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## Editorial Note

It's been three years since LIES Volume I was published. A lot happens in three years: promises get made. Deadlines turn into organic matter, then shrivel and rot away with the seasons. Shit happens. LIES was always going to be a difficult and ambitious project. For many of the writers and editors involved, writing is both a desirable avenue for our thoughts and an obstacle in itself.

Sometimes we did not write because our bodies were tired from work. Sometimes we wrote anyway. Sometimes we watched the streets burning on the screen, and sometimes we were out there, burning too. Sometimes we went to care for a sick friend; because we were both mourning; because we needed each other. Sometimes we were taking care of family, of children, of friends' children, of ourselves. Some-

times we were grappling with new death; sometimes it was the same old death that has always followed us.

Sometimes we were curled up in our beds, horrified at the news. We watched in awe and we rioted in surges of bodies as the world continued to change around us, as the writings contained in this volume gained new meaning and significance through the years, with every Black body shot in the street, every migrant body drowned in the sea or caged in the desert, every friend's body that fell apart. New struggles and resistances bloomed with each spring and exploded into every winter, and we tried to make some sense of it all.

These events are what make up the day-to-day, things you probably know about (some of us know more, to different degrees, than others).

Sometimes it felt perverse to be writing, or to say anything at all. Sometimes our meetings were our refuge, the one place we could find mutual aid and shared rage. Sometimes they were another instance in our week where we had to explain too much, could not explain what was so difficult to put into words. Sometimes, maybe even most days, we pushed beyond this exhaustion, individually and collectively, because there is so much to be done and so much to be written. We stumbled and paused, wandered and reconfigured – but we did make it here, eventually.

While working on Volume II, we aimed to develop ideas, analyses, and conversations that we think are important, rigorous, critical, provocative, and useful to struggle, survival, and joy in this messed up world. In addition to the difficulty of writing, we have tried to address social issues within our organising as they have arisen. White supremacy, gender hierarchies, histories of colonialism, and interpersonal political relationships are just a few topics that have surfaced in our learning to create together in this collective process. We challenged and questioned each other at great lengths in editorial meetings and feel lucky that this project allowed us to both have those conversations and prioritize them over “just getting it done” or “the larger cause.” This meant a great deal of patience on the part of the contributors, and we are grateful for their writing, for trusting us with their work, and for working with us through a process that was both rigorous and messy.

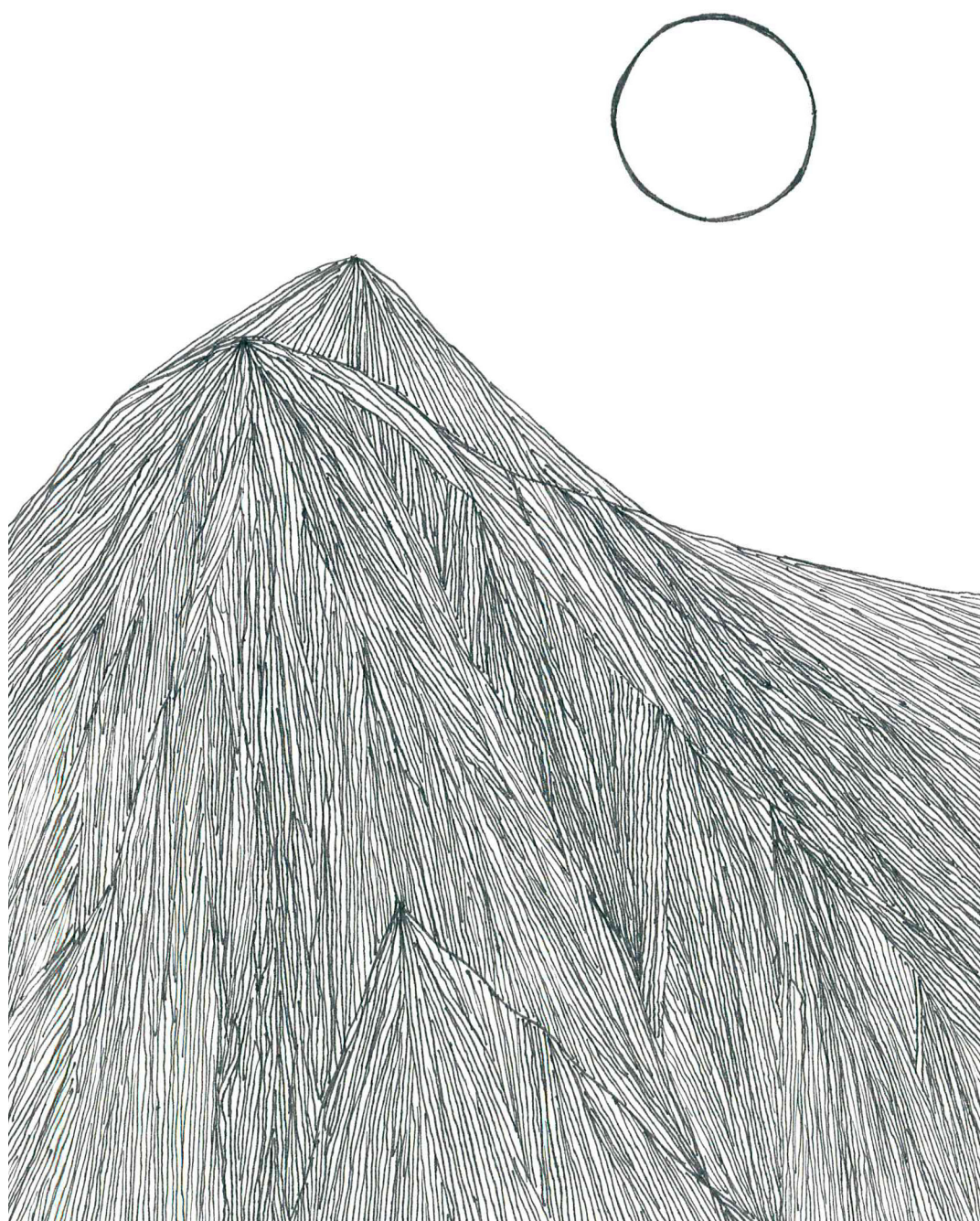
It's also been amazing to see readers and thinkers grapple with the content from Volume I, and this helped us think through what we wanted to be different, what additions or pivots we wanted to make.

LIES is excited about what might happen between between dissonant concepts and understandings in this issue. These are the tensions in which we live, to which we return, and unravel and twist around. We publish in order to deepen and advance discussion, to introduce people and ideas to one another. Like all relationships in this hellworld, nothing comes easily, but requires a commitment to figuring things out together. Thanks for figuring with us.

Imperfectly,  
the LIES collective

P.S. If you want to submit a piece for Volume III, or if you wish to respond to what you read in Volumes I or II, write to us:  
[liesjournal@gmail.com](mailto:liesjournal@gmail.com).







# Untitled

*Michelle*

a woman and her  
mouth, the same as mineshaft  
of coal, or diamonds





# Against Gender, Against Society

*nila nokizaru*

*Exclusion is not remedied by inclusion but by attacking those forces that exclude, which are numerous and are rarely entirely within our control.<sup>1</sup>*

Gender is a tool of war. There 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 correspond to nebulous parameters surrounding behaviors, sexualities, aesthetics, socio-cultural roles, bodies, et cetera. Genders concretize differently in different places, times, and individuals; some will experience gender as very constricting, while others will never hit the boundaries their genders impose on them. Gender is

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<sup>1</sup> Ignorant Research Institute. "How to Destroy the World." 2012. <http://anarchalibrary.blogspot.com/2012/06/how-to-destroy-world-2012.html>.

inextricably connected to sexuality, and both 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, against 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.

Gender itself is used as a tool for centralizing and colonizing. As Europeans moved outside of Europe to further colonial projects, they brought their ideas and conceptions of gender. The nuclear family 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 fits most easily in the social narrative of dominant western cultures; it plays easily into patriarchal power dynamics. Within the nuclear family, the patriarch does the work of the colonizer: 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 the spread of the nuclear family and western conceptions of gender and sexuality. Some populations accepted Christianity, integrating it into their cultures to

varying degrees, while others were violently forced to “accept” it. This isn’t to say that gender didn’t exist in some form outside of colonialism and western cultures. Other forces are surely at play in defining and limiting what gender is, but what is certain is that the current “universal” and “natural” ideas of gender now stem in part from colonialism and a need to centralize and control non-western forms of life.

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 moves to assimilate all “unusual” genders, and even the lack of gender, into trans-ness. 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 belong 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). The very existence of trans people of all stripes (especially non-binary people), and of intersex bodies which frustrate efforts to attribute gender to certain anatomical characteristics, calls into question the narrative that gender comprises two stable biological categories that follow from specifically sexed bodies. These realities push us to acknowledge that gender is something that happens to us and not something that we are inherently or “naturally.”

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, and so we must oppose identity. However, we’d be foolish to deny the material consequences of the myths of identity – these myths are, after all, 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 insensitive and strong. 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, but 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 imposition of gender.

Behaving in ways that are seen as outside the domain of our imposed genders will inevitably bring down repression. Whether that repression manifests as an awkward laugh from a sibling or as a severe beating and prison sentence will depend on the context; either way, as long as gender remains intact, we will be limited to the lists of actions that are acceptable to the gender we’re perceived to be, lest we face corrective violence. We have nothing to gain from being gendered that doesn’t come from either conforming to our own genders or as a benefit of policing or enforcing 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 maleness are centered, prioritized, empowered. Gendering places people closer or further from the 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 the gender hierarchy by everyone. Every gender exists at an intersection of subjugated and subjugator. Combinations of gender, race, trans-ness/cis-ness, and a myriad of other factors create subject-positions within which it is possible to both oppress and be oppressed. Hierarchy has always gone hand-in-hand with control and domination. Gender is simply another facet of hierarchical control, of social war.

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 eradication 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 anything instead of pacing within the limits of genders we know to be inadequate, we say: let's destroy society, let's destroy gender.



# I am here as a victim

*Michelle R.*

My baseball bat initiates the process of renewal. I am leaving this shattered glass en la calle signifying my triumph. Why don't you come outside? Are you afraid of me? I see you swallow – machista violador sin vergüenza. How much did you pay for this car? More than anything else in your life: I can see it in the panicked contours of your face.

You won't come out. I see you staring. You see my bat de aluminio. I am here as a victim. If you take a step beyond the threshold, I will bash you up, sin vergüenza. As the bat hits the windshield, I see your jaw drop. You can't even move. How much did you spend on this stupid car?

My flinch from sudden human contact remains. My nightmares return. My distrust takes over my intimate actions.

With this bat, I cleanse myself.

My skin gets pricked by shards of glass. I purge myself of the possessiveness and insecurity in my relationships with droplets of my blood. You thought you had a right to my body. You did not. You do not.

With my sweat, I restore my sexualities. Barely.

With my spit, I clear away the inability to get to know my body for fear of seeing your face there. My ignorance of myself melting away in the heat of every swing I take.

I remember your stink. I cringe at the smell of alcohol. I swear that *esto no se te va a olvidar*: the destruction of your property for thinking of me as property.

I leave my marks here, the sex goddess, *la virgen maria*,<sup>1</sup> spray painted all over your car and driveway. The color of my *venganza* is yellow. The yellow I once used to color the sun and stars on paper. The yellow I see in my act of healing.

A mosaic of tinted glass on the streets I ran down as a child. The streets I ran down as a victim at quince. The street I now walk as a victim with a bat.

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1 Sandra Cisneros. "Guadalupe the Sex Goddess: Unearthing the Racy Past of Mexico's Most Famous Virgin," *Ms.*, July-Aug 1996, 43-46.



# A Disgrace Reserved for Prostitutes: Complicity & the Beloved Community

*Pluma Sumaq*

*I propose to consider a dimension of political life that has to do with our exposure to violence and our complicity in it, with our vulnerability to loss and the task of mourning that follows, and with finding a basis for community in these conditions.*

- Judith Butler, from *Precarious Life*

In conversations with communities of color regarding prostitution I am confronted with what oftentimes feels like outright hatred or disgust for people in the sex trade. I am, however, also presented with a lot of legitimate concerns. The sentiment that, “it’s different in our communities” and “women of color do not enjoy the same privilege of empowerment as white women do” are echoed over and over again. As a woman of color in the sex industry who has encountered the paradox of both financial stability or at least disposable income, alongside many hardships in this profession, I can say that much of these hardships were a direct result of how we as a culture tend to perceive women of color when they take on something as perverse as any combination of sex, money and economic struggle.

I grew up with ideas, images and stereotypes regarding prostitution like any other first generation woman of color attempting to represent all the goodness of her race in every scrutinized endeavor. My parents wanted more than anything for their youngest daughter to grow up to become a lawyer, a doctor or a business owner. They imagined that for all their hard work and sacrifices, for the three jobs my mother worked, and all the times they ate less so that we could have more, their children would, in the end, be in a position to be in charge and demand respect. In many black and brown communities a parent's worst nightmare is to have dignity stripped from them by knowing that their children are in a worse position than they were in when they brought us into this world. For many of our communities, failure is synonymous with the continuation of poverty, with dependency and disempowerment, with addiction and dysfunction. For many of us, prostitution epitomizes these very things.

My initial experiences in the sex trade at 17 were coercive to say the least. I have since worked in and experienced a broad range of both sex acts and financial status within what we call the sex industry. But regardless of my experience in backdoor strip clubs, indoor incalls, as an independent escort or in the backseat of a vehicle, I have carried with me the markers of my race, my family's class background and innumerable stereotypes as well as stories about the meaning of success and morality that have penetrated me from all angles. I have experienced suspicion from clients and neighbors because of the way I looked, the way I dressed, the questions I asked. I have lived through dysfunctional relationships with both money and sex, as well as a dangerous combination of the two. I have spent entirely too much of my sex-work-earned money on drugs, and on bailing family members out of jail and countless financial crises. I know what it is like to "have a problem," as well as what it means to find a solution. I know what it is like to be unable to escape the way wealthier and white people perceive me.

Women of color, poor women, or trans women doing sex work, or women who work in places one might find atrocious (like the street, truck stops, or with pimps) are confronted with the weight of racism, sexism, and classism at the same time as they are being told by the world that they have no self-respect, that they are destructive, reck-

less, responsible for the decline of the nuclear family, culpable for the downfall of society. We are made into invisible, disposable targets for violence through the stigma of prostitution, through the illusion that it is *prostitution* and not targeted violence that violates, rapes and murders us. It is these extra burdens that do in fact make it different in our communities.

For a prostitute, her stigma intensifies or lessens in direct relation to how she is perceived racially and economically, relative to whether she is a drug user, homeless, a black woman, a trans woman, gender non-conforming or a woman of color. The stigma of prostitution keeps the conversation silent and keeps us from wanting to (or believing that we can) understand something rather than turning away. The stigma of prostitutes is a reductionist mentality that we participate in actively and in our every day. We often use this stigma to justify our discomfort with or aversion to actually take a look at our own participation in the racism, classism, sexism, as well as our own emotional fears that conceive and perpetuate violence towards prostitutes. In turn, we reduce these larger and deeper issues and instead dismiss, blame and invisibilize the experiences of people who trade sex for resources. Stigma is deeper than ignorance and larger than individual discrimination. Because this stigma is socially sanctioned when we discriminate against someone stigmatized as a prostitute, we not only have the permission of others to do so, but are equally validated and supported by a pervasive cultural belief. Rather than being called out for our actions we will be excused (consoled and even encouraged) as it is understandable to discriminate against, hate, be uncomfortable with, be violent towards, or simply condone negative behaviors and attitudes towards prostitutes. Stigma is constructed from deep fear and then assigned to those of us who cannot escape the disease of wielding our sexuality in the face of capitalist complacency.

For many women of color in my position, prostitution is not what you do when you hit rock bottom. Prostitution is what you do to stay afloat, to swim rather than sink, to defy rather than disappear. For me, this was “financial strategy” and not “easy money.” Please believe that there is nothing easy about being a young woman attempting to figure out how I will ever earn the right to a stable, livable, non-exploitative

income. Prostitution is not an easy task. This profession requires that you are on your game because it will swallow you if you are not. Prostitution is anything but reckless. When you walk into prostitution from a place of chaos and recklessness, the consequences of your actions will be tenfold. You quickly learn that in order to earn income you will have to get your act together. Many times in my life this has been my main source of income; it has informed the way in which I earn and spend money; it has implicated my race; it has implicated my class; it has affected how my work could be leveraged as social capital (or how it could never be). It has become its own category whenever I consider what is my income bracket or financial status. This is what I have chosen to do repeatedly – above office work, above working retail, above being told what to do by a younger white female supervisor – an experience I have found to be degrading and demeaning beyond words.

There is a sentiment out there that engaging in an act of prostitution is the equivalent of selling your soul. But for those of us who have ever been in a position where prostitution could buy us time before an eviction, could afford us the luxury of not going into collection, could give us the “comfort” of cash so that our deviant credit would not be questioned while obtaining something as fundamental as housing, for those of us that have experienced financial relief (if only temporarily) as salvation from the much more costly ramifications of mental breakdown and emotional triggers due to a lifetime of poverty, we understand there is much more at stake than simply our souls.

I write this as a woman who has survived financially by the wisdom of her risk-taking and the resources of men with disposable income, obtained with something as autonomous as personal choice and as inherent as a body. I also write this as a Latina, as a person of color who has grown up poor, who has not enjoyed the same privileges of empowerment as white women or the “educated,” who has not been stereotyped as a minority who has something good to model. For me, sex work has not been easy. As a young woman I experienced my unfair share of hostility and violence. But none of these dangers or issues of racism or classism were created by prostitution and none of them would disappear from the world or even my life if I were to simply exit the sex industry. As a matter of fact, I was experiencing these things

in painful ways long before the thought of prostitution ever entered my mind. I posted my first ad on craigslist because I was exhausted from struggling financially, I entered prostitution in order to escape the oppressive force of limited options. I entered in order to have access to money, and therefore resources. So I acknowledge that there are obstacles and I acknowledge the concerns of people of color regarding prostitution, not only because they are valid, but because I have personally lived them.

The very idea of prostitution as illicit pushes it further underground, causing the women who work within this trade to become isolated, leading to forms of increased exploitation. My lived understanding of the sex industry is that isolation and violence go hand in hand. The exchange of sex for money has been portrayed as so forbidden that the great majority of prostitution occurs out of plain sight. Many laws created around prostitution are directly influenced by this fear of prostitutes. As a matter of fact during the emergence of the HIV test in the mid 80s, policies that were supposedly created in order to safeguard public health did not take into account the civil and human rights of groups of people who were stigmatized (black people, gay men, trans women, and prostitutes) and therefore blamed for the spread of HIV. These communities were immediately marked as a threat to public health rather than as part of the same public these laws were seeking to protect. This is one of the many ways in which the stigma and subsequent silence around prostitution has played a part in halting practical and actual attempts to educate, treat and reduce the spread of HIV.

In this way we as a society use “delinquent” communities as scapegoats. When we scapegoat women in prostitution (or any other group) as the “cause” of disease, drug abuse, poverty or any other societal “ill,” and we don’t really address these issues. In HIV prevention many years were lost policing and criminalizing women who were seen as tainted and therefore worthless. These are years we will never get back that could have been better utilized in understanding the needs of entire communities and addressing the spread of HIV by “how” it is actually spread, rather than “who” is spreading it, something that experts in HIV prevention are now beginning to address. In recent years these same experts are beginning to see sex workers as a valuable resource

for developing and improving safer sex education and the prevention of STIs. In this way a deeper understanding of women in prostitution is essential in addressing not just HIV, but a great many other issues with the understanding that criminalizing people tends to push behavior underground and does more harm than good.

There have been countless other opportunities missed in linking sex worker issues with other movements. That prostitutes are not seen as obvious and valuable allies in the anti-trafficking movement or as part of the migrant workers movement is only to the detriment of these movements and their efforts to build in inclusive and sustainable ways. We as prostitutes understand this because many of us come in direct contact with women who have purposely left their countries to come here and work in “houses.” And we hear about and witness the injustices that are done to them, the exploitation they are vulnerable to because as migrant workers and as sex workers, the law does not protect them; because as sex workers they live with the fear of being arrested; because, as with all migrant workers, there is the additional fear of being deported; and because they live with the stigma of prostitution and the isolation that comes along with it. That we cannot hold complexity in the experiences of sex workers prevents us from seeing this different perspective. It prevents us from understanding the many reasons why women would want to come to this country to work as sex workers. It prevents us from understanding how they could then feel exploited when they are asked to work in unreasonable conditions for very little pay. It justifies our paternalistic tendency to want to save “these women.” It prevents us from understanding how our own beliefs about prostitutes make us complicit in these forms of exploitation. In short, it prevents us from seeing immigrant women who trade sex for money as fully human.

When we speak for experiences that are not our own, that we do not fully understand, and when we engage in a rescue-savior mentality towards prostitutes, we assume disempowerment in women and therefore perpetuate violence towards women, however unintentionally. Rather than empower we disempower, we become complicit in violence, we participate in erasure. When we isolate prostitution as problematic relative to other jobs and other forms of sexual contact, we miss

an opportunity to understand all forms of wage labor as exploitative and minimize the extent to which all women have been confronted (at one time or another) with the choice to leverage their sexuality in order to gain access to resources. When we enthusiastically support physical safety and labor rights for “all women,” only to the exclusion of prostitutes, we assert that our compassion and their humanity is conditional. There is a tendency to simplify the motivations behind entering the sex industry, insisting upon a strong distinction between people who enter consensually by “choice” and those who are “forced.” While it is true that working in the sex industry is a choice that many women have made for themselves, it is equally one that (like most other economic choices) is largely circumstantial. When we fail to see the complexity behind this choice we run the risk of denying, neglecting and erasing the inequalities many women of color continue to experience after they have made the empowered decision to survive.

Personally, I could never bring myself to buy into the rhetoric of empowerment through normalization that the mostly white middle-class sex worker rights movement was selling. To create a language around and an image of a “Sex Worker” that is normalized and free of stigma did not seem very revolutionary to me. To me it said, “accept us because we are just like you.” *Well, what if we're not like you? What then will you do to us?* The campaign to push forward the picture of the fully autonomous and sovereign woman in prostitution contributes to the polarization of ‘The Prostitute’ into two cartoon figures — one of total empowerment and one of total degradation. In reality, women’s experience in the sex industry and their motivations for entering it are vastly complex. This polarization is an oversimplification of both privilege and oppression and of people. There is a disgrace reserved for prostitutes with limited alternatives that women of color know first hand cannot be easily escaped.

Don’t get me wrong, there were many times when I wanted to (and even aspired to) be this image of an independent woman who makes her own income, who is self-respecting and educated. But growing up poor, being Latina, uneducated and a survivor of various traumas, I realized the physical, emotional and psychological barriers that could not be erased by simply claiming a term and believing I had made an

empowered decision. The decision to hustle, to take my income into my own hands was empowering but it did not erase the trauma I had endured because of poverty; it did not erase the dysfunctional dynamics around money I had to continue to navigate, nor did it fully alleviate the fear of being financially unstable. Similarly, when I called myself a Sex Worker as opposed to a Prostitute it did nothing to change the fact that men had put their hands on my lips, their mouths on my nipples, their fingers inside of me. It only made this experience invisible and therefore impossible to talk about. The truth is I had done something with my body in order to acquire resources and to not have this acknowledged made me feel as though my body was being disregarded.

In many ways, the term “sex work” presents me with a marketable and homogenized depiction of something that I have never experienced as such. In fact, out of the countless prostitution exchanges I have engaged in, sex work is the last term I would use to describe any handful of them. Today, I use the word prostitute liberally (and interchangeably with sex worker) hoping that when people hear this word they will challenge themselves to see a bigger picture. Sometimes, in conversation, I want the stigma to be there because it *is* there, because I want real revolution. I want a revolution of true awareness rather than one of denial and elevated status for only some. I want people to acknowledge that there is a stigma in exchanging your sexuality for cash, housing, food, safety, drugs, desires, and resources. I want it to be known that it is not as easy for some to walk away from this stigma. I want it to be clear that the weight of that stigma, oppression and violence in prostitution gets heavier the darker your skin, the less heteronormative you are, the less educated you are and the less value society places on how you are being compensated. I want society to acknowledge a complete picture as complex as a collage of class, race, gender and acts of sex.

Much of the white feminist discourse around prostitution asks us to stop focusing on the sexual nature of sex work and instead consider the labor and human rights implications. There is no doubt that we should be doing this, always considering worker rights, human rights and our humanity within a dominant culture that relentlessly demands that we repress our needs. But considering the sexual nature of prostitution is part of situating it politically and socially. It is part of hold-



ing prostitution as a layered endeavor involving many parts, one of which is undeniably sex. Without accepting sex and sexuality within prostitution as something that cannot be pulled apart from race, class, gender, economics, industry and survival, our acceptance of prostitutes is contingent upon the idea that sex will be left out of the equation. But prostitutes are actually having sex and this is what makes people uncomfortable, so to deny this prevents us from acknowledging the full range of experience of women and men in prostitution.

Looking at the sexual nature of prostitution is essential to understanding prostitution. How could it *not* be? We need to look at it, not in order to scrutinize particular sexual acts that women do in prostitution, but rather to explore the crucial question of *why* it makes us so uncomfortable. As it turns out, intimacy, sex and sexuality not only one activate some of our deepest fears, but also some of our deepest woundings. The immense silence surrounding the sex industry is symptomatic of our society's phobia of sexuality, the taboo of women as sexually powerful, a fear of intimacy stemming from violence and trauma, and the circulation of misinformation. Our homophobia, transphobia, femmephobia, erotophobia, and fear of prostitutes ensures that we remain silent, pushing these issues to the bottom so that we cannot resolve them, so that we cannot heal from them. The fear of prostitutes is so loaded because it drags with it the chains of desire, disgust, judgment, morality, guilt and shame. It is loaded with things we are too hurt and too wounded to recognize; we only recognize it as something to fear and therefore something to stay away from. Never does it occur to many of us to take a closer look because there is no hiding from it, because only by taking a look at an impossible bridge can we ever imagine we will cross it. The crime of prostitution is that we would rather not look deeply at our own pain. Prostitution presents us with a reality that is sometimes too emotionally painful to unravel because as we attempt to do so, we begin to realize that it is our reality too. Sex and intimacy are personally also our own struggle. This illuminates our personal and societal shame around sex and our deep internalization of a misogyny-driven capitalist world.

There is something very vile about being a woman in this world. To choose to be a woman, then, is unacceptable. To choose to be a prostitute is unforgivable. We are fearful and violent against women.

We vilify trans women. We crucify prostitutes. And the feminine concept of change and fluidity is under constant attack. In a capitalist world, to be a woman is to be sexually exploited and subordinated, disempowered and oppressed, to the benefit of men. The wealthy profit from, and industries are built with, the exploited sexuality and labor (whether sexual or not) of women and the poor. When women do not default into this scripted form of disempowerment, they are in danger of retribution. Any choice a woman makes, any coercion a woman experiences, happens within the context of a world that is violent towards her. Prostitution, then, oftentimes becomes an logical choice in the context of a violent world. That a woman enters prostitution by choice, however, does not erase the oppressive context she must continue to live in, and neither does it make her liable for it. And it certainly does not give any of us a pass to deny, excuse or ignore this as violence. We live in a rape culture that asks women repeatedly to be accountable for their own oppression.

However complex, layered or illusory the decision, I did choose to enter prostitution. What has been oppressive has sometimes been the nature of my work, but most often it has been the social isolation, the lack of emotional support, the violent jokes about sexual assault and murder, as well as the fear of being arrested, attacked, raped or killed, that has felt the most difficult, impactful and traumatizing to navigate. For women of color in prostitution, our very choice to enter prostitution makes us criminals, and our only salvation from this is our victimhood. That we are neither victims in need of rescue or criminals deserving of punishment is never fully held. For many it is hard to accept that women struggling within an industry that is thought of as the most demeaning act for a woman are not necessarily looking to be rescued but are instead in need of resources. Our inability to hold this complexity prevents us from fully accepting women who trade sex for resources. But I am no longer willing to dismember or disembodify myself for the sake of salvation. I am not pure and I am still sacred. And I am certainly not available to assimilate into an impossible system in order to be given the liberation that should already belong to me.

Prostitution is loaded with the battle for power and the audacity of fallen women to claim empowerment. Prostitution raises questions

about what power is for us, and challenges the faulty equilibrium we've created about being empowered in a world designed for our exploitation. Prostitution is the convergence of many forces in our society—the economic hierarchy created by capitalism, the struggle for resources, the sexism stemming from patriarchy, the objectification of women, the impressive ability of women to survive within impossible systems, the ingenuity of people who hustle and make something where there previously was nothing, who reveal entire worlds amidst rubble. Prostitution not only reflects the coming together of all these pieces but it is in actuality a physical manifestation of them.

We have been taught to believe in a world that is good and bad, up and down, righteous and evil, and this serves us. It validates us when we are called to separate our vulnerability, and therefore our intimacy, from our work. It informs our logic that there is never any choice or agency in poverty, in being oppressed, in prostitution. We are manipulated into ignoring broken systems and are instead coerced into seeing broken people who will only choose survival if they are desperate enough, as if survival were some extreme option. But no one can say “prostitution has nothing to do with me.” It exists precisely because of the economic and misogynistic system we participate in every day. The incredible tragedy of it all is that when we see the result of our own complicity, we are disgusted by it. But if there was no one to be poor and exchange their sexuality for capital, the world would not turn. There are not enough jobs for every woman to exit prostitution. Our economic system is not set up for wealth to flow in the direction of poor communities. It is interesting that we make women into criminals when they exchange sex for capital, yet most non-prostitute women (knowingly or unknowingly) exchange sex for resources or access. Prostitution allows us to deny all this.

In the same way that the feminist movement tried to exclude the experiences of women of color, and more specifically black women, many movements have tried to exclude the voices of sex workers. Within the very Sex Worker Rights Movement, the significant and even crucial voices of trans women of color, who are the first targeted when it comes to violence, specifically black trans women, are oftentimes

overlooked. As a woman of color in the sex trade, it is difficult for me to see how it is possible for us to orchestrate our liberation when we are seldom (if ever) given the opportunity to explore and speak the ways we have experienced our own sex work. The experiences of people of color in the sex trade have been repeatedly stigmatized, pathologized, invisibilized, scapegoated, vilified, and dehumanized. When you consider how expansive something like prostitution really is, it should be alarming that we rarely hear the actual voices of people who have first-hand experience in this industry. When I think about the relevance of prostitution in social movements as well as its stark exclusion from them, I cannot help but wonder about the compelling opportunity for linkage, about the aspects of radical social justice movements that parallel the prostitution rights movement, that of visibility, autonomy and equanimity from the ground up. I think of the burden of responsibility experienced by any group of people who have been historically denied voice, visibility and agency. I think about the cost of our complicity when we accept targeted violence done to others. And I think of our collective accountability to bridge these conversations and find a basis for community and healing.

I hear the concerns of communities of color, that liberation will not come from assimilating to empty western notions of empowerment, that lack of resources is a form of oppression and trauma, and that for some, the subversion of capitalism is a long and complex road. I sincerely hear this, because having worked in a scary, underground and illicit industry, I have these concerns too. But I also believe that it is these communities, our communities, who will most readily understand and be willing to fight against the stigma experienced by women who trade sex for money, who have been made vulnerable through invisibility. These are the communities who understand with their own bodies what it means to have tangible barriers created by society because of the color of their skin, the proficiency of their language and the way they are perceived. A deep analyses of prostitution as an economic phenomenon with complex cultural layers, along with struggles within the sex trade, are necessary to the fight against the violence of colonialism, patriarchy and white supremacy. Prostitution overlaps with every aspect of society. Women and men who move in and out

of the sex trade are part of our economy, our schools, our health care system, our legal system, tourism, recreation, alternative modalities for mental health and emotional support, in addition to being part of our communities. It is essential for the liberation of all of us that we begin to understand this.



# Grateful

*Monica Stevens*

I've been in places where to take it in the ass so I could suck on a dick of  
glass

Was a good day

To take it in the ass for a burn-bag was a great day

Because nobody beat the shit out of me

I've been in places where I had to ask the fucker who burned me to let me

Sleep on the floor

And it was a good day because I didn't have to take it in the ass to sleep  
there

And when I saw the stars in the sky, I saw the stars in the eyes of my  
delirium

Because Monday had run into Sunday and lack of sleep had tuned night into  
day and day into night

I've been in places where I was afraid to die because that meant I would be  
stuck in the alley forever

That fucker's laughing voice in my ear for eternity saying:

"you sure a dumb muthafucka for a college kid!"

and the next hit, and the hit after that, and the hit after that  
only took me farther down the alley

I've been in places where all of Bill Gates' money, J-Lo's ass,  
Cleopatra's charm, and the beauty of all the most beautiful people who ever  
lived and who ever will live couldn't wash away the blackness of my heart or  
brighten the skies of the bottomless pit of my depression

I've been in places where I watched an "A" student mama's-boy get cooked  
up in a spoon, exhaled in a puff of smoke, sold off in a bag inside a broken-  
down abandoned house

And I've been in places where young lady's dignity got sold off bit-by-bit



GRATEFUL

Stolen by some predator who couldn't even spell dignity  
Watched her get blown away in a pile of ashes in the wind  
Only to gathered up and blown away again  
I've been in places where happiness is a trick question on a trick quiz given  
by a trickster;  
If I answer yes, I want it, the only way to get it is to die  
If I answer no, I live on in misery  
Well, I'm still here  
I've been in places where I was so blind I couldn't see the grace of God for  
the grace of God  
It was too big, too broad, too all encompassing, too tall, too everywhere  
I've come to realize that I can be blinded by the knowledge that I don't  
what it is to be without it  
I've been in places where I got caught in a brainstorm without a pen  
And I couldn't get wet  
And I've been in places where all I had to do to win was put a word on a page  
But I couldn't unscramble myself  
I was the letters of a palindrome staring at a doppelganger that I didn't

recognize; lost in my own head

I've been in places where I couldn't write a poem with all the verses laid out  
in front of me

Rhyme, reason, rhythm, rollicking, maddening, mayhem danced through my  
mind like sugar plum fairies on crack

Turning my reality into pink smoke, my vocabulary into 1960's broken-hippy-  
gibberish

While I morphed into a Hendrix groupie lost in time

I've been in places where reality faded into thick miasma

Shaken, not stirred

Influenced by bits other people's reality

Chance encounters, atomic fusion, sub-atomic explosions, physical changes,  
metaphysical, mystical, and spiritual blendings

Like colors on an artist's palette

Consensus reality grafted onto me to make me more palatable for human  
consumption

I've been in places where I was invited out because I was just too damned  
undigestible

GRATEFUL

I've been in places where the last acid trip never ended

The first kiss never happened, I never got arrested,

I was never a boy, I was always a girl, my family was white,

I lived in Africa, I was from Alpha Centauri, I spoke 15 different languages,

My index finger could disintegrate you, I could blink and make all the world's  
hurt and pain go away

I've been in places I wish I could go back to but I know I never will

And I've been in places, I thank God I'll never be in again



# Inversion and Invisibility: Black Women, Black Masculinity, and Anti-Blackness

*LaKeyma King*

*For four hundred years I was neither your man nor my own man. The white stood between us, over us, around us. The white man was your man and my man ... Across the naked abyss of negated masculinity, of four hundred years minus my Balls, we face each other today...*

— Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*

*Look at all these young women going to college. When you [Black women] come with your degree, he [the Black man] is already behind. The only thing he has is his physical strength and his sex. To have power, the white man broke the black male. Once your male is broken, you [Black women] are fair game for being the victim.*

— Louis Farrakhan, in a speech to a graduating class of mostly Black young women<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cited from “Black Male Racial Victimhood” by Devon W. Carbado, in *Callaloo* Vol. 21, No. 2 (1998): 337-361.

In the quote above, Eldridge Cleaver surveys the damage white supremacy has wrought upon Black men's psyches. This letter "to all Black Women," which concludes *Soul On Ice*, is saturated with emotion: citations of historical trauma give way to self-effacing apologies to Black women for his, and all Black men's, failure to protect them from white racial violence. Highlighted in this final chapter are Cleaver's feelings of impotence in the face of gratuitous racial violence. "Impotence" here is key. Cleaver's analysis of racial violence in the United States is structured around a critique of how anti-Black regimes have mounted attacks upon the masculinity of Black men.

Farrakhan proceeds along a similar route. In the quote above, he does not refer to Black women being victimized by white men — he does not argue that once Black men are broken, Black women have no one to protect them from white men's violence. Rather, those to whom Black women are "fair game" are Black men; Farrakhan states that once Black men are "broken" by white men's brutality, they will in turn victimize Black women. For Farrakhan, the cause of intra-racial gendered violence is Black men's emasculation by white men.

Though separated by more than 30 years, these two quotes are linked by a central premise: that racist regimes do not operate on gender-neutral terrain. Instead, according to both Cleaver and Farrakhan, white supremacy specifically targets Black men for emasculation—the subjugation of whole communities is effected through the humiliation of Black men. Cleaver alludes to this consistently throughout *Soul on Ice*. In these masculinist narratives, the goal of white supremacy is not merely to suppress or destroy Black people, but to specifically attack Black men by feminizing them. In other words, the traditional concepts of gender and vulnerability are inverted. It is Black men, rather than Black women, who are more vulnerable to attack based on their gender, and it is Black maleness and masculinity that is targeted for elimination rather than Black femininity. While it is true that demasculinization was a technique of white supremacy — one need only to look at the decidedly non-masculine minstrel or the historical defenses of slavery which assert that Black people, men included, were like helpless, simple "children" — I want to show also how theories of racial castration are fused to a narrative about racial authenticity that leaves

Black women politically isolated from the overarching Black community, their efforts to survive attacked as forms of race-betrayal, their struggles within and without their homes elided.

### I White Supremacy and Demasculinization

The racial castration narrative does not begin with Cleaver or Farrakhan. Both are influenced by E. Franklin Frazier, a Black sociologist at Howard University, who wrote during the 1930s. It is worth noting that Frazier was studied by a vast array of people of decidedly opposing political aims. His work made it into the Black Panther Summer Reading list, but his dissertation, *The Negro Family in the United States*,<sup>2</sup> was also heavily referenced by the conservative US government policy maker, Daniel Patrick Moynihan.<sup>3</sup>

As the title suggests, Frazier's work is centered on Black family formations. Frazier's analysis of Black social conditions begins, of course, with the cataclysmic effects of chattel slavery in the southern US. He then traces their reverberations through Black communities, even as these communities attempt to distance themselves (geographically and temporally) from them. Though a brief component of his work, Frazier's most influential assertion concerns the dispossession of patriarchal authority within Black families. For Frazier this dispossession begins with slavery, as Black men are violently separated from their families through both the slave trade and the investment of ultimate masculine authority in the white slave master. As he traces Black families through the outset of emancipation he anxiously wonders who will "take the place of the master's [authority] in regulating sex relations and maintaining the permanency of marital ties." Frazier asks, "Where could the Negro father look for sanction of his authority in family relations which had scarcely existed in the past?"<sup>4</sup> This anxiety is revealing — for Frazier the problems plaguing Black communities are rooted in the "traditionally" fatherless families caused by slavery.

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2 E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939)

3 *The Negro Family* has also been subject to critique by many Black women, most famously Angela Davis in *Women, Race, Class* and Hortense Spillers in *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book*.

4 Frazier, p. 89.

While Frazier laments the effect of fatherlessness on the organization of the Black family, Eldridge Cleaver focuses more explicitly on emasculation. Cleaver outlines the contradictory notions of masculinity created by white supremacy. According to him, Black men are bequeathed a brutal hyper-sexualized masculinity, but this is a ruse deployed by white men who occupy the position of Omnipotent Administrator — that is, the ideal masculine position. He states: “The white man turned himself into the Omnipotent Administrator and established himself in the Front Office. And he turned the black man into the Supermasculine Menial and kicked him out into the fields. The white man wants to be the brain and he wants us to be the muscle, the body.”<sup>5</sup> Later, Cleaver reveals the epicenter of white obsession with Black male sexuality:

The Omnipotent Administrator conceded to the Supermasculine Menial all of the attributes associated with the Body: strength, brute power, muscle, even the beauty of the brute body. Except one.... even though this particular attribute is the essence and seat of masculinity: sex. The penis. The black man’s penis was the monkey wrench in the white man’s perfect machine.... *You can seize the Body in a rage, in violent and hateful frustration at this one great flaw in a perfect plan, this monkey wrench in a perfect machine, string the Body from the nearest tree and pluck its strange fruit, its big Nigger dick, pickle it in a bottle and take it home to the beautiful dumb blonde...* [italics in original]<sup>6</sup>

The Omnipotent Administrator grants the Supermasculine Menial access to a superficial masculinity that covers over his emasculation, which for Cleaver is illustrated by the limitations the Administrator imposes upon the Menial’s sexual relations with others. White men’s ability to control Black men’s sexual access to women, on pain of death, produces a Black masculinity attenuated by the system of white supremacist capitalism. Cleaver alludes to the actual cases of castration throughout the history of Black men in the United States when he

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5 Cleaver, 191.

6 Cleaver, 191-4.



states that he feels as if he's been metaphorically castrated by the violence of racist regimes in the US.

Part of resisting white supremacy for Cleaver, then, is a vigorous assertion of masculinity that involves (1) sexual access to all women (especially white women, because they are understood as the possessions of the enemy, white men) and (2) the organization against the prevailing trend of unisexuality or androgyny. These assertions of masculinity that seek to exaggerate the distinct poles of the (fictitious) sexual binary are the rationale for the infamous "penis pants," a pair of trousers with a separate, hanging cod piece for the penis, that Cleaver designed in the mid-70s. The pants, he brags, "cannot be worn by women".<sup>7</sup> This line of thought culminates in Cleaver's "political" rapes of white women, which land him in the jail where he writes *Soul on Ice*. He calls his obsession with seeking revenge upon white supremacy by attacking white women a revolutionary sickness — an effort to reassert his thwarted masculinity that he later condemns, but only because "the price of hating another human being is loving oneself less."<sup>8</sup> That he is selfishly mobilizing a devastatingly harmful stereotype that has haunted Black men in order to gain access to women's bodies apparently does not merit concern for him. Neither is he concerned that his strategy of first "practicing" rape on Black girls in ghettos before mounting an attack on white women relies on and perpetuates the same norms of erasure and impunity that enable white men's violations of Black women, even as Cleaver claims that his actions are a protest against this history of rape.<sup>9</sup> Here a bell hooks quote is strikingly relevant: "In their eagerness to gain access to the bodies of white women, many Black men have shown that they were far more concerned with exerting masculine privilege than challenging racism."<sup>10</sup> Resistance, for Cleaver, must take place on the terrain of masculine privilege because attacks on Black men's masculinity through their sexuality is not merely the

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7 Mark Stillman, "Eldridge Cleaver's New Pants," *The Harvard Crimson* (1975). Cleaver's negation of androgyny is especially interesting when considering the history of lesbian-feminisms. A year before the *Harvard Crimson* article was written Carolyn Hielburn published *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* — feminist organizations were enacting or debating androgyny as a strategy for women's liberation.

8 Cleaver, 36.

9 Cleaver, 33.

10 bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 113.

consequence of historical processes as with Frazier, but rather is essential to the stability of the white supremacist social order. What for Frazier is a history of oppression is, for Cleaver, part of the ontology of white supremacy.

## II Inadequacies of Conceptualization

Intersectionality has helped orient many theoretical efforts to reconcile anti-racism and anti-sexism. But intersectionality, as advanced by Kimberle Crenshaw,<sup>11</sup> reproduces many of the assumptions found in Cleaver, Farrakhan, and Frazier. In Crenshaw's conception, "race" and "gender" are two distinct vectors of oppression. When these vectors and the violence that comprises them meet — for instance when a woman of color faces sexual violence (gender) and must appeal to a white-staffed rape crisis center (race), women of color are marginalized by the collision of these two axes of oppression.<sup>12</sup> Later, Crenshaw demonstrates how some anti-racist politics jettison a consideration of gender from their analysis through their suppression and denial of gender violence within their communities. Crenshaw references the many logics that undergird the erasure of violence against women of color within their communities: concern that reports about domestic violence will be mobilized to stereotype men of color as violent, the reluctance non-white communities have toward appealing to a racist police force, the conception of domestic violence as a reaction to the stressors of racism. On this last point, she writes: "Of course, it is probably true that racism contributes to the cycle of violence, given the stress that men of color experience in the dominant society. It is therefore more than reasonable to explore the link between racism and domestic violence. But the chain of violence is more complex and extends beyond this single link. Racism is linked to patriarchy to the extent that racism denies men of color the power and privilege that dominant men enjoy."<sup>13</sup>

Here Crenshaw echoes theorists of Cleaver's ilk whose work proposes a link between the denial of male privilege and systems of racial

11 Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 43, No. 6. (July 1991), 1241.

12 Crenshaw, 1244.

13 Crenshaw, 1257-8.

oppression. However the two speak past each other: for Cleaver, the denial of male power and privilege, “symbolic castration,” and racist regimes are not merely linked together, they are the same system. Denial of male privilege is how racism functions, not merely a consequence. These sorts of theorists conceive of white supremacy as mounting sexualized attacks against Black men. Their historical evidence stretches from “studding” during chattel slavery, to lynching in the Jim Crow-era South, to present-day invasive stop-and-frisk searches during which police officers sometimes pull down the pants of their victims. In other words, for these thinkers the traditional, feminist concept of gender and vulnerability is flipped — it is Black men who are more vulnerable to (sexualized) attack because of their gender, it is Black maleness and masculinity that is targeted for elimination.

Cleaver was preoccupied by white hypersexualization of Black communities. For him, and many others since, this hypersexualization — and vulnerability to sexualized assault — at the very least levels the power differential between Black women and Black men (hence his obsession with counteracting “unisexualty”). White sexual objectification of Black bodies originates as a racial attack that interpellates male and female subjects alike and *as* alike. The most pressing concern from this standpoint is that racial attacks always bear a sexual component, and men are not spared: the object of this violence is to dissociate them from power by associating them with the lack of power that femininity signifies.

Intersectionality cannot be mounted as a critique of the line of argumentation that sees Black women as less oppressed than Black men, and attacks Black women on this basis. Intersectionality associates the axis of “gender” exclusively with women’s oppression, and in so doing either ignores or brackets off the type of sexualized violence against men that is described by men like Cleaver. The cause of this bracketing is intersectionality’s use of separate, autonomous axes of oppression that interact, rather than the conception of systems of subjugation as concentric which informs Cleaver’s theorization. Frazier, Cleaver, and others who write similarly already explicitly address gender. The problem isn’t that their work fails to acknowledge the interaction of race and gender. The issue is that the gender hierarchy they use in their analysis

is inverted. Their formulations around gender, femininity, and racial attacks create a paradigm which inverts assumptions around maleness, femaleness, and vulnerability. For Cleaver et al., racism's goal to dissociate Black men from masculinity makes them singularly attacked and especially vulnerable to attack.

Framing racial attacks as feminizing coincides with what feminists have stated for decades — that femininity functions as a short-hand for lack of power in a patriarchal society. Cleaver offers his re-masculinizing efforts as the antidote to this dispossession of agency. Other theorists followed a similar route, mobilizing false perceptions of what traditional African societies looked like in order to justify the ratcheting up of patriarchal relationships within African American communities.<sup>14</sup> These analyses — which assert that Black men need to be remasculinized — fail to interrogate the fact that their standard for masculinity is often the archetypal rapist of peoples and continents: the white man. When Black men petition for access to a toxic sort of masculinity which requires the submission of women and compulsory heterosexuality, they seek inclusion into an exploitative relation rather than the liberation of all entities from it. Masculinity's connection to violence, especially against women, as it is defined by patriarchy, is left unexamined. Because this analysis inverts the gender hierarchy to privilege and affirm Black men, there is no functional analysis regarding Black women. By this same logic, racialized pressure on Black women to be feminine does not count as evidence of oppression. Rather, it is the natural order of things.

Interpreting racism as first and foremost an effort to subjugate Black men because of their gender creates an “endangered Black male” narrative. This narrative functions to prioritize the political needs of Black male subjects above those of Black women. Devon Carbado explains:

As a consequence of this myth of racial authenticity and the currency of the endangered Black male trope, when an individual Black man is on trial for some criminal offense, the Black community sees first and foremost his status as a racial

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14 See: E. Frances White, “Africa on My Mind: Gender, Counterdiscourse, and African American Nationalism,” *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 2, No. 1, (Spring 1990), 73-97.

victim. Furthermore, when the alleged crime involves violence against women, the fact that a Black female or a woman of any race may be the victim of Black male aggression is subordinate to the concern that a Black man may be the victim of a racist criminal justice system.<sup>15</sup>

Here Black men mobilize their experience of emasculation under the yoke of white supremacy to excuse acts of violence inflicted on female bodies, particularly those of Black women. Black men's acts of gendered violence become an assertion of masculinity in a world that deprives Black men of the privilege male gender normally grants.<sup>16</sup>

### III Authenticity and Betrayal

As racism is defined as a system that primarily affects Black men, an interrogation of racial authenticity occurs which further privileges a masculinist analysis of white supremacy. Racial authenticity is often used to assess one's allegiance to one's race, particularly its political interests. Black women often find their allegiance to their race questioned when they speak about the violence they face within their communities. In this context, Black men, by virtue of their race and gender, are defended on the grounds of racial authenticity because the terrain upon which they are being attacked — as men who harm women — mirrors racist tropes used to unfairly persecute Black communities. Here narratives of lynchings and the white gaze come into play again: when assaults on Black women by Black men are made public, this evokes well-known pretexts for lynching, with the figure of the white woman replaced by a Black woman determined to betray her people by publicly airing her grievances. Condemnation of these men is read as the reanimation of the lynch mob.

Appeals to racial authenticity are also used to jettison “undesirable” people from the Black community. In *Soul on Ice*, Cleaver alienates James Baldwin from his Blackness, stating that he and other Black homosexuals are worse than Uncle Toms. Because Black homosexuality

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15 Carbado, 337-8.

16 Carbado, 348.

represents for Cleaver the reification of the emasculation enacted by white men, for him James Baldwin represents a racial death wish:

The white man deprived him of his masculinity, castrated him in the center of his burning skull, and when he submits to the change and takes the white man for his lover as well as Big Daddy, he focuses on ‘whiteness’ all the love in his pent up soul and turns the razor edge of hatred against ‘blackness’—upon himself, what he is, and all those who look like him, remind him of himself. He may even hate the darkness of the night.

The racial death wish is manifested as the driving force in James Baldwin.<sup>17</sup>

When the concept of racism is so closely tied with emasculation, Black persons who are not heterosexual are accused of being in collusion with genocidal white supremacy. And neither is Cleaver the only theorist to espouse this. Molefi Asante blames the disintegration of Black communities on the “outburst of homosexuality among black men fed by the prison system.”<sup>18</sup> More contemporarily, Dr. Frances Cress Welsing writes that “Black male passivity, effeminization, bisexuality and homosexuality,” all caused by white supremacy, are responsible for the disintegration of Black communities.<sup>19</sup> Welsing’s writings are especially troubling because they are featured in a series of documentaries called *Hidden Colors*<sup>20</sup> and therefore reaching a wide and newly politicized audience of young Black people. Moreover these documentaries are peppered with popular musicians like Nas, so that the somewhat marginal opinions of those like Welsing are given extra credence when presented next to those of more recognizable figures. Moreover, narratives that center white supremacy and castration threaten Black lesbians who frequently encounter the argument that they are contributing to the genocide of their people by not participating in Black heterosexual relationships. According to nationalists, they

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17 Cleaver, 128-9.

18 Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity* (Trenton: Africa World, 1992)

19 Frances Cress Welsing, *The Isis Papers: The Keys to the Colors* (Chicago: Third World, 1991)

20 Tariq Nasheed, Dir. *Hidden Colors: The Untold History of People of Aboriginal, Moor, and African Descent*, 2011. Film.

should be breeding. This argument ignores the fact that many Black lesbian and gay couples start families which include children from previous relationships, from family members who could not take care of their children, or adopt children from unrelated families.

Arguments that racism emasculates Black men often insist that Black women are de-feminized usurpers. If we return to E. Franklin Frazier's writings, we find him arguing that slavery did not subjugate women, *as women*, well enough. "... Save for the interference of the master or overseer, her wishes in regard to family matters were paramount. Neither economic necessity nor tradition instilled in her the spirit of subordination to masculine authority."<sup>21</sup>

This thesis is extended by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a Swedish sociologist commissioned by the Johnson administration in 1965. In *The Negro Family: A Case for Action*<sup>22</sup> Moynihan alleged that social problems, such as unemployment among Black men, forced Black families into a matriarchal pattern of family formation. In his study he cited Frazier's assumption that Black women were "accustomed to playing the dominant role in family relations," agreeing that it was an aberration originating in slavery and still replicated within contemporary Black families.<sup>23</sup> This supposedly matriarchal family organization within Black communities is thus responsible for the further marginalization of those communities because it contradicted American social norms, making efforts at assimilation all the more fraught. Moreover, Moynihan proposed that Black women invest more, emotionally and materially, in their daughters; resulting in lower self-esteem and lower achievement for their sons, and thus reproducing these matriarchal family forms.<sup>24</sup> In short: Black women preside over a matriarchal family structure that marginalizes all Black Americans in order to maintain power within Black communities.

In agreement with Frazier and Moynihan, Cleaver extends their characterization of Black women as "dominant," and like these widely influential sociologists, roots the origins of her "subfeminine," "incomplete womanhood" in slavery. Cleaver also contends that white

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21 Frazier, 125.

22 Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action* (US Department of Labor, 1965)

23 Moynihan, 17.

24 Moynihan, 31.

men gave Black women preferential treatment to enable the latter's subjugation of Black men, accusing them of participating in the symbolic neutering of Black men and therefore Black people as a whole.<sup>25</sup>

And it's a very effective tactic: the specter of authenticity obstructs Black women's participation in radical, self-emancipatory movements. By claiming "dominant" Black women hinder racial progress by "castrating" Black men, the discourse of authenticity prevented many women involved in Black liberation struggles in the '60s and '70s from being taken seriously when they spoke out against sexism within the movement. Elaine Brown described the difficulties that emerged out of the party internalizing the myth of Black matriarchy:

A woman attempting leadership was, to my proud black Brothers, making an alliance with the 'counter-revolutionary, man-hating, lesbian, feminist white bitches.' It was a violation of some Black Power principle that was left undefined. If a black woman assumed a role of leadership, she was said to be eroding black manhood, to be hindering the progress of the black race. She was an enemy of the people.<sup>26</sup>

Angela Davis describes being accused of orchestrating a "matriarchal coup d'etat" whenever women in the SNCC began work on something important, while ironically noting that most of the work she had taken on had fallen to her by default.<sup>27</sup>

Orlando Patterson, a Jamaican sociologist known for his work on slavery, takes this position to its (il)logical conclusion, stating that while the burdens of Black men are always oppressive and soul-killing, those encountered by Black women are "generative, empowering, and humanizing."<sup>28</sup> Patterson posits that Black women's identities give them an advantage over Black men *and* white women: their identity as women remove their racial stigma, and their Blackness means that they aren't seen as feminized sex objects by their white male bosses.<sup>29</sup>

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25 Cleaver, 190.

26 Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story*. (Anchor Press, 1993)

27 Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race in America* (New York: W. Morrow, 1984), 312.

28 Orlando Patterson, "Blacklash: The Crisis of Gender Relations Among African Americans," *Transition* 62 (1993): 4-26.

29 Patterson, 13. Cleaver also aligns Black men and white women, calling them "psychic"



Patterson explicitly states what is usually implied: that Black women psychically and materially benefit from racism, are relieved from the most brutal aspects of racial oppression by their gender, and protected from sexist dynamics by their status as less-than-feminine subjects. This absurdity proceeds directly from an analysis of racism I have traced to Frazier, one which asserts that white supremacy feminizes Black men, and de-feminizes Black women. As Patterson writes quite overtly, Black women's de-feminized status also de-races, protecting them from the full brunt of white supremacy. Again, the hierarchy of sexual power and vulnerability is inverted. According to Patterson, Black women are less affected by racist regimes and *benefit* from anti-Black social constructions — by virtue of their gender, not in spite of it.

In *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*<sup>30</sup>, Hortense Spillers does much to undercut the logic of Frazier and his theoretical progeny by attacking the belief in the matriarchal organization of Black social life. Spillers argues that the social organization of the family in slavery was neither patriarchy (the inheritance of land/money by the legitimate male heir) nor matriarchy (matrifocality, and matrilineal naming in particular). Rather, white civil society arranged slavery such that children born by Black women had one specific inheritance: their enslaved position. Attempts at naming, matrilineal or otherwise, were impossible given that Africans lost their names and their ability to name during the middle passage. Moynihan's "Fatherless Negro Family" is fatherless because the master owns his enslaved progeny, but he does not sire them, and the enslaved man cannot be a father, as he does not have a family. Furthermore, any child born from an enslaved woman inherits only her debased status, and does not have a family, so all that is left is the "mother," whose child does not belong to her either. Spillers argues that Black women birthed many children, but were mother to none of them. The family loses meaning, as it is always obliterated by the requirements of the slave economy.

Gender, according to Spillers, originates within the domestic sphere where the sexual division of labor first manifests itself. For the slave, the "home" is obliterated and replaced by the slave quarters, the bride and groom within the present society. Weigman also aligns Black men and white women, to the elision of Black women.

30 Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics*, Vol. 17, No.2 (1987), *Culture and Countermemory: The "American" Connection*, 65-81.

opposite of the domestic haven that shields its inhabitants from the evils of society. The absence of a domestic realm within chattel slavery de-genders Black women, relegating them to “femaleness” rather than “womanhood.” Womanhood, purified and protected by domesticity, is distinct from femaleness. Women are not subject to brutalities “generally reserved for men.”<sup>31</sup> Any gendering of Black women is “merely” the harnessing of reproductive capabilities and labor associated with women. Because this gendering is utilized if and only if it resulted in the production of human capital for slaveholders, it is too circumspect to be considered an essential component of the Black “female” identity. For Spillers the designation of “woman” ignores the historically specific positions of Black women during and after slavery: the sacredness of domesticity and femininity were always foiled and truncated by the fact of slavery and race. The “Black female” does not belong within the privileged category of “women” — she is subject to the obligations of “womanhood” (such as reproduction and reproductive labor) only insofar as it generates profit for the slaveholder.<sup>32</sup> There is no “matriarchy” because slavery obliterated gender and linear bequeathal of a name altogether. Ultimately, as with Frazier and his cohorts, Spillers asserts that slavery de-feminized Black women.

Arguments like those made by Spillers in *Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe* are alluring because they attend to aspects of Black women’s identities that have been ignored in the name of a superficial concept of sisterhood within white-dominated feminism. Furthermore Spillers touches on what theorists like Frazier and his progeny have merely circled around: she attempts — without success — to explain why there is a disjunction when one attempts to apply traditional concepts of gender to Black experiences in the US. Put mildly, Black bodies do not map neatly onto European male and female archetypes.

I disagree, however, with her extremely rigid definition of “woman” and “patriarchy.” Spillers defines “patriarchy” as the linear bequeathal of a name, wealth, etc. Her critique of gendered categories and terminology (such as patriarchy and matriarchy) stems from what she alleges is the loss of gender through racialized dehumanization. She defines gender rigidly — stating that gendered roles are created

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31 Spillers, 68.

32 Spillers, 74.

within the domestic sphere, and then they proliferate into the public sphere. The brutality to which Black women were subjected during slavery (because they were unprotected) is a brutality generally reserved for men, and so is evidence of their de-gendered condition. Some violence was surely gender-neutral – for example, whippings, for which Masters would accommodate pregnant women by digging holes into the ground for their swollen abdomens. But some violent interactions targeted Black women specifically. The advent of the “mammy” stereotype, for instance, reveals a material reality particular to women slaves. The “mammy” is forced to ignore her own children in order to provide reproductive labor for her white Master and Mistress — childcare, emotional labor, housework, and so on. Only women fulfill this role. While Black men who participated in slave rebellions were generally hanged, Black women, ostensibly because seeing underneath her dress would be scandalous, were instead burned at the stake. This death was crueler, slower, and gender specific — a punishment for being a woman and an insurrectionary.<sup>33</sup>

It seems like a sleight-of-hand to allege that violence is what would eject Black women from the category of women, when violence is what makes the categories of gender relevant to begin with. Black women are targets for specific kinds of violence: they are inherently rapeable (or un-rapeable, insofar as rape of Black women is never considered rape), their bodies are scandalous or monstrous (an obsession which has famously included the “monstrous” body of Saartjie Baartman, or the “Hottentot Venus”), their labor should not be remunerated because it is not categorized as labor at all, their reproduction is subject to another’s whims, their bodies can be violated as long as whoever does it “owns” them, their problems are always “personal,” never political. Historically white women and Black men alike have ignored Black women’s gendered position. Yet if any identity embodies surviving the violence that makes the category of “woman” operational, it is Black women. Maybe this is what white women strain to recognize when they say that housewifization<sup>34</sup> is akin to slave labor. And maybe this is

33 Giddings, 35.

34 Liberal feminists are guilty of exploiting this comparison — Germaine Greer in *The Female Eunuch*: “[Women]... represent the most oppressed class of life-contracted unpaid workers, for whom slaves is not too melodramatic a description (329).” But materialist feminists are guilty of this as well (see *Counter-Planning from the Kitchen*, Silvia Federici and Nicole Cox). For more on

what Black men are gesturing toward when they call the racial violence they experience a process of “feminization” — in nascent recognition of the fact that being controlled, and being subject to violence regardless of whether one acquiesces to control or rebels against control, describes the category of woman. Perhaps instead of dissolving patriarchy, Blackness highlights the contradictions of a patriarchal social order.

Within the Black community, as well as without, there is a particular economy of gender roles, even if this economy is the result of mimicking white hegemony. One cannot dismiss the category of gender when gender is replicated within communities. The evidence of this is in part the *very existence* of the community. The “matriarchy” that is constantly misnamed is in fact the private-public, reproductive labor that black women, as women, have performed to keep their communities intact as they are constantly under siege. Disproportionately represented in churches, neighborhood associations, and nearly every other aspect of social organization (except of course in the leadership), this is what makes them ‘pillars of their community.’ Surely an aspect of why Black women took on this work involved their gender: women, whether by “choice” or by historical circumstance, are always seen as responsible for keeping their cultures and communities intact.

#### IV Conclusion

The problem with the argument that Black women have been historically “treated like men” is that this is not borne out, historically or contemporarily, in Black women’s lives. Often the conclusion reached from these examples is that there is no component of a feminist analysis that applies to Black women. Again, this conclusion can only be reached if “woman” is a mystical, privileged category, marked only by reproductive labor that is exploitative only because it is unpaid and supplants waged work. Ironically this critique of gender as a concept often ends up doing precisely the work of gender by rendering much of the violence excised against Black women exceptional, private, and invisible. For example, lynching is the hallmark of white racism mobilized over and over again in narratives about Black existence in this housewifization see Chapter 3 of *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* by Maria Mies.

country, the systematic rape of Black women is not, or if it is, it is made into a joke.<sup>35</sup> The fact that Black women's political organization in response to these rapes helped usher in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s was covered over, as were the rapes themselves, until very recently.<sup>36</sup>

In the present, most recognize how mass incarceration and the extrajudicial murder of Black men evidence continued anti-Black racism. But when systemic racism impacts Black women it is suppressed by being stamped as exceptional. When a racist "War on Drugs" materializes through monitoring Black women's pregnancies rather than arresting them, no one notices.<sup>37</sup> When police brutality ends with a rape of a Black woman rather than a baton to a man's face, no one notices. When police murder a 7-year-old girl, no one notices. Marches for "safer streets" and demands to end "black-on-black crime"<sup>38</sup> follow when Black men are shot in broad daylight, but none are organized for 11-year-old Black girls raped in ghettos, or women murdered by jilted ex-boyfriends. When we write that Black women are ejected from bourgeois, white notions of womanhood, we must also interject that this does not mean they are not leading exceedingly gendered lives.

Eldridge Cleaver writes in his letter to all Black women that that the white man is "your man and mine." In doing so he suggests that the white man's denial of Black masculine power is on the same plane as Black women's vulnerability to rape at the hands of white men. In his analysis, the "castration" wrought by white supremacy functions as a symbolic rape that covers over the actual rapes and other forms of violence that Black women have endured. Cleaver and the other theorists I've critiqued here exploit language around gender violence in an anti-racist posture that silences and controls Black women. This

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35 For example, Russell Simmons released a "comedic" Harriet Tubman "sex tape;" Saturday Night Live comedian Leslie Jones performed in a skit making light of the sexual exploitation black women endured on plantations.

36 See *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance — a New History of the Civil Rights Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* by Danielle L. McGuire.

37 See *Killing the Black Body*, and, *Punishing Drug Addicts Who Have Babies: Women of Color, Equality, and the Right of Privacy*, both written by Dorothy Roberts.

38 Here I am setting aside the rather spurious and conservative origins of the term "Black-on-Black Crime." As many have stated, most crime is intra-racial. "Black-on-Black Crime" is a way of consigning and equating Black people with violence. Leaving this aside, there are always people in the community organizing against violence when brothers kill each other. Tellingly, this does not happen as often when Black women are murdered.

reanimates, obscures, and condones the myriad of violences Black women face from at least three parties: white men, white women, and Black men. When Black women protest their treatment at the hands of Black men who are more concerned with becoming patriarchs than with the healing of Black communities as a whole, these Black women are associated with race-betrayal. This specious accusation of betrayal anticipates and masks the constant political betrayal of Black women by Black men.

Like Spillers, I look toward a sort of re-appropriation of the Black female power that is mislabeled as “matriarchy,” but I don’t agree that Black men are the only ones who have had the opportunity to understand us.<sup>39</sup> If they do indeed have that ability, what explains the decades of negligent misunderstanding? The problem is that our brothers think that they understand us because they think feeling powerless because of racism is the same as feeling powerless due to the rapacious nature of sexual and racial violence from which there is no relief, not even at home. The notion that these two things could combine, are in fact always consubstantial for us, and have cataclysmic effects that we must bear both outside our communities (in white space, where we feel uncomfortable) and within them (where we are supposed to be protected from the antagonisms of the outside world), evidently never crosses their minds.

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39 Hortense Spillers, et al. ““Whacha Gonna Do?” Revising “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: an American Grammar Book”: A Conversation with Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Farah Jasmine Griffith, Shelly Eversley, and Jennifer L. Morgan,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. ½, *The Sexual Body*, 299-309.

# HOW TO DIE

*Feng Chen*

I am like a nation in its traditionally feminine form prostrate  
desperately seeking the love of its citizens  
impossible to give love a nation does not love it doesn't exist  
how would you accept it?  
only in the vertical wall of its dead  
who also sought the end of times  
in my excessive romance novel of unrequited love I enact  
the tragedy of man's pursuit of nationhood  
maybe I slice the pussy back into history  
I am the nothingness that reeks of man's origin in the fishy  
light absorbing bed of the sea and its watery earth  
an earth that streams from my poisoned agriculture  
tired of being fraught by my own conservatism  
even my radical vulnerability and radical passivity barely receive  
the footsteps of ghosts that have no weight  
why worry about the dead when the living are dead?  
the dead are in the living too  
I want to reach  
the dead within you  
the place among the animals  
the bones made of the bones of endless beginning  
I never want to write poetry again  
I want to touch your cunt in the long night that will also never end





# Shout to Cissy Girls

*Sepand Mashiahof*

When your trans girl friend ask you to walk down the street to get a pack of smokes with her, please go. Maybe not all “girls like me” have the same request. Some t-girls can stomp their way over with a paramount shield of confidence that can split the eye that scorns her. But some of us — some of me — can’t bear to pass through the front door on my own, in this body I’ve struggled to design, to be confronted with the consequences found in the public realm. We trudge vigilantly through frightful avenues where violence against gender-nonconforming people is frequent and foreboding, keeping us explicitly at risk. See me through what seems like minor hazards to you, because alone, on my own, I know well where the disaster begins.

There are no hands strong enough to wring out this swollen paranoia that consumes my psyche, when there are institutions of fear and

rage imperiously prescribed to antagonize my existence: my need to move autonomously and my safety to grow. We live these complications not as a choice, and it shouldn't depend -on me- having to dress in appropriate attire or present a comprehensible gender before I go out. No matter what we look like or what we put forth, we can't be ignorant of the terror we have reluctantly come to learn. This at-times useful terror waxes and wanes in rhythm with the rise and plummet of my chest — I trust it when it rings. I loathe your earnest testament as to how things would have been fine if I had just gone out earlier in the day before I shaved my scruff and painted my face. You say I have the option to wear baggier clothes, deepen my voice, and rehearse some type of discreet performance when planning my moments of survival, but why should I choose this kind of death? Why retreat into what kills me? Mortality has its many forms and the whirlwind of doubt that swarms my body promises a future etched with material demise.

Allies, or whatever position you believe you've assumed, relieve us of these grand expectations about safety. I wish I could carve these apparitions of text onto all of your bodies and allow them to sink in the way that this anxious stupor that caused me to write them has sunken into me. As cisgender women you're susceptible to similar forms of violence, and we crave the ability to relate our stories to each other and find some sort of calm when doing so. The hard part is acknowledging the painful divisions and subtle differences between us that exacerbate my feelings of alienation when I place your image next to mine. Don't flaw my logic when I plead for your accompaniment to the dissonant tunes of my menial ventures. Let's prevent any casualty of this sort by allowing each other to be honest when asking for support. What I fear is no more important than what you do, but the patterns that make me up are more vulnerable to the distortions caused by those who hold the power to give names. Though you have psychically trimmed the hegemonic gendering imposed on my body, there are stronger currents that rupture our ties, complicating my trust in how you perceive me. I refuse to abide by this disconnect, and I hope you can meet me where the horizon is bare.

We need to share the tools that we've gathered for our survival. I want to give you the shards of glass I breathe with every breath — to

SHOUT TO CISSY GIRLS

enhance your perception of my request. Once you taste the blood that coats my tongue you can take off your shoes. Step into mine so you can use your own as weapons. Walk me down the street and stand there with me while the guy at the counter who can't tell if he wants to fuck me or kill me make his purchase and leaves. Use what you know, whatever it is — your militancy or your humor or a combination of both, be there for me. I promise that I will continue to do the same for you.







**To make many lines,  
to form many bonds  
//  
Thoughts on  
Autonomous Organizing**

*F L O C*

**1 // Introduction — (rethinking/remaking openness)**

We begin with an attentiveness to lived conditions, not with the imposition of categories. This means that we are interested in observing how this imposition conditions our lives, friendships, group dynamics, and political movements. We are interested in finding the holes in the seemingly unbroken surface of those categories, the patterns not described by the analyses of our contemporaries, the sticky spots that catch us, the fogs that obscure us from others and blind us from time to time. We would like to describe our moment, as we've encountered it and clashed with it. This was written to imagine what the content of our current projects may mean to anyone else, record some historical problems, and clarify a set of positions that seem politically

salient, under-theorized, and often mischaracterized. So many of our current projects after all began as a kind of naming: some people getting together, finding a shared circumstance, and then finding a shared interest in approaching it with antagonism, as a start. Clearly, this is a preliminary search is not an exhaustive one; much more thinking and difficulty lie ahead.

We write this for those who, like us, have been wary of utopias, of rooms supposedly filled with people like us, for those who have drawn lines, erased, and drawn them again, slightly different each time. We write this for those who, unsure of their friends and their enemies, have nonetheless needed to find a way to clear out some space. We write this because so often people reject autonomy due to the complexity and contradictions in their lives, thinking that such practices would reduce these lived experiences into something inflexible and simplified. Because of, not despite, this complexity, we want to make a case for autonomy: for finding more ways of talking and being together, for the potential to engage with different kinds of openness.

## **2 // The “we” of the authors**

We, the authors of this piece, are four individuals who have been involved in the LIES collective — an autonomous feminist project composed of only non-cis-men — for the past 1-2 years. Some of us have had longer experience with autonomous organizing through other political projects, along lines of gender (“women only,” or “queers and trans people only”) and/or race (“people of color only,” or “women of color only”). For others of us LIES was our first experience in a group with stated grounds for autonomy. Some of us rarely organized or socialized with cis men before this project began, while others still remain in organizing projects and social relationships with cis men. Our experiences are varied geographically, temporally, experientially. Furthermore, this essay is particular to its authors, who together form only a part of the LIES collective.

LIES itself emerged out of the shifting friendships formed, more often than not, in the midst of our engagement with social movements and political milieus: engagements that ultimately exposed us, both



individually and collectively, to physical violence and social exclusion. On top of that, we kept wanting more from our political engagements, wanting to focus on the totality of all the relations that constitute us. The point is, we didn't begin to engage with the idea of working together without cis men as a mere theoretical interest. For some of us, we did it out of necessity; for others, it presented itself as a way to circumvent an impasse. Autonomy was contextual, practical; it emerged gradually, through time spent together, meetings, phone calls, shared experiences of disappointment, of intimacy, of betrayal, of violence — the material conditions that make us who we are.

Over the years, we have individually and collectively struggled to clarify our vision of autonomy, both in theory and in practice. Within the LIES collective, we've sought to make our feminism antagonistic toward the racism and transphobia of historically hegemonic feminisms, as well as the racism and transphobia in our current political milieus and in society at large. In so doing, we came to a practice of autonomy built around the exclusion of cis men, rather than around a static notion of "womanhood," a gender-essentialist and cis-supremacist notion of "female-bodied-ness," or an insufficient and problematic notion of "lesbian separatism." As a collective of heterogeneous composition, we have tried to name and confront the tensions we've encountered around our differences in identity, power, and experience. The problem is rooted in white supremacy, patriarchy, and class, which are together fundamental to the reproduction of capitalist social relations — and so we seek to build a praxis that encompasses all of these parts of the whole. To engage in such a project is to continuously struggle with each other, and with ourselves.

### **3 // Navigating the Field / Field Notes**

In our attempts to make sense of the gendered relationships we move within, we draw from marxist feminism and queer theory, among other things. As we have navigated the various fields of feminist inquiry, we have found ourselves mired in debates, in conflicts that some have framed as antagonisms between "marxist feminists" (read: second wave cis women) and "queers" (third wave and/or post third wave

queer, trans, and gender variant people). Interestingly, individuals who identify with both of these camps have accused us of belonging to the other. We categorically reject a gender politics that pits women and queers against each other, even though we recognize that there are historical reasons why all the people subordinated by patriarchy have not found common cause. And we don't want to be pushed into taking sides in a debate in which the parameters seem designed to foreclose the possibility of new ideas and nuanced critique. Rather than enter into this rigid framework, structured by two sharply defined poles, we prefer to carve out our own position.

That being said, because these two poles are so salient in our political milieu, and so frequently presented as antagonistic to one another, we feel the need to identify, in addition to the strengths of both tendencies, their limitations. Marxist feminism has given us some conceptual tools to understand how and why patriarchal gender relations, and the relational categories "man" and "woman," continue to be reproduced in capitalism. As a body of inquiry it demonstrates that men and women exist and are materially real; not in a biological sense, but as produced through a matrix of social relationships and institutions sustained by the needs of capital and of men as a group. However, we find untenable the failure of largely second-wave marxist feminism to consider gender fluidity and multiplicity under capitalism, to grapple with the forms of exploitation and violence that undergird these categories, and the political consequences of these facts. At the same time, we reject the refusal of postmodernist, anti-identity versions of gender abolitionism to engage in a structural analysis of patriarchy, an analysis that acknowledges that the gender binary produces antagonisms between those who benefit from patriarchy and those who are oppressed by it. We also have not failed to notice the glaring omission of race as a serious subject of consideration for either of these "poles" of gender theory. This absence is certainly related to the fact that both mainstream second and third wave feminist ideologies are framed and dominated by the historical experiences of white cis women (though of course, these ideologies are also espoused by people who are neither cis nor white nor women). In staking out our own perspective on autonomy, we need to figure out how to avoid the traps of previous

feminisms — their transphobia and racism, their reformism, their vulnerability to co-optation by the state and capital — while affirming the necessity of a feminism that is gender and race abolitionist, and that is part of the struggle to overthrow capitalism.

Our project additionally involves taking a more rigorous look at the question of “identity politics” that has come to dominate debates about autonomy in radical milieus. We have found some recent critiques<sup>1</sup> useful, and are interested in new efforts to expose the reformism of privilege theory and other variations of anti-oppression politics circulating within anarchist and communist milieus. The best of these critiques have attacked the co-opting elements within contemporary feminist and anti-racist movements, in particular the role of an embedded layer of bureaucrats and managers, who seek to represent people of color, women, queers, and trans people, and who sap identity-based or oppression-based forms of organizing of their potential to destabilize capitalist social relations. But these critiques have been read too sloppily by some who want to discredit autonomy as a practice itself. Against that reading, we want to bypass two opposing misinterpretations of autonomous organizing. In the first misinterpretation, autonomy relies on a simple inversion of the valuation attached to existing categories, affirming what has been socially devalued, and constructing a simplistic narrative of unity within identity categories. And in the second misinterpretation, autonomy is dismissed as an impossibility due to its contradictions — a position that is opportunistic in its refusal to recognize the existence of broad social patterns, or of a material basis for solidarity. The relationship between autonomy and abolition is important here; it is through their tension and interconnection that we can find a way out of this impasse.

#### **4 // “We would have to fight the world”— Race and multiracial organizing**

We’re starting from a wrecked place. Perhaps what keeps people from imagining autonomous groups as themselves heterogeneous and multifaceted, as not just about shutting out but about developing resistance,

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<sup>1</sup> Some examples: “Who is oakland?”, “The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality,” and “Privilege Politics is Reformism.”

as positing practices to deal with that world, is the dearth of existing communal spaces and formations. “Community” becomes a monolith, and an abstraction. There is no guarantee of course that any autonomous project wouldn’t recreate existing social relations, and therefore problems; in fact, the opposite is surely the case. And yet, our premise is that it is important to try. And in our experience, the trying is a lot better when it is named, struggled over; when no monolithic project is implicitly assumed, and that whatever space we enter into, we do so on the same terms. This is not merely a game of “recognition.” The point is not that everyone must wear their identity like body tags. We also posit that it is lazy and reactionary to toss off these issues as complications to a group formation, something that is impossible to resolve and therefore cannot be on the table.

For some of us, organizing autonomously along the lines of gender presents a particular conundrum, one that at times can feel like an inconsistency, even a hypocrisy. Why would someone choose to identify with their gender over their racial or class position? All are processes of violent assimilation into a system of power. The gender antagonism certainly, absolutely, does not take precedence over other axes of oppression. The answer to that question, for those of us authoring this piece who are people of color, is complicated and personal. Sometimes there isn’t really an answer that satisfies all the misgivings and doubts. Sometimes the answer is lost in bitterness, in the disappointment of a comrade’s failure to really be there for you, to really be *in this* with you — because they are white, because they do not struggle against white supremacy, because they betray you in the worst ways and expect you not to break. We have no pretensions of automatic “sisterhood” or “solidarity” or “allyship” in our collective. Many of us have been down that road before, or at least imagined it, and we are not interested in a false unity. There are real problems in our collective, ones that could surely tear us apart, ones that have come close to doing so. Then, why persist? Why not apply our autonomy to all facets of our imposed identities?

Again, the answer is complicated, wrapped up in our individual and collective histories, trajectories, desires, and compromises. For some of us, the choice to organize in a multiracial collective is a hard

one; for some of us it's a choice that surprises even ourselves. Some of us also participate in various instantiations of autonomous POC organizing. And when doing so in a context with cis men of color, we have encountered the heartbreaking reality that merely swapping one antagonism for another still does not suffice to carve out a place for us in this world. For those of us whose lives are violently and simultaneously determined by both race and gender, "The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives."<sup>2</sup>

The answer sometimes comes in the form of autonomy along multiple axes of oppression: racial and gender autonomy, organizing with non-cis-men as well as non-white people. To this end, the more kinds of autonomous organizing, the better; that is, we support autonomous organizing that experiments with excluding whatever makes some kind of political work impossible, along non-essentialist lines. This could mean even more precise and specific formations, groups that are based on the autonomous organization of queers, or of trans and gender-non-conforming people, or of feminine-spectrum people, or Caribbean women, or Indigenous non-binary people, or Latin American trans men, and so on. Some of us have, and do, participate in such formations — they have existed for much longer than we have as a collective. How many ways are we crossed; how many formations can we configure to ease the pain of violent assimilation? We say, as many as are made necessary by our material conditions, to undo our material conditions. Being non-cis-male is not a monolithic existence: not all POC will want to organize with white people; not all trans people will want to organize with cis people. The imaginary that finds autonomous groups "narrow" and "exclusive" is again imagining these groups to be made up of exactly the same people, because of categories that exist in capitalist social relations. To imagine such is to imagine that people cannot come together on the basis of relations they hope to overthrow for the sake of collective liberation. We support all forms of autonomy along the lines that coerce and repress us, insofar as they do not reinforce other lines of oppression. But the content of those lines might continue to change as we find more workable affinities. Our particular history is our own, is specific to us, and our formulation is not pre-

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2 The Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement"

scriptive. Michelle Wallace puts it succinctly when she says (of Black feminists): “there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle — because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done: we would have to fight the world.” And so, we do what we need to survive: revolt against that which keeps us from life.

## 5 // Autonomy & Essentialism

Trans and gender variant people have every reason to be suspicious of feminist separatism; the historical evidence is abundant. There are the well-known examples in academia, the Janice Raymonds and Mary Dalys who pathologize trans people and use feminist theory to rationalize their transphobia. There are the lesbian feminist groups of the 1970s, such as the Daughters of Bilitis, who excluded trans women as a standard practice. Groups like STAR, Queens Liberation Front, Fems Against Sexism, and Transvestite-Transsexual Action Organization engaged in bitter struggles with radical and socialist feminist groups who characterized trans women as male predators co-opting women’s spaces. Today some feminists position themselves as gatekeepers through their roles in state agencies, NGOs and non-profits, and academia. They employ cis-womanhood against trans women and deny them access to vital services and funding. They call for carceral policies that encourage violence against trans women of color. Even on the level of smaller projects in radical milieus, we constantly encounter a facile analysis that omits trans people entirely: every girl can be a riot grrl as long as she looks like Kathleen Hanna; trans-masculinity is tolerated only as long as it is sexually fetishized and nullified as a threat to “real” masculinity by emphasizing “female-bodied-ness”; trans-femininity is silenced by hegemonic cis-womanhood and violently attacked; non-binary genders are all but invisible.

Yet, we insist: autonomous feminism can be, must be, more than this. The history of feminism is also a history of the struggles of women of color and trans people, not only against cis white men but also cis white women whose goals and behavior have all too often been centered around extending their power while maintaining control over

non-white, non-cis bodies. There may be Sheila Jeffreys and Cathy Brennans, but there are also Emi Koyamas, Audre Lordes, and Susan Strykers. There is radical transfeminism, and Stone Butch Blues; there are hijras, two-spirits, and the Black and brown queens of Stonewall. For autonomy to be trans, revolutionary, and feminist, it can't simply be situated as the "inclusive" end point of cis or white feminism, can't be an addition to somebody else's struggle. We desire discourses and practices that are unwaveringly antagonistic to any articulation of feminism that is defined by transmisogyny, that upholds the essential reality of the gender binary, that reifies a singular cis-supremacist and racist or anti-Black notion of womanhood, or that clings to biological determinism. At the same time, we seek not to dismiss those who are fighting to have their gender identities recognized in society as it exists: we see this as no more of a contradiction than those who would seek to abolish work, but must work or look for work, to survive.

What we have in common is not a shared, intrinsic and essential identity — as "women," as "not-men," or as anything else — but a general position of lacking access to certain kinds of power, and of being subject to patriarchal violence. Those of us that are not cis men experience the imposition of gender in different ways and to different degrees; we're not positing a commonality of experience, or the existence of a unified category of oppressed people. The patriarchal binary system subordinates cis women in relation to cis men. Additionally, for certain people — for example trans people, especially trans women of color; Black, brown, and indigenous cis women; poor trans and cis women; sick and/or disabled non-cis-men — gender oppression often takes the form of death, whether through bodily violence and murder, or social death; of exclusion from the categories of dominant (man) and subordinate (woman) and the relative security these positions can offer. While cis women are constructed as "less than men," trans people are excluded from the system of naming entirely, and thus from the social altogether; or are "brought inside" the social for only the most brutal, functionalized subordination; or given a fragile, contingent place only insofar as they adhere to cis-sexist, binary concepts of gender. In the case of people of color, gender categorization depends on the violent imposition of a western European binary, and an erasure

of precolonial genders. These differences are profound in effect, and can't be equivocated or made universal: hence our choice to use the term "non-cis-men," rather than "women" or "women and..." Trans-masculine, as well as trans-feminine, people are a part of our autonomous project — not because, as some have suggested, we don't think trans men are "real" men, but rather because we see a basis for solidarity amongst all people who are subject to various kinds of violence, exploitation, and exclusion because of existing gender relations, as all transgender people are.

Autonomy requires some drawing of lines between people, and in our extended political circles this has at times drawn the accusation that those who practice autonomy are "essentialists": that is, that we view the identities we invoke as essentially, transhistorically, universally real, or that we are invested in maintaining their reality. One perspective we often encounter argues that, rather than affirm the existence of patriarchy, the gender binary, and white supremacy, we should emphasize the singularity and fluidity of individuals, and refuse to participate in practices of naming. This argument presumably works on the logic that naming, and even speaking about, these structural realities is in effect reifying and reinforcing them. Here liberalism sneaks in the back door, smuggled in by unfortunately simplistic reproductions of post-structuralist and postmodern identity theories. These theories, while useful, are often taken up as a means to critique practices of racial and gender autonomy. The argument goes, if race and gender are reproduced through discourse and performativity (in the words of Judith Butler, an oft-cited poststructuralist gender theorist, a "tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain... cultural fictions"),<sup>3</sup> then presumably they can be unmade by a collective refusal to acknowledge their existence. Not only is this conclusion a reductive misreading of Butler and other poststructuralist identity theoreticians, but more importantly, it also fails to understand that gender and race are historically specific social relations, produced by the matrices of western European patriarchy, colonialism, and industrial capitalism, whose material effects cannot simply be conceptualized away. While anti-identity revolutionaries presumably wouldn't be caught dead anywhere near such

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3 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pg. 190



liberalism, by conflating autonomy with essentialism they drift closer to it than they think.

These ahistorical, anti-materialist critiques also betray a certain failure of imagination. They assume that all autonomous spaces first require a flattening of singularities — as if more “inclusive” projects don’t already do this effectively but more invisibly, letting those who drop off go unnoticed, their departure just incidental “collateral damage,” rather than a structural problematic to be addressed. This de facto exclusion is naturalized by white supremacist patriarchy, in which only white cis men are the ones that “count.” The critique cynically predicts that we are about to be caught unprepared, surprised by our internal conflicts, only to be ultimately rebuffed from our desired group-meld. And yet, so-called “inclusive” spaces are heavily policed on ideological grounds. Those who resist this ideology are always cast as extremists, and are excluded in order to preserve a politically-subdued “togetherness,” a universalizing and ahistorical position that functions to reproduce the status quo. In such a landscape, “inclusivity” is an open territory easily settled by and for reactionary purposes. Thus autonomy is the flip side of a more hidden form of exclusion that already occurs against our will.

In short: we can’t talk seriously about gender abolition without talking about *who* will target the aspects of class society that reproduce patriarchy and the gender binary. The answer is, of course, those who are oppressed by them: women, trans people, queer and gender variant people. We exist, and our material conditions cannot vanish from our analysis, insofar as they exist. This is all painfully obvious but bears repeating, because where the specific conditions of gendered oppression are left unspoken, the result is a useless, de-gendered conception of “random” violence that just “happens” to unfortunate people, but without discussion of to whom this violence occurs, by whom, and to what end — leaving us no closer to gender abolition, let alone an end to the violence. Patriarchy itself produces people whose lives are defined by the material conditions of gender, whose location within the social creates a real interest, based on lived experience, in strug-

gling against it. Our autonomy has nothing to do with an affirmation of identity, but it has everything to do with showing where we stand in a web of power relations, and in seeking to destroy that which produces us as “trans,” as “women,” as “queers.”

## 6 // Autonomy as a practice / Conclusion

We work solutions out on a contingent basis, in order to deal with practical problems that emerge in the course of struggle, of work, of everyday life. Let's use the following as an example: the exclusion of police from Occupy Oakland/the Oakland Commune in 2011. It emerged early on as one of the defining qualities of the encampment: first argued through and agreed on by consensus in planning meetings, and then again through the general assembly, and was upheld through both formal and informal consensus to not call the cops as well as to watch their movements, chanting and blocking them out of the camp, and erecting barricades during raids. This action was necessary for two reasons: 1. for the immediate material and practical reason that people would no doubt come to harm, and/or be forced to stay away from the space or not want to exist in the same space as the cops; and 2. the cops' structural position as the frontline troops defending the interests of the state and capital. Obviously this analogy is inexact, but there are useful points of comparison. The goal of excluding some people (cops) also had the goal of undermining other kinds of social segregation, allowing more people to come together who in normal civil society are deeply alienated from each other. The encampment stayed a tense place — marked by racism, gendered violence, and every other sort of oppression — but the removal of the police made for new patterns of relating, of dealing with those struggles. It formed, in part, a basis for the precarious togetherness of the space, and through that basis — through the arguments about the roles of the police, through the creation of a consensus that the cops should not be called, through the ongoing processes that kept them physically out of the camps — one of the forces that maintained the hegemonic order was made weaker.

We are often advised that basically people, in this case cis men, are better won over through explanation, appeals, and sweetness. This

advice misses the point entirely, suggesting as it does that our political work and energy should be relegated to the general “improvement” of cis men, the real agents of political change. We say, we have our own projects and visions, we have more important work to do with each other. We come into this already splintered, already cut off and alienated, especially in this tendency we call “feminism.” Gender oppression often works in ways that are private. All too often one’s life is shut up and contained — stuck moving between the isolation of work, the isolation of home, the isolation of romantic love, the isolation of gender dysphoria, the isolation of fear, the isolation of Pavlovian responses for self-preservation. Seemingly minor interpersonal dynamics become a political hurdle, especially when they become sedimented and entrenched. Gender oppression leaves us in the middle of nowhere, in no place, and with no one with whom to speak. Autonomy from cis men can act against that. It means no time wasted in dealing with the old boy’s club, and the chance to work things out without fear of offending cis male comrades, friends, or lovers. It removes one force that drains our energy and shuts us up, a force of social segregation that isolates the recipients of patriarchal violence from one another. That’s where we see the potential.

Autonomous feminist organizing is not a program, and it cannot be a program. It is practicing what we have trouble imagining, and imagining what we have trouble practicing. The resulting space is often far from any kind of idyllic community; in fact, this is when the more difficult, but we’d venture, more interesting, problems become clearer to us. Those problems are also structured into the relationships between us that, less obscured by a mutually dominating force, now come out to play. This is at its heart a rather demoralizing thing to recognize, even for those who had no delusions of innate essentialist, identitarian, or political solidarity. Now come splits, further grievances, vague dissatisfaction, fights, betrayals, as well as the good, the shared. It can be tricky to think how autonomy can work, under such circumstances, which may seem to promote narrow ideological infighting, and political quietism. Does it not put “radical scenes” at the center of political discourse, prioritizing a certain mode of organizing as the necessary praxis which itself may be problematic? How can anyone

be sure they aren't simply reinforcing the borders of gender and what gender politics "ought to look like," stratifying resources, alienating people from existing support networks? Which is to say, beyond just saying we aren't proposing a program, how can we actually work to make sure that it isn't one? Or that it isn't even various programs, just simply working at odds with each other toward embittering ends? And how do we not just move away from, but make sure people don't get stranded, left floating for the sake of a fragile nascent formation, of bonds constituted around a no longer as-present enemy, but quite capable of using that figure as a means to cover over intra-group oppressions? These are the questions we hope to continue to grapple with as we continue our struggle, our self-imposed togetherness: bound by a material need and a desperate desire to be rid of patriarchy, of class, of ableism, of transmisogyny, of white supremacy and anti-Blackness, of all the sedimented hierarchies that produce and normalize structural violence. Togetherness in separation, like so many fingers touching, hesitant, and too often burned, but wanting to tear, punch, pull down that which holds us in place.

# FANTASY NUMERAL FOUR

*Feng Chen*

fantasy machine! alien machine! pop machine! I am fantastic! we are differently  
fantastic! I am forgotten! you hurt me! the epigraph of this poem is Debbie.  
but I love the way your hands are always twitching because they twitch  
gracefully  
but I just want to be regressively reduced by them  
I am writing poems because I am afraid of the work I have to do  
to maintain my compelling but precarious status  
I won a big fellowship being born to beautiful parents  
Friends are beautiful and there is always exquisite humanity  
Nothing will become okay just because I am writing except  
for a moment you can float in my aquarium because <3 <3 <3  
but that was the fantasy I bought when I started  
I still have to believe it

because it is actually true  
I want things to be okay  
poetry is magic  
it is memory to the bad memory and memory to the false one  
everything will be okay, babies  
I have loved you all my life  
Where is a person born?  
oh that is a dark place, baby, it's nothing like where you were born  
Where was I born?  
you were born, baby, in a cloud of beautiful flowers  
made of rainbows and golden corn  
The smallness of daddy is endlessly iterated in contemporary literature  
Gone is the granddaddy but the clock is here to stay  
I could write a book about the genre of WHITE CASTLE  
abstract male narcissism which loves even  
its own Supreme Smegginess and reflexive abuse  
because it's hard to be a man!  
the man inside me cries  
but my android told me to write through the non-genre of female annihilation  
which has an organ of shame that once touching  
another organ lights up in unseen colors  
to which daddy says, why don't you move beyond the binary  
meanwhile I am told and I know  
war is going on, people are brutalized  
raped and tortured  
this secret won't make you feel better  
but so many lines are the arms that hold a broken person through the night  
and you were once sure that real love will wreck you  
against craggy Tennysonian rocks.  
My love is miniature and forgetful of itself, too bad it is heterosexual  
but it looks good in a complicit sweater.  
What is a secret encounter? Where does my arrogance come from  
that I should look upon confusion and judge  
that I should believe that things do not have to be the things they are!  
**ANDROID LOVER JUST WANTS TO BE A BABY!**  
To be a person who only feels like a baby is the karma of our ages.

FANTASY NUMERAL FOUR

But bleeping on the internet the air stokes my skeins  
rumbling out invisible fabrix.  
And the witch told me  
what is a book but a repository for the saliva of ghosts?  
it has glands that get infected, form cysts, that cry when touched  
and I still remember the sounds of the other world  
that belonged to us in common  
we no longer hear  
but even as you operate the thin stream of your national life  
there is no way for everything to take shape that needs to be said  
the meek have been listening for centuries and centuries  
and still the question is Why were there dinosaurs on this earth  
and Why have we been abandoned?  
and How have we forgotten?  
But something had been broken so that the answers come crawling back to us  
mangled and confused, even beautiful.  
And the witch told me  
At night, Mother Teresa  
Teng still rules the world  
sweet sorrow coats the modern throat  
BRIGHT BURNING IN THE CUT THROAT BELLY  
BRIGHT BURNING IN THE CUT UP FOAL  
SPASTIC PLASTIC IN THE HOLLERING HUMANOID HAAAAHA  
HAHAHAHAHAHA





# **First Women, Then the Nation: Confronting Colonial Gender Violence in Canada and the US**

*L. Cornum*

I first began writing this essay more than a year ago, motivated by the urgent need for the nascent Idle No More (INM) movement to commit to ending violence against Native women. It was January 2013 then, less than two months since INM had begun as an internet teach-in on the consequences of a Canadian omnibus bill that stripped the protective status of tribal lands in order to make them more accessible to private corporations. It had since become a broader movement for Indigenous self-determination manifesting in round dance rallies across North America and eventually railroad and highway blockades in Canada as well as declarations of solidarity and support across the globe.

I lived in New York City then, and for the first time many of my non-Native friends seemed finally interested in understanding and pro-

testing colonial power over Native lives. Some knew of the movement as a response to Bill C-45 and the harmful policies of Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Some got involved through environmental movements. Others conceived of the movement as a “new Occupy.” (The two latter approaches are steeped in their own colonizing mentalities, which see the protection of Indigenous peoples’ relationships to land and nation as only a steppingstone for their own movements.) Regardless of some of these problematic motivations, Native people were on the news and in my daily conversations almost every day — and not as drunken tragedies or exoticized curiosities, but as real people fighting for their lands, lives and nations.

While I was incredibly excited to lend my voice and presence to INM, I kept waiting for the broad rallying cries of “protect the land” and “stop Harper” to gain nuance. I wanted to see them address that bills like C-45 and other colonial policies aren’t just issues of environmental destruction or state-sponsored corporate greed, but fundamentally about which people are valued in settler colonial societies and which are seen as superfluous or resistant in the onward march of capital. I kept waiting for people to acknowledge that we could not talk about Indigenous self-determination without understanding how gender violence, colonialism, and capitalist exploitation meet in destructive ways to harm our relationships with the land and each other.

When I was following and participating in Idle No More, there were simultaneous discussions in the US about how changes to tribal legal sovereignty could mitigate violence against Native women. While this may seem exactly like the kind of discourse I was hoping would come from a global Indigenous resistance movement, the discussion unfortunately centered around the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), a bill that supposedly bolsters Native people’s ability to deal with an epidemic of sexual violence on reservations, but only through greater law enforcement and incarceration. Neither INM nor VAWA were providing solutions, or even rigorous dialogue, about gender violence in settler colonial societies. In both instances, I was frustrated with how public discourse — and even the less prominent discourses within radical, Indigenous and feminist movements — often fails to truly account for the violence faced by all Native women.

Many things have changed since that winter, while many things have stayed the same. I have had to put Idle No More into the past tense. In fact, for many people the INM acronym doesn't even mean the same thing anymore, it has been transformed into the Indigenous Nationhood Movement. According to the website [nationsrising.org](http://nationsrising.org), which was launched in November of 2013 by a collective of scholars, writers, and activists, this renewed INM is "a movement for land, life, languages and liberation" which is "fighting for the survival and independence of Indigenous nations." So, while there aren't as many regularly scheduled round dances and marches, the spirit of resistance that was sparked by (and predates) INM continues in the anti-fracking blockades at Elsipogtog, anti-pipeline movements across North America, and continued information and media campaigns. Meanwhile in the US, a version of VAWA was signed that puts in place a pilot program for only three tribes to begin prosecuting non-Native sexual offenders who assault Native women. Things have changed, but not nearly enough. Even as Idle No More has grown and made a much greater effort to incorporate an end to sexual violence into its demands and message, trans women and others disproportionately targeted by colonial violence remain on the extreme margins of our movements and communities. And talk of solutions, from VAWA to the calls for a National Inquiry in Canada, remains rooted in capitulation to an oppressive government. In order to truly address sexual violence against Indigenous women, we need to look deep into our peoples' ways, not the state, for strategies to end violence; and we need to completely untangle our ways of thinking from colonial notions of gender.

### **A Brief History of Sexual Violence and Resistance**

One of the most inspiring and important aspects of the Idle No More movement has always been the women who are leading the charge. The internet teach-in which first generated the now famous hashtag and movement name was begun by four women: Jessica Gordon, Sylvia McAdam, Nina Wilson, and Sheelah McLean. Rarely do Native women get the level of recognition they deserve for being activists for their people and defenders of the land. Both Natives and settlers may

know the Native woman as victim, but rarely do they know the strong Native woman as leader. The two most well-known Indian movements of the past fifty years, the American Indian Movement of the 1970s and the Oka standoff of 1990,<sup>1</sup> are most often remembered and represented by the image of the warrior: a typically masculine figure, sporting a handkerchief and a gun. The image of the imposing male Indian figure is much more suited for the front pages, whereas there is rarely mention of the many women who fight right alongside the hyper-masculinized warrior. Leonard Peltier, the Lakota Sioux man spending life in prison for allegedly killing an FBI agent, is a household name. But Anna Mae Aquash, a Mic'maq activist and AIM leader who was shot in the head in the wake of the Wounded Knee occupation, remains an obscure historical figure for most outside the Native communities of North America.

On December 11, 2012, INM captured increased media attention and intensified public pressure on the Canadian government when At-tawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence began a hunger strike. She demanded to meet with both the Canadian government and with a representative of the British Crown, under whose authority the treaties that currently structure Indian-Canadian relations were made. Spence's hunger strike was a bold and definitive illustration of how it is women's bodies and women's leadership are so degraded by colonial society, and are so crucial to the survival of Indigenous peoples. The hunger strike also shifted the INM conversation to consider the roles of women in our movements.<sup>2</sup>

On the afternoon of December 17, 2012, just six days after the beginning of Chief Spence's hunger strike, a 36-year-old First Nations woman was walking to the store in the Ontario city of Thunder Bay when two men pulled over, forced her into their truck, beat her, strangled her, and raped her while explicitly telling her Indians didn't

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1 These two movements are perhaps the most influential predecessors to Idle No More. AIM began as a organization of urban Natives and grew into a kind of pan-Indian action group, which organized a march to Washington DC and occupation of Wounded Knee. The Oka Stand-off occurred over the summer months of 1990 when the Mohawk communities at Kanesatake refused to allow a golf course to be extended into their territory and Canada responded with the largest deployment of troops since the Korean War.

2 Although, further conversations about colonial gender violence still seem sidelined in the overarching calls for renegotiating nation-to-nation relations between tribes and the Canadian government, and in internal debates about the movement's end goals.

deserve treaty rights. The men told their victim they had raped First Nations women before and would do so again. As of today, the rapists' identities remain unknown. In the panicked wake of the crime, women in Thunder Bay were told to travel in groups, and First Nations students returning to school from the winter holiday were given personal alarms to carry with them. Unfortunately this atmosphere of fear is nothing new for Native women, especially those living in border towns or impoverished areas, places that are seen as prowling grounds for white predators. While the Thunder Bay case has received a significant amount of media attention because of its connection to INM, the town has been reported as a site for sex traffickers who kidnap and sell Native women and children across the border in Minnesota.<sup>3</sup> It was after I read about the December 17th rape and beating in Thunder Bay that I sat down to begin this essay. My main concern was that as movement created and led by women, INM was not living up to its responsibility to incorporate the goal of ending violence against women into demands for tribal sovereignty. It is specifically by attacking, raping, and killing Indigenous women that settler societies and governments attempt to gain control of Indigenous lands. In order to combat colonial intrusions onto our territories, one of the purported missions of INM, we need to defend the Native bodies that are all too often desecrated when settlers come to extract resources from Indigenous lands.

Pueblo Laguna feminist scholar Paula Gunn Allen states that the reason for the "physical and cultural genocide of American tribes is and was mostly about patriarchal fear of gynocracy."<sup>4</sup> Gynocracy is a societal structure that Allen argues was common to many North American tribal nations; one which centers women as leaders and decision makers, as well as care takers, storytellers, and producers. Once tribes began to interact with foreign governments, Native women were deemed illegitimate leaders or negotiators, and this tradition of gynoc-

3 Christine Stark, a Masters student at the University of Minnesota, Duluth, has spoken widely with the press on her research into the sex trafficking of Native women. In an news article from August, 2013, she is quoted saying, "I have spoken with a woman who was brought down from Thunder Bay on the ships and talks about an excessive amount of trafficking between Canada and the Duluth-Superior harbor." That same news article from CBC News also draws a connection between a lack of housing for Native women and survival sex work. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/thunder-bay/native-canadian-women-sold-on-u-s-ships-researcher-says-1.1325167>

4 Allen, Paula Gunn. *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986. 3.

racy became one of many aspects of Indigenous governance targeted for destruction by the foreign government. For a settler colonial government to recognize the power Native women have historically held in their communities would be to recognize an alternative to a system that promotes men as superior to women. If an alternative to the patriarchal structure of settler societies is recognized, other seemingly taken-for-granted aspects of this society might also be scrutinized — most crucially, their claim to land.

The presence of Native peoples and their embodied histories is always a threat to the progress of a patriarchal capitalist state that is founded and dependent on stolen land, previously governed according to radically different principles. Not only does their physical presence inconvenience access to land and resources, but their political and social history represent an ideological resistance to Western ways of life. When governments have been unable to completely eradicate Native presence, they have turned to policies of assimilation. These processes of assimilation are usually no less violent than armed conflict. Bill C-45 is just the latest in a long string of attempts to absorb Native lands into Canadian and corporate ownership. The sexual assault at Thunder Bay and the hundreds of other attacks on Indigenous women are myriad examples of how settler men try to intimidate First Nations into accepting this assimilation through acts of sexual terror. The Thunder Bay rapists essentially told their victim that they were punishing her and other women in her community for daring to be publicly noticed. If settler societies are invested in subjugating nations that recognize the power of women, they must also be invested in subjugating individual women. Thus, sexual violence becomes a tool to attack the nation through the person.

By attacking and degrading women specifically because they are Native, settlers attempt to claim ownership of the land by asserting their dominance over Indian bodies. However, it is important to note that these brutal attacks are not just the work of a few roaming socio-paths. Sexual violence may be publicly condemned, but it is implicitly supported by a government and settler society that must necessarily deem Indian life less worthy in order to justify their own presence. When I say settler society I mean not only the foreign government,

whether it be Canadian or American, but the entire structure and attitudes that these governments support.

In her writing on the death of First Nations Sakimay woman Pamela George,<sup>5</sup> Sherene Razack examines how sexual assault against Native women bolsters white settler men's sense of their own masculinity and their control over physical spaces. These physical spaces are often represented, for white men, by the bodies of Native women. Similar to the settler government's violent relationship to the land, the sexual assailant relates to Native women as objects to be contained, exploited and disposed of. Through their violent acts, these men attack the physical bodies of those people whose presence on the land is inconvenient for them. Razack explains that, "While it is certainly patriarchy that produces men whose sense of identity is achieved through brutalizing a woman," sexual assault against Native women in particular confirms their national identity as "men entitled to the land and full benefits of citizenship" (126). The two young men who were eventually found responsible for the death of Pamela George, a woman who sometimes supported herself through sex work, had committed their crime with the sense that there would be little consequence for killing an "Indian hooker." Throughout the trial of the Alex Ternowetzy and Steven Kummerfield, the judge explicitly told the jury to consider the fact that George was paid to have sex with the men. By marking George as criminal, and not the men who paid her, the judge was already punishing George for her own murder.

The implication seems to be that George, as an Indian woman who did sex work, was accustomed to and deserving of a certain kind of violence. From the perspective of the white male settler, a sex worker cannot be raped and an Indian cannot be killed; they are already violated and dead by nature of their identity. It is the aim of the sexual assaulter to confirm this identity. The constant refrain of "murdered and missing" Native women, even amongst those working against the gender violence epidemic, collapses female Indigeneity with victimhood and seems to detract from the uniqueness and individuality of those women targeted for sexual violence. Pamela George, like many Native

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5 Razack, Sherene. "Gendered Racial Violence and Spatialized Justice: The Murder of Pamela George." *Race, Space and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society*, edited by Sherene Razack, pp. 123-156.

women, was stuck in a colonial limbo between a reservation and a city: both places where it was incredibly difficult for her to access public services or find consistent employment. Sex work was one of the ways she made money to survive. It is a choice made by many Native women living on the margins of a colonial society that does not provide a multitude of opportunities for them. However, while the Indigenous sex worker is a subject that comes up again and again, the clients who are on the other side of these transactions are largely unscrutinized. Native women are thus punished further for their own dispossession and the means by which they provide for themselves. This was all too apparent in the trial of Kummerfield and Ternowetsky. The inability to see Native women, and especially Native women who are sex workers, as possessing the same quality of personhood as settler men not only serves to justify the sexual violence that Native women experience at higher rates than any other group, but also further naturalizes the perspective that Native women are inherently violable.

In *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*, author Andrea Smith argues that “attacks on Native women’s status are themselves attacks on Native sovereignty.”<sup>6</sup> Through her study of genocidal practices such as forced sterilization, environmental contamination, high numbers of rape cases, and the history of prolonged sexual violence at Indian boarding schools, Smith articulates the deep connection between interpersonal violence and state violence. When non-Natives sexually assault Native women, they do so with the understanding that those lives are inherently worth less in the eyes of settler governments. This dehumanization is necessary in order to justify the genocide of millions of Native people on which the US is founded; they must continue to be seen as worth less if non-Natives are to benefit from living off that stolen land and its many resources. Like the US soldiers in 1890 at Wounded Knee, who stretched the uteruses of murdered Native women across their hat bands, non-Native men have always employed violated Native women’s bodies as symbols of their conquest of Indian land.

This far-reaching history of sexual violence is so vast that many of our efforts include simply trying to document the problem and make

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6 Smith, Andrea. *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*. Cambridge: South End Press, 2005. pp 138.



it known against the dominant society's desire to see cases of Native people's murder or disappearance as past aberrations. After the Thunder Bay sexual assault, Operation Thunderbird was launched as an on-line map project marking the locations of hundreds of sexual violence crimes committed against Native women in Canada from 1975 to the present. This map was actually a recreation of the Missing Sisters map<sup>7</sup> created and maintained by the Save Wiyabi Project, a decolonization and anti-violence movement led by Native women. While the map and its huge concentrations of red dots was a shock to some outside of Canada, most Canadians seem well aware of the epidemic of violence against Native women. They just don't seem to care enough to do anything about it. Highway 16 in particular is an infamous location for these hate crimes. A billboard sign on the highway warns, **GIRLS DON'T HITCHHIKE**—a typical call for women to change their behavior in order to prevent being attacked, instead of addressing the men who attack them. The government and general public does not investigate ways to stop men from seeing and treating Native women as inherently violable, and instead encourages Native women to be fearful about inhabiting certain spaces.

When I moved to Vancouver in the fall of 2013, I began to truly understand how colonial violence against Indigenous women has been completely engrained in the fabric of society. In Vancouver's Downtown East Side, a neighborhood sometimes called the "urban rez," at least sixty Native women have disappeared in the past thirty years. Even if they have not disappeared, the Native women of the DTES have already been assigned to a fate of impoverishment. All too often, they suffer the ironic fate of not being noticed outside their tightly knit community until they have disappeared. While the population at large may choose to overlook the colonial circumstances these women live under, organizations in Vancouver and other areas with large Native populations have been working to end these patterns of violence before INM was ever tweeted. Some of these groups include tears4justice, Families of Sisters in Spirit, and the organizers of the Women's Memorial March, which happens every year on February 14th in the Downtown East Side.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://missingsisters.crowdmap.com/>

Despite the efforts of such groups, every year we hear about more deaths and more disappearances, and the lists become a kind of numbing chant of defeat. In my darkest imaginings, the future appears only as a series of ever larger memorials: where rage and sorrow rise to a higher and higher pitch, yet nothing changes. More recently, people have been mourning the death of Loretta Saunders, an Inuk graduate student researching the disappearances and/or deaths of three Indigenous women in Nova Scotia. Saunders' body was found on the side of the Trans-Canada Highway in New Brunswick on February 26, 2014, thirteen days after she had gone missing. After her death a new hashtag was born: #ITENDSHERE. This became a heading for a series of essays posted on the Indigenous Nationhood Movement website and then shared a thousand times over on social media sites. From her death there also arose renewed calls for a national inquiry into missing and murdered Native women.

In the face of such relentless tragedy, is a national inquiry enough? I want to challenge the often automatically accepted idea that government recognition of the problem we already know exists is a productive goal. Instead of calling for a national inquiry, why not call for an action plan rooted in Native communities?

### **Legislative approaches to ending sexual violence**

A rare discussion about strategies for ending sexual violence against Native women in the United States arose in 2012 around Congressional debate over the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), a federal law that strengthens federal penalties for sexual offenders and allocates funds to law enforcement as well as support services for survivors. VAWA has been around since 1994 and has been regularly renewed since. However, the 2012 additions to the act were rejected by the GOP-majority House because it gave "too many concessions" to LG-BTQ, immigrant and Native American populations. One of these concessions granted tribal courts the power to prosecute non-Natives who sexually assault tribal members on tribal lands. Ever since the Major Crimes Act was passed in 1885, certain cases which occur on reservation lands (including incidents of rape) are under federal jurisdiction

and thus handled by the FBI, which has a history of under-investigating and failing to convict non-Native sexual offenders.

Interestingly enough, it is those who opposed the additions to VAWA who made most clear the connection between tribal self-government and sexual assault against tribal women. The Heritage Foundation, an influential far-right think tank that has spearheaded a campaign of misinformation against VAWA claimed that the updated legislation would give unconstitutional federal power to tribes, thus violating the civil rights of alleged rapists and abusers. However, VAWA clearly states that any non-Indian prosecuted in tribal courts maintains all of their rights under the US constitution. Even this small amount of conditional sovereignty offered to tribes—basically, the right to prosecute offenders only according to American criminal justice standards—is far too much in the eyes of the Heritage Foundation. This group promotes the idea that allowing tribes to protect their communities is a menace to the US citizen's freedom, when in fact the only freedom VAWA actually threatens is the freedom to rape and abuse Native women without consequence. The fact that VAWA, a piece of legislation that does not fundamentally challenge the conditions or precepts of settler-perpetuated violence on tribal lands, is met with such opposition says a lot about what Native people can expect from the US government.

Florida Senator Marco Rubio made similar remarks about his concerns “regarding the conferring of criminal jurisdiction to some Indian tribal governments over all persons in Indian country, including non-Indians.” This comment reflects the problem that most US settlers have in understanding tribes as sovereign nations. When a US citizen enters the borders of any other nation, it is generally understood that they must abide by the laws of that country. If they break one of those laws, they will be prosecuted according to the laws of that nation. Thus, it would hold that when entering the borders of an Indian nation, you are beholden to their particular laws and courts. Statements such as Rubio's and those coming from the Heritage Foundation reveal the conservative's view that tribal nations are not worthy of full nationhood. Even in cases of sexual assault perpetrated by non-Natives, tribal na-

tions are not even considered worthy of the conditional nationhood needed to prosecute these perpetrators.

While VAWA also has very vocal supporters both in the government and from various feminist organizations, very few voices are heard speaking about how to conceptualize an end to sexual violence against Native women that does not rely only on more law enforcement and legal convictions (Canadian, Tribal, or otherwise). In a post entitled “VAWA—A Black Feminist’s Dissent,”<sup>8</sup> blogger computerblu takes a critical look at how VAWA, as a type of “law-and-order legislation,” supports a criminal justice system with a long history of hurting as many survivors as it helps. Instead of supporting such a system, computerblu hopes “feminist advocates would promote a politics grounded in racial justice that address the profound structural conditions that help drive domestic and sexual violence for so many of us.” For Native peoples these structural conditions are inextricably tied up with the colonial government that seeks to control Native bodies. By seriously investigating how internalized colonial notions of patriarchy and justice have allowed sexual violence to reign in terror over women’s lives, tribes may find that it is their communities and traditions that hold the real power to overcome this problem. In the words of one of Andrea Smith’s favorite maxims, it might motivate tribes to *take power by making power*. Many Native people have supported VAWA because it *gives* tribes power to prosecute sexual violence cases, but what if Native people instead *took* that power by creating their own responses to crimes that do not rely on recognition from the US government?

These considerations are important when we consider that any power of jurisdiction given to tribes by Congress is only permissible in a framework that mirrors the US justice system. This fact not only reveals the absurdity of conservative claims that non-Natives would lose their constitutional rights in tribal courts, but also raises questions about how sovereignty can be practiced when it is granted by a colonial government. By miming the institutions of the settler state, tribes essentially assimilate into a foreign form of governance, thus lending legitimacy to that dominant system. By supporting this kind of law and order legislation, tribal courts will send more people into the same

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8 “VAWA—A Black Feminist Dissent.” Computer Blue. <http://computerblu.tumblr.com/post/38322273971/vawa-a-black-feminist-dissent>

prison system in which Native people are vastly over-represented. Putting more non-Native people into jails where there are already many Native people is nothing close to justice or progress. By asking for and accepting the judicial power to prosecute and send non-Native rapists to jail, tribes lend legitimacy to the oppressive institutions of the settler nation-state and the specific idea that it can “grant” tribes this power.

If tribes stop seeing sovereignty as something that can be given back and only under certain conditions, they might be able to get down to the very serious work of figuring out what asserting that sovereignty looks like. Much of the discourse around Idle No More centered on re-establishing a nation-to-nation relationship and it is important to consider what that means. Who can Native communities trust to represent their nations? The tribal governments who negotiate (and often compromise) with the federal governments have proven many times to protect myopic economic interests more than the interests of its members. If Idle No More is a movement about Native people reclaiming control of their lands and lives, decision-making cannot be left to what is essentially a tribal board of directors. The tribal governments are caught in a constant desire to be recognized by the federal government, and this recognition requires a mirroring of those same colonial institutions that support the oppression of Native people, in particular sexual assault. However, I see a troubling reflection of these desires for recognition in even our most “radical” and grassroots Indigenous movements. For instance, consider the blockade of Canadian Highway 401 that began on March 3, 2014, by a group of around 100 Mohawk men from Tyendinaga. Their single demand was a National Inquiry into the murdered and missing Indigenous women of Canada. This call is appealing because it has the appearance of a feasible goal: it would provide the sense that the murders and disappearances of so many women are no longer being ignored. But still, it is nowhere near a solution.

In her contribution to the #ItEndsHere series, “I am Accountable to Loretta Saunders,” Sarah Hunt explains her rightful cynicism about the strategy of demanding a national inquiry:

Even if the Canadian government conducts an inquiry, we may see, as we did with the Pickton inquiry or the inquiry into

Frank Paul's death<sup>9</sup>, that the government is not bound to implement its own findings. In these two examples, the answer to "justice" only seems to go as far as actually conducting an inquiry. The inquiry itself stands in for change. This is how colonial power perpetuates itself — the negligence and violence of Canadian law is precisely how violence against us is normalized. So the solutions to be found there are limited.<sup>10</sup>

As Hunt points out, "justice" for the murdered and missing women cannot be reached with something as paltry as the Canadian government confirming what so many people already know: violence against Native women is a systematic result of colonial policies. Our struggles do not need to be legitimized by an illegitimate governing force. Beyond these matters of principle is the plain truth that an inquiry without a commitment to implementation is useless to Native women.

### What is to be done?

What other stances can we take to combat violence without relying on the institutions of our oppressors? In the 2012 short film "A Red Girl's Reasoning," director Elle Maija TailFeathers presents a vision of how Native people can find "justice when the justice system fails."<sup>11</sup> The protagonist, presumably the "Red Girl" of the title is a First Nations sexual assault survivor turned motorcycle-riding vigilante. Women who have seen their rapists let off easy by police and the courts hire the Red Girl to track down their rapists, force a confession from them and punish them physically for their acts. The Red Girl frames the necessity of her violence in terms of the historical precedence of sexual violence against Native women: "I've been on this warpath for six long lonely

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9 The Pickton inquiry refers to an investigation into the disappearances of more than twenty women in Vancouver's Downtown East Side. Robert Pickton was charged with 27 counts of first-degree murder and convicted of six. Many of Pickton's victims were Indigenous sex workers, many of whose remains were found disposed of on the Pickton pig farm. The Inquiry into Frank Paul's death occurred after Frank Paul, a 48 year old Mi'kmaq man, died of exposure and hypothermia after being dumped in a Vancouver alley by the police. The inquiry was to decide whether the Crown prosecutors were biased in their decision to not charge any of the police officers involved with manslaughter or criminal negligence. It was found that they were not.

10 Hunt, Sarah. "I am Accountable to Loretta Saunders," *Indigenous Nationhood Movement*. March 3 2014. <http://nationsrising.org/i-am-accountable-to-loretta-saunders/>

11 *A Red Girl's Reasoning*. Dir. TailFeathers, Elle-Maija. 2012.

years but white boys have been having their way with Indian girls since contact.” It’s clear to our protagonist and the survivors who seek her out that they will never get their justice in the courts; those institutions have allowed white men to go about their ways without consequence for years. Having witnessed the failure of the state to protect them let alone hold their assailants accountable, the survivors create their own means for determining how to address their assailant. It is no surprise that it is through a counter-attack of physical violence that the Red Girl and her fellow survivors find justice. Being able to put their assailants into a state of fear not only empowers them, but creates a much more effective deterrent to sexual violence than victim-blaming legal institutions. “A Red Girl’s Reasoning” may be a fictional film, but it provides a radical alternative and much more effective vision for the end of gender violence than state-based measures.

It is state-based measures and “criminalization-based strategies in general” which blogger computerblu states have been “a catastrophe for many survivors of color.”<sup>12</sup> Envisioning other strategies is something tribal communities will have to come together to work out, unrestrained by the need to conform to the colonial model of addressing sexual violence.

Tribal nations have their own forms of governance outside the imitative neocolonial tribal governments; they simply need the courage and strength to enact them. It won’t be a simple or quick process, but it is time to stop waiting for foreign colonial governments to fix the problem which is inherent in their existence: the subjugation of Indigenous peoples through gender violence. The name Idle No More suggests this reversal from passively requesting tribal rights be respected, to actually asserting those rights. There is a realization of our power. This realization is the rumbling at the center of every round dance flash mob. First Nations aren’t asking the Canadian government, but demanding they meet them at the negotiation table as equals. Idle No More speaks to Indigenous peoples globally because it is more broadly about Native peoples revolutionizing their relationship to colonial power. We know treaty violations are one among the many violations

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12 “VAWA—A Black Feminist Dissent.” Computer Blue. <http://computerblu.tumblr.com/post/38322273971/vawa-a-black-feminist-dissent>

committed against Native people's bodies and the lands to which they are so intimately connected.

It is women whose bodies have been specifically targeted in the settler campaign for lands and resources. These women challenge their nations to consider how to solve the problem of settler violence instead of waiting for a federal or tribal government that has little interest in helping them. The lack of enforcement on reservations in the US, and the appalling number of missing women in Canada whose disappearances fade into bureaucratic obscurity, are signs of the settler nation-state's total dismissal of Native lives as equal to those of settler lives. Our bodies and land are seen as that which can be sacrificed for the greater good. But Idle No More and the developing Indigenous Nationhood Movement can be the beginning of our refusal to be sacrificed. We begin to fight back by refusing to see ourselves the way they see us. We begin to fight by testifying to the strength of our nations, our relations, our mothers.

The sexual assault case in Thunder Bay should be a wake-up call for those who would wait to address settler violence against women until after the revolution. There is simply no way for an Indigenous nationhood movement to succeed without its women. And by empowering tribal women, respecting their place at the forefront of the battle for nationhood, Native communities will already deliver a blow to the colonial notion that Native women are insignificant easy victims.

So far, I've addressed how and why certain colonial policies have exploited Native women and made them more vulnerable to sexual violence. However, we need to also unpack what insidious colonial attitudes are actually replicated in our movements. We need to stay ever vigilant about making truly anti-oppressive discourses. For instance, in her piece for the #ItEndsHere series, Leanne Simpson states that the issue is not just violence against women but gender violence more broadly. "The idea and implementation of a gender binary is at the root of heteropatriarchy the system of power which has created the dire situation for Indigenous peoples, women in particular." Simpson also makes the important point that "we do not even have statistics about violence against Indigenous Two Spirit, LGTBTTQQIA and gender



non-conforming people.”<sup>13</sup> Too often when we talk about Indigenous women we fall back into the comfort of this colonial gender violence. We cannot continue to tack on “two spirit” to the end of our conversations and believe we are doing right by our trans and gender variant relatives. Simply acknowledging “two-spirit” peoples (a generalization in itself of a multitude of tribal conceptions of gender identity) does not account for the particular ways in which Western conceptions of gender have wreaked violence on Indigenous peoples.

The hierarchy of innocence that silently underlies the discourse around Indigenous victims of gender violence is troubling. In her essay “Against Innocence,” Jackie Wang discusses how “innocence becomes a necessary precondition for the launching of anti-racist political campaigns.”<sup>14</sup> Wang primarily addresses anti-Black acts of violence, but her argument about the preconditions for empathizing with racialized victims of state or interpersonal violence can be extended as well to Native women. Innocence for victims of violence, Wang points out, is usually equated with “nonthreatening to white civil society.”<sup>15</sup> However, it is not just white civil society which rejects certain peoples as deserving of empathy; movements themselves will often neglect those marred by lack of respectability in order to make their demands or appeals more palpable. If our movements fail to account or fight for sex workers, prison inmates, the homeless, the mentally ill, the addicts, we will only be reinforcing the twisted values of the settler colonial state and its conception of which lives matter.

Our conception of Indigenous womanhood remains far too narrow. It is all too often the straight, cis, mother figure who is upheld as the Indigenous women worth fighting for. We forget the trans women whose lives are equally important and often overlooked. Mothers are crucial to our nations, but they are not all women. People who can bear children are important to our nations, but they are not all women. What about the women who are not mothers? What about the women who are alone, who are excluded from their reserves and communities because of the enforcement of colonial law? All Native women and

13 Simpson, Leanne. “Not Murdered and Not Missing.” Indigenous Nationhood Movement, March 5 2014. <http://nationsrising.org/not-murdered-and-not-missing/>

14 Wang, Jackie, “Against Innocence: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Safety.” *Lies*.1.1 (2012):145-172.

15 Wang, Jackie. p. 147.

those whose gender has made them targets of the violent imposition of colonial heteropatriarchy should be a part of our movements, not just cis women. Loretta Saunder's death was tragic, but the media coverage often made me uncomfortable because it was a light-skinned, white-passing, reportedly pregnant member of an academic community that propelled the call, #ITENDSHERE. When our movements reproduce colonial hierarchies of who is deserving of our attention and energies, our nations and communities are only made weaker and more aligned with our oppressors than with our people.

Since my initial engagement with INM in 2013, I have only begun to truly understand the scope of violence and history of resistance Native women and peoples have faced. There have been times I wanted to abandon this work because it was too hard to focus on the particulars of a seemingly endless assault against the people I love. As I was putting the final edits on this essay, I learned about Marlene Bird, a homeless First Nations woman beaten and burned so badly in Prince Albert, Saskatoon, that she has had to undergo two leg amputations and facial reconstruction surgery. As with the woman in Thunder Bay and so many other Indigenous women, her assailant remains at large.

So I ask, what is to be done? Much of the work has been about spreading awareness and raising consciousness. These are important projects, but they are not a solution. This essay, a collection of words built on the words of so many before me, is not a solution. In the end, it is Native communities themselves who must create the solutions, but I have some ideas about where to start. I believe in arming Indigenous women with weapons to fight back against those who would threaten their lives. I believe in halting all ongoing and proposed resource extraction projects such as oil pipelines and tar sands operations which not only destroy Indigenous lands but also create situations disproportionately dangerous for Native women. I believe in centering our discourses and movements around trans women, sex workers, and all those who do not fit nicely into our idealized vision of Native women. I believe in empowering all Native women and remembering all victims of colonial violence, the mothers and sisters and daughters and also those who stand alone on the extreme margins formed by dispossession, poverty and prejudice. As the movement moves forward, we

must never forget the women who brought us to this moment and the history of sexual violence that has worked to stop them. In remembering them, we remember what makes us not only survivors, but warriors. We should remember the women warriors who came before us and fight like hell for the lives of all Native women today.



# Monica, my Son

*Monica Stevens*

When the fear of not doing  
Outweighs the fear of doing

When the voice on the phone is a ghost from the past  
A skeleton escaped from my broken glass closet  
Or the sound of inevitability traveling backward through  
Fiber-optic heartstrings

When my future hangs in the balance between  
Broadband signals of anxiety emanating from  
The region between my earrings and the land  
Where the confident, eloquent language  
Of my body languishes

When the babies of my issues babies  
Buried under the crush of self-denial  
Stigmatization, foundation, blush, eye paint  
And jewelry are freed and made whole  
By the light of sponsorship, step work and self-discovery

When "I love you" is a phrase reserved for the moment  
Between confession and rejection  
In a 3am phone call from Arizona  
Floating in the mist of time-gone-by  
It becomes a memory  
Like a rainbow after a summer storm

When time stops and the words I wish I said  
And the words I wish I didn't  
Become entangled in a murky amalgam of apology and regret  
Staining like chocolate on a white cotton dress  
Heartaches and headaches dulled by age distance  
Lie dormant in a pile of torn-off leaves from  
God's calendar

When tragic mistakes and missteps line the road back through my  
Path of least resistance  
I realize the growth and gratitude of my journey

When yesterday, today, and tomorrow  
Become interchangeable puzzle pieces  
In the heart of one I love

A clear picture of me cuts through the  
Confusion, chaos, contradiction  
I lived and made real

When the 11th hour is gone  
And all that remains is  
Thumbs up or thumbs down  
Yea or nay

MONICA, MY SON

Stay or leave  
He loves me he loves me not  
Simplicity is water for my thirsty soul  
And warmth for the stark coldness of my fear  
Produced by paralysis from over-analysis:

To listen to my head or my heart  
To continue illuminate my lies  
Or take the other fork in the road  
That leads to your door and my inconvenient truth:

When I sat down in your living room  
All time stopped as I awaited the answer

Your blessing  
Or your curse  
Then you said:

This is my son, and her name is Monica!





# Notes On The Erotic in the Capitalist Mode of Production

*Eli Long & Jack Frost*<sup>1</sup>

*For when the Sabines, after the war against the Romans were reconciled, conditions were made concerning their women...It continues also as a custom to this very day for the bride not of herself to pass her husband's threshold, but to be lifted over, in memory that the Sabine virgins were carried in by violence, and did not go in of their own will. Some say, too, the custom of parting the bride's hair with the head of a spear was in token that their marriages began at first by war and acts of hostility.*

– Plutarch's *Moralia: The Life of Romulus*

*We, the oppressed sex, are the only humans to be just sex, sex itself, "the prey and the servant of the collective voluptuousness," says Marx.*

– Monique Wittig, et al. *For a Women's Liberation Movement*

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<sup>1</sup> The composition process of this article involved a long sequence of revisions and revisionings, produced in collaboration between the two named authors, as well as between the authors and the LIES editorial collective. The scope and content of the text was then necessarily subject to differences in opinion that we have attempted to reconcile here.

In an episode famously known as ‘the rape of the Sabine women,’ the ancient Greek historian Plutarch describes a mass abduction of women to serve as wives in newly founded Rome, around 750 BCE. What troubled us about this story was not the mythical founding of the ‘western world’ on sexual violence—this is obvious. It was the paradoxical condition of violently appropriating women in order to spend the rest of one’s life as their companion. This paradox, exemplified by the legend that “marriages began at first by war and acts of hostility,” evokes the fact that, to this day, the gender relation consists of asymmetrical and oppositional categories called ‘woman’ and ‘man’ that are bound through compulsory heterosexuality. Herein, women have overwhelmingly and paradoxically occupied the roles of love object, servant, and often, hostage or casualty.

The asymmetrical relationship between the political categories ‘men’ and ‘women’ can be characterized as a relation of domination: feminization is gendered subjugation. Gender under capitalism is produced through the historical manipulation and maintenance of hierarchized erotic relations, systematized as the appearance of difference. With Kevin Floyd, we maintain that erotic desire “is not only constitutive of the performance of gender, but one of this performances’ most enabling conditions, even its most crucial.”<sup>1</sup> The binary gender relation and its specific articulation onto heterosexuality in the current mode of production are effected through physical, psychic, and economic coercion. We are interested in these means of coercion, and we identify the erotic as a major tool that ensures the subjugation of feminized people and the continued appropriation of their labor and products. In this article, we interrogate how erotic social relations, as gendered and economically mediated phenomena, are predicated on the subordination of certain sexualities and genders to others. An epistemological feature can obscure this context of domination. That is to say, the erotic is both a general and a specific phenomenon of political life. The experience of desire and our knowledge of desire are at the same time structural *and* subjective, in a world where “materialism and subjectivity have always been mutually exclusive.”<sup>2</sup> By way of a recontextualiza-

1 Floyd, Kevin. *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2009. 85.

2 Delphy, Christine. “For a Materialist Feminism.” *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women’s Lives* (London: Routledge, 1997), 62.

tion of desire as structured by domination, we also wish to demonstrate how particularized sexualities are subjugated with respect to a hegemonic and racially solidarious, monogamous heterosexuality, that is necessarily un-waged. With Guy Hocquenghem, we contend that “to present the oppression of homosexuality by the social machine as the manifestation of a paranoid system of desire...presupposes the presence of desire in every institution.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, we offer this article as a preliminary study of the erotic in order to suggest an orientation in the struggle against the violence of the gender paradigm and hence the immiserating capitalist totality.

### Gendered Subjugation and the Erotic

Like other forms of labor performed by feminized people, erotic work exists in both waged and unwaged forms. Unwaged sex forms the overwhelming majority of sexual encounters, and Capital has a stake in this ratio. From the 1970's on, certain Western schools of feminism, as well as sociologists and social historians produced a sizable field of research and debate on waged sex work, addressing prostitution as the dominant form of sexual repression under capitalism. This betrays deep confusion around the commodity status of sex and the erotics that produce gender. Both waged and unwaged erotic encounters are sites for the reproduction of a gender relation that is fundamentally hierarchized and grounded in heterosexuality and the white bourgeois family. Further, we argue that unwaged erotic work performed in the context of the heterosexual family form amounts to a deft extraction of labor. But this claim is not new: Marxist feminists have long argued that the feminized labor at the heart of companionate coupling and family structures is obscured by notions of love and care, which we diagnose as falling in the rubric of the erotic. Silvia Federici claimed that wages for housework is “the demand by which our nature ends and our struggle begins.”<sup>4</sup> Does the ideology of a trans-historical feminine ‘nature’ render this feminized labor non-labor, or is it an aporia or opacity inside the erotic relation itself?

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3 Hocquenghem, Guy. *Homosexual Desire* (London: Allison & Busby, 1978), 72.

4 Silvia Federici. *Wages Against Housework*. Power of Women Collective and the Falling Wall Press, 1975. 4.

Engels, in *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, described brutality itself as the only remaining basis for male domination when women too have become breadwinners.<sup>5</sup> For him, no incentive exists for male supremacy among the oppressed classes, as they have no property and are thus removed from the benefits gendered subjugation affords the owning class through bourgeois law. How can patriarchy exist, he asks, when, as waged workers, proletarian women are the obvious class allies of proletarian men? The diagnosis of brutality *as a cause* elicits a number of questions: if the wage is not a safeguard against gendered subjugation, as was once thought, does such a safeguard exist? And why do heterosexuality and the family or couple form function to subjugate women and other feminized people across class and race? These questions rely on one important presupposition—that a connection exists, as social fact, between erotic relationships and gender oppression, and that erotic relations have a certain propensity to take the form of violence. But it would seem that brutality in itself cannot be both a cause and an effect of the patriarchal gender relation.

This insight compels us to study the specifically capitalist configuration of the erotic in order to better grasp gender production in relation to contemporary heterosexuality.<sup>6</sup> As Kevin Floyd notes, “the very content of masculinity and femininity is the performative maintenance, the stabilizing, of heterosexual identification.” Gender, then, is fully relational, and whether this relation takes the form of sexual pleasure or sexual violence, it generates the palatable congruity of labor and eroticism for feminized people. In other words, *sex appears like work, and work appears like sex*, and this conceptual torsion is a defining characteristic of feminization. Like capital, which abstracts and generalizes class oppression through the wage relation, gender abstracts and generalizes feminization (as categorical gender oppression) by reducing its features and activities to eroticism.

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5 Engels, Fredrick. *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*. (1884) <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884-fam/ch02d.htm>. (August 2000).

6 For more on the relationship between the heterosexual matrix and gender construction, see Kevin Floyd, cited above. Though the heterosexual matrix is generally regarded as an epistemological rather than an ontological object, Floyd describes the historically specific forms of masculinity and femininity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as regimes of reified sexual knowledge. We find this useful for periodizing the law-like qualities of heterosexuality and male supremacy as a primary structuring principles of gendered experience.

The association, even a conservative one, of sexual pleasure with gender subjugation necessarily interacts with questions of individual and historical agency. We are not suggesting that sexual agency is impossible for feminized people, but instead propose that the profound structural relationship between the appropriation of feminized labor and eroticism throws “the autonomy usually attached to erotic choices”<sup>7</sup> into question. Because it is impossible to fully disambiguate erotic choices from the capitalist and racist paradigm of heterosexual relations, we must take note of the environment of social rewards and punishments in which such choices occur.

The durability of whiteness as the structural location of erotic value is secured and reproduced through the demanding and rewarding of racial solidarity in partner choice among white people, and the colonization of diverse fields of sexuality by white and bourgeois erotic norms.<sup>8</sup> Definitions of the erotic that are external to whiteness are jettisoned into a space of exoticism and fetish, becoming inextricably bound to whiteness, removed from self-determination, and posited as always already ‘other.’ This type of eroticization grounds and enables the extreme sexual violence and exploitation of erotic work perpetrated upon women of color by white men.<sup>9</sup> It also cannot be divorced from the colonial desire to extract resources and labor from non-Western lands and the people that inhabit them. Colonial and neo-colonial projects materially involve the rape and erotic exploitation of colonized women by colonizer men, in addition to the emasculation/feminization of colonized men, the violent restructuring of gender norms to mimic those of the colonizer. Insofar as certain races, classes, and castes are naturalized as inferior to others, they are transformed into potentially erotic objects.

The institution of Western heterosexuality unassailably serves white patriarchal values, typified by the capitalist nuclear family unit. The archetypical Western family “is strictly heterosexual and monoracial in its coupling.”<sup>10</sup> The refusal of white racial solidarity, colonial sex-

7 Holland, Sharon Patricia. *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 7.

8 See Deliofsky, K. “Compulsory “White” Heterosexuality: The Politics of Racial and Sexual Loyalty,” *Socialist Studies / Études socialistes*, North America, 1, Jan. 2009. Available at: <http://www.socialiststudies.com/index.php/sss/article/view/47>.

9 See, for example, Lindzy’s essay in this volume.

10 Deliofsky

uality, and heterosexuality provokes repression, evidenced by attempts at systematic legal and extralegal interventions into queer and/or interracial families and families of color. White eroticism “holds itself together by rituals of unity and exclusion, which develops in its members certain styles and attitudes useful in the exploitation of others.”<sup>11</sup> The subjugation of people of color is consistently couched in, and justified through, the preservation of white womanhood and the erotic value of whiteness.

As stated above, the question of heterosexism as the erotic-normal necessarily passes through the material reproduction of the family. Women of color occupy a specific place in the reproduction of the species globally, not only for men of all races, but also for white women. In her analysis of racial divisions in the domestic and public sectors, Evelyn Nakano Glenn argues that white women “have sought to slough off the more burdensome tasks onto more oppressed groups of women,” and thus collaborate in the tracking of women of color into socially stigmatized forms of reproductive labor, by actively “blocking entry into other fields.”<sup>12</sup> Because of the dialectical nature of gender and race constructions, white women who actively or tacitly support the hierarchized racial division of labor for immediate material gain undermine their own gender struggle in the long term.<sup>13</sup>

Heterosexuality and racism function together at the level of the erotic, as object choice relies on the reproduction of structures of domination expressed as individual or group commitments to racial and sexual loyalty. Thus we find the gender produced through erotic violence intimately connected with race and economic subjugation. For example, in the low-waged restaurant industry, one of the sectors where women of color are overwhelmingly employed, women are more than 5 times more likely to report sexual harassment than in other industries. As the horrific levels of violence against trans people, (and trans women of color in particular) show, erotically charged violence is often the means by which they are gendered, correctly or not.

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11 Frye, Marilyn. “White Woman Feminist.” *Overcoming Racism and Sexism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 115.

12 Glenn, Evelyn Nakano. “From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor.” in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18.1 (1992): 7.

13 Ibid, 36

Gendered violence produces “gay and queer men, trans people, gender nonconforming people and bodies, and children of any gender”<sup>14</sup> as *feminized*. These examples indicate that the erotic informs the process of gendering and racializing individuals and the moving, historical qualities of sexuality that animate this process.

What, then, *is* the erotic, and how are bodies dominated through it? In the words of Paola Tabet:

What is at issue is...on the one hand, how women’s sexual impulses are channeled, by socialisation, towards one single type of sexuality, that of [heterosexual] coitus...and, on the other, the ways in which they are coerced into it, even when they feel no desire, once again by psychological and physical means. Acts of power which thus have nothing to do with sexuality.<sup>15</sup>As queer theorists since the seventies have noted, no ostensibly revolutionary sexual practices up to this point have allowed us to dispense with the subjects and objects that constitute a relation of domination.<sup>16</sup> Precisely because gender does not inhere within bodies, but shifts, subjectivating bodies in endless configurations, patriarchy’s often violent eroticization is facilitated by people of disparate subject positions.

To clarify, we do not fetishize queerness as an escape from gendered social relations, nor do we believe that queers are exempt from reproducing them. Federici famously writes, “Homosexuality and heterosexuality are both working conditions...but homosexuality is workers’ control of production, not the end of work.”<sup>17</sup> Likewise, Guy Hocquenghem notes, “When we say that all social activity corresponds to the sublimation of homosexual interests for the public good, one must also add that this applies to gays, regardless of how comic the consequences seem.”<sup>18</sup> Only by acknowledging the essential fungibility of social processes can we interrogate the premise that *all* erotic rela-

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14 P. Valentine. *The Gender Rift in Communisation*, (July 2012). <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/gender-rift-communisation>

15 Tabet, Paola. “Natural Fertility, Forced Reproduction.” *Sex in Question: French Materialist Feminism* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1996), 119.

16 Hocquenghem, Guy. *The Screwball Asses* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2010.), 17.

17 Federici, 1.

18 Hocquenghem, 19.

tions reproduce capitalist — and hence, hierarchized, racialized, and gendered — social relations. There is no dual or tripartite system in which these relations function separately. A theory of gender must be elastic enough to variously address trans and racialized bodies, while also recognizing the structural resilience of the man/woman binary and its foundation in whiteness. Eroticization occurs as a volatile and crucial feature within a complex process of racialized, gendered and classed subordination.

### The Limit Case of Sex Work

As Prabha Kotiswaran notes, “Feminists theorizing sex work...hardly offer an elaborate, normative theory of sex.”<sup>19</sup> Here she refers to “sex work exceptionalism” — a view that sees waged sex work as an exceptionally exploitative, abject, or violent activity. This perspective flattens antagonisms such as race and nationality, obscuring the consistency of oppression in realms such as low-waged ‘non-erotic’ service work, often performed by feminized people of color. It also tends to obscure the stratified allocation of violence and wages within sex work according to race, class, gender, and geography. We prefer to view sex work *in context*, that is, in the context of generalized oppression. On the other hand, it is notably that waged sex work is performed by individuals of all genders for an almost exclusively cis male clientele. For us, this fact easily dismisses arguments that sex work is a politically neutral and above-board contractual relationship, one that could take place between parties of any gender. Indeed, the disparate attitudes and acts constituting waged sex work function to gender the client in a specific way, regardless of the sex worker’s gender. To augment the idea that women are defined by capital as those upon whom violence can be done, we contend that *feminized people are those whose bodies conduct the erotic*. In dismissing sex work exceptionalism, we take exception with sex. Put simply, waged sex work is the exception to the massive field of unwaged sex, and the erotic plays out with equal force in both.

Women have been waged workers since the dawn of capitalism, and only ever in the context of highly gender-segregated labor mar-

19 Prabha Kotiswaran, *Dangerous Sex, Invisible Labor: Sex Work and the Law in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 80.



kets. Access to the wage, while having a range of positive outcomes for individual feminized people, rarely succeeds in removing them from concomitant exploitation in other spheres of activity. In *For a Women's Liberation Movement*, Monique Wittig and others write:

We are not, as workers, liberated of our—oh so natural!—menial tasks. That's even what condemns us to the worst of solitudes. We don't have the time to make ties of comradeship between workers. We have to hurry; we run as we leave the factory, the office; there are errands to run, children to pick up at school, meals, laundry, dishes to do, etc.<sup>20</sup>

Despite being over-worked and undercompensated, what compels women and other feminized people to “run” from the factory (in all its possible configurations) to the next phase of work in the domestic sphere? Only two options seem plausible: either one is moved by norms relating to love and the family, or barring that, through intimidation, violence or loss of access to resources. Here again we understand pleasure and violence as two contiguous principles that structure gender.

As Leopoldina Fortunati in particular has emphasized, the advent of women as part-time workers was born of capital's need to purchase female labor-power while at the same time continuing to secure the free reproduction of other workers.<sup>21</sup> In Fortunati's view, it is the mark of capital to exploit both of these positions: waged worker and ceaseless reproducer of the entire family unit.<sup>22</sup> She suggests that things like “love,” “sex,” and “affection” are productive of value in the technical Marxist sense, whether these affects and activities are market-mediated or not. While we will not engage with Fortunati's specific theory of value,<sup>23</sup> we are interested in her claim that sex work does not formally

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20 Monique Wittig, Gille Wittig, Marcia Rothenberg, and Margaret Stephenson. “For a Women's Liberation Movement,” in Shaktini, Namascar, ed., *On Monique Wittig* (Champaign, IL: U of Illinois Press, 2005), 25.

21 This has historically been resolved in many other ways as well, for example state and corporate provision of childcare, and sharing the burdens of reproductive labor with extended family and kinship networks.

22 For more on the concept of various exploitation see chapter 4 of Leopoldina Fortunati's *Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia Press, 1989).

23 Fortunati, 33. For a thorough exegesis on Fortunati's reworking of classic Marxist

exist as a commodity for capital. She examines sex work on a continuum with unwaged, naturalized sex, and argues that because sex overwhelmingly occurs outside the market and in the home, prostitutes appear to capital “as an unnatural force of social labor.” In contrast the housewife represents a “natural force of social labor,” herself in opposition to the immanently social male laborer, who is not subject to the question of naturalization. A barrier exists between prostitution and the formal economy, a barrier that Fortunati posits as predominantly epistemological. Beyond an appeal to the unthinkability of waged sex by Capital, what makes sex such a troublesome commodity in this mode of production?

Some contemporary theorists of sex work claim that Capital has no reason to reject sex as a formal commodity. Elizabeth Bernstein observes that the content of waged erotic work is constantly shifting and asserts that a dissolution of the traditional nuclear family has in turn impacted the content of erotic desire, resulting in a new “recreational sexual ethic.”<sup>24</sup> This leads her to argue that buying and selling sex is increasingly normal for members of all classes, and that sex bears no antagonism to commerce. It follows that as taboos around sexual commerce fall away, sex work becomes homologous with other service and leisure commodities. Indeed the recent move of EU states to include prostitution as part of GDP might seem to support this trend.<sup>25</sup> However capital does not simply foster the expansion of sexual markets and a “new public culture of sex commerce;”<sup>26</sup> it “actively distinguishes between commodified and uncommodified sex,”<sup>27</sup> a fact for which Bernstein’s theory fails to account. Capital designates commodified sex as a product of “women’s work” within the frame of a historically highly gendered labor market. It is a limit space wherein social relations take extreme but telling forms with respect to feminized bodies. As the so-

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categories, see Maya Gonzalez, *The Gendered Circuit: Reading The Arcane of Reproduction*, <http://viewpointmag.com/2013/09/28/the-gendered-circuit-reading-the-arcane-of-reproduction/> (October 2013).

24 Elizabeth Bernstein, *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex* (University of Chicago Press: 2007). This ethic is defined by “emotionally bounded erotic exchange or bounded authenticity.” 6.

25 Alderman, Liz. “Sizing Up Black Markets and Red-Light Districts for G.D.P.” *The New York Times*, July 9, 2014, accessed September 30, 2014.

26 Bernstein, 108.

27 Kotiswaran, 80.

cial instantiation of capitalist erotics, sex work is undoubtedly charged terrain.

While sex has been bought and sold throughout history, the specific form of waged sex (“commodified sex”)<sup>28</sup> we have examined arose in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when urbanization and industrialization propelled the subsumption and restructuring of many domestic services formerly performed in the North American home. Waged sex work became “social labor,” intimately linked with the (male) wage and with other commodities on the market. The U.S. state had an interest in regulating sex work as part of its emerging regime of industrialized capitalist relations. In contrast, the massive field of uncommodified sex also fell under the purview of the state indirectly, as a negotiation of the private sphere as marital, meaning monogamous and heterosexual. We wish to illuminate capital’s deliberation over erotic labor by briefly sketching episodes concerning the prevailing paradigm of prostitution in this period as an example of the structurally racist and classist relation to the erotic.

### A Case: Waged Sex in Gilded Era US

Prior to WWI most U.S. cities had conceptually cordoned areas where prostitution was considered legal. Nonetheless, police heavily repressed prostitutes, and the harassment coincided with the need to discipline an emergent industrial working class. Indeed, across the political spectrum, 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century theorists sensed a link between prostitution and proletarianization. The belief that “mass employment of young women at low wages was causally linked to prostitution was a mainstay of antiprostitution. The vice commissions endorsed the theory; socialists did as well.”<sup>29</sup> Such a causal link was spurious, leading either to a conservative argument for keeping women out of the

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28 The choice of terms “waged sex” or “commodified sex” imply different perspectives on the relationship between bodies and property, “property-in-person”, and the like. Thus when we talk about the exchange of sex on the market, it might make sense to refer to “commodified sex”, but when we are talking about the labor itself and the worker, we might refer to “waged sex”.

29 For example the socialist *New York Call* wrote, “the graft that sends girls into that shameful death in life is the original of all grafts—the wage system”. This position was typical of “wages-and-sin” theories of prostitution. Quoted in Connelly, Mark Thomas. *The Response to Prostitution in the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1980), 32.

labor market or a socialist argument for the elimination of wage labor itself. With traditional forms of kinship and labor in flux, prostitution “became a master symbol...for a wide range of anxieties engendered by the great social and cultural changes” of the period.<sup>30</sup> As a ‘societal evil’ the prostitute was an erotic object of general interest, accessible to the state and political movements as a site where the social relations produced by generalized wage labor were contested and cemented.

Racial tensions and hierarchies also played out on the social body of the prostitute. The U.S. movement to outlaw prostitution was hinged on overt racism and xenophobia, subsequently triggered by white supremacist reactions to mass economic migration and urbanization in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>31</sup> Sensational and sometimes pornographic accounts of the ‘white-slave trade’ flooded the media, describing white American women forced into prostitution by syndicates of racialized men, often immigrants.<sup>32</sup> The white-slave trade hype could mobilize a range of responses, including “xenophobia, anti-Semitism... anticlericalism, even the vague anxiety about population growth and the undermining of the race”.<sup>33</sup> The issue cited foundational tropes in U.S. colonial racism, with notable similarities between white-slave stories and the colonial genre of ‘captivity narratives’ describing the abductions of white settler women by Native American men. When legislation was ultimately passed in response to the white-slave scare, racialized men were often deported or imprisoned. The boxing champion Jack Johnson was arrested in 1912 for transporting white “prostitutes” across state lines, and later convicted of violating the Mann Act, commonly called the White-Slave Traffic Act, by an all-white jury. The Mann Act itself was passed with help from Rose Livingston, a prominent, white, women’s suffrage activist, who alleged she had been forced into prostitution in New York’s Chinatown. Livingston was able to draw upon “decades-old popular fears of Chinese male labor migration” to depict a place where wife-less Chinese laborers preyed

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30 Ibid, 6.

31 Over thirteen million immigrants entered the U.S. between 1900 and 1914.

32 Connelly characterizes the basic narrative of white-slave writings as follows: “American girls become prostitutes...because they are victimized by a huge, secret, and powerful conspiracy, controlled by foreigners, whose evil work is impelled by an incomprehensible fanaticism.” Ibid, 116.

33 Corbin, Alain. *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1850* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1990), 290.

upon white women.<sup>34</sup> Though it is rarely emphasized, the women's suffrage movement, led by middle- and upper-class white women like Livingston, gained significant momentum as a result of the media attention paid to white-slavery.

As opposed to the augmentation of rights ultimately granted to white women, immigrant women and women of color faced increased repression as a result of the white-slavery scare.<sup>35</sup> These women were always already eroticized as potential prostitutes, capable of corrupting white American society. In reference to the racialized Eastern European women immigrating to the U.S., a Congressional commission found that the "vilest practices are brought here...and beyond doubt there have come from imported women...the most bestial refinements of depravity."<sup>36</sup> Between 1907 and 1910 immigration laws were passed with clauses for deporting women suspected of prostitution. These laws helped the state selectively issue citizenship and immigration status along racial lines, such as in Hawaii where "Japanese prostitutes living and working in Hawaii were deported despite the fact that they had emigrated before U.S. annexation of Hawaii."<sup>37</sup> The anti-prostitution movement facilitated repression along racial and class lines, criminalizing working class women of all races and racialized people of all genders.

These cases from the turn of the century exhibit the tensions surrounding capital's need to consolidate a regime of sexuality in the white family, move populations according to the demand for labor, and renegotiate the terms of social democracy and citizenship. Women's bodies, specifically the social body of the prostitute, displayed the erotic dimension of these changes, becoming a site of repression and regulation. The socialized (waged) sphere of sex is a crucial site for both the enforcement and production of erotic relations evidenced by the managerial paranoia of the State, as it attempts to mold social elements

34 Lui, Mary Ting Yi. "Saving Young Girls from Chinatown: White Slavery and Woman Suffrage, 1910–1920." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18.3 (2009): 393–417.

35 It should be noted that working class white women were targeted too: "by the end of [WWI] some thirty thousand women had been...apprehended and incarcerated" for suspected prostitution near military encampments. Many were white women whose friends and lovers were the working class men drafted to fight the war, men whose sexual health was considered a matter of national security. From Connelly, 143.

36 Connelly, 55.

37 Gardner, Martha Mabie. *The Qualities of a Citizen: Women, Immigration, and Citizenship, 1870–1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005), 79.

and cultural components in the service of capital. We have emphasized the inextricability of waged and unwaged sex, exploring the historical eventuation of both by way of the political and economic limit case of sex work. Waged and unwaged erotics are productive of capitalist social relations that play out on a molar *and* molecular level in each erotic encounter.

### Implications

We have attempted to show that *the erotic is not for nothing*. As crisis wears on the productive sphere and labor becomes increasingly informal, reproductive labor persists as feminized labor in both waged and unwaged forms.<sup>38</sup> From a Marxist perspective, it would appear that “capital rejects as ‘non-social’ the moments of its own reproduction which escape direct submission to the market or to the formal process of production.”<sup>39</sup> In an era of austerity, when reproduction is being shouldered by women and feminized people, and further sorted by race, the enforced invisibility of that labor and the sexual violence concurrent with it reveals the contemporary scope of gender oppression.

The importance of theorizing the gendering process extends beyond the current horizon of struggle. As our collective practices are necessarily imbricated with the question of sexuality, we must position ourselves to ask: what is the erotic now, and what should it be? Deferring an evaluation of intimate social relations has serious consequences: not only might it threaten the possibility of feminist and communist praxis emerging co-extensively with a myriad of social struggles in the future, but it thwarts our ability to organize, create solidarity, and fight alongside each other now. Only a politically committed perspective on gender, sexuality and love will enable any revolutionary sequence to generalize itself—to speak to and through those who have rarely been anything but marginal actors, “in a universe of ideologies and causes in which their problems are barely allowed to surface.”<sup>40</sup> And as any feminized person knows, the hour is already late.

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38 See Zora Balksaya’s article in this issue.

39 Theorie Communiste, *Response to the Americans on Gender* (April 2012). <http://libcom.org/library/response-americans-gender-theorie-communiste>

40 Carla Lonzi, “Let’s Spit on Hegel,” in *Feminist Interpretations of G.W.F. Hegel*. (State College, PA: Penn State University Press, 1996), 284.

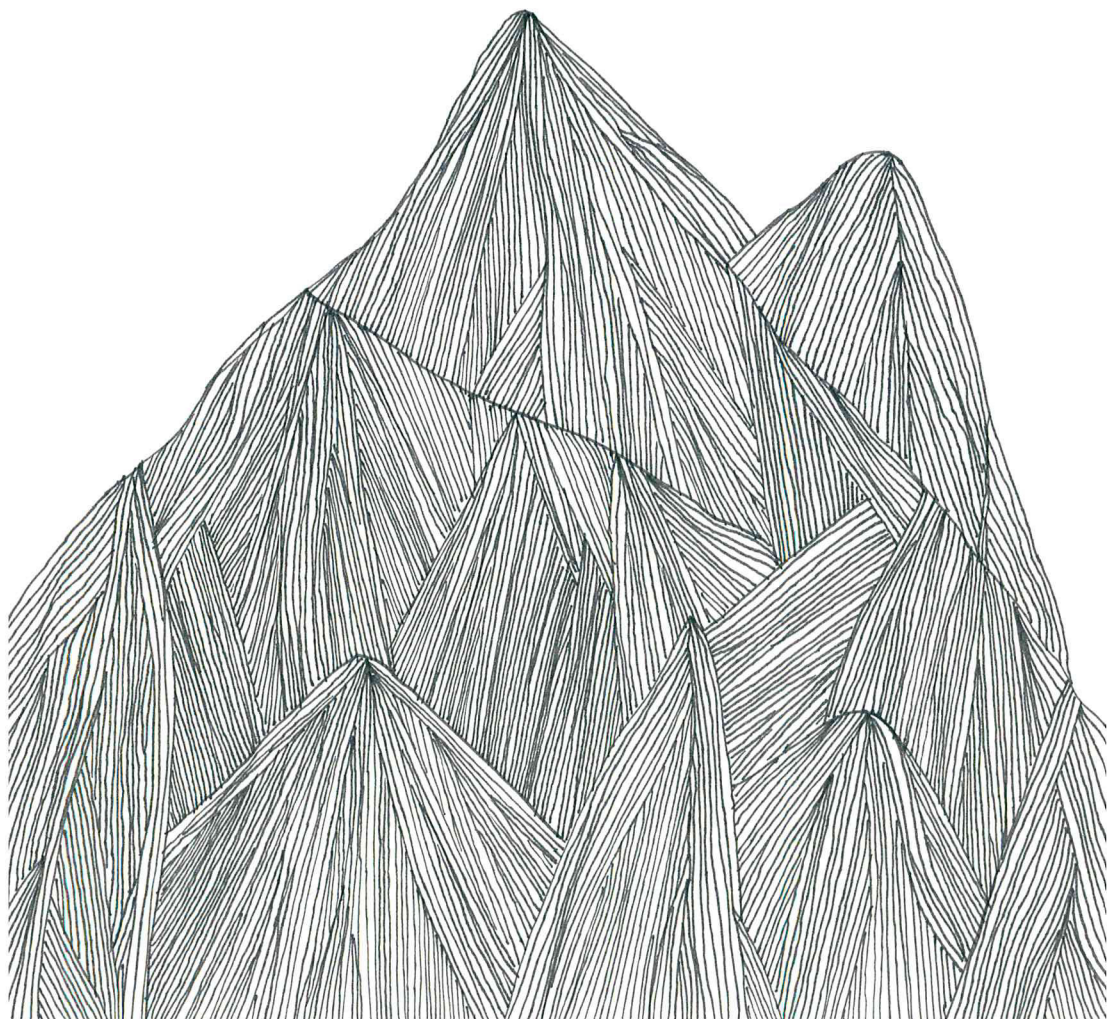
# what resembles the grave but isn't

*Anne Boyer*

always falling into a hole, then saying “ok, this is not your grave, get out of this hole,” getting out of the hole which is not the grave, falling into a hole again, saying “ok, this is also not your grave, get out of this hole,” getting out of that hole, falling into another one; sometimes falling into a hole within a hole, or many holes within holes, getting out of them one after the other, then falling again, saying “this is not your grave, get out of the hole”; sometimes being pushed, saying “you can not push me into this hole, it is not my grave,” and getting out defiantly, then falling into a hole again without any pushing; sometimes falling into a set of holes whose structures are predictable, ideological, and long dug, often falling into this set of structural and impersonal holes; sometimes falling into holes with other people, with other people, saying “this is not our mass grave, get out of this hole,” all together getting

out of the hole together, hands and legs and arms and human ladders of each other to get out of the hole that is not the mass grave but that will only be gotten out of together; sometimes the willful-falling into a hole which is not the grave because it is easier than not falling into a hole really, but then once in it, realizing it is not the grave, getting out of the hole eventually; sometimes falling into a hole and languishing there for days, weeks, months, years, because while not the grave very difficult, still, to climb out of and you know after this hole there's just another and another; sometimes surveying the landscape of holes and wishing for a high quality final hole; sometimes thinking of who has fallen into holes which are not graves but might be better if they were; sometimes too ardently contemplating the final hole while trying to avoid the provisional ones; sometimes dutifully falling and getting out, with perfect fortitude, saying "look at the skill and spirit with which I rise from that which resembles the grave but isn't!"







# Infrastructures of Injury

*Amanda Armstrong*

This essay charts three histories of working class struggle against injury and immiseration in the sphere of transportation, beginning with the demands of working class women in late nineteenth century Britain for compensation and better safety measures following the injury or death of their husbands working on the railway. The essay then transitions into a discussion of the coordination of a year-long boycott of municipal buses in 1956 by the Women's Political Council (WPC) of Montgomery, Alabama to challenge systemic anti-Black violence; and finally, I chart the emergence in the early 1970s of organized resistance to workplace sexual harassment amongst US flight attendants. These instances of opposition were not isolated manifestations. Rather, their emergence can be understood with reference to particular social and economic shifts — including shifts in labor processes — that preceded

them, and to subsequent moments of struggle that they inspired and enabled. In what follows, I want to narrate these struggles in ways that gather these episodes of antagonism into a constellation, and in this way to show how they are historically and conceptually related to each other.

These historical episodes demonstrate how transit *infrastructures* have — along with other workplaces — been central sites of *injury* and of collective struggle. What is particular about transit infrastructures is that the force of schedules and other time-based structures is palpable, consumption tends to occur at the same time and place as production, and various sectors of workers brush shoulders with stratified groups of consumers. As we will see, these elements make the sphere of transportation a potential hub of complex social antagonisms and a vehicle of often acute injury.

But there is another sense in which this essay considers the relation of injury and infrastructure — that is, by showing how conditions of systemic injury, immiseration, and violence, as well as struggles against these conditions, can be understood within a materialist framework as central moments of class antagonism and as part of the *infrastructure* — the basic structuring forms and dynamics — of capitalist social relations.

In doing so, the essay hopes to intervene in materialist debates, challenging those traditional Marxist accounts of class struggle that would install white male waged workers as the key agents of class struggle and, ultimately, of historical change. Such accounts typically draw upon the distinction between *base* (or *infrastructure*) and *superstructure*, suggesting that struggles over racial and gender oppression, injury, and immiseration are “superstructural,” and thus not necessarily central to histories of capitalism and of anti-capitalist struggle. While Marx understood injury and immiseration to be crucial aspects of class struggle and capital accumulation, traditional Marxisms have sometimes downplayed struggles over injurious conditions of life and labor, particularly insofar as such struggles involve collective resistance to racial and gender oppression. In what follows, I want to rewrite Marxist language, drawing it down unfamiliar tracks in a way that challenges and makes less tenable racist and sexist appeals to Marx, to anti-capitalisms, or to

class analysis that would write out or cast aside entire worlds of class antagonism. There can be no adequate, materialist account of class struggle under capitalism that does not attend to histories of systemic injury, immiseration, and of resistance to these conditions.

There are two particular materialist concepts that I want to reconsider in relation to these stories of transit-related struggle: the *real subsumption* of labor to capital and *social reproduction*. Each of these categories found a place in Marx's later works, and each was taken up and partially reworked over the 1970s by politically committed theorists who were interested in making sense of emergent forms of class struggle. These categories provide ways of understanding those processes, which are conditions and effects of industrial waged labor but are, at the same time, structurally set apart from the wage relation (i.e. the imposition of unwaged domestic and reproductive work on populations excluded from or marginalized within the wage relation, or the creation of superfluous populations, or groups of injured former workers, whose exclusion from the wage relation is a condition and effect of capital accumulation). These categories offer ways of seeing injury and immiseration, and struggles against these conditions, as being tied up with the imperatives and dynamics of capital accumulation.

Marx fleshes out the concept of *real subsumption* in a series of manuscripts composed during the early 1860s, contrasting this concept with what he refers to as *formal subsumption*. For Marx, formal subsumption brings non-capitalist production processes (e.g. weavers making cloth on their looms at home) under the control of those managing capital (e.g. by bringing all those weavers into a big room and having them work fourteen hours per day on looms for a wage), transforming these production processes into engines of capital accumulation (the capitalist is the owner of the room and the looms and makes profits from the product). Under formal subsumption, the concrete quality of the labor process doesn't change (weavers are still weaving in the same way on the same style of loom). Real subsumption, on the other hand, involves fundamental transformations in the quality of labor processes. For Marx, the change that characterizes real subsumption is the introduction of large-scale machinery into labor processes, which accelerates production and, in doing so, enables the ever more intensive extrac-

tion of surplus value (e.g. workers now press buttons and pull levers on large machines which do the weaving themselves and produce far more cloth per worker than the smaller looms).

Marx argues that the emergence of mechanized production—enabled by steam power, new mining practices, and railway technologies—does not simply change the quality of labor processes.<sup>1</sup> Mechanized production also transforms the social relationship of labor and capital, inaugurating new modes of labor’s subjection to capital (e.g. independent hand loom weavers cannot make enough money to survive when markets are saturated with machine-produced fabrics, while workers in textile factories are frequently injured by the large, fast moving machines). Proletarians experience new forms of injury and immiseration, both at and beyond sites of waged labor, under the accelerated and machine-driven conditions of life and labor that follow from real subsumption.<sup>2</sup> The concept of real subsumption helps show how the structural imperatives that reshape processes of production (primarily, the drive towards ever-increasing profits) also create new forms of injury at work and immiseration beyond the waged sphere. In what follows, the concept of real subsumption helps clarify some of the constraints and conditions of social struggles against systemic injury and violence: as we will see, moments when struggles over injury and immiseration intensified were often also moments when more

1 This argument can be seen in manuscripts of the 1860s, the *Grundrisse* (1939), and the first volume of *Capital* (1867).

2 For Marx, processes of real subsumption expose proletarian populations to superfluity and immiseration in a number of ways: first, by diminishing the socially general amount of time taken to produce a unit of value, real subsumption tends to prevent displaced, wageless populations from surviving through small-scale production: the value of their products, even if they work long hours, usually remains relatively minimal. Small-scale producers generally cannot compete in markets dominated by mechanized producers. In periods of real subsumption, such producers find themselves remade as superfluous, “non-productive” populations. And second, waged workers’ bodies and minds become expendable and exposed to harm by the labor process itself, partly because the knowledge and motor force enabling the production process exist to a significant extent outside of and in opposition to them. In *Capital*, Marx describes forms of exposure that workers suffer within machine-driven production processes:

*Every sense organ is injured by the artificially high temperatures, by the dust-laden atmosphere, by the deafening noise, not to mention the danger to life and limb among machines which are so closely crowded together, a danger which, with the regularity of the seasons, produces its list of those killed and wounded in the industrial battle.*

*The economical use of the social means of production, matured and forced as in a boathouse by the factory system, is turned in the hands of capital into systematic robbery of what is necessary for the life of the worker while he is at work (553).*

Marx’s discussion of systemic workplace injury in an era of real subsumption suggests that a certain quality of proletarian life — namely, exposure to immiseration — inhabits both the “outside” of production as well as the “interior” spaces of production.

mechanized, accelerated, and capital-intensive production processes were being imposed on workers.

The concept of *social reproduction*, on the other hand, which was taken up and reshaped by feminist and anti-racist materialist writers during the 1970s, draws together those practices, mostly mundane, that in some way maintain the underlying conditions of given social institutions and forms, particularly the form of waged labor. The still significantly gendered and racialized labors of domestic life, including cooking, cleaning, bearing children, and teaching kids to talk and listen, are considered aspects of social reproduction, especially insofar as they instill in current and future wage earners, including the domestic worker herself, the capacities necessary for work. In reproducing workers' ability to work at no direct cost to management, unwaged or under-waged domestic labor reproduces the exploitative wage system.

Recent critical work on social reproduction has focused particularly on the structures of reproductive labor at different times and places, the direct and indirect forms of discipline that enforce such labor, and the uneven distribution of reproductive work in terms of race and gender.<sup>3</sup> Another central concern in the narratives presented below has to do with breakdowns or limit-points of reproduction — situations where populations are separated from the means of reproduction and where the labors of reproduction become nearly impossible or extremely fraught, either as a result of mass displacement, the collapse of previously existing forms of social support or the complete severing of individuals' access to the wage (possibly as a result of family members' workplace injuries, or of racially exclusionary employment regimes). In the narratives of injury and of struggles against injurious and immiserating conditions that are stitched together in this essay, such "limit-points" of reproduction manifest in various forms, as do collective attempts to live through these limits by constructing *insurgent modes of reproduction*. In these insurgent modes of reproduction, what is reproduced is less one's own or others' capacity to labor, but rather, shared

3 See, for example: Neferti X. M. Tadiar, *Things Fall Away: Philippine Historical Experience and the Makings of Globalization* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 25–142; Kate Bezanson and Meg Luxton, eds., *Social Reproduction: Feminist Political Economy Challenges Neo-Liberalism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006); Isabella Bakker and Stephen Gill, *Power, Production and Social Reproduction: Human In/security in the Global Political Economy* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).

capacities to survive immiserating processes and to fight back against violent infrastructures. The concept of social reproduction highlights these peculiar limits, barriers, and potential points of insurgence that occur beyond the waged sphere.

### **Gender Divisions of Labor and Immiseration along the Early British Railways**

At the time and place Marx was writing, proletarian populations were increasingly encountering forms of superfluity and immiseration in ways starkly differentiated by gender. Over the course of the second half of the nineteenth century, working class women in Britain, particularly married women, were pushed out of waged employment, making them more dependent upon the wages of men for survival. While in 1851 seventy-five percent of married women worked for wages, by 1913 only ten percent were employed. This drastic shift in economy-wide gendered employment patterns was a cumulative effect of multiple causes. Male workers in strategically situated industries, such as mining and railway transit, were able to secure wages high enough to support more than one person; shifts toward factory-based production eliminated the so-called “putting out” system, which had involved women’s waged work in the home; and male workers, particularly unionized workers, effectively organized to exclude women from most forms of industrial work. Dependent on male wages, working class women confronted superfluity in ways conditioned by their location within an emergent gender division of labor. Because of their exclusion from waged work, women could only secure the means of survival in a mediated way, by marrying wage-earning men; but such men were often exposed to dangerous conditions at work. Barring meaningful forms of social and/or familial support, a husband’s workplace death or injury resulted in a married woman’s (and her dependents’) swift passage into severe immiseration. This condition of the gender relation significantly set the terms of proletarian struggle in late nineteenth century Europe, even if such struggle generally remained inadequate to the conditions facing fractured proletarianized populations, and proletarianized women in particular.



Injury and immiseration became particularly acute on the railways in the early 1870s. In 1873, British railway companies experienced a significant drop in profits, part of a broader crisis in the capitalist system, the proximate cause of which was a sharp drop in the value of silver following Germany's decision to abandon the silver standard, but the deeper causes of which included over-speculation in railway projects that offered less-and-less lucrative returns as lines had already connected many major cities. Railway managers responded to this crisis by imposing labor-intensifying changes specific to the railway industry: forcing longer hours on workers and running trains more frequently on existing tracks. Predictably, these measures brought about a significant increase in workplace injuries and deaths on the rails. It was in this context that rail workers in England and Wales established the first lasting, national railway trade union and initiated a series of wildcat strikes, informal seizures of company property, and demonstrations demanding higher pay and reduced hours. Initially, male unionists did not make the issue of compensation for injury central to their organizing, nor did they establish a benefit fund for injured workers and their spouses. But by the end of the 1870s, concerted pressure on the part of women whose husbands had been killed in railway accidents had thrust these projects to the center of the union's efforts.

In the archival research I've done on this topic,<sup>4</sup> the pressure applied by working class women generally appears indirectly: in the form of a male union representative worrying at a national meeting about what women in his district will say if the union doesn't expand the benefit fund, or in descriptions of mass funeral processions, led by women whose husbands had recently been killed, that turned into protests against the railway companies for which their husbands had worked. Even with such pressure, patriarchal norms and prerogatives prevailed, as the union only disbursed money to legal widows of killed railway workers who both remained single and were still caring for young children. Union members imagined the union as standing in, for a time, for the deceased husband and father. And members spied on women who

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4 I have worked with the archives of the *Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants* (ASRS), housed at the Warwick Modern Records Centre, and with the *Railway Service Gazette*, the periodical published with the support of the ASRS.

were receiving funds to determine whether they were dating someone new; if they were, the union cut off the support it had promised.

Working class women who were connected to the railway industry lived in ongoing antagonism with state, corporate, and union bureaucracies, all of which operated in ways that at once devalued the reproductive and domestic labor performed by them and imposed such labor as a norm and condition of their survival. Women were made primarily responsible for the reproduction of male workers, both current and future, but could secure no guarantee that such work would continue providing them with a way to subsist. In order to think through the gender and work relations that reproduced this condition of relative dependency and exposure to immiseration amongst working class women in nineteenth century Britain, it is useful to turn to materialist feminist writing from the late twentieth century on regimes of social reproduction.

### **Leopoldina Fortunati on the Role of Men in Mediating the Capital-Woman Relation**

Leopoldina Fortunati has made an attempt to draw an abstract schematic of how regimes of social reproduction ground capital-labor dynamics. In her 1981 *The Arcane of Reproduction*, she rewrites Marx's critique of capitalism in order to address the qualities and contradictions of "indirectly waged" reproductive labor, such as the domestic and care labor performed by women who were tied to the nineteenth century railway industry. Her account proceeds at the relatively high level of theoretical abstraction found in Marx's *Capital*. She argues that, under capitalism, the privatized sphere of reproduction comes to be defined by "an exchange that *appears* to take place between male workers and women, but in reality takes place between *capital* and women, with the male workers acting as intermediaries."<sup>5</sup> For Fortunati, industrial male workers occupy a contradictory position with respect to capital: on the one hand, at work, they find themselves directly subordinated to the power of capital, which is materialized in the often dangerous machinery they are required to supervise; on the other hand, away from work,

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5 Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labour and Capital* (New York: Autonomedia, 1981), 9.

male workers take on the role of capital as they attempt to extract reproductive labor from women, particularly from their wives, wielding a combination of their relative economic power (their control of the wage), and their state-sanctioned paternal authority. While male workers primarily encounter the force of capital in the steady rhythms of impersonal machines, working class women primarily encounter this force in the mercurial faces of individual men (including, as discussed above, the suspicious faces of railway union representatives). And, in the sphere of reproduction, working class women generally face capital alone, lacking forms for the manifestation of their collective interests, such as unions or assemblies.

Fortunati's schematic account of how individual male workers act as intermediaries between women and the abstract force of capital usefully brings into focus certain dynamics of women's subjection under capitalist and patriarchal relations, shedding light, for instance, on the behavior of the national railway trade unions in nineteenth century Britain. Fortunati's work makes it possible to understand the surveillance enacted by union representatives against women whose spouses had been killed in accidents as having been part of male unionists' attempts to assume the role of mediator between capital and women — a role that had been vacated by the workplace death of such women's wage-earning husbands. But her account remains partial, as it presupposes a set of conditions that never were universally experienced by proletarian populations: in particular, Fortunati's account assumes male workers' (or their representatives') survival and continued access to the wage, as well as the dominance of the patriarchal heterosexual couple form. Male workers' continued and stable access to the wage is a racialized and hierarchized access, enjoyed primarily by white and/or middle-class men worldwide. The structure of social reproduction also reproduces white supremacy and racial hierarchy, something missed by Fortunati. Additionally, the patriarchal/heterosexual couple-form is inaccessible to many people for an array of reasons, but since capital is structured to assume its workers to be in heterosexual couples, those who are not face increased rates of exploitation, and experience structural coercion to engage in the couple-form (even if it is untenable to do so).

### Racial and Gender Divisions of Domestic Labor in the Early Twentieth Century US

Considered in relation to histories of class struggle in the twentieth century US, Fortunati's account of exploitative relations in the sphere of reproduction is particularly helpful in illuminating white working class women's historical experience, but offers limited help in conceptualizing the forms of exploitation and violence faced over this period by women of color, and Black women in particular. Over the first half of the twentieth century in the US, as Dorothy Sue Cobble discusses in *The Other Women's Movement* (2005), within industries where significant numbers of white women were employed, exclusionary and "protective" laws and policies were passed that prevented women from earning full-time wages for the full course of their adult lives — laws and policies that echoed those, alluded to above, which were established over the course of the late nineteenth century in Britain.<sup>6</sup> The airline industry in the US offers a clear illustration of how these exclusionary policies were imposed. In the 1930s, white men and women were both employed as airline stewards, though women over thirty, those who were married, or those who were pregnant or postpartum, were barred by company policy from employment. As stewards began to organize and to win better pension benefits, the airlines moved toward all-female flight attendant corps, in part because the limits on married or middle-aged women's right to employment meant they would only accumulate minimal pension benefits for the few years during which they were employed. At the same time, white working class men were being preferentially hired in a range of expanding industries, especially manufacturing and transit industries (including as pilots and air traffic controllers), and were effectively organizing in these industries to win so-called "family wages" and pension benefits. The combination of these trends helped solidify the patriarchal nuclear family as a norm and economic compulsion for the white working class, wherein middle-aged women and/or women with children were dependent upon a husband for access to the wage and were compelled to perform nearly

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6 Dorothy Sue Cobble, "A Spontaneous Loss of Enthusiasm: Workplace Feminism and the Transformation of Women's Service Jobs in the 1970s," *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below During the Long 1970s*, Ed. Brenner, Brenner, and Winslow (London: Verso, 2010), pp. 335-356.

all of the domestic labor that was necessary to sustain and reproduce themselves and their immediate family members.

Over the same period of time, a different set of transformations were reshaping the working and living conditions of Black women in the US. As Evelyn Nakano Glenn shows in *Forced to Care* (2012), over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, white politicians and property owners, particularly in southern states, effectively re-imposed coercive labor regimes on Black populations, maintaining forms of bonded agricultural labor through sharecropping regimes, coercing people arrested under vagrancy laws to work, including as domestic servants, and reinforcing these conditions through the threat of sanctioned violence. Through these and other dynamics, Black women were generally forced into highly exploitative domestic work arrangements within white peoples' homes, where they were forced to live for days, and in some cases weeks, and could only spend time with, and work to care for, children, spouses, or friends for brief moments between work. By 1930, more than one million Black women were employed or indentured in domestic and personal services. Their conditions of employment and life at this moment were, like white working class women, certainly defined by isolation in individual homes, exploitative forms of reproductive labor, and exposure to violence — however, unlike most white working class women at this time, Black women were isolated in other people's homes, performing reproductive work for bourgeois white families.

Over the course of the second quarter of the twentieth century, as Mignon Duffy has demonstrated through quantitative analyses of census and other employment data, domestic workers gradually altered certain conditions of their employment, particularly the requirement that they spend days on end at work. Elizabeth Clark-Lewis describes how live-in domestic workers in Washington, DC, participated in mutual aid societies to enable themselves to weather the temporary loss of income associated with moving from live-in service to “day work,” which many did over the 1920s and 1930s. By the 1950s, daily commutes for domestic workers were the norm, while certain forms of reproductive labor, particularly food service work, were increasingly taking place outside of homes, in corporate or state-run institutions

(and were increasingly being assigned to men of color). While isolating, exhausting, and underpaid reproductive labor was still imposed on Black women working in domestic service, their daily commutes, often on segregated municipal buses, provided regular moments of shared work-related activity. Early twentieth century efforts by domestic workers to separate themselves from their places of work, and to limit their working hours, thus set the groundwork for the 1956 Montgomery bus boycott, which itself set off sequences of protest against racial apartheid and against exploitative and often isolating and violent regimes of social reproduction — struggles that took shape over the 1960s and 1970s. As we will see, these collective attempts to challenge prevailing conditions of social reproduction helped enable related struggles against workplace unsafety and violence that were taking place around the same time within sites of production.

### **The Montgomery Bus Boycott and Struggles Against Racial Apartheid and Exploitation**

The year-long 1956 bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, which was initially organized by members of the Black Women’s Political Council, involved a collective refusal, on the part of Black women engaged in domestic labor in the homes of white people, to commute to and from work on segregated municipal bus lines. As Paula Giddings writes in *When and Where I Enter*,

Black women needed public vehicles to get to the White part of town to perform the numbing and exploitative work that had been their lot for centuries. They needed the vehicles to return home for precious and fleeting moments with their children before morning, when they had to ride them to work again. Ill-treatment on public transport represented the final insult and humiliation to Black women in a society run by White men.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (2007; repr., New York: William Morrow, 1984), 254.

In her narrative of the origins of the boycott, Jo Ann Gibson Robinson describes a number of particular instances of harassment and violence faced by Black passengers prior to the boycott, including times when bus drivers physically assaulted passengers, and when drivers called the police against passengers who refused to give up their seats or who challenged the drivers in any way. In 1952, a man named Brooks was shot and killed by an officer after simply insisting, contrary to the white bus driver's accusation, that he had in fact paid his fare.

Unlike the homes of white families, where Black women were subjected to a spectrum of injuries in isolation, segregated buses were places where the violence of racial apartheid was enacted in plain view; Black people of all genders experienced this violence together, as they commuted to and from work or traveled across and between cities. In addition to the 1956 bus boycott in Montgomery, Robin D. G. Kelley describes, in *Race Rebels* (1994), smaller-scale forms of resistance that were enacted by Black residents of Birmingham on segregated buses during and after the Second World War. Such forms of resistance included simply disregarding the location of so-called "color boards," fighting back when white riders harassed or attacked them, and calling drivers who had harassed Black passengers to stop at every station, regardless of whether anyone needed to exit at the stations. The buses became sites around which collective struggles against the forms of violence and hyper-exploitation faced by Black populations at this moment could crystallize.<sup>8</sup>

The bus boycott in Montgomery helped set off cycles of struggle in both the South and the North against racial apartheid and against the forms of hyper-exploitation experienced by Black women. Such struggles were particularly intense in many of the Northern cities to which Black, proletarianized populations had been migrating over the first half of the twentieth century — migrations spurred in part by ex-

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8 Such struggles were generally less possible in the sphere of waged work, or through the form of unions, because of white male workers' active participation in workplace discrimination. There were some notable exceptions to this general condition of blockage though, in forms of militant anti-racist unionism that emerged in industries with higher percentages of Black workers, such as the organizing against discrimination undertaken by the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers of America; the strikes organized by the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters over the 1930s and 1940s in Chicago; or the 1968–75 Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) in the Detroit auto manufacturing industry.

panding rates of rural unemployment, following the mechanization of agricultural labor processes (i.e. the real subsumption of agricultural labor). Neighborhoods open to Black migrants were frequently targeted by municipal governments for demolition and urban redevelopment. And Northern cities generally failed to establish decent schools or other public services in predominantly Black neighborhoods. Through the 1960s, waves of urban riots, often sparked by acts of police brutality, contested these conditions.

Great Society-funded storefront service organizations were established in the late 1960s in an attempt to channel and manage increasingly militant opposition to structural exclusion and immiseration. These Great Society-funded organizations led campaigns for the expansion of access to social welfare benefits. As Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward show, however, this organizing had a tendency to exceed the limits envisioned by federal Great Society bureaucrats. Piven and Cloward describe a 1967 sit-in at a Boston Welfare Department where police struck participants, who “[cried out] from the windows of the welfare department, and for three nights widespread rioting erupted in the streets.”

### **Autonomous Social Reproduction in Response to Racialized and Gendered Immiseration**

The formation of the Black Panther Party (BPP) in Northern cities at the end of the 1960s was part of a broader effort amongst those struggling against racial apartheid to break through white supremacist limits imposed by federal anti-poverty initiatives. While these initiatives had largely been confined to efforts to expand social welfare benefits, the BPP’s direct challenge to the rule of the police and courts, as well as their establishment of free breakfast, childcare, and medical programs can be understood both as a broadening out of sites of struggle as well as an intensification of the movement’s challenge to the state. The party worked to establish practices of social reproduction autonomous from and in opposition to the state. These programs provided a material basis for the confrontation of gender divisions of labor and hierarchies in the movement, while also addressing basic needs for food and care



that were being unmet, due to economic dislocation and the exploitation of Black women's reproductive labor. Black women employed as domestic servants in the homes of white families generally did not earn enough to cover the cost of reproducing themselves and their children, and the work pulled them away from their children for long stretches of time. While the state responded to the challenge constituted by the BPP primarily through infiltration and the extra-judicial killing of party leaders, it also worked to neutralize the force of the party by incorporating free breakfast programs into public schools, beginning in 1975.

The BPP's move toward autonomous social reproduction partially inspired and informed a variety of feminist projects that, at the same moment, were establishing forms of direct support around issues of reproduction and sexual violence. In Chicago, for example, members of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union (CWLU) worked with members of the BPP, and, at the CWLU's first convention, the delegates agreed to help support and share information about the Jane underground abortion collective. The Jane Collective (the Abortion Counseling Service of Women's Liberation) generalized amongst the 100 or so members of the group the knowledge of how to perform abortions, and ultimately worked with approximately 10,000 women to terminate unwanted pregnancies. In doing so, the collective pulled control over their and other women's reproductive health away from male doctors, fathers, and husbands, and contributed to the expansion of the capacity of women to refuse unfree and unwanted forms of reproductive labor. While the 1973 Supreme Court decision in *Roe versus Wade* lifted restrictions on abortion, it also worked to neutralize the potentials opened up by the collective, in part by enshrining the authority of medical doctors to make decisions about abortion and other reproductive health procedures.

At this moment, women were also building somewhat broader networks of support to challenge sexual and domestic violence, both within privatized (sites of reproduction) and in waged workplaces. Through the 1970s, feminists established anti-domestic violence collectives and safe houses for women leaving abusive relationships. As Susan Schechter notes, however, the more emancipatory aims of early feminist anti-violence organizing were partially blocked by concerted

state efforts over the course of the 1970s to remake shelters and other sites of direct support into more narrowly conceived service organizations.<sup>9</sup>

As part of this feminist anti-violence organizing, women were also forming support networks within various sectors of employment to contest — both through formal grievance procedures as well as direct actions — the normalization of workplace sexual harassment. As Dorothy Sue Cobble notes, much of this early organizing against sexual harassment was led by women of color.<sup>10</sup> Organizing efforts during the 1960s against race and gender discrimination in the workplace had built up knowledge about how to use new anti-discrimination laws and regulatory agencies to challenge harassment at work. Organizing against workplace discrimination and harassment supported the significant expansion of women's waged employment, beginning in the late 1960s. While consequential in this respect, the more broadly transformative potentials of workplace anti-sexual harassment efforts frequently were blocked insofar as such efforts faced sharp resistance from union bureaucrats and other male workers — resistance that Fortunati's account of working class men's historical role as mediators between women and capital can help explain. Nevertheless, at least within the clerical sector, anti-sexual harassment organizing effectively corroded one of the key bases of labor discipline in large, bureaucratic mid-century firms. According to Rosabeth Kanter, most clerical workers at this time performed regimented tasks as part of general labor pools.<sup>11</sup> These workers were encouraged to work efficiently in the hopes that they might eventually be promoted to work as personal secretaries. But when personal secretaries began in the mid-1970s to organize publicly against the sexual harassment they faced from their bosses, forms of labor discipline tied to the idealization of the role of personal secretary broke down, enabling the emergence of new forms of labor organizing and solidarity amongst clerical workers. This is one of the ways that struggles against forms of race and gender violence and harassment cut

9 Susan Schechter, *Women and Male Violence: The Visions and Struggles of the Battered Women's Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1982).

10 Dorothy Sue Cobble, "A Spontaneous Loss of Enthusiasm: Workplace Feminism and the Transformation of Women's Service Jobs in the 1970s," *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below During the Long 1970s*, Ed. Brenner, Brenner, and Winslow (London: Verso, 2010), pp. 335-356.

11 Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation* (Basic Books, 1993).

across sites of waged and unwaged labor and remade the dynamics of class struggle in the third quarter of the twentieth century.

Another area where organizing against harassment significantly transformed the dynamics of class struggle around 1970 was in the US airline industry. In what follows, I talk some about the shifting dynamics of struggle in this industry over the late 1960s and early 1970s, focusing particularly on organizing by flight attendants against intensifying forms of workplace sexual harassment.

### **The Relation between the 1970 Crisis of Profitability, Harassment, and Gendered Exploitation on the Airlines**

In 1970, US airline companies experienced net losses, after having maintained relatively high rates of profit through much of the 1960s. The 1970 crisis of profitability in the airline industry was spurred in part by the adoption, through the 1960s, of higher capacity, jet-powered planes, which brought about what appeared to industry managers as a crisis of overcapacity (they couldn't fill the seats on the planes). This crisis has remained essentially unresolved since, having been exacerbated by industry-wide deregulation in 1978. In 1971, airline managers responded to the previous year's losses by spending more on advertising and marketing, particularly on advertising that sexualized flight attendants — in response to crisis they began more intensively marketing their female workers' bodies to potential passengers. National Airlines required all flight attendants to wear "Fly Me" buttons, while Continental introduced the slogan "We Really Move Our Tails for You." These advertising campaigns prompted a group of stewardesses, working with national feminist organizations, to publicly contest the normalization of sexual harassment on the planes. In response to the "Fly Me" buttons, for example, flight attendants affiliated with Stewardesses for Women's Rights made and wore "Go Fly Yourself" buttons. And a whole series of more informal acts of resistance at this moment initiated what would become a lasting struggle over the course of the 1970s against sexual harassment and for autonomous feminist unions in the airline industry. By the end of the decade, flight attendants had successfully broken with the male-dominated pilot unions with which

they had been affiliated for much of the mid twentieth century, and had formed their own all-flight attendant unions.

Within the US airline industry of the 1970s — as was also the case in the British railway industry of the 1870s — first we see an industry-wide crisis of profitability, then a management offensive defined by speedup and the intensification of injurious conditions, and then waves of organizing on the part of those directly or indirectly waged by such industries. In each case, workers rebelled not only against overwork and inadequate pay, but also against management attempts to exacerbate their exposure to particular forms of workplace injury, violence, and immiseration. And in each of these historical situations, management-imposed changes to work rules interacted with patriarchal intransigence on the part of male unionists, contributing to the intensifying exploitation of women’s sexuality and/or unwaged reproductive labor, and setting the conditions for women’s organizing against both company work rules and male-dominated union bureaucracies.

However, there were important historical differences between the leading transit industries of nineteenth and twentieth century capitalism — railways and airlines, respectively. On the railways, the forms of speedup imposed after 1873 on signal operators, guards, and drivers were particularly dangerous. Avoiding new capital investment in track construction, railway owners simply ran trains more frequently on existing lines, attempting to realize more value in the form of passenger and cargo receipts per labor hour. This led to a spike in fatal railway accidents in the early 1870s. By the 1890s, railway managers began investing in larger-capacity engines and carriages, thus further increasing the organic composition of capital (the ratio of dead to living labor — an index of the real subsumption of labor to capital), which tended as well to increase the severity of accident-induced injuries. However, by the 1890s, companies had begun to invest in safety-promoting brake technologies as well, making accidents somewhat less frequent.<sup>12</sup> A key determining factor of industry-wide dynamics was the fact that the “grounds” upon which the trains ran — the cuttings, beds, and rails — were subject to relatively inflexible physical limits. While the twentieth

12 According to Walter Johnson, an almost identical process unfolded at around the same time in the Mississippi steamboat industry, as the mid-century saturation of passable steamboat lines gave way to dangerous efforts to run boats more quickly, more frequently, and with larger carrying capacity over the second half of the nineteenth century.

century airline industry also faced some physical limits – particularly in terms of the size and locations of airports, the carrying capacity of planes, and the capacity of air traffic control systems – the actual space through which the planes flew, the sky, was relatively boundless.

While airline owners similarly responded to the 1970 crisis of profitability by attempting to run planes more constantly and by imposing forms of speed-up on airline workers, in part by increasing the frequency of flights, the fact that planes pass through the air on their journeys between terminals meant that increases in the frequency of flights tended to have relatively little effect on accident rates, although air traffic controllers did report increasing rates of near misses following increases in the frequency of flights. Managers of individual airline firms determined that to realize profits they also needed aggressively to compete for passengers, particularly for businessmen who traveled frequently between major urban hubs. They appealed to these customers by attempting to normalize sexual harassment against flight attendants on their airlines. In this way, it is possible to see the spike in sexual harassment on the airlines, to which flight attendants associated with Stewardesses for Women's Rights were responding, as having been conditioned by the crisis of profitability that struck the airlines in 1970.

### **Workplace Sexual Harassment as Counter-Attack to Earlier Struggles Against Discrimination**

It is also possible to see this intensification of sexual harassment as part of a management backlash to an earlier phase of organizing against gender and race discrimination in the industry. Over the 1960s, policies restricting the employment of married, middle-aged, and postpartum women as flight attendants were effectively challenged, as were policies restricting the employment of women of color. Airline managers' attempts in the early 1970s to more aggressively promote sexual harassment on the planes thus followed the elimination of restrictive policies that had allowed managers to determine the composition of the flight attendant corps — that is to say, to retain only young, white women as workers. Following this limitation of airline managers' direct control over the composition of the workforce, managers attempted through advertisements and changes in attendants' uniforms (which generally

became tighter-fitting, shorter, and lower cut) to sanction the physical aggression of male passengers, and to impose on attendants conditions of labor defined by acute and persistent forms of sexual harassment. So the sexualization of flight attendants was, in part, a way that management attempted to control labor, through the mediation of male passengers.

As Phil Tiemeyer shows in *Plane Queer* (2013), it was at this moment that airline managers, under pressure by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to begin employing men as attendants, also articulated a novel account of the nature of flight attendants' work. Managers argued that attendants were primarily responsible for performing an "immaterial" form of labor that women were uniquely qualified to carry out — a form of labor that involved producing in passengers feelings of comfort and pleasure, which, they argued with explicit reference to Freudian theory, purportedly brought to mind for passengers their experiences as young children with their mothers. The notion of "immaterial labor" articulated by airline managers in the early 1970s was thus an ideological notion, designed to naturalize the intensive forms of gender and sexual exploitation being imposed at this time on women flight attendants.

Airline managers' attempts in 1971 to impose a more intense regime of sexual harassment on the planes can be seen as a reactionary response both to attendants' previous struggles against workplace discrimination, and to the industry-wide crisis of profitability that shook the airlines in 1970. Forms of authority and sanctioned male violence that had characterized the sphere of reproduction and/or domestic sites of production for much of the twentieth century came at this time to be imposed as well within many sectors of the formal, waged sphere of production. This affected married women and women of color who only a decade or two before would have been pushed out of the airline and other industries and into a condition of relative dependence upon, and exposure to violence through, a male wage-earner and/or underwaged domestic labor.

### A History of the Present?

This essay has focused on a few episodes of struggle that took shape in and around the sphere of transportation, and that emerged in part as responses to the differential exposure of certain populations to injury and death, as well as to the inadequacy or paternalism of existing structures of support for those without resources to fall back upon. I've focused in particular on a series of struggles that took shape before and during capital's last major crisis and moment of restructuring — roughly 1968 to 1974. The history offered above runs counter to the essentially positive account of this restructuring offered in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* and *Multitude* (2004) — where the increasingly “immaterial” or “affective” quality that labor processes took on over the 1970s is seen as a generally liberatory effect of labor struggles over the late 1960s and early 1970s against the drudgery of Fordist production processes. Instead, I've tried to show how the management offensive of the early 1970s was tied up with, on the one hand, state attempts to co-opt and neutralize emergent, autonomous forms of reproduction, and, on the other hand, a broader politics of backlash, including amongst white male workers, against feminist and Black liberationist ruptures of the 1960s. The “immaterial” labor processes that emerged or became more central to processes of accumulation in North America at this moment were often, as the case of the flight attendants indicates, highly injurious, defined by acute forms of gender- and race-based harassment, and linked to the casualization of labor.

If this sketch of management intransigence, state intervention, and backlash politics helps to set out some of the negative conditions of class struggle in the post-Fordist era, perhaps the acts of collective refusal and mutual support discussed above also offer glimpses of possibilities for the present. One of the lessons we might draw from these past episodes of struggle is the importance of finding or making possible moments where isolated experiences of vulnerability, injury, or immiseration give way to the composition of emergent collectivities in struggle, whether that be through boycotts or blockades of transit industries, debtors assemblies, the composition of autonomous networks of social reproduction, or shared refusals to accept forms of harassment, speedup, or injury at work, whether waged or otherwise.





# get free

*Julia Katz*

in life and death  
a disappearance

prissy  
who spent her whole life  
trying to get free

fought the law and the logic  
beat bloody against the bars  
shot down diagnoses  
and battled nurses barehanded

prissy who spent

her whole life trying  
to get to the other side

it's a short distance  
from shadow to ghost  
but mama weeps at her passing  
feels her fingers in her hair  
and hears her hands massaging  
melodies from an old piano  
mama marvels how the fluency  
of silver tongue and tapered fingers  
never betrayed the fault lines  
that plotted her rupture

in life and  
death a shame

prissy who  
spent her whole life  
trying to get free  
followed strange orbits

i picture you  
between the moon and hotel street  
your heart full you lose yourself  
in the narrowing space  
between your black eyes  
and their reflection  
in the widening iris  
of a man in uniform

i see you pinned  
under fire and smoke  
the flickering tongues of pentecostals  
chase demons down your throat

i see you shocked  
a nameless doctor sends  
voltage down your spine  
your slender body spasms  
and the demon snickers

i see you caught  
coughing smoke and speaking volts  
kept under lock and needle  
where lights burn fluorescent  
til your skin pulses and glows  
and when you scratched and thrashed  
and willed your way out  
how good the sun  
must have felt as it seared you  
the hum of fluorescents  
burned quiet

prissy  
who spent her whole life  
trying to get free

you left because you knew  
we couldn't promise  
not to try to keep you  
sealed off and sanitized  
like the moon in tupperware

prissy my aunt  
who died a rebel queen

the records will pity how you died  
alone diseased and untreated  
but i know you must have  
sighed your very soul out  
to lay down unexorcised

prissy  
who spent her whole life  
trying to get  
free

over the ocean i see your freedom  
train smoking ten packs a day  
churning around the pacific  
in ascension you follow the smoke  
high into volcano ash  
and higher still above the fog  
and into the ether  
you escape

prissy  
i spent my whole life  
praying for your freedom  
i listen to your favorite song  
and wonder how you wanted  
your love to be

aunty i wish  
i could ask you  
close enough to whisper  
if you believe you can love whole  
when you feel like  
pieces of a person

# **Fire This Time: Notes on the Crisis of Reproduction**

*Jasmine Gibson*

Fire burns upon the Witches' Pyres again. The cyclical nature of capitalist crisis crashes upon the woman worker body. The purpose of this body is twofold: to reproduce and expand capital as well as to tend to a growing labor force with fewer and fewer resources. In this article, I examine the crisis of reproduction brought on by the crisis of fictitious capital, which has been the underlying issue in the crisis of 2007-2008 and its aftermath. I examine this crisis at work in feminized labor markets, such as healthcare and the fast food industry. Here, the strain of the crisis is felt intimately, taking the form of short staffing, longer hours, less pay, furloughs, fewer benefits, or more clients. I focus on the role of the woman worker to emphasize a specific role women play in determining the production and reproduction of capitalism. Her place within capital is to tend to the reproduction of others, whether

that is in the home or the waged workplace. The unique placement of the woman worker is at both the entry and exit point of social reproduction; she labors both where wages are stolen and where the laboring population is being reproduced.

The current crisis is a crisis of fictitious capital. Fictitious capital consists of forms of profit and wealth that take the form of loans or stocks and bonds, and as titles to wealth, all of which have an indirect impact on the economy. Fictitious capital is not money, which has a direct material existence. Fictitious capital arises from a chain of debt based off of an imagined sum of money. Imagine one company buys things on credit from another company for 1 million dollars, and then the second company buys things from a third company for 1 million dollars, promising to pay in a month when they expect to be paid by the first company. And then the third company goes around and promises that 1 million to another company. And on and on. This is one central process by which fictitious capital comes into existence. It is the same structure as operated in subprime mortgage lending – everyone was mobilizing money they expected to receive in predatory mortgage payments. If the first company goes bankrupt, or the people in their homes can't pay the predatory interest rates on their mortgages, millions of money that has been assumed to exist in the economy disappears.

When the amount of fictitious capital is growing especially large and at a very fast rate in numerous sectors (for example, credit cards, stock markets, and student loans), this situation is often referred to as a process of “financialization,” and the economy is described as “financialized.” In recent decades, according to some scholars like Loren Goldner, the financialization of the global economy has become extreme.<sup>1</sup> When the economy is highly financialized, and debts are unable to be paid on a large scale, this causes what is called a crisis in fictitious capital.

When titles to wealth cannot be fulfilled and loans cannot be repaid, the state often takes interventive action, as in the bank bailout of 2008. Goldner suggests that “it is the non-exchange of equivalents, either by non-reproduction within the system, or by primitive accu-

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1 See for example Loren Goldner's “The Remaking of the American Working Class: The Restructuring of Global Capital and the Recomposition of Class Terrain.” (1999 edition).

mulation outside the system” that enables the continuation of the financialized economy. Since 2008, states all over the world have taken on the debts left unpaid by the chain reaction of collapsing bubbles of fictitious capital. States have generally managed this debt by cutting social services, in a formula commonly referred to by the phrase “austerity measures.” Capitalism creates fictitious capital to avoid plunging into crisis, but to do so it must devour the workers that sustain capital’s function. Even then this strategy itself creates a crisis as “social reproduction stagnates or goes backwards.”

In order to overcome the growing crisis of fictitious capital, capital has to cannibalize itself. In other words, in order to restore their ability to turn profits, capitalists lay off a significant portion of the workforce, evading the obligation to pay them their wages and thereby destroying the capacity of part of the working class to reproduce itself. In this current political moment where fictitious capital has had a real, material impact on the lives of workers, it is the feminized<sup>2</sup> worker who is hit particularly hard by the crisis. Due to their positions in both unskilled and unproductive labor, and as caretakers of the working class, women workers are the most likely to be laid off from positions first and are more likely to take on extra burdens due to the austerity measures.

Because feminized workers are positioned at the entry point of production and the exit point of social reproduction, their labor power is used to manage the crisis. Women workers are by no means outside of the system, but they have historically and continue to operate in the “hidden” part of the circulation of capital, which is the reproduction of labor power. Reproduction of labor power is often considered to be unproductive labor — labor that produces no value — like unwaged house work. Waged, reproductive labor has not historically added surplus value to the economy. But the crisis of fictitious capital has mass marketized the role of reproductive labor, in the form of fast food restaurants, waged care work (nannies, maids, nurses, social workers, etc.) and public sector jobs, to name a few. This means that much of the labor that goes into directly reproducing labor power is now produc-

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2 The phrase “feminized worker” refers to a worker who performs feminized labor — labor that is relegated to the realm of reproduction. This includes care work, emotional labor, housework, etc. The “feminized worker” is often a person designated female at birth, but not always. Because of this, the phrase “feminized worker” is used interchangeably with “woman worker” throughout this paper.

tive labor. Women are both waged and unwaged reproductive workers, with the twofold responsibility to reproduce other workers in addition to themselves, even while public resources like food stamps or daycare are cut due to austerity measures.

Hence, the definition of the category “woman worker” has been reconfigured. While reproductive labor was once conducted mostly in the private sphere, it has now become heavily institutionalized and has grown massively in both the post-1970s and post-2008 recession world. The journey of the feminized worker has been a journey from an “unskilled liability” to a colonization of gendered social norms, for the purpose of labor, like caring or secretarial work. As Leopoldina Fortunati describes in *The Arcane of Reproduction*, “the capacity to produce has been primarily developed in the male worker, while the capacity to reproduce has been primarily developed in female workers.”<sup>3</sup> Labor under capitalism, as Fortunati points out, “liberated” the male worker to freely subordinate himself to capital, but for the female worker, labor was also a means of subordination to housewifery or to feminized waged reproductive labor. Now we see this legacy playing out in the development of feminized career positions like the nurse, the direct care worker, the administrative assistant, the fast food worker, etc: a life eternally tied to the reproduction of others, and the destruction of self.

As reproductive labor moves from private to public, unwaged to waged, it is also subject to new forms of discipline and capitalist attack. Mariarosa Dalla Costa’s “Capitalism and Reproduction”<sup>4</sup> describes the destructive tension between the productive and reproductive lives of women workers who are caught in the undertow of the devalorization of labor since the 1970s. Dalla Costa comments:

Currently, the major financial agencies, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, have undertaken the task of re-drawing the boundaries of welfare and economic policies as a whole in both the advanced and the developing countries.

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3 Leopoldina Fortunati (1995). *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*. London: Automeia, 13.

4 Mariarosa Dalla Costa. “Capitalism and Reproduction.” Toyko. April 8 1994. Women’s Unpaid Labour and the World System, organised by the Japan Foundation “European Women’s Study Tour for Environmental Issues.”



(The economic, social welfare and social insurance measures recently introduced in Italy correspond precisely to the various ‘structural adjustment’ plans being applied in many Third World countries.) The result is that increasingly large sectors of the world’s population are destined to extinction because they are believed to be redundant or inappropriate to the valorisation requirements of capital.

This is the story of gender in capitalism: within every crisis, the sexual division of labor gets reconfigured in order to serve as a lucrative tool for the continuance of capitalism. As capitalism continues to expand, it condemns the social relationships once deemed necessary to obsolescence and begins to shed them off violently. Capitalism’s violence against women, in the shape of austerity, is part of the process that marks the historical failure of Keynesian economics. Capitalism has turned inwards, on those who keep production and reproduction going, intensifying the violent appropriation of their labor as a means of averting its own destruction.

As Fortunati’s title suggests, reproduction happens as if it is magic, secret technology, which remains “hidden.” But this is the magic trick of capitalism, the magic of harnessing and institutionalizing reproductive labor and the handsome magician that performs it: the woman worker. This trick must be revealed for what it is and destroyed. But not all forms of reproduction are hidden; reproduction occurs in the form of both waged and unwaged production. Capital is currently reducing the size of the sphere of waged social reproduction, and is thus contributing to the non-reproduction of the class. Non-reproduction of the class can take the form of hospital closures and wage squeezes, and occurs very publicly. This contraction of the waged, public, unhidden form of reproductive labor leads to the intensification of the hidden, unwaged form. As the public waged reproductive sphere strains to meet the needs of the class, the unwaged private sphere is forced to take on the extra burden.

### **Women and Labor in a Post 1970s & Post 2008 Recession Era**

The dire labor market of both the post-1970s and post-2008 crisis has

reconfigured the reproductive duties that were once located in private sectors, like the home, and has pushed them into the public sphere. Reproductive duties like elder care, food preparation, and domestic care are not new to the labor market, but these fields have seen massive serious growth while also becoming increasingly precarious, in a process that began in the 1970s and accelerated in the wake of the 2008 recession. The result is a new, expanded low-wage workforce disproportionately composed of women of color. I examine the conditions of this workforce in both paid domestic work and the fast food industry.

Sectors of industry that are vital to the reproduction of individuals, like medical or fast food, are highly feminized labor. One constant in the reconfiguration of reproductive work from private to public is the heavy appearance of women of color, particularly Black women. Black women once made up 75% of domestic workers, but in the 1970s they largely moved into the health and food preparation industries. Jobs have changed over a generation or two, but exploitation, like the exploitation of all workers, haunts the Black woman in industry. The great irony for Black women workers is that we struggle to escape our mother's fate of being a reproductive worker, only to find ourselves in positions that require us to "care about your job," and be eternally grateful because "at least you have a job," all while acting as "wife" "friend" and "confidant" to a boss that pays you a shit wage as an "administrative assistant," "case manager," or "direct care worker" where you still have to pretend that you care about others.

In the domestic work sector, 95% of workers identify as women, and consist mostly of Black and Brown immigrant women hailing from the Caribbean and Central America.<sup>5</sup> This population largely consists of older women who are the primary (unpaid) caregivers of their families, while also being paid care workers. Between 40-46% of domestic workers are required to work hours outside of their estimated hours of work, and another 56-77% of domestic workers are forced to work when injured or sick. The strenuous hours of work for a domestic worker leads to a life that constantly revolves around reproduction — both inside the home as unwaged labor and outside the home as paid care labor. Living as both a stressed care worker in the home and

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5 Linda Burnham & Nik Theodore. "Home Economics: The Invisible and Unregulated, World of Domestic Work" (2012) New York, NY: National Domestic Workers Alliance, 11.

an overworked care worker at one's job creates a conflictual relationship to this vexed emotion known as "care." What does it mean to care when your labor power is being exploited, when you are susceptible to sexual, emotional, and mental violence on the job, or in conflict about the emotions you experience for the children you care for, feeling both compassion and resentment all at once? This is what it is to experience work as both a worker and a woman. To care as a domestic worker is not simply a representation of how you work, but of how people view your moral character as a woman.

The food industry has also become heavily feminized in this ongoing reconfiguration of the labor market. Young proletarian women usually fill these new roles of being the "housewives of the labor kitchen." Women make up two-thirds of fast food workers, averaging between 28-32 years in age, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Fast food workers occupy an interesting space within the working class because they mass reproduce other workers on a different level that is much more effective than the house or kitchen could dare to be. Many studies about food consumption directly point to fast food being the food most widely consumed by workers. The working day has dramatically lengthened over the past decade, with most adults spending 8-12 hours a day at work; this longer work day affects other domains of their lives, including self-care behavior and physical health. Food consumption in the home has decreased from 10.2% to 6.6%.<sup>6</sup> Capitalism has institutionalized the essential ingredient of reproduction—food—which is a necessity if its labor stock is not to die.

In summary, women of color dominate low wage reproductive industries in the United States. They dominate both domestic work in the homes of the middle class and the fast food industry that produces prepared food to the working class. At the same time, most of these reproductive industry workers struggle to reproduce their own lives. As Dalla Costa notes, "Reproduction is crushed by the general intensification of labour, by the overextension of the working day, amidst cuts in resources whereby the lack of waged work becomes a stress-laden work of looking for legal and/or illegal employment, added to

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6 J. J. Putnam & J. E. Allshouse. "Food Consumption, Prices, and Expenditures, 1970-97." Food and Rural Economics Division, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. Statistical Bulletin No. 965, April 1999.

the laborious work of reproduction.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Destruction of the State-Funded Reproduction of the Class**

As the crisis of fictitious capital has mutated into a crisis of state expenditure, the crisis has been felt most acutely among social service providers (social service case managers, nurses, direct care workers and administrative assistants) and the client base that depends on them, both of which are majority women. In the U.S., the austerity cuts have come in the form of the sequester, a series of budget cuts in public sector services which began in early 2013. Women workers are most vulnerable to this. The sequester puts the brunt of the crisis onto the backs of workers via furloughs, which force workers to take an unpaid leave of absence at the discretion of their bosses, and hiring freezes, which force employed staff to work extra hours and take on a higher caseload, but for the same amount of money. The furlough was enacted on March 1, 2013, but didn’t actually take place in most workplaces until July 2013. In “The Sequester Starts To Show,” on the *New York Times* blog *Economix*, Anne Lowrey describes the effects: “Federal employment had been on a downward trend since the start of 2011, with the government shedding about 3,000 or 4,000 positions a month through February. Then sequestration hit on March 1. And in the last three months, the federal workforce has shrunk by about 45,000 positions, including 14,000 in May alone. In part, that is because federal offices have gone on hiring freezes and taken other steps to wrench down their spending.”

This shedding of unproductive labor puts a severe strain of state-funded social reproduction, leaving both service providers and the people previously receiving services in the dust. Service providers see up to 11% of their emergency benefits per year (like unemployment benefits) evaporate, 20% pay cuts, forced time off without pay, increasingly demanding workloads, frozen pay for the next three years, and they are forced to pay up to 1.2% of their own retirement fund. For clients, it means services getting cut — food stamps, cash assis-

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7 Dalla Costa. “Capitalism and Reproduction.”

tance, child care, and programs like Head Start<sup>8</sup>, which affects 2,300 children and their working parents.

The unions have been inert in the face of the attack, choosing to co-manage the austerity instead of fighting back. Unions have brokered conservative demands, which are decided upon by the heads of departments and not by the employees themselves. They encourage scabbing from older employees, as with the case of The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), which agreed not only to have its senior employees accept the deal to pay for 1.2% of their own retirement, and the pay freeze, but also to put more of the burden on future hires, in the form of a 2.3% pay cut.

These furloughs, pay freezes and hiring freezes have decreased the amount of reproductive services being performed within the public sector since 2008. The public sector can no longer reproduce the class as effectively as it did previously, and that reproduction must now become more and more the responsibility of the private sphere of the home (again). For example, individuals in need of daily intensive care who previously would have received care at state subsidized outpatient clinic are now taken care of by family members at home. The reconfiguration of waged reproductive work, the intensification of this work, and the austerity cuts will lead to ruptures. Whether that rupture will be a revolutionary process or a counterrevolutionary process has yet to be seen.

### **“Tearing at The Seams”: Austerity Leads to Ruptures**

The cuts in social services impose the violence of austerity upon the female workforce and the mostly female client base. Many women and the families they support are feeling the aches of the contraction of capitalism. Many ruptures have occurred since the 2008 recession and have shown just how destructive this process of capital contraction has been.

The ruling class has told us that we are the ones who created the recession. We “took out too many loans,” and that is why we acquired

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<sup>8</sup> The Head Start Program is a program of the US Department of Health and Human Services that provides early childhood education, health, nutrition, and parent involvement services to low-income children and their families.

“good debt” in the form of student loans, or we “got sick without insurance” and that is why we have so many medical bills, or we “got pregnant at the wrong time,” or we “use too many social services and abuse them,” and that is why we are in this economic mess in the first place. This is all false. These are all lies. This crisis was not begotten by those who do not have access to capital. It has been caused by capital’s attempts to overcome its own contradictions by relying on fictitious capital. But we are told that we created this crisis, and we internalize it in the most intimate way, in the spaces where we reproduce ourselves and others.

On December 6th, 2011 in San Antonio, TX., a woman desperate to feed herself and her two children, who for months had been trying to receive food stamps, killed herself and shot her two children after being denied food stamps repeatedly. On October 25, 2013 the police were called to a residence on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Yoselyn Ortega was found with a wound on her neck from a suicide attempt, along with two children she cared for, dead, that she murdered. These acts of violence upon those that she cared for brutally echo forms of violence that occur routinely in capitalism. They are similar to what we see in nursing homes, when patients are abused by caretakers, and to what we see in schools, when children are belittled and dehumanized by their teachers. These are expressions of the violence initiated by capital and the imposition of capitalist labor relations.

These are tragic events, but from a broader perspective such acts of violence are a necessary aspect of life under contemporary capitalism. These events are, in a very vulgar sense, future labor power being devoured due to the limitations put on reproduction during this crisis. Although there is much to distinguish the current moment from the era of U.S. slavery, such acts do recall similar occurrences during that earlier period. For instance, in 1856, Margaret Garner killed her own daughter to prevent her child from becoming a slave. We must grapple with the fact that, under capitalism in the U.S., mothers kill their young because they know that maybe death is more bearable than life under capital. And of course, if we don’t devour our own, capital will do it for us, in the form of juvenile detention centers, subpar schools, and nursing homes.

Due to the currently ongoing reorganization of reproductive labor, security/state apparatuses are needed to contain potentially unruly workers. Loïc Wacquant's *Punishing the Poor* discusses the state's need to police and incarcerate its population, stating: "In the era of fragmented and unstable labor, the regulation of the lower classes no longer involves the sole arm, maternal and supportive, of the social-welfare state, but implicates also that, virile and stern, of the penal state. And why the fight against crime serves as both screen and counterpart to the new social question that is the generalization of insecure work and its impact on the life spaces and strategies of the urban proletariat." Michelle Alexander also argues in *The New Jim Crow* that "Mass incarceration in the United States, had, in fact, emerged as a stunningly comprehensive and well-disguised system of racialized social control that functions in a manner strikingly similar to Jim Crow."<sup>9</sup>

Bodies are being policed, as the growing sexual division expands and creates more labor that relies on socialized gender performance, and along with it, what it means to be a woman or a "feminized body." Events like Kyra Kruz's death, Cee Cee McDonald's self defense, and the serial killings of Black women in Cleveland, are directly connected to nurses' struggles surrounding mergers, like in New York City between St. Luke's Hospital, Mount Sinai, and Beth Israel, where thousands of women stand to lose their jobs. These events are related because they all reveal a brutal fact: at the general social level, women's lives and labor are massively devalued. The current moment demands that discipline be administered in the social and political spheres of life, for the sake of stability.

The U.S. labor market constantly disciplines the working class woman, by threatening her with the loss of her livelihood (which might support an entire household), and alienation at work. The threat of brutal, humiliating death, or a criminalized, precarious life is ever-present for the working class woman and for all those who are non-compliant to strict gender behaviors and norms in social spaces. These forms of discipline alienate the woman worker from her own body, turning it into her enemy and also into a tool for capital accumulation. This represents a continuity with the era of primitive accumulation in

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9 Michelle Alexander. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York, NY: The New Press (2010), 4.

Europe, in which the witch hunts were required to destroy women's power in order to establish capitalist social relations. It is part of a history of ongoing accumulation by dispossession.

Ruptures so far have been contained at great expense. The violence that we face daily on our way to work, during work, on our way home, and in our home has been internalized and neutralized. These feelings of rage are often funneled into cultural criticisms or actions that try to challenge our role as women in this period of crisis. We are desperate, searching for somewhere to place our rage.

### Conclusion

The seams of the economic crisis are bursting. Reproductive labor has been institutionalized on a massive scale, to a point where the line increasingly becomes skewed between "client," "provider," "caregiver," and "care receiver." Many women move from being a nanny and not making enough money, to having to receive food stamps, to becoming a care recipient, to carrying out exhaustive unwaged reproductive work in their homes in order to nourish and sustain themselves and others. This leads to desperation, and inevitably ruptures emerge. These ruptures have revolutionary potential to change our relationship to work, and hopefully, to destroy work entirely.

A mass movement with an analysis of what is happening in the U.S. today must endeavor to destroy what it means to be a "woman" in the midst of the current recession, not to laud and valorize it. How do we overthrow capitalism, so that women no longer perform labor in isolation and humiliation? These questions must guide our tactics, strategies and demands. The following struggles are currently being waged across the country and should be escalated wherever possible:

- An attack on unions that diminish and stifle the self-activity of rank and file workers. The union's role in capitalism is as a mediator between workers and bosses, and unions will always side with the bosses in order to preserve their own existence.
- A struggle by domestic workers for control over the wages and hours they work, for a separation of private life from work life, and



for the right to refuse care to children or the elderly.

- Fast food workers have been striking, and hopefully will call for a mass strike, to cripple the exploitative economies that survive off their stolen labor.

- Nurses and waged care workers are demanding an end to short staffing, hospital closures, mergers and increased patient loads, while also attempting to unite with their patients to fight against the exploitative health industry that destroys both the worker and the client.

- Public sector workers are demanding free benefits for all care recipients, including the workers themselves. Social programs make up for the lack of actual wages, which workers need to reproduce themselves under capitalism.

The woman worker is made to live in a state of simultaneous work and “care”: both her productivity and reproductivity depend upon this simultaneity. There will be no commoning but the communing of our suffering and pain at the hands of capital. If we’re to overcome this crisis on our own terms, it is in order to ultimately destroy capital and its social relationship to gender. As women workers, we must organize within the class, as the class, to achieve an anarchist and communist feminist revolution. If the fate of capitalism rests on the destruction of the feminized proletariat, then now is the time to prepare for our coming insurrection. Then, there will be no commoning but the communing of our wrath and liberation.



# the gospel according to michelle

*michelle*

1:1

they will come for your hair first.  
the braids will be too close to the scalp,  
make you feel like you're always  
trying to uproot your own self.

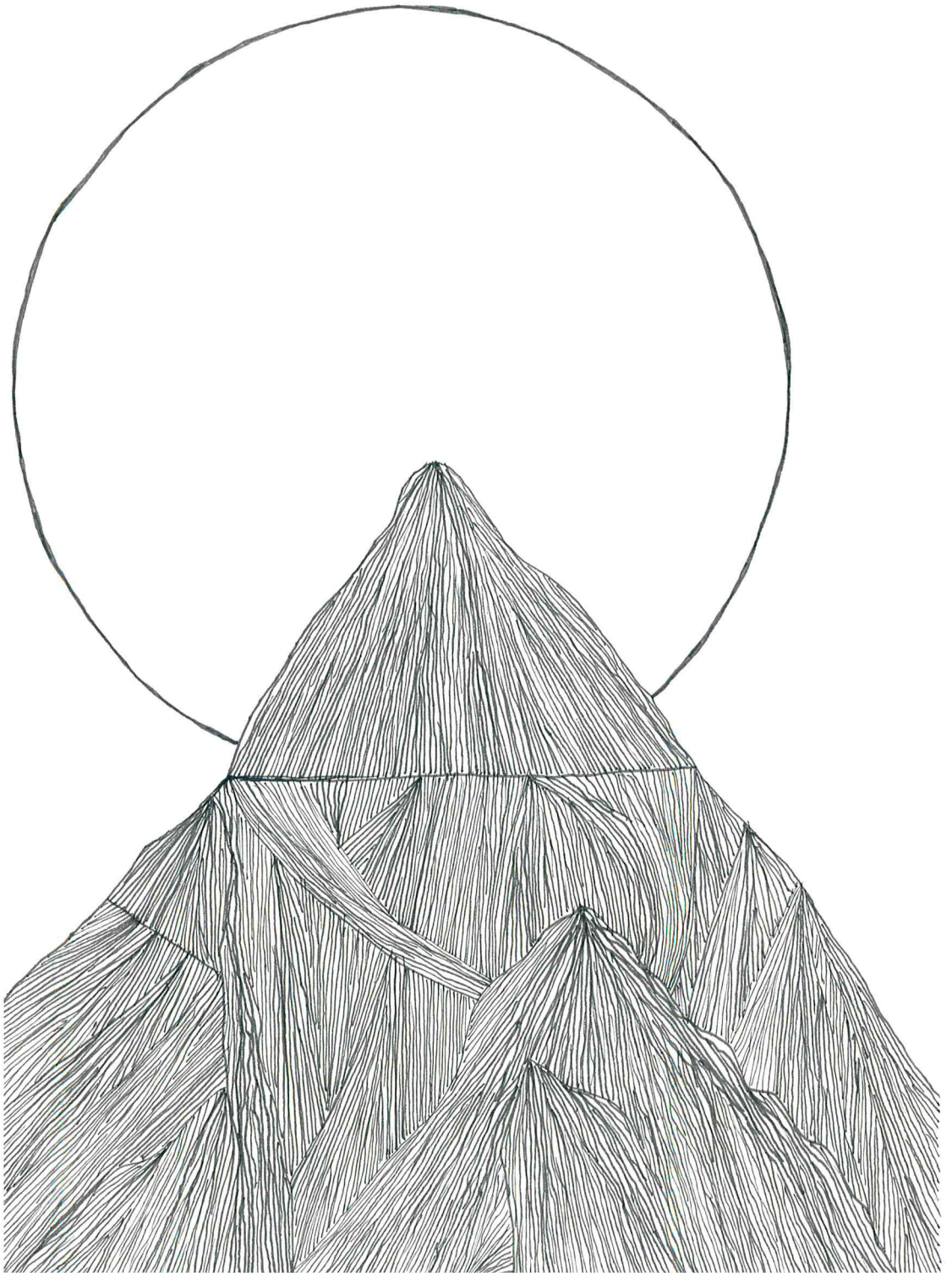
1:2

then it will be your mouth.  
they'll tell you not to talk.  
then they'll tell you to smile.  
then they'll tell you that  
language was just a thing men invented  
so you could tell them yes in all the ways—  
that “no” was a word you stole.  
they want it back.

1:3

last, they will come for your hands.  
they will offer you buckets  
and then fill them with stones so heavy,  
your wrists beg for the break.







# love poems

*Paula Cobo-Guevara*

\*\*\*

We arrived in a country with no language. Lawless we created this fantasy. Years ago we were given the obsolete cartographies with which we crossed the desert. Mirages are possible in humble towns. Lawless women walked through this field.

I inserted *Veinte poemas de amor* by Pablo Neruda through my white male European 16 year old boyfriend's asshole. Not an artistic project. Not a representation or a mere aesthetic phenomena of the type.

(Some found freedom in their own servitude). This event-act wanted to enable modernity, a feminist modernity in a space of the future present. Feminism almost never happened in the south, the struggles from the Seventies were hardly present. Little symbolic adjustments

into our dystopic HISTORY. Equality is a juridical principle & sameness is theological.

To put a poem into his asshole as a performative gesture is not a reversal principle. Only a mirage of servitude, a symbolic appeal for difference. Hegel is the king. *Let's spit on him.*

She threw to the mistress of education a jar full of water. AGUA DEL RÍO CON NOMBRE DE INDIO. She said to the mistress: WASH OUT THE CRIME OF YOUR FACE, mother. Música Sepúlveda is the non-militant subject who decided not to reconcile differences but to make them visible. This event was the advent of the Chilean student movement. SHE RIPPED THE DOOR AND WALKED out of her mother's house. There are no horses available for precarious girls, so she had to walk through the ruined landscape in the desert. Música didn't know what she was fighting for, but she knew what she was fighting against. Her act-event was political. The grandmothers are the wives of the left wing communists, those guys who lived under the spirit of Mao Tse-Tung and the form of Ezra Pound. Cells are composed of three comrades. Sometimes they don't know with whom they belong in the same cell. Oedipal triangle. Love triangle. Hegel is Oedipal. The working class kids from the United Kingdom created Punk. Ulrike Meinhof said anti-communism was the new religion replacing German anti-semitism. She went from socio-political activism to armed struggle in only a couple of months. *Now we had to break through to the other side.* Ritornello as a teenage girl embedded in the body of a giant. Holy Spirit. ONLY FUCKING ESSENTIALIST ritornellos of the concept of wo-men. Hallucinatory enterprise of the South American left wing bourgeois intellectual and the armed revolutionaries. Nostalgia for something that never quite happened completely. My grandmother, like Ulrike Meinhof, was that *gurl* who broke through the looking-glass. She was declared a terrorist, the Most Dangerous Woman in Perú. She became a militant of Sendero Luminoso. *She was the woman that put the head in the gas-oven.*

*Oh silence! I like your silence, woman... I'll spell my male seed into your rose garden.*



I SPEAK American English as my second mother tongue, my Chilean migrant mother's second language, as a deterritorialization of "my own."

*i.*

I was called a radical anti-American that day. Drove to the West Hollywood public library. Paid 10 dollars for parking the car. Two big flags in the room: Republic of California & United States of America. A lawyer-activist from ACT UP! Los Angeles. The guy was talking on the necessity of voting in the forthcoming elections. Electoral politics were in fact the only way of enabling democracy. The conference was televised on the public county TV. TV lights all over the room, microphones and a TV camera broadcasting the event.

Toilet. Makeup. I had a visual encounter with this 40ish-something woman. She was painting her lips red. We stared at each other. I was also painting my mouth on, a dark brown color. I colored up my lips just in case I could get laid with someone. She looked at me with a certain distance. I noticed that she felt somehow old, she wasn't really old, but she had this look of a conservative female-Kennedy. She was a Historian. She was the second speaker at this conference. She, as well as the ACT UP! guy, were fervently speaking on electoral politics. On how women's rights had been systematically dismantled by the Republican Party. Blah Blah Blah the things we all know. Cuts on Planned Parenthood. Abortion. The pill. The light from the ceiling made my eyes red. They matched the red Kennedy's lips. I had a red scarf covering my neck. Black garment. Uncomfortable bodies & asses lying on plastic chairs. A self-broadcast was being televised in the room. Endogamic mirrors. Novellas on "women's problems." That's the problem with makeup.

He talked about the West Hollywood struggles on gay rights during the 1970s and 80s. He said that without women's struggles from the 70s, the gay movement would have not been possible. Women were on the streets organizing, meanwhile *gays continued to dance and fuck to the rhythm of Donna Summer*. He said it was extremely difficult to orga-

nize with women because it was impossible to agree about the structure of the assembly room, assemblies were impossible rooms, the impossibility of an impossible architecture. *They were always disagreeing on how to place the chairs.*

At one point I asked for the microphone and naively uttered: *Don't you think that all you've been talking about is subsumed under a "class war?"* Because we all know that if you are "gay" and have the money you can *freely* choose to take an American Airlines flight to one of the nearest colonies of the United States of America, get married and fuck with a collection of dildos. But what about if you need to make decisions out of necessities? If you are a gay illegal alien, you'll be probably forced to put on an act of heteronormativity because you'll need the papers. How the fuck can electoral politics manifest in your everyday life, if you cannot even vote?

He replied that in the United States of America the class question was not on the discussion table. He said class war issue is a rhetoric coming from European or Latin American struggles. That my statement attempted to destroy all conception of what AMERICA REALLY IS. That probably due to the fact that I was not an American but a foreigner I was accustomed to that rhetoric. IN GOD WE TRUST.

## ii.

I had to buy a Honda to move around Los Angeles. I never considered having a car before. A 1989 model repainted in a baby-shit-brownish color for \$1,000, I was lucky my mother could give me the money since I'm precarious. I paid cash. My first drive was to visit a friend since we were flirting. I told her that I had been reading *The Condition of Modern Man* with a dildo between my legs. She immediately went into her room and brought out *I Love Dick*. She read the following lines:

C and S are having dinner with D... Over dinner the two men discuss recent trends in postmodern critical theory, and C, who is no intellectual, notices D continual eye contact with her. D's attention makes her feel powerful... Later the check comes she takes her Dinners Club Card. "Please" she says. "Let me pay"... D invites them both to spend the night at his home... C wants to separate herself from her couples... C and S maintain their intimacy via deconstruction: i.e. they tell each other everything. The morning after, C tells S how she experienced a conceptual fuck with D...

Hearing this excerpt made me think about the subjectification of the liberal body becoming a sex experiment of a delusional transgression, and how the discourse of the hippie left neutralizes bodies coming together as a political act. Like a teenage life passage, similar to the 19th century novel, this excerpt only proves itself as an affirmation of the bourgeois categories regarding sex, coupleness and fuckness. What could be the point in writing a book saying that you are planning to fuck a reactionary who comments on the trends of critical theory?

*iii.*

He was in the toilet washing his dick and hands. We were in a suite of the Bauen Hotel in Buenos Aires. His tongue passed through my entire clitoris while I was writing. Cat lips licking milk from a plate. I have a dog chain on my neck. The workers had taken the hotel. A self-managed occupied hotel. Once upon a time a neoliberal collapse had happened in this country. The owners escaped their businesses. Hotel, factories, publishing houses. Workers self-organized their labor force. They still run the hotel by themselves. Some cleaning ladies and elevator managers wear piercings and tattoos. The soap bar logo reads Hotel Bauen. The Paris Commune was against the bourgeois state. A new form of modern self-government. The means of production were limited to the workers and their cooperatives. Once upon a time there were barricades in Buenos Aires. We have to make both devices, barricades and dicks, unfold, stop them working in a binary way. Binarisms are wrong for a politics of autonomy. Unfold all devices: cultural and technical, flesh and objects. The means of desire production must be under our own sovereignty. Sex workers and communards. There was a trans women's meeting at the Hotel Bauen, Simón Bolívar conference room. One night he met someone in the elevator. They were staying on the same floor, rooms side by side. They immediately decided to walk together into one room. He sucked her dick. Later they fucked each other. Finally they slept together. They remain in contact sometimes. Art for art's sake is the same as fucking for the sake of fucking. Just an ideological mechanism. Not the reproduction of pornography. Not the reproduction of boygirlfriendness. Not the reproduction of capitalist desire. The witches and the communards were executed. The executioners dissociate the head from the rest of the body. Fucking for the sake of fucking is an act of dissociating the head from the rest of the body. The body as objectified thing. Some bodies want to be Greek headless sculptures. But other bodies try to become soft barricades. Sometimes mirages happen. Sometimes we inhabit mirrored rooms.

## iv.

The bodies walked fluidly through the bridge. A galactic wave of bodies. Bodies occupied the freeway. Freeways are like monuments in this country. National monuments of this nation-state: the United States of America. Freeways unite us. The only commons. Vehicles are like individuals. They flow along the gridded cement. *And then I left the academy to be a roadie for a metal band.* The multitude blocked the possibility of the individual form in the preformatted public space of the freeway. Wells Fargo on fire. Dismantled cars. *Occupy Oakland protesters are blocking the entrance to the port. They have built a chain-link fence and placed dumpsters at the entrance to the port at 3rd and Adeline streets.* Black-blockers & punk girls & families. Driver's licenses as ID cards. Streets, neighborhoods, houses, doorways. Homeless are the new flâneurs of the city. Not as an activity for leisure but in order not to get imprisoned since the law prohibits lying down in the street. San Francisco, November 2011. The new flâneurs, post-situationsists, and radicals are the new communards. That morning she walked through the city, she left her home. She didn't want to go to school that day. She was 14. Her name was Música. In Los Angeles they were buying debt. Slaves from the Americas had to buy their own freedom by paying a debt. A few punk-rocker girls are in prison for playing their music inside of a church in what used to be called the Soviet Union. They used masks like the Zapatistas. Old rituals like burning witches are back. Class riots are back. Primitive accumulation is back. *You are not a loan.* She decided to burn all of the Seventies militant music records. A personal event of insurrection. A barricade shouldn't be merely an object that divides a situation in two. *Long Live the Oakland Commune!*

## V.

The girls managed to place all of the metallic chairs throughout the fence that surrounded the liceo de niñas. Door handles were locked out by metallic sticks, steel wire and white linen banners covered the precariously armored architecture, the harsh winter breeze made the pale linens painted with black texts shake as if this same invention was moving forward in a static space. The large cement corridor illuminated by white neon lights could be seen from the outside through the cracked window glasses. Two girls were kissing each other, they were leaning against the glass wall. At the moment they realized someone was staring at them, one of the girls sucked with her tongue a fragment of the stained glass wall, her friend went on with the work of carrying the tables from one side of the building to the other. The public school had been occupied for almost two months then. The mother was standing on one side of the street watching the landscape of steel chairs and horizontal banners. She suddenly ran across the street towards the occupation, as if her body could not resist that image that suffocated her subjectivity as a working class mother from the port of Valparaíso. Pushing and shouting, she embedded her body and voice into the horizontal teenage bodies, which laid behind the precarious structure; this was the first boundary between an inside and an outside. The decision-making committee agreed to let the mother into the occupation. It was the first time someone from the “outside” had been allowed to enter. The young girl was dragged by her mother from her neck and ponytail, she was pulled along the surface of the ceramic floor onto the harsh cement of the street, slapped on her increasingly blushed cheeks, probably both from shame and anger. She resisted her mother’s cracked hands over her head. Bit and clawed at her progenitors, 40 year old prematurely aged bodies. Das Ah Riot. Later that night in July 2011 I walked through the hills just above the occupied secondary school. All the hills in Valparaíso were illuminated by the 20 watt yellow bulbs lightening the working class family homes that literally hang all over the hills, composing the image of a magnificent Christmas tree.

Afterthoughts

These series of *Love Poems* seek to counter the phallic domination of objectified women through the poetic sexual sublimation of romantic love, which is one of the crucial historical modes of centering the masculine subject in classical literature. The “I” in these poems, on the other hand, is not a specular, equally centered essentialized woman, although the democratic conception of love poetry in Adrienne Rich is far more desirable than the modernist male violence of Pablo Neruda. It is a de-centered “becoming” subject, since these poems are in fact the description of re-subjectification processes. Two are the methodologies behind these writings, displayed as experimental subjectifying devices. First, performativity: the scenes described are the result of the body operating in different social — intimate, public, academic, political — scenarios. Second, relationality: poetry here is not the expression of a singular voice, but the result of a diversity of social interactions in which the vibrancy of the body is activated through the articulation of sexual intercourse, political confrontation, social activism, intellectual discussion. Sex is not sublimated in romantic love here.

“We arrived in a country with no language...” I translated — and therefore modified — one of Adrienne Rich’s *Twenty-One Love Poems* (1977) into English from the Spanish edition, without checking the English original. I got American English language — as well as my US citizenship — as a paradoxical second mother tongue from my mother, a Chilean migrant in the US in the early 90s.

*Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* (1924) was written by Pablo Neruda. He is an untouchable symbol for the Chilean and Latin American Left, and is considered one of the highest expressions of Modernist literature in Spanish language. Through their rhetorical sublimation of the objectified woman, his love poems are also an epitome of misogynist, reactionary romantic love. “I like you when you are quiet because it is as though you were absent.” The first image of my *Love Poems* subverts the opening image of macho-like, aggressive phallic penetration of the naturalized female body in Neruda’s first verses. “Body of a woman, white hills, white thighs / you look like a world, lying in surrender. / My rough peasant’s body digs into you / and makes the

son leap from the depth of the earth.” Rich’s book of poems can be considered a non-explicit, 70s lesbian feminist response to Neruda.

A Deleuzian image: in order to go through a re-subjectification process, one’s skin has to “fold” so that one’s self enters into touch with an outside. According to Judith Butler, the activity of critique in Foucault means no longer expressing the point of view of an enlightened subject distanced from its object. It is a practice of transforming oneself in the process of critique, the critical art of self-modeling.

“Woman must not be defined in relation to man. This awareness is the foundation of both our struggle and our liberty...We spit on Hegel.” The feminist classic *Sputiamo su Hegel* was written in 1970 by the Italian collective Rivolta Femminile. “Difference Feminism” held in the 70s that the ontological difference of women with respect to men and their shared experience of historical oppression should lead them to organize politically beyond their differences, thus expressing the autonomy of the female labor, consciousness, creativity, body, and sexuality. A contradictory political as well as essentialist construction of “the women” as unified subject.

In 2008, a 14 year-old girl called Música Sepúlveda threw a jar of water on the face of Mónica Jiménez, then Minister of Education of the socialist administration of Michelle Bachellet, first female President in the history of the nation-state of Chile. Música, together with some friends who participated in the student movement, approached the Minister during an official public event. They questioned the Minister why the police forces were allowed to openly exercise violence on the students during their demonstrations. The Minister refused to enter into a dialogue. Thus Música’s response, which caused her public prosecution. Several times since 2006, public high school students in Chile have started uprisings for the democratization of education. Assemblies and occupied schools throughout the country served as devices for a radical political self-subjectification of the young students. Consciousness-raising processes on the conditions of life under the neoliberal policies that the Chilean democracy has inherited from the military dictatorship. After the right-wing military coup in 1973, Pinochet’s regime became an experimental ground for the economic doctrine of Milton Friedman and his peers, the so-called “Chicago Boys.”

Young Música Sepúlveda acted out that image of multiple non-reconciliation against neoliberal democracy incarnated in the body of a



woman politician. This has to be understood within the framework of the student struggles that had been increasing until the explosion of the university students in 2011. This later has become the wider Chilean social movement current. I have envisioned that the water splashed on the Minister's face could have been collected by Música from the river crossing the city of Santiago de Chile: Río Mapocho. Its name refers to the Mapuche people, the radical other of both European modernization and the modern nation-state of Chile. Like many indigenous peoples on the American continent, the Mapuche have suffered a continuous process of illegitimate expropriation and colonization of their territories, starting with the Spanish colonization and running through the declaration of an independent Chile two centuries ago. Colonization of the Mapuche people always went hand-in-hand with their genocide. They have nonetheless resisted for centuries.

The impressive high-rise, five-star Hotel Bauen, placed at the very administrative, commercial and touristic center of Buenos Aires, was built in 1976. It went into bankruptcy and was closed on December 28, 2001, right after the well-known Argentinian popular uprising on December 19-20. This uprising took place in the middle of the tremendous economic collapse provoked by the neoliberal policies implemented by the local governments and imposed by the IMF. The Hotel Bauen was immediately taken by its workers and put back to work, like many other companies around the country. Today, it works as a workers' cooperative, in continuous legal struggle for the buildings property, with a huge social support. The occupied factories and companies "under workers' control" in Argentina have been some of the most important and visible alternative responses to neoliberal policies, with symbols like Brukman in Buenos Aires and Zanón in Neuquén (the property of the latter has been recently granted to the workers' co-op). Apart from its usual functioning, the Hotel Bauen frequently hosts a diversity of social and political events. In 2008, the Red Lactrans (Red Latinoamérica y del Caribe de Personas Trans) held a several days meeting in which they declared their statutes as a network of organizations present in 17 countries. LGBT movements are becoming an increasingly significant social and political subject in most of Latin America, fighting for social respect, legal recognition and equal rights under extremely violent conditions of misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia.

*This poem was written in 2012.*



# NOT HANGING OUT

*coda wei*

I'm not hanging out with you  
ever again



# Betrayal

*Words to Fire Collective*

*Disclaimer:*

We're fucking sick of disclaimers. We resent having to provide apologies and justifications for our words before we even speak them. We're bitter about how specialized discussions of rape, sexual assault, and abuse have become. We feel insulted and embarrassed that we have to constantly point out that we aren't speaking on behalf of all survivors, as though that were even possible. Sure, we appreciate a well placed trigger warning. It's just good etiquette. But when fanatical attempts to avoid triggering each other serve as tools to relegate discussions of interpersonal violence to the margins where an illusion of safety can be guaranteed, well, then we start to get pissed. If we only speak of our oppression from the position of safety, we'll be forever silent. If

we can't learn to work through being triggered amongst friends and comrades, we'll be ill equipped to work through it in their absence. An atmosphere of nervousness permeates the discussion, and we confer to the advice of specialists partly out of fear of saying the wrong thing. But all we're talking about are our own experiences, a topic on which we are all experts. So we long for the day when we won't need to place ourselves under disclaimers, or any other banner for that matter.

But at the same time we recognize that we're not there yet. These topics are still so charged, and the support available still so sparse, that our words hold the tremendous potential to do harm. So in the meantime we must take care when we speak, so as to not become inadvertent allies of the forces we mean to oppose.

Some of the authors of this piece are survivors; others are reflecting on their own role as people who have been abusive in the past; but they all share a commitment to the struggle against a culture of rape. When we say "we," we are not referring to "survivors," or even to the authors, but to everyone who agrees with the statement made, and perhaps more broadly, to everyone who sees themselves a part of this struggle. There are surely survivors whose experiences will seemingly contradict the arguments made here. But of course the examples cited throughout this text are not meant to be exhaustive or all-encompassing. We do not see our own experiences as exemplary of the experiences of all survivors, or even most survivors. They do, however, provide examples of how rape culture has materialized in our own lives, particularly in anarchist social circles in North America.

We have chosen to use gender neutral language throughout. Of course the majority of survivors are women and people who don't conform to binary gender identities, whereas the majority of perpetrators are cisgender men. The neutrality of our language obscures the systemic nature of not only this, but also the way that interpersonal violence has consistently been a tool of colonial invasion, imperialist occupation, and the maintenance of white supremacy. It obscures the way in which organizing against interpersonal violence has historically been co-opted by white middle class feminists, leaving women of colour, poor women, queer and trans folk with less access to support resources. It is not our intention to depoliticize the nature of interper-

sonal violence with language that is gender neutral — certainly, when it comes to gender, we are not neutral! But having said that, we also wanted to recognize that people of all identities, from all walks of life, can be both survivors or perpetrators, or even both at the same time. We didn't want those whose experiences don't fit neatly into oppressive binaries to find themselves even further marginalized here.

It would seem that throughout the anarchist milieu, wherever you turn, there is a community being ravaged by rape, by sexual assault, and by abuse. These cycles are neither new nor unique to anarchists. At first glance it seems surprising that our communities find themselves at least as vulnerable as any other to interpersonal violence. After all, don't we begin from the starting point of opposition to domination, without which interpersonal violence could not exist? And yet, the one thing that ties these communities together — a supposed shared politics or political analysis — is often the weakest point in anarchist responses to interpersonal violence. Despite being a community which is explicitly political in nature, anarchists often depoliticize interpersonal violence and divorce it from its roots in systemic power. For instance, the need for good consent practices becomes confused with the belief that informing people about consent will transform our communities, as though rape were the result of ignorance and misinformation, rather than deeply entrenched structures of power. Strategies that anarchists have adopted, such as the accountability process, more often than not fail to address the interpersonal violence in our midst.

The failure of the accountability process to transform our communities is often viewed outside the context of that failure, without examining the broader social forces that contributed to it. This oversight is a result of the accountability process and also a precursor to it. The accountability process narrows our focus; it both confronts us with expansive systems of power while reassuring us that dealing with individual instances will deconstruct them. We speak of patriarchy, colonialism, heterosexism, but we deal only with a perpetrator. In our casual conversations, we agree that power concedes nothing without the threat of force; yet our attempts at accountability usually take the form of moral suasion, relying on liberal-bourgeois notions of choice: as if our choices were more than a calculated reaction to the material condi-

tions we find ourselves in. Of course a perpetrator chooses to pursue or reject accountability, but what makes this choice possible? What conditions fostered their feelings of entitlement over another person? It is these conditions that, when viewed from the terrain of struggle, must be recognized as what they are: enemy territory. It is from this realisation that we attempt to launch our attack.

The insistence that interpersonal violence is perpetuated by more than just the actual perpetrators is not meant to shift accountability away from those perpetrators. On the contrary, it's a recognition of the many factors that entitle them to sidestep accountability. A perpetrator who refuses accountability is often enabled by a similar social network. Such networks aren't only comprised of those who explicitly defend a perpetrator, but of all those who ensure the balance of power remains tipped in their favour. What this looks like in practical terms will vary. Silencing, repression, recuperation, or most often combinations of several of these methods are used against survivors and their struggle. The defining factor will always be what most effectively reproduces rape culture.

### SILENCING THE STRUGGLE

*"In the end, it won't be the words of our enemies we remember,  
but the silence of our friends."*

The term "silencing" has been popularized in our communities, but only with a limited definition. Calling a survivor a liar, conjuring their sexual experiences, deviancies, or style of dress to shift blame, or otherwise insinuating that they were "asking for it," are all behaviours most anarchists would frown on, though they rarely bother confronting them. This hypocrisy hints at a larger problem, revealed by a closer look at our conception of what is silencing. The aforementioned examples only apply to the survivor who has called out their perpetrator, or else talked openly about their experiences. But of course many survivors never get even this far.

So what silences them? Is it the other members of their affinity group, who maintain a false separation between the struggle against the state and the struggle against other systems of power (especially the



ones they benefit from)? Is it the roommates who never acknowledge fucked up dynamics for fear of triggering someone, as if an offer of support would be more triggering than total isolation? Is it the other show-goers who write off the struggle as petty, too personal, or mere “drama,” as if a survivor who struggles against their oppression is being dramatic? Is it the fellow collective member who regrets that they are “not in the place” to offer support, while still being in the place to hang out with a perpetrator on a regular basis? Is it the acquaintance who claims to be in no position to confront a perpetrator because they are not even friends, or is it the acquaintance who claims the same because they are? Is it the people who organized that event, the ones who say they know nothing about the situation, while doing everything in their power to make sure they never do? Is it the band mate who claims they can “see both sides,” or eschews sides altogether, as if this wasn’t a fucking war? We’ve even seen rape apologists turn survivor autonomy on its head, claiming that they’d received no explicit instructions from a survivor, so of course they had no choice but to carry on a completely uncritical friendship with their attacker! Perhaps it is not the silence of survivors, but of those around them, which is truly revealing. With no one to say otherwise, a survivor can only assume that they will be given the same treatment as every other survivor before them.

If we broaden our definition of silencing to mean everything that works to maintain silence, then we aren’t merely defining a few grossly insensitive remarks. Instead, what we’ve implicated is the totality of our culture.

Abuse, assault, a total lack of accountability — all are business as usual in the world as we know it. But normalcy is more effectively maintained through the complacency of masses than through the brutality of masters. While violence provides the foundation upon which rape culture reproduces itself, it also poses certain risks: that its shared experience can create bonds of solidarity, that lines of conflict will be drawn more clearly, that people will fight back. The process of normalisation seeks to undermine these risks by making violence invisible. The obvious apologists, the goons who say “slut” like it’s a bad thing and think the perpetrator is the victim, don’t do nearly as much to further normalisation as their more subtle accomplices, the ones who

maintain complete silence on the subject. These more sophisticated apologists share space with the perpetrator; they march alongside them at demonstrations and dance alongside them at parties, without ever uttering even a single word about interpersonal violence. When forced to speak on the subject, they sigh and say “it’s complicated.” They may even claim to be disgusted by the violence, though mostly they’re sad that you had to disrupt their event to confront it. They lament, “If only I had known!” while keeping their heads planted purposefully in the sand.

### UNLEASHING REPRESSION

This conspiracy of silence seeks not only to end a survivor’s struggle before it even begins, but also to provide the back drop for what will happen to the few survivors who refuse to be muzzled. For a survivor to speak openly of their experiences in such a climate can only be understood as an act of resistance, and as with all acts of resistance, repression is a likely outcome. This repression is more nuanced than the clubs of police officers or the guns of soldiers, though these too have been turned on survivors. The repressive forces are more likely to be mentally and emotionally devastating. The agents of such repression are not familiar to us through uniforms or badges, but as our supposed comrades and former friends. Many of us are accustomed to seeing only the police in this repressive role,<sup>1</sup> and of course they have their part to play in the reproduction of rape culture as well. But in our own radical communities, the state’s role in this reproduction seems downplayed. After all, there’s little point in the state expending the resources while so many self-described anarchists are willing to do the job for free.

Those who doubt the brutality of this internal repressive apparatus have likely never been on the receiving end. The “communities” that are so often turned to with the expectation of support are more often mobilized against the survivors on behalf of their perpetrators

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1 Amongst most anarchists, at least, the police are a faceless enemy. We don’t have to see them tuck their kids in at night, they don’t tell us jokes over beers, they do not confront us with the contradiction of their own humanity. This is not the case for those who are called out for assault or abuse within anarchist circles, a reality which many perpetrators use to their full advantage.

in a stunning counter attack. It's difficult to properly illustrate what so many survivors have had to endure at the hands of their supposed comrades, and speaking generally will never fully encompass all the complexities of a person's experiences; nevertheless, there are many patterns we can identify within the anarchist milieu, all of which faithfully reproduce the patterns of broader society.

One glaring example is the character assassination of the survivor. No aspect of their life is spared from scrutiny, all in search of any detail that can be used against them. These details, whether genuine or fabricated, are often used towards invalidating their experiences of violence and valorizing the perpetrator. Few will be so clumsy as to blatantly accuse a survivor of lying (though there are more self described anarchists willing to do this than even we care to admit). Instead, most will utilize any number of slight variations as a way of saying the same thing. Perhaps a survivor gave no clue of abuse as they endured it; perhaps they consented to certain sexual activity but not all of it; perhaps they felt the need to disclose certain experiences and withhold others; perhaps they needed time to process their trauma and only revealed it gradually; perhaps they have their own issues with power or boundaries. What's important is not the details themselves, but rather how those details can be twisted, taken out of context, or else used to undermine a survivor's credibility. Past histories, addictions, coping mechanisms, debts, insecurities, even a survivor's political identity are all fair game.<sup>2</sup> When this strategy is successful, survivors are villainized and their attackers are recast as the victims of lies and manipulation. But even if the apparent objective of discrediting a survivor in the eyes of community fails, the process itself can still be effective at forcing survivors out of that community. Knowing that simply walking into an anarchist space means that nearly everyone there has discussed your personal life at length creates a tremendous barrier, regardless of the conclusions people may have reached. Survivors may feel compelled to preempt this dynamic by engaging their critics. Often, this plays into demands

<sup>2</sup> This same process is often extended to a survivor's support network as well. In fact, focusing mainly on supporters sometimes allows the agents of repression to continue posturing as being supportive of the survivor, while at the same time sabotaging any genuine support. Such thinly veiled attacks, though possibly devastating to supporters, must still be understood primarily as attacks on the survivor, however indirect. In worst case scenarios, such attacks result in a degenerated conflict between the accomplices of Rape Culture and a support network, once again leaving the survivor sidelined and disempowered.

for “proof” or details of assaults or abuse. The re-traumatizing aspect of this is yet another further attack on the survivor, and often feeds rather than undermines the conflict.

As tensions grow, it begins to spill over into new arenas. Previously uninvolved parties who may not even know the survivor or perpetrator become caught up in the mounting bedlam, and organizing becomes disrupted. Of course, at this point normalisation has been broken, and the repressive apparatus no longer has anything to lose by not holding back. Anarchists who would otherwise scorn the politics of liberals now turn to their ideology for reinforcement: “These divisions are hurting us!” they cry. Of course, such divisions are never blamed on the perpetrator or their actions, but on the survivor for insisting that the trauma they’ve experienced cannot go unanswered. They are blamed for tearing the community apart and ultimately for “undermining the struggle.” The importance of this last point cannot be overemphasized. The previous dismissals of the broader community, which hinted that “the struggle” merely excludes survivors and their needs, are now clarified to reveal that in fact these struggles are diametrically opposed. To be perfectly clear, anarchists who feel their struggle is undermined by a survivor are in fact engaged in a struggle against survivors; they are active defenders of a culture of rape. They will often liken the survivor’s struggle against their perpetrator to a “witch hunt,” when they themselves share more in common with the executioners than with those who burn at the stake.

### **IF YOU CAN'T BEAT 'EM**

The various repressive measures described earlier can actually split the ranks of the more moderate rape apologists, undermining the common front against the survivor. At the same time, repressive measures are deemed necessary when the usual process of normalisation is broken. This points to one of the biggest contradictions within rape culture: that the very violence it relies on to reproduce itself also reveals its true nature for all to see. This contradiction is resolved by recuperative forces within radical communities which seek to co-opt support for survivors and redirect it against them. Many will claim to support

a survivor while actually undermining their autonomy. This is usually done by limiting the possible scope of a survivor's response to exclude anything that might further upset the social peace. These false supporters work to uphold the image of a supportive community, and in the process prevent any truly critical engagement with community. Their tools are the language and organizing frameworks which were forged by survivors and their supporters, appropriated for the purpose of disempowerment and twisted to usurp the survivor's struggle.

Initially, the creation of new words and frameworks was necessary, as the language for survivors to even talk about their experiences did not exist. Unfortunately, language is easily recuperated, and we can now see the inevitable limitations of relying on it so heavily. Once upon a time, radicals championed the use of the word "perpetrator" as an attempt to sidestep the stigma of harsher words. The still fairly prevalent framework of transformative justice emphasises a person's ability to change. "Rapist" or "abuser" hardly reflected that framework, and many felt it kept the rapists and abusers locked in those roles — just as referring to survivors as "victims" potentially kept them locked in a moment of subjugation rather than centering their strength and perseverance. And now we are faced with a new wave of anti-violence activists, who lament the stigmatized nature of the word perpetrator, and advocate the even more watered-down term "person who causes harm." Perhaps it's time to realize that if a perpetrator's capacity to change is not broadly recognized, that is a result of their own actions more so than the words we use to describe them. This is not to say that we should not choose our words strategically, or that we should not use them with strong intention, but only that our apparent obsession with language has serious drawbacks. At best, it leaves us caught in a never-ending loop to find the right words rather than addressing our more meaningful shortcomings. At worst, it preserves the power dynamics of rape culture by attributing fault to survivors and their supporters rather than to perpetrators and their apologists.

This bizarre reversal, where a perpetrator's refusal of accountability is viewed at least partially as a result of flaws in a survivor's response, is a common pattern seized upon by the recuperative forces of rape culture. Countless zines and pamphlets list strategies towards account-

ability which seek to avoid making a perpetrator defensive, which are perhaps better understood as strategies towards accountability which seek to accommodate a perpetrator's defensiveness. The only thing such an approach avoids is a recognition that being defensive is not something forced on a person by others, but a reactionary response which must be realized and worked through for any genuine accountability to be possible. Many will use the term defensive without ever asking: in defense of what?

Of course, many survivors who anticipate defensiveness and the repressive apparatus activated by it have made good use of such strategies in the short term to initiate dialogue, or else to make demands concerning immediate safety without the goal of transforming a perpetrator. We have no interest in questioning the choices survivors make, or discouraging the dissemination of potentially useful strategies. Rather, our concern is when the accommodation of defensiveness — and the strategies implied by it — become a tool of false supporters to limit the possible choices available to survivors, or to criticize the choices a survivor has made. Discussions of how to call out a perpetrator rarely centre on the survivor's needs, and “avoiding defensiveness” provides the pretense to shift the discussion back to the needs of the perpetrator. Once a perpetrator has been called out, a similar framework is used to undermine support for a survivor. The false supporters endlessly reassure us that they are not angry that a perpetrator was called out, it's only *the way* they were called out. The fact that a survivor would speak openly about their experiences is seemingly taken as more violent and controversial than the violence of those experiences themselves, which warrant very little discussion by comparison. That a survivor's public response might reflect their needs does not seem to occur to the false supporters, as they are so preoccupied with their need to preserve a façade of cohesion. The false supporters' insistence on denouncing the resistance of survivors and claiming to despise rape culture while simultaneously diminishing any fight against it, is reminiscent of the arguments of those who claim to agree with the grievances of protesters while condemning their actions. The liberal complains that intensity and ferocity sabotage the struggle; the anarchist knows that the real problem is we haven't gone far enough.

The accountability process itself can also be a double-edged sword. Radical communities often divorce the accountability process from its place within the broader transformative justice framework, offering it as the sole response to intimate violence while simultaneously avoiding any further attempts at preempting violence before it happens. This false support places the needs of the survivor secondary to the question of how to deal with a perpetrator, once again prioritizing the needs of the perpetrator and maintaining the pattern of domination. What little support is offered survivors often replicates this same dynamic. One of the most common models of support used, that of making demands of the perpetrator, once again leaves all agency in the perpetrator's hands, especially when there is no contingency plan if the perpetrator should refuse. Survivors who become emotionally invested in such models as a path for healing are often devastated when the demands yield nothing, or worse, when they incite a new barrage from the perpetrator and the repressive forces. In the anarchist milieu, where it is widely recognized that demands are generally useless when not accompanied with the threat of force, it is quite revealing that such models prevail.

In addition to its role in the wider context, the internal workings of the accountability process itself have the potential to be hijacked and used against a survivor. The concept of survivor autonomy, which once formed the theoretical foundation of the accountability process, is often discarded, transforming the process into a toothless form of conflict resolution. Without being informed by a clear analysis of the power dynamics at work, of course the default power of the perpetrator is upheld. The goal is still the rehabilitation of the perpetrator, and most likely their continued participation in the community, but the false supporters who have hijacked the accountability process can now do so at the expense of the survivor, selfishly defining the perpetrators "rehabilitation" in any way that is convenient for them. In the most extreme cases, accountability processes will be initiated against the explicit wishes of survivors, as an attempt to legitimize the perpetrator in the eyes of others. The pretense of making it a "community issue"<sup>3</sup> allows the false supporters to not only take control out of the

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3 This is not to say that issues of intimate violence are not community issues, but that a genuinely anti-rape community will seek to empower its survivors and encourage their

survivors hands, but also to portray survivors who refuse to cooperate with their own disempowerment as a barrier to accountability. The embarrassingly common farce of false supporters informing a survivor that actually, their perpetrator has “worked on their shit,” stems from this or similar dynamics.

In less extreme cases, the survivor’s participation will be permitted but only so long as it falls within parameters set by their false supporters. Reprisals against a perpetrator, physical or otherwise, are completely off limits. Even questions of immediate safety, such as sharing space with a perpetrator, are subject to the discretion of false supporters. Again we see radical language turned against survivors, as their demands for space within their community are twisted by false supporters and likened to the prison system (for not making rehabilitation the only goal, or for “punishing” a perpetrator), or openly referred to as an attempt to “banish” the perpetrator. Of course the insincerity of these concerns are revealed as they provide the pretext to banish the survivor from the community instead.

The perpetrator’s role in the hijacked accountability process<sup>4</sup> also reproduces their power. In some cases they are allowed to make demands of the survivor or else place conditions on their own participation. Perpetrators, or their apologists, all too commonly respond to being called out by making defensive “call outs” of their own. As discussed earlier, they will accuse the survivor of any wrongdoing they can think of, or else make some up when actual misdeeds are not forthcoming. Rather than recognize these pathetic attempts at slander as the manipulative transgressions they are, the false supporters usually join the perpetrator in absurd calls for “accountability” from the survivor.<sup>5</sup> From this newfound position of righteousness, and with the complicity of the false supporters, the perpetrator is free to alter the very character of the accountability process. What began as a call out of

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autonomy. Aspects of a community that find their own interests in conflict with those of survivors are revealed to not be part of an anarchist community at all, but of an enemy garrison in our midst.

4 Of course once hijacked it is no longer a process towards accountability, and whatever words the false supporters use to describe it – a mediation, a conflict resolution, a healing circle – the result will not be accountability.

5 Meanwhile, the repressive forces are not so conciliatory, and instead use the defensive allegations solely to attack the survivor. Perhaps this explains why so many survivors engage with the charade of the false supporters, if only because they don’t seem so bad by comparison.



a perpetrator becomes more like a negotiation, as a perpetrator's cooperation becomes contingent on the survivor addressing their concerns. What's important to recognize is not the validity of the perpetrator's concerns, but rather their role in undermining the survivor's struggle. The survivor must now *earn* not only accountability from the perpetrator, but also support from the community. Those survivors who are unwilling or unable to jump through all the hoops will be written off. In a final perversion of the accountability process, the survivor will be the one blamed for its failure, the one who was unwilling to work things out. By this point the so-called transformative framework has been so distorted that it succeeds only in restoring the power dynamics of a rape culture which had been otherwise compromised by the survivor's struggle.

### BAD APPLES

In radical communities especially, apologists will not always rally behind a perpetrator. In certain cases the contradiction of doing so would be so blatant that even their own self image as anarchists would not survive it. Once again, liberal ideology comes to the rescue: just as apologists for police brutality will insist that it results only from "a few bad apples" as a plea to avoid any structural analysis of the police or their role in society, the rape apologist will attempt to scapegoat the individual perpetrator, sacrificing them to the altar of rape culture. They may reference their own disgust with a perpetrator, or brag that they no longer talk to them, as though these things were proof of how supportive they are. Of course, disapproval of a perpetrator's actions does not automatically equal support of a survivor. In some instances vilifying the perpetrator will contradict the survivor's wishes, while in others the perpetrator and survivor can be ostracized simultaneously, as the repressive apparatus carries on the patterns of domination in the perpetrator's absence.<sup>6</sup> The mere ostracisation of perpetrators as the only response has been heavily critiqued elsewhere, but we'd like to emphasize that such an approach serves to protect rape culture by

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<sup>6</sup> That being said, sometimes survivors will want their perpetrators ostracized. This is both a valid and understandable response and should be respected. There's nothing mutually exclusive about analyzing power systems and rejecting perpetrators.

avoiding direct confrontations with it. In doing so, apologists can externalize the negative aspects of rape culture as something separate from themselves. By projecting everything onto a lone perpetrator (or perhaps all perpetrators) the apologist can deflect any analysis of the social relations that produce perpetrators, especially their own role. By singling out a few bad apples, they distract from the fact that the whole bunch is rotten.

This strategy also avoids the whole question of *how* to support a survivor, by seeking a resolution that does not address the needs of the survivor at all. This is revealing of rape culture's true priority: because scapegoating a few perpetrators will still leave oppressive social structures intact, but survivors who are able to struggle successfully against those structures threaten its very foundation. Rape culture values the perpetrator about as much as any imperialist army values its foot soldiers. It will happily sacrifice them if necessary, because of course it is the subjugation of the survivors, and their perpetual state of victimhood, that must be maintained at all costs. Just as with empire, it is only through this subjugation that rape culture can reproduce itself.

### WAGING WAR ON CULTURE

The functioning and reproduction of rape culture is complex; the crude generalisations and examples we've laid out here are too simple to faithfully recreate the dynamics we experience in our daily lives. While we've tried to categorize, describe, and give shape to oppressive structures with the hope of making them recognizable, in reality most individuals will oscillate between roles. Even those who at times may step outside social confines to provide genuine support may in other instances serve as rape culture's most brutal shock troops. Even survivors themselves can take on repressive roles towards each other, seduced by the prospect of being one rung higher on the social hierarchy rather than offering solidarity to their peers. People's roles are not static, and systems of oppression are not congealed. The interplay between the silencing, repressive and recuperative forces of rape culture is not conspiratorial; these sometimes separate but always collaborative elements do not meet to strategize or divvy up the tasks. But

of course, collaboration is not so contingent on actual associations as it is on a shared interest. Those with shared interests will reach similar conclusions or else work towards similar goals without ever having to interact. And so rape culture is revealed not merely a vague concept: rather, it is the concrete material conditions that lead people to conclude, consciously or not, that their interest lies in silencing a survivor, in being complicit in their continued subjugation, or in actively countering a survivor's struggle.

The complaint that people "just do the easy thing" partially articulates this problem, but also attributes it only to moments of moral weakness amongst individuals. This sidesteps the more obvious question: why are our radical communities still structured in such a way that supporting a survivor is not the easy thing? What makes it difficult? A more materialist view of our responses to interpersonal violence, one that looks not to someone's politics or sense of decency, but instead to material conditions such as their social dependencies, could provide more insight into how our own interests are controlled and shaped by a culture of rape.

Perhaps the most significant mitigating factor of these conditions is power: both the power a survivor holds in the community, as well as the corresponding power of a perpetrator, are key to shaping that community's response. When a perpetrator holds very little power in comparison to a survivor, or when the perpetrator is not even part of the community, a token show of support costs little and helps maintain the benevolent veneer of rape culture. Of course, this is rarely the case. It has commonly been urged that support of a survivor should not be hindered by a perpetrator's position of power in the community, but the position of power itself receives little scrutiny, as does any possible correlation between that position of power and interpersonal violence (which is itself a brutal expression of power). The failure to establish this link is like asking what came first, the chicken or the egg, and then insisting that the chicken and the egg have nothing to do with each other. This blind spot is especially curious amongst anarchists, who claim to oppose all forms of hierarchical power.

It follows that a genuine analysis of the functioning of rape culture must also include an analysis of the relationships of power that govern

our lives. This implicates not only the hierarchies, formal or otherwise, which persist even in anarchist spaces, but also the larger systems of power which inform them, such as patriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism, ableism, and so on. We must acknowledge rape culture's integral place within capitalist society. Through this we can recognize rape culture as a mechanism for social control, as it reinforces these systems of power and domination that in turn reproduce it. It then becomes necessary to undermine the hierarchical divisions which serve to both facilitate interpersonal violence itself as well as shape the interests of those in a position to respond to it. Many anarchists and radicals rightly reject the liberalism and navel-gazing of "identity politics." But a sharp analysis of systems of power, the ways in which these systems offer privilege to some of us yet oppression to others, and the ways in which our experiences of these systems of Power influence the ways we fight against them, is crucial to genuine resistance. To successfully attack a culture of rape, we must strike at the roots of this power.

### THE IMAGE OF COMMUNITY

Many anti-violence activists begin from the precarious presumption of "community:" that a survivor has a social base they can turn to for support, or else a support network that escapes the influence of the power we just discussed. Here community is defined rather nebulously or not at all: is your community a geographic space? Is it a shared identity or experience? Is it the people you spend time with? A community may be a combination of all these things, yet none of these things point to an inherent position of support.

Many anarchists and other radicals do not even realize the importance and interconnections between building community and attacking systems of oppression, and those of us who do rarely make use of this realisation beyond our rhetoric. And, perhaps more to the point, we often make the mistake of assuming that the targets of our attack only lie outside ourselves. Attack is the process through which we recognize the forces which oppress us and seek to destroy them. The question of violence, of what it will take to destroy systems of power, is largely out of our hands. Capitalism, with its standing armies and myriads of

## BETRAYAL

prisons, has made its own position on the matter perfectly clear. Those comrades amongst us who inevitably carry the baggage of white supremacy, patriarchy, and colonialism, those who find themselves in the position of the apologist, can hopefully exercise a wider range of choice. They can choose, as we have, to attack those aspects of themselves which recreate the old world, and to bolster the attack against those who choose otherwise. It should be this choice that defines the anarchist, which sets us apart from our enemies and guides us to our comrades. It is from this choice that all genuine struggle becomes possible.



# Poem #2

*Eden Jeffries*

Tell your story  
over  
and  
over  
and  
over again  
until  
they forget  
the one  
they wrote  
for  
you





