited to the lists of actions that are acceptable to the gender we're perceived as, lest we face societal violence. We have nothing to gain from being gendered that doesn't come from either conformity to our genders or as a benefit of policing or enforcement of the genders of others. This is to say we gain nothing from gender that isn't based on controlling others or limiting ourselves.

Additionally all gendering perpetuates and reinforces hierarchy. In terms of hierarchy, cis-ness and male-ness are centered, prioritized. Gendering places people closer or further from center, above and below others as a consequence. Because of the way genders are defined in society, different genders are valued more or less. This, combined with the fact that none of us can escape our socialization, leads to the constant perpetuation of gender hierarchy by everyone. Every gender exists at an intersection of subjugated and subjugator. Combinations of gender, race, trans\*-ness/cis-ness of gender and myriad of other factors create subject-positions where it is possible to both oppress and be oppressed. Hierarchy has always gone hand-in-hand with control, domination. Gender is simply another facet of hierarchical control, of social war.

## **Mail a Bomb to Your Gender**

While some make demands of society to accommodate, respect or even equalize genders, we must look beyond gender equality and gender inclusion and destroy everything that perpetuates or imposes gender, we must turn against society itself. Gender is a war against all of us and for those who desire freedom, *nothing short of the total abolition of gender will suffice*. To those of us who wish to remove all the walls between each other instead of being alienated from each other (and ourselves) because of groupings we never chose, to those of us that wish to access all our potential doings, our potential to become any being instead of pacing within the limits of genders we know to be inadequate, we say let's destroy society, let's destroy gender.



To destroy gender,  
we must be willing  
to destroy the world  
it exists within.

After all, there's no hope anyway,  
why not?